

UNDERSTANDING SOUTH LOUISIANA THROUGH LITERATURE:  
FOLKTALES AND POETRY AS REPRESENTATIONS  
OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

by

ANNA BURNS

(Under the direction of Dr. Nina Hellerstein)

ABSTRACT

Folktales represent particular cultural attitudes based on location, time period, and external and internal influences. Cultural identity traits appear through the storytellers, who emphasize these traits to continue cultural traditions. The folktales and poetry studied in this thesis show how various themes work together to form the Cajun and Creole cultures. The themes of occupation, music and dance, and values; religion, myth, and folk beliefs; history, violence, and language problems are examined separately to show aspects of Cajun and Creole cultures. Secondary sources provide cultural information to illustrate the attitudes depicted in the folktales and poetry.

INDEX WORDS: Folktales, Poetry, Occupation, Religion, Violence, Cajun and Creole, Cultural Identity

UNDERSTANDING SOUTH LOUISIANA THROUGH LITERATURE:  
FOLKTALES AND POETRY AS REPRESENTATIONS  
OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

by

ANNA BURNS

B.A., Loyola University of New Orleans, 1998

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2002

©2002

Anna Burns

All Rights Reserved

UNDERSTANDING SOUTH LOUISIANA THROUGH LITERATURE:  
FOLKTALES AND POETRY AS REPRESENTATIONS  
OF CULTURAL IDENTITY

by

ANNA BURNS

Major Professor: Dr. Nina Hellerstein

Committee: Dr. Doris Kadish  
Dr. Tim Raser

Electronic Version Approved:

Gordhan L. Patel  
Dean of the Graduate School  
The University of Georgia  
August 2002

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all those who have supported me in various ways through this journey and many others.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank all those who have given me superior guidance and support during my studies, particularly Dr. Nina Hellerstein for her continual encouragement and advice. And to my committee Dr. Doris Kadish and Dr. Tim Raser for participating in the process. To my family, particularly my parents and grandparents, I extend my gratitude and utmost appreciation for their support in every way. My sister, I thank you, for the sweet and encouraging notes sent to me all along the way. And to my love, Christopher, who has been patient throughout this year and given me words of courage and persistence. Thank you all, including friends, family, and teachers who I haven't mentioned, for all the love and support you have given me.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	v
INTRODUCTION .....	1
CHAPTER	
1 OCCUPATION, MUSIC AND DANCE, VALUES .....	11
2 RELIGION, MYTH, AND FOLK BELIEFS .....	25
3 HISTORY, VIOLENCE, AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS .....	44
4 CONCLUSION .....	56
WORKS CITED .....	59

## INTRODUCTION

The Creole and Cajun cultures of South Louisiana have survived many changes from slavery to Americanization. With the influence of the CODOFIL and C.R.E.O.L.E., Inc. the Cajun and Creole cultures have begun to re-establish their importance in the Francophone world and rebuild their French communities. The cultures of South Louisiana have been glamorized and commercialized for the tourist industry and only offer a glimpse into their way of life<sup>1</sup>. Most of the traditional Cajun and Creole societies have been Americanized and the only way to reach these cultures today is through the oral tradition that still exists. The transmission of stories through the generations has preserved these cultures' identities.

Cajuns are descendants of Acadians who were forced to leave Canada. The term Cajun comes from the Americans or English speakers' inability to pronounce *Acadien*. Thus the Acadians were known as Cajuns (Ancelet *Cajun* xv). This term is still used to describe this culture and its people. In the case of the Creoles, Sybil Kein defines the term in its contemporary context, in which

one group which calls itself Creole will say that a Creole is someone who has ancestors which came from France or Spain, who were born in Louisiana or New Orleans; who have black blood—but, someone with light complexion. The other group is going to be in agreement with that but add to it that a Creole will never have black blood. (...) It is not

---

<sup>1</sup> The appearance of Louisiana in tourist images is directly tied to the publication of Longfellow's poem "Evangeline" (Le Menestrel 278).

necessary to continue the research because it is evident that there are many people in Louisiana who see themselves as Creole and who are not in agreement, one with the other on what makes one Creole. (5-6)

Even though Cajuns and Creoles are defined as separate cultural communities with different ancestral backgrounds, the intermingling of the two cultures shows similar identity traits. The similarities between the cultures have occurred due to the sharing of stories during times of slavery and the Americanization process, when the two cultures depended upon each other for survival. To speak of one culture without the other is to give a false representation of the peoples of South Louisiana and of the cultural contributions by each.

The emergence of oral tradition as written literature is recent, establishing the cultures of South Louisiana by recording the stories in written form. With the recordings of oral tradition and folklore, Cajun and Creole cultures of South Louisiana are re-establishing themselves as cultures that are growing rather than disappearing. The written versions of oral traditions from South Louisiana reveal many cultural identity traits that help outsiders better understand these peoples.

Folklore is the “art of the oppressed classes, both peasants and workers” and it changes according to the people who pass it on (Propp 5). Cajuns and Creoles use traditional tales and then change the content to fit their audience. In this region, communities were connected by waterways (rivers and bayous), which enabled the stories to move easily from one area to another (Claudel 164). The tales from South Louisiana have evolved through the generations so that the “stories are able to adapt themselves to any local and social climate” (Dégh 53). Thus, many tales will reflect the

culture from the storytellers' point of view. Oral tradition provides a way in which values and cultural attitudes are transmitted. It is "the expression of a people (...) and not that of a few geniuses" and in this oral transmission, the speaker emphasizes particular traits that he/she believes important to the cultural identity (Rosenberg 75-76). Oral tradition is constantly updated to reflect the current beliefs and attitudes of the culture. According to Rosenberg, oral tradition will not only adapt itself to the current culture, but it will also represent or mirror "a global representation" of group "values and attitudes," more so than a literate society (80). Folklore never has an author in the modern sense and it should be compared to language, not literature, because it arises having no authors and changes over time to fit the history of the people (Propp 7). Characters in literature typify a particular milieu, whereas folklore characters do not have a name and are not generalized representations of a people (Propp 27). Thus, in South Louisiana, Cajuns and Creoles project their cultural identities through the various folktales, which change and adapt according to the storyteller's opinion and will reflect this opinion as current cultural attitudes.

Many tale types in *Cajun and Creole Folktales: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana*, categorized by Barry Jean Ancelet, provide information about the cultures. Dégh in her research explains some tale types and their cultural connections. Magic tales correspond to attitudes in human culture and provide a way of escaping reality (Dégh 59). They tend to reflect an old world that shows that all things are humanized and shows "religious and social institutions of an older society" represented by characters who have Christian values of innocence, constancy, righteousness, and fidelity (Dégh 63-64). Legends, however, are "localized, down-to-earth, and have

historic validity” (Dégh 69-73). Legends often play the role of education, so that these stories “inform (people) about important facts and arm them against danger within their own cultural environment” (Dégh 73). Legends also have other implications such as understanding the culture and its people and showing verifiable and fictitious information (Dégh 74). Historical legends are based on national or local heroes, naming of places and rivers; they teach about the past, and “contain narratives about real events connected with real individuals (that) reflect the people’s economic and cultural achievements” (Propp 50).

Animal tales use animals as main characters and show how their world is comparable to a human world. They encounter the same trials and tribulations as humans. The typical characters in Animal tales, Bouki and Lapin, represent greed and laziness, and cunning and wit. Animal tales typically teach a moral lesson, showing how cunning and wit overcome greed and laziness. All characters in Animal tales are from everyday life because people worked with them on an everyday basis (Propp 17).

Ethnic jokes arose from the Americanization process and reflect the consequences of this process on the Louisiana cultures. Jokes, for Dégh, are “universal themes of uncommon occurrences in common place situations” (68-69). Jokes are the most popular form of oral narrative in South Louisiana because of their versatility and transmission across cultures (Rickels 246). Lying tales are stories of hunting, absurdities and exaggerations of actual occurrences.

In addition to folktales, theater and poetry are becoming ways to transmit Cajun and Creole cultures. Theater is used to transform the oral to written and back to the oral for those who cannot read the language. Poetry is popular as well because it represents

the language as it is spoken and the form of poetry allows freedom of expression, mirroring the spoken qualities in folktales. Contemporary poetry is not a fixed form and neither are folktales (Cheremie 304). Creole poets, like Sybil Kein, use poetry as a means for expressing their cultural heritage. “*Gombo People* is a book written with the Creole heart and shows the beauty and the soul of the Louisiana Creole culture and language” (Kein 4). Through her poetry, the group finds oral expression: the oral qualities of her poems are a major element, and in certain poems, like “Dans le matin,” the text becomes a conversation or group activity. This poem describes everyday activities as representations of Creole culture:

Mo fais mo café pour la journein,  
Mo cuire quichoge pour manger.  
Mo pélé mo voisin, Dalzee,  
pour venir avec moin au marche.

Nous acheté des verts, des poissons,  
et z.haricots, mais pas la viande, ça couté  
trop cher. Tels prix aujourd ‘hui,  
mon Djeu! Cinq sous pas vaut deux! (Kein 23)

Even though these same activities occur in other cultures throughout the world, Kein transforms them into representations of Creole culture by writing down her spoken language. In essence the poem expresses the same orality found in folktales because the poet tells a story and the reader becomes the listener, the other conversationalist or gossip with whom the poet has a relationship:

Nous joindre Tootoo, Bébé, et Tant Goux,  
Lemontine, Tundoo, et Tilune. Bojarde  
perdu son l'argent dans un dispute yé dit,  
c'est triste, pitits-yé sans rien pour manger! (Kein 23)

The poet gossips about others in her community and shares this information with the other conversationalist, the reader, creating a familiarity which draws the reader into the Creole culture. The reader could be from anywhere, but the poem includes the outsider as part of the community through the orality of the poem and describing the events throughout the day.

Kein also addresses many cultural identity traits and issues within her poetry specifically the problem of ethnic identity. In “La Chaudière pélé la Gregue” she uses gumbo, a soup made with many different ingredients, as an image of the mixture of the two cultures:

Hé, Cajun.  
Et toi, Créole,  
cofaire to pélé to même  
blanc où noir? Qui donnein toi noms-yé?  
Nous tous descendants des Français, Espagnols,  
Africains, Indiens, Acadiens, Haitiens,  
et tous z.autres Gombo People qui té venir à  
la Louisiane. Epice-yé té fait le Gombo.  
Nous culture riche servi comme nous liaison commun. (Kein 30)

Separating the ingredients (the cultures) only brings an incomplete representation of the cultures and someone is forgotten. Gumbo includes everyone and all are needed in order to make the soup:

Mais mon ami, pas garrochez l'épice  
Parce que li trop blanc où trop noir.  
Si vous fait ça, to sa pas gain Gombo  
jamain plus, mais un ragout fondu salé-là  
fait avec la chair niée de to l'ancestre-yé  
to grandmère, to grandpère, to mère, to père,  
to soeur, to frère, to tante, to nonc,  
to cousin, to niece, to nevéu, to pitits, où  
to-même. (Kein 30)

In essence, the gumbo soup represents all cultures in South Louisiana and the mixture cannot be separated like the ingredients in the soup. The two cultures come from similar ancestry and to separate them would destroy the representation of contemporary South Louisiana. Although Kein does show that Cajun and Creole are the same and come from the same ancestry, she also suggests that urban Creoles distinguish the two cultures.

Kein's poem "Le compagne et La ville" shows how urban Creoles consider anyone from the country as a Cajun:

Mo cousine, Tee-Ta, li dit li Cajun;  
et moin, mo créole, nommé Tee-Teen.  
Li reste encore dans la campagne, to connein;  
Mais moin, mo déménagé à la Ville. (38)

Throughout the poem, the narrator tries to distinguish what it means to be a Cajun and a Creole, but she comes to the same conclusion: Cajun and Creole are the same. The two cultures have mixed so much that there is no real distinction:

Mo cousine, li jolie, li pitit, li gain plein conte;

Et li laimein danser tout la journein!

Et moi, to péut oir mo comme ça aussi,

Bon temps et Chantez! Ça c'est pour moi!

Nous cuit le même manger—jambalaya et bisque,

Mais mo fait le gombo, mais oui!

Avec filè, des gros crabes bleues, et les z.huitres et chevrettes,

Mo cuisine, oh-là-là, senti mieux! (Kein 38)

Cajun and Creole are one and the same because both cultures have the same ancestors:

Mais, dit pas rien, li fait ça li véút;

Et moin, mo juste ris tout le temps.

“Cajun” et “Creole” nous cousins, ça c'est vrai!

Parce que so monde “Français” c'est “Français” juste comme moquenne!

(Kein 38)

Even though Kein presents the problems of separating the ethnic identities and emphasizes their many years of intermingling, Cajuns and Creoles tend to distinguish between their cultures. In addition, Cajuns separate themselves from mainstream America. Rickels describes the main difference in the attitude of the Cajun culture versus the rest of America as the “lack of puritanical religious strictures” that has “fostered a

festive tradition, one emphasizing the enjoyment of food, drink, music, dance, and the excitement of contests” (246). Cajun way of life is described in the phrase *la joie de vivre* in which the Cajuns proclaim that this expression is the heart of their culture.

Within this expression many elements come together to form the Cajun culture:

Un Cadien aime vraiment faire la fête. Un vrai Cadien aura toujours du bon temps, même quand la journée est merdique! (...) Alors il faut juste accepter que la vie n'est pas toujours agréable, mais ça ne veut pas dire qu'elle n'est pas joyeuse. C'est cette joie primordiale, profonde, qui vient de la *joie de vivre*, qui pour moi est vraiment véritablement l'essence de l'Acadie. *Ça c'est l'esprit des Cadiens*. C'est ce qui nous rend cadiens.  
(Le Menestrel 301)

Hospitality is a large part of the Cajun culture and Cajuns pride themselves on their hospitality. This hospitality is not just reserved for visitors, this same “gentillesse” seems to characterize “les relations sociales, notamment dans les communautés rurales” (Le Menestrel 289). Other than hospitality Cajuns define themselves as a people who know how to profit from the pleasures of existence: “Être Cadien apparaît ainsi comme un mode d'être, une manière de vivre” (Le Menestrel 299-300). Even though Creoles do not have a similar phrase or an expression that describes their culture, they share similar views of life with the Cajuns. Creoles live by the same cultural customs as the Cajuns’ *joie de vivre*:

The Creoles—many of whom are ancestrally linked to Cajuns as well as to Continental French, Spanish, and Native Americans—share much

culturally with Cajuns, including the French language, Catholicism, foodways, and aspects of music style. (Spitzer 88)

The following study will analyze the tales according to cultural traits like way of life, to show how they represent different aspects of the South Louisiana cultural identity. In the following study we shall examine the themes of work or occupation, music and dance, and values; religion, myth, and folk beliefs; and the role of history, violence, and language problems. The intricate web of Cajun and Creole way of life is revealed through the understanding of these qualities, creating a rich mixture unique to South Louisiana.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> The languages of the texts used in this study reflect an ongoing process to form a standardized version. Ancelet primarily uses standard French orthography to express the language and researched other languages to provide accurate spellings and grammatical syntax (*Folktales* lv). Since the language is still primarily oral and the majority of Cajuns and Creoles cannot read or write their language, Ancelet justified the usage of standard French as a way to show standardized rules and variations within the language itself. Some of the variations in Cajun French include, but are not limited to, the plural personal pronouns such as *eux* and *eux autres* to represent *ils*, the usage of *tu* and *vous* to represent singular and plural rather than informal and formal, and the lack of *ne* in the negative phrase *ne...pas* (Rottet 138-144). These are some representations of standard variations that occur frequently in Cajun French. Ancelet states that most “serious Louisiana French specialists seem to agree that Cajun French is a variant of the French language and is best rendered using the French system with minor adjustments” (*Folktales* lv). By using standard French orthography as opposed to the oral orthography that some purists prefer, Ancelet hopes to show that Cajun French exists on the same level as other dialects in France. He also used standard French orthography to allow for a larger reading audience that could understand the tales in the Cajun French form rather than in the English form. The use of standard French enables other French speakers to understand and study the literature in the language it is spoken, rather than a translation. By using standard French the tales are preserved in their original form and allow for stabilizing the language. Creole French, however, is less like standard French and presently Creoles are trying to establish Creole French as a separate language. Ancelet points out that Creole French “resembles dialects used in parts of the Antilles” (*Folktales* liv). For the Creole folktales in his collection, Ancelet used standard French orthography with Creole elements. Some of these elements are the third person pronoun *il, elle, on* that changed to *li, té apé* to indicate past imperfect, and *yé* for *ils* (*Folktales* lvi). Sybil Kein expresses the Creole language as she learned it from childhood and her version of Creole varies from Ancelet’s orthography. The storytellers in Ancelet’s collection were more concerned with his comprehension of the stories rather than portraying the linguistic qualities of Creole. As a result they spoke with more standard French than Creole. Sybil Kein is, however, more interested in preserving the linguistic qualities of Creole because language is one of the “three major tenants which define culture” (v). Some of the orthography represents pronunciation like the liaison between the consonant *s* and a vowel: *z.herbe*. The only signifier that shows the noun is plural is the *z* in front of the noun. She includes a dictionary of Creole terms in *Gumbo People* to aid comprehension of the Creole language. Her poems reflect the Creole language as it is spoken in South Louisiana.

## CHAPTER 1

### OCCUPATION, MUSIC AND DANCE, VALUES

Occupation, music and dance, and values are three aspects that characterize the Cajun and Creole way of life. They provide a basis for the culture. Occupation is a means of support and survival for the family. Music and dance help to preserve the cultural identity traits by bringing the community together to celebrate the common bond the members share. Ideas and values connect occupations and pastimes, acting as a transparent glue to form tradition. Through oral tradition each of these identity traits is interwoven in a complex manner to form Cajun and Creole culture. By separating the different aspects in the oral tradition, one sees how the culture is formed and how the folktales act as a voice for the cultures and represent them from within.

Many of the stories portray the occupations of the Cajuns and Creoles: hunting, fishing, or farming. The wild or country setting for most Cajun and Creole stories is indicative of their culture:

Il restait loin, loin, loin dans la campagne. Son premier voisin était deux miles, sûr. Et il avait quelques volailles. Il avait une truie. Il avait un mulet et un cheval. C'était juste lui et sa femme, tu sais? Ça fait, ils ont convenu qu'ils auraient élevé des petits cochons. (*Ancelet Folktales* 112)

This passage uses the pig farmer's occupation to show his isolation, indicated by the words "loin, loin" and by his neighbor who lives two miles away. These occupations serve as a starting point, a background scenery, for the stories through which other

cultural identity traits are explained or demonstrated. In particular, most stories have as main characters farmers: “Là, une autre fois ( ils étaient associés, tu vois), ils ont fait une récolte. Ça fait, la première année, ils ont planté des patates, juste des patates. O! C’était beau, ces lianes de patates-là,” or hunters: “Ils étaient à la chasse dans le bois,” or fishermen: “Il y avait ces deux vieux hommes. Ils étions voisins et ça pêchait tout le temps ensemble” (Ancelet *Folktales* 11-12, 88). Occupation is a means through which the Cajuns and Creoles communicate their culture. They define themselves by their relationship to nature and it creates a “stability and life cycle” which becomes a part of their cultures (Barry 53). Cajuns and Creoles relied on nature to provide them with food, materials for housing, and water because of isolation (Beaulieu 148). These occupations also provide many accounts for unbelievable hunting or fishing stories. The following excerpt of a Lying tale shows a hunter’s expertise through exaggeration:

Il a vu quelques uns de ses animaux, et là, il a vu un gros chevreuil. Il s’a collé contre un bois, et puis il a mis du sel dans sa main. Il a attrapé une poignée de sel. Le chevreuil a venu. (...) Il (le chevreuil) a mis sa langue dedans sa main qu’il a barrée dessus sa langue. Et le chevreuil s’a tiré par en arrière et la langue lui a resté dans sa main. (...) Et quand la barbue a tombé, elle a tapé un lapin. Et avant que le lapin puisse crever, il a *kick*, et il a *kick* si dur avec ses pattes, il (le lapin) a tué six jeunes perdrix (caille). (...) Il s’a arraché les bottes et il avait deux douzaines de patassas dans ses bottes. (Ancelet *Folktales* 123)

This account of an unbelievable hunting story portrays the abilities of Cajun and Creole hunters. The hunter used salt, a natural element to attract a deer, the animal typically

hunted. The use of salt shows the trust between nature and Cajuns and Creoles because the hunter holds his hand out as if to feed the deer. This particular action shows how people and nature have a harmonious relationship, going beyond the opposition of predator and prey. The deer recurs frequently as the typical animal hunted and as a symbol of trust. Because of his skill at catching the deer, the hunter catches many other meats through a series of chain reactions. The series of chain reactions shows how Cajuns and Creoles accept the situation for what it is: the hunter accepts all the meat even though he did not actively seek it. This relationship symbolizes the Cajuns and Creoles' ability to accept and adapt to any situation, to overcome obstacles. This story like other folktales focuses on elements they have rather than emphasizing the difficulties of their life. By interacting and working within this world of nature, Cajuns and Creoles adapt to their circumstances and form a symbiotic relationship, enabling them to prosper.

Some stories relating to occupation show the opposite of pride and great skill as well as the inability to adapt and change, causing the symbiotic relationship to falter or become weak. One story in particular shows the ineptness of a hunter and how his inability to accurately track a deer results in a confusion of time and space. The storyteller points out that the hunter is typically an expert, but in this particular episode he makes a mistake and inaccurately tracks the deer:

J'ai entendu parler de ce bougre qui avait tracé un chevreuil. Il était beaucoup bon traceur, beaucoup, beaucoup bon. It traçait n'importe quoi. Et de quelque manière, il a pris à tracer un chevreuil. Mais il a fait une petite erreur. Il a pris à le retracer en regrichant la trace, ayòu ce qu'il devenait. Au lieu de descendre, il a pris à monter. Il a tracé le chevreuil et

il a suit la trace jusqu'au jour où il est né. Quand il a arrivé, l'essence du chevreuil était juste après commencer. (Ancelet *Folktales* 124)

As a result, the hunter backtracks to the deer's birth and birthplace, mixing up time and space. The confusion between time and space ultimately reflects the South Louisiana cultures and their place in the American culture. The confusion emphasizes the Cajun and Creole cultures' way of expressing a return to the source of their way of life and an inability to situate their cultures in a contemporary world. Their cultures are situated in the past and this confusion between time and space represents confusion between the past and the present in which there is "ambiguity and loss" (Barry 51). The confusion also symbolizes the isolation from the rest of the world, since the culture preserved itself in a time and space away from the contemporary world. Isolation provided a way for traditions to prosper and preserved Cajun and Creole culture, almost as if it were frozen in time and space. Modern conveniences and technology could not easily reach the isolated bayous and prairies until Huey P. Long expanded the interstate system linking the areas together (Allain 132). In essence, the confusion in space and time reflects the isolation and slow evolution of the culture as well as the confusion of adapting to the contemporary world. Since the prairies and bayous are isolated from urban areas, Cajuns and Creoles continue their traditions from the past by passing them on through folktales, which express these traditions and values about traditions. When South Louisiana was connected by the interstate, modern culture began to influence the rural communities. Cajuns and Creoles adapted their cultures from the past to the present by incorporating modern technology. Confusion often resulted from their inability to situate their cultures

within a contemporary culture that simplifies many traditions. The *boucherie*,<sup>3</sup> one such tradition, has been eliminated by modern technology and commercialization, which enables Cajuns and Creoles to purchase fresh meat any time from the grocery store.

Creoles, like Cajuns, are linked to the earth by their occupation as well. In the Creole stories, like Cajuns, the occupations of farming and fishing set the background for the story: “Ouais, mais, Bouki té gain un jardin” (Ancelet *Folktales* 7) or “yé té couri pêcher” (Ancelet *Folktales* 13). Even hunting is an occupation of the Creoles: “Un jour, le petit garçon dit à sa mère, il était parti faire la chasse dans le bois” (Ancelet *Folktales* 36). However, the stories representing the different occupations are few; the majority of characters who appear in Creole folktales are farmers.

In addition, occupations connect Cajuns and Creoles to nature. Kein does this symbolically by transforming the occupations. In “La Rivière” Creoles are connected to nature through the presentation of an artist who sits by the river and dreams: “L’Artiste quand li té jeune / gardé bateaux naviguer dans la mer / ‘et les filles c’est comme la lune’ / les bois, grand z.herbe, maisons de bois; / yé resté avec li dans so rêves” (Kein 9). The nature of an artist implies a transformation process. The artist transforms images and ideas of reality based on what he sees. With “les filles c’est comme la lune,” he takes in nature and then reprojects this nature as a combination of what he sees and interprets. The things that he sees in nature “les bois, grand z.herbe, maisons de bois;” are experiences from the past. They become thoughts or memories in his dreams. Thus, these natural elements are transformed from physical manifestations to an intangible form. The artist continues this type of transformation when he sees how rivers come

---

<sup>3</sup> The *boucherie* is a weekly gathering of families to slaughter a pig and pass the meat among the families to eat for the rest of the week and it also serves as a social gathering (Allain 137).

together: “‘Toutes les tits rivières va faire une grand rivière” (Kein 9). Through this transformation, he understands community. The artist, like nature, is then transformed from the traditional occupation of a fisherman to a spiritual fisherman in which “avec so mains fort du pecheur / li prend yé l’esprits douce du vent” (Kein 9). He uses the spirits of the wind to ignite this perception of nature. He is like the “quatre moulins” that “va marcher sur l’eau” (Kein 9). Windmills use wind as power and convert this power to grind corn to make grain. They transform natural power to create a new product. The mill changes natural power like the artist who changes the spirits: “Et li té faire avec chacun un ti portrait / de so coeur, / ‘et l’images-yé va colorer la lune” (Kein 9). He transforms nature into images that he paints on the moon, like the corn that changes to grain through the power of the wind. The artist changes nature through the spirits that he fishes from the wind and then reprojects these images, resulting in images that will color the moon.

In addition to their work or occupations, Cajuns and Creoles love to dance and have a good time. While dances and music are not unique to the Cajun and Creole cultures, they serve to unite the community and promote cultural identity traits. Cajun music and Creole zydeco as well as jazz are typical of these cultures and the dances provide a medium through which these traditional music styles prosper. Music also transcends the language barrier (Ancelet *Cajun* 149). Cajuns and Creoles work hard during the week to provide for their families, and on Saturdays they dance to have fun with neighbors and other members of the community: “Ça fait, quand samedi soir vini, o, yé tous vini, un gros bande. Et Compère Lapin commencé jouer, mais yé tous commencé danser au ras où il t’apé jouer” (Ancelet *Folktales* 14). Through Deacon John, “chanteur

des Blues,” who makes his music reflect the people’s and culture’s soul, music becomes “l’âme de Ville-là” (Kein “Deacon John” 63). In addition music is a liberating element in “Jazz”:

De Storyville, Vaudeville, Cabarets et Tonks,  
nous joue Les Blues, Marches, Chansons  
religiéux, et Rags  
et nous quitté fardeau-là de  
maître, esclave, et batard;  
nous metté li dans un syncopé insolent.  
La Vieux Nouvelle-Orléans dansé. (Kein 64)

Jazz becomes the music of the Creole culture’s soul, enabling its members to free themselves from the memory of oppression.

For Cajuns, the dances serve several functions. Typical dances include *bals de maison* and *salles de danse*. The *bals de maison* were held in the largest room of the house and were by invitation only. The invitation-only requirement allowed for families to control which families came to their home. The regularity of the *bals de maison* preserved “Acadian music, cuisine, dances, and language” (Ancelet *Cajun* 47). The *salles de danse* are public dance halls in which the traditional *bals de maison* become more open and allow for more community involvement. *Salles de danse* do not restrict the dance goers by an invitation-only requirement, and all members of the community are welcome (Ancelet *Cajun* 49). These dances provide a way for young Cajuns to meet their future spouses, a way for relieving the week’s stress from work, and a way to indulge themselves: “Il y avait deux garçons qui courtaient la même fille, et c’était

deux hommes qui étaient grosse affaire. Ça restait un chaque bord du chemin et ça allait au bal ensemble et chacun avait un joli cheval” (Ancelet *Folktales* 193). Dances are a way of preserving cultural traditions through adaptations from contemporary society. The music provides the way to express traditional culture and the dance serves to promote the traditions.

Courting rituals are important in Cajun life and a few stories present these ideas as well. In some of the Magic Tales, older traditions of courting rituals survive, portraying the lover who has to win the father’s favor to marry: “ ‘Bien, mais,’ elle dit, ‘tu peux pas me marier autrement que mon père, me dit que tu m’as gagnée,’ Et elle dit, ‘Si tu veux prendre tes chances, peut-être que tu pourrais me marier’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 39).

However, more common to Cajun culture are stories showing characters who follow the advice of their parents in order to win a woman’s heart:

“Écoute, garçon. T’aurais un goût d’aller au bal, et t’aurais un goût de rencontrer des filles, peut-être te choisir une fille pour ta femme, mais,” il dit, “écoute. C’est pas tout ça, non. T’as pour avoir assez de quoi, quand tu vas te rencontrer une dame, en tout cas tu décides de te marier, peut-être pas longtemps après.” (...) “T’as pour avoir un cheval et un boghei, ça c’est sûr, et,” il dit, “t’as pour avoir de l’argent. Ça fait, tu peux pas aller te marier avec les poches vides.” (Ancelet *Folktales* 84-85)

Sundays in Cajun and Creole culture are typically reserved for family gatherings and a day when young lovers may meet and spend time with each other under the supervision of the family: “Enfin, il avait sorti avec une fille et il a demandé pour aller la voir un dimanche après-midi. Elle lui avait dit oui” (Ancelet *Folktales* 192). This suitor shows

his intentions to court the young woman by asking to visit on Sunday. Through her acceptance a series of courtship rituals take place to develop their relationship under the supervision of the family. This excerpt shows part of a courting tradition that has survived, in which young men who have serious intentions visit on Sundays. A young woman's father and potential suitor used this time on Sundays to negotiate. The community considers these visits official (Ancelet *Cajun* 72).

While the stories relating to occupation, music, and dance show the work ethic and pastimes of the Cajuns and Creoles, other stories teach moral lessons and impose limitations on the people's *joie de vivre*. The morals taught in these stories warn younger generations of dangers if they are too careless with traditions of celebration. This type of story often uses animals as part of the repertoire. The animals are representations of everyday life and reflect the Cajuns' and Creoles' connection to nature, but they also teach moral lessons about greed and laziness versus cunning and wit. Bouki typically represents greed and laziness while Lapin is cunning and wit. In the following excerpt Lapin has been caught for eating Bouki's fish and is whipped for stealing. Lapin, however, finds a way to escape by playing the banjo so well that he avoids being caught:

Quand li joue l'autre danse, li—yé continué après danser, pi après *brag on*  
li, li dit yé “*Go ahead*, avance là-bas toujours! Li dit, “*Avance!*” li dit.  
Tout d'une éscousse, li jette banjo-là par terre, li dit yé, “*Good-bye!*” li dit,  
“*I'm gone!*” (Ancelet *Folktales* 15)

Lapin escapes due to his cunning in convincing the others to move further away from him so they cannot catch him and his music, which in this case is a liberating element for him. The moral lesson teaches how Lapin escapes without using force or violence. This story

teaches younger generations how to avoid dangerous situations without the use of violence.

Another theme that appears in many stories is a warning about marital problems. These types of stories are told as advice to newlyweds at weddings. A young couple is married and the groom needs to use the restroom. When he enters, a large pig surprises him and takes off running with the groom on the pig's back with his pants down: "Il courait tout parmi tout le monde, les tables de gâteaux et de manger, et le bougre était couché sur le dos du cochon, avec les coulottes en bas!" (Ancelet *Folktales* 112). The lesson in this Joke tale warns young married couples of the dangers of being inattentive and careless, which leads to unfaithfulness, through the embarrassing sight of the groom with his pants down on the back of a pig.

Some stories reflect marital problems in which differences cannot be resolved:

Il y avait une vieille femme et un vieux bougre qu'étaient assis en avant le foyer un soir, et il y a une souris ou un rat qu'a passé. N'importe comment, la vieille femme a dit que c'était une souris, elle. Ça fait, le vieux bougre dit, 'Vieille! C'est un rat!' La chicane a pris. Ils se sont quittés. Une qui disait c'était une souris, l'autre disait c'était un rat. La chicane a pris. Ils se sont quittés. Ils ont resté un an délaissés. Ça fait, ils ont décidé ils se seraient repris. (...) La chicane a repris. Ils se sont quittés encore. La vieille femme voulait pas lâcher, ni le bougre non plus.

(Ancelet *Folktales* 78)

The advice in this passage implies that differences can not be resolved. Both the husband and wife think they are right. This story teaches the importance of different perceptions

and how men and women communicate differently. The “rat” and “mouse” represent the different ways that men and women communicate. The couple breaks up because neither one is willing to acknowledge the difference in communication and the other’s opinion. As a result of their wanting to be correct, problems in the marriage are never resolved. This story teaches younger generations of the communication differences between men and women and that insistence on being correct all the time is not always the best answer.

The previous passage gives advice while other stories discuss marital infidelity and how people cope with this issue. Unlike American culture where infidelity is not always spoken about, Cajuns and Creoles tell stories, which open the generations to the reality of marriage, and the different problems that one may have within marriage. The stories help to keep this openness and at the same time warn younger generations of marital issues and teach them about life through examples. By telling stories of marital infidelity, storytellers present the reality of marriage instead of an ideal image often depicted in movies and television. In addition, the stories can reveal secrets of infidelity in the family. The following excerpt exposes marital infidelity through the family dog, Rover, and the knowledge he acquired at “school.” A son tells his father, “Il dit, ‘Papa, dis pas rien!’ Il dit, ‘Je vas te dire un petit secret.’ Il dit, ‘Rover était après devenir trop *smart*. Rover était après dire quoi t’avais fait, dans le dos à Maman!’ Il dit, ‘J’ai eu pour m’en défaire, de Rover. Je voulais pas qu’il gâte ton mariage!’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 84). The father is unable to conceal his infidelity from his son. The dog, Rover, represents the part of the son that wants to reveal his father’s secret to his mother. The son has a conflict of loyalty within the family. He wants to tell his mother of the affair, but he does

not want to destroy his family. Thus, by getting rid of the dog, the son rids himself of the desire to tell his father's secret.

Not all stories reveal infidelity as openly. Others are more symbolic in their meaning. Food is important in Cajun and Creole way of life, another medium to express the culture. It is a performance at some dinners (Ancelet *Cajun* 146). Food is so important that it becomes, in the following excerpt, a symbol for an extramarital affair between a traveling salesman and a woman. The traveler is eating dinner with the couple and is eating many pickled turnips. The pickled turnips symbolize the traveler's flirting. He continues to eat them until the woman's husband requests that he stop. At night when they are all in bed, the wife tells her husband that there is someone trying to break into the barn. When he goes to look, the wife and the traveler have their affair: "Alors, il (the traveler) a sauté en bas du lit, et puis il a foncé à la cuisine, puis il a ouvert le buffet, et puis il a mangé tous les cornichons de navets qu'il a pu tandis que le vieux était au magasin" (Ancelet *Folktales* 105). Opening the buffet and eating the pickled turnips symbolizes the affair. However, there are stories that are not as subtle or symbolic regarding extramarital affairs. These stories discuss extramarital affairs openly to express the emotions behind the affair. One story develops a wife's vengeance as a theme to counteract the affair by her husband. This tale openly portrays affairs as a means of justice (an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth):

Ça fait, quand Prosper a dit, 'Allons se revenger,' la camisole à Clodice a frappé le plancher (elle avait une camisole neuve elle avait fait avec des sacs de *feed* peints), et les *overalls* à Prosper a tombé dessus la camisole à Clodice. Ça fait, ils se sont revengés. (Ancelet *Folktales* 109)

In essence, the wife sees her affair as vengeance for her husband's act of having an affair. Her action is dignified through vengeance whereas her husband's remains just an act of infidelity.

Another type of story teaches young people the dangers of pride, showing how this negative quality will stunt growth. A farmer is proud and believes he is better than others in his community. God grants his wish of having rain when he wants it. However, he is the one that has the stunted corn in the end. Nature again is a typical theme to show how a relatively positive characteristic can become a negative quality if it is overused:

Il y avait (...) un homme, tu connais, qui était glorieux, il voulait se faire accroire mieux que les autres. (...) Les autres quand ça venu temps, le Bon Dieu a voulu, Il a donné une pluie à eux-autres, ça fait des épis de maïs. Mais son maïs à lui a juste fait des champignons. Une petite affaire blanche à la place des épis de maïs. Il a fait pas une graine de maïs.

(Ancelet *Folktales* 152)

Pride stunted not only the growth of the farmer's corn, but also the farmer himself. He becomes alienated from the rest of his community and is stunted spiritually like his corn.

Occupations in the folktales and poetry create a setting for the events to take place. Cajuns and Creoles express their way of life and how these occupations evolved from their limitations of being isolated in the prairies and bayous. The occupations function as a way of communicating valuable information about their culture. Cajuns and Creoles developed folktales about their occupations to portray isolation, cultural transformation, or to show their symbiotic relationship with nature. Music and dance served two functions: physical liberation from work stress and spiritual liberation from

isolation. Music and dance enabled Cajuns and Creoles to meet socially and continue traditions of language, cuisine, and celebrations. They were able to overcome isolation by weekly gatherings to play music and dance. Courting rituals became a part of this celebration, continuing tradition. In addition, the tales communicate the values of the community, helping to preserve cultural customs and instill a sense of respect. Values mold and shape culture by acting as an invisible bond and establishing a relationship between work and celebration.

## CHAPTER 2

### RELIGION, MYTH, AND FOLK BELIEFS

Religion, myth, and folk beliefs are important in Cajun and Creole cultures. Catholicism is the basis of their religious beliefs and myth and folk elements supplement these beliefs, creating a folk religion. Cajuns and Creoles observe traditional Catholic holidays as well as folk holidays. In Cajun culture, traditional Catholic values continue through the children, who go to Catholic schools, and through the community's celebration of Mass (Allain 139). The Creole tradition of Catholicism reflects similar values, through "folk Catholicism and the use of *traiteurs*, faith healers" (Brasseaux 117). In their folk religion, Cajuns and Creoles celebrate traditional holidays incorporated from the many immigrant cultures, such as the Italians. These folk holidays shared by both cultures include Christmas, New Year's Day, Mardi Gras, St. Joseph's Day, and All Saints Day (Ancelet *Cajun* 77). Also included in folk religion are treaters who have the ability to heal others in the community. Folk beliefs explain religious traditions through folk understandings of traditional religious beliefs. The superstitions also show moral lessons about the *joie de vivre* (a balance between work and rest) that is the basis of the cultures in South Louisiana. Cajun and Creole myths show cultural adaptations and evolutionary explanations for animals. In addition to folk religion in Cajun and Creole cultures, some Creole communities practice voodoo, a variation of Catholicism and African religion. The majority of South Louisiana residents consider voodoo to be black magic. On the other hand, voodoo within Sybil Kein's poetry mirrors many folk religion

traits found in the Catholic based Cajun and Creole communities. In essence, folk religion combines superstition, myth, and traditional religion, representing a complex set of beliefs and rituals.

Since South Louisiana has had many cultural influences from the Europeans, Africans, and Native Americans, many of these holiday celebrations reflect these influences. For example, Sybil Kein's "Les neuf rites de la vie créole" describes some of the shared holidays, such as St. Joseph's Day, All Saints Day, Christmas, and New Year's Day (44-60). The refrain at the end of each poem emphasizes the importance of the Catholic Church as part of the religious beliefs: "Après le prêtre béni-yé, / yé retournein à lamaison / pour passer bon temps avec / manger, musique, et l'amour tout partout" (Kein 44-60). The refrain shows the importance of qualities Cajuns and Creoles cherish in the culture. The priest represents the influence of the conventional Catholic religion and its importance as a basis for Cajun and Creole folk religion. He is a symbol of the organization and the traditional parts of Catholicism. The "manger, musique et l'amour" are the values of the religion that Cajuns and Creoles embrace as cultural identity. In traditional Mass celebration, congregants eat unleavened bread and sing hymns as part of the entire celebration in order to communicate with God. From the traditional Mass Cajuns and Creoles have developed their own celebration. They personalize the religion by creating an environment in the home where they share food, music, and love. In essence, the celebration in the home mirrors the traditional Mass by applying the same celebratory qualities. Mass is a communal celebration at a conventional level and returning home with these qualities continues the celebration at the familial level.

Folktales in Cajun and Creole culture reflect the traditional religious practice of observing a day of rest, the tradition of going to Mass and resting on Sunday. Stories are told reflecting this point of view, in which people are punished for working on Sunday. In one tale, a man cuts trees to provide for his family. God asks him to rest and he refuses. As a result he becomes a tree, a human tree. When other members of the community try to free him, he begins to complain and show pain as if they are tearing him apart. He no longer is a man, but a part of nature and a member of nature's community: "Et le monde venait, ça dit, à peu près dix pas de lui pour commencer de fouiller la terre pour essayer d'arriver à lui pour le décoller. Ça lui faisait mal pareil comme si ça coupait dessus sa viande à lui" (Ancelet *Folktales* 154). He becomes his work, meaning he becomes a tree. He is removed from the community as a punishment for not observing a day of rest and, thus, he becomes a moral representation to his community. He serves as a warning to others. These stories of people being punished for working are used to teach moral lessons about working and resting. Cajuns and Creoles work to enjoy the time off and these stories are a reminder to not let work dominate life. The hunter in another story runs after his dogs who are chasing an animal. When this hunter was alive he ran after his dogs instead of going to Sunday Mass. As a result, he chases his dogs through the air in his afterlife: "Ça fait, après il est mort, tous les dimanches, dans l'air ils entendaient les chiens japper, puis ça entendait sa voix" (Ancelet *Folktales* 158). This is his punishment for not attending Mass in order to go hunt, which shows he prefers to pursue wealth instead of worshipping God. Since he is a hunter, the animal he's chasing represents his wealth. As a consequence, he is condemned eternally.

In addition to keeping balance in their observance of *joie de vivre*, Cajuns and Creoles create stories to express their contempt or misunderstandings of traditional religious organizations. Sometimes the Church is the subject of the story. In the following Joke tale, a backwards priest symbolizes the contempt the Cajuns and Creoles occasionally have for the clergy. A priest is wearing a coat backwards due to the cold weather and the bystanders who find him think his head is on backwards: “Mais, il y en avait deux dessus ce *motorcycle*. Celui-là, on l’a trainé de dans le fossé, ça a l’air comme si qu’il va le faire. Mais l’autre bougre là-bas, *by the time* qu’on lui a redroiti la tête dessus les épaules, il était mort” (Ancelet *Folktales* 96). The priest is killed, due to the ignorance of the bystanders. The backwards priest symbolizes the disdain that Cajuns and Creoles have for the clergy and traditional organization of the Church. Other characters in a Joke tale express the lack of morals in the clergy and confusion regarding traditional religious organizations: “Il a arrivé, et il a demandé à manger. Ils lui ont demandé s’il était Catholique. ‘O, ouais! Mon père était un prêtre et ma mère était une soeur!’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 101). This Joke tale has a double meaning. On the one hand it reflects the loose morals of the clergy within the organization. The other meaning in this joke relates to ignorance about the religion. The vagrant is not Catholic and he wants to eat. Another vagrant tells him that he has to say that he is Catholic in order to eat. When confronted with the question, the vagrant’s ignorance about the Catholic Church organization appears through his comment about his parents.

Even traditional Mass fails to escape criticism. A Pascal storyteller expresses his sentiment about traditional Mass by using his allergy to pork to create a context in the tale in which he describes the monotony and absurdity of the Roman Catholic liturgy:

Tu connais, quand je mange de la viande de cochon, je suis *allergic* de ça. Ça me fait ma tête, mes oreilles “Bingue, bingue, bingue, bingue.” À quatre heures du matin (...) et mes oreilles ont commencé à sonner. Toutes les vieilles femmes, elles sont beaucoup religieuses, elles se sont tout préparées. Elles ont arrivé à l’église à quatre heures et demie. Elles ont réveillé le prêtre. Ça croyait c’était la cloche de l’église qui sonnait. Tout ce temps-là, c’était mes oreilles. “Bingue, bingue, bingue!” Là, elles sont pas contentes avec moi, non. Mais le prêtre s’a mis à les croiser. Il les a croisées, puis là, il les...Il les a confessés. [chanté] Vobiscum.

(Ancelet *Folktales* 144)

The women believe that the ringing of his ears is the Church bells. The women blindly participate and do not question the process and do not question the traditional Mass. The Mass becomes a routine for which the parishoners do not have to be awake. The Church goers attend Mass without thinking or actively participating and the chants indicate that the priest recites Mass in the same way. The ridiculous chants that the storyteller sings represent the absurdity and monotony of traditional Mass. While Catholicism is important in Cajun and Creole cultures, the beliefs and morals underlying the religion are more important than the traditional organization of clergy and Mass. The dogma of the Church is secondary to the overall general beliefs in God, helping the community, giving love, and acting with good intentions.

Folk religion is a combination of both the Catholic Church and cultural practices, like treaters. A treater is a Cajun or Creole man or woman “who heals various ailments by power of prayer, and laying on of hands, as well as by some basic medication”

(Sexton 237) and the practice is rooted in spirituality (Guilbeau 53). These religious healings can include “charms, holy words, and holy actions to cure disease” and were often used for minor injuries because of people’s isolation and lack of access to modern medicine (Sexton 237). This type of faith healing is seen as a “gift from God” and treaters believe this form of healing does not go against the religion (Sexton 240). Treaters cannot refuse patients and cannot accept payment for services, however gifts are acceptable (Sexton 240). One storyteller tells of a treater who treated to “arrêter le sang” (Ancelet *Folktales* 197). Through the treater’s hands he is able to stop blood flow. He heals his patients by using his gift from God: his ability to stop blood flow represents the ability to stop death. Treaters exist in voodoo but traditional Catholic Cajun and Creole folk treaters consider voodoo as a black magic religion, and herbs or rituals relating to gris-gris or voodoo are black magic (Sexton 240). In the Catholic based communities treating is used only for minor injuries and illnesses, whereas in voodoo based communities treaters are spiritual healers.

Even though voodoo is considered black magic by the Catholic communities of South Louisiana, some Creole communities practice voodoo as their folk religion. One figure, Marie Laveau, was a prominent priestess during her time and legends surrounding her power still exist today. In “À la Veuve Paris,” Sybil Kein shows a glimpse of Marie Laveau’s power in the Creole community:

Oh Reine qui conjure,  
Marie Laveau,  
traiteur des vengeances pêcheurs,  
vous qui garde les z.herbes pour

l'amour cruel qui tchué. (Kein 26)

In other words, Marie Laveau is a spiritual healer, acting through voodoo. She gives hope to the Creole community. She treats the spirit for fear and pain by transforming these qualities into mystery, hope, and courage:

Donnein-nous mystère, espoir,  
courage!

Commence! Nous marche  
encore avec peur.

(...) Nous parle avec  
doleau dans nous z.yeux. (Kein 26)

Traditional treaters in both Cajun and Creole Catholic communities believe that God's spirit heals through their hands. Treaters are not the spirit, but a vessel through which the spirit travels in order to heal. Marie Laveau, in the above passages, is a spiritual healer, not a God herself. She transmits the spirit to the Creole people through the use of the drum and the serpent, which animate life forms. Rather than healing minor injuries and illnesses, Marie Laveau heals the spirit within Creoles. In this way, her practice is similar to traditional religious ceremonies, since conventional religion and participation in Mass on Sundays also seek to heal the spirit.

The power of Marie Laveau can still be felt through legends passed on in writings like Sybil Kein's poetry. In "Mo oulé mourir dans lac-là," Marie Laveau shows this power. The sun apologizes to Marie Laveau for "l'ouragan" that has no "respect / pour esprits-voodoo-ça-yé," (Kein 29). Voodoo spirits are powerful. Marie Laveau, already established as a spiritual healer, respects these voodoo spirits and is a symbol for them.

The hurricane destroys everything around her, showing a lack of respect. Both the hurricane and the sun are personified, making nature human. Nature and Marie Laveau, who embodies voodoo spirits, compete for space to exist. The sun acknowledges the spiritual power of Marie Laveau by apologizing for the hurricane's destruction. Marie Laveau is more powerful than nature because she survives the hurricane and the sun apologizes: "Sur la tranquillité instant / un soleil faible t'apé dire-apologies / sur so longue cheveux noir" (Kein 29). In fact, Marie Laveau commands everything, "Mo oulé mourrir dans lac-là!" / Li dit, apé commander tout," as if she were the most powerful spirit (Kein 29). According to this poem, nature is at the mercy of Marie Laveau. If it tries to overpower her, as with the hurricane, Marie Laveau can wreak destruction around herself in turn.

Other folk beliefs in voodoo concern the serpent. The serpent is a "major conduit for transmitting the energy that leads to possession by the spirit" (Duggal 169). The meaning of the spirit transmitted by the serpent symbolically represents the life force that animates the body (Duggal 169). In the following passage from "Appé Voudou Moin," the serpent represents death and the transformation of a being's life force back into this form. Madame Siline transforms from a woman into a serpent. She eventually dies as the serpent:

So gros lapeau brun  
t'apé séparer des os  
péu à péu, comme un serpent;  
(...)Madame Siline, à l'autre bord chemin-là.  
so langue rouge apé surgir et sortir de

so labouche,  
replie dans so lit  
et mouri. (Kein 27)

Madame Siline begins to change from a woman to a serpent, indicating the onset of death and the return of her spirit back to the serpent. Since the serpent represents the life giving force or spirit, Madame Siline's changes symbolize the transformation from life to death and a return to the source of life. This poem represents death as transformation from one life force to the next. Thus, the serpent reclaims the spirit of Madame Siline to rejoin the greater spirit.

In conjunction with traditional religious beliefs and folk celebrations, folk beliefs add to the folk religion with many stories warning of omens. The words *juif errant*, based on the story, are applied to "frequent and usually unwelcome guests, or more commonly, to people, especially children, who are given to prowling or roaming" (Guilbeau 49). The "Juif Errant" tale is an example of the consequences one may incur if a stranger does not receive adequate hospitality. It teaches how to be a part of a community. The vagrant in this story is God in disguise, who comes to teach lessons. In this particular lesson he asks a man for food and the man refuses, saying "Il y en a plus, les restants, c'est pour mes chiens" (Ancelet *Folktales* 155). For not giving what he has to the vagrant he is punished and sentenced to walk two thousand years or more: "Si c'est comme ça tu vas te lever et tu vas marcher jusqu'à la fin du monde. Deux mille ans, plus ou moins. (...) Le Bon Dieu, quand Il était sur la terre, c'est pour ça il était là, pour exemplar, donner exemple au monde" (Ancelet *Folktales* 155-156). The vagrant is a stranger who represents unknown members of the community. The moral implication

reminds others to help all members, even strangers, or they may wander the earth and remain isolated from this community.

*Feu Follet* is a folk explanation that represents the soul of a child who died before being baptized. Some still see a *feu follet* as an omen (Guilbeau 49). A *feu follet* is

un enfant qui mourait qu'avait jamais été baptisé. (...) Et ils disent le soir quand tu marches que ça faisait noir, noir-là, que le monde marchait le soir, ça voyait comme une petite lumière, pas beaucoup plus grosse qu'une chandelle. (...) Et si tu observais cette lumière-là, cette petite lumière t'aurait perdu, ça. (...) Mais ils disent si jamais le monde, ça voyait un feu follet et qu'il avait un couteau de poche, fallait il ouvre le couteau, et tu le plantes sur un poteau, si tu voyerais un feu follet, comme cette lumière-là. (...) Et là, cette petite lumière reste. Elle joue avec ce couteau. Là, ça te laisse tranquille. (Ancelet *Folktales* 156-157)

This superstition explains the importance of the Catholic religion through natural phenomena. Baptism is the first sacrament that a person receives and it represents the beginning of a spiritual journey in the Church. A baptized person who follows the Church will have proper guidance and will not be lost. The glow of the swamp gases symbolically represents the lost souls of unbaptized children. These lost souls are temptations along the spiritual journey. The knife represents the Church that is guidance along the path in a spiritual journey. Following the Catholic Church will keep travelers on their path and keep temptation fixed on itself like the lost souls that become entranced with their reflection in the knife. Thus, the moral lesson of this superstition implies that

not baptizing children will deprive them of a spiritual journey by making them lost souls and they will tempt others to lose their way.

Other folk beliefs involve other elements like curses. Curses are a part of the Cajun and Creole cultures. The *lougarou* word originates from the superstition of a man who can change shape from man to animal. He cannot resume his natural shape as a man until someone pricks blood from him. The *lougarou* is typically a well-known member of the community (Guilbeau 50). When he becomes the *lougarou*, he can no longer be a part of the community as an animal. Losing blood signifies losing his animal qualities. Upon losing the animal qualities he changes back to man and is accepted in the community: “ Le chien s’en allait un bout encore, puis il revenait. Alors la femme a dit, ‘*God dog!*’ Puis alors, elle a lancé un couteau après le chien, puis ça lui a coupé le nez et il a saigné quelques gouttes de sang. Il a tourné en homme” (Ancelet *Folktales* 160). The woman causes the change in the dog/man. She represents the feminine qualities that control the animal, with its masculine qualities, and this combination creates a balance. In other words, women transform the animal qualities in men that isolate them from community: “Elle dit, ‘Ton gri-gri?’ ‘Oui,’ il dit, ‘j’avais bu du sang de poule noire à une croix de chemin, à minuit, pour me donner l’habilité de devenir n’importe quoi ce que je voulais. Mais j’en étais fatigué! Et perdre ce sang-là, ça m’a ôté mon obligation de changer de forme. Merci beaucoup!’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 160). Losing blood signifies this transformation of qualities. This superstition teaches that cooperation is needed to make the community prosper and acting like an animal will only isolate oneself from the community.

The *lougarou* is not the only superstition about changing shape. Another story speaks of a Native American changing shape in order to protect his territory from trespassers. Like other tales, the characters in this folktale are representations of the cultures. Jody McBrown represents the Native American culture, while a hunter represents the immigrant culture that invades the territory. Jody McBrown becomes an owl to keep watch over his land: “Le hibou était par terre; il était mort. (...) La première chose ils ont vu, c’était son bec, et son bec avait une grosse dent en or. Il avait deux boucles d’oreilles en or, et dans sa patte, il avait un bracelet, et c’était écrit dessus le bracelet, ‘Jody McBrown, *the Indian*’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 164). The owl symbolizes the Native Americans and the land the owl watches over is their territory. The man who trespasses and shoots the owl represents the other culture that took over the Native American territory. This tale shows the influence of Native Americans in Cajun and Creole cultures because the story is told from the Native American point of view, the characters are depictions of cultural attitudes, and it is a part of the Cajun repertoire. *Juif errant*, *feu follet*, and *lougarou* are other typical folk beliefs in Cajun and Creole culture. These beliefs show the importance of religion and teach moral lessons and warnings with respect to community and religion, and at the same time show cultural influences.

Magic tales represent escape from reality and portray folk beliefs about death. For example, one voyager, on his tour of cemeteries throughout the country, happens upon a town in which no cemetery exists and everyone lives to be very old:

Ce fait, il a amené le voyageur pour rencontrer son papa et son grand-père. Et il dit, ‘Je suis intéressé de connaître où le cimetière.’ Il dit, ‘Où je vas, c’est toujours les cimetières j’aime visiter, mais,’ il dit, ‘je vois à présent

la raison que je trouve pas le cimetièrre. Le monde vit tellement vieux, il y en a pas pour enterrer! (Ancelet *Folktales* 60)

This story is similar to “Juif Errant” because of the similar actions and implications that take place. In “Juif Errant” the man had refused to give up food, a symbol of his wealth, to God and, therefore, had to wander the earth as punishment. In this tale, the man’s wealth does not satisfy him so he begins to wander. His wandering symbolizes his search for truth. His search for cemeteries represents a search for true knowledge about death and how others view death. When he comes to the Cajun town and there are no cemeteries, he sees that Cajuns consider death a transformation of life, another stage of life. The old man that he meets represents the wisdom that one attains through life, and the belief that death is transformation of life and not an end to life is part of this wisdom.

Accepting the loss of a loved one, particularly a child, is expressed through a combination of religion and superstition. The general interpretation is based on the Catholic religion, but the specific description of the afterlife is a folk belief. This story’s theme is to help people cope after losing a loved one. The following excerpt shows how the spirit of a young girl visits her mother in a dream to tell her no longer to mourn her death. In the dream, other children are carrying lit candles and the young girl’s candle stays unlit because of her parents’ tears: “Le Bon Dieu aime pas que vous autres pleures pour moi. Faut vous autres acceptes que le Bon Dieu m’a pris. Quand vous autres pleures, vous autres éteins ma chandelle. (...) J’appartiens au Bon Dieu. Il m’a pris quand Il a été paré. Faut vous autres acceptes votre croix” (Ancelet *Folktales* 66-67).

This story gives a resolution to the death of a young child and how to cope with such

deaths. This story is an example of how Cajuns have come to accept child deaths and the idea of an afterlife.

Other tales revolve around death and facing death. One story shows how a young boy finds a grave and dances on it. The young boy in this story tells his mother that he danced on a grave: “Ça fait, il dit il avait vu une petite tombe dans le bois. Et il dit il y avait un tas des feuilles sur la tombe. Et il avait propreté la tombe et il avait dansé dessus. Ça fait, là, il s’avait amusé sur cette petite tombe-là dans le bois” (Ancelet *Folktales* 150). By dancing on the grave the young boy triumphs over death at this point in his life. When they return together the grave is no longer there. The storyteller emphasizes that “s’il aurait peut-être retourné lui seul, mais il était trop jeune, tu vois. Il était trop jeune” (Ancelet *Folktales* 150). The comment about the young boy being too young indicates he is too young to die because his mother had to come with him. He escapes death by dancing on the grave, but his mother protects him from death because he could not return alone. Since he could not return alone and death is a solo journey, the young boy escapes death.

In Myth tales, we see the superhuman exploits of God-like characters. These tales often resemble creation myths and recall Biblical episodes. For example, Mayo creates water on the moon: “Mayo va prendre une qualité de pierre il y a dessus la lune et il reste peut-être cinq gallons d’eau. Et il va cracher sur une de ces pierres-là, ça fait une rivière, une rivière que l’eau coule partout, il paraît. (...) Et à tout moment, il éteint le soleil là-dedans. Il l’éteint le soir. C’est pour ça tu le vois pas” (Ancelet *Folktales* 132-133). Mayo creates water and extinguishes the sun in the water. This tale resembles the creation story in Genesis: The Bible’s influence emerges through Mayo’s creation of

water and alternating day and night. Other characters who have God-like qualities are Pascal and Jim who make it rain for “trente-neuf jours. (...) C’est Jim qu’avait percé le fils-de-putain de gros nué. Il l’avait percé avec une aiguille. (...) Quand la grosse pluie a pris, les poissons d’eau salée pouvaient pas vivre dans l’eau douce. Pascal a percé les nués. Et Jim est venu-là avec des tonnes de sel” (Ancelet *Folktales* 134-135). This tale, too, reflects aspects of the Bible, such as the 39 days of rain. Both Pascal and Jim have God-like qualities, like Mayo, through their actions of making it rain and salting the sea. These tales offer a characteristic combination of Judeo-Christian elements and mythical qualities attributed to Cajun or Creole characters.

Other mythological stories explain the evolution of animals, similar to Greek mythology that explains natural phenomena through personifying nature: “Une *seal*. Ces grosses—Ils ont fait l’amour un bout de temps. Elle avait envie de le manger, mais elle a vu qu’elle était amoureuse. Elle était en course! Pascal lui a calé, là. Une *seal*, ça porte trois jours. Trois jours après, il y a eu des petits pascals qu’a sorti dessus la neige. C’était des pingouins. C’était tous des petites affaires minces” (Ancelet *Folktales* 139). In this Pascal story, a love affair between a seal and a human is the explanation of the penguin’s emergence. Pascal stories are usually exaggerated, but they also show various adaptations and evolutions such as the Cajuns’ change from rural to urban in which they are modernizing their culture to adapt to the twentieth century (Allain 132). The Cajuns adapted the following Pascal tale to reflect the change from traditional to modern: “C’était une grosse mule, ça l’appelait Raleigh. Pauvre vieille Raleigh est morte et Jim a pris à jongler qui il aurait fait avec cette emballeuse-là. Ça fait, il l’a *convert* avec un vieux petit *gas motor*” (Ancelet *Folktales* 145). Mayo’s horse, Raleigh, who dies,

reflects the death of traditional transportation and way of life. When Mayo acquires a gas motor, instead of buying another horse, he is adapting to modern transportation. Mayo symbolizes the Cajun culture and his adaptation is the culture's change to incorporate modern technology, conveniences, and way of life.

The bull appears as a constant mythological or supernatural character and acts as a protector of territory. It is a "source of protection" because of the "great strength and virility" it possesses (Pickering 46). In the following excerpt a bull creates a valley and guards the four corners: "Il gratte-là. Il peut gratter, cher Bon Dieu! Dans vingt minutes, il sera vingt pieds de creux. Il a commencé à gratter dessus une montagne, il a fait un *valley*. (...) Il a une cloche d'église pendue dans le cou. (...) Mais ça résonne dans les quatre coins" (Ancelet *Folktales* 136-137). The valley is the area between mountains that is typically luscious and plentiful. It symbolizes the wealth, or the fruits of one's labor, that is protected by the bull, who represents strength. The bull also wears a church bell, signifying a religious element in the myth. The bull is a spirit that protects four corners, the four directions and the church bell around his neck rings, indicating where the spirit of the religion is. In addition the wandering of the bull among the four corners symbolizes the protection that religion offers during the four stages of life: birth, childhood, adulthood, and death (Rickels 246). The valley also symbolically represents life, the vitality of the spirit. Religion (the bull) carves out a spirit (valley) in life and then protects it through the stages of life (four corners).

The stories in South Louisiana about buried treasure originated from families burying money during the Civil War to protect it from Union and Confederate armies (Ancelet *Folktales* 147). The bull represents the spirit that guards territory in any myth

containing the oak or the bull or both. In the previous tale, the bull symbolizes the spirit of religion whereas in the following tale the bull is a spirit guarding territory: “un certain chêne avec une marque au nord du lac (...) il y avait un gros boeuf qui s’en venait en travers de le bois avec la flamme qui lui sortait du nez” (Ancelet *Folktales* 148). The bull is transformed into a spirit that has to be controlled by a spirit controller while others look for money. According to the storyteller, they found the money because the controller was able to control the bull: “Faudra je retourne en ville après un contrôleur d’esprits. (...) Le trou était là, et la caisse, et les marques de piastres étaient dessus les bois qu’ils ont cassé de la caisse. (...) Faut croire il (controller) a contrôlé le boeuf-là, le boeuf avec la flamme” (Ancelet *Folktales* 148). In this case, the controller represents the Union and Confederate armies’ attempt to overtake territory in South Louisiana, symbolized by the money. The bull represents the family spirit guarding the money and its ability to thwart these attempts and to maintain their territory. In the following excerpt, the controller is powerless against the bull: “Et il y avait un contrôleur qu’avait amené une bible pour contrôler les *spirits*. (...) Et jusqu’à le contrôleur s’est sauvé et il a jamais vu sa bible après ça” (Ancelet *Folktales* 149). The controller’s powers prove ineffective, and the family is able to defeat the Union and Confederate soldiers trying to pillage their land.

In these tales about money, the oak appears as a locator for the money. The oak appears in several stories in which “le chêne a été transplanté pour connaître la place, pour marquer la place” where “l’argent était” (Ancelet *Folktales* 151).<sup>4</sup> The oak

---

<sup>4</sup> Many other stories contain the oak as a way of marking the spot for buried treasure: “Il y avait deux boeufs qui se battaient à l’Ile Navarre-là tout le temps. Et là où eux se battaient là, et bien, il y avait de l’argent là, mais c’est pas là l’argent Dédé et eux, ils ont trouvé. Dédé et eux, ils ont trouvé l’argent à l’Ile Navarre, mais l’autre bord de la petite coulée. Et c’est d’autres qu’a trouvé là ayoù les chênes verts *twin*-là,

symbolizes the knowledge of territory. Since money represents the threatened territory, the oak symbolizes the knowledge of this territory. The oak is a typical tree in Louisiana and is representative of the terrain. However, it also symbolizes the knowledge that Cajuns and Creoles have of the territory. Wherever there is an oak, it is their money, their territory, and the Cajuns and Creoles guard this territory (wealth) by using a bull as a symbol for their strength. In these tales the oak is a symbol of knowledge.

Oaks also appear with greater significance in Louisiana folklore, since the trees “stand as living witnesses to the tenacity, strength, and love of the people of South Louisiana” (Orso 59). When a storyteller relates the oak to prayer in the following tale, the tree becomes a symbol of God’s wisdom: “C’était une vieille fille qui voulait se marier. (...) ‘Mais, si tu prierais les soirs auprès d’un chêne, ta prière pourrait être exaucée’” (Ancelet *Folktales* 71). The oak becomes a symbol of strength and wisdom for the girl. She is reminded that her prayers will bring the wisdom and strength of God so that she may marry. Oak trees are sturdy, representing strength, and this strength reminds the girl of her own strength. Prayer is a private conversation with God in which one asks for blessings or in this case, to marry. The strength exhibited by the oak in all directions also reaches toward God and, thus, becomes a vehicle for God’s wisdom. The oak is the vehicle through which God speaks to people, and it represents this wisdom and strength.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen that various tales reflect the Cajuns’ and Creoles’ view of religion. Traditional religion is important for observing certain holidays and sacraments, but folk religion also uses elements like treaters to express more or less Catholic values and morals. Many tales represent disdain for conventional organized

---

ils sont” (Ancelet *Folktales* 180). The bulls can be seen as two families competing for territory and the twin oaks represent this territory.

religion, as well. However, folk beliefs and myths show how Cajuns and Creoles incorporate religious morals and commandments into their way of life. Tales reflecting community involvement, respecting others, and helping others are examples of conventional religion adapted to folk religion. Folk beliefs and myths about death create an understanding of the afterlife and alleviate the fear of death. The storytellers use superstition and myth to explain ideas of conventional religion and spirituality and to add their own personal understandings of religion.

## CHAPTER 3

### HISTORY, VIOLENCE, AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

These themes all have in common an exploration of the region's origin and the problems it has had to overcome. In the past, Cajuns and Creoles endured many hardships from slavery to Americanization, which threatened their way of life. They have become "a people whose history of tragedy and turmoil has taught them to be careful" (Ancelet "Survival" 47). Isolation and external influences threatening the cultures of South Louisiana have created a territoriality in which outsiders are questioned thoroughly before being accepted by the community.

When "mandatory English education was imposed" upon the state, Cajun and Creole cultures began to disappear. Children were punished for speaking the language of their heritage and Cajun and Creole traditions became a sign of "cultural illegitimacy" (Ancelet "Survival" 48). The effects of the English-only mandate eventually caused internal conflict within the cultures. According to Ancelet, "stress cracks appeared on the social surface: alcoholism and suicide among musicians and artists; juvenile delinquency among children who could no longer speak to their grandparents because of the language difference (...); (and) self-denigration among a people (...), bearing the stigma of shame" ("Survival" 48-49). These effects of cultural suppression entered the folktale repertoire. Cajuns and Creoles created folktales in order to understand their situation, to teach and warn the younger generations, and to preserve their cultures. As a result, stories were created, representing the survival traits of South Louisiana. In addition to external

influences, some folktales show the violence within the culture. Isolation causes boredom and one way Cajuns escaped this boredom was through fighting. However, these stories are few and the majority of the stories about violence represent a way to institute justice within the community. Within the Creole community violence stories mostly involved the vigilantes, a group associated with the Ku Klux Klan. These stories show the survival of the Creoles during a difficult period. The vigilante stories are all told by Creoles, so it is unclear if Cajuns encountered similar problems with vigilantes or if their isolation kept them from being attacked. There is little evidence regarding the exact reason, such as race or religion being the cause of the attacks, for the aggression by vigilante groups. In addition, language problems appear in the stories, showing the difficulties that Cajuns and Creoles had communicating with Anglo-Americans. Cajuns and Creoles have overcome and adapted to these obstacles to preserve their cultures. The ability to adapt is the key element that has allowed these cultures to survive. This ability to “chew up change, swallow the palatable parts and spit out the rest” has become the “principal issue of cultural survival in French Louisiana” (Ancelet “Survival” 50). Many times the folktales were the only source of communication among the generations, particularly between the older generations who could speak and understand French and the younger generations who could only understand it (Barry 49). Through the folktales, the older generations teach traditions and morals, which allow the culture to survive.

The folktales show the history of the land and its people and how cultures mixed in South Louisiana. Some legends pertain to the naming of places and areas; other legends describe relationships between cultures. These legends provide information about South Louisiana regions and the history teaches how the cultures mixed. In the

following legend, two hunters name a town Carencros because they see many birds of this name: “ ‘On va la nommer le nom du premier z-oiseau on va trouver’. (...) Ça fait, ils ont vu qu’il y avait beaucoup de carencros là, ces gros oiseaux noirs. Et ils ont dit, ‘Mais c’est comme ça on va nommer la place’ ” (Ancelet *Folktales* 164). The Carencros bird is a buzzard or carrion crow. According to Ancelet, two hunters name the area after this bird and the combination of two words, “carrion crow,” changed to form Carencros in the “local vernacular” (*Folktales* 164). In other words, the people in this area created a word to represent their town after a bird, indigenous to the area. By combining a typical occupation and an indigenous bird, a legend is created to show the origination of a town’s name and explain local dialect as well as to combine culture and area (Barry 55).

Another region, Nez Piqué, has its own folktale regarding the region. This folktale is about a bridge and how it was formed. The bridge was a large “cocodril” and “il avait la tête enterrée dessus un bord, et il avait la queue pliée dans l’autre écore, l’autre bord” (Ancelet *Folktales* 161). This legendary tale uses the crocodile to explain the existence of the first Nez Piqué bridge.<sup>5</sup> The alligator, a reptile indigenous to South Louisiana, represents the tale’s adaptation to the region. The storyteller emphasizes that no one knew how the bridge was originally constructed. This story originated from the lack of historical knowledge about the region. Different qualities of the bridge are accentuated throughout the tale. For example, “Le pont était assez large, dans ce temps-là, il y avait juste des wagons et des bogheis et ça, et le monde croisait. Ils auront croisé le pont pour aller l’autre bord, visiter, quelque chose. Là, quand ça revenait, ils s’auront croisés sur le pont. Alors, ils auront été, arrêté les wagons et puis le monde visiter” (Ancelet *Folktales*

---

<sup>5</sup> The crocodile is actually an alligator. In English the Cajuns and Creoles use the correct term, but in Cajun and Creole French the alligator is a “cocodril.”

161). Thus, the original bridge served as a meeting place to socialize with other members of the community. The lack of historical knowledge about the region prompted storytellers to create a tale based on the region adding their own elements to explain history. At the end of the tale the storyteller implies this story is true because there is a plaque by the new bridge describing the bridge's history, which will confirm the story.

Other folktales portray relationships between cultures. When the Acadians settled in South Louisiana, the region was different from Canada and the Native Americans helped the Acadians adapt to their new home. Through this adaptation process, folktales emerged, showing the cultural influences of the Native Americans (Ancelet *Cajun* 33). The following legend shows the intermingling of cultures in the past:

Il y avait des Indiens droite ici pendant un temps. C'était leur territoire. Et ils ont réussi à les chasser, mais pendant un temps, il y avait du monde qui les avaient adoucis alentour. Ça causait bien. C'était du monde *smart*, mais c'était des chasseurs. Il y en a quelques uns qui ont resté qui étaient vaillants et doux. (Ancelet *Folktales* 94)

The excerpt describes relationships in the past between Native Americans and Cajuns. Through this legend, Cajuns learned hunting techniques from Native Americans (Ancelet *Cajun* 33). This evidence of the mixing of cultures shows how the Native Americans influenced the Cajuns, helping them to survive. It also describes Native American personality characteristics. The storyteller describes their characteristics as smart, kind, and gentle. By including these qualities in the folktale the storyteller shows the relationship of the mixed cultures.

In addition to legends explaining the history of the land and cultural influences, other stories inform about threats to the survival of South Louisiana culture. The history reflects internal and external influences that shape the cultures as well as violent tendencies within the cultures that hindered community development. For example one storyteller compares contemporary culture with past culture in which “le monde était criminel. C’est plus pareil” (Ancelet *Folktales* 183). The past within the cultures was more violent and in the past “un homme pouvait pas aller dans un endroit d’un autre. Et quand il allait dans un endroit d’un autre, eux le faisaient partir, ou fallait il battre. C’était une manière de vivre dans ce temps-là” (Ancelet *Folktales* 188). This comment by a storyteller implies that violence isolated the community because one had to fight in order to obtain acceptance into a place. This violence also implies a level of fear in the community, since the story affirms that a man could not go from place to place. The threat of violence physically restricted movement in the community. Throughout other folktales the underlying attitude is light-hearted and jovial. In this tale, however, this quality is suppressed to show the violent tendencies within. The storyteller explains that this violence was the way of life. The notion that a man had to fight in order to enter a place implies a territoriality of the place and fighting served to guard this territory. These tales portray the problems within that threatened the survival of South Louisiana culture.

Violence within the community also threatened the cohesiveness of the culture. Hostility came from members not being able to work. In one Historical tale, a man asks a clockmaker to teach him how to make clocks. The clockmaker refuses, saying “Non je fais ma vie avec ça” (Ancelet *Folktales* 183). The man becomes so angry that he blinds the clockmaker and does not learn anything. The act of blinding the clockmaker does not

solve the problem of the man being out of work. This act of violence actually inhibits both men's survival in the community. As a result of the man's actions, the clockmaker and the man are unable to be productive members of the community.

The previous example shows how violence breaks up the community, whereas the following example illustrates violence as a reaction to boredom from isolation. This type of violence is considered a part of tradition since the mid-nineteenth century (Rickels 252). Two Cajuns, who are pranksters, in the following Historical tale, decide to use violence to escape boredom: "Ils ont été pour casser un bal un soir. Le cousin à Pap (Arthur Gaudet) dit à vieux Victor, 'Vic, allons casser le bal à soir'" (Ancelet *Folktales* 185). To them "casser le bal" is a form of amusement. This jovial feeling about violence is expressed when one of the pranksters is thrown out of the window:

Il dit, "Vic, moi, je vas rentrer en dedans-là, et toi, mets-toi à la fenêtre en dehors et comptes-les." Il dit, "Moi, je vas les passer en dehors." (...) "Boy," il dit, "c'est pas rien pour passer vieux Jake en travers." (...) Il le passe en travers la fenêtre. Il tombe dehors. (...) Il y a quatre ou cinq qui lui ont tombé dessus l'autre. Lui, il était grand, Arthur Gaudet. Ils l'ont sacré à travers de la fenêtre. (...) Vic dit, "Deux!" "Euh, euh, Vic!" Il dit, "Compte pas ça icitte, c'est moi!" (Ancelet *Folktales* 186)

He is thrown out instead of throwing out others. Their "casser le bal" was thwarted, but to them the whole process was all in good fun.

The violence became so prevalent and out of control in the community that constables and lawmen were hired to help deter the troublemakers. Some folktales show characters, who represent the law, as an effect of the violence. The constables were often

from the same group of troublemakers that caused the violence. By hiring them, the community solved two problems: violence diminished because troublemakers were now hired as lawmen, thereby reducing their number. Many times the lawmen were able to institute justice without the use of force or violence:

C'était un homme que jamais, jamais personne a pu prendre le dessus de lui. Si ça arrivait à là, il attrapait une main au fond de culotte, et puis une main dans ton cou, et puis il te tirait en travers la porte. Puis là, la citerne t'arrêtait souvent des fois. (...) Il était un homme, aussi bon constable comme la terre a jamais fait. Mais il avait pas peur de rien, et puis il coupait le train avant ça commence"  
(Ancelet *Folktales* 188).

According to the storyteller this constable can stop violence before it begins. As a result, violence within the community diminishes and the community begins to prosper again.

Nevertheless, violence also served as a form of folk law or justice. In South Louisiana history, fights and duels were often a way of solving differences and disputes. According to Ancelet, folk law emerged as a result of "territoriality, isolation, a lack of civilizing influences, and a system of justice that did not necessarily include outside authority" (Ancelet *Cajun* 105). In some cases, calling a *grand rond* made the fight official in the community, an official way of instituting justice, and, thus, no police or lawmen ever arrested the fighters. Those involved in fights or duels almost always know each other and the reason for the confrontation (Ancelet *Cajun* 109-110). The folktales reflect this type of folk justice: "Ils ont fait un rendez-vous pour le dimanche matin. (...) Le dimanche matin à dix heures, ils se seraient rencontrés en avant. Ils seraient battus en armes" (Ancelet *Folktales* 184). This type of folk law creates an understanding that the

fight must be about life and death, because the nature of a duel implies that one person dies.

In some cases, folktales reflect isolation as a cause for folk law, as in the following tale when a farmer punishes one of his workers by shooting him:

Là Dédé a crié après une de ses filles pour elle amène son fusil. Et il y avait un canal qui coupait en travers de la savane. Dauterive s'a couché et il a parti à se sauver dans la savane en allant au canal. Quand il a arrivé presqu'au canal, Dédé l'a tiré. Ça fait, lui, il s'a juste tiré dans l'eau. Et l'eau ôte les plombs. Là, lui, il a resté là-dedans un élan. Vieux Dédé, il a rentré dans sa maison. Puis là, Dauterive a parti. Il a été chez lui pour la balance de la journée. (Ancelet *Folktales* 181-182)

Both the farmer and the worker did not return the rest of the day. With the lack of legal authority in the isolated communities, members solved the differences the best way they understood. In this case shooting the worker for disrespect solved the problem. The worker was not badly injured and both felt that justice had been applied correctly. The worker returned the next day to continue his job. Isolation from mainstream society helped to preserve the culture, but with isolation violence became a regular part of the community and this type of folk law is typical of isolated communities (Gaudet 80).

However, some violence by outside groups, such as the vigilantes, a form of the Ku Klux Klan, threatened the culture's survival in South Louisiana during the first half of the twentieth century. The vigilantes attacked anyone who did not respect the "planter caste" system (Brasseaux 82). These victims included, but were not limited to, "European immigrants suspected of socialistic political tendencies, poor whites who had

slave or free black concubines, free blacks with slave lovers, and poor persons of all walks of life and all racial background” (Brasseaux 82). The influence of the vigilantes created stories in the Creole repertoire as a reminder of injustice and how to cope with this injustice. The following excerpt describes how some vigilantes tried to force the Creoles to move out of their way. On a narrow road, two buggies try to pass, and the vigilantes became hostile: “C’était des Bergeron, deux blancs. Il avait un de ces *rawhides*. Il a descendu de son boghei avec le *rawhide* comme s’il aurait voulu cogner mon papa. Ça fait, mon papa dit, ‘Si tu sens comme ça, *go ahead*. Je crois je suis assez grand pour ta baleine frapper dessus” (Ancelet *Folktales* 176). The storyteller’s father confronted the vigilantes. Through this confrontation and not expressing fear of being whipped, the father deterred the vigilantes’ attempt to inflict injustice and thus protected his family.

While other vigilante groups in America threatened black culture in particular, the vigilantes threatened Creole culture as a whole. Other stories show the same injustice and threat to the Creole culture. The following conclusion to a confrontation with vigilantes gives an overall impression of the vigilantes’ presence and the threat against Creole survival: “O mais, ils étaient à peu près une cinquantaine, ou une centaine, quand ça allait. C’était une bande, à cheval” (Ancelet *Folktales* 172). The gradation of the number of the vigilantes in the tale reflects their increasing threat. They also become more menacing when the storyteller adds that they are on horseback. By continuing to increase the number and the mobility of the vigilantes, this storyteller evokes the overwhelming presence of this group. In this particular incident, the group of vigilantes had positioned themselves against a single man. The point of view is from the storyteller

and the number reflects his emotions connected to the incident. The storyteller exaggerates the number in order to emphasize the vigilantes' presence, to express an element of fear on the part of the storyteller, and to make the conclusion more triumphant. The storyteller was able to defeat this band of vigilantes by killing one of their members. Thus these folktales illustrate violence from outside the culture to show how Creoles coped with the vigilantes' system of injustice as well as their ability to withstand this injustice.

These themes serve to preserve history and show cultural threats as well as language problems due to the Americanization movement. Both Cajuns and Creoles encountered language problems beginning after the Civil War and lasting until the mid-twentieth century. In Cajun culture, Joke tales reflect this language problem through humor. Cajuns use humor to accept what they cannot overcome and to also show their ability to laugh at any situation, no matter how horrible (Ancelet "Harvard" 102). In the following Joke tale, Jean Sot forgets how to speak French due to his English education at school: "Jean Sot avait été à l'école pour apprendre l'anglais. Ça fait, il a revenu *back* pour visiter son père et sa mère, et il faisait comme s'il comprenait plus le français" (Ancelet *Folktales* 82). Jean Sot acts as though he has forgotten French because of his English education and the prejudice toward the French language at school. This Joke tale reflects the communication problems that began in Cajun families after the English-only mandate was enforced. Parents stopped speaking French to their children because of the stigma and isolation from society that they felt. As a result children grew up speaking English instead of French and this tale reflects the beginning of this process.

Sybil Kein shows the language problem in a different way. In “Dans l’hospital,” a Creole goes to the hospital with a broken leg and encounters communication problems because the nurse does not understand French and the Creole does not understand English: “Yes, Yes, but what’s your race, your color? / Ah! Couleur! C’est bleu! / Blue?! Impossible! / Non. C’est, possible. Mo tombé et mo jambe vini bleu” (Kein 42). In this excerpt the Creole explains the color of his leg while the nurse tries to establish his race for admittance. The language barrier is so difficult to cross that the Creole misunderstands the nurse and ends up leaving the hospital: “To popa c’est fils-fils-tain! Mo pas vini ici pour to / Bouche salé! / Wait! Sit down, Mr. Ed- / Aide? Aidez to-même!” (Kein 42). As a result of the language barrier the Creole is inadvertently insulted and does not receive proper treatment. The mix of English and French in the poem “splits the poem apart while leaving the reader with an embarrassed and uneasy feeling” (Barry 60). The split of the languages represents the split of the two cultures and the confrontation between the two. The Cajun Joke tale and Creole poem are examples of the language problems that threatened the survival of these cultures. Through these examples of the language barriers, Cajuns and Creoles show how they were forced to adapt to a different culture in order to avoid the stigma of shame.

Through folktales Cajuns and Creoles explain the history, violence, and language problems that shaped their cultures as well as threatened their survival. The history shows the cultural influences and their development. Folktales and poetry about violence and language problems educate and warn younger generations regarding the survival of their culture. These folktales are teaching tools to show the negative aspects within the cultures as well as external obstacles. Poetry enables the poets to surmount the obstacles

in written form, in which words become “the battlefield and weapons which the poets use to carve out an image of the cultural problems” (Barry 57). The examples of the folktales and poetry show how Cajuns and Creoles internalize problems within the culture and outside the culture in order to adapt and change with these forces. Cajuns and Creoles continue their survival by representing their cultural problems in folktales and poetry.

## CHAPTER 4

### CONCLUSION

Throughout this study we have examined the physical and spiritual identity of South Louisiana as well as the problems and difficulties that characterized these isolated communities. While the folktales and poetry discussed represent South Louisiana culture in the past, this literature also helps to re-establish culture in a contemporary setting. For many years in the beginning of the twentieth century Cajuns and Creoles were told their cultures were substandard and were forced to adapt to the mainstream culture. Isolation preserved the cultures until the interstate system connected the communities. Through this isolation, folktales emerged telling of cultural identity, preserving language, and continuing traditions. Recent publications of folktales and poetry enable outsiders to view the cultural identity of South Louisiana, as it was forty years ago and how it has survived.

The physical identity of South Louisiana culture through occupation, music, and folk life has changed and adapted to reflect a contemporary version from the past. Cajuns and Creoles may still be farmers and fishermen, but they are now working to provide food for a larger industry rather than a small community. With this change from rural to urban and isolated to pluralistic environment, physical traditions such as courting rituals and dances changed, showing the influence of mainstream American culture. The material properties of Cajun and Creole culture seem to blend in with the American culture in the contemporary context. Instead of practicing cultural traditions, like the

*boucherie*, every week as part of a way of life, these traditions are celebrated every so often as a way of remembering the past, preserving cultural traditions, and being a part of the community. The physical representations of the culture in the folktales and poetry show continual community involvement and prevent further isolation.

The folk religion from the folktales and poetry studied shows the spirituality of South Louisiana. This spirituality has prospered despite many outside and detrimental influences. Through this spirituality Cajuns and Creoles endure by maintaining a level of beliefs and spiritual rituals that have transformed over time as a result of oral tradition.

Even though the transformations of the culture caused a modernization of tradition, the spirituality or folk religion continues, allowing cultural beliefs and traditions that have an ever changing form to continue. In essence, the folktales and poetry discussed have a changeable, allowing for transformation and reinterpretation of cultural identity with each storyteller and poet. As a result of the changeable form of folktales, storytellers changed the stories according to the cultural elements that were relevant for a particular time period and region. The storyteller's ability to change the tales reflects the culture's ability to change. The folktales themselves represent the ultimate traditional aspect of Cajun and Creole culture that has not changed since the founding of Louisiana. The contents and form may have changed to reflect current situations, but the folktale in general and the act of telling stories has not changed.

The folktales from the past to the present provide a medium for Cajuns and Creoles to situate themselves in an American culture and observe tradition. These folktales are the physical representations of the spirituality of South Louisiana culture. By recording these oral traditions, the cultures further establish themselves as a unique

element in American culture and in the Francophone community. The recordings also establish the folktales as literature and can no longer be considered specifically as oral tradition. Many Cajuns and Creoles write poetry as a way to continue their culture and use language they learned from childhood. When they are published these folktales and poetry lead to a stabilization of the language. In addition the Cajun and Creole cultures portray themselves accurately from within by publishing folktales and poetry by natives. The cultural depiction in the literature changes from that of an outsider who is unfamiliar with customs showing cultural identity, to insiders portraying the culture as it is from their own point of view and, thereby, refuting the inaccurate representations made by outsiders. This study summarizes the cultural identity within the folktales collected by Ancelet and within Kein's poetry.

## WORKS CITED

- Allain, Mathé. "Twentieth-Century Acadians." *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*. ed. Glenne R. Conrad. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1978. 129-141.
- Ancelet, Barry Jean. *Cajun and Creole Folktales of Louisiana: The French Oral Tradition of South Louisiana*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- . *Cajun Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991.
- . "The Survival of French Culture in South Louisiana." *1985 Festival of American Folklife: June 26-30 / July 3-7*. 47-51.
- . "The Cajun Who Went to Harvard: Identity in the Oral Tradition of South Louisiana." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 23 ( Summer 1989): 101-115.
- Beaulieu, Bertille. "Affirmation de l'identité dans la littérature cadienne." *Francophones d'Amérique* 6 (1996): 141-157.
- Barry, David. "A French Literary Renaissance in Louisiana: Cultural Reflections." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 23 (Summer 1989): 47-63.
- Brasseaux, Carl A., Keith P. Fontenot, Claude F. Oubre. *Creoles of Color in the Bayou Country*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.
- Cheramie, David J. "La nouvelle littéraire de la Louisiane française." *Francographies* 1-2 (1993): 301-308.
- Claudel, Calvin. "The Folktales of Louisiana and their background." *Southern Folklore Quarterly*. 19 (1955): 164-170.
- Dégh, Linda. "Oral Folklore: Folk Narrative." *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972. 53-83.
- Duggal, Barbara Rosendale. "Marie Laveau: The Voodoo Queen Repossessed." *Creole: The History and Legacy of Louisiana's Free People of Color*. ed. Sybil Kein. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000. 157-178.
- Gaudet, Marcia. "The Image of the Cajun in Literature." *Journal of Popular Culture*. 23 (Summer 1989 ): 77-88.

- Guilbeau, John. "Folklore and the Louisiana French Lexicon." *Revue de Louisiane / Louisiana Review*. 1 (1972): 45-54.
- Kein, Sybil. *Gumbo People*. New Orleans: Margaret Media, Inc., 1981.
- Le Menestrel, Sara. *La voie des Cadiens: Tourisme et identité en Louisiane*. Paris: Belin, 1999.
- Pickering, David. *Dictionary of Superstitions*. London: Cassell, 1995.
- Propp, Vladimir. *Theory and History of Folklore*. trans. Ariadna Y. Martin and Richard P. Martin. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
- Orso, Etheylyn G. "Louisiana Live Oak Legends." *Louisiana Folklore Miscellany*. 7 (1992): 59-67.
- Rickels, Patricia K. "The Folklore of the Acadians." *The Cajuns: Essays on Their History and Culture*. ed. Glenne R. Conrad. Lafayette: University of Southwestern Louisiana Press, 1978. 240-253.
- Rosenberg, Bruce A. "The Complexity of Oral Tradition." *Oral Tradition*. 2 (Jan 1987): 73-90.
- Rottet, Kevin J. "Language Change and Language Death: Some changes in the Pronominal system of declining Cajun French." *Plurilinguismes* 11 (Apr 1996): 117-151.
- Sexton, Rocky. "Cajun and Creole Treaters: Magico-Religious Folk Healing in French Louisiana." *Western Folklore*. 51 (July-Oct 1992): 237-248.
- Spitzer, Nicholas R. "Mardi Gras in L'Anse De 'Prien Noir: A Creole Community Performance in Rural French Louisiana." *Creoles of Color of the Gulf South*. ed. James H. Dormon. Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1996. 87-125.