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Connecting past to present: Louisiana cajuns and their sense of belonging to an Acadian diaspora

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Connecting past to present: Louisiana cajuns and their sense of belonging to an Acadian diaspora

- 1 Bien qu'ils soient issus d'une culture mixte, élaborée en Louisiane à partir des différents groupes immigrés qui se sont implantés sur le territoire (français, acadiens, espagnols, irlandais, créoles noirs...), beaucoup de Cadiens se réclament d'ascendance acadienne. Ce sentiment d'appartenance se manifeste par la mise en valeur d'une filiation « par le sang » avec les Acadiens des Provinces maritimes du Canada, d'une mémoire historique commune fondée sur l'expérience du Grand Dérangement (l'expulsion des Acadiens par les Anglais en 1755) et du thème de la survivance. Le lien ressenti avec les Acadiens du Canada repose également sur le partage d'une langue et de valeurs communes et va jusqu'à la perception de ressemblances physiques. Peu importe la relation objective des Cadiens à ce passé, c'est l'importance qu'ils lui accordent qui détermine l'appartenance à une communauté acadienne. La notion de diaspora acadienne s'est amplifiée ces dernières années au sein du mouvement louisianais de renouveau francophone, et s'est trouvée fortifiée par les Congrès mondiaux acadiens (en 1994 au Nouveau Brunswick et en 1999 à Lafayette). Même si ce sentiment d'appartenance ne s'exprime pas chez l'ensemble des Cadiens, il constitue un critère de définition de plus en plus répandu, et se trouve à l'origine de plusieurs initiatives récentes dans le « pays cadien » (situé autour de Lafayette), telles que la création du Mémorial acadien, la multiplication de sociétés généalogiques, la constitution d'expositions consacrées à l'histoire acadienne, ainsi que le développement du tourisme entre les francophones louisianais et canadiens. Toutefois, ce marqueur identitaire n'entre jamais en conflit avec l'identité américaine des Cadiens.
- 2 After examining the way the primacy of Acadian ancestry is expressed, we will see how it is extended by Cajuns' sense of belonging to a community which goes beyond Louisiana geographical borders to include Acadians of the Maritimes Provinces of Canada. We will then attempt to establish the foundation of this ethnic consciousness and consider what role it plays in the Louisiana French movement.

The enhancement of Acadian ancestry

- 3 Several factors have led Cajuns to give priority to Acadian ancestry in the definition of their identity. In its efforts to give back a positive image to the French Louisiana culture, CODOFIL (Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, located in Lafayette) favored Cajuns' Acadian origin to the detriment of the cultural mix they derive from, thereby influencing their self-definition. Consequently, many Cajuns have then perceived it as a criterion of definition, whereas they did not take it into consideration earlier. Therefore, Cajuns identification with Acadians is not peculiar to the French movement's actors but is also representative of an important part of the group, without any social distinction, even if those who do not refer to it come from a humble background.
- 4 Inside as well as outside the group, the terms "Acadian" and "Cajun" (either in English or in French) are used as synonyms, as demonstrated by their joint use in official labels: the tourist region called "Cajun country" echoes the official one called "Acadiana", the football team "Ragin' Cajuns" is part of "l'Université desAcadiens" ; the State tour guide talks about "Acadians, or Cajuns". The three regional "Acadian cultural centers" lead to confuse the history and culture presented with the Acadians one. These designations show the persistent association of Louisiana French culture with Cajuns and by extension to Acadians.

- 5 In some cases, both terms are invested with a different sense which varies depending on persons and context. Their use can be dichotomous (forma/informal, urban/rural), reflecting the various social groups they have been historically associated with (elite/ low class). Such is the case in literature, cinema, newspapers et tourist brochures, where the term "Cajun" often implies a person from a modest social background and rural origin (whether it is associated with a positive or a negative image).
- 6 Most of the time, the use of "Acadian", never being exclusive, indicates a deliberate desire by the members of the group to draw attention to the importance of Acadian ancestry. Much more seldom, this enhancement conducts to make Acadian ancestry a *sine qua non* condition to the group's belonging, to the point where most Cajuns become usurpers. Being Cajun turns out to be the privilege of a restricted population defined by its historical roots, a definition which participates to a mythic conception of the group.
- 7 Even though it seldom includes such restrictions, the definition of the group often conceals those who have contributed to the elaboration of Cajun culture, despite the recognition of non-Acadian persons as members of the group. Some consider that "Acadian blood" makes a "real" Cajun, including in this category those who come from intermarriages, while distinguishing them from a "pure" Cajun, who only has Acadian ancestors: one is considered more or less Cajun depending of the number of one's Acadian ancestors. The highlighting of this inheritance does not exclude, however, the awareness of a mixed origin and even of the role of other groups in the constitution of Cajun culture. Many deliberately emphasize their Acadian descent while spontaneously mentioning their other origins. This emphasis indicates a sentimental choice which entails them to see themselves as Acadian in spirit.
- 8 The prominence of Acadian descent does not exclude other types of definitions, more inclusive depending on context and on the belonging of the speaker (whether he is part of the group or not). Acadian ancestry is nonetheless an ethnic marker invoked not only in Cajuns discourse but also backed up by reference to genealogy.
- 9 The craze for genealogical searches is part of the increase of historical studies on Cajuns. The ethnic revival inclined several Louisiana historians to document whole sections of their history so far overshadowed. This new impulse in the academic realm was concomitant with the Civil Rights Movement of the sixties, which made many American minorities eager to search their origin. The publication of *Roots* (1976), from A. Haley, achieved a national success increased by the TV show which followed and launched a sharp interest of Americans for their historical and cultural heritage. In Louisiana, Father Donald Hébert wrote in 1974 a genealogical collection of Acadian ancestors which encouraged the population to trace their family back. Available in all municipal libraries, it is still assiduously used by those who undertake such searches.
- 10 The aim is to go back as far as possible, the forefather of the 17th century representing the outcome of the search. The use of documents often confirms or fixes a name or a date already memorized. Searches are not limited to retirees but involve persons of all ages. The numerous genealogical societies created in the region also give assistance to them, while several how-to guides specifically dedicated to Acadian ancestry searches have been published to indicate the procedure for beginners.
- 11 These searches are combined with an oral practice of genealogy, by which Cajuns carefully list every person they are related to, without necessarily going back very far. At a first meeting, everyone immediately inquires about the other's name and family links as a recognition sign, and ask where the other is from. Everyone is cousin, to the nth degree if necessary. Then, searches beyond Louisiana borders just deepen an already keen genealogical memory, omnipresent in social relationships.
- 12 There again, Acadian and French ancestors are not systematically used to give evidence to a Cajun identity. The link is nonetheless confusing, always revealing the indisputable

importance of Acadian ancestry without elevating it to the status of an absolute criterion of definition. When I asked a woman from Acadian origin about her husband's identity, French on his father side and Irish on his mother side, she pointed out she did not consider herself more Cajun than him :

We've both been raised with our grandparent's language, we both have the same lifestyle as our families had. (...) So we're basically Cajuns to the same degree.

- 13 The feeling of kinship with "cousins" from the Maritimes Provinces however appears very strong, to the point where family reunions are organized on a trans-American scale, including sometimes French relatives. These family reunions cause the creation of associations. The first Acadian World Congress in August 1994 which took place in Moncton, New Brunswick, has given a new impetus to these gatherings which constituted one of the mainstay of the event: many Cajuns went for the first time to the Maritimes Provinces to attend it, and the second Congress in Lafayette renewed the experience in 1999.
- 14 This attachment to Acadian ancestors is expressed in the recent constitution of genealogical centers. The main one, downtown St Martinville, opened his doors during 1997, offering to the public an impressive multimedia center which allows to redraw one's Acadian ancestry. It also gives access to the history of Acadians from 1604 to the present, as well as biographical notes on each identified Acadian exile who has come to Louisiana. The creation of this research center and the information it gives express a growing interest for the search of Acadian ancestors and a desire to encourage the local population to take part in it. The impetus comes from a group of leading citizens who feel strongly about their Acadian origin and wish to expand this enthusiasm which nonetheless concerns people of very diverse background. However, it seems like Acadian ancestry is unanimously recognized as a criterion of definition by the local social elite, who is keen to develop this dimension in the members of the group's self-consciousness, despite the existence of an important social diversity.
- 15 Finally, it is interesting to point out that the persons who initiated these projects count few Acadian ancestors. One of them specified she had just one while giving me a passionate account of the Acadian exile. This awareness of a mixed origin does not affect in any way the sense of belonging to an Acadian community. On the contrary, these people feel very strongly about it, this attachment being strengthened by a historic memory common to all Acadians.
- 16 The reference to Acadian ancestry is not only a means to create a common origin for all Cajuns, but also establishes a link with Acadians as a whole, expanding the frontiers of the group past geographical borders to create an Acadian community.

The trauma of the "Grand Dérangement"

- 17 The "Grand Dérangement", symbol of the common history of Acadians, situates chronologically the identity of Acadian diaspora. Acadians were the descendants of the first settlers from Northern Europe in the New World, French peasants mostly from the West-Center part of the country, in particular from Poitou and its neighboring regions. By 1632, these immigrants crossed the Atlantic to establish in Acadia (present-day Nova Scotia). Their community originally consisted of craftsmen, fishermen, trappers and farmers.
- 18 At this time, hostilities between France and England were constant and Acadia changed hands several times, becoming eventually English at the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 which put an end to the War of the Spanish Succession. But at the outbreak of a new war with the French, Acadians were considered unreliable and therefore undesirable. They were ordered to take an oath of allegiance to the English Crown, threatened to be expelled in case of refusal. Persistent in their neutrality, Acadians went through a moment's respite until 1755, when the Seven Years War started between French and English. Suspected to adopt the French cause, they were given a second ultimatum. The new British military governor, Charles Lawrence, finally chose a radical solution: the deportation.

- 19 Among the 12 000 Acadians, 6 to 8 000 were imprisoned, then expelled from their territory and herded into boats in order to be dispersed in the English colonies. Poorly prepared by the English, these expeditions were fatal to many prisoners, devastated by epidemics, cold and malnutrition. A first group was shipped to the Carolinas and Georgia, others to Massachusetts, Connecticut, Pennsylvania or New York. Many survivors of what was called the “Grand Dérangement”, as well as those who had fled in Canada or in New Brunswick, moved back to Nova Scotia as early as the 1760’s. There, they survived in misery before being able to reestablish in the whole Maritimes after the war, in 1763. Some were shipped back to France, taking advantage of an agreement between English and French. Unable to adapt, they decided to leave for Louisiana in 1785. Others, in search of a welcoming land, took refuge in the French West Indies, particularly in St Domingo, before heading Louisiana which they reached by successive waves between 1764 and 1785.
- 20 The hardship suffered during this tragic episode laid the foundations of a common identity to Acadians as a whole. Even though not all of them have experienced deportation, fleeing towards Canada or St Domingo and then to Louisiana, the “ Grand Dérangement” caused an exile and a persecution which concerned the group as a whole. This dispersal is associated with sites and characters endowed with an emblematic status. In Nova Scotia, Grand Pré, the historic site of the departure for many prisoners, and its church where Acadians were imprisoned, have become true symbols. Acadians of the Maritimes have rebuilt a commemorative church in 1922 at the same place as the original church and have made it a National Historical Park. All Cajuns who have been to Grand Pré remember with emotion the visit of this site which filled them with meditation.
- 21 Strongly connected with the heartbreak of Acadians, whose families were separated as they were boarded on ships, Evangeline is logically listed among emblematic characters. The heroin’s statue situated in Grand Pré since 1920 makes a pair with the one in St Martinville, as a sign of the twinning of both of these places of memory.
- 22 The remembrance of the “Grand Dérangement” has considerably grown within the ethnic revival, non only among associations but also in museums. The film *Acadie Liberté*, screened at the Acadian Cultural Center in Lafayette and also at meetings of activists associations carefully traces the course of Acadians from France and is dedicated almost exclusively to the deportation. Kinship by blood and memory of the deportation are then honored, inviting Cajuns to think of themselves as Acadians.
- 23 The expel of Acadians has left such a deep wound in memories that the terms to name it are borrowed to the deportation of Jews by the nazis. References to "holocaust", "genocide", Halifax "concentration camps " or the "ethnic cleaning" are frequently used by the most active individuals.
- 24 The geological center in St Martinville is part of a project put together by the Acadian Memorial Foundation which is made up of 3 parts: a mural representing the arrival of Acadians in Louisiana; a list of 3000 names identified as Acadian refugees; an eternal flame in tribute to the exiles who have perished in the boats.
- 25 The celebration of the first Acadian World Congress in Moncton, named Retrouvailles 1994, marked the 390st anniversary of the foundation of Acadia. It addresses “the cousins of the great scattered Acadian family” and gathered more than 300 000 Acadians from the Maritimes Provinces, Louisiana, France and Quebec. This Congress represented an essential step in the mobilization of Cajun activists. It awakened the sense of belonging of the musician Zachary Richard who came back to French language in his songs and created the cultural association Action cadienne (Cajun Action). The effects of encountering Acadians from the Maritimes on Cajun ethnic awareness have for that matter become a means used today by activists to try to enroll the members of the group.

26 Descent and history happen to be essential factors in the constitution of an ethnic identity. Whether real or presumed, the value ascribed to ancestry shows that the belonging to the group comes from a voluntary and deliberate choice. The objective link with this past matters little compared to the importance attached to it and which determines their belonging (Weber, 1922; Alba, 1990). Ethnicity then cannot be separated from a significant perception of descent and of a common history which unifies, widens and extends it. This historical memory is grounded on the evocation of a past which makes martyrs of the Acadians, cruelly affected by the experience of "Grand Dérangement", but also rebellious and resistant.

Surviving to adversity

27 Forged by the hardship endured throughout their history, the survival is seen as a common value to all Acadians and defines their contemporary identity. The perseverance showed by Acadians throughout the centuries is constantly invoked to praise them as "survivors". In France, their ancestors chose to leave the West-Center part of the country in order to escape the violence of religion wars, particularly intense in this bastion of Protestantism. Besides this devastation which goes on from the end of the 16th to the beginning of the 17th century, one must add famines and epidemics.

28 Overcome by misery, these peasants saw the exile in North America as a chance for salvation. This first stage already demonstrates their ability to survive in the face of adversity, since Acadians succeeded in overcoming their distress and in achieving the experience of exile. Their first challenge preceded therefore the main one they will have to take up, the Grand Dérangement. Expelled by the British, abandoned by the French, Acadians have survived, whether they went back to their native homeland or settled a new society in Louisiana.

29 Resulting from their resistance, the independence of the group is constantly underlined. Folklorists and historians often present it as Acadians main characteristic (Brasseaux, 1987, Ancelet, 1991). In Acadia, their political independence kept them from giving up against the British government threats, and from joining the French cause. In Louisiana, their history was marked by an economic independence and some territorialism, combined with anticlericalism (Brasseaux, 1987).

30 Cajun activists emphasize the historic basis of this resistance but also strive to embody it in their actions. Some elements symbolize the adoption of this attitude, such as the rooster, emblem of Cajun Action, or the language used by activists. Words (used in French) like "brave", "valorous", "proud" punctuate mail and brochures, while "Dear fighters", "Don't drop it" – from the local expression "Don't drop the potato", which means "Don't give up" – urge the members of the association to be perseverant and determined in their action. Among the group, some attributes quite often used refer to independence and resistance as well: "*avoir la tête dure*" (to be hard-headed) defines a person who refuses to back down, which is not always perceived as a quality. "*Canaille*" refers to a mischievous, cunning person, who has more than one trick up his sleeve. It is often employed in a friendly way but can also express a certain duplicity.

31 As a symbol of Cajuns and consequently of "Cajun Country", the crawfish shares the same quality of "survivor". Herbivore, carnivore, this animal feeds on all kinds of food, adapting to all environments. Cajuns precisely describe themselves as people who eat everything and enjoy joking about it. Pugnacious and fearless, the crawfish resists its attackers in brandishing its claws, just like Cajuns have resisted oppression, from the "Grand Dérangement" until the banishment of French in schools at the beginning of the century.

32 The resistance of Cajuns throughout the centuries and their revival among the French movement is perceived by activists as a revenge against the British. The Acadian Memorial in St Martinville and the two Acadian World Congresses represent the Acadian's victory through their coming-together, one symbolic, the other one real, as does the struggle for the preservation of French.

- 33 The perception of common values among Acadians from the Maritimes Provinces and Cajuns also testify, to the members of the group, their ability to survive. An essential factor is the faithfulness to Catholicism. Along with the attachment to land and family, Catholicism appears in historical studies as a key-value of Acadians. Acadians and Cajuns feel they are united by the same devotion to this worship, honored by two eternal flames (one in St Martinville, the most recent in Erath), the fire being considered as a “traditional element of the Catholic Church rituals”. The ceremony hold in St Martinville to light the flame took place on a Sunday and started with a procession led by the city’s priest, who blessed the flame.
- 34 Catholicism has been officially raised as a symbol of the Acadian community by the end of the last century . In 1881, the first Acadian National Convention of Memramcook, New Brunswick, gave rise to the creation of the Acadian National Holiday on the 15th of July. In 1884, the Acadian flag was adopted, colored in blue, white and red and decorated with a golden star representing Our Lady of the Assumption. The adoption of a national anthem, Ave Maris Stella, completed exhaustively this worship to the virgin. These symbols have been appropriated by the most recent Cajun cultural associations which are willing to assert their common devotion. The omnipresence of the Catholic religion in these association meetings (through prayers and masses) makes it an integral part of their identity claims.
- 35 Among Cajuns and even the whole population of Southern Louisiana, religion constitutes a significant cultural trait. It distinguishes them from the Anglo-Saxon Protestantism, which draws a main cultural boundary between North and South Louisiana. Catholicism entails for Cajuns a philosophy different from the American one, associated with their “joie de vivre” (joy of life), shared by all Acadians.
- 36 The feeling to share similar values, combined with genetic ties established within the Acadian population, give even rise to physical resemblances. During their stay in New Brunswick, a great deal of Cajuns were struck by this similarities, to the point where they referred to double and had the disconcerting feeling never to have left Louisiana. The perception of common physical features, linked to the identification with Acadian ancestors, has encouraged those who funded one of the historical characters of the Memorial in St Martinville to physically represent their ancestor in posing for the artist.
- 37 As numerous as the signs of the feeling of belonging to an Acadian diaspora are, as strong as the desire to develop it further may appear, this self-awareness never comes into conflict with Cajuns American identity.

The duality of American identity

- 38 The evolution of the French Movement, the creation of new associations and the increase of identity claims are not opposed to a wish to circumscribe ethnic assertions in Louisiana. The supporters of bilingual programs are far from willing to isolate themselves and strive to avoid any misunderstanding: they insist in claiming these programs are an asset and not an obstacle to their integration to American society.
- 39 The oaths of allegiance which systematically start the meetings of all Cajun cultural associations show this fidelity to the American social contract. The members of these associations do not see any contradiction in promoting Cajun culture while participating in festival parades with the American flag on their float (during the Gulf War, one could read on it the widespread expression: "We support our troops").
- I guess the best way to put it is that we're Americans, mais on est pas américains !,
- 40 explicitly stated the founder of a Cajun student association, expressing each of his claimed identity in the language associated with it.
- 41 Asserting their cultural specificity and enhancing it is even interpreted by some Cajuns as an American feature. Addressing a letter to the Acadian Memorial, a man wrote: “Thanks to your efforts, we can now be proud. From now we are perceived as a society which has the true

American spirit of freedom". The tribute to the Acadian exiles, to the "Grand Dérangement", and the celebration of the survival of the Acadian community represented by the Memorial associate with Cajuns values which are considered typically American: their fight for freedom, their struggle against oppression give evidence to their spirit of independence, which defines all Americans. This statement perfectly illustrates the duality of the American identity, making of ethnic claims the very criterion of definition of this identity.

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43 Through the emphasis on Acadian ancestry, of a common historic memory grounded on the experience of the "Grand Dérangement" and of the survival theme as evidence of their tenacity and independence until the present, Cajuns have developed a sense of belonging to an Acadian community with the Acadians of the Maritimes Provinces of Canada. This feeling has significantly increased these past years, both caused and strengthen by the past Acadian Worl Congresses and the ones to come (the next one will be held in 2004, in Nova Scotia).

44 This sense of belonging, although increasingly widespread, is not expressed by all Cajuns. Just like other identity markers, this one is not unanimously adopted. Some never refer to it, in particular at the bottom of the social scale. Others favor it only in certain context, stressing the situational nature of ethnic identity. Other groups like Creoles, long overshadowed by Cajuns in the local image of French Louisiana culture, claim their distinct African descent against a uniform vision of French Louisianians. However, the sense of belonging to an Acadian diaspora represents an essential element in the way Cajuns define themselves, as well as in the collective history of French Louisiana as a whole.

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Abstract

Many Cajuns claim their Acadian ancestry, despite the fact that their culture is mixed, originating from the different immigrant groups which have settled in Louisiana (French, Acadian, Spanish, Irish, Black and White Creoles...). This sense of belonging appears through the enhancement of a “blood” filiation with the Acadians from the Canadian Maritimes Provinces, of a common historic memory based on the “Grand Dérangement” experience (the expulsion of the Acadians by the British in 1755) and of the survival theme. The bond felt with the Canadian Acadians is also based on the sharing of common language and values and goes to the perception of physical resemblance. The notion of Acadian Diaspora has grown these last years within the Louisiana French revival Movement, and has been fortified by the World Acadian Congresses (in 1994 in New Brunswick and in 1999 in Lafayette). Even though this sense of belonging is not expressed by Cajuns as a whole, it represents a criterion of definition increasingly widespread, and has given rise to several recent initiatives in “Cajun Country” (located around Lafayette), such as the creation of the Acadian Memorial, the increase of genealogical societies, the setting of exhibitions about Acadian history, and the development of tourism between Louisiana-French and Canadian-French. However, this identity marker never comes into conflict with Cajuns’ American identity. Just like the Louisiana culture as a whole, the origins of Cajun culture are multiple. The metaphor most often employed to illustrate this process of creolization is of culinary nature. It uses a local specialty, *gumbo*, from which almost every ingredient reveals a different origin : the basic element, *roux*, comes from a French technique ; *okra* is a vegetable imported from Africa ; *filé* has an Native American origin ; finally, rice and the diverse ingredients incorporated (seafood, poultry, pork or wild game) are local products. Cajun last names also show such a process and reveal the diversity of this culture’s origins : German (Hoffpauir, Shexnayder...), Spanish (Castille, Domingue, Romero...), Scottish (McGee), White Creole (de La Houssaye, Fontenot...), which come along Acadian origin (Leblanc, Broussard, Arceneaux...). However, this cultural mix is not always enhanced by Cajuns, since many increasingly emphasize their Acadian ancestry, which appears to be an essential criterion of definition of the group’s identity.

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