Creole Identity

Creoles on Cane River have a deep-seated feeling of identity. Their view of their history incorporates the sense that as long as France and Spain ruled Louisiana, they had space in the socio-political structure to exist as a culture. As several Creoles have put it, "There were blacks, Creoles and whites. Then, after the Americans came in, there were only blacks and whites." American is still not always a friendly term.

So, the Creoles wish to reappropriate their own history. Their heroes and heroines are Creole - their rich heritage created by blending a wealth of cultures and races. Historians and sociologists who have cast them as caught "in between" cultures seem, to the Creoles at least, to miss the mark. In the first place, their concept of "Creole" involves Old World cultural and biological processes. One has, as the local historians Terrel Delphin and Mickey Moran point out, to look to the Spanish-Portuguese connections to Africans in the seventeenth century to understand the "roots."

In spite of a deep respect for Gary Mills's (1977) work on the history of the Cane River families - particularly beginning with Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin and. Claude Thomas Pierre Metoyer - most Creoles say simply it did not "go far enough." It is not felt widely that (Marie Thérèze Coin-Coin is clearly identified as "all black) Little is known of her father and the possibility she was, herself, "Creole" of some West African or West Indian connection is an old tradition on

the river.

No matter how the historical roots are elaborated, Creoles are quick to assert their own skill at what the French might call *bricolage*, that is, taking parts from many wholes to build something unique, adaptive, and creative on their own. Over the centuries, Creoles are proud of the fact that they have created a culture of their own – not just on Cane River, but worldwide. They note their involvement in the American Civil Rights Movement with pride. Literally, they see civil rights and equal opportunity – things denied them because of their African heritage – as important to all people. Legally and politically, they have been racially connected to black communities while culturally they have been distinct people, and that is resented as overt racism. Still, they have not denied their activism in the movement in the 1960s and 1970s, and they look with great pride on their efforts to open the socio-economic and political system for Negroes and Creoles alike.

Race, as an identifier, became, as one person put it, "a problem" only when one left home. In town, in school, in the cities – places where people had to "race" themselves – race was a problem. In Creole environments, there is more of what Terrel Delphin has characterized as "comfort." Since children generally know their family and since they learn about race as a cultural category outside the family, people cling strongly to Creoles – seeking their own "comfortable" identity, while not denying nor boasting of their genetic or cultural roots.

The 1960s brought activism to a proud people, and the

obvious connections to both cultures became advantageous. For the first time, the bicultural, better educated and more culturally "acceptable" Creoles found themselves in leadership positions in the community. Teachers, law enforcers, lawyers – professional people of all sorts found niches where they could become cultural brokers, for both blacks and Creoles, not to mention for whites. The 1990s are seeing a resurgence of Creole identity, to be discussed later, but Creole pride and new interest in presenting their culture and history from their perspective now powers a statewide, even nationwide, Creole identity.[1]

1. We Know Who We Are: . . . by H. F. Gregory and J. Moran pp. 14-19