

Creole identity in a globalized world

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Ladies an Gentlemen,

First of all, I want to tell you that I am very happy to lecture on Creole Identity at Cave Hill campus tonight. As I don't have many occasions to practice my English in my native country, Martinique, I beg your pardon for the mistakes I'll probably make. I would like to thank my colleague Isabelle Constant and the Department of Foreign Languages for their kind invitation.

Well, I've been asked to speak about « CREOLE IDENTITY IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD », but there are so many things to say and to discuss that I'm afraid I would need more than 2 hours to have a serious look at it. Anyway, I'll speak for about 40 minutes, leaving then 20 minutes for the debate.

Before examining the relations between « Creole identity » and « Globalization », it is necessary to define these two concepts since everyone seems to have a set opinion on these concepts, depending on the country you are from, the language you speak and the social class you belong to. My own definitions of « Creole identity » and « Globalization » are then related to my being from a French Overseas Department--the polite way in French to say « Colony »-- that I speak two different languages (Creole and French) and that I am both a writer and a university teacher. This means that I didn't come here to preach anything and I am not trying to impose my own point of view on these difficult subjects. I came here to confront my vision with your particular vision since Barbados is, in my judgement, one of the most remarkable success stories within our Caribbean archipelago; success story as far as economy is concerned, as far as democracy is concerned and, of course, as far as culture is concerned.

Definition of the word « Creole »

I'll start with a definition of the word « Creole » as we understand it in the French Caribbean in order to compare it with its various meanings throughout the Americas. First of all, let's say that « Creole » is not a European, but an American word. What I mean is that this word was created around 1500 in the Spanish colonies of the West-Indies to name the children of the Spanish colonists who were born in the New World. So this word characterizes a new kind of population, neither totally European, nor American nor even Native. You had then 3 different populations in the New World:

- The Tainos or American Indians
- the Spanish Colonists
- The Creoles

At first, the word « Creole » was used to define white people, but very rapidly, after miscegenation between Spanish colonists and American Indian women, it was given to

racially mixed people too. By the beginning of the 16th century, The Spanish decided to stop the enslavement of the Natives of Cuba or Hispaniola, Natives whose number was dramatically declining, in order to import Black slaves from Africa. Very rapidly, a distinction appeared within this new population: on the one hand, the slaves born in Africa were called « Bossales » and their children born in the New World, on the other hand, were called « Creoles », « Black Creoles ».

We can note, then, that the word « Creole » was applied to all types of population whose parents came from the Ancient World. « Creole » has never been a racially tainted word. It simply means: « born in the Americas from foreign parents ». But what is more extraordinary about this word is that it derived from its anthropomorphic meaning to be applied to animals, plants and objects. You have « the creole horse », « the creole cow », the « creole banana » the « creole sugar cane » or the « creole cooking or music ». Then, this word started to be used for all that was living or created by human mind in the New World by what I would call « the New Natives » since the true Natives, the Tainos or their cousins, the Caribs, had been totally exterminated by the middle of the 17th century. This shows us that the fact of becoming « Creole », or **the process of creolization**, defines the adaptation of men, animals and plants to a new environment. America was new to both Whites and Blacks and there was no sugar-cane or banana on this continent before the arrival of Christopher Columbus, to give another example. Then to sum up this point, I would say that at the beginning, it was a neutral word which came from the latin word « creare » which means « to create », an objective characterization of the new situation of the Americas with so many different and foreign elements coming to this continent. But later, for ideological reasons, as we'll see later, its meaning has been modified when the English, the French and the Dutch started to settle in the West-Indies.

How did creole language and culture appeared in the french territories

At first, you had two sorts of Creole populations in the Americas: the Spanish Creoles and the Portuguese Creoles in Brazil since the pope had divided the New World between the two main catholic states of these times, Spain and Portugal, excluding the other European states. As you know, the English, the French and the Dutch tried desperately to have their share of the cake, as we say in French, and the only place left for that was the South of our archipelago, the small islands of the West-Indies where the Caribs were living. The Spanish had conquered in less than 40 years the big islands after 1492 and exterminated their Native population, the Tainos. At that time, the south of the archipelago was populated by a proud and fierce people called the Caribs who were accustomed, before the arrival of the Europeans, to raid the big islands where they captured women and food. **These Caribs resisted Spanish colonization during 125 five years**, that is to say between 1492 and 1625. Ten times, one hundred times, the Spanish tried to occupy the small islands but their attacks were stopped and their army defeated by the Caribs, although the latter lived almost naked and only had arrows to protect themselves. The great Aztec, Maya and Inca empires of the continent, which built pyramids, invented a calendar, planted thousands of acres of corn etc..., these brilliant civilizations were destroyed by the Spanish colonists whereas the so-called barbarian Caribs, who lived in cabins, resisted the Spanish attacks during more than a century. This mystery can be explained by the fact that they were nomadic people who used to travel from one island to another, islands that are very mountainous, in fact too mountainous for the Spanish army to deploy its battalions. Then, we can say that the Caribs were the creators of what is called nowadays « guerrilla warfare ».

The Caribs resisted the Spanish invasion but this paved the way for other European powers such as France or England to settle in the New-World. France, for instance, proposed to the

Caribs to sign a peace treaty by 1630 and promised them to help them fight back the Spanish. The same thing happened between the English and the Dutch. For the first time since 1492, the Spanish and the Portuguese had to admit the presence of other European powers in the New World. At the very beginning, France, England and the Netherlands respected these treaties but very soon, they did the same thing the Spanish had done in the big islands one century before : they massacred the Natives, the Caribs. By 1660, there were no more Caribs living in the small islands, except for Dominica which is so hilly that it was impossible to chase them.

Who were the french colonists

During the 50 years when Caribs and French lived together, a sort of « patois », or mixed language, appeared. It was called « barougouin » and was mainly used by the Caribs to communicate with Europeans while they kept their own native language. The baragouin disappeared after the massacre of the Caribs, but many linguists think that it has been the basis for what is known nowadays as the French Creole language. Various reasons are given to sustain this thesis. Let me give you two of them:

- Many Blacks escaped in the forests and joined the Caribs. These Blacks were mostly « ladinós » that is Blacks who had spent a few time in Spain or Portugal before being brought to the Americas. At that time, France, just like England or the Netherlands, had to buy Black slaves from these two countries. This means that these runaway slaves, who knew some Spanish or Portuguese, learned the baragouin in order to communicate with their Carib hosts.
- The first French settlers were ignorant, illiterate people, mostly peasants, coming from the North-Western provinces of France such as Normandy, Poitou, Vendée or Bretagne. At the time they arrived in Saint-Kitts in 1625, and later, 1635, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, the French language had not been unified yet and each french province used its own french dialect which was rather different from the kind of french spoken in Paris and at the court. Very significantly, it is the same year that the French occupied Martinique and Guadeloupe; that Cardinal Richelieu, Prime Minister of France, decided to create the French Academy. If there was need to create such an institution, it was because the Kingdom of France urgently needed the same type of French all over the territory. How the faraway provinces could obey the King if nobody understood what its civil servants said or wrote?

It is important then to note that when the French arrived here, in the West-Indies, they lacked a unified language, contrary to the Spanish whose first grammar had been published by Nebrija in 1493 and the English who benefited from the first translation of the Bible known as the « King James version ». On the other hand, the black slaves they bought from the Portuguese spoke different languages and couldn't understand each other most of the time. **So both Whites and Blacks were living in a situation of linguistic insecurity in the first part of the 17th century**, paving the way for the emergence of a new language that we call today « creole » in the French-speaking territories and « patois » in the English territories. This language had an extraordinary extension in the 19th century since it was spoken from Louisiana in the North down to the North of Brazil, including Haiti, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Martinique, Saint-Lucia, Grenada, Trinidad and French Guyana. Today, with 9 million speakers, it is still the second most spoken language of the whole Caribbean after Spanish, but before English, French or Dutch.

I'd like to insist upon the fact that creole was not born during the plantation period but before that, in the period our historians call « the time of discovery » that is the first fifty years of French colonization in Martinique, Guadeloupe or Saint-Domingue (named today « Haiti »). At that time, there were no sugar-cane and of course no plantations. Whites and Blacks had to learn from the Caribs how to live and to survive in a new and sometimes hostile environment. The Caribs taught Whites and Blacks the culture of tobacco, sweet potatoes, and pine-apple; they taught them the different kinds of trees and animals. Although Blacks had an inferior position in French colonial society, they were not slaves in the classical sense of the word, in the plantation sense of the word, as it were. What is more interesting is that White men had to live with Carib or Black Women, having children with them because they weren't enough white women in the West-Indies. So, during the first fifty years of the colonization in the French territories, Whites and Blacks lived together and reproduced. This explains why a new group called the Mulattoes appeared, a group which was to play an important part in the history of our territories at the end of the 19th century.

Historical and anthropological evidence clearly showed that the creole language had been the creation both of Blacks and Whites. **Creole is not a black language as most people believe.** It was the mother-tongue of the first generation of white and black people born in the French West-Indies. But when sugar-cane became a very important resource for Whites, by 1660-70, they had established the harsh system of slavery that all of us know. In 1685, they passed a special law, the « Black Code » which forbade marriages and even sexual intercourses between Whites and Blacks. Whites had become very rich people thanks to the sugar-cane business and they started to downgrade Creole as a Black language, as a slave language, although they had taken part in its creation. It was an ideological decision since White Martinicans never stopped speaking creole. So when they imported hundreds upon hundreds of slaves by the end of the 17th century, the number of Blacks rapidly outnumbered Whites and the influence of African cultural and linguistic habits became predominant in Creole language and culture.

Another ideological decision had been taken by the white-ruling class in the same period: they appropriated to themselves the word « creole ». Only white people were called « Creoles » in the French territories, a contradiction with the first historical meaning of the word. Another contradiction is the fact that the Whites didn't want to consider Creole as their own language but they insisted on being called « Creoles » !!! So during two centuries, in Martinique and Guadeloupe, Black people who spoke the Creole language, cooked creole food, carved creole furniture, built creole cabins, sang creole songs and played creole music were not allowed to call themselves « Creoles ». This is the contradiction my generation (born in the 50's) has tried to solve and it is one of the explanations for the emergence of the literary and political movement, Patrick Chamoiseau, Jean Bernabé and myself, have created, **the Movement of Creolness.**

The destiny of the creole language

Despised and rejected by the Whites at the end of the 17th century, the creole language has been rejected by the Mulattoe class too in the 19th century because the main goals of this buffer class between masters and slaves was to obtain the same rights as White people, and be considered as equal to the Whites, something the Whites didn't want of course. A fierce battle erupted between these two groups to seize power of the French territories and by the end of the 19th century, the Mulattoes succeeded in expelling the Whites from our political institutions, leaving to them the economic power, that is the plantations and the sugar-cane factories. Contrary to the Mulattoes of the USA who never made any distinction between them and the Blacks, our Mulattoes discarded the Blacks and rejected Creole language and

culture although they spoke creole every day and were part of this culture. They adopted the same attitude the White colonists had had a few decades before; they declared that creole was a black and inferior language and they forbade their children to use it. For the second time, creole had become an orphan language.

After the abolition of slavery, in 1848, unfortunately, the Blacks followed in the footsteps of the Whites and the Mulattoes: they rejected the creole language too, not because it was a « black language » but because it was a « backward language ». Such an attitude was somewhat understandable since most ex-slaves were illiterate and knew their children had to learn French to be really free. Only the French language gave you the opportunity to learn something, to read and write, to obtain a good job, to be respected and considered as a human being. This explains why the Blacks started, at the end of the 19th century, to idealize the French language and why they sent their children to school specifically to learn French more than to grasp other forms of knowledge. So creole was an orphan language for the third time. One more time, it was to be discarded, a fourth time, by the Indians and the Chinese who came to the French territories by 1853 as indentured labor to replace the Blacks in the sugar-cane fields, since after the abolition, many Blacks didn't want to cut sugar-cane anymore. At first, East-Indians and Chinese had to learn creole in order to adapt to their new environment, they creolized themselves, but by the middle of the 20th century, when they abandoned the rural areas to emigrate around the towns, they rejected creole language and culture too.

Creolness

Creole identity is then a mixture of almost all cultures around the world. A question immediately arises: how come our peoples are not proud of such an extraordinary melting-pot? How come we have rejected such a rich heritage? The answer is simple: this identity was born within slavery, racism, injustice and ethnocentrism. Moreover, this totally new and multiple identity confronted and challenged the unique identity of the different European powers. **Creolness means multiple identity.** Our ruling classes went on worshipping unique identity, European identity, whereas our people lived in a multiple identity. Although White Martinicans are partly black and Hindu on the cultural level, they refuse to admit it and proudly declare they are just Whites. Although Black Martinicans are partly White and Hindu, culturally speaking, they prefer to say : « We are Africans ! ». Our East-Indians, Chinese and Syro-Lebanese have adopted the same ethnocentric attitude which is in total contradiction with our anthropological reality. Everybody in the French territories speaks creole, eats creole food, sing creole songs etc...but everybody refuses to recognize the extraordinary value of such a culture. The Movement of Creolness is making tremendous efforts to reconcile our people with its culture, explaining that creole culture prefigures what is taking place nowadays and around the world, that is globalization. **As a great Martinican writer, Edouard Glissant said : « The whole world is becoming creole. »**

What is globalization

Today, the word « globalization » seems to be everywhere: in the newspapers, in the TV channels, in the universities and international conferences. « Globalization » can be considered, then, as the key-word of the XXIst century. But what does it mean exactly? Is there any conceptual consensus on its meaning? Before examining this question, I would like to tell you that the globalization process we are experiencing today is the second one in man's history. The world has experienced **a first kind of globalization** when Christophe Columbus landed on the shore of the island of Guanahani, in the Bahamas, some day in 1492. Our archipelago, the West-Indies had been the place where, for the very first time in the history of

mankind, all cultures, religions and languages got in touch and started to melt. Of course, you had colonization and invasion phenomena in the Ancient world, but they were affecting neighbouring cultures and peoples : Romans invading Helvetia, Iberia or Gal ; Persians conquering the north of India ; Chinese submitting Vietnam and Cambodia etc... For example, before Colombus, nowhere in the Ancient World, had Jesus-Christ to live together with Maboya, the Carib god, Legba, the African god and Lakshmi, the Hindu god. During the last three centuries, the Amerindian Culture, the European Culture, the African Culture and the Asian Culture merged in the West-Indies and the rest of the Americas to create, as I have just explained to you, a new identity, a multiple identity. The center of this first globalization process was the island of Saint-Domingue, which is known as Haiti today. Why? Because this island was the richest colony of the world at a time when sugar-cane was the exact equivalent of oil today, that is when our white landowners were as rich as the Arab sheicks of the present day. France made 40% of her foreign trade with Saint-Domingue and most French Atlantic ports such as Nantes, Bordeaux or La Rochelle developed thanks to the Triangular trade. This explained why Napoleon sent an army of 50,000 soldiers, headed by his brother-in-law, General Leclerc__who married Napoleon's sister, Pauline__to crush the slave revolution and reconquer the island. In fact, it is in the 18th century in Saint-Domingue that a work organization appeared, known one century later as « Taylorism ». In the sugar cane factories and distilleries, each slave had to accomplish one single task during the whole day. This explains also why the Haitian Revolution was the first modern revolution, the first revolution based on a violent class confrontation as CLR. James explained it in his famous book, « The Black Jacobins ». This is why the Russian Revolution of 1917 was not the first, but the second Revolution, in the modern sense of the world. In the first constitution of Haiti, written in 1804, the revolutionary government of General Jean-Jacques Dessalines had decided to seize all the plantations, farms and factories of the old ruling class, the class of the white landowners, nationalizing the means of production one century before the Soviets did so in Russia.

Most Western historians and anthropologists generally tend to minimize or to neglect these two important historical phenomena : the fact that the first globalization process was born in the West-Indies by the 16th and 17th centuries on the one hand and the fact that the first modern revolution broke in Saint-Domingue/Haiti at the beginning of the 19th century on the other. This explains why they describe present day globalization as a totally new phenomenon and not as a continuation of something that had been experienced before by one particular region of the World, namely the West-Indies. This also explains why this second globalization appears in such dramatic terms in the conscience of most peoples around the world. In fact, except for the US population, everybody is either suspicious or afraid as far as globalization is concerned. Those who are suspicious are the old European powers who lost their empires by the middle of the 20th century, even a country like England who shares the same language and culture with the United States. For example, when a movie is n° 1 in the english box-office, it is rarely exported to the US although Americans would have no difficulty in understanding the dialogues. Hollywood producers buy the film rights and hire US actors to replay exactly the same history ! ! ! This happened with the very famous « My beautiful laundrette ». Then, if the American public is not open-minded enough to listen the English accent during one or two hours, one can imagine its attitude towards French, German or Italian movies. The countries who are more than suspicious, who are really afraid are the underdeveloped countries, the Third-World who know they cannot compete with the US on the economic, linguistic and cultural levels and who try desperately to protect their disenfranchized cultures.

In my opinion, this second globalization process sparks suspicion or fear only because we don't have a historical view of what is happening today and because we unfortunately forgot

that a first globalization process had already taken place a few centuries ago. I was telling you, at the very beginning of my lecture, that the definition of the world « globalization » depended on the language you are using. In French, we have two different word for that: « **mondialisation** » which has no equivalent in english and which derives from the french word « monde » coming from the latin word « mundus » and, **globalization**, just like you, english-speaking people. « Mondialisation » is not synonymous for globalization although they describe the same process: the first word insist, etymologically speaking, on the impact of the phenomenon on the people, on the populations, the « mundus » as the Latins said., whereas the second word, « globalization » insist upon the material, the economic aspect of the phenomenon since it is based upon the word « globe », that is the planet earth. So in french, when someone uses the word « mondialisation », he or she refers to the humanistic impact of the extraordinary contact of cultures, religions and languages where are experiencing since the end of the 70's. When, on the contrary, someone uses the word « globalization », he or she refers to the commercial, financial or economic aspect of the phenomenon. I don't have to tell you that most left-wing intellectuals, politicians or activists prefer to say « mondialisation » whereas most of their right-wing counterparts prefer « globalization ». The fact that the dominant language of the present day, English, has only one word for this process is not an innocent thing at all. It's not just a question of etymology or a linguistic nuance : it means that the dominant power of the world, and its satellites, Canada, Australia, New-Zealand and to a certain extent England, are unable to admit a different sort of globalization that the one they are imposing on the rest of the world. On the contrary, in the rest of the world, we are very conscious that globalization under US leadership is a big danger for us and for the preservation of our particular identities. The motto of the most prominent french activists is « Another globalization is possible ! » and they have invented a word for that : « **Altermondialisation** » which can be translated by « Alterglobalization », « alter » being a latin word meaning « other ».

It is at this precise point that Creole identity and the ideology of Creolité (Creoleness or Creolity in English) are precious. You have probably noted that I didn't say anything about the concept of « identity » yet. It is because the creolization process which took place in our archipelago many years ago has deeply modified the traditional vision people had of this concept in the Ancient World. And when I say, the Ancient World, I'm not just talking about Europe, I'm talking about Africa and Asia too. At that point, it's important to distinguish « identity » and « discourse about identity ». Identity is something which is in permanent change, which is composed of various contradictory elements and which, consequently, is never perfectly shaped. On the contrary, the discourse about identity__the one that was dominant in all parts of the Ancient World before 1492__has always tried to give a unified and static vision of each particular identity : you had then « french identity », « english identity », « turkish identity », « chinese identity », « zulu identity » etc...This discourse, totally ideological, has been used by political powers to control and dominate the different social classes and minorities which are part of a specific territory. France is one of the best (or the worst, as you prefer) example of such a phenomenon. Although this country was divided between the North who spoke « oil languages » and the South who spoke « oc languages », the French Revolution of 1789 decided to ignore this diversity and to impose the myth of a « Unique and Indivisible Republic », launching a campaign of eradication of all dialects of french on one hand and of the other languages which were present in France but had nothing to see with the french language : corsican, basque, breton, alsacian etc...From that time on, French identity became Paris region identity. Similar processes of construction of a national identity took place in most of the Ancient World and when the Spanish, the Portuguese, the French and the English conquered the Americas, it was normal that they tried to impose their mythical identity on the natives, that is the American Indians. What they hadn't foreseen was

the fact that the contact between so many different cultures, the conflicts which arose, the miscegenation process which started very early, would give birth to a completely different vision of identity. Just one example : normally, in the Ancient World, you can't be in the same time Christian, Jewish and Moslem ; in Martinique, it is very common to go to the catholic mass on Sunday morning, to participate in a hindu ceremony on sunday afternoon and to go and see a black witch-doctor on Sunday night. Most Martinicans didn't see any contradiction in believing and worshipping at the same time the Christian god, the Hindu gods and the African spirits.