

Études

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Créoles

Comité international des études créoles

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Vol. XXXVI n°1 & 2 - 2018

**The pepper in the pot:**  
***The uneasy relationship between Creoleness and Blackness***

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**Résumé**

Une discussion sur le patrimoine africain en tant qu'ingrédient essentiel du concept de créolité dans les communautés créoles issu de la traite des esclaves, juxtaposée au déni de l'africanité, avec une référence particulière à l'océan Indien. Les sociétés créoles se caractérisent généralement par une certaine fierté de leur identité et de leur culture créoles. Cependant, la source de cette culture créole est l'esclavage du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle qui, dans la plupart des sociétés créoles, dura bien après l'abolition, bien que sous différentes formes. Cependant, la fierté d'un homme ou une femme créole s'étend rarement aux composantes africaines de sa culture créole, principalement en raison du douloureux héritage de l'esclavage. Aux Seychelles, par exemple, ce déni prend la forme d'une attitude générale selon laquelle l'esclavage et le colonialisme ne sont plus pertinents pour la société d'aujourd'hui, ce qui est en soi contradictoire. Comme dans toutes ces sociétés créoles, il existe un sentiment de traumatisme sous-jacent dans la perception que les Seychellois ont d'eux-même. Ce traumatisme s'exprime dans la langue des gens, dans leurs croyances et leurs pratiques, et plus particulièrement dans leur folklore. Cette étude examine brièvement différents concepts de créolité dans l'océan Indien et la manière dont les peuples créoles de la région s'engagent dans leur héritage africain, en tant que partie intégrante de leur identité créole.

**Mots clés :** créolité, négritude, identité, trauma, Océan Indien

**Keywords:** creoleness, negritude, identity, trauma, Indian Ocean

**Introduction**

This paper may be viewed as the beginnings of an enquiry into identity perceptions of the Creole communities of the Indian Ocean. Particular attention will be given to the idea of Creoleness as opposed to Africanness or Blackness, as the latter seems to be the *bête noire* of Creole societies all over the world in Post-colonial discourse. Seychelles, Mauritius and the French Department of Réunion have many points of convergence due to their common histories. However, due to different incidents of history that have affected the three islands separately, there is a considerable divergence in their concepts of Creoleness, the Creole and ancestral heritage. The resulting concepts of self and nation can be seen as mirror images of the Caribbean Creole zone, having stemmed from the same phenomenon of slave societies and indentured labour, colonialism and the post-colonial search for identity. As works that have marked literary thought in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

and are still giants in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant's *Éloge de la Créolité* (1989), and Frantz Fanon's *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952) can be used as landscapes against which to set the "Creoleness versus blackness" scene in the Indian Ocean.

## Background

The early history of Seychelles and the Mascarenes is characterized by a series of European takeovers, mainly between the French and the British. Vasco da Gama spotted the Amirantes Group of the Seychelles on his second journey between India and East Africa (1497-98), but did not make a landing. The first recorded landing by a British ship was in 1609 (Shillington, 2009, 3). The French made the first recorded definite move towards occupation by laying a stone of possession on the mainland in 1756 (Shillington, 2009, 5-6). It was only in 1770 that a first attempt was made to settle, when a group of 15 French colonists, coming from Ile Bourbon with a certain Henri Brayer du Barré, landed on Ste. Anne with 13 slaves. The following year, another attempt was made on the mainland, with the establishment of a spice garden at Anse Royale, which signalled the beginning of permanent residency (Shillington, 2009, 9). As for Mauritius, the Dutch made the first attempts of occupancy between 1599/1638 to 1712 (Vaughan, 2005, 4-19). The first French colonists arrived in 1722 (Baker & Fon Sing, 2007, 307-308). From 1726, the *Compagnie française des Indes Orientales* (CIO) worked towards stabilizing the French occupancy and by 1735, Mahé de Labourdonais was appointed Governor of both Ile de France and Ile Bourbon, whereby he chose Ile de France as his headquarters (APiCS online; Bollée, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Reunion (Ile Bourbon), had been occupied by the French much earlier when the CIO had sent French *engagés* to settle on the island from 1665 to 1671, then in 1689. These were joined by mariners and travellers who decided to settle on the island from 1687 onwards (Bollée, 2015). The three islands remained linked through joint administration, first as a French chartered colony and then as a French Crown colony with Seychelles being administered as a dependency of Mauritius (Shillington, 2009, 4-18). Consequently, these islands converged in the evolution of their creole cultures – as Wilfrid Berthile put it:

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<sup>1</sup> *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures Online (APiCS)*, Survey Chapter, Mauritian Creole. Available on <<https://apics-online.info/surveys/55>> (accessed 26/09/2019).

Bollée, Annegret, "French on the Island of Bourbon (Réunion)", *BRILL. Journal of Language Contact* [Online]. Volume 8, Issue 1. Published online, 17 Dec 2015, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2019, URL: [https://brill.com/view/journals/jlc/8/1/article-p91\\_5.xml?lang=en](https://brill.com/view/journals/jlc/8/1/article-p91_5.xml?lang=en)

C'est la colonisation française assimilatrice qui a fixé sous l'Ancien régime, les traits constitutifs de la « créolité » des îles, métissage, langue créole, cuisine, musique, mentalités, structures sociales... (Berthile, 2013, 13).<sup>2</sup>

The divergence began with the seizure of Mauritius and Seychelles by the British, making them British Crown colonies in 1814 with Seychelles still being a dependent of Mauritius. Though Ile Bourbon fell briefly to the British in these early days of the French and British imperial war, she remained firmly attached to France and is a department to this day. The culture of this Indian Ocean Creole zone had however already been well established as an essentially French influenced one, especially language-wise with all three islands speaking a French-based Creole. In the case of Seychelles for example, Chaudenson refers to the fact that the islands were populated through migrations from Ile de France (Mauritius) and Ile Bourbon (La Réunion) (Chaudenson, 1992, 34). The absence of an indentured labour force of Indians and Chinese in the archipelago is one aspect that contributed to the divergent outlook of the Seychellois population with regards to the concept of *Créolité* and what a Creole is. The lack of arable land made it unnecessary for a large labour force from the Asiatic mainland to be imported, unlike in Reunion and Mauritius where it was possible to have a flourishing sugarcane industry. Furthermore, the Seychelles population was further differentiated by having shiploads of liberated slaves dumped on its shores in the 1860s (Choppy & Salomon, 2004), thus inflating its African population and making the general population more indiscriminately mixed, the isolation of the islands making it easier to break the social taboos that reigned in more metropolitan areas (Scarr, 2000, 8). In Ile Bourbon as well, the early population was quite a melting pot of ethnicities, resulting in a “Creole” population. However, the blacks were always a minority and came to be known as “Cafres” (kaffirs) (Chaudenson, 1992, 32). As for Mauritius, the influx of indentured Indian labourers after the abolition of slavery eventually brought about a majority of Indian origins in the population. A significant amount of Chinese immigrants (some came as labourers, others as merchants) also added to the population mix – but it is important to note that different racial groups in Mauritius have tended to remain within their own groups with the descendants of the slaves (referred to as the Creoles) holding a minority position (Boswell, 2006). It is thus these early incidents of history that have caused a divergence in the interpretation of the word “Creole” in the Creole zone of the Indian Ocean.

### **Hypothesis 1: Creoleness is often used as a buffer against the idea of Blackness.**

The concept of Creoleness in the Indian Ocean and the Caribbean generally means a mixture of African, European and Asian. Historically there is no doubt that this came about through the slave trade, thus essentially contains the African element – the pepper in the pot, at once the flavour and

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<sup>2</sup> Etudes Océan Indien, N0.49-50, 2013

the sting. Basically, though the African component in Creole cultures may be seen by Creoles of African origins as exciting, alluring, it is at the same time, the same component that creates a sense of inferiority - what Fanon calls, 'la négrophobogénèse' (Fanon, 1952, 158). This is why it has become ingrained in most Creoles' minds that they must whiten their blood (in Seychellois expression, "seeking the light" – *al rod lalimyer*.) Fanon's analysis of Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis Martiniquaise* (1948) and Abdoulaye Sadjji's *Nini* (1954) is a clear illustration of how mulatto women (i.e, Creoles) consider themselves a cut above black people because their blood has been diluted – whitened:

Qui est Mactar ? C'est un bachelier, comptable aux Entreprises fluviales, et il s'adresse à une petite dactylographe, toute bête, mais qui possède la valeur la moins discutée : elle est presque blanche. Alors on s'excusera de la liberté que l'on prend d'écrire une lettre... (Fanon, 1952, 70).

A look at either the oral or literary discourse of any Creole society in the Indian Ocean or the Caribbean suggests that Creoleness is valued in descending order with white origins at the top, Asians in the middle and Africans at the bottom. The discrepancy between the world of the white folk at the top of the hill in Carrington Village and the black labourers at the bottom, makes this clear in George Lamming's *In the Castle of My Skin*, (Lamming, 1953). The inherent belief of the West Indian of Indian origins in his superiority to the blacks is also apparent in most of V.S Naipaul's works, which his critics describe as a sort of repression:

It's the exile of the repressed, of a man who was told by his colonizers, even by his own family, that his West Indianness didn't count: that Indians in the West Indies were superior to their surroundings, more like the British (who, in the imperialist hierarchy, were always the best and the brightest) than their black neighbors. (Als, 2003)

This is the traditional plantation mentality that has coloured Creole societies born out of the slave trade all over the world, as is evidenced by their folklore and sayings. The ancient *moutya* songs of Seychelles for example (generally believed to have originated from plantation slaves) are often testimonies to this.

Depi ler mon'n arive, mon bat lanmen danm pa leve / Me Siboudou i annan long seve, i bat lanmen danm i leve / Abe mwan, mon seve lanmson, mon bat lanmen, danm pa leve... (Estrale, 2006, 34)

[Translation: I've been here a long time, I've been clapping my hands, but the ladies won't dance with me / But Siboudou has long hair, he claps his hands and the ladies stand up for him / I have fishhook hair, the ladies won't stand up for me].

In this song, the voice of the singer laments his fate which causes the women at a local dance to shun his attempts to get a dance partner simply because he has 'fish-hook' hair – basically this refers to the afro type of hair, indicating his racial origins. Siboudou, on the other hand, has long hair, so he has either Asian or European origins, and is as such more acceptable to the ladies. It is clear that the Afro-Creole has reason to rue his origins.

However, so much has been made of the concept of Creole culture by the Western world itself, that the idea of being Creole has also become attractive. This is mostly due to the tourism industry's exoticization of Creole culture; the idea of "Creole food" "Creole flavours", "Creole music", 'Creole girls' ..., has been made attractive to the adventurous Western palate. Consequently, this aspect of Creoleness has become the straws at which Creole peoples could grasp in a sea of identity crisis. The pride in Creole culture that this has evoked however needs to be taken with a pinch of salt, because the European concept of "Creoleness" is sometimes mixed up with the idea of "island culture", very often influenced by the Gauguin fantasy of "natives" from the colonial backwaters of the South Pacific, living happily among their coconut groves, half naked in colourful flowered sarongs and welcoming visitors with open arms, flower leis and hopefully open legs!<sup>3</sup> We are guilty of creating ideals of this Creoleness for tourist consumption, this concept of happy islanders, saffron skin and delightful mixtures of East and West, pretending that Africa is not right there in the middle of East and West. One example of this is the adopted tradition of putting flower leis around tourists' necks when they disembark. The most significant reason why we tend to change our concepts of Creoleness and adopt exotic practices and concepts is that it allows us to turn away from the painful aspects of the origins of our Creoleness. Basically, we reconstruct the idea of Creoleness as a buffer against what we see as the degradation of being black.

**Hypothesis 2: Africanness is the *bête noire* of the Creole world.**

*Le nègre sent qu'on n'est pas noir impunément* (Fanon, 1952, 159).

The tendency among Creole peoples with an African component to either completely deny the African component or protest vehemently that they are different because they have been "civilized" by white society is no less than an act of self-preservation. A UNESCO led research on memories of slavery in Seychelles in 2004, reveals that second and third generation slaves who had been born locally considered themselves civilized as opposed to newly arrived slaves or slaves liberated by the British Navy in the 1860s (Gillieaux & de Commarmond, 2004). As Fanon's 'Black Skin, White Masks' aptly shows, any negro of the African diaspora born in the islands soon finds out that "one is not black without problems", especially when placed in the alienating world of Europeans, who in Fanon's time dominated the world and still do today. In self protection, the Afro-Creole often sees no choice before him but to efface his Negro origins. Fanon comments that Antilleans watching a Tarzan film at home would not identify themselves with the savages in the film but would be forced to in a European milieu. Furthermore, these same Antilleans would laugh at the idea of Zulus and bushmen, but says Fanon, 'Il serait intéressant de montrer que dans ce cas cette exagération réactionnelle laisse deviner un soupçon de reconnaissance' (Fanon, 1952, 159).

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<sup>3</sup> Jennifer McComas, 'From Paris to Polynesia – Paul Gauguin', January 24 2016  
< <https://www.theryder.com/feature-articles/from-paris-to-polynesia-paul-gauguin/> >

Fanon's diagnosis can be described as "the black syndrome": self-hatred, self denial...often leading to a whitening process, either through affecting manners, seeking white progeny or physically using skin whiteners. The black man sees himself only in terms of the white man:

...quand les nègres abordent le monde blanc, il y a une certaine action sensibilisante. Si la structure psychique se révèle fragile, on assiste à un écroulement du Moi. Le Noir cesse de se comporter en individu actionnel. Le but de son action sera Autrui (sous la forme du Blanc), car Autrui seul peut le valoriser. (Fanon, 1952, 160)

One manifestation of this phenomenon is that many Martinicans, according to Fanon, will refer to themselves first as French, and then Martinican. In fact, personal contact with Martinicans of today shows that this attitude has not changed from Fanon's time. Fanon refers to this as an illness – symptoms of schizophrenia; something which is compounded by the fact that there is no Martinican state. (This applies also to Reunion.)

Creoles of the African diaspora thus become basically afraid to link themselves to Africa, though of course this does not include those intellectual and political revolutionaries who saw Africa as their salvation from white domination (thus the negritude movement), especially during the post-colonial period.

**Hypothesis 3: *Éloge de la Créolité* is symbolic of the Creole's wish to declare independence not only from white domination but also from the shackles of slavery and negative African heritage.**

*Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous proclamons Créoles* (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, 1989, 13).

This opening declaration of *Éloge de la Créolité* is very symbolic of the dilemma of Creole identity in any Creole region of the world. Putting it in the context of the whole book, such a declaration might be attributed on the one hand to disenchantment with European domination and frustration with Caribbean writing mimicking European forms, something which the authors describe as alien and lacking interior vision, but also on the other hand, to a certain wariness of the proverbial "black drop". The text can be read as a manifesto for the creation of a "Creole Nation":

Nous voulons, en vraie créolité, y nommer chaque chose et dire qu'elle est belle... Explorer nos origines amérindiennes, indiennes, chinoises et levantines, trouver leurs palpitations dans le battement de nos cœurs. Entrer dans nos pitts, dans nos jeux de « grenndé », dans toutes ces affaires de vieux nègres a priori vulgaires. C'est par ce systématisme que se renforcera la liberté de notre regard. (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, 1989, 40)

This section of the text also makes a clear distinction between Caribbeanness and Creoleness, the latter which links Caribbean Creole communities to the Mascarenes, whereas the former links them to the American continent and their Amerindian ancestors. Creoleness is also defined in terms of globalization:

La Créolité c'est « *le monde diffracté mais recomposé* » (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, 1989, 27).

In spite of praising Césaire as the original mental liberator of the Caribbean from European mimicry through the valorisation of the African heritage, the text shows at the same time, a clear wariness of negritude as a debilitating factor in the quest for independence/freedom (*interior vision*):

Thérapeutique violente et paradoxale, la Négritude fit à celle d'Europe, succéder l'illusion africaine (Bernabé, Chamoiseau, Confiant, 1989, 20).

In this instance, Africa becomes as alien as Europe ; Avec Edouard Glissant, nous refusâmes de nous enfermer dans la Négritude... ' (21). Thus the Creole often finds himself caught in a limbo of uncertain identity. We are neither one nor the other. We might be tolerated in one camp, but will always be reminded of the elements that make us different, whichever group we might try to adhere to. We are forever caught between Africa, Europe and Asia. We are left with no choice but to make our own identity, as do the authors of *Éloge de la Créolité*.

#### **Hypothesis 4: Both the concepts of Négritude and Créolité are quests for identity.**

Négritude is rooted in Africanness and an acknowledgement of the stigma of slavery. The Negritude movement began precisely because the Creole, especially the black Creole, « se découvre soudain rejeté par une civilisation qu'il a cependant assimilée » (Fanon, 1952, 103). Thus, creoles sought to make the subject of their subalternization, their pride. Both *Peau Noir*, *Masques Blancs* and *Éloge de la Créolité* acknowledge this : « La Négritude césairienne est un baptême, l'acte primal de notre dignité restituée. Nous sommes à jamais fils d'Aimé Césaire » (Bernabé, Chamoiseaux, Confiant, 1989, 18).

Though the above quote acknowledges *Créolité's* debt to *Négritude*, the former's concept is a rejection of both Africanness and Europeanness. It is a recreation of a new culture that is completely different to both cultures, but yet stemming from both, as well as other elements (Asian, Native American, etc...).

The term “creole”, however, remains ambiguous, or is often described as ‘polyvalent’, for lack of a better description. This means that the concept of *Créolité* is perpetually confused by the ambiguity of its root word. Confiant, Bernabé and Chamoiseaux see Creole as the mixture and recreation of different cultures within their respective new environments. However, the Hispano-Portuguese tradition of naming European settlers born in the Americas, “creole”, expands this meaning to people of different ethnic groups who have been transplanted from the Old World, to the New World, and who have adapted to their new environment. The original meaning of this category need not involve mixture, but rather adaptation or being bred in the new location. This also applies to Africans and other ethnicities who have been born in the colonies (DECA, 2017, 205). When these different groups mix, the word ‘creole’ thus covers a wide spectrum of mixtures.

To this spectrum is added the linguistic dimension, in reference to the languages emerging from these mixtures, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as “A mother tongue formed from the contact of a European language (especially English, French, Spanish, or Portuguese) with local languages (especially African languages spoken by slaves in the West Indies)” The Routledge Handbook of Linguistic Anthropology also refers to creoles (and pidgins) as “new language varieties that developed out of contacts between colonial nonstandard varieties of a European language and several non-European languages around the Atlantic and in the Indian and Pacific Oceans during the 17<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> centuries” (Mufwene, 2015, 349). This brings in the Indian Ocean and Pacific regions that have experienced these mixtures due to slavery and/or colonialism. The complexity of the definition or interpretation of the word ‘Creole’ and the wide spectrum it covers, is perhaps testimony to the dilemma of identity faced by the Creole individual, in his birthplace or abroad. The pain and degradation of slavery brings an added dimension to the concept of *Créolité*, which might be interpreted as the motivation behind the creolists’ rejection of Césaire’s *Négritude*, and their insistence on creating a new identity belonging wholly to creoles born of the slave trade and colonialism, and their evolved societies. It is the rejection of negativity through the creation of positivity. Thus if Césaire and his compatriots of the *Négritude* Movement aimed to restore the slave descendant’s pride in his identity by looking to Africa, if the creole descendants of the white settlers in the colonies looked with pride to Europe as their original homeland, the creolists aimed to inspire pride in creoles of the ex-colonies by looking to their respective local environments. This search for pride and solidarity of the creole identity is illustrated by the attempt of a group of creolists from the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean in the 1980s to create a federation of creole societies under the title, “Bannzil Kreol”, in St. Lucia in 1981.<sup>4</sup>

### **Hypothesis 5: One cannot create an identity without origins.**

#### **The case of Mauritius**

The state of Mauritius has an official motto to describe its concept of Creoleness: ‘Unity in Diversity’. In terms of population and culture, the concept of Creoleness is often equated with the melting pot theory. The Mauritian ‘Unity in Diversity’ however, cannot really be termed a melting pot in the true sense of the word. Though there is a certain amount of inter-racial mixing, the different racial groups have tended to and are more or less socially expected to stick together, living in separate communities, having separate cultural associations or societies and very distinct religious practices (Boswell, 2006). It is a fact though that everybody shares the same markets, the same Creole music, food, public transport facilities, etc... The most unifying factor is the Creole language which is spoken across the board by all Mauritians, though its formal use is very limited

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<sup>4</sup> Langue Créole – Histoire et Culture < <https://www.caraiibes-mamanthe.org/culture-creole/langue-creole/> >

(Ramtohul & Eriksen, 2018, 192-193).<sup>5</sup> The resulting culture is more like a Japanese lunchbox composed of separate compartments but each being part of a whole. Notably, the Indo-Mauritians make up a majority of the population and tend to dominate the political scene and the Public Service whereas the Sino-Mauritians tend to be merchants and are recognized as a population group, whilst the Franco-Mauritians and Creoles (who were there before the arrival of the Asian groups) are classed together as the “general population” though the Franco-Mauritians, even if they are a tiny group, have the status of having European descent (Boswell, 2006, 45). The Creoles are seen by Boswell as being an “invisible” group with no status.

In Mauritius, Creole is the name given to descendants of African slaves, and to all intents and purposes, it is pejorative in the Mauritian reality since both the black and the hybrid identity “are caught in a vicious circle of negativity” (Boswell, 2006, 2-6). Any official written reference to Mauritius in relation to Creole must be stated as “Creole speaking” rather than just Creole. For example, during the setting up of the *Lenstiti Kreol Enternasyonal* project in Seychelles in January 2014, the Mauritian representative specified that any reference to proposed member countries which includes Mauritius must be changed from “Creole countries” to “Creole speaking countries”.<sup>6</sup> This is essentially because whilst Mauritians concede that they are Creole speakers, a majority of the population do not consider their identity as Creole as that is reserved for the specific group who are slave descendants – and Mauritians who are not slave descendants do not consider that to be a subject of pride.

Whilst Fanon shows hybridization (an essential element of Creoleness) as something that Creoles in the Caribbean are proud of as it speaks of their diluted/whitened blood, in Mauritius, hybridization seems to be considered as undesirable (Boswell, 2006, 2-6).

In *Le Malaise Creole – Ethnicity and Identity in Mauritian Society*, Boswell explores the condition of Creoles in Mauritius and exposes their lack of status in society – directly linked to the African element in their ancestry. Boswell’s work shows that Mauritian Creoles have begun an attempt to establish an identity of their own, mainly because their ostracism is due to the fact that they are considered as rootless, part of the “general population” and have no claims to the grandeur of ancestral links that Mauritians of Chinese, but more significantly, of Indian origins have. Thomas Eriksen puts this into perspective in his lecture about Mauritian Creolization at Warwick University in 1999:

Although they (non-Creoles), like the Creoles, can be seen as diasporic populations – uprooted, exiled and homeless – their genealogical and cultural links with their ancestral country enable them to construe their past as an unbroken and continuous narrative that harks back to the mists of pre-history, and even more importantly in an age of identity politics, their identity linked with a great

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<sup>5</sup> Patrick Eisenlor, ‘From Language to Religion in Mauritian Nation-Building’, in *The Mauritian Paradox: Fifty Years of Development, Diversity and Democracy*, ed. R. Ramtohul and T.H. Eriksen (University of Mauritius Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Draft Terms of Reference, International Creole Institute, 2014.

civilization of immense historical depth, whether it is the Chinese, the Indian, the Islamic or the European tradition (Eriksen, 1999).

As descendants of slaves, the Mauritian Creoles have more or less been denied this claim to ancestral greatness, an element of identity which is very important to Mauritians. However, though almost an age later than the Caribbean negritude and Creole movement, it is commendable that Creole intellectuals in Mauritius, like their counterparts in the Caribbean, are today embracing their Creole identity through various positive actions. Claiming “Le Morne” as a heritage site signifies a quest to establish origins and to create a sense of pride in those origins.<sup>7</sup> As long as a race is ashamed of its origins, any attempt to establish identity will be fruitless. Creating and officially registering a “Creole Speaking Union” (2011) is another positive move that suggests a quest for the same rights as other racial groups. The most significant outcome of such a move is the right to culture. It is important to note at this point that even before the creation of the Creole Speaking Union, Creoles had access to cultural expression through the Nelson Mandela Centre, a cultural centre catering for “the general population” as opposed to more specific cultural centres that cater for specific groups such as Tamils, Hindus, Mandarin speakers, etc. Thus, as long as the Creoles remained lost in “the general population” compartment in Mauritius with no specified roots, they were in danger of having an unspecified identity, and consequently, no clearly specified cultural rights as a group.

### **The Case of La Réunion**

People from Seychelles who are used to thinking of anybody with mixed blood as being “Creole”, inclusive of slave descendants, would be surprised to learn that in Réunion, slave descendants are called “Cafres” (*Kaf* in Creole). This appellation has become so much part of the general fabric of Reunionese society that the slave descendants themselves have come to claim the name as their identity. The name “Creole” is reserved for light-skinned Reunionese of mixed descent, usually with a considerable proportion of white ancestry, mixed perhaps with some Asian and Malagasy. Besides this there are other appellations for different portions of the Réunionese population, from the “Petit Blancs des Hauts” (poor whites), “Grand Blancs” (European descendants of plantation owners), “Malbars” and “Zarabes” (Hindus and Muslims from India), “Sinoi” (Chinese), and at the top of the social ladder, the French expatriates, the “Zoreilles”. As is the case in Mauritius, people of African descent are still at the bottom of the social scale.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Listed on UNESCO world heritage site list in 2008 and the site where Creoles gather to commemorate the abolition of slavery every 1<sup>st</sup> February as Le Morne was a maroon slave site where escaped slaves threw themselves to their deaths on the rocky slopes when on 1<sup>st</sup> February 1835, a police delegation approached them to announce their liberation, an intention which they had tragically misinterpreted.

<sup>8</sup> Countries and their culture: Reunion Island <http://www.everyculture.com/No-Sa/Reunion-Island.html#ixzz3TREu0seT>

The history of slavery in La Réunion has tended to be romanticized in literature (Daniel Vaxellaire's works might be considered an example) and the 'Kafs' themselves tend to take pride in saying that their ancestors were escaped maroons.<sup>9</sup> Dr. Sheila Walker, an American anthropologist who conducted a research in La Reunion on African heritage in November and December 2008 seems to have come to the conclusion that Reunionese slave descendants are proud if they are descended from maroon slaves but not so keen to discuss their slave ancestors who stayed on the plantations. In my opinion, all this romanticism on the part of the slave descendants is part of their attempt to create an identity that they can live with in the face of the subaltern identity they face every day under the appellation "Kaf". Reunionese Creole, though it is now considered a French regional language (as are other "Outremer" creoles) and is thus taught in the French school systems, (with some limitations), has a history of diglossia, with Creole as the 'low' variety (APiCS online).<sup>10</sup>

Intellectuals and groups of slave descendants or people who consider themselves as having a Creole identity have formed different societies and organizations to claim a Reunionese, or Black identity. Examples are the "L'Union pour l'identité Réunionnaise" led by writer Jean-François Sam-Long, "Lofis Lalang La Réunion", led by writer Axel Gauvin and black identity groups such as "Racine Kaf" and "Ankraké". The case of La Réunion is different to that of Mauritius and Seychelles in that the government is still an ancient colonial power, thus European; social lifestyles are juxtaposed, as people are generally expected to live like the average French person whereas social circumstances and the physical environment doesn't in all cases allow that. "*Revendication*" of the marginalized identity, especially the slave identity has become more or less the battle cry of the marginalized groups. Failing to identify themselves with the European ideal, the descendants of the slaves, and other marginal groups have recreated their religions, expressed through the conducting of what is known as "Service Kabaré", which is basically ancestor worship associated with the Malagasies, Africans and 'Malbars' (Yu-Sion Live, 2006).

The Reunionese identity groups and the practice of "Service Kabaré" (especially "Service Kaf" and "Service Malgache") may be considered as important elements of the Creole population's attempt to reclaim their African ancestry. An important comparison to the Mauritian situation is that "Kafs", like the Creoles of Mauritius, have tried to identify themselves as slave descendants, thus embraced their African ancestry, out of a need to create a rooted identity. It is from this

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Vaxellaire, *Chasseurs de Noirs*, 1982, Gallimard. *L'affranchi*, 1996, Nouvelle Edition Phébus.

<sup>10</sup> *The Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures Online (APiCS)*, Structure Dataset 54: Reunion Creole. Available on < <https://apics-online.info/contributions/54> > (accessed 26/09/2019).

identity that they hope perhaps, to make others see their needs as a visible group of people with rights and aspirations like any other people.

### **The case of Seychelles**

*Nou tou nou menm grander, nou tou nou menm groser, nou tou nou menm larzer...* (Accouche, 1979). (We are all the same height, the same size, the same width...)

This song typifies the general Seychellois attitude to the issue of Creoleness and Seychellois identity after the Liberation Coup d'état in 1977. As such, the meaning of Creole in Seychelles, with reference to identity has come to mean any Seychellois, irrespective of colour, race, ancestry or social position.

Whereas in Mauritius, Mauritian Creoles consider that they are owed reparations from the Mauritian Government for their long years of being under-privileged, they consider that Seychellois Creoles need no reparations because essentially the country is run by the Creoles themselves (since everybody is Creole) and there is no marginalized group (Police-Michel, 2008). Socially speaking, this is quite true. However, the taking of power in their own hands has had at least one negative effect on the Seychellois people (in my opinion) in that the general tendency has been to forget about slavery and colonialism and only look ahead to progress; what I tend to call, 'drinking from 'Lethe'. The 'Lethe Syndrome' manifests itself in the denial of blackness and the insistence on being Seychellois and not African as was illustrated in a colloquium on African diaspora and Creoleness at the Creole Institute of Seychelles in 2008. The situation is further made complex by the fact that indeed, a portion of the population have no obvious African ancestry, though we are geographically placed with the continent of Africa (something which causes a certain amount of discomfort to those Seychellois and Mauritians who want no part of 'the dark continent'). However, the fact remains that we do claim ancestry from all three continents of Europe, Africa and Asia. The denial of Africanness has resulted in an emphasis on our Creole identity in the style of *Éloge de la Créolité*. We say that we are neither Africans, nor Europeans, nor Asians, but rather Seychellois – but really, what we are saying is that we do not consider ourselves in any sense African, and most Seychellois will not hesitate to openly declare this, as was the case in another forum entitled "Definitions of Creole and Creoleness," also held at the Creole Institute in October, 2015, where a number of tertiary students voiced this opinion.<sup>11</sup>

In literature, however, the long memory of slavery and the trauma of that period that has been passed down through generations, tend to resurface, even in the younger generation. If we take two writers of the older generation and who would have experienced remnants of a slave society in their lifetimes, we can compare how this trauma has affected their psyche. Antoine Abel for

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<sup>11</sup> Lenstiti Kreol, *Definitions of Creole and Creoleness*, 2015, Colloquium Report.

example, recreates the scene of our African ancestors being uprooted from their homelands, their suffering on that painful journey, the slave route from Zanzibar to Seychelles, and the handful that lived to tell the tale.<sup>12</sup> He picks up the trauma of the descendants of those slaves again centuries later in pre-independent Seychelles, in many of his poems and novels expressing the poverty of the African descendant and the injustice of society.<sup>13</sup> Georgine Robert, on the other hand, who recreates the historical scene of an early slave society, tends to manifest some notorious stereotypes of Africans in representations of social habits, though we see the usual ‘civilized’ imagery of characters of European descent in representations of beauty and goodness.<sup>14</sup> A much younger poet of the later generations, Reuban Lespoir, cries out the trauma of his ancestors, revealing his own deep-seated trauma as a descendant of a race that has been enslaved, despised and cowed. It would be possible for him to do that only because there are still remnants of that devalorization in the world today that would still affect his own psyche in response.

In the ‘Slave Route’ project in 2004, de Commarmond and Gillieaux found out that a significant amount of people in Seychelles prefer that memories of slavery and stories from that era and the colonial era are not raked up again as it could affect the more or less perfect racial harmony that exists in our society today. If any Creole society is a true melting pot, Seychelles can indeed be quoted as that true prototype for inter-racial mixing has been close to the norm here, beginning with our celebrated original Seychellois, Pierre Hangard, who founded the first mixed race family from the beginning of the settlement itself (Scarr, 2000, 7-8), to the egalitarian society promoted by the Second Republic in 1977. However, I will maintain that in Seychelles, putting slavery and our African heritage in the past is not only a manifestation of our desire to escape our past but also reveals our failure to recognize the cracks in our psychological make-up.

## Conclusion

In most Creole communities that have been created as a result of the slave trade and plantation economy of the 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the African component is part and parcel of Creole identity. It is what makes Creole societies, from the Caribbean and the Americas to the Indian Ocean, similar (alongside common European inheritances among the different groups); from the pepper in the soup, to the rainbow colours of the people, to the rhythm of the music, the linguistic characteristics and colourful imagery... It is this, mixed with the Asiatic and European influences, that give Creole culture its specific flavour so that from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean, one can talk about Creole heritage with a specific connotation. It is also a fact however, that the trauma of slavery and colonialism is still an important element in the Creole’s approach to his identity today. We are still associating Africa with abasement and backwardness and thus are keen to make of our African

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<sup>12</sup> Antoine Abel, ‘Freedom’, in *Paille en Queue*, 1969 (unpublished)

<sup>13</sup> Antoine Abel, *Coco Sèc*, 1977, *Anthologie de Poésie Seychelloise*, 1984

<sup>14</sup> Georgine Robert, ‘Deryer Laport Makouti’, 1996

heritage, something of the past. Until we come to terms with the totality of our heritage, the question of Creoleness shall remain a question. *We must find the pepper in the pot.* Rejection of origins results in rootlessness, forgetfulness and the exoticization of identity. *We must lance the boil in order to be cured.*

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## Pour citer cet article

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### Référence électronique

Penda Choppy, « The pepper in the pot: *The uneasy relationship between Creoleness and Blackness* », *Études Créoles* – Vol. XXXVI n°1 & 2 - 2018 [En ligne], consulté le ..., URL : [http://www.lpl-aix.fr/wp-content/uploads/Etudes\\_créoles/choppy.pdf](http://www.lpl-aix.fr/wp-content/uploads/Etudes_créoles/choppy.pdf)