



## CREOLIZATION AS MODEL FOR TRADITION IN PLURAL SOCIETIES: THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE

**Effumbe Kachua<sup>i</sup>**

Centre for General Studies,  
Cross River University of Technology,  
Calabar Cross River State,  
Nigeria

### **Abstract:**

Creolization is a cultural theory that seeks to explain and redress the cultural diversity in multi-ethnic communities. It makes for desired unity and harmony towards the achievement of the sense of wholeness and identity for a disparate people. The theory was developed by Kamau Brathwaite to describe the process through which Old World (African) life forms became indigenous in the New World (Americas). Today, in the era of globalization, the term is used as synonym of hybridity and syncretism to portray the process of seamless cultural mixture in plural societies. Creolization is also adjudged and likened to the old “melting pot” hypothesis which conceives of new cultural unity from diverse original ones, thus, it is used as a metaphor for Caribbean unity. The Caribbean society is a multi-ethnic community of peoples who were forcefully taken away from their homes, mostly from Africa as slaves. The term is interpreted to mean being Caribbean – ‘Caribbeanness’ – and goes beyond identification with one race and one place. In their distinct and separate national identities as Europeans, East Indians, Amerindians and Africans, Caribbean territories could not achieve any socio-political and economic stability, but Creolization offers endless possibilities for socio-cultural, economic and political fulfillment as a plural society.

**Keywords:** creolization, tradition, plural societies, Caribbean experience

### **1. Introduction**

The concept of Creolization first came into prominence after the European “discovery” of the Americas, to describe the process by which Old World life forms became indigenous in the New World. The cultural processes of creolization have overtime become the central preoccupation of several Caribbean writers for several reasons, bordering on the critical importance of the theory to the analyses of what M. G. Smith calls “plural societies”.

---

<sup>i</sup> Correspondence: email [kachuaeffumbe@yahoo.com](mailto:kachuaeffumbe@yahoo.com)

Kamau Brathwaite, to assert the seamless flow into 'wholeness' that the four cultural carriers in the New World – Amerindians, Africans, Europeans and East Indians – integrated, identified two distinctive types of creolizations in the New World: the *"mestizo-creolization and mulatto creolization"* (344). The main difference between the two is that in the *mestizo-creolization* process, the aboriginal Amerindians interacted with the migrant Iberian Europeans within the Central and South Americas, while in the case of the *mulatto-creolization*, both the Africans and Europeans (mainly Western Europeans) were immigrants to the West Indies and North American continent, where slavery prevailed.

Today creolization appears in writings on globalization and post-modernity as synonym of 'hybridity' and 'syncretism' to portray the seamless mixtures occurring amongst societies in an age of migration and telecommunications. The preponderant historical records remind us that creolization did not refer centrally to mixture, but, most significantly to the adaptive effects of living in a new environment. It is in the light of this that O. Nigel Bolland asserts that *"in the popular view, creolization is the version of the old "melting pot" hypothesis, which conceives of a new cultural unity emerging from the blending of diverse original elements"* (16). This idea superimposes over the Smith's cultural plurality with which he sought to define the Caribbean society as a plural society.

Kamau Brathwaite develops the theory of creolization partly in response to the legacy of racist's thoughts that influenced the writing of the history of the Caribbean region. The theory expounds on the cultural values of the Africans and their descendants, as a reaction to the opinion that Africans had no cultural history, but are replicas of their European and American masters. Glen Richards attests that the theory *"advanced the view that African cultural norms had played a decisive role in the foundation of the culture of the local population in the Anglophone Caribbean, and that this culture was not merely a poor imitation of Europe's but a new 'creole' culture"* (223). In the light of this, Caribbean societies and cultures can no longer be thought of as a result of a one-way process, of the unilateral imposition of European culture upon passive African recipients, but the conjoint participation of different peoples, not least those from Africa.

Brathwaite's theory of creolization signals his ardent pursuit of what he believes is the *"ground from which we ourselves will see the world, and towards which the world will look to find us ... a Creole culture ... And a creole way of seeing too"* (108). This in effect becomes in many ways a reference point towards which other critics either seek to affiliate or differentiate themselves, and one that remains core to many contemporary theorizations of Caribbean cultural studies today. This invaluable contribution towards a cultural redefinition of the West Indian society informs Alison Donnell's affirmation that:

*"Brathwaite was perhaps the most strident and prolific writer in terms of remapping cultural and critical agendas at this time .... He laid out in straightforward terms a series of arguments concerning the politics of location, attachment to community, social conscience and the representation of Caribbean history (20/21)."*

This in many respects amounts to radical epistemic shift enacted through the framing of an alternative cultural resource.

The term “Creole” used in some context in West Indian literature is connected to “ac/culturation” and “inter/culturation” – the twin terms or concepts coined by Brathwaite to explain the ways through which the process of Creolization is achieved. The way in which cultures originally foreign to Caribbean adjust and relate; lose and offer some of their own, pick up some of the patterns of the “host”; so that all groups move, even though the pace and consciousness varies, towards a kind of eventual homogeneity: at least of general response. He goes ahead to define it thus:

*“The term creolization ... refers to a cultural process perceived as taking place within a continuum of space and time, but which, for clarification may be divided into two aspects of itself: ac/culturation which the yoking (by force and example, deriving from power/prestige) of one culture to another...; and inter/culturation, which is unplanned, unstructured but osmotic relationship resulting from this yoke. The creolization which results (and it is a process not a product), becomes the tentative cultural norm of the society (6).”*

This viewpoint informs Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin’s perspective that “... the ‘creole’ is not predicated upon the idea of the disappearance of independent cultural traditions but rather on their continual mutual development. The interleaving of practices will produce new forms even as the older forms continue to exist” (184). In this guise, Creolization becomes the process by which the various and distinct cultural groups in the Caribbean interact with each other, resulting in a language and culture that is distinctly Caribbean. At this instance, creolization becomes a metaphor for Caribbean unity and possibility; at the centre of the experience of creolization is the African experience in the New World. June Bobb affirms that “anyone of perception who has studied the history, literature and culture of the Caribbean recognizes that the African experience dominates creolization process” (168).

## **2. The Dialectical Conception of the Creole Cultural Model**

For several decades, sociologists and historians have pondered over the very contentious issues of cultural change and the creation of new ethnic identities in situations of multiple ethnic contacts like the New World. In view of this, they have advanced different labels to the process, and end results of cultural interfaces in the Americas; theories have been formed around such concepts as creolization, ethno-genesis, inter-ethnic fusion, hybridization, transculturation and pluralism.

The idea of Creolization in the New World, propounded by Kamau Brathwaite has received an avalanche of critical rejoinders. The perspectives from which these various scholars have analyzed the idea have not been unified. In spite of the divergence of opinions, these opinions have served the necessary part of accentuating the lively debate that reaffirms the intellectual depth and fundamental nature of Kamau Brathwaite’s work in Caribbean cultural studies. What Shepherds and Richards in their “Introduction” to their edited

anthology entitled *Questioning Creole: Creolization Discourses in Caribbean Culture*, describe as a “wide diffusion of the creolization concept” (xii) grants the theory “a significance comparable to the globalization model” (B. Higman, 6).

The Creole cultural model is a projection of the ways in which “the conflicting influences of African and European-based practices and ideologies are constantly assimilated to produce a composite culture which remains mutable and open-ended” (Gilbert and Tompkins, 103). Considering the immutable principles behind creolization, and the fact that the carnival is a repository of culture, one, which demonstrates communal life with its associated tensions, the duo see in it abundant transformations of cultural signifiers to counter imported regimes of values and give acceptable credibility to indigenous aesthetics. Antonio Benitez-Rojo adjures that within the plantation milieu, the Carnival is the synthesizing context from which the different states of creolization are realized in language, music, dance and literature, food and theatre.

In his defence of the continuity and centrality of the African Caribbean consciousness in the anti-colonial and hence anti-imperialist struggles of the entire Caribbean peoples, Ngugi wa Thiong’o pursues the argument that for all the orchestrated attempts to impose a double alienation from Africa and from the Caribbean environment, Afro-Caribbean culture could not be wiped out. Wa Thiong’o traces the persistence and shaping of this consciousness to the numerous slave revolts; the slaves’ affirmation of freedom through fight and flight; and the popular songs and literature in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Ngugi wa Thiong’o, the celebrated playwright, novelist and polemicist argues in his essay, “Decolonization: A Prefatory Note” that:

*“But a history of subjugation sets in motion a process of its own negation: a history of resistance. Thus the African did not just submit to the colonial fate. He fought back to regain his freedom, regain control of his land and labor. In the process, he created a new culture, ... which he expressed in his songs, his dances, his literature. Through orature, he kept his history of Africa alive while embodying his dreams and vision of tomorrow. He even appropriated the languages imposed on him and created new languages. Thus the orature of the Afro-Caribbean is the richest oral traditions in the world; and in it one can detect an unmistakable and unbroken thread to Africa (my emphasis) (10).”*

Citing such icons in the history of cultural and political emancipation of African peoples as C. L. R. James, Frantz Fanon, Aime Cesaire, George Lamming, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Marcus Garvey, and Walter Rodney, wa Thiong’o says in written literature, the Afro-Caribbean has shone brightly just as he has contributed immensely to the modern world culture of resistance and revolution.

Kamau Brathwaite is one of the most expressive minds in Caribbean literature to underwrite genuine local difference through the promotion of linguistic innovations. This Man of Letters is remembered for his emphasis on the significance of Africa to cultural re-institutionalisation in the Caribbean which is paramount to his theory of Creolization. Even though the emphasis Brathwaite places on African and Amerindian ancestry tends to

privilege this aspect over the European connection as a means of reconstituting an identity submerged by imposed cultural norm, he does not repudiate the European factor in Creolization.

Creolization as defined by Wilson Harris means 'native consciousness in Caribbean experience' (59). The Caribbean experience as we have noted, is a history of double estrangement from one's community and landscape. Native consciousness or Creolization as put forward by Brathwaite is a proposal for negotiating this palpably desolate world.

The urgency this warrants is manifest in the seriousness Brathwaite attaches to projecting an alternative, speculative vision of 'wholeness' in a situation inveterately defined by fragmentation, with reference to the unnatural formation of the Caribbean society and the problems attendant upon its unusual formation. Antonio Benitez-Rojo highlights that:

*"The main obstacles to any global study of the Caribbean's societies, insular or continental, are exactly those things that scholars usually adduce to define the area: its fragmentation, its instability, its reciprocal isolation, its uprootedness, its cultural historiography and historical continuity; its impermanence, its syncretism etc. This unexpected mix of obstacles and properties is not, of course, mere happenstance. What happens is that post-industrial society – to use a new-fangled term – navigates the Caribbean with judgments and intentions that are like those of Columbus (978)."*

Benitez-Rojo reasons that in view of these problems, imported dogmas and methods that inadequately express Caribbean realities have been employed in exploring the region in the artistic mode. Brathwaite, who as noted earlier positions himself in relation to the evolution of writing in the region, equally calls for a creative response to the peculiar literary and cultural problems of the Caribbean, if authentic and environmentally germane methodologies are to be summoned to formalize its aesthetics.

In his essay entitled "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" Brathwaite sets out to delineate the defining characteristics of an emerging literary tradition in the West Indies. In addition to tracing the various tendencies in the emergent writing, he isolates two major phases: an earlier stage defined by a castrating and pervasive sense of loss, violent protest or rejection and die-hard cynicism; and a second period marked by the quest for restoration or vision of 'wholeness'. Driven by a relentless concern for cultural reinstatement, Brathwaite explicitly situates himself in the second phase, seeing it as a crucial shift in artistic sensibility through which the shortcomings of his literary predecessors could be redressed.

Furthermore, as a means of communication growing out of the Caribbean soil, dialect shaped by the creative spirit and authority of the artist is for Brathwaite, a potent device for galvanizing the encrustations of the Caribbean landscape. The use of speech patterns drawn from local dialects has both ideological and literary implications for Brathwaite. Accepting the need for the writer to be part of a tradition if not its very growing edge, Brathwaite insists such a tradition must be steeped in the creolized cultures of the Caribbean. Politically, the model of Creolization he proposes opens out to embrace a wide-ranging sense of cultural interaction, not only among all elements of the 'tropical plantation', but also between these

elements and certain metropolitan aspects of the continent. In his *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, he not only explores the unexacting process of Creolization in the Caribbean, but underscores the interflow of Creole features which he sees as integrating the Jamaican society, and by extension all plural societies.

In his monograph, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*, he articulates his intuitions for an authentic Creole presence in the Caribbean, rejecting the commonly accepted cultural plurality for the interfluent. Stating his main thesis, Brathwaite avows that:

*In spite of efforts to socialize individuals into separate social groupings as demanded by the ethos of slavery, the ramifications of personal relationships ... brought new, unexpected exchanges into each group's repertoire of behavior. This slow uncertain but organic process (from initiation/imitation to invention) ... is what we mean by Creolization (Cited by Micheal Dash, 226).*

Accordingly, Creolization as Brathwaite cultivates it is a cultural action based upon the 'stimulus-response' of individuals to their environment and, within culturally discreet white-black groups to each other. He stresses that "*the scope and quality of this response and interaction was dictated by the circumstances of the society's foundation and composition*" (296). Thus in his participation in the constitution of identity and a distinctive 'sun aesthetics', Brathwaite underscores place as a dynamic factor in Caribbean reality.

In the development of Creole languages, the act of moving beyond the mere imitation of former colonial masters is a vital step towards the formation of distinctive independent Caribbean identities. But the notion of what it means to be 'creole' goes far beyond the issue of language. It affects every aspect of Caribbean life. Creolization as a cultural model in fact, traverses linguistic borders in the Caribbean. The word 'Creole' means Caribbean-born, as opposed to aboriginal or European-born. It is not a racially specific term in the region but applies to people of all races whose place of origin is the Caribbean. (In the USA however, it is applied to descendants of early settlers of French origin in Louisiana). The cultural process of Creolization has become a central preoccupation of several Caribbean writers for obvious reason of its topical relevance to a definition of identity.

Before writers began to focus on creolization as a particular way of thinking about identity in the Caribbean beyond European categorizations, there was a movement that propagated reorientation specifically towards the region's African heritage: Negritude. (Kamau Brathwaite's notion of 'nation language is influenced by this concept). Negritude sought to define Caribbean cultural identity in historical and cultural affiliations to the so-called 'mother' continent of Africa. Its main thinkers in the Caribbean (it also had its African counterpart in Leopold Sedar Senghor, Senegalese Statesman and poet) were Leon Damas (French Guyana) and Aimè Cessairè (Martinique).

In spite of its own dedication to African roots of Caribbean culture, Kamau Brathwaite's definition of Creolization is much more inclusive than that of Negritude writers.

In *The Development of Creole Society* (1971), Brathwaite says of the Creole society of Jamaica between 1770-1820:

*“The single most important factor in the development of Jamaican society was not the imported influence of Mother Country or the local administrative activity of the white elite, but a cultural action – material, psychological and spiritual – based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and – white/black, culturally discrete groups – to each other (296).”*

What links the Jamaican Creole society of the late eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries to the creole societies of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is the interaction of the two or more distinct cultural and racial units in order to form a *“new construct, made up of new comers to the landscape, and cultural strangers one to each other”* (296). Creolization, therefore is a distinctly Caribbean form of hybridity.

What is called Creolization in Anglo-phone Caribbean appears as ‘Antillanite’ and ‘Creolite’ in Franco-phone Caribbean. For Glissant who coins the term Antillanite (Caribbeanness) in his book *Caribbean Discourse* and develops it further in *Poetic of Relation*, Caribbean reality contains the potential to link cultures across language barriers. Being a Martinican himself, his works engages with that of Césaire. Glissant, however rejects the older writer’s emphasis on Africa, and conceives of his own concept of Caribbeanness as something that goes beyond identification with one race and one place: *“we are the roots of a cross-cultural relationship”* (67). For Glissant, Caribbeanness is multilingual and multi-racial, so his focus is more hemispheric, than that found in other models of Creolization. From this, analysts have inferred that to Glissant, creolization *“is not an isolationist concept, because he has indicated that “infinite varieties of creolization are open to human conception”* (250).

### 3. Conclusion

One of the effects of creolization is the politicization of the Caribbean in its effort to obliterate the regional compartmentalization into linguistic socio-cultural units. The concept is a *“... threat to existing regional and neo-colonial power structures”* (June Bobb, 169). As a force for unification, creolization has historically been viewed as a revolutionary concept by those interested in maintaining the status-quo in the Caribbean. Its political and visionary thrust inspires the possibility of being a real force for change. Rex Nettleford succinctly captures this revolutionary dimension when he opines that:

*“The Caribbean is to be seen more as a cultural unit, the product of the process of creolization which goes beyond biological mixing to the creation of a unique and distinctive sensibility capable of coping with difference without resort to intolerance, or deterioration into psychic despair”* (ix-x).

In their separate existence as English, French, Spanish and Dutch islands, Caribbean territories will not achieve political and economic self-sufficiency. However, Creolization opens endless possibilities for socio-cultural, economic and political inter-relationships. The poets of the region are ahead of the politicians in recognizing the transformational and unifying powers of the creolization process.

Conclusively, it is possible and necessary to see Creole Society/Creolization theory as Caribbean historiography's gain from Kamau Brathwaite's major intellectual effort at creolist-theory building since the late 1960s. History, thereafter, could square up to the social sciences with their "plural society" and "plantation society" theories. This Creolization incorporates both "plural society" and "plantation society" perspectives. O. Nigel Bolland's summation of his essay lays credence to this, as he affirms: "*In sum, Brathwaite vision of the Creole society is an advance on the plantation- and plural-society models in so far as it emphasizes the active role of Caribbean people and the importance of African cultural traditions in the development of Caribbean cultures and societies*" (38). Brathwaite, on his part, from 1970 was committed to his creolist revolution in Caribbean historiography. The meaning of the underlying historical experience has become, in his work, a tool with which to think creatively about the totality of the entire Caribbean cultural experience and meaning.

The concept of Creole society, as it has been used in the Caribbean, stresses the active role of Caribbean peoples and the importance of African cultural traditions. In many ways, it is the antithesis of the old imperialist viewpoint that denies the "natives" a history of their own and asserts that nothing of any cultural value was ever created in the Caribbean, as exemplified in James Anthony Froude and V. S. Naipaul. This concept, the Creolization model/thesis, by insisting that the common people – slaves, peasants, freedmen and labourers – were active agents in the historical process, has made a fundamental contribution to Caribbean historiography.

## References

- Bobb, June D. *Beating a Restless Drum: The Poetics of Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998. Print.
- Bolland, O. Nigel. "Creolization and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History" *Questioning Creole: Creolization Discourses in Caribbean Culture*. Eds. Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards. Kingston: Ian Randles Publishers, 2002. 15-39. Print.
- Brathwaite, Edward. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica: 1770-1820*. London: Clarendon Press, 1971. Print.
- . *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean*. Kingston: Savacou Publications, 1974. Print.
- Brathwaite, Kamau. "Jazz and the West Indian Novel (Parts 1, 11, & 111)" (1967/68). *Roots: Essays in Caribbean Literature*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994. 55-110. Print.



- . "Timehri" (1970). *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature*. Eds. Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh. London: Routledge, 1996. 344-50. Print.
- Dash, Michael. "Edward Brathwaite". *West Indian Literature*. Ed. Bruce King. London: Macmillan Press, 1979. 210-27. Print.
- Donnell, Alison. *Twentieth Century Caribbean Literature: Critical Moments in Anglophone Literary History*. London: Routledge, 2006. Print.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989. Print.
- . *Poetics of Relation*. (Trans. By Betsy Wing) Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997. Print.
- Gilbert, Helen and Joanne Tompkins. *Post-Colonial Drama, Theory, Practice, Politics*. London: Routledge, 1996. Print.
- Harris, Wilson. *Tradition, the Writer & Society: Critical Essays*. London: New Beacon Publications, 1967. Print.
- Nettleford, Rex. *Inward Stretch Outward Reach: A Voice from the Caribbean*. New York: Caribbean Diaspora Press, 1995. Print.
- Rojo, Antonio Benitez. "Three Words Towards Creolization." *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*. Eds. Balutansky, M. Kathleen and Mari-Agnes Sourieau Florida: University of Florida Press, 1998. 53-61. Print.
- Shepherd, Verene A. and Glen L. Richards. "Introduction" *Questioning Creole: Creolization Discourses in Caribbean Culture*. Eds. Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards. Kingston: Ian Randles Publishers, 2002. xi-xxvii. Print.
- Smith, M.G. *The Plural Society in the British West Indies*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965. Print.
- Wa Thiong'o, Ngugi. "Decolonization: A Prefatory Note". Saakana, Amon Saba. *The Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1987. 9-11. Print.

Effumbe Kachua  
CREOLIZATION AS MODEL FOR TRADITION IN PLURAL SOCIETIES:  
THE CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE

---

Creative Commons licensing terms

Author(s) will retain the copyright of their published articles agreeing that a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0) terms will be applied to their work. Under the terms of this license, no permission is required from the author(s) or publisher for members of the community to copy, distribute, transmit or adapt the article content, providing a proper, prominent and unambiguous attribution to the authors in a manner that makes clear that the materials are being reused under permission of a Creative Commons License. Views, opinions, and conclusions expressed in this research article are views, opinions, and conclusions of the author(s). and European Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics Studies shall not be responsible or answerable for any loss, damage or liability caused in relation to/arising out of conflicts of interest, copyright violations and inappropriate or inaccurate use of any kind content related or integrated into the research work. All the published works are meeting the Open Access Publishing requirements and can be freely accessed, shared, modified, distributed and used in educational, commercial and non-commercial purposes under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License \(CC BY 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).