

CREOLE CULTURE & LANGUAGE IN THE COLOMBIAN CARIBBEAN CULTURA & LENGUAJE CRIOLLO EN EL CARIBE COLOMBIANO

Oakley Forbes, Universidad del Quindío

Resumen

El presente trabajo parte de la formación de la etnia afrocaribe. Una vez dilucidado este aspecto se ilustran los elementos más trascendentales de la cultura. Entre los aspectos más importantes se tendrán en cuenta la familia, la posesión de la tierra, la gastronomía, la religión, la administración pública, la política partidista y la tradición oral, la historia oral, la literatura oral, la música y la danza. Una de las manifestaciones más esenciales de cualquier cultura es su lengua. En el caso de la etnia afrocaribe de San Andrés y Providencia, existe la presencia de tres lenguas, dos de ellas de procedencia europea y la otra producto del sincretismo entre elementos africanos, caribes y anglosajones en el contexto de una cultura con aire afrocaribe. Se analizan, entonces, algunos elementos de la lengua criolla caribe, de base léxica inglesa, en el contexto del archipiélago de San Andrés y Providencia.

Introduction

The Afro-Caribbean ethnic group of the Archipelago of San Andres and Old Providence was formed by Maroons who came to the Islands from Jamaica and from Trinidad on the one hand and by black slaves and their slave masters who settled in the islands in order to cultivate land on the other. We also find the practice of underground miscegenation, which was widely practised by the white landlords during the time of slavery. The Miskito Indians were the first people to settle these islands. They called them Abacoan Islands. They got along quite well with the Englishmen. Finally, we also find British descendants amongst the Creole people: we can mention the Scottish, the Welsh, and the Irish who left some fundamental aspects of our heritage. Occasionally, Europeans of diverse origins were present and contributed to the formation of the Afro-Caribbean ethnic group.

The presence and formation of the initial Afro-Caribbean ethnic group in the Archipelago corresponds to the period between 1600 and 1800.

During this early period the only type of miscegenation practice that was carried out was deployed by the slave masters. The other human groups were the subjects of this practice. Several centuries later, when the masters freed the slaves in the Archipelago and when the black man had access to private property and to literacy, he also had access to inter-ethnic relations with the white woman and /or with the mestiza. Inter-ethnic marriages began to take place on the Island of San Andres in the nineteen twenties, and became more frequent in the nineteen-fifties. On the Island of Old Providence, instead, this situation has never become natural.

Since the opening of the Free Port on the Island of San Andres, the few white men who were considered to be noblemen lost their social status and their prestige as merchants, outstanding men and leaders of the island community. With the presence of a new dominant class imposed as part of the strategies of Colombianization on the Archipelago by the Central Government in Bogota, a new era had dawned on these Islands. The former noblemen were openly forced to assimilate. As a reaction, they decided to become part of the Afro-Caribbean culture and to develop their lifestyle. The Afro-Caribbean Ethnic group has acquired the air of good family from this very moment and the cultural differences between those who used to consider themselves of European and of Afro-Caribbean origin were put aside. The Afro-Caribbean openly assumes his/her own cultural practices and appropriates him/herself of those that were considered as only European background. Before this kind of syncretism occurred, the Afro-Caribbean only used to reproduce European cultural practices in order to satisfy the needs of the white man.

It is important, then, to take into account that in the formation of the Afro-Caribbean culture in the Archipelago of San Andres and Old Providence elements of different origin have intervened and that their synthesis is not to be taken for granted. It

is also relevant to keep in mind that even though there are elements in the culture of a group, which give it cohesion and make it stable, it is also dynamic. So, when an element of the culture changes, the group itself changes. No culture exists in vacuum and is never isolated from the rest of the cultures of the world.

The Afro-Caribbean culture of San Andres and Old Providence is a continuous melting pot. Without being consolidated thoroughly, it is constantly in contact with diverse sub-cultural groups from the Colombian Mainland. These contacts have been taking place in two different ways. From the sixties on, the National Government has promoted the strategy of sending Natives to the Mainland to intern-schools for high-school studies, teacher training, and higher education. On the other hand, with the opening of the free port, mainlanders from almost every corner of the country, including the fringes of the Republic, arrived on the Islands. The same thing happened with the Israeli Jews and the Sirio-Lebanese. These three different immigrant groups took over the northern part of the Island of San Andres and with the help of Colombian bank loans they developed a commercial and hotel infrastructure. While all this was happening, the great majority of the Native people who had left for the Mainland were at the same time returning back home.

Forbes and Mitchell (1992) consider that the great majority of black people, educated in the National culture, are the worst enemies of their own culture and language. These people think that the National Government has given equal opportunities to all the citizens, including their own co-ethnic members; but because the Ethnic groups are inferior and ignorant, they do not take advantage of the opportunities and they cannot compete with the monolingual citizens of the National culture, namely, "it is the same Ethnic minority groups' fault not to take advantage of all the possibilities that the National Government offers". The culture and the language of the community become part of our problem when these neo-Colombians stop using their language and adhering to their ancient cultural practices, even in their interaction with their peers and with their own children. They change their names, sometimes they use Spanish (Castilian) names, at other times they use surnames as first names and

they try to adapt to the Spanish cultural profiles.

In the 500 years of cultural invasion, the few members of the indigenous and black groups who have had access to higher education and to the regional and local power have become the best agents of the cultural invasion and the blind implementation of contrary cultural policies towards the minority groups. That is to say that the few persons from ethnic minority groups with formal education have got their education in a culture and a language that is contrary to the regional and local culture and language. As a matter of fact, these characters come back home brainwashed and do everything to hamper the promotion, development, and enrichment of the local culture; they certainly do not see it as their role to protect the culture of the minority groups of the country.

It is important to keep in mind that centralism does not only emanate from the capital; it is also exercised regionally and locally by certain thongs that tie the periphery up the way colonies should presumably remain. No single decision of importance is taken without the mediation of some bureaucrat in Bogota. In plain and straight words, this is what we call colonised conscience. Formal education has been an enhancing element in the processes of social adjustment and symbolic violence in which the member of a minority group ends up becoming ashamed of his/her own culture and language in front of his/her own people and of strangers without an awareness of his/her own identity. God save the holy acculturation!" (Forbes & Mitchell 1992:18-19).

The Afro-Caribbean Culture

In spite of the situation of the cultures and languages in contact and in conflict, the Native Community of the Archipelago has been developing a cultural specificity. Its relevant features are the following: The Afro-Caribbean culture is the product of the internal relations of the members of the Native Community of the Archipelago and at the same time it is the product of the inter-relations that the community or its members have established with other ethnic groups from the rest of the country or the world. The Native Settlers of the Archipelago have been appropriating certain elements that harmonise with their culture or are useful to the

interaction with other groups that enter in contact or in conflict with the native culture. The Afro-Caribbean cultural synthesis is the result of the most intense relation that the native has developed with different groups that live on their territory or elsewhere. Let us make a sample, in our view, of the most extraordinary aspects of the Afro-Caribbean Culture of the Native Settlers of these Islands.

Family

The Afro-Caribbean family was formed, at the beginning, on the basis of spontaneous solidarity because of survival needs. The whole community was just one big family. The rites and myths and the social structure of the community, though coming from different cultural backgrounds, were basically of a tribal type. All the members of the community knew each other, each and everyone was in charge of the education of its members, the elders were respected, paid homage, consulted and had the last word in any important decision or issue. The Afro-Caribbean family had everyday practices of African origin that appeared in their life project. These constituted the foundation of the community, even though the history of the community in the Caribbean was assimilated to cultural practices of the European master. One of the reasons why the Afro-Caribbean people were so united was because there was no trace of a nuclear family amongst them at that time. The black man did not have his own nuclear family. He himself was owned by his master. His economic value consisted in his reproductive capacity and the more he multiplied the more valuable he became for his master. This situation, in itself, is an important aspect of his machismo and of his irresponsibility as a father. Correspondingly, the black woman was unable to take care of her own children most importantly because she had a lot of hard work to do besides being a mother. The Afro-Caribbean could not have assumed the responsibilities as a father/mother because s/he did not have that choice. He was not a father but a breeder. She was not a mother but a bearer. The black mother could not give affection to her own children while she was required to give it to her masters.

After the slaves were freed, the possibility to form a couple was developed in multiple forms in the Afro-Caribbean environment. The different religious denominations have tried very hard to enforce the idea of the nuclear couple under the tradition of

family, country, private property, and capital. The slave master came from the Christian tradition and was a faithful ally of the nuclear family. The Afro-Caribbean man has lost the African features of spontaneous solidarity in the process of assimilation from a tribal society to a nuclear family and both Afro-Caribbean women and men have become orphans of their basic social and moral virtues and values while facing the transformation of the environment in the construction of a proper history and life project.

Possession of the Land

It is relevant to take into account the fact that the existence and survival of a people, in short, of a community, is intimately linked to a territory. A people cannot exist without members, let alone without a territory. When the slaves were liberated, the Runaway Slaves already possessed some land on these Islands. Some masters divided part of their properties amongst the slaves; however, what most facilitated the appropriation of land amongst the Afro-Caribbeans in the Archipelago and especially on the Island of San Andres was the open practice of inter-ethnic relations. Around this period of time women could inherit from their parents; but when they formalised a relation with a man their property passed over to the husband. Brown skin girl is not a construct that resulted from this type of inter-ethnic relations. Brown skin women and men are the product of the practice of miscegenation of the former slave master. These practices created the possibility of an intermediary group with certain social status over the rest of the Afro-Caribbeans. The master needed to have an ally between him and his slaves. For that reason he recognised his bastard sons and he let them come near his house. This practice was extended throughout the whole Caribbean and it is the one that has allowed the Caribbean man to recognise his outside children without shame and to make a difference between the open type of polygamy that is practised here with the one developed and maintained hidden in the Colombian highlands.

There has always been a strong pressure for the possession of land in the Archipelago, both at the macro and at the micro level. At the macro level, before the independence of Panama, the United States had the intention and the subtlety to approach the Native to find out his inclination about becoming

ing their overseas territory. On other occasions it has been one of the smaller countries dependent on the United States that have raised the claims. This is the case of Nicaragua.

At the micro level the families of the few former noblemen and the newcomers have used different strategies and tactics in order to expropriate the Afro-Caribbeans. Some of the best known methods have been the following: 1) the use of false witnesses; 2) giving shelter, nourishment, and taking care of the sick elders; 3) becoming the legal representative in another man's will; 4) representing someone who lives abroad; 5) certain doctors ask people on their death bed to pass their properties over to them with the help of a public register; and 6) others keep the people's document when they borrow some money from them and later they reclaim their land.

The old fashion strategies and tactics were refined and amplified after the opening of the free port. 1) A translator, supposedly a friend of the person who leases a piece of land to a stranger, was one of the new ways to take away the Native man's land. The translator has become a central figure in the loss of land among many indigenous groups. The role played by the translator is very often one of a traitor to his own people. This betrayal has developed the Latin saying 'traduttore traditore' which means that the translator is also a betrayer. 2) Burning down the Palace on several occasions has proven to be another way to make all traces of stolen land vanish or to register other people's land. 3) The Local branches of National Banks have often lent some money to the Natives who had land and later taken away their lands. This is pure wild capitalism. 4) Finally, a peculiar way to take away other people's land was introduced, consisting of a legal process known as 'the proceedings of ownership of property possession'. In this case some insider gets the information from the Agustin Codazzi, a local lawyer sets up and presents the case, somebody living in Cartagena, in the past or now right here on the Island, works with the Tribunal, and when the real owner gets to know and opens his/her eyes s/he has no land any more. The claim on a piece of land is made based on the consideration that someone has owned the land for a period of more than twenty years but does not have a document, either because he never

had one, he never registered the land or the registry disappeared with the burning of the Palace.

Lately, new ways of expropriation have been developed. They are now expropriating us from the sea view, they are privatising the beaches and the cays, and they have serious intentions of taking over the cemeteries, and if we do not open our eyes there will not be any territory left for the Afro-Caribbeans to live and survive on. Now we are a group of people in the process of extinction. In the near future, our language will no longer be studied by linguists but historians and anthropologists will give an account of the reasons and causes of our extermination.

Gastronomy

The gastronomy of the Native People of the Archipelago is intimately linked with their diet and working habits. The native settlers used to have three different meals, a main one and two minor ones. Lunch was the main meal taken at midday. Both in the morning and in the evening, the meal consisted of some tea accompanied by bread, fritters, fried breadfruit, sweet potato, or plantain. Instead of tea, one could also have porridge. The Native used to get up early in the morning before day break and get to work before daylight. A hard day's work would go on until about two o'clock in the afternoon when the native islander would rush back home. He would have to get home before his sweaty clothes dried on his back. After getting home, he would cool off, have a rest, and then he would have a big plate of food and then go to bed to take a five. Later on, he would get up, clean up, change his clothes and get ready to go and tell stories, play dominoes, give some gyabits, or stay at home and play some music, especially if he had a young wife.

On Sundays we used to drink coffee or chocolate and milk. The main Sunday meal was usually cooked already on Saturday. Mothers would spend the entire Saturday cooking the food for Sunday. Several kinds of light and sweetened bread, bread-type foods and different meat dishes would be prepared during a long day of cooking, stewing and baking. Rice and Irish potatoes surely did not form an important part of our diet. Instead we would rely on the produce of our back yards and of our plots in the bush. Each family raised chicken, pigs, and other animals for special events. Baked chicken was one

of our specialities. Red meat did not form part of our diet. Red meat, an essential ingredient of the Sangkochie, was only consumed during the end of year festivities and at certain parties where it was mainly used to cut down alcohol because it is rich in grease. Crisco was an ordinary fat that we used for cooking every day while for special things we would use tin butter. Instead of electric stoves we would use a fireside outside the house, where we would cook and drain the meat or fish that we salted; we would also smoke it for good taste and in order to keep away the flies. Nowadays our diet is changing. We can hardly get crabs or fish or anything from the sea any more. We seldom eat vegetables or fruit that contain fibre. This is one of the reasons why so many people suffer from hypertension. However, one could still advocate the idea that the Afro-Caribbean man has the richest plates on the market around the world. Our basic way of seasoning consists of using a lot of lime juice, onion, salt, and black pepper. Our main spice is based on our basket hot pepper and all this with a touch of Hindu flavour that we get from Trinidad from their everyday cooking style.

Religion

Beyond any doubt, religion is the most important aspect of the tradition of the Afro-Caribbean Community of the Archipelago. Our religious rites are basically protestant. The protestant religion that we practice was first of British origin; but when the Protestant Church was officially founded, it was a Scottish descendant ordained in the United States who did it. In 1845, Philip Beckman Livingston founded The First Baptist Church. He also freed his slaves, shared part of his land with them, and taught them to read. Other religious denominations, such as The Christian Mission, were a kind of offspring of the Baptist Church. When the Catholic Church first came to these Islands it was a Governmental strategy to assimilate our culture and language. At the very beginning, the English language was used to introduce the Catholic religion. However, once the Catholics had gained power, they began to be extraordinarily demanding. For an Islander to get a job he had to become a Catholic. That was when we skilfully introduced the term job Catholics. Today there is a kind of standby amongst the different religious denominations and there is no declared war amongst them.

Public Administration

For a very long period of time, people who were completely alien to our culture carried out the official administration of the Archipelago. The Government was like something thoroughly apart from us. In a sense we did not even realise that it existed. After all, they did not bother us. Until the opening of the free port we lived in spite of the National Government. After the opening of the free port, it was the same Government that started to take away our land for public buildings, roads, an airport, two hotels and so on and so forth, and lately for military bases. The free port meant and still means the transformation of part of our Archipelago into the infrastructure of a city with an economic and political system in which the mainlander mentality began to grow. It is this system that has controlled our life since 1953 and that is making inroads on our traditional life-style by the day.

Party Politics

The Native Community has not participated in party politics for more than a century. Lisandro May introduced the liberal party to the Island of San Andres. The liberal party did not come alone; the first vices of clientelism and political and administrative corruption came in the package. Many years later Jeremiah Mitchell founded the conservative party, which was later appropriated by the Gallardos. Only ten votes were collected in the first elections in which the liberal party participated. These ten votes mark the history of these peaceful Islands and the life of its Islanders. Before the era of the parties, there was relative unity of thought and action amongst the people. However, the Catholic Church had already divided the Community into two groups, one defending Spanish culture and the other the Anglo-Saxon tradition. In the recent past, the two parties have embodied the conflicts of Colombianization. Those nobles who are still expecting the British to come back have now lost all hope. The political parties are so deeply assimilated into every space of the civil and religious life of the Community today that even amongst relatives no decision can be reached, each one belongs to a different group that owns their body and soul.

Oral Tradition

The oral tradition constitutes the main element of transmission and coverage of the Islands' literature, history, music and dancing. This tradition arises from

within the internal interaction and communication of the group, giving rise to a folkloric process. The Afro-Caribbean folklore of the Archipelago is a mixture of African, British, and Creole aspects distributed through a cultural continuum of variations. The members of the elite develop certain forms of local standards of archaic British culture and the Creole people trigger off a series Caribbean syncretism with a mixture of Amerindian and African feeling.

Oral literature

- Folk songs
- Ring play tunes
- Song plays and games
- Proverbs and maxims
- Riddles
- Duppy or ghost stories
- Historical narratives
- Popular superstitions.
- A variety of jokes and folkloric humour
- Fables, Nancy stories, and Uncle Rabbit stories
- Rhymes and stories

Musical Genres and Dances

- a. Religious Music
 - Hymns
 - Negro Spirituals
 - Gospel
 - Reggae-Gospel
- b. Banta Music
 - Afro-Caribbean:
 - Calypso
 - Mento
 - Reggae
 - Socca
 - Afro-American:
 - Jazz
 - Blues
 - Country Blues

Oral History

The Afro-Caribbean history is illiterate. Namely the construction of the reality of the community lies in the collective subconscious mind of its members. The main reason for this is because everyday reality is not written. On the other hand, our very first language is still not written in the Archipelago. At times it is an advantage not to write in our native language when we are keeping the holy secrets of our community; but at others it is a disadvantage

for academic and other specific purposes. This situation becomes problematic when we have not learned to read and write in our very first language and very often we appear as slow learners or as dyslexic, just because we did not learn to read, write, and to manipulate academic skills, activities, and concepts as part of our conscious awareness.

The Creole Language of the Afro-Caribbean People of San Andres and Old Providence

The structure of our language comes from African languages. Although the basic structure consists of a subject and a predicate, there are also some main differences with European languages.

The first difference appears to be the absence of the copula or linking verb.

1. Di woman solid man / *'The woman is solid'*
2. Di food nice man / *'The food is nice'*
3. Di gyal coming / *'The girl is coming'*

Another difference is the absence of the auxiliary verb in almost every occasion.

1. I no know / *'I do not know.'*
2. We never know / *'We did not know.'*
3. Him no come yet / *'She has not come yet.'*

There is a central difference that consists of the noun, the adjective or adverb playing the role of the verb.

1. Di children dem home / *'The children are home.'*
2. Di man waiting / *'The man is waiting.'*

Conclusion

A culture is the sum and synthesis of the social world of a community. This world is perceived through our beliefs, norms, routines, and cultural practices. They are the basis for the creation of social presuppositions. Social interaction is based on presuppositions; social patterns and behavioural habits are acquired, as well as the ability to respond to cues and to develop our own expectations. We subscribe to our own beliefs without any restraint. The beliefs of the community are accepted universally. There is no alternative for

doubt, because we accept them as stereotypes. Some forms of cognitive processes and some beliefs, such as prejudices, stereotypes, and religious and political beliefs and ideologies are profoundly embedded in our social realities.

Presuppositions constitute the identity of the members of a community. The social identity of a group makes them share the same expectations and aspirations even though the experience of each person is unique and unrepeatable. Each person has a personal and a social identity. These identities become more complex with age. A person interacts with his initial community but s/he also interacts with other communities. Each person does not only have one and only one identity, but multiple identities too.

The Afro-Caribbean Community of the Archipelago is undergoing a permanent process of consolidation at a high level of contacts and conflicts with other groups. Both contacts and conflicts are important for the consolidation and survival of the community. Whether the community is going to get in contact with others or whether it is going to isolate itself from the rest of the world is no longer at stake. What the whole situation is about is that the Afro-Caribbean Community finds itself in a situation where it can get in contact with other groups and communities. In addition to that, it can decide with whom it interacts in order to share or confront. No group can appropriate elements from other cultures without mixing with them in order to enrich, strengthen, and consolidate their own culture.

References

- ADMAN, A. & HIGH FIELD, A. (1979). *Theoretical Orientations in Creole Studies*. Academic Press, London.
- ALLSOPP, R. (1972). Why A Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage In: *Caribbean Lexicography Project*. University of West Indies, Cave Hill, Barbados.
- BICKERTON, D. (1975). *Dynamics of a Creole System*. C.U.P., London.
- BICKERTON, D. (1981). *Roots of Language*. Karoma Publishers, Ann Arbor.
- CASSIDY, F. C. and LE PAGE, R.B. (1967). *Dictionary of Jamaican English*. C.U.P., Cambridge.
- COURLANDER, H. (1976). *Afro-American Folklore*. Crown Publishers, New York.
- DALPHINIS, M. (1985). Caribbean and African Languages. In: *Social History, Language, Literature and Education*. Karia Press, London.
- DEVONISH, H. (1986). Language And Liberation. In: *Creole Language Politics in the Caribbean*. Karia Press, London.
- DACAMP, D. and HANCOCK, I.F. (1974). *Pidgins and Creoles: Current Trends and Prospects*. G.U.P., Washington, D.C.
- DITTMAN, M. (1982). *El Criollo Sanandresano: Lengua y Cultura*. Universidad del Valle, Cali.
- DITTMAN, M. and FORBES O. (1985).: Análisis Sociolingüístico de la Realidad Sanandresana. In: *Estudios Sobre Español de América y Lingüística Afroamericana*. Instituto Caro y Cuervo, Bogotá.
- FORBES, O. (1986). La Situación Sociolingüística del Archipiélago de San Andrés y Providencia. In: Cifuentes, A. (ed.), *La Participación del Negro en la Formación de las Sociedades Latinoamericanas*. Instituto Colombiano de Cultura e Instituto Colombiano de Antropología, Bogotá.
- FORBES, O. (1986). El Cuento de Arañas. In: *El transfondo de la Cultura Negra* 5 (1).
- FORBES, O. and MITCHELL, D. (1992).: Cómo entendemos la interculturalidad. In: *Educación y Cultura*, 27.
- HOLM, J. (1988). *Pidgins and Creoles: Theory and Structure*. Vol. I, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- HOLM, J. (1989). *Pidgins and Creoles: Reference Survey*. Vol. II, C.U.P., Cambridge.
- LE PAGE, R.B. and TABOURET-KELLER, A. (1985): *Acts of Identity: Creole-Based Approaches to Language and Identity*. C.U.P., Cambridge.
- MILLER, J. (1983). *Many Voices: Bilingualism, Culture and Education*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- O'FLYNN DE CHAVES, C. (1990). *Tiempo, aspecto y modalidad en el criollo sanandresano*. Lenguas Aborígenes de Colombia, Serie Descripciones 5. Universidad de los Andes / Colciencias, Bogotá.
- RAMÍREZ-DAWKINS, J. (1996a). *Naked Skin / Piel Desnuda*. Universidad del Valle, Cali.
- RAMÍREZ-DAWKINS, J. (1996b). *The Soldier Dem De Come / Ahí Vienen Los Soldados and I y The Mango Tree / El Palo De Mango*. Universidad del Valle, Cali.
- TURNAGE, L. C. (1975). *Island Heritage: A Baptist View of the History of San Andres and Providencia*. Colombian Baptist Mission, Cali.
- TRUDGILL, P. (1984). *Applied Socio-Linguistics*. Academic Press, London.