

Original Paper

Creolization and Creole People in Early Modern Caribbean Colonial Societies

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Abstract

Creolization is one of the most fascinating topics for regional studies on the Americas. Previously, scholars across various academic disciplines have extensively studied and viewed creolization in the substantial content under the trend—how did creolization proceed—such as the material and cognitive development of creole cultures and peoples: their way of living, and the linguistic aspect of creolization has been especially focused on. This paper, however, focuses more on the palpable impacts of creolization and delves into the way in which such ethnic convergence influenced the sociopolitical environment of colonial societies, or the impacts of the process, which provides a better understanding of how the dynamic of creolization affected the colonial societies back then, instead of merely informing the readers of how creolization was happening. Specific primary and secondary sources have been used and referenced, based on which the study has been conducted. The study has reached a conclusion that creolization had a complicating impact on the sociopolitical environment of the colonial Caribbean.

Keywords

creolization, colonial Caribbean, and sociopolitical environment

1. Introduction

When we think of the Caribbean, probably the first image popping into our minds is pirates. While the embodied intercolonial dynamic and maritime statelessness played essential roles in the sociopolitical development of the region, the pervading changes and evolutions taking place on lands were equally crucial when we are to delve into the past of the Caribbean. As the first region in the Americas colonized by European powers, the Caribbean had been a center of intercontinental activities as the pivot of trade and communication. Through the early modern times, this region, consisting of multiple islands and territories that were inhabited by diasporas and groups from vastly different backgrounds,

was especially vibrant and dynamic in terms of interracial and intercultural communication and had developed a political, social, and economic ecology different from that of the American continents because of its peculiar geopolitical and geographical location.

The gathering of different peoples from vastly different cultural backgrounds in the Caribbean region had direct impacts and indirect repercussions in the colonies, through which a long-term and profound process—creolization—proceeded. If we are to explore the role of creolization in the evolution of the sociopolitical environment of the region, a consistent definition of “creole” and “creolization” is needed. The definition of creole people provided by the Etymology Dictionary is the people born in a certain country who are not indigenous to it (Note 1). However, a single, short definition might be too exclusive to understand the broader picture. Historical archaeologist James A. Delle noted in his article that because the term “creole” had been used in a variety of contexts, it is almost impossible to create a consensus (Note 2). For the purpose of research, in this paper, the term “creole” will be used to refer to not only the mixed-race people who cultivated Caribbean cultural hybridity but also locally born peoples whose ancestry traced back to the Old World. Categorially, although all born locally, there were ethnic creoles—white creoles, those descending from Europeans, and black creoles, those descending from Africans brought here—and racial creoles—mixed-race ones descending from more than one racial group. Their creole way of life, both racially and ethnically, was the manifestation of their *local*, islandic cultures and creole identity different from that of non-creoles. Naturally, the term “creolization” will be used to refer to the process through which people of different racial groups were adopting or becoming innate to the *local* way of life, cultures, identities. While creolization was, by its definition, a process, it could be too exclusive to confine this long-term sociopolitical indigenization to any specific time range. It almost started as soon as the Caribbean was colonized by Europeans and is still ongoing today. However, if we are to explore how creolization impacted colonial society, what it was like in the “pre-creolization” time is needed as a reference. Although developing rapidly, creolization didn’t immediately result in any large transformation of society. Therefore, for the purpose of making temporal reference, any indication of the “pre-creolization” period, or the “old” period, in this paper, actually means the time when creolization was not pervasive and impinging enough to cause any significant impacts. Naturally, the impacts to be discussed all happened when the process was strong enough to make visible differences.

Since Europeans first landed on the islands of the Caribbean, while the region prospered due to its strategic location for trading activities, Europe was for a long time the cultural center of the transatlantic connection, as evidenced by the fact that a majority of European white elites chose to go back to Europe for education. Under the strict institution of slavery and the diminishing indigenous cultures, European cultures on the sociopolitical environment in the region played a dominant role. Creolization, through which creole identity and culture was formed, had an impinging effect on the colonial societies. It was an essential part of the long-term cultivation and formation of the societal underpinning in the New World, under which new ideologies, traditions, and ways of life developed

spontaneously, locally, and natively. The creolization proceeding in the Caribbean region in early modern times complicated and diversified the colonial sociopolitical environment, as it significantly added plurality to the cultural composition and prompted identity issues and meanwhile increased the complexity of social stratification, classification, and differentiation.

2. How Creolization Impacted the Cultural and Identity Composition

Creolization, by its definition, was the process through which peoples of different racial groups adjusted to and became innate to the creole way of life, or simply “something or somebody derived from the Old World but developed in the New (Note 3).” While we tend to regard this adaptive process as something self-evident, it was still complicated and had a transformative impact on the colonial societies in terms of cultures, ideologies, and identities. This ongoing process in colonial Caribbean societies significantly boosted the cultural diversity and fostered a new creole cultural identity, thus complicating the culture and identity composition. Cultural identity was underlying yet powerful, whose basis was the formation of a mutually and relatively distinct cultural underpinning. The creolization ongoing in the Caribbean greatly promoted the cultural plurality and vibrancy through the formation of new creole cultures that updated the previous cultural hierarchy of the colonies, through which a new cultural identity was formed and complicated the society.

Due to the special geographical and sociopolitical environment in the colonial Caribbean, the birth of creole traditions significantly diversified the culture in the colonies. As mentioned in the introduction, in the time when indigenous cultures were losing dominance due to demographic shifts, the Caribbean colonial mainstream society was increasingly dominated by European cultures, given the fact that African cultural influence was, to a great extent, limited under slavery. The process of intermingling and localization (Old-World cultures adapted to the locality and became creole) of Old-World cultures, however, broke such cultural monopoly of European influence and helped to make the cultural composition more complex, diverse, and fluid. Under this trend, identities were also blurred as the new creole cultures developed and played larger roles.

When she was living in Jamaica in the early nineteenth century, a British colony then, Lady Maria Nugent noted special cultural phenomenon on the island and later recorded them in her diary that was privately published in 1839, a few years after her death. Nugent, although born in British North America, was staunchly loyal to Britain, went back to England at a young age right after the revolution, and later married the British Governor General of Jamaica (Note 4). Therefore, to some extent, she represented a traditional European elitist perspective on the cultures in colonies of the Caribbean; in other words, an embodiment of the once-dominant European cultural ideology in the region. In her diary, she mentioned the manner in which local peoples, including “mulattos” (mixed-race people, or creoles), lived was “melancholy” and shocking, expressing her slight discontent and contempt with respect to these locals (Note 5). She wrote that these white creoles were much more materialistic, as they always tried to make money and disregard “religion and morality”; what’s more, the locals

become “indolent and inactive,” indulging themselves with enjoyment (Note 6). Here the object of Lady Nugent’s description was the European creole people who were born and lived locally and adapted to the island creole way of life. From the perspective of a European, this localized culture, or, in this case, the local creole culture, was perceived as more materialistic and more indulgent and was distanced from the traditional, much polished European culture that put greater emphasis on religious spirituality. Similarly, in his description of the civil life on the island of Jamaica in the early nineteenth century, John Stewart noted cultural and ideological differences between ethnic creole people and non-creoles, as he described creole slaves were more “acute and quicker of apprehension” than Africans (Note 7), and there had been clear differences in the “habits, manners, and mode of life” between white creoles and Europeans, although they were gradually fading in the nineteenth century (Note 8). Here it is clearly expressed that this localized creole way of life and cultures were distinct from the Old-World cultures. Furthermore, Edward Long, a slave owner in colonial Jamaica in the eighteenth century, also wrote in his book, *The History of Jamaica*, that black creoles were also different from their Old-World counterparts not only in “manners” but also in “beauty of shape, feature, and complexion (Note 9).” Quite paradoxically, Bryan Edward, then a member of the colonial assembly of Jamaica in eighteenth century, wrote in his book that creole people’s generosity, compassion, and kindness also stood out proudly (Note 10). The new ethnic creole culture, although derived from the Old-World cultural traditions, was different from the original one and thus served to break the former predominantly European cultural composition and pluralize the local cultural hierarchy by adding new creole elements—the materialism and the carpe diem culture as well as new cognitive and behavioral characteristics—to it.

Furthermore, from a linguistic perspective, the creolized culture and conventions also blurred the previous cultural hierarchy. The language was one of the most significant factors under the general trend of creolization, which included not only the newly-constructed languages but also dialectical derivatives in the colonies. This adaptive creole language deviated from the standard European languages, as the local speakers, due to the special environment, developed creole ways of speech that were under less European influence. Nugent, in her journal, remarked that creole language was spoken by not only black people but also white creoles (Note 11). These people were not educated in England; therefore, it can be inferred that they were much less influenced by European orthodox cultures. They “speak a sort of broken English, with an indolent drawling out of their words (Note 12).” Here Lady Nugent expressed her contempt toward the creole way of speech, which reflected the much less formal and more colloquial manner of speech in accordance with the way these ethnic creole people lived. Similarly, Edward Long, in his book, also emphasized the deviation of creolized language that he described as “bad English” and adopted African words due to the institution of slavery (Note 13). Again, through descriptions and attitudes from people who lived in Jamaica and observed local creole people, it can be inferred that under creolization people’s way of speaking changed and deviated

significantly from the previously dominant European traditions into a more casual manner, and this new pattern again complicated the cultural hierarchy by localizing and creolizing European languages. While these cultural traits tell how creolization apparently impacted the cultural composition, the underlying formation of new cultural identity that followed new cultures was also crucial. The emergence of new creole cultures reconstructed the old cultural hierarchy and contributed to a new creole identity under the localization of exotic cultures and their intermingling, which was an essential part of creolization and further complicated the society. Although racial intermingling and cultural indigenization had been ongoing for centuries, it wasn't until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the process of people's self-conscious self-identification as creoles began to develop (Note 14), which was a direct implication of creolization. Therefore, we can see that the formation of creole identity was backed by a creole cultural foundation that was rooted enough, which was clearly an impact of creolization. In the early nineteenth century, white Jamaicans who were born locally and native to the creole culture called themselves creoles (Note 15), which shows that under the trend of cultural creolization, local people gradually identified themselves as creoles—strong direct evidence of the formation of creole identity. Furthermore, black creole people in the region showed an even stronger sense of self-identification, as they were creolized and nativized locally. Black creoles, although of African ancestry, didn't show any compassion, connection, or any mutual disposition toward Africans who were not born locally; instead, they pretended to be superior over Africans in "intellect and manners," bragging their "being born creoles" (Note 16). In his survey of local Jamaican society, Edward Long noted that black creole people, differing from Africans, called Africans "salt-water Negroes" and "Guiney birds" with great contempt; black creole people distanced themselves from Africans while they put much value on their own "pedigree" (Note 17). These pieces of evidence both directly and indirectly tell how spontaneously and overtly ethnic creole people identified themselves and distanced themselves from those non-creoles, which shows that cultural creolization prompted the creation of new identities by the end of the early modern period. In colonial Jamaica by the very early nineteenth century, in terms of demographics, the proportion of the white creole population to Europeans was about three to two (Note 18), which shows Jamaica had a strong European presence and reflected the great impact of self-identification among these ethnic creoles. While apparent cultural traits denote the cultural diversification and complexity of the Caribbean, these new identities that followed even more intensely complicated the sociopolitical environment, stirring the identity pool. Moreover, the fact that the Caribbean region was essentially European colonies further complicates the identity issue. Although born in Jamaica, many children of both sexes were sent to Great Britain for education (Note 19). It can be inferred that this practice would further complicate the identity pool, as people were influenced by both the cultures of their birthplaces and the cultures of their education places. The identities prompted by cultural creolization posed issues and complexity upon the colonies, which was strengthened and furthered by how European influences were entwined

in the region. Therefore, creolization was complicating the sociopolitical environment not only by diversifying the cultural composition and hierarchy but also by editing the identity pool of the colonies.

3. How Creolization Impacted Social Hierarchy and Group Differentiation

The term “creole people” itself denotes a sense of ambiguity and complexity that was furthered due to the identity issue and the institutionalized slavery. While people’s skin color played an important role in the classification of social groups, creolized identity and birthplace complicated the hierarchy. The emergence and expansion of people of mixed race as well as nativized diasporas from the Old World made the old color standard outdated and complicated hierarchical factors. Meanwhile, creolization prompted a higher level of social differentiation and classification, partly due to the difficulties and complexities posed by the mixture of color and birthplace as well as identities.

In the colonial societies of the Caribbean region, including Jamaica, a distinct British colony, the racial composition was by no means purely constituted by only the white and the black. In colonial Jamaica, people were divided into four layers, or classes: Creoles; Blacks, Whites, Indians, and their varieties; Europeans and other White people; the imported people including African slaves (Note 20). Although a distinct class of racial creole people was created in the social hierarchy, further complications could be seen in the classification of mixed-race people. The child of a white person and a black person was called a Mulatto; the offspring of a black person and a Mulatto was called a Sambos; the child of a Mulatto and a white person was called a Quadroon; the offspring of a Quadroon and a white was called a Mestees (Note 21). The distinction of color was hardly perceptible below the last category, and the mixed-race people who were far away from their black ancestors were recognized as white and enjoyed all the privileges granted to pure white people (Note 22). It was the interracial creolization among different groups that prompted such detailed, color-based social identification. Skin color was only an apparent trait, and it was the external attitude and recognition that reflected the general pattern of social classification from a cognitive perspective. From this categorization method, we can see that, given the fact that one of the parents was white consistently, the three categories introduced above, the Mulatto, the Quadroon, and the Mestise, were becoming lighter and lighter in their skin color and finally evolved into a status both physiologically labeled as and cognitively regarded as white. Therefore, it can be inferred that skin color largely accounted for the shift of people’s cognitive labeling and creoles’ class position. Although essentially creole, these mixed-race ones themselves had such color-based internal hierarchy under the larger picture, which complicated the hierarchical social complex. Such more detailed social group differentiation could also be seen in the laws of colonial Jamaica; on a roster of servants, there was not only the distinction between African and black creoles but also clear categorization of different creole subgroups such as “mulatto,” “sambo,” and “quadroon,” which showed the application of the color-based racialized social differentiation and that this method could also be used in multiple situations. Interestingly, some black people on the list were categorized as “creole,” while some other blacks were categorized as “African,” which shows the social complex that

was made up of both physical attributes as well as cultural traits, based on which social classification was prompted (Note 23). Clearly, creolization, in which the racial intermingling was a significant part, advanced such classification and differentiation, which complicated the hierarchical composition in the colonies.

While the color-and-background-based social classification led by creolization was, again, the apparent, or superficial, manifestation of the complicating effect of the chronic process, the larger repercussions that this classification and stratification brought further complicated the sociopolitical environment. During the early modern colonial era, racial creoles were generally categorized as a relatively inferior social class. In the hierarchical social pyramid of colonial Hispaniola in the Caribbean, the social status of mulattos and other mixed-race groups were below social elites and clerical personnel and even middle-class people and were only higher than enslaved laborers (Note 24). In 1549, the Spanish crown even enacted a Cedula Real that stipulated that mulattos or mestizos could not hold property and must reside near their masters (Note 25). Similarly, two centuries later in colonial Jamaica, as Edward Long noticed in his observation of local peoples, the way of life of Mulattos, a significant portion of the creole population, were more laborious, and they were more exposed to open air that made them harder and possessed occupations that gave them constant exercises (Note 26). It can be inferred that creole people who were more engaged in laborious, low-end work were subject to a large hierarchical environment that put them on a relatively inferior social class.

These hard facts show how the color ambiguities and lineage complexity of the racially creole people affected their position in the social hierarchy under creolization. They were an in-between social class in the hierarchy both economically and numerically and experienced uncertainties and insecurities of being rejected to enter the white upper class and unwilling to and fear of entering the marginalized slave class (Note 27). We can see those mixed-race creole people, often in a considerable population, were positioned in an intermediate status in the social pyramid and ostracized and distanced from any higher levels and lower classes. Notwithstanding, creolization prompted a subtle fluidity and hierarchical mobility, as creole people were eager to have intermarriage with “established” peoples, which could make them gain full membership in the local elite class (Note 28). Paradoxically yet reasonably, racial creole people were benefitting from their hierarchically intermediate position while also vulnerable to being relegated to social outcasts (Note 29). Creole peoples had developed their own identity and cultures, as aforementioned, and, because of their mingled and ambiguous racial lineage, they were trying to find a balance between enslavement and higher class as well as elitism. It was the formation and enlargement of the middle, or “in-between,” class that added new elements to the class stratification and stirred the fluidity of the social hierarchy, complicating the sociopolitical environment.

As one of the most crucial parts of the creolization process, racial and cultural intermingling, as aforementioned, had a profound impact on the hierarchical and social composition of the colonial Caribbean. Some might argue, therefore, that due to the lineage ambiguity, creolization might have

actually de-emphasized the importance of color on racial lines. For example, the physiological combination of both black and white lineage of a mulatto might blur the once strictly enforced color differentiation and de-accentuate racial line. While during the process of creolization, color lineage was sometimes blurred, for example, in the case of those mixed-race people who were far away from their black ancestors, the racial line still largely existed as an important factor in the hierarchical composition. As evidenced by the ladder-pattern racial differentiation aforementioned, the distance of a racial creole person from his/her white and black ancestry, or the physiological color composition of the person, played a decisive role in determining the social categorization and status.

4. Conclusion

As one of the most essential parts of the adaptation and reformation after the European colonization of the Americas, creolization had transformed and brought the New World social underpinning away from that of the Old World. It complicated the sociopolitical environment through not only horizontally diversifying the culture and social identity composition but also vertically contributing to the higher level of complexity of social differentiation, classification, hierarchical stratification, as well as class mobility. While creolization taking place in the Caribbean was not only geographically distant away but also culturally different from the ethnic and cultural localization happening in British North America, they were essentially similar in terms of the transformative impact in the locality. The emergence of not only cultural discrepancies but also social differentiation between “Americans” and “British” in eastern coastal North America could also be understood as a way of localization similar to the creolization in the Caribbean, which was an important contributing factor of the burgeoning call for independence, as it helped foster a sociopolitical environment increasingly different from the one favored by the upper-class ruling elites. Local cultures, fostered either by racial intermingling or ethnic indigenization, were fundamental to the formation of New World nationalism that had significant sociopolitical impacts, as shown not only in the Caribbean but also in North America and Latin America in the Age of Revolution.

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Notes

Note 1. "Creole | Origin and Meaning of Creole by Online Etymology Dictionary," accessed August 29, 2020, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/creole>.

Note 2. James A. Delle, "The Material and Cognitive Dimensions of Creolization in Nineteenth-Century Jamaica," *Historical Archaeology* 34, no. 3 (2000): 1.

Note 3. O. NIGEL BOLLAND, "Creolisation and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History," *Caribbean Quarterly* 44, no. 1/2 (1998): 1.

Note 4. "Lady Maria Nugent (1771-1834)," accessed August 15, 2020, http://www.understandingslavery.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=229_lady-maria-nugent-1771-1834&catid=51_key-historical-individuals&Itemid=88.html.

Note 5. Nugent, 131.

Note 6. Nugent, 131.

Note 7. John Stewart, *A View of the Past and Present State of the Island of Jamaica* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, Tweeddale House, 1823), 264.

Note 8. Stewart, 168.

Note 9. Edward Long, *The History of Jamaica or, General Survey of the Antient and Modern State of the Island: With Reflections on Its Situation Settlements, Inhabitants, Climate, Products, Commerce, Laws, and Government... Illustrated with Copper Plates...* (London: T. Lowndes, 1774), 410, <https://doi.org/10.5962/bhl.title.20976>.

Note 10. Bryan Edwards, *The History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* (London: Stockdale, 1794), 13.

Note 11. Nugent, 132.

Note 12. Nugent, 132.

Note 13. Long, 426.

Note 14. Delle, 70.

Note 15. Delle, 57.

Note 16. Stewart, 251.

Note 17. Long, 410.

Note 18. Stewart, 168.

Note 19. Stewart, 168.

Note 20. Long, 260.

Note 21. John Stewart, *An Account of Jamaica and Its Inhabitants*. (Kingston: Longman, Hurst, Rees and Orme, 1808), 296.

Note 22. Stewart, *An Account of Jamaica and Its Inhabitants*, 296.

Note 23. “*The Laws of Jamaica: Comprehending All the Acts in Force, Passed Between the First-year of the Reign of King George the Third and the Thirty-Second Year of the Reign of King George the Third, Inclusive, to Which Is Prefixed, A Table of the Titles of Public and Private Acts Passed During That Time*” (St. Jago De La Vega: Alexander Aikman, 1800), 354.

Note 24. Milagros Ricourt, *The Dominican Racial Imaginary: Surveying the Landscape of Race and Nation in Hispaniola* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 66.

Note 25. Ricourt, 61.

Note 26. Long, 29.

Note 27. Ricourt, 68.

Note 28. Ira Berlin, “From Creole to African: Atlantic Creoles and the Origins of African- American Society in Mainland North America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (1996): 259, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2947401>.

Note 29. Berlin, 263.