

CREOLIZATION AND THE LESSONS OF A WATERGODDESS IN THE BLACK ATLANTIC

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In recent years creolization has been employed by anthropologists and sociologists to describe the effects of globalization.¹ This was particularly stimulated by the work of the Swedish anthropologist Ulf Hannerz. In a much-quoted article in the late 1980s, he described the worldwide cultural interaction resulting from globalization as a 'world in creolization'.² He, and a growing number of researchers in his wake, have employed this concept to describe contemporary cultural innovations resulting from global interactive processes. It is also increasingly used as a term in the post-modern preference for hybridity. The renowned sociologist Stuart Hall has referred to the 'aesthetics of creolization' and the anthropologist Vertovec has noted that contemporary cultural phenomena 'are more globalized, cosmopolitan and creolized or hybrid than ever'.³

Creolization, in their vision, is a kind of hybrid mixture that increasingly binds the world together. This has been accompanied by the abandonment of what social scientists once referred to as cultural essentialism and the desire for authenticity

¹ See, for example, J. Fabian, 'Popular culture in Africa: findings and conjectures'; *Africa* 48:4 (1978), or H.G. Siebers, *Creolization and Modernization at the Periphery: The Case of the Q'echi'es of Guatemala* (PhD diss. Nijmegen 1996).

² Hannerz (1987).

³ Stuart Hall (1991:39); Vertovec quoted in Cohen (1997:128). In his analysis of the *Black Atlantic* Paul Gilroy (1993:46) eloquently rejects 'ethnic absolutism' and pleads for the creativity of 'creolization, métissage, mestizaje and hybridity'. This is taken to impassioned heights in Salman Rushdie's defence of *Satanic Verses*, in which the term creolization does not in fact occur: 'If the *Satanic Verses* is anything, it's a migrant's-eye view of the world. It is written from the very experience of uprooting, disjuncture and metamorphosis (slow or rapid, painful or pleasurable) that is the migrant condition, and from which, I believe, can be derived a metaphor for all humanity [...] The *Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelization and fears the absolution of the Pure. Mélange, hotchpotch, a bit of this and a bit of that is how newness enters the world. It is the great possibility that mass migration gives to the world, and I have tried to embrace it. The *Satanic Verses* is for change-by-fusion, change-by-conjoining. It is a love song to our mongrel selves' (Rushdie 1991:394). In descriptions like this of post-colonial, post-modern identity, creolization represents 'a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities. The cultural patterns that result from this "crossbreeding" (or cross weaving) undermine any academic or political aspiration for unitary origins or authenticity' (Balutansky & Sourieau 1998:3).

when discussing non-Western cultures. Cultures are now generally viewed as 'work in progress', in which growing numbers see creolization playing a central role. But what kind of phenomenon is this?

I will not go into the etymology of the term creole, nor on its socio-historical development in the Americas, where *criollo/crioulo/creole* arose as a term in the sixteenth century to denote everything and everyone born in the Americas which was not originally indigenous. However, it was not until the late nineteenth century that the term was used in an active sense, creolization, by linguists who used it to describe the linguistic genesis of completely new languages in the Caribbean as a result of socio-cultural interaction between Africans, Europeans and Amerindians since the first days of the transatlantic slave trade.

Here they found complete, recently created languages and discovered a kind of laboratory situation in which every phase and aspect of the entire process of language formation, transformation and acquisition, even 'language death' could be examined.⁴ Indeed the study of creole languages – known as creolistics – has become a separate and not unimportant branch of linguistics which has seen a number of hard-fought debates over the years.⁵ This focus on creole languages led gradually to a shift in interest from creole itself to the process of becoming creole, or creolization. While for a long period this retained a specifically Caribbean connotation, the results of this research acquired increasingly universal dimensions as the linguistic analyses became more abstract and model-oriented.

The three debates in creolistics of particular relevance to research on creolization focus on simple, yet fundamental issues: how and where do creole languages evolve; how fast is the process and when does it end; and what is the principal impetus for the development of a creole language. By replacing the word language with culture it is possible to extrapolate these linguistic questions to culture in general, resulting in the following.

⁴ Apart from various dictionaries of languages spoken by slaves and their descendants in various countries, the earliest linguistic study was probably by J.J. Thomas on the Trinidad dialect, *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* (London 1869).

⁵ The use in the Atlantic area of the term 'Creole' or creole language to describe what were originally thought of as bastardised European languages dates from the seventeenth century (Chaudenson 1977:273). Examples occur in various Caribbean colonies in the eighteenth century of writers with more than a passing interest in the structure of the local creole language, which increased in the nineteenth century (e.g. J.M. Magen, *Grammatica over det Creolske sprog* of 1770 and J.J. Thomas's study on the Trinidad dialect, *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* of 1869). Yet creolistics, the study of the process of creolization, is generally thought to have begun at the close of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth century, especially following the studies by Schuchardt, Hesseling and Jespersen (See Reinecke 1977; Meyer and Muysken 1977; Plag 1995:17). In the 1930s the study of pidginization and creolization became a serious aspect of linguistics, albeit somewhat marginal. The foundation of an international research centre for Creole studies at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica and the organisation of the First International Conference on Creole Language Studies in 1959 represented a definitive academic breakthrough for creolistics. Since then, it has acquired its own respectable place in linguistics and has proved especially vital for the theory of language formation (Reinecke 1977:viii). Recent debates on creolistics are discussed in Hymes (1971), Valdman (1977), Woolford & Washabaugh (1983), Byrne & Holme (1993), Arends (1995).

Depending on the degree of power imbalance and/or numeric or other demographic discrepancy between groups ignorant of each others culture, the process of creolization is preceded by the emergence of a so-called pidgin. This rudimentary contact language (culture) has limited use and consists of a highly simplified and reduced linguistic system, in our case therefore a cultural behavioural or social system; the native culture remains dominant. As contacts develop from a sudden clash between different cultures of which at least one is outside of its original environment, power becomes unevenly distributed and, depending on the social-psychological distance from the dominant group, creolization may begin. If that distance is relatively small, a shift towards the dominant culture will take place, eventually resulting in the disappearance of the pidgin. In linguistics this is described dramatically as 'language death' so that we could adopt the term 'culture death'.⁶ If, however, the distance from the dominant culture is great, then a genuinely new culture may emerge.⁷ This occurs when subsequent generations are no longer able to maintain their forebears' primary culture. The pidgin then becomes their primary culture. When this happens it necessarily experiences a rapid expansion; it no longer serves a limited purpose and has to accommodate every aspect of life.⁸

The speed of this process is the subject of considerable discussion. Some claim that the transition from pidgin to creole is completed within a single generation, based on the universal principle of language (c.q. culture) acquisition, the so-called bioprogram innate to every child.⁹ Today, linguists who take social and historical circumstances into account increasingly agree that, whatever the context, creolization is far more gradual, sometimes taking as long as two centuries, and that the speed differs in different segments of the language (c.q. culture). Bilingualism (c.q. bi-culturalism) can therefore continue for several generations, although steadily declining.¹⁰

⁶ In fact Warner-Lewis warns against being too quick to refer to language or culture death, as is often done with West African languages in the Caribbean. Despite the cultural rigidity of the slave system, conditions existed for the survival of African languages and cultures in the New World. Moreover, all migrants carry and transmit various parameters of knowledge and conditioned motorial skills through memories and somatic behaviour. "The assumption that African languages died out once a slave was "seasoned" derives ultimately from racist premises that dissociate Africans from culture, cultural loyalty, an affective being, and intellect" (Warner-Lewis 1996:212-3).

⁷ The role played by social-psychological distance has emerged particularly in research into second language acquisition (T2) among Turks in Germany. This description is largely based on Voorhoeve & Lichtveld (1975:273); Charry (1983:19-20); Wekker (1989a:4).

⁸ Pidgin is the product of inTER-action between different cultures, creolization is the subsequent process of inTRA-action, inwardly directed interaction, forming a sense of community, rules and structure. Where a large distance separates the dominant culture, inTRA-action will also be substantial and creolization extensive; and vice versa. Some linguists describe this as 'focusing' – various aspects of form and content dominate in the formation of a new culture based on the direction in which the group identity develops, whether a European or an African direction (LePage 1977:239; Mühlhäusler 1995:245).

⁹ This is known as the Language Bioprogram Hypothesis (LBH), propagated by Derek Bickerton (see e.g. *Roots of Language*, Ann Arbor, 1981).

¹⁰ See Plag (1995), Arends (1995), Chaudenson (1992). Arends (1993:374-5) refers to a 'differential (as opposed to monolithic) process' of creolization. That is, divergent rates of creolization for different aspects of the process, depending on the degree of conflict or acceptance a particular innovation receives from the

Finally, the debate about the structure and direction of the creolization process focuses on whether creolization is a merger of different language (c.q. culture) systems or a compilation or combination of languages (c.q. cultures) (see Chaudenson 1992:47 ff.). This discussion has also spilled over into the social sciences, although it has hardly led to the kind of further refinement or theoretical substructure developed in the field of linguistics. Among linguists the discussion is known as the substratum-versus-superstratum debate. In the case of the Carribean, the question is whether Africa or Europe dominated the formation of the creole language (c.q. culture) and whether, and if so how this has shifted in the continuum between the two extremes of the socially-deprived African pole and the dominant European pole, known as the prestige or target language (c.q. culture). Where a language shift occurs towards the social and economically dominant extreme this is known as decreolization. With a little effort this process can be quantified and measured, although in practice the situation is rather less predictable. Thus it has become evident that it is not just the language that operates on a continuum, this applies equally to the speakers. What is measured therefore depends to large extent on the context (DeCamp 1977, Winford 1994). Varying demographic patterns, power imbalances, social differences and distinctions between cultural segments all play a role (see Alleyne 1988, 1994). Moreover, the relatively simple continuum is actually made more complex by the presence of other cultures than the African and European – such as indigenous and Asian cultures – as well as the ‘global culture’ that plays an increasingly major role. Language shifts, and in our case culture shifts, are therefore not by definition decreolization; they may equally point to recreolization, for example under the influence of cultural nationalism, or a new phase of progressive creolization. At the same time, the discussion also has an ideological dimension. After all, as some have noted, the fact that it is taken for granted that the European extreme is the superstratum, prestige or target language (c.q. culture), suggests at least a degree of Euro-centrism (Warner-Lewis 1996:209).

The creole continuum model that Ulf Hannerz adopted in the 1980s has been presented in growing numbers of publications as the ideal concept to describe and analyse the expanding cultural connections and networks of today’s increasingly globalized world. In the functioning and positioning on this creole continuum, a central factor is power imbalance, generally referred to in terms of the relation between the centre and the periphery. Yet, remarkably, creolization is also used to describe cultural interaction and merging, even by Hannerz, as illustrated by his

groups concerned. Thus Arends concludes that with Sranan, which many linguists consider one of the most interesting creole languages, creolization is more a question of second language acquisition in a process extending over one or two centuries (Arends 1993:374-5). In a highly practice-oriented comment on the rapid-versus-gradual creolization debate Warner-Lewis (1996:194) noted that it is sometimes difficult to determine whether a person is a second or fourth generation creole speaker, depending on the paternal or maternal line. Moreover, she continues, it should not be forgotten that the generational sequence from pidgin to mature creole language is highly schematic, since in everyday life the generations obviously mixed and communicated with each other.

remark that '[a]long the entire creolizing spectrum, from First World metropolis to Third World village, [...] a conversation between cultures goes on' (Hannerz 1987:555). In this sense, creolization is therefore more a continuing intercultural conversation – although within the asymmetry of centre-periphery relations – than a description of confrontation and struggle.

This leaves the term creolization in a romantic – or perhaps politically correct – 'learn-so-much-from-each-other' kind of world. Yet the reality is quite different. In fact, and more importantly here, the discussions in creolistics provide plenty of suggestions for alternative options to the use of terms such as 'harmonious mixture' in this analysis. For example, the emergence of pidgin and creole languages depends totally on an unequal demographic and power balance, and on a social-psychological distance from the dominant power. Moreover, the use of terms such as decreolization, differentiated creolization and language death in linguistics is more suggestive of an erratic process of struggle, selection and survival, than of a relatively harmonious intercultural conversation. Some aspects of this process are well illustrated by the history of the water goddess of Suriname and West Africa.

African water goddesses

Gods and especially goddesses associated with water occur in many cultures across the world and sometimes display remarkable similarities. Where this is most evident is in the African cultures on either side of the Atlantic Ocean – a logical consequence of the shared history of the slave trade and slavery, with its resultant forms of cultural interaction.

The evolution of the pan-African vision of water goddesses into a mermaid-like creature is often attributed to the existence in both Carribean and West African waters of manatus that occasionally surface unexpectedly and the female of which, especially when seen by moonlight, is reminiscent of the human form (Salmons 1977:8, Wendl 1991:105). It has also been suggested that the appearance off the West African coast of European ships with imposing figureheads of mermaids and other mythological figures contributed to the development of the image too (Salmons 1977:8, Drewal 1988b:104, Wendl 1991:102-5, Kramer 1993:227). And naturally, European folklore, related by sailors, would also have had an influence.

Both in the Carribean and the African vision, the water goddess is described as an extremely attractive, immeasurably wealthy mermaid-like woman with long, generally smooth hair and a relatively light skin residing in a paradisiacal underwater world. Some have suggested that this represents the ultimate reversal of the everyday reality of her adherents (Wendl 1991:12-4, Kramer 1993: 226-39). Sometimes the goddess abducts people in or on the water and brings them to her underwater palace. Occasionally she is surprised – almost always by men – as she sits on the shore holding a mirror and combing her hair. She immediately darts

away, leaving her comb and other attributes behind. Invariably she then reappears in the man's dream to demand these back. If he obeys and keeps their meeting secret, and if he promises to be her faithful lover, she will make him rich. But if he refuses she will bring bad luck to him and his family.

Even without the initial shoreline meeting, the water goddess may visit people, generally women, in their dreams and they too will become rich if they obey the goddess and remain faithful to her. The water goddess is worshipped with all kinds of ritual offers, often consumer goods, but she is best consulted through a specialist and communicates to her adherents by taking possession of them during trance dances.

In fact there is not just one African water goddess, but many, even in a single society. Yet in almost all these societies a general, or rather all-embracing name has emerged and/or it is absolutely clear which deity is the most important. Here the similarities between West African and Afro-Caribbean water goddesses, or rather water mothers, end. So first a review of their creolization history in Suriname.

Watramama

Between around 1650 and 1830 some 213,000 slaves were transported to Suriname from the area that ranges from today's Senegal to Angola (Van Stipriaan 1993:314). Yet, a key factor in the creolization process is that these transports did not consist of a balanced mix of Africans representing the continent's various cultures. In general the slaves were taken from four major areas which were referred to with generic ethnic names.¹¹

¹¹ This is not to imply that these were the only African peoples (see following note). In 1835, for example, Teenstra recorded a further fourteen different ethnic groups, noting qualities then useful to slaveholders but which now reveal aspects relating to creolization. Thus he described the Luongo as 'submissive, good workers', but prone to run away if given too much work and unable or barely able to learn 'the Negro-English language'; the Papa were 'more sensible than other tribes', brave, strong, good-natured, hard-working and 'open', although Teenstra complained of their excessive liking for strong drink; Cormanti were generally good workers, but short-tempered and proud as well as 'keen on dancing to exhaustion'; the Mandé (Mandingo) were 'from a good nation' and 'quick to learn the new way of life' (Teenstra 1835 II:180-84). His remarks reveal that the Luongo were the most reluctant to merge with other cultures, while Mandingo culture merged with the least difficulty. As the first to arrive, it is hardly surprising that little pressure was placed on the Luongo to adapt, while the pressure on the Mandingo, the last to arrive, was the greatest. The other ethnic groups mentioned by Teenstra are the Damakuku ('extremely stupid and bad people'), Sokko ('unusually stupid, but good-natured and loyal' – these included some Moslems), Pombu ('not among the best types'), Abo ('willing and hard-working, but unusually gluttonous'), Gola (among the 'best slaves'), Gangu ('a good, strong race of Negroes, but unusually vindictive when angry'), Tiamba ('willing and strong'), Pré ('good workers'), Wan-Wie ('good-natured and submissive') and Temné ('willing and good workers, more sensible and inclined to defend their own interests than other tribes'). According to Teenstra, most of these groups were only found in Suriname in limited numbers.

Table 1 Embarkation area for Africans bound for Suriname

Area slave import	Collective ethnic name	Percentage	in
Luango between Cameroon and Angola	Luango (Luangu)	c. 30 %	
Slave Coast Togo, Benin, West Nigeria	Papa	c. 15 %	
Gold Coast Ghana	Cormanti (Kormanti)	c. 30 %	
Ivory Coast and Grain Coast (also Windward Coast) Guinea, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Ivory Coast	Mandingo (or Mande)	c. 25 %	

(NB, percentages are only indications)

Table 2 Arrival of Africans in Suriname 1675-1803 (on Dutch ships)

Period	Mandingo	Cormantin	Papa	Luango	total
1675-1699 19,000	–	1 %		38 %	61 % c .
1700-1729 26,000	–	26 %		62 %	12 % c .
1730-1759 68,000	25 %	41 %		8 %	26 % c .
1760-1803 70,000	39 %	27 %		1 %	33 % c .

Compiled on the basis of Postma (1990:122-123, 186, 212, 305-349); the embarkation port of an average of 14% of the slaves was not known. In addition, between 1791 and 1827, at least around another 25,000 Africans were shipped in non-Dutch vessels semi-legally. These were probably mainly Mandingo and Luango. A few thousand others were smuggled in illegally (see Van Stipriaan 1993:314).

Luango slaves were transported to Suriname throughout the period in relatively large numbers and formed almost a third of the total. Papa were transported in large numbers only in the early period, and hardly any arrived after 1730; they formed no more than a sixth of the total. In the course of the eighteenth century Cormanti began to be transported instead of Papa, forming a third of the total. Another substantial group, the Mande or Mandingo, formed around a quarter of the total, although these were latecomers in Suriname so that, despite their numbers, they had to struggle harder to make their mark on Afro-Surinamese culture than the groups that preceded them.

One of the remarkable aspects of this process is the powerful influence of the Papa, despite the relatively small number that arrived in Suriname from Africa, albeit in an early period. This is clearly reflected in the introduction of the water goddess Watramama in Suriname. Around 1775 Jean Nepveu, a perceptive observer and later governor of Suriname, noted that ‘the Papa¹² [...] have introduced certain diabolical practices in their romps and dances, which they have transferred to all the other slaves, [...] which is generally known as Watermama’ (Nepveu *c.* 1775:232). This description is the first in which the term *winti* occurs, in this case mainly in relation to the trance dance for Watramama. In contrast, Nepveu’s contemporary, Anthony Blom, noted that participation in this strictly prohibited Watramama dance was far from general among the slaves ‘since they are traditionally from different nations, those of one not trusting the other’ (Blom 1787:389). It seems that the intercultural acceptance of this originally Papa cult was not a smooth process.

Yet the increasing frequency with which, despite the prohibitions, the likes of Watramama in particular and her cult are mentioned in the colonial sources suggests that these formed the core of what might in the early stages be termed a common pidgin culture, while the local African cultures, or significant parts of these continued to survive for long periods. The central place of the water goddess in this development is hardly surprising, given the overwhelming role water played in the lives of the slaves (Van Stipriaan 1994, Oostindie & Van Stipriaan 1995). They had come to Suriname across the water, and the plantations they were forced to build and maintain lay along the river, so that their most traumatic task centred on an endless battle against floods. Moreover, many Africans knew the water goddesses from their original cultures and from their contacts with indigenous Surinamese peoples they learned that Surinamese waters had been inhabited by water goddesses before they arrived.

So despite the strict ban on the Watramama cult, despite the characteristic use in this rigid slave system of (ethnic) divide and conquer tactics and excessive violence, and thanks probably also to the almost total failure to evangelise among Suriname’s slaves until well into the nineteenth century, it was possible for an Afro-Surinamese culture to develop far removed socially and psychologically from the colonial culture, with *winti* religion, including the originally Papa cult of Watramama, at its core.

Since each ethnic group was apparently able to retain its own gods and rituals for a long period, and since a kind of cultural hierarchy existed with the first African cultures to arrive taking a dominant position, the circumstances were right for creolization. It was necessary to overcome the mutual differences in order to struggle for space and rights in and outside the system. Moreover, the slaves gradually

¹² Also mentioned were ‘Nago, Arada and other slaves generally known by the name Fidase slaves’. These groups were often referred to with the generic name Papa; Fida was the Dutch name for the Ouidah/Whydah of today’s Benin, former Dahomey.

developed in this process into peasant-like communities, settled on particular plantations in which they now had an interest of their own (Van Stipriaan 1995).

Ethnic-cultural differences gradually became blurred, even if only because many would have found it difficult to find a partner of the same ethnic background. In everyday practice slaves from different African cultures were forced to make all kinds of cultural selections, adaptations, mixes and innovations. Yet this does not mean that the ethnic-cultural differences disappeared. They simply shifted from everyday, material reality to the metaphysical level by being transformed into rituals. Thus a pantheon of gods and deities (*winti*) emerged comprising Luango *winti*, Papa *winti* and Cormanti *winti*, each with their own language, rituals and apparitions, whose adherents communicated with their own songs, dances and rhythms (see e.g. Voorhoeve & Lichtveld 1975:52; Wooding 1979, Price & Price 1980:178-80). Clearly this shift opened the way for the creation of common ground in everyday life.

In fact, in this creolization process Watramama appears to have lost her prominent and, for many, threatening position and character. Perhaps this reflected the decline of the importance of water in everyday lives of the slaves, while the role of the soil increased: it was in the soil that successive generations lay buried. Gradually, a kind of peasant existence emerged. Perhaps this was why Mother Earth, Mama Aisa, developed into the prominent goddess she is in today's *winti* pantheon. Meanwhile, Watramama also lost her specifically Papa identity. In one respect she emerged in the hierarchically less prominent terrain of 'Indji' (Indian) *winti*; in another she began to take on Cormanti elements as well as Papa, and might inadvertently speak through the mouths of possessed dancers in an esoteric Luango language (Wooding 1972:179). Remarkably, therefore, while she went through an unmistakable process of creolization, through this mixture she also lost some of her distinctive identity, making it difficult to place her in the hierarchy and eventually forcing her into the margins. By the same token, she also lost the element of danger and acquired a gentler role as the intermediary between the human world and Mama Aisa (Stephen 1985:48).¹³

¹³ While the ban on performing the Watramama dance remained in place, plantation owners gradually became increasingly tolerant in the nineteenth century. Klinkers concludes that they no longer viewed the dance as a real threat (Klinkers 1997:63-5). As late as 1744 Watramama was still described as a demon (*spooksel*). If her adherents did not follow her instructions to the letter, 'the Watermama would soon make their child or husband etc die or inflict some other evil' (*Ontwerp* 1744:317). A century later, an observer described a more gentle, conciliatory approach: 'the WATERMAMA [is] a god in whose influence they believe and whom they worship avidly. Because they make all kinds of offers of drink and food to her. When I inquired, they depicted the Watermama as a beautiful Indian with a child; why not a Negress, which was oddly denied, I do not know. She is crowned with waterlilies, about which hummingbirds flutter with feathers made of precious stones glistening in the setting sun. The son of the wilderness makes offers of drink and food, with perhaps the same devotion as a Christian says an Ave Maria; and if the ceremonies they perform appear ridiculous to our eyes, the care with which they are executed reveals that these are a serious matter and that is after all what is most important' (*Iets over Suriname* 1854:156). Around 1900 the governor appears to have given personal permission for a dance to celebrate the return to the real world – foretold by a *wintiman* – of a woman who had been abducted years previously by Watramama and taken down to her underwater palace. Indeed, the governor insisted on attending the ceremony himself, although a group of missionaries eventually managed to dissuade him (Van Lier c. 1920:15-8).

Clearly, these interpretations are based to some extent on conjecture and require further research. The principal purpose here is to show that the creolization process which transformed the water goddess probably began with a reduced pidgin phase in which her Papa background remained the most prominent, recognisable feature. Clearly, also, this did not take place over a single generation, since large groups of slaves still distrusted the cult in the late eighteenth century; which indicates, moreover, that the mixing of cultures was not always a harmonious and egalitarian affair. Indeed, it seems that creolization may also involve an element of unification and innovation featuring the explicit airing of ethnic-cultural differences in rituals. Furthermore, changes, or shifts may not necessarily represent decreolization towards the social and economic dominant culture, given that European colonial culture was (almost?) entirely uninvolved.

Nevertheless, after slavery, and certainly in the twentieth century, as mass evangelism, Western education and general government policies took hold, winti religion, including Watramama, became marginalised, especially in the towns, retaining its position only in lower-class folk culture. In recent years, however, it has begun to reemerge from this position. Slowly but surely, the partially Westernised Afro-Surinamese intelligentsia has begun to reappraise winti as a way of life and a form of spirituality relevant to them. It should not be forgotten that the prohibition of winti worship – once officially labelled idolatry – was only repealed from the Surinamese legal code in 1971, shortly before independence! Meanwhile, the migrants from Suriname have brought winti to the Netherlands, the country which had banned winti religion and especially Watramama since the eighteenth century. Not only is scholarly interest in the phenomenon increasing;¹⁴ the winti tradition is being upheld with the support of specialists, especially among Holland's Afro-Surinamese, in healthcare, in domestic circles, at meetings and ceremonies. And perhaps most surprisingly, in recent years I have encountered two contemporary depictions of Watramama at leading Dutch museums!¹⁵ She appears, therefore, to have taken some fundamental new steps: for the first time, she has ventured beyond Suriname's borders. As part of what was once a folk religion, she has now forced her way into the spiritual and scholarly experiential world of the upper social echelons in Suriname and the Netherlands, while her image is now displayed Western temples of art and culture.

Are these the final stirrings of a decreolization process? Is this recreolization? Or is this perhaps a new creolization phase? Time alone will tell. Either way, the broad

¹⁴ A bibliography several dozen pages long of publications about winti in the Netherlands and Suriname in the period 1970-1991 by Mildred Raijmann, which appeared in 1992, has been followed by numerous studies.

¹⁵ The first time was in 1994, at the *Messenger from the Jungle* exhibition at Rotterdam's Museum of Ethnology, by Surinamese artist John Lie A Fo, who is actually of entirely Asian background. The second time was in 1998 at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum in an exhibition of work by the equally non-African but nevertheless very Surinamese painter and sculptor Erwin de Vries. That both artists come from non-Afro-Surinamese backgrounds indicates the degree to which Watramama – and winti in general – has outgrown traditional boundaries.

concept of creolization employed in linguistics is a useful way of showing the various phases of the development of this intercultural phenomenon. And perhaps a clearer insight into developments surrounding the water goddess can be obtained by comparing her history in the continent she originally came from – Africa.

Mami Wata

In West Africa the history of Mami Wata, as she is now generally known, has followed an almost diametrically opposed course to that of Suriname's Watramama. She has developed from a local water goddess within a wider pantheon of gods connected with various societies, into an almost standard, pan-African deity with an autonomous cult, part of a mainly urban and popular folk culture in which the awe that the goddess inspires appears to have precedence over her gentler characteristics. This is not to say that a homogenous, supra-national cult has formed, since all kinds of local varieties still exist. Yet her growing pan-African popularity and the increasing number of publications, films, pictures and Internet discussions, all point in this direction.¹⁶ She appears therefore to have become part of Africa's modernisation and globalization process, and the question is whether this can be expressed in terms of creolization.

Three developments appear to have played a key role. As already mentioned, it is possible that the original West African images of water goddesses were influenced by European images of mermaids and similar figures as early as the sixteenth century. Developments since the nineteenth century can be traced with greater certainty. One is the role of the Kru in today's Liberia, who emerged as intermediaries for European traders along the West African coast, and undoubtedly had a major influence as cultural intermediaries on cultural changes in that part of the continent, which also appears to have resulted in some jealousy and local rivalry (Wendl 1991:115).¹⁷ Thus it has been demonstrated that in some societies the name Mami Wata, itself a pidgin English term, became current after the arrival of Kru traders (Wendl 1991:113-6).¹⁸ Thus the development of a standard image of the

¹⁶ See Salmons (1977); Paxson (1983); Drewal 1989a and b, Kramer (1993); Wendl (1991); Jewsiewicki (1991), Frank (1995), Jell-Bahlsen (1997). A lively discussion of Mami Wata can also be found on Africa H-net, <www.h.net.msu.edu/logs/logsearch.cgi> where contributions can be found under search terms such as mammy, mami and wata.

¹⁷ The Kru were employed on English ships as sailors, guides and intermediaries. At the end of the coastal voyage they were usually paid in kind. They then paddled home in fully-laden canoes, apparently as far as the Congo estuary. Wherever they moored they used their merchandise to trade. It is easy to imagine the impression these Kru traders with their well-stocked and seaworthy canoes made on the coastal societies they visited and that they were thought to enjoy the good will of the water gods. Over the years groups of Kru traders settled along the length of the West African coast where, with their relative wealth, they became especially popular among the women. Around 1875 some 20,000 Kru men appear to have been living along the coast southeast of Liberia, with around 2,000 in southeast Nigeria alone (Wendl 1991:115).

¹⁸ The pidgin English name Mami Wata (from *Mamma Water*) has even enjoyed currency in Francophone countries such as Senegal and Congo, alongside the local names.

pan-African Mami Wata may reflect the influence of the Kru version of the water goddess.¹⁹

The second major factor influencing the creolization and standardisation of the water goddess is a picture of a woman from Samoa, a snake charmer who appeared in Carl Hagenbeck's freak show in Europe during the 1880s. Large numbers of posters appear to have been displayed, eventually finding their way to Africa where, in the course of the twentieth century, the snake charmer became the key image for Mami Wata (Drewal 1988b:38; Wendl 1991:116-21). One recognisable element is the two snakes she holds. In the core territory of the Mami Wata cult, in and around Benin – where Suriname's Papa slaves originally lived – pythons in particular are seen as messengers of the gods and through their ability to predict the future are often linked to Mami Wata (Jell-Bahlsen 1997:108-9). At the same time, her non-African, relatively Asiatic appearance seems to have coincided with the existing image of the water goddess.

In the 1930s paintings and copies of the German poster began to appear in growing numbers. By the 1980s the influence of the original poster could be traced in no less than 41 cultures in fourteen different African countries (Drewal 1988b:96). Clearly a lively market existed for images of Mami Wata. Indeed, Indian businessmen in Africa also cashed in on the trade. They had tens of thousands of posters and derivative prints made in India,²⁰ resulting in an accentuation of Mami Wata's Asian features and occasionally even merged with images of Hindu gods (Drewal 1988a:121-3).²¹ The image of the pan-African water goddess has therefore developed from a mixture of African, European and Asian elements through a process referred to by Mami Wata researcher Drewal as 'one of active interpretation, adaptation, and re-creation, not reproduction' (Drewal 1988b:45).²²

The third factor influencing the creolization of Mami Wata is Africa's rapid social and economic transformation in the twentieth century, particularly in the latter decades. Urbanisation and participation in globalization processes, such as migration, have enormously influenced and changed family, community and gender relations. The clarity and occasional forced harmony of these traditional links was

¹⁹ Other trading peoples apart from the Kru probably also contributed to the spread of the Mami Wata cult. For example the Ijo, who traded across the entire Niger delta – including in slaves – and sailed canoes carrying as many as eighty people, would also have been influential. The use of Ijo as a ritual language among some peoples in this area appears to confirm this (Drewal 1988b:38).

²⁰ In 1955, for example, the Shree Ram Calendar Company in Bombay delivered 12,000 copies of the Mami Wata poster to two traders in the Ghanaian city of Kumasi (Drewal 1988b:96).

²¹ 'Africans determined that there was a direct connection between these Indian images, the beliefs associated with them, and Indians' success in financial matters, just as mermaids and other European icons had been linked with wealth and power' (Drewal 1988b:40).

²² Paxson (1983:411-5) suggests, moreover, that Mami Wata's popularity has also been stimulated by Arabic Islamic stories of *djinns* – spirits who are able to marry people. 'Although I have found no precise instance of Mammy Water herself being one with a *djinn* of African Islam, the descriptions of both are close: the dual-nature, the powerful and exclusive sexual liaisons, the bondage with promise of gifts' (Paxson 1983:415).

replaced by chaos, ambiguity, aggression, individuality, as well as the unexpected opportunities and innovations of life in an urban environment. Mami Wata embodies all these aspects of modern life, which have always lain dormant in her. She can be as unpredictable and aggressive as urban life itself, she can make people rich, or drop them like a hot potato, she relates to individuals rather than the community and her insistence on unconditional loyalty from adherents is interpreted by some as a signal for new rules of sexual contact. Moreover, especially for women, she can encourage and justify changing gender relations, opportunities for sudden wealth, female priesthood and control by the individual over their own sexuality (Jewsiewicki 1991:133 ff., Frank 1995:340-2, Jell-Bahlsen 1997:118, 126-9).

It has been suggested that Mami Wata symbolises the ultimate 'other' (Fabian 1978:327; Drewal 1988a:101, Wendl 1991:12-4; Kramer 1993:221-7). Because, while she has remarkably human traits, she also has a fish tail, lives in the water, possesses untold wealth and has non-African skin and hair, while the origins of her form can be found in three different continents. So this ultimate 'other' would clearly appeal to those whose experiential world used to consist of a clear 'us' group and a distinct 'them' group, but which now, as a result of urbanisation and migration, has changed into a world in which almost everyone around is the 'other'. Mami Wata is the creolized symbol of the 'other', presenting solutions where the familiar traditional gods no longer suffice.

In fact Mami Wata is not the only option. Islam and Christianity have also expanded enormously in this part of the world, with all kinds of local variants. Mami Wata is certainly the most West African of the three, although she has adopted some Christian and Islamic elements. Nevertheless, the rivalry is considerable and occasionally even violent.²³

Mami Wata seems therefore to have been the right goddess at the right time for many est African societies as these experienced drastic, ongoing transformations. In the course of this process of change, a creolized Mami Wata emerged from her parochial context and became an autonomous, supra-local god

²³ The popularity of her cult and her rivalry as a woman with the Christian Virgin Mary has incurred the hatred of many Christians who sometimes attack her with every available weapon. This occasionally leads to riots and panic that can cost lives. As in several cases cited by Jell-Bahlsen in Nigeria. 'In one violent attack on a Water Goddess temple, two life-size seated shrine sculptures for the River Goddess Ava were beheaded by fanatic Christians at Ukana near Nsukka in 1992, and there are many more stories of destructions of local shrines, harassment of priests and priestesses, and of burnings African art objects that are associated with non-Christian religious beliefs and practices. Yet, as if this was not enough, various churches also spread vicious allegations particularly against the female river spirit, in their attempt to discredit the child- and wealth-giving Mother Water Goddess. Church leaders charge that Mammy Water, "takes away children", or "kills babies"' (Jell-Bahlsen, Review of V.Castleman's *Mommi Wata, Spirit of the River* [Ottawa 1995] on Internet H-net List for African History 22 June 1998). Meyer also notes that the message spread by some Christian denominations in Africa, like the Pentecostal Church, in their campaigns against Mami Wata is aimed not just against the water goddess, who is portrayed as an incarnation of the devil, but also against the consumer goods associated with her cult, which they also ascribe to the kingdom of the devil (Meyer 1999:164-7).

with a whole cult to herself and her own, expanding pantheon of associated gods and spirits, in part coopted from other religions and mythologies. Meanwhile she has retained a local profile in the form of a consistently wide diversity of local water gods and goddesses with often wide-ranging functions.²⁴ The same applies to her priestesses and priests, some of whom attract clients from far beyond their own society, or who employ material acquired through networks that sometimes reach out as far as other continents.²⁵

In fact, although Mami Wata is now known in around twenty African countries, she has not always developed into a religious cult. This is especially true in the core territory stretching from Cameroon to Ghana, while in a country like Congo her image has become especially popular as an icon representing (individual) hope and success in a rapidly changing and violent world. Successful people place painted Mami Wata figures – produced since the 1970s by specialised artists known as *Watistes* – in their living rooms as symbols of their upward mobility, while the figures also protect against evil and the unknown ‘other’ (Paxson 1983:417–8; Vogel 1991:116; Jewsiewicki 1991:130). Following the most famous *Watiste*, Chéri Samba, who in fact warns against the temptations of Mami Wata in his work, many Mami Wata paintings have now penetrated the hallowed halls of the international art world in the cities of the West.²⁶

The creolization of Mami Wata demonstrates that a potential exists for the processes of globalization and modernity. Meanwhile, she has not lost her local roots, which suggests that here too differentiation has acquired a place in the creolized whole.

In short, creolization occurs where groups from different cultures confront each other with relative suddenness and violence, with intensity and in a situation of power imbalance, resulting in those involved being forced to adopt changes in order to be able to survive together. The familiar frames of references no longer suffice, people feel alienated, surrounded and threatened by the ‘others’. This is a process in which decreolization, culture death, merger and recreolization compete for

²⁴ For example, among the Igbo in Nigeria the local name of the water goddess is Ogbuide or Uhammiri, and she is addressed as Eze Mmiri (ruler of the water), while for non-Igbo her name is Mammy Water/Mamy Wata (Jell-Bahlsen 1997:106, 121). Among the Ibibio, also in Nigeria, she is called Ndem Mmo, and is also referred to by outsiders as Mammy Wata (Salmons 1977:8–9). In Congo (former Zaire) she is Mamba Muntu, in Cameroon Mengu and in Sierra Leone Tingoi (Fabian 1978:319–31; Kramer 1993:221–27). Among the Ewe in southeast Ghana and southern Togo ‘[a] whole row of old deities now appeared in *mami wata*’s entourage, all equipped with the attributes of modernity: *mami-densu*, *mami-tohosu*, *mami-ablo* etc. As a consequence of extreme syncretism, this pantheon also appears simultaneously in a Hindu version as *mami-vishnu*, *mami-rama* etc., while Christians equate *mami wata* with the Virgin Mary and assign *mami-josef*, *mami-jesuvi*, *mami-gabriel* and other saints and angels to her entourage’ (Kramer 1993:235).

²⁵ See Drewal (1988b:42) and Chesi’s description of the famous Togolese priestess Mamissi Koku who was personally received by Ghana’s head of state (Chesi 1979:58–87).

²⁶ Chéri Samba’s international breakthrough came in 1989 with the celebrated *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Since then his work has appeared many times, including in the Netherlands, for example in *Africa Now* at the Groninger Museum (1991–92).

dominance. The new forms that result are a bundle of contradictions, with people constantly moving back and forth, sometimes flexible, sometimes problematic.

What does the water goddess have to say on the subject? Her Surinamese history shows that ethnic-cultural differences were bridged through ritualisation, meanwhile Watramama herself lost her ethnic specificity and gradually marginalised; her West African history reveals that she can become autonomous and international without cutting her roots in local societies. She epitomises a new identity, adapting to the new context, presenting an alternative to expanding faiths from outside, while absorbing elements from these religions. In short, increasing cultural interaction which eventually leads to a merger of several different cultural traditions may be possible, or may indeed only occur if space is conquered for the institutionalisation of difference, either from below or from inside. That is a process which is not necessarily harmonious, which may continue for generations and which has received a fresh impulse from globalization.

Does this answer my original question and has creolization been shown to be the ultimate analytical concept for this field of inquiry? That is not a claim I would care to make as yet. However, I believe that with a little refinement and adaptation the concept of creolization will contribute to the internal understanding and discussion of intercultural interaction within a context of a-symmetrical power relations. On different sides of the Atlantic the watergoddess gave different answers, however, I think they form part of a creolizing whole.

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