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Pushing the creolisation paradigm on the Comorian island of Ngazidja:

When does creolisation cease to be?

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Abstract

What is 'creolisation', and at what point do processes that might be called 'creolisation' no longer warrant the name? At what point do creole societies cease to be 'creole'? Creolisation, in the Hannerzian sense of the word, conjures up images of hybridity, globalisation, cosmopolitanism; while not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon it is nevertheless widely associated with the political and economic expansion of the European world, and the cultural implications thereof, in the colonial and post-colonial eras. On the Comorian island of Ngazidja in the western Indian Ocean, processes of social change have been the product of interactions with the outside world since first settlement of the islands some two millennia ago. Much as in neighbouring Mauritius or Réunion, but on a longer timescale, waves of immigrants have arrived on the island, interacting with the inhabitants, each other, and their external partners. They have constituted Ngazidja society and culture as 'hybrid', through processes of interaction that today—and they continue today—would be called 'creolisation'. This paper considers whether the term 'creolisation' is an appropriate and useful description of these processes or whether the widening of the term to such long-term (and perhaps less visible) processes diminishes its acuity.

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1 Introduction

What is 'creolisation', and at what point (either theoretically or temporally) do processes that might be called 'creolisation' no longer warrant the name? Can creole societies cease to be 'creole', and if so, how? Creolisation, in the Hannerzian sense of the word, conjures up images of hybridity, globalisation, cosmopolitanism, and while not a uniquely contemporary phenomenon, it is nevertheless widely associated with the political and economic expansion of the European world, and the cultural implications thereof, in the modern and, particularly, post-modern eras.

On the Comorian island of Ngazidja in the western Indian Ocean, processes of social change have been the product of interactions with the outside world since first settlement of the islands some two millennia ago and might well be considered creole. The island is well known for its apparently syncretic culture and 'contradictory' social structures. Descent and inheritance are matrilineal but the Wangazidja are Muslim: not unknown, but an uncommon juxtaposition nevertheless. There are age systems, rarely found in conjunction with either matrilineality or Islam. Like Muslims elsewhere, Wangazidja are polygynous, but residence after marriage is – again unusually – uxorilocal. Contemporary legal systems in Ngazidja draw on three, sometimes incompatible sources: shari'a, custom and French law. Similarly, details of cultural practice reveal further examples of 'creolisation': in customary marriage ceremonies the groom dresses as the Sultan of Zanzibar while the bride wears a white dress in the European style. Biriyanis and baguettes are popular foods, and hip-hop (a favourite among creoles) and local variants of the Egyptian *taarab* are common musical styles. Swahili-style houses, which were an innovation themselves, are now being replaced by Arab villas with European kitchens. A plethora of influences have clearly constructed a society that is an exemplar of transnationalism, globalisation and, perhaps, creolisation.

The reasons for these characteristics are at first glance obvious. Much as in neighbouring Mauritius or Réunion, but on a longer timescale, waves of immigrants have arrived on the island, interacting with the inhabitants, each other, and their external partners, and constituting Ngazidja society and culture as 'hybrid', through long-term processes of interaction. Indeed, the historical process of settlement of Ngazidja (and the Comoros generally) probably paralleled very closely that of other creole islands: an immigrant population 'discovering' the islands, deeming them places worthy of settlement and exploitation, and soon realising that they require additional labour in order to do so. In the absence of a local labour force, and unable to recruit sufficient numbers of labourers from their home populations, they recruit by enslavement, labourers from elsewhere, who rapidly come to constitute a majority subaltern population on the island. With time, modifications in economic and cultural practice in response to different social and economic conditions among both the subaltern and the dominant groups produce a syncretic 'creole' society that owes much to their home societies, but develops in relative isolation into something quite different.

2 Linguistic and cultural creolisation

Uninhabited until the early Christian era, it now seems likely that Ngazidja was first settled some 2000 years ago by Austronesian, Arab and East African immigrants. Although some of the latter undoubtedly arrived of their own accord, or of their own free will, it is highly likely that in the early period the majority were brought to the island either as slaves or (and the difference is one of degree rather than of kind) as servile labourers whose personal freedoms were constrained. While this supposition is partly hypothetical, there is as yet no reliable evidence of East Africans having reached

Ngazidja alone: neither early Bantu speakers nor their predecessors on the East African coast seem to have possessed the navigation skills that would have permitted them to reliably travel to and from an island 300 kilometres offshore.[1] Arab seafarers, who were trading the length of the East African coast, probably did, while Austronesians, who settled Madagascar from their homeland in insular Southeast Asia, certainly did.[2] Africans first travelled to the island in the company of Arabs and Austronesians.

The initial settlers were therefore East Africans (probably Bantu-speakers, who would have reached the coast about this time, but possibly a pre-Bantu population[3] or a mixture of the two) with a minority of Arabs and/or early Malagasy constituting a dominant class. This clearly parallels the settlement of the Mascarenes, but it raises an important linguistic question. If the dominant classes were not speakers of an African language, why is Shingazidja not a Semitic or Austronesian-based creole – or a language derived from such a creole – which *sensu stricto* is a requisite for identifying a creole society? Shingazidja is a Bantu language; like the closely related languages of Swahili and Mwani spoken on the nearby mainland, it is of the Sabaki group of North East Coastal Bantu.[4] Syntactically, there is no evidence of non-Bantu origins for Shingazidja, nor that it has been subjected to significant non-Bantu influences. Both lexically and syntactically there are some early non-Bantu contributions—Austronesian, Southern Cushitic, Arabic – but of insufficient number to support theories of non-Bantu origins.

This in itself does not necessarily obviate the creole character of a language, since syntactic substrates of creoles are generally only derived from a single parent language and the parent language could hypothetically be a Bantu language. One of the characteristics however, of a creole language, indeed, perhaps a defining one from a social perspective if not from linguistic perspective, is the constitution of a lexicon drawn almost exclusively from the language of the dominant group in order to enable communication both between master and slave and among slaves. Without wishing to enter debates regarding the relationships between speakers of creoles (and pidgins), it clear that there must be a dominant group in order for this process to occur; but the nature of the dominance is variable. The greater the inequalities of power between dominant and subaltern groups, the greater the possibilities for the creation of a creole: hence the classic (but contested) scenario of a small but élite property-owning class of European origin speaking pidgin to slaves who have no common language and who appropriate and develop the language of the élite for their own purposes. At the opposite extreme however, it is possible to envisage a weakly dominant class unable to impose their language on a large group of immigrants of servile status who already have a common language and who have no need to adopt their masters' language. This hypothesis however, sits awkwardly with the chronology of settlement since it requires the later arrival of a population speaking proto-Shingazidja and imposing their language on the inhabitants already present: a theoretically unnecessary double linguistic shift.

There is a second hypothesis. Since the settlement of the island clearly pre-dates the arrival of Shingazidja speakers, the dominant slave-owning class may themselves have been proto-Shingazidja

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1. I do not exclude this hypothesis: archaeological work remains to be done; but the conclusions of Chami (2009) regarding early settlement of Ngazidja would appear to be tenuous. It is highly unlikely that East Africans would have arrived accidentally on the island since winds and currents are towards the mainland.
2. This is not the place to discuss Arab/Austronesians, but to note that estimated dates for the first human settlement of Madagascar (without specifying origins) seem to have been pushed back well into the first millennium BC (Tofanelli et al 2009).
3. Presumably speakers of either Southern Cushitic or Khoisan languages.
4. Note that Comorian has not evolved from Swahili and is not a Swahili creole; rather the two languages evolved from a common ancestor. The northern group of proto-Sabaki developed into Mijikenda, Pokomo and Comorian while Swahili evolved from the southern group (Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993).

speakers from the African coast: people of Arab origin who had settled and intermarried on the coast and arrived in Ngazidja with slaves of sufficiently diverse origins for the later to have no common language with which to communicate. This hypothesis would seem to be the more plausible of the two, particularly since the linguistic evidence indicates that Shingazidja developed on the northern mainland and was brought to Ngazidja after first settlement by immigrants who appear to have spent time on the southern part of the mainland coast before arriving on the island.[5] It finds support in the settlement myths of Ngazidja, which describe how early settlers were brought to the island by their owners and left there. They intermarried with their predecessors, who were already on the island, and produced food for their masters, who would presumably return eventually.[6] Early inhabitants could have spoken any of a number of languages depending on their origins but – in the context of a growing slave trade and the arrival of large numbers of immigrants speaking an equally diverse range of languages – constructed a creole in a classic fashion from the language of their Bantuised Arab masters, some of whom – despite the myths – undoubtedly remained on the island. If the hypothesis that Shingazidja was originally a creole language is correct, then we have good grounds for characterising Ngazidja as a 'true' creole society rather than one constituted according to the Hannerzian paradigm, where the society is not a creole society *ab origine* but is rather a non-creole society that has been creolised (or globalised). Let us see if the subsequent development of Ngazidja follows processes that may continue to be characterised as creolisation.

Linguistic histories suggest that differences between Shingazidja and mainland languages are the result of limited contact between speakers. It seems reasonable to assume that if there was limited linguistic contact then there was limited social contact. As Wangazidja had no ivory, no gold, no 'naturally occurring' slaves and were not obviously part of the trading networks of the East African coast, they were obliged to present themselves as part of a socio-cultural area – as being socially desirable partners if they were not economically desirable partners – in order to maintain relationships with outsiders. Hence the process of social change by accretion, the adoption of practices whose juxtaposition with practices already in place seems curious but was not impossible. For those Wangazidja who were not enslaved, the next significant social change was the adoption of Islam. Local myths place the islamisation of the island during the Prophet's lifetime, indicative of the importance accorded the event. It is perfectly feasible for the first Muslim to have arrived in Ngazidja in the first century of the Hijra – indeed, given the rapid spread of Islam elsewhere, it is quite probable – but the social process of islamisation of the local population, as elsewhere on the coast, was a gradual one. In Ngazidja in particular, the practice of Islam would initially have been restricted to the elite and later would have become an essential marker of Ngazidja identity, not only to maintain a distinction between free and enslaved (and hence the identity and status of the free), but to reinforce a singularity of identity between Wangazidja and their trading partners, be they Swahili or Arab, on the nearby coast.

This encouraged the development of the economic relationships upon which the island increasingly depended, particularly for imported manufactured goods such as worked metal, porcelain and cloth. The island was not unproductive, of course: in the pre-colonial period there is evidence of the island exporting foodstuffs (particularly livestock) and goods such as skins, turtle shell and rope to neighbouring islands and the mainland; as well as exporting slaves in significant numbers. Piri Reis, the Turkish navigator, who visited the Comoros in the early 16th century, describes how:

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5. Nurse & Hinnebusch 1993, Walker 2010.
6. See Walker (2010: 41-42) for discussion of the various myths of settlement.

> They raise slaves like lambs and sheep. Certain of these slaves they have possessed for a long time, others for just a short while. It happens that an individual may possess a thousand. Female and males are raised like animals. Believe it, their daughters and sons are continually sold: take this for certain. People of the the sea arrive and lead them on board their ships and take them away. Know that they are sold in Yemen, friend; they even arrive in Jeddah, know it, oh! child. (Allibert & Said Korchid 1988: 27)

There were therefore clearly substantial movements of population in and out of the island and we can hypothesise an on-going process of demographic change whereby large numbers of immigrants – by the 16th century some free, others enslaved – arrived on the island bringing with them cultural practices that the islands inhabitants were required to negotiate in order to integrate, indeed, assimilate, these immigrants. Note that the slave immigrants would probably not have been Swahili speakers since by the second millennium most Swahili speakers would presumably have been Muslim. The juxtapositions mentioned above suggest that islanders were amenable to external influences and practices where these were not radically incompatible with pre-existing practices. In some cases there would have been active efforts on the part of immigrants to persuade islanders to accept changes of external origin, the introduction of Islam presumably being one. Both rigidity and flexibility were required in dealing with external social influences: pre-existing practices were not abandoned, but new ones were adopted. Thus a matrilineal society of East African origin accepted the age system of later immigrants but retained their matrilineal principles of descent and inheritance. An uxorilocal society accepted polygyny;[7] Islamic law was grafted on customary legal systems, and appears to have taken precedence where Islam did not conflict with custom. This process was repeated in the colonial and post-colonial period, whereby French law was adopted and employed in contexts where it was not incompatible with pre-existing principles of jurisprudence.

Slavery remained perhaps the most important economic activity in Ngazidja until the early colonial period and can be considered a form of plantation economy, analogous to that of the Mascarenes or the Caribbean, slaves replacing sugar, the workforce becoming the commodity. In the nineteenth century, repeated references both in published accounts and in the reports of European visitors, stress the slave-trading activities of the island: the constant import and export of individuals for the labour markets of Madagascar, the Mascarenes, the Arabian Peninsula and Zanzibar. However, while many slaves were indeed 'produced' for export, it is equally clear that a sufficient number remained on the island to serve as a labour force for the island's inhabitants, either domestically – in which case they either lived in or near the owner's house – or as agricultural labourers. In the latter case, they lived in servile villages, known as *zitreya*, of which there are dozens across the island or, in larger towns, in the servile quarter. It seems likely that slaves generally converted to Islam, and although this did not guarantee them their freedom, their conversion prevented their onward sale. Conversion to Islam and concubinage, marriage and the birth of children to slave women and free fathers, and the subsequent manumission of the concubine or wife and recognition of the child, further increased the local population of Wangazidja of servile origin.

It should be emphasised that although former slaves became Wangazidja, they retained their low status. In contemporary Ngazidja, servile origins are widely recognised and both *zitreya* and servile quarters continue to exist across the island. In certain villages, people of slave descent living in their own quarter belong to kin groups that are constituted as independent matriclans, in others they

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7. Or possibly vice versa; but it seems harder to envisage a polygynous (albeit matrilineal) society abandoning virilocality than an uxorilocal society adopting polygyny, particularly in a context of highly mobile populations.

belong to subordinate lineages of free matriclans. In *zitreya*, of course, all members of the community are of slave origin, and in all cases the servile status of these kin groups is structural and reproduced over time.

Again, the parallels with the creole plantation islands are fairly clear: uninhabited islands settled by a dominant group accompanied by slaves, who constitute (create) a hybrid society drawing differentially on diverse societies of origin. This immigrant society is structured by hierarchically ordered social relations between former owners and former slaves, the latter constituting a large proportion of the population, and constitutes syncretic social structures and cultural practices based on contributions from a diversity of sources that initially appear to be contradictory or unrelated. This produces, according to the creolisation paradigm, creole social structures and linguistic and cultural forms. In the creole plantation islands, slave ancestry is generally assigned to those phenotypically identifiable as being of mixed origin, and well as to those whose genealogical identities (as in Ngazidja) are locally known. However, the difference between the 'true' creole islands (be they the Antilles or the Mascarenes) and Ngazidja is that in Ngazidja these processes have been unfolding for the best part of two millennia, rather than 300 years. Furthermore (and I will return to this below), the precise historical details of the processes that created a creolised society have not been recorded. However, these observations do not, *ipso facto*, obviate the creole origins of Ngazidja society.

3 Creolisation as diversity, as process

Does creolisation require or imply diversity? Contemporary Ngazidja is remarkably homogeneous, socially and culturally. All Wangazidja, except a small handful of immigrants of Malagasy or Gujerati origin, regardless of their origins or their place in social hierarchies, subscribe to the same set of values. The defining feature of Ngazidja society is *aada*, 'custom', a set of practices that are articulated about transformations of status in the age system and which refers more widely to a body of codes for practice formally known as *aada na mila* ('custom and tradition') that are neither Islamic nor 'modern' (that is of European, generally French origin), and generally accepted as Bantu.[8] The central feature of *aada* practice is a ritual marriage that all men are now expected to undertake at least once in their lifetime. Indeed, the *aada* is so central to belonging and identity in Ngazidja that it is almost impossible not to undertake it. It is not unknown for those who have not done so (usually for religious reasons) to have had it performed on their behalf, generally to their great irritation.[9]

The strict exhortations to perform the *aada* are a relatively recent phenomenon. Until the 20th century, the *aada* was more explicitly linked to a change of status in the age system and only the eldest son performed it, attendant changes in status being subsequently conferred on his brothers by the fact of his own *aada*. Contemporary practice is now seeing the requirement to perform the *aada* also being extended to all daughters (presumably at least partly for demographic reasons, since if all men are required to perform the *aada* then a suitable supply of brides is required). The existence of such a high degree of social coercion (if it may be so described) seems to be indicative not so much of the social homogeneity of the island, but of the disparate sources of social practices and the related risks of social fragmentation in the face of constant external influences that need to be confronted by the rigorous application of social norms, particularly where those norms confer identity, as indeed the *aada* does. To be Ngazidja is to perform the *aada*; to perform the *aada* is to be Ngazidja.

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8. Even if they are not: the age system is probably not of Bantu origin: see Walker (2010).
9. See Walker 2010. Note that despite it being described as a marriage, a marriage is not strictly speaking required in order for an aada to be successful. A man who performs the aada without a spouse is said to 'marry the Indian almond tree' (hulola mhandaya).

This proposition is corroborated by the discourse of inauthenticity often heard on the island. Wangazidja regularly claim that their culture is not a true culture: it is inauthentic; a poor imitation of the Other practiced – in a self-fulfilling prophecy – by those who feel that their culture is so inauthentic that they need to have recourse to other cultures in order to palliate their cultural shortcomings. Some things are Bantu, others are French, still others are Arab,[10] and acknowledged as such, and there is an acceptance that Wangazidja constantly attempt to be like these others, often unsuccessfully. But the constant refrain 'We can't get anything right' (Walker 2005) is one which, perhaps logically, allows precisely for the constant incorporation and transformation of external contributions into local practice. This process has continued into the 21st century. The colonial period is historically attested as one of constant assimilation of external influences, often explicitly acknowledged as such. For example, the adoption of certain aspects of the French legal system, or the incorporation of a meal called 'dinner' into the *aada* marriage rituals, complete with starter, salad and dessert (but with its central core of coconut rice and *ntibe* meat). And so, too, the groom dresses as the Sultan of Zanzibar and is conducted to the nuptial residence in a *zifafa*, the Arab bridal procession which, in Arab societies, leads the bride to the groom's house but here of course does the opposite. Meanwhile the bride wears a white wedding dress. All these practices are incorporated and reworked in such a way as to present them as inherently Ngazidja.

Indigenous (to the extent that creoles can be characterised as indigenous) perceptions of their own 'inauthenticity' is perhaps an implicit universal in creole societies: a recognition that all is foreign, all is syncretic. But do these processes, still in evidence today, warrant the appellation 'creolisation'? On the one hand, Ngazidja culture is clearly syncretic, creolised; but on the other, these processes of cultural syncretism have been in place for centuries and have produced (and continue to produce) a society that is both homogeneous and (in the words of one external observer) 'authentic'. There seem to be two different questions here, one is 'is Ngazidja a creole society?' The other is the wider question, 'are creole societies still undergoing creolisation'? I will take the latter question first, partly because it seems easier to answer, and partly because the answer suggests an answer to the first question. My suggestion here is that creolisation is a process with a limited durée in time, a process of social constitution and consolidation that produces a society and a culture that is substantially different from the original societies from which it has evolved, and then ceases. This, perhaps radical claim would suggest that processes of creolisation (but not, of course, of social change) have largely ceased in areas characterised as 'creole', such as the Mascarenes or the Caribbean islands. Creolisation occurred as populations were established and societies were effectively created, if not *ex nihilo*, then in such a way as to radically and fairly rapidly distinguish themselves from their parent societies. But it is not an on-going process of generalised social change. This requires a distancing from the term as used by Hannerz and others, which constitutes creolisation as an increasingly widespread process of social change that seems to me to be a fundamentally different form of social change from that which constituted creole societies.

Creolisation as a process limited in time not only seems to be a much more useful concept but also would appear to be a more accurate analysis of the processes of the constitution of creole societies, the majority of which have been creole for decades if not centuries. The first instances of the description 'creole' date from the 1500s (Cohen & Toninato 2010) and the majority of creole societies seem to have been consolidated in the eighteenth and, particularly nineteenth centuries. The exact timeframe depends somewhat on the precise definition of creole being employed, but in the majority of cases creole indeed refers to subaltern populations who have their origins, if not wholly, then at

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10. Cf Stuart Hall's three presences in Caribbean creole societies (Hall 2010)

least partially, in slavery. In the classic Caribbean context, creolisation led to the development of local societies, but once established as creole societies, further processes of social change would be more usefully described using terms such as globalisation or hybridity. I suggest however, that creolisation be specifically linked to colonisation in the demographic sense of the word, which, while intrinsically linked to the politico-historic process of colonisation, is a specific instance of the latter. The French colonisation of Chad (for example) did not, I believe, produce a creole society; the French colonisation of Réunion did.

Furthermore, as Stuart Hall observes, 'creole' is an 'exceedingly slippery signifier' (C&T: 27): Europeans born and/or having lived for a lengthy period of time in 'the colonies' have also often (but not always) been accorded the appellation 'creole', without of course, the slave ancestry. Thus Réunionnais are creole regardless of their origins as slave or non-slave, or of their 'racial' type as black or white. The criteria for being creole does not appear to include a direct experience of slavery (if it did there would be very few creoles in the 21st century) but rather a shared experience of the political conflicts that were produced by the hegemonies of the colonial system and which affected all settlers, slave and non-slave. Nevertheless, and without wishing to downplay the traumas of slavery that were not felt by settlers of European origin, the character of creole societies was, and remains such that the 'natives' of creole societies often shared much, both culturally and politically, that was alien to the metropolitan dominant class. It is worth noting that many of the early European settlers of creole societies were not given much choice either. Convicts sent to New South Wales were slaves in all but name, and there are grounds for arguing that early Australian society was creole. Certainly the hierarchies of power were such that, while maintaining a social distance from emancipists, locally born free settlers nevertheless had much in common with them that the foreign born did not share.

We begin to suspect that creolisation is a political process, and furthermore the product of a specific historical conjuncture. Stuart Hall (again) is particularly insistent on the political character of the creolisation process: 'Creolization *always* entails inequality, hierarchization, issues of domination and subalternity, mastery and servitude, control and resistance. Questions of *power* … are always at stake' (Hall 2010: 29 emphasis in original). Perhaps significantly, there seem to be few, if any cases, of recently constituted creole societies, suggesting that the process was indeed the product of a specific historical event: colonial plantation slavery. It is also perhaps telling that although there have been suggestions that creole cultures (in a strict sense of the term) have developed outside the European colonial and post-colonial context, they are rare. Creolisation would appear to be a product of the encounter between Europe and its Other in the post-Columbian colonial period.[11] Almost all the case studies both from the creolised world and from the creolising world in Cohen and Toninato's *Creolization Reader* (2010), for example, deal with creole societies that have emerged from the European encounter. While this may be a reflection of a definition of creolisation itself, I suggest it is also indicative of the historically contingent and fundamentally political character of the process of creolisation.

What does this imply for suggestions that Ngazidja is a creole society? Ngazidja would seem to fulfil all the criteria: a society constituted on an uninhabited island by slaves and their owners who, over time, come to be differentiated, socially and culturally, from their home societies. This occurs largely as a result of the hierarchies of power that obtain through the very act of settlement, and leads to the creation of a syncretic society based on, but substantially different from their societies of origin.

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11. One may classify Cape Verde as politically post-Columbian if not chronologically so.

They speak a language that would (and admittedly this is largely speculation) appear to have been a creole language. Why, then, is the expression 'creole' never (to my knowledge) invoked when discussing Ngazidja? Hypothetically Ngazidja is a creole society, but this is precisely the point: without history, without a historical awareness, there can be no creolisation. The specific European colonial encounter which not only established the creole society in the first place, but which provided the political context for contestation of the creole paradigm is absent. The discourses that lead to affirmations of African origins in the Caribbean are missing in Ngazidja: the négritude movement was strongly influenced by Caribbean (creole) thinkers but had little resonance in Ngazidja. Similar discourses, of subaltern claims to rights, for example, are also rare in Ngazidja. Instead there is a strong ambivalence regarding Bantu (African) origins: Bantu arrived on the island as slaves and remain of low status. As a result, any attempts at rapprochement with neighbouring Bantu societies on the African mainland, far from being a valorisation of origins, must confront the fact that they remain *makafiri*, unbelievers. Only identification with the Islamic peoples of the coast, largely the Swahili, is socially acceptable, but this alignment leads away from the Bantu and towards claims to *ustaarabu*, civilisation: the prestige accorded to Islam and the Arab world lead Wangazidja almost universally to assert Arab origins and thus to assert identity with former slave owners at the expense of any recognition of the collective traumas to which the processes of enslavement undoubtedly gave rise.

Historical processes in the Caribbean saw a growing political awareness among the subaltern population contemporary with, driven by, and responding to similar political processes in the metropole. Calls for the abolition of slavery in Europe both prompted and were prompted by similar abolitionist calls in the Caribbean, constituting a single political movement that in some cases lead to violence – the Haitian revolution and the American Civil War being among the more prominent examples. In the Indian Ocean, too, local activists were agitating against slavery and found support within the politically dominant classes locally as well as in the colonial power: Rémy Ollier in Mauritius, for example. These movements occurred in the context of the Enlightenment and within an increasingly democratic European political framework under which the European nation states and colonial powers were recognising universal rights to certain freedoms and granting those rights to populations under their control.

There was no analogous process in Ngazidja. Ngazidja was independent[12] until the establishment of a French protectorate in 1886 and although slavery was abolished on the island in 1904, abolition did not occur in a context that in any sense parallels that existing in colonies elsewhere. Ngazidja had no European points of reference: there was little political awareness and certainly no abolitionist movement prior to 1904 and there was no enlightenment, in the political and philosophical senses of the word. Without political awareness, and without an abolitionist movement, there could be no subaltern discourse and therefore no creolisation as a political process. Hall's observation that 'creolization *always* entails inequality' is quite correct but must be qualified: it must also be accompanied by an *awareness* – a political awareness – of that inequality. Ngazidja was certainly a locus of inequality, and I do not wish to suggest that slaves in Ngazidja were either unaware of their status or happy with it; but there was little political consciousness of inequalities, and certainly no collective political awareness of the subaltern state of slavery and therefore no collective movements aimed at ending slavery. Indeed, the aim of most slaves was to escape the stigma of slavery by identifying with their former owners and claiming Arab origins – and possess slaves themselves. As a result, I suggest that processes of social change cannot be regarded as creolisation.

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12. In fact the island was divided into a number of autonomous kingdoms.

This observation remains true today: more than 100 hundred years after the abolition of slavery, the social structures of slavery remain in place. Families of slave origin retain the stigma of their origins; and this is true despite their faithful reproduction of Ngazidja cultural forms or, rather, because of it: paradoxically (not unsurprisingly, perhaps) an inability to change is evidence of inauthenticity.

4 But even so…

If Ngazidja cannot be described historically as a society constituted by processes of creolisation, are there grounds for doing so today? In other words, if not historically creole, is it creole within contemporary paradigms? Certainly the processes of change continue, although links with the outside world are no longer based on the arrival of foreigners on Ngazidja's shores but rather on the emigration and return of Wangazidja themselves. Although it is likely that Wangazidja have always been mobile, since the economic transformations of the colonial period and the end of the slave trade Wangazidja have emigrated in significant numbers – to Madagascar, to eastern and southern Africa, to France and to the Gulf states – and constituted substantial (and often influential) communities in diaspora. They have subsequently returned with diverse socio-cultural influences which, as described above, have continued to contribute to transformations in practice on the island.

Linguistically, Shingazidja is not currently characterised as a creole and is unlikely to be so characterised in the future even if my speculations regarding the languages origins prove to be founded. Creolisation however, is of course not contingent upon linguistic typologies: indeed, linguists and anthropologists have largely parted company (if indeed they ever kept company) in discussions of creolisation. In a Hannerzian world, creolisation as a cultural process (less commonly a social one) does not require any particular accompanying linguistic process apart perhaps, from the introduction of suitable foreign words into the lexicon, which of course continues today in Shingazidja – witness such expressions as *tsitelefone*, 'I telephoned'. Indeed, in much of Hannerz's work the word 'creolisation' is used to represent the cultural processes of change that are attendant upon globalisation, a long way from the specific definitions that I have proposed above. Hannerz is not alone in this—almost at random, Thomas Hylland Eriksen's article 'Creolization and creativity' effortlessly speaks of 'creolization and globalisation' (2003: 227) without any particular effort at distinguishing the two, leading the reader to suspect that the two are to be conflated in process. In this case, Ngazidja would seem to qualify; but then, as these and numerous others (e.g. Hutnyk 2005, Pieterse 1995) have pointed out, so do most societies: all processes of social change in a contemporary world are, to varying degrees, eclectic and syncretic.

An analytical tool – indeed, any tool – must be appropriate to the task; my contention here is that the collection of processes and outcomes that are gathered within and analysed by means of the term 'creolisation' are (already) adequately dealt with by the terms 'globalisation' or 'hybridisation'. To use creolisation in this sense does not seem to be a useful engagement with the terminology. It would be possible to adopt a more rigorous definition of creolisation that brings us back to the notion of cultures constituted by (rather than subject to the influences of) alterity which would allow us to include Ngazidja. However, cultures (societies) constituted by alterity are, almost by definition, politically constituted. The dominant role of the Other in constituting a culture – and the Other's role must be dominant in order for it to be the prime force behind social change – sees the Other as hegemonic. Relationships between the two are thus politically constructed, which returns us to the argument above, that there is a political significance to creolisation, and one which requires an historical awareness of the conditions of its own production. As Palmié (2006) points out (and in common with other such terms in anthropology), the indiscriminate use of the concept erodes its

value: the extension of the term 'creolisation' to contexts beyond the immediate historical and political sense within which it was originally developed (sociologically if not linguistically) would seem to be counterproductive insofar as it removes from our toolkit a term which has a precise and highly useful sense

It is now, I think, widely accepted that no society evolves in isolation. Cultural contact has been a feature of the human condition since the evolution of the species itself. Levi-Strauss's Nambikwara – 'found' in his search for the pristine human society – did not live in isolation, while cultures closer to us are radically 'creolised', if the word is to be used in the sense of mixed, syncretic. England, and its language, are prime examples of hybridity, creolisation. But if we accept the thesis that there are no 'pure' cultures, then the definition of creole cultures as 'mixed' or 'impure' effectively renders the concept so indiscriminate as to be useless. True, some cultures may be characterised as 'more creole' than others, but not only does there seem to be limited utility and less logic in so doing, there is also an arbitrariness to the application of the concept. Rather, a restriction of the term to a specific political context allows for analysis of historically constituted creole societies and the creation of new ones, but within certain parameters. The term creolisation would appear to be more useful if it is not applied to any form of socio-cultural change that is driven by external influences, for the simple reason that all societies have, probably always, been subject to external influences and there would therefore be no society that has not, and is not, undergoing creolisation.

To describe such processes as creolisation disavows the distinctive character of those societies that have emerged in the context of struggles for political rights by subaltern populations. Creolisation processes in the past and in the present –if processes of socio-cultural change attendant upon globalisation are to be so characterised – require political consciousness and historical depth if they are to be so characterised: these are necessary conditions; whether they are sufficient remains to be seen. The use of the term creolisation does not appear to add anything to the analysis but does, I fear, subtract from the utility of the terms as applied to 'true' creole societies. To return to the ethnography in question, Ngazidja cannot be regarded as a creole society because the political context is lacking: there has been no political act of rupture with the past.

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