

Chapter 2

Incarnation of the National Identity or Ethnic Affirmation? Creoles of Belize¹

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“*Ah wahn no who seh Kriol no gat no kolcha*” (“I want to know who said Creoles have no culture”). The title of this song by Lee Laa Vernon, famous Belizean artist, reveals the current transformations of the “Creole” status in this small Anglophone country of Central America. Until now, because it was considered the symbol of Belize, the “Creole culture” did not need to be defined, much less defended. This culture was considered to be precisely what bound together a society that was characterized by a multiplicity of groups, described in accordance with their specific origin, history, culture and language. This society was frequently shown as multiethnic, in which the Creoles were the guarantors of integration and “ethnic” labels were reserved for the rest, the “others.” Creoles recognized themselves better in their close relationship with power, symbolized by the British Crown and its representatives, colonial administrators and major traders, in a territory that was British Honduras for a long time. Does the fact that

Creoles wonder about their own culture now mean they have to be understood as an ethnic group just like the others? In the way this ethnicity is asserted, are the aspirations of the Creoles to embody the nation, in the way they are considered to have embodied the colony, thereby weakened?

Being the dominant group, the Creoles did not define themselves as an ethnic group; they reserved this label for the “others,” those who were not thought to incarnate the Colony, and then the Nation; those who, quoting the expression of Cedric Grant (1976, 19), are *in* the society, but are not *from* this society. In this way, investigations concerning Belize remark upon the tendency to mistake the term “Creole” for “belizeanness.” For David Waddell, “the ‘Creoles’ in general consider themselves the only true British Honduran, and it’s the only group that thinks in national terms rather than in racial terms” (Waddell 1961, 71). Assad Shoman confirms this statement: “Creoles are considered the guardians of the British colonial culture, and this culture, with its language, customs and traditions, is considered properly Belizean” (Shoman 1993, 116).

Caribbean societies are frequently described in terms of “creolization,” a concept which was defined by Edouard Glissant as “the contact of several cultures or, at least, of several elements from different cultures, in a certain place, that produces a new result, completely unpredictable, in relation with the sum or just the synthesis of these elements” (Glissant 1997, 37). This contact among several cultures not only constitutes an issue of integration of groups defined outside the colonial or national projects but also refers primarily to the power struggles for the definition and the genesis of these projects. In this sense, Belize offers a particularly interesting image: the nation is the object of rivalries among colonial (Great Britain, Spain) and national powers (Mexico, Guatemala) that compete to impose different “societal patterns.” This situation seen in a positive light shows the cultural richness of Belize, the coexistence of several languages, the multiplicity of ethnic groups, and so on. When examined less optimistically, this “sitting on the fence” brings isolation – Belize is forgotten by her neighbors of Central America and the often insular Caribbean – and

also political anomie which can be linked with the identity and nationalist radicalization associated in this context to any effort to construct a society.

If “creolization” could be considered as the ideological foundation for the independent nations of the Anglophone Caribbean (Bolland 2002, 15-46), it seems, on the contrary, that independence in Belize is a synonym for the stagnation of the political Creole domination and the renewal of identity claims. Many elements –economic, institutional, and diplomatic – explain the difficulties of the Belizean national project; here I will focus primarily upon the terms of ethnization and racialization of the social relationships (De Rudder, Poiret and Yourc’h 2000) to study the contrast amongst apparently contradictory dynamics: integration vs. differentiation, inclusion vs. exclusion, belonging vs. marginalization. I will initially examine the status of “Creole society” associated with Belize to analyze its main characteristics. Then I will concentrate on the social dynamics that hinder the conformation of the “Creole nation” and promote the appearance and development of ethnic-racial differentiation. Finally, I will focus my attention on how, within that context, Creoles have tended to identify themselves as an “ethnic group” to the point of often questioning their own national status.

Belize, a Creole society?

The ambiguity of the category “Creole” was widely described in Belize (Bolland 1990, 29-40) and outside Belize (Jolivet 1990, Dominguez 1986). In Belize, British colonial politics are described generally in terms of “divide and rule:” By dividing the population into ethnic groups with specified outlines and attributes, it was easier to control it and avoid any threatening social mobilization. Within this mosaic, the Creoles have a separate status, due to their proximity to British power. My interest here is to recall that Creoles are considered the “first inhabitants” of the future Belize: the founders of the “*Settlement*” at the mouth of the Belize River at the mid-17th century.

The “Settlement”: The Creoles and the others

In chronological terms, the category ‘Creole’ was not the first used to describe the inhabitants of British Honduras; Karen Judd (1990, 34) considers that it appeared in 1809. It was preceded by the categories “Settlers” and “Baymen” which confirms the local origin of this population and transmits the idea of anteriority and regional connections. In fact, the *Baymen* are considered the first inhabitants of the future Belize, settling in the area surrounding the mouth of the Belize River (in the current place of Belize City). In the mid-seventeenth century, European pirates and traffickers, most of them British, accompanied by Africans and descendents of Africans, slaves or free, took refuge in the coralline islets and the coastal estuaries. Gradually, as the exploitation of the forest wealth became more profitable than attacking foreign vessels, some of them settled down and together constructed a first camp, the *Settlement* (Clegern 1967, Dobson 1973). The development of a viable logging industry as an economic activity led to the continued introduction of slaves (Bolland 1997). Thus, some researchers on Belize believe that Creoles are the result of the meeting between *Baymen* and slaves. The fundamental element is that Creoles define themselves as the “first inhabitants,” the founders of the future Belize.

At the same time, the history of Belize is connected to the arrival of the different groups and their settlement in particular places of the territory: Miskitos coming from Nicaraguan coasts in the second half of the eighteenth century; Garinagu, from Saint Vincent Island and from Bay Islands at the beginning of the nineteenth century; *Mestizos* who ran away from the Caste War in the nearby Yucatan state since 1847; Chinese at the mid-nineteenth century and then again at the end of the twentieth century; Indians who came to work on the country northern plantations in the nineteenth century; Mennonites in the 1950s; contemporary African migrants; American pensioners; and as of 1980, political and economic refugees from Central America.

The Battle of Saint George's Caye, starting point of the national narrative

The Battle of Saint George's Caye on 10 September 1798, symbolizes the military victory of the British against the Spaniards and the British occupation of the territory. This is undoubtedly the most revealing event in establishing the status of Creoles and the appearance of a "Creole society," particularly through their different commemorations. Raised to the level of national holiday, 10 September represents the official establishment of the Creole society and the birth certificate of the British Honduras. It is interesting to remark that the independence of Belize occurred on 21 September 1981: That explains why the celebrations on September 10 and 21 are usually mixed up during great part of September and the Battle of Saint George's Caye is implicitly associated to the national independence, as though it were its inspiration. It is necessary to emphasize also that the different groups which would compose the future nation had no role in this mythical episode of the "Belizean identity," either because they had not arrived yet (especially *Mestizos* and Garinagu) or because their presence was denied or ignored (Maya).

The first commemoration of the Battle,² on the occasion of the 1898 centenary, symbolizes the affirmation of a "Creole society," in the exact moment when the colony was politically institutionalized and economically developing. Just prior to the celebrations, on 2 April 1898, an editorial of the *Colonial Guardian* brought back the consequences of this victory and drew the edges of the Belizean society: "It guaranteed forever the civil and religious freedom and a good government to the *Baymen* and their descendents and successors. However, beyond the importance of the event itself, the Battle of St. George illustrated a situation in this Colony which is unique in the World History. In all the countries where slavery has existed, the regular condition has always been the slave hatred towards his master, due to the rigor and cruelty of his domination."³ In fact, the celebrations of 1898 insisted on reminding participants of the "specificity" of Belizean slavery, organized around camps scattered in the forest that allowed certain autonomy to slaves

and, in that sense, were shown as completely unconnected with the typical subhuman conditions of slavery in the plantations. This peculiar situation was used as an argument to celebrate the *harmony* of the relationship between masters and slaves, and the emergency of a more pacific society than in any other place. Some years later, Monrad Metzgen (1928),⁴ in a compilation book about the Battle of Saint George's Caye, made popular the memory of a fight *shoulder to shoulder*, between the *Baymen* and the slaves.

No man's land and diplomatic rivalries

"The anathema has been indisputable: England stole Belize to Spain, England stole Belize to Mexico, England stole Belize to Guatemala" (Echanove Trujillo 1951, preface). Even in the modern period, statements like this are not unusual in Mexico and especially in Guatemala. Conflicts between the English and Spanish structured the history of Belize within a wider frame of rivalries between the colonial powers in the Caribbean. The territory of Belize was originally attached to the Captaincy of Yucatan that was under the Spanish Crown's control. With the settlement of *Baymen* in the mouth of the Belize River, and specifically with their increasingly numerous and durable incursions into the interior of the land and associated exploitation of the forests, Spain and England signed agreements that granted certain economic prerogatives to the latter, within a territory delimited by the Treaty of Paris (1763). Ultimately disregarded, these agreements demonstrate a pattern subsequently followed by many others that fluctuated according to the degree of tensions between European countries.

However, these diplomatic activities ultimately did not indicate an overriding interest in this territory: Spain did not go farther than the Fort of Bacalar and never placed permanent settlements in Belize; Great Britain waited until 1862 to change the territory into the Colony of British Honduras. With the movement of Latin-American countries toward independence, the negotiations began again, this time with Mexico (to the North) and Guatemala (to the West). The territorial borders were once and for all established with the former (the Mariscal-

Spencer Treaty of 1983) but continued to be a subject of diplomatic conflict with Guatemala (Toussaint 1993).

This conflict, heir of the unresolved tensions amongst colonial powers, is an omnipresent menace to the integrity of Belize and considerably delayed the gradual emergence of independence from the 1960s to 1981. Before the neocolonial ambitions of Guatemala, the (re)affirmation of a Caribbean, Anglophone, and Protestant assumptions which contrast with a Central-American, Spanish speaker, and catholic Guatemala, came the warranty of a yearned independence and the mark of a “Creole society”. Either in an implicit or explicit way, the diplomatic conflict with Guatemala led Belize to insist on its Caribbean past more than its Latin-American bonds. Discrediting any integrative discourse, the conflict with Guatemala forced the Creoles to claim a “Belizean specificity” following the logic of defense of a threatened “Creolity.” Any identity affirmation, either ethnic or national, must be reconsidered in this strained political-diplomatic context that transforms the marks of belonging in dual and conflictive submissions, pro-Hispanic or pro-British, pro-Central-American or pro-Caribbean.

The failure of the national project of Creolization

With the independence of Belize in 1981, we can wonder if the model of a “Creole society” – in the sense of an integration of the different groups that compose it and a political and cultural hegemony of the Creole group – served as fundamental for the new independent society. The speeches of George Price, the so-called “Father of the Nation,” seem to fit perfectly into the search for a society in which differences would be overcome: “There are no Caribs, no Creoles, no Ketchi, Maya or Spanish-Indians. There are only citizens in our country in our own right” (Galvez, Greene 2000, 89). Likewise, he evokes a “handsome blend of people uniting the flesh and blood of Africa, Asia, Europe and of our Carib and Maya origins, but today one people who should remain united to build the new Central American Nation of Belize” (Galvez, Greene 2000, 103). In this way, the anti-colonial movement would not be aligned to

ethnic fractures and would have its foundations on a political and socioeconomic line of argument.

But, as we mentioned before, contrary to the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean, independence was delayed for twenty years due to the conflict between Guatemala and Belize. Twenty years passed, during which time the popular movements of the 1960s and 1970s stalled while the English presence became the last barrier towards territorial integrity. To Assad Shoman, one of the main actors of this period, the outcome was bitter: “The system set up by the British and maintained by the two established Belizean political parties had the effect of increasing the country’s dependence and perpetuating its state of underdevelopment and denying the people effective participation in the creation of a new society” (Shoman 1987, 49). He argues that, “Independence, therefore, has failed to resolve one of the major goals set by Belize’s first political party –the search for, and promotion of, a national identity” (Shoman 1987, 89). When Belize finally achieved its independence in 1981, the situation was very different than the other British colonies in the 1960s: Central America was marked by violent conflicts that had a direct impact on Belize, and Latin America began to look for the development of multicultural politics.

The process of “creolization,” which is generally understood as cultural syncretism, served to justify national specificity and unity, could be considered as a threat to the status of the Creoles in their role as heirs of the British power and culture. Therefore, they lost their status of dominant group and their pretension to embody the Nation, politically and culturally.

***Black, but not Creoles:
Rejection of a part of the black population***

Formed on 9 February 1969, the United Black Association for Development (UBAD) movement, initiated by Evan X Hyde, was devised to meet the needs of a double agenda. Permanently mobilizing against the threat of a “latinization” of the country, it adopted racialized speech that denounces the racism of which black populations are victims. The usage of the label “black” refers to the relationships perceived as racial and hegemonic,

with a speech inspired widely by the black American movements (from Marcus Garvey to Martin Luther King, including Malcolm X, in an ecumenism that explicitly refused to align to a preset ideology). Curiously, if UBAD had undisputed intellectual and popular influence, it has never been recognized as an institutional actor.⁵ In fact, the organization dissolved in 1974, and Evan X Hyde tried unsuccessfully to move into politics with the creation of a party. After the disappearance of the UBAD, his activities shifted toward mass media with the creation of the journal *Amandala* (since 1969) and the radio-television *Kremandala*, then toward education, with the creation of the program *UBAD Foundation for Education*. Evan X then played the role of a severely caustic free electron, cultivating his independence outside any institution. Although the claims of UBAD and *Amandala-Kremandala* were expressed in the anticolonial public scene, and then the national one, these were not integrated into the rising sense of national community. On the contrary, the increasing radicalization of Evan X Hyde's discourse contributed to associate any evocation of the category "Black" to a way of extremism labeled as communist, or even, in an inversion of the allocations, as racist or anti-national.

This is how, far from symbolizing the unity of a "Creole society," Saint George, according to Evan X, favored the division and domination of a Creole bourgeoisie supported by the "British slaveholders". Evan X recalled the history of slaves' rebellions, particularly the one in 1773, and considered these slaves as his true ancestors, much more than the actors in the Battle of Saint George. He therefore re-appropriated the "Black rebel slaves" and re-imagined them as "revolutionary black people". Evan X rejected the category of Creole, yet reproduced the logic of racialization that he at the same time denounced. He called out to the "black" mobilization against any form of "creolization:" "If you are black you think like me. If you're high brown you think like the Loyal and Patriotic Order of the Baymen. If you're white, you couldn't have read so far. You must be thinking black" (Hyde 1995, 17).

Leaning on a populism that would justify his actions (the editorials of *Amandala* are always signed by a "power to the

people”) and a “conspiracy theory” that would make “Black People” the eternal victims,⁶ Evan X Hyde attacks the “*Mestizos*”, whom he accuses of wanting to dominate the country, and the Creoles, whom he reproaches for relinquishing to their African heritage and denying their skin color. Therefore, the “Creole” category is called into question by a portion of the population that supposedly belongs to it. To Evan X Hyde:

I am an African-Belizean, I am not a Creole. But I am not an African. I am not going back to farm in Africa, you see. It’s like the people who want to divert attention away from the real issues by saying: oh, we’re Creole. He acknowledges that they’re not white, but they don’t want to be African. The history of Belize was that white men exploited black. During all those centuries, the people who came out brown were focused to get a lighter color and there were lots of black women who were disrespected. That’s what Creole represents, an attempt to disrespect my Africanness. (interview, April 23, 2008)

*New “aliens” and “ethnic war”:
The Central American migrations*

The 1980s met a new wave of migrations with the arrival of Central American refugees fleeing from civil wars in Salvador and Guatemala, and were soon followed by economic migrants from Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Once again, for so sparsely populated a country as Belize, the demographic disruption was massive. The term “alien,” used in the nineteenth century by the British colonial administration, reappears in the official language and in the daily interactions, introducing a supplementary degree of strangeness in connection with the category of “migrant.” The creation of a refugee camp at Valle de la Paz; the origin of neighborhoods identified as Central-American in origin (Salvapan, Las Flores) in Belmopan, the new capital of the country;⁷ the increasing number of people who only speak Spanish; these are some signs that give an especially strong notoriety to this migration. The media has contributed considerably to develop a feeling of insecurity, contrasting the societies of Central America (reduced to a succession of civil wars and military persecutions) with Belize, shown as a peace-

ful backwater (a “tranquil haven of democracy” as the national hymn celebrates). In this way, the Central-American migrant is frequently described as delinquent, thief, and trafficker.⁸ Joseph Palacio goes so far as to talk about an “anti-Central American migrants’ ideology in Belize” (Palacio 1990, 6).

Faced with this new migratory wave, the Creole group lost its dominant demographic position; its association (until then taken for granted) with the destiny of the colony and then of the nation was brought into question. Indeed, the 1980s witnessed the merging of two migratory dynamics in direct opposition to one another: While the Central-American refugees arrived in considerable numbers, Belizean people, on the other hand, migrated more and more to the United States. And most of these migrants were Creoles.⁹ In fact, in the 1991 census, the *Mestizo* population exceeded the Creole population in number for the very first time: 43.6% of *Mestizos* compared to 29.8% of Creoles.¹⁰ The “ethnic balance” of the country was inverted, as this popular slogan demonstrates: “The Black goes and the Latin comes.” This census had many pessimist interpretations that were expressed openly in the form of a “Latin threat” that called into question the “Caribbean identity” of Belize. Harriet Topsey (1987, 1-5) formulated it referring to an “ethnic war.” Some years later, the Belizean anthropologist Joseph Palacio (1996) wondered if there was still a place in Belize for what he calls “africanness.” Assad Shoman (1993, 121) mentioned a project destined to favor the Haitian migration: “people of much more unconnected customs and language to the Belizean than those of the Central-Americans, but dark skinned.”

It is essential to note that the categories of the census account more for the social rules in the administrative or political camp than a “reality” they should “reflect.” The extensive nature of the category *Mestizo* favors the feeling of a Hispanic “invasion, since it forgets the multiplicity and heterogeneity of the population included in this category. It indeed reunites the victims of the Caste War of the nineteenth century and the Central American refugees of the 1980s under the same appeal. Without a shadow of doubt the criteria of the administrative classification had, willingly or not, a fundamental consequence

in the institutionalization of this new *Mestizo* face of the country. Numerous “scaremonger” interpretations of the 1990s were based on a methodical comparison of the census of 1991 and 1981, assuming continuity among categories. However, in 1981, respondents were asked to choose from different options, namely the terms “Negro/Black” and “mixed,” categories most often reinterpreted afterwards as synonyms of Creole and *Mestizo*.

Multicultural politics and ethnization *The Maya and the Garinagu*

The period that preceded independence was characterized by a backward motion of ethnic matters in favor of the promotion of a common “national identity” and the rejection of the British policy of “divide and rule.” The work *A History of Belize. Nation in the Making*, the first independent national narrative, describes the actions of the colonial administration as follows: “people were also divided by their religion, by where they lived, by occupation, by color and by class (...). Each group was encouraged to hate and fear the others” (*A History of Belize* 2004, 69). However, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed a renewed affirmation of the ethnicization of certain groups, mainly Garifuna and Maya. Scholars should consider the appropriation of ethnic identities that operated until then as a hierarchal assignation instead. Beyond the geographical and social limits, the ethnicization re-asserted differences, even if the second logic is far from having completely replaced the first one. The appearance of two organizations of an ethnic nature, the *National Garifuna Council* (in 1981) and the *Toledo Maya Cultural Council* (created in 1978, but above all active in the mid-1980s), was symptomatic of these transformations. If their ethnicization was a synonym of marginalization and inferiority before, now it became an identity vector enhanced by the Maya and Garifuna populations themselves in the new multicultural globalized context of the 1980 and 1990s.

That is how many works propose an analysis in terms of preservation of specific ethnic traits: “In the face of persistent and ever-increasing forces of change, these groups have

managed to retain their cultural cohesiveness to a substantial degree, and all possess a strong sense of shared identity” (Wilk, Chapin 1990, 5). In the case of the Garinagu, the existence of a specific language, the religious rites (*dugu*), the transnational community (Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Belize, and United States), the richness of the musical practices (*paranda*, *punta*, *punta rock*), are used as a line of argument to highlight their difference and their “authenticity” (González 1969, Foster 1986, Cayetano and Cayetano 1997, Izard 2004, Palacio 2005). Their peculiar history places them in an ambiguous identity situation since they can be classified (and they classify themselves) as indigenous and as African descendants. All the more reason for us to say that they are identified in ethnic terms, in that ethnicity is a factor that they in fact cultivate and that is widely recognized. The Garinagu language, dances, and chants received the status of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by the UNESCO in 2001.

While the *Toledo Maya Cultural Council* works above all on the valorization of the Maya history and culture, it took advantage of the development of patrimonial tourism (exploiting the Maya archaeological and natural sites) and engaged in a newfound course; as it is shown in the debates about the creation of a “Maya homeland” in the 1980s or its participation in a network of Mesoamerican Maya NGOs.

Despite this re-ethnicization, which was sometimes described in terms of the blooming of a “multicultural folklore” (Macpherson 2007, 17) these changes have an unquestionable political dimension. This is not expressed through an explicit political commitment (political parties, ethnic vote, specific claims), but rather has served to contribute to further weaken the model of “Creole society” that had been established on the basis of a marginal inclusion from the Garinagu and the Maya: as Belizean citizens who did not incarnate the Belizean Nation. Furthering this shift, the *Toledo Maya Cultural Council* states that the Maya were the first inhabitants of Belize before they were pushed to the margin. The memory of the existence of a particular way of political organization (the *Alcaldes* institution inherited from the Spanish colonization, Bolland, 1988), having

survived what is presented as an invasion of the British colonists, primarily the *Baymen*, or the petition for creating a “Maya homeland,” an indigenous reserve in the South of the country, demonstrates the extent these changes have gone in opposing a strictly cultural identity confinement. We will underline equally the fact that the Garinagu had founded a *Settlement Day* that celebrates their arrival to Belizean lands in 19 November 1802; in this way they too become established in the national territory like the first *Settlers*, the Creoles, did. The anniversary of the Garinagu’s arrival was promoted to “national holiday” level in 1977; the same level as Independence Day, the Battle of Saint George and “Día de la raza”, renamed “Panamerican Day”, which, in Latin America, celebrates the arrival of the Spanish to American lands (12 October) and which is associated to the *Mestizo* population in Belize.

In a general way, this ethnicization, from now on positive, has effected change in national politics and staging. For example, in 2007 the National Library opened its doors to a presentation of the Garifuna culture and history while the National Museum presented an exhibition about the Maya, which showed chiefly a jade mask discovered in 1968 by the American archeologist David Pendergast in the site of Altun Ha. It was accompanied by the following comment: “It is a unique relic bequeathed to us by some of the first Belizeans.” It is interesting to recall that this museum, opened in 2000, only traced the history of the country from 1705, the date of the settlement of the British colonists to exploit wood, to the present day in its chronology. While the Maya civilization was celebrated in the second floor, it remained forgotten in the first floor.

Likewise, in 2004, a national project concerning the overhaul of the educational programs and the integration of a “multicultural” element in their curricula was launched. Supported by the Ministry of National Education and the *National Institute for Culture and History*, this initiative will lead to a publication with the programmatic title: *Belize New Vision. African and Maya Civilization. The Heritage of a new nation*. The reconsideration of a national identity, which exceeded initial differences, just as the “fathers” of the independence upheld it, is evident:

“The multi-cultural model looks at Belize’s cultural heritage in a multifaceted and holistic perspective. It seeks to develop an awareness of the different cultures that are manifest in present day Belize (...). The multi-cultural model is an attempt to link Belize’s history to the different home lands from whence the different cultures came” (Iyo, Tzalam, Humphreys 2007, 85). This new “multicultural vision” from now on only considers the categories “African” and “Maya”. In this way, the colonial and national epochs seem to be put in parentheses for the benefit of a return to a distant precolonial origin, in which “Creoles,” “Garinagu,” and “Blacks” would be mixed into one group, the “Africans,” reducing the current heterogeneity of the populations of African descendants (even though the African populations, in Africa, are presented in great detail). The “history of Belize,” the one that began as a construct in the 17th century and prevails today in the national narrative has been reduced to occupy the third section of the work, after the Maya history and culture and then the African contribution to a lesser degree. Above all, any trace of a society dominated by a Creole group favoring the integration seems to have disappeared, in a relationship of horizontality among the different sectors of the population.

Towards the ethnicization of Creoles?

Today’s multiethnic language defies the definition of the Creole group: Is it an ethnic group like the others? Has it lost its special, preponderant place, personifying the nation? The “Latin threat” and the “re-ethnicization” of the Garinagu and the Maya, far from leading to the vanishing of the Creole group, tend to promote its “salience” (Douglass, Lyman 1976) in a logic of withdrawal over ethnic traits. The “Creole” category appears in the 1991 census in a revealing way: the Creole people are no longer the symbol of the Colony or the Nation. Instead, they have become an ethnic group like the rest. In other words, the national project is less similar to a creolization process – understood as the integration of differences – than to a progressive politicization of ethnic membership inherited from colonial times and translated to the specific context of the end of the

twentieth century. In this logic of differentiation, the Creoles have to justify a particular culture, language, and history, while their “natural” association with the collective project is called into question.

Redefining their place

To illustrate this process, an examination of the 2005 republication of a manuscript by Lawrence Vernon is revealing. The manuscript was originally written in 1964 to get his college diploma.¹¹ The foreword highlights the importance of this work, republished during the 70th anniversary of the *Belize National Library* and in response to a particularly strong petition (Vernon 2005, forward). Lawrence Vernon, who comes from a great Creole family, was connected with the National Library. Now, forty-one years later, the text has changed. First of all, the whole title adopted a more “politically correct” language, changing from *A Brief ethnological description of Belizean races* to *Cultural Groups of Belize*. Additionally, the order for presenting these groups and the number of pages devoted to each one, vary from one edition to the other: while in 1964 those qualified as “Spanish community”, “Spaniards” or “Meztizos” occupied the fourth position, right after the Maya, Garinagu, and Creoles, and had only three pages devoted to them, they now open the 2005 publication. Also, in the 1964 edition, right after describing the Garinagu and Maya, Vernon states that the other groups to be studied – including the Creoles – do not show clear enough differentiation markers, and the author seems to be in some doubt regarding their status: “The following races of people that help to comprise the population of the country are not a ‘tribe’ as such (...), but rather regarded as more conventional or conservative people who have to a great extent adopted Western ways and culture” (Vernon 1964, 70). The description of the Creole category is also instructive. If both texts coincide in the main traits (African ascendancy, harmony between masters and slaves, a connection with Belize City), several nuances are revealing. The long series of stereotypes that depicted the Creoles in 1964 disappeared: “The average Creole has an apparent smile, and laughter is usually not far under the surface. He tends to be

outspoken and vociferous in his talking, and always ready for a fight. His willingness to help is another of his fine qualities, and his friendliness to all is quite evident (...)" (Vernon 1964, 71). The "black blood" (Vernon 1964, 72) is replaced by "African blood" (Vernon 2005, 22). The affirmation of the Belizean identity of the Creoles, "generally accepted as the finest example of a true Belizean" (Vernon 1964, 71) produces a more tinged discourse: "because of their colorful intermixture, and having occupied the largest center of population in Belize, the Creole has perhaps adapted the most nationalistic attitude among cultural groups" (Vernon 2005, 23) While the permanency of a racial hierarchy is underlined in 1964, "the upper class of Belize society remains light-skinned, and the number of upper class negroes are small" (Vernon 1964, 74) the 2005 text adopts a more cultural perspective: "of all present-day Belizeans, it is the Creole who is likely the most culturally alienated and confused for it was the African, the Creole's ancestor, who was most intensely dehumanized, de-culturized, and reoriented" (Vernon 2005, 23). This cultural alienation leads to the extinction of the "popular beliefs" (Vernon 2005, 28) and almost the entire disappearance of religious practices (Vernon 2005, 29), but it authorized the prevalence of specific music and dances: "despite efforts by the slaves-masters to suppress music that they considered a nuisance, or an encouragement to revolt, the *Gombay* as a musical recreational event survived and was recreated in today's Boom-and-Chime bands" (Vernon 2005, 28). In 1964, however, the same author stated that the "the Mayas have their Deer dance, the Caribs their *Cunjoy* and *Sambai*,¹² while the Creoles have no set dance" (Vernon 1964, 77).

The language shifted from focusing on racial matters to a much more cultural focus. Similarly, some cultural practices that would be common to the Creoles reappear and replace a characterization based primarily on social traits. Additionally, the national status of the Creole group, held like evidence before, becomes the order of a "behavior" which is not perfectly assured by itself.

Ethnic... but not too much

Several years after the creation of the Garinagu and Maya *Councils*, the Creoles adopted, in 1995, their own association, the *Kriol National Council*, and they seem to want to be included in this logic of ethnicization. “The purpose of the National Kriol Council of Belize is to promote the culture and language of the Kriol people of Belize, as well as harmony among all the ethnic groups of Belize.. The first words in the *National Kriol Council* website (<http://www.kriol.org.bz/>) are revealing: on one side, the spelling used leaves the term “Creole” out of the English orthographic rules; on the other, the “Kriol” define themselves in ethnic terms like culture and language. At the same time, however, they are still presented as the ones guaranteeing harmony between the different ethnic groups. This role as arbiter or conciliator is not new, but it is no longer connected to the proximity of the British power, and it seems to adhere strictly to an ethnic logic. In fact, the website is divided in three sections which present “Kriol” culture, history and language.

The page concerning culture starts with a question: “What is a ‘Creole’?” and it seems to participate in a classification process that appears geared toward the division of ethnic groups. The answer, however, far from giving a series of identification criteria, offers an extremely open and subjective definition of the Creole category. In the same manner, there is a return to the usual spelling of this ethnic group, accentuating the normalization in detriment of the differentiation:

There are many answers to this question and we do not intend to present a complete definition. The following categories discuss cultural qualities that are identified as Creole. However, in the final evaluation, while an outsider might look at someone who embodies many of these characteristics and say that person is a Creole (and there are people who will say that a certain person doesn’t embody one of these qualities enough, i.e. he isn’t black enough to be a Creole), anybody who holds to some of these qualities and wants to identify as a Creole – can be Creole. (http://www.kriol.org.bz/CulturePages/Creole_Culture.htm).

Although the ethnic specificity is presented as an argument, the definition criteria for this ethnicity are extremely vague; even if we could expect a sort of identity withdrawal, the ethnicity conception transmitted is absolutely inclusive.

Indeed, the words of Mirna Manzanares (interview from April 19, 2008) and of Silvana Woods (interviews from November 8, 2007 and April 17, 2008), President and Secretary, respectively, of the *National Kriol Council*, confirm the coexistence of these inclusion and exclusion logics. It was observed at that time that an important effort was taking place to valorize a culture presented specifically as Creole which would take inspiration directly from Africa: lexicon and cuisine considered as African; promotion of the *Sambay*, described as an African fertility chant; support to the story-tellers and oral tradition associated with Africa, etc. Every year, during May, the *Cashew Festival* is organized in the town of Crooked Tree. The festival is intended to celebrate the Creole culture. It is not about the city of Belize anymore, former symbol of both “Belizeanness” and “Creolity,” perceived today as too mixed. The Creole culture is situated in the old timber camps that border the rivers (Belize River, New River) that were the main communication and timber transportation routes in the past. These small villages are presented as the true birthplaces for a specific culture, in which we would find the Creole language, *bruckdown* music, cashew wine or Christmas festivities. In that way, this “back to the origins” passes through a search for authenticity expressed by a valorization of rural life, a reaffirmed reference to Africa, and an exaltation of the woodcutter figure, which replaces that of the slave. At the same time, M. Manzanares and S. Woods stress the “inter-ethnic harmony,” the importance of the mixed races from which, the Creoles would be a symbol. The interviewees repeat in several occasions that anyone can become a member of the *Kriol Council* if they share the Creole culture, it does not matter if they are Chinese, *Mestizo* or Mennonite. Even though the Creole culture is not as visible as others, that is exactly why it is “so much a part of everything,” a “living culture” that “everyone experiences in daily life,” for which it seems “evident,” “incorporated,” and “present everywhere.”¹³

Conclusion

In April 22, 2008, Lee Laa, “the Queen of *Kriol kolcha*” was invited to participate in the Earth Day celebrations in Guanacaste National Park, at the entrance of Belmopan. She was wearing an African dress with the colors of the Union Jack, and she sang some themes accompanied exclusively by her own compact discs played in a portable sound system. When she was about to sing the classic “Kriol Kolcha,” she asked the improvised DJ to lower the volume and then she gave a long explanation on the origins of the slaves, the mixes with British people, the timber camps, the Creole language, etc. Off the improvised stage, Lee Laa recalled the speech, saying that “people tell me that I’m wasting my time, that Creoles don’t have history or culture. They are wrong” (interview, April 22, 2008). We are therefore led to believe that this is about presenting and valuing the Creole culture and history. But, in doing so, is not the Creole place among society what ends up transformed? The more the Creoles adhere to an ethnic group, the less they can represent the nation; on the contrary, the less they are defined in ethnical terms, the more they will be able to maintain their preponderant position. That is how they are confronted with this contradiction: to lead the national project reaffirming a specific identity and to defend a culture that is threatened even though it is supposed to symbolize the national culture. Therefore it becomes apparent to what extent the Creole representatives’ discourse seems to be trapped in a contradiction, between affirmation of a cultural specificity and the logic of crossbreeding, between the valorization of a difference and normalization, between singularity and daily life.

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Notes

1. Translated by Karla Sánchez Domínguez and Ernesto Du Solier Espinosa. Revision by Katrina Keefer.
2. The first representations of the Battle of Saint George appear in 1823: After a slaves' rebellion, the Creole elite finds out about the benefits of promoting a reference to a "harmonious society" before the slaves and the British managers.
3. *Colonial Guardian*, April 2, 1898.
4. For a critical analysis see (Shoman, 2000; Macpherson, 2003).
5. In this regard, Belize's situation is quite different from that of Jamaica. See (Sheperd 2002).

6. Beyond this discourse, it's necessary to state that Evan Hyde comes from a prominent Creole family and he himself held one of these institutional positions which he is so inclined to criticize, since he was senator from 1993 through 1998.
7. In addition, since its creation at the beginning of the 1960s, it struggles to develop and populate itself, which accentuates even more the feeling of Central American "invasion".
8. In that regard, the 2000s are witness of an inversion of the tendency: the media generally will associate violence, particularly severe in Belize City, to the black shown as young people out of work, consumers and traffickers of drug.
9. The first important migratory flows to the United States date from the beginning of the 1960s, after the hurricane Hattie (March, 1961), which devastated a great part of Belize City, most of it Creole.
10. The census of 2000 (the last one available) confirms this tendency: while "Creoles" are approximately the 24.9% of the population, those who are grouped from now on in the category "Mestizo/Spanish" represent the 48.7% of the population.
11. The photocopied document is available at the Belmopan archives, in the *Books* category, referenced as 0069 BAD.
12. It is likely that the 2005 "gombay" is the 1964 "sambai", now associated with the Creoles and spelled "Sambay" or "Sambai".
13. It's interesting to mention that I heard a very similar speech during my visit to the *Creole Museum*, in Belize's downtown, and whose managers also participated in the rise of a Creole mobilization in the 90s. The Museum portrays a "typical" Creole home of a family living from cutting limber. There, and above all, the "Creolity" seems to express itself in daily life much more than in any political claim or in cultural traits set on stage.

Cunin Elisabeth.

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