

## **CREOLISATION, SYNCRETICISM AND MULTICULTURALISM**

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Increasingly, multiculturalism is being promoted, in the 'first' world, as a desirable educational and social perspective. Its appeal can be seen in the title of one prominent philosophical contribution: Taylor's "Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition" (in Gutmann, 1994). Multiculturalism gives different groups a voice, an opportunity to be recognised on an equal footing. As Appiah (1997) says, 'multiculturalism' now covers a variety of positions:

That word is now used . . . to cover an extraordinary range of educational practices, from the anodyne insistence that American students should be taught something of the history of all the world's continents to the kooky suggestion that they should learn that the Africans who built the pyramids did so by telekinesis.

However, the basic demand is the acknowledgement of a plurality of cultures and insistence on mutual respect and toleration. It is, however, worth insisting, as Appiah does, on the facts of the matter in such societies as the US: most of the groups involved have suffered extensive cultural loss, so that we now have more a nostalgia for the past rather than a reaffirmation of the present.

Noting that mutual respect does not necessarily mean wholesale curricular change, Appiah observes that

Nevertheless, contemporary multiculturalists are right in thinking that a decent education will teach children about the various social identities around them. First, because each child has to negotiate the creation of his or her own individual identity, using these collective identities as one (but only one) of the resources; second, so that all can be prepared to deal with one another respectfully in a common civic life. Much of current multicultural education seems to me to have these reasonable aims: let us call this weak version 'liberal multiculturalism'.

In contrast to this, he distinguishes illiberal multiculturalism "that wants to force children to live within separate spheres defined by the common culture of their race, religion, or ethnicity."

In speaking here of collective or social identities, Appiah hopes to remain an uncommitted observer, but the notion is one that can, as in the illiberal guise he rejects, easily give refuge to illicit elements. So one can think that a collective culture is pretty much a given, settled, unable to offer a completely original response; that it is a 'package deal,' not internally fractured or incoherent; that it is somehow tied up with innate or genotypical characteristics (cf. the fuss people make about adoption, though one must admit here that it is difficult to separate thoughts about what it would be like for a child to grow up a particular way from thoughts about how he or she will have to cope with what other people think about that upbringing); or, as Taylor does, that people have a right to the continuation by other persons, notably their children, of their particular culture.

While not opposed to liberal multiculturalism as Appiah characterises it, I think that one possible contribution we in the Caribbean might make to rethinking these matters from our local perspective — not so much rethinking for ourselves but for the wider world — is to propose as a positive something that undercuts what might be the assumptions even of that benign approach. I reach that positive by two very different routes: creolisation as the major social and cultural fact about Caribbean life (what matters will of course be the social process

but it may prove illuminating to proceed via linguistics) and Arnold's accounts of Western culture as an amalgam of Hellenism and Hebraism, and the English race as an amalgam of Celtic, German and Norman 'bloods.'

### **Creolisation**

When I learnt a little linguistics 30 odd years ago, it might have been possible to see the first and last of these processes as identical. People were inclined to look at the Frenchifying of Middle English (itself one aspect of the enormous impact of the Norman conquest) as not unlike the processes leading to Caribbean creole languages or the relexification of some of them (e.g. Trinidadian or now St Lucian creole moving from predominantly French to predominantly English vocabulary). Current views in linguistics are not so hospitable to the pretensions of any stage of English to creole status (though it has been argued for fairly recently by some scholars) but the debates on the status and typology of creole and other contact language forms are, I think, instructive. One reason for a philosopher to find them interesting is that language is by and large not under conscious socio-political control. Particular groups or even individuals can distort and repress how people might otherwise arrange their business or reproductive or domestic affairs on the basis of rational reflection on the traditions they find around them, but it is rare for any group to consciously redirect language (one of the few notable exceptions I can think of is a local effort: the development of rasta language). And yet to fashion a means of communication is a notable and important achievement, a solution to a crucial problem of co-ordination or partial conflict of a kind that generates real morality, and it may show us how we might seek to resolve other situations of diversity in contact.

(Another related point is that language is in general evaluatively neutral. As Macaulay pointed out long ago, there is no intrinsic basis in the language to prefer Latin to Chinook as a component of élite education. If one thinks of culture by reference to conventions like language, there is scarcely any scope for evaluatively ranking exemplars, but if one focuses on the way culture operates as "an engineering program for producing persons" (Nerlich, 1989) then there is no more reason not to discriminate among them than there is not to distinguish a saint or an ordinary decent person from the likes of Pinochet or Burmese generals. "Moral" equality among persons is no bar to moral discriminations.)

Of course creolisation does not provide us with a recipe. There is still much difference of opinion on what has actually happened in the case of prototypical creoles and pidgins. But one lesson I would wish to draw from recent debates is that what is salient for ordinary usage of 'creole' (once upon a time, foreign-born, now whatever it is) or for some theoretical perspective (e.g., origin in a colonial slave plantation) does not uniquely characterise the outcomes of contact situations. There are a host of types of language contact bringing with them a host of outcomes, perhaps depending on particular social or historical configurations. Mufwene has enunciated his idealised and apparently deterministic version of this idea in relation to creoles, immigrant workers' varieties, etc. by saying that "in all these cases of language contact we still deal with the same equation for restructuring; only the value of some variables keeps changing" (1997, 51). Taking this in conjunction with the fact he has particularly stressed, that the categories we rely on have been taken from the contingencies of the social reality, not from theory, we find that what structurally or in some other respect are very similar situations become classified differently. The terminology remains affected by the connotations attached to terms by metropolitan non-specialist users. So, speaking of American or Australian English, Mufwene remarks "there are other good sociohistorical reasons why these varieties have not been called creoles: they developed in settings in which descendants of non-Europeans have been in the minority; and they have not been disowned by Europeans and descendants thereof" (57).

This provides by the way another notable difference between creolisation and Arnold's cases (at least the first), since creolisation is a matter for *hoi polloi* whereas Arnold's is mainly a matter of élites interacting.

But while not the same, we can say that they are all species of the same genus: syncretism. Echoing Mufwene, our terminology here tends to embody derogatory connotations — Protestantism in particular sees the early Christian church beset by temptations to indulge in corrupting mysteries just as a present-day Haitian might mix up Shango with a Catholic saint's rite (though Catholic and Orthodox views of church history equally repudiate such heresies, they merely have to distinguish an acceptable sequence of doctrinal changes and elaborations from syncretic corruption) — but what I want to suggest is that for us in a creole context the implicit evaluations are to be resisted and overturned, and we should preach to the rest of the world the virtues of miscegenation. It is what we have, at least, not a pipe-dream.

(This is not, I think, a commission of the "naturalistic fallacy". Crudely, that fallacy is the idea that we can move directly from what is to what is to be valued. In rejecting it, one is not, however, supposing that what is to be valued has no connection with what is. My point now is that in reviewing possible aims, things to be valued, the fact that some of them are actualities is not to be ignored. For one thing, it shows them to be possible. Culture conceived as statically as in Gormenghast on the other hand may never have existed and while this does not rule it out as a possible aim it raises the question of its feasibility. Another, *ad hominem*, point is simply that we do value the creole condition as it now is; let us promote it, recognising it for what it is. Of course, there is considerable ambivalence here: that creole condition originated in a crime against humanity, it has been characterised by some commentators as schizophrenic, neurotic, or homophobic, and whether or not it suffers from these faults, it is, like any other social condition, not exactly perfect. My assumption is simply that there is something Nettleford and others wish to celebrate.)

### **Arnoldian history of culture**

I have suggested that while there is as yet no consensus on what has happened in the development of creole languages, we can draw a philosophical moral from the sheer fact of their existence. Similarly with Arnold. It is not a matter of his getting the details right — his thinking explicitly operates with crude racial and racist notions that we cannot take seriously, though for his time they had the same scientific aura I have sought by invoking creole linguistics. But his theorising relates to a context that permits these misconstruals. To put it crudely, Icelanders no longer appeal to the world-view of the sagas, Greeks no longer invoke the Homeric gods. Western Europe owes central portions of its cultural life to what was originally a Jewish sect, with of course several rebirths of Greco-Roman culture along the way. To see the very broad structure, such categories are all but inescapable. Focussing simply on one society, Trilling remarks that the two contrasted notions, Hebrew and Hellene — ascetic concern for conduct, strictness of conscience, versus this-worldly seeing things as they are, spontaneity of consciousness — "offer ... a splendid means of analyzing English society by quantity rather than quality" (1949, 256).

England had once been populated by Celts, was invaded by Romans, later in much greater numbers by Germanic tribes, and then, after 1066, subjected to the Normans. These last, as Trilling points out (239, fn.), Arnold conceived — in contradiction to his official racial theory — as significant for their Latin civilisation rather than their Germanic 'blood.' This extensive and violent mixing led, in Arnold's view, to a richness and diversity lacking among the more uniform, thoroughbred Germans. The only point I want to save from this is the recognition that English cultural resources draw from a wider range than might normally be noticed by its popular chauvinist defenders, that its culture is not a "pure" strain, but the outcome of innumerable contacts.

## Consequences

Let us return to the errors often insinuated with talk of culture. The creole context, and an Arnoldian perspective on the West or simply on England, both reveal that a culture lives, changes, innovates, interacts with others, and is in a process of continuous construction, like many a website. Where alternatives are to hand, this often means selection, not simply preserving and reproducing. It is not therefore a complete or necessarily coherent bundle (to which we may add Gellner's (1981) point about the multiplicity of (nearly) all cultures: the official first eleven has a fall-back for other occasions, scriptural Islam versus the dervishes).

Again, the creole context makes it plain that there is nothing genetic in operation. More importantly, that context (and perhaps linguistic studies more generally) give one no reason to think a culture will continue in the same old way. As noted already, we find relexification in Trinidad or now in St Lucia. Scholars are deeply conservative at heart. No doubt Alleyne was sad to see that a form of Twi-Asante is "dying (but not dead)" (1988, 126) in Jamaica. But is there any reason to regret that we no longer speak like Chaucer, or Arnold, come to that? One may regret death, but that does not entail that one would endorse immortality — we must move to a view that puts life and death in their place and accepts both. Or to return to less exalted matters, it may be pleasant to discover a "retention" but it is not what makes or breaks a culture. We can endorse change, endogenous or syncretic, in general and our own creole variety or "transculturation" without it.

It seems to me that a crucial difference between the liberal and illiberal forms of multiculturalism distinguished by Appiah derives from a fundamental difference of view on individual versus group issues, a difference that impinges on social reproduction. A liberal moral position leaves decision to each person individually, and so does not provide an obvious mechanism to allow anyone to choose for others. We have generally begun to accept that people should not choose in this way for other adults, but it is by no means accepted that the same applies to children. People assume they may choose how to bring up their children in the sense that they choose how those children should be rather than providing them with the materials to make their own choice. If we agree with Appiah in seeing education in this second way, however, we must acknowledge that children may choose not to preserve cultural ways we favour, languages we speak, or what-have-you. The phrasing Appiah uses — negotiate the creation of his or her own individual identity, using these collective identities as one (but only one) of the resources — does not perhaps draw sufficient attention to its allowing a mix-'n-match cosmopolitanism. To offer creolisation, or transculturation, as an alternative educational perspective is to do as much as a liberal may to encourage such picking and choosing and reflecting, supported by the forgivable exaggeration that not only are we all creoles now but that we always were (to some extent at least).

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