

EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE
THE DEVELOPMENT OF CREOLE SOCIETY IN JAMAICA (1971)

The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820. Oxford : Clarendon, 1971.

Brathwaite's The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica is, by his own description, a "historical study with a socio-cultural emphasis" (xiv) and, one as such, with decisive implications for understanding Caribbean society as a whole in the twentieth century. His thesis here is that the

people, mainly from Britain and West Africa, who settled, lived, worked and were born in Jamaica, contributed to the formation of a society . . . which, in so far as it was neither purely British nor West African, is . . . creole. (xiii)

The term 'creole' as used by Brathwaite denotes, when applied to persons, both whites and blacks, freeborn and slave, "born in, native to, committed to the area of living" (xv). When applied to the general society, it denotes both a colonial relationship with a "metropolitan European power, on the one hand, and a plantation arrangement on the other" (xv). Creole Jamaica, Brathwaite is explicit, was a society in which there was a "juxtaposition of master and slave, élite and labourer, in a culturally heterogeneous relationship" (xvi). Although "multi-racial" (xv), it was "organised from the benefit of a minority of European origin" (xv).

The single most factor in the development of Jamaican and, by extension, Caribbean societies, Brathwaite argues, was not the "imported influence of the Mother Country" (296) nor the "local administrative activity of the white élite" (296) but, rather, what he describes as a

cultural action--material, psychological and spiritual--based upon the stimulus/response of individuals within the society to their environment and--as white/black, culturally discrete groups--to each other. The scope and quality of this response and interaction were dictated by the circumstances of the society's foundation and composition--a 'new' construct, made up of newcomers to the landscape and cultural strangers each to the other; one group dominant, the other legally and subordinately slaves. (296)

Brathwaite's term for this "cultural action or process" (296) is "creolization" (296) which he likens to an "obscure force" (297) compelling all members of Jamaican slave society to "conform to a certain concept of themselves; makes them perform in certain roles which, in fact, they quickly come to believe in" (297).

Creolisation is a "way of seeing the society, not in terms of white and black, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole" (307). Brathwaite distances himself from the economic reductivism inherent in the 'plantation-thesis' of George Beckford and company: he is explicit that it is wrong to see Jamaica solely as a "'slave' society" (307) or an "enormous sugar factory" (307). Brathwaite also draws a distinction between the pluralist model of Caribbean society promulgated by sociologists like M. G. Smith and his own notion of creolisation. The former is "based on an apprehension of cultural polarity, on an 'either/or' principle, on the idea of people sharing common divisions instead of increasingly common values" (310). By contrast, the latter is based upon the notion of an

historically affected socio-cultural continuum within which . . . there are four inter-related and sometimes overlapping orientations. From their several cultural bases people in the West Indies tend towards certain directions, positions, assumptions, and ideals. But nothing is really fixed and monolithic. Although there is white/brown/black, there are infinite possibilities within these distinctions and many ways of asserting identity. A common colonial and creole experience is shared among the various divisions, even if that experience is variously interpreted. (310)

Brathwaite lists the four main orientations as "European, Euro-creole, Afro-creole (or folk),

and West Indian" (310).

In short, in Jamaican society, "fixed with the dehumanizing institution of slavery, were two cultures of people, having to adapt themselves to a new environment and to each other" (307). Brathwaite's point is that the

fiction created by this confrontation was cruel, but it was also creative. The white plantations and social institutions . . . reflect one aspect of this. The slaves' adaptation of their African culture to a new world reflects another. (307)

Brathwaite divides the process of acculturation which new slaves underwent into four stages: firstly, the stage of "seasoning" (298) when the slaves were branded, given a new name, apprenticed to already creolised slaves, taught the rudiments of the new language orally, and initiated into the relevant work routines; secondly, the stage when they were induced to "become identified with their work" (298); thirdly, the stage of "socialisation" (298) during which they were encouraged to identify with their fellow slaves "through the gang system and through communal recreational activities such as drumming and dancing and festivals" (298); and lastly, the stage of "identification with the group . . . and with local symbols of authority--the proprietor, the overseer, the driver, the obeah-man" (298).

The socialisation of the newly arrived slaves led to what Brathwaite labels as one of the most important "tragedies" (300) of slavery: "mimicry" (300) or "imitation of the master" (299) which in turn made "mimic-men" (300) of African slaves. Many black Jamaicans, he argues, especially the "black élite" (308), "failed, or refused, to make conscious use of their own rich folk culture (their one indisputable possession) and so failed to command the chance of becoming self-conscious and cohesive as a group and consequently, perhaps, winning their independence from bondage"(308):

'Invisible,' anxious to be 'seen' by their masters, the elite blacks and the mass of free coloureds . . . conceived of visibility through the lenses of their masters' already uncertain vision as a form of 'greyness'--an imitation of an imitation. (308)

However, the creolisation produced by "inter-racial concourse" (300) was a "two-way process" (300). Whites were also mimic-men. In the same way that the slaves were forced to adapt "their African culture to a new world" (307), within the white community was the "Negro influence" (301), as he puts it, "pervasive" (301), not least where language was concerned (so much so that planters felt impelled to lock their daughters away in order to "preserve the pure dialect of the tribe" [302], among other things.) The main tragedy where whites were concerned consisted in their inability to recognise the humanity of their black labourers (had they done so, this demographic alliance would have resulted in economic and possibly even political independence earlier) and to embrace more fully the process of creolisation, opting for what Brathwaite describes as a "bastard metropolitanism" (307), to wit, "dependence on Europe" (307).

Brathwaite also stresses the "area of sexual relationships" (303) was one of the most potent facilitators of the process of creolisation: the

visible and undeniable result of these liaisons was the large and growing coloured population of the island, which, in its turn, acted as a bridge, a kind of social cement, between the two main colours of the island's structure, thus further helping (despite the resulting class/colour divisions) to integrate the society. (305)

The persons whom Brathwaite describes as "mulatto culturalists" (305) produced by this miscegenation (Brathwaite would seem to have in mind the Harrises and Walcotts of the region) continue to be the prime proponents of cultural synthesis and integration.

Brathwaite draws upon the concept of 'great' and 'little' traditions advanced in Robert Redfield's Peasant Society and Culture:

In a civilisation there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a

little tradition of the largely unreflective many. The great tradition is cultivated in schools and temples; the little tradition works itself out and keeps itself going in the lives of the unlettered in their village communities. The tradition of the philosopher, theologian, and literary man is a tradition consciously cultivated and handed down; that of the little people is for the most part taken for granted and not submitted to much scrutiny or considered refinement and improvement. . . . The two traditions are interdependent. (qtd. in Brathwaite, 213)

"Cultural autonomy" (309), Brathwaite writes, "demands a norm and a *residential* correspondence between the 'great' and 'little' traditions within the society" (my emphasis; 309). However, Brathwaite concludes, "neither was residential" (309) as a result of which "[n]ormative value-references were made outside the society" (309). "Folk culture, though usually autochthonous" (213), Brathwaite points out,

may be said to be dependent upon a 'great tradition' . . . for its sanctions, its memories, its myths. . . . In the case of Jamaica's slaves, the 'great tradition' was clearly in Africa, in the same way that white Jamaicans' was in Europe-- both in other words, external to the society. (213)

His argument is that creolisation

provided the conditions for and possibility of local residence. It certainly mediated the development of authentically local institutions, and an Afro-creole 'little' tradition among the slave 'folk.' But it did not, during the period of this study, provide a norm. (309)

The reason for this was that the "Euro-creole elite" (309) were either unable or unwilling to "absorb in any central sense the 'little' tradition of the majority" (309), merely creating as a result the "pervasive dichotomy" (309) which is so characteristic of Jamaican and West Indian society.

The question with which Brathwaite ends would seem to be even more relevant today: to be precise,

whether the society will remain conceived of as 'plural'--the historical dichotomy becoming the norm--or whether the process of creolisation will be resumed in such a way that the 'little' tradition of the (ex-)slaves will be able to achieve the kind of articulation, centrality, prestige and influence--assuming that it is not by now too debased--that will provide a basis for creative reconstruction. Such a base, evolving its own residential 'great' tradition, could well support the development of a new parochial wholeness, a difficult but possible creole authenticity. (311)