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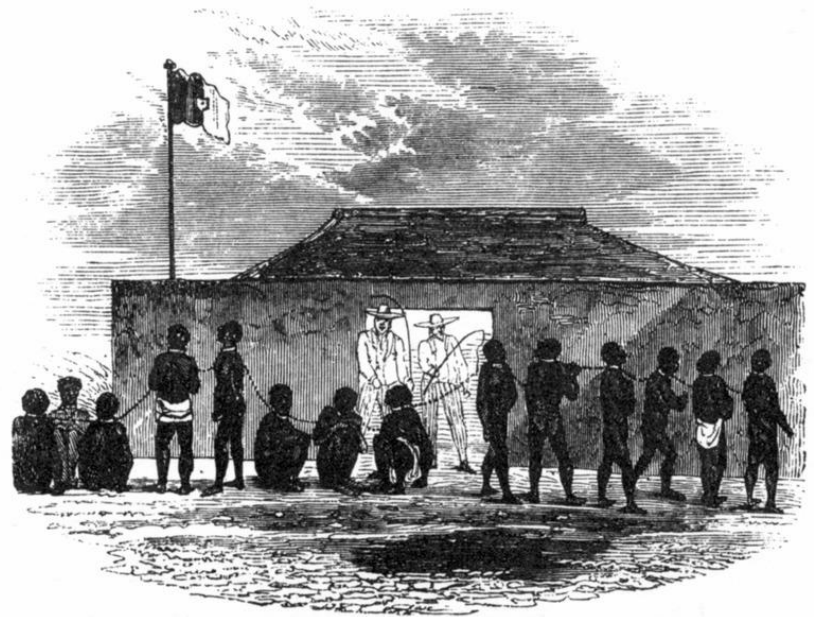
COMMEMORATION OF FET'AFRIK 2020
ACHILLES KWAME LUC MEMORIAL LECTURE

'GRANNTER' AND CREOLE ROOTS

Creole societies in the plantation context owe their existence, first to the islands of the New World (in both Atlantic and the Indian Ocean) and second, to the African diasporas that settled there under the specific conditions of slavery. In his work, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941), which is considered a landmark study of creolization, prior to the coining of the term, Melville Herskovits pointed out that the plantation system of slavery originated in the Caribbean where it reached its greatest scale, and then spread to the American continent (p. 8). This is an unexpected contribution of 'Grannter' (Africa) to Humanity – from the painful history of slavery.

CATALYSTS OF CREOLIZATION

First of all, the plantation system involved slavery, and this meant that millions of slaves had to be imported from the African continent, to the Americas. In fact, from the West coast of Africa, between Senegal and the Congo rivers, Herskovits proposes that between six to twelve million Negro slaves were brought to the Americas (p. 17).



CATALYSTS

African Diaspora - Indian Ocean

- Haring refers to the thousands of slaves who were forcibly moved to Seychelles and the Mascarenes as the diaspora that was also the “tradition bearers” which brought with them, the expressive cultures that would be reinterpreted during the creolization process. He cites several well-known works on the demographics of the region in early 17th century which show that by their sheer numbers, the slave populations were bound to influence the formation of the new creole cultures very significantly (2005, p. 291).
- By 1807, at 65,367 heads, the slave population in Mauritius had outnumbered the colonists by ten times (Teelock, 2001, p. 118). Towards the abolition period, in 1830, Reunion had 71,000 slaves (Scherer, 1980, p. 54). As for Seychelles, in 1835, in a total population of 7,500, an astounding majority of 6,521 were slaves who were to be liberated (Filliot, 1982, p. 109). For more comprehensive figures, Peter Nicholls’ recent work on slavery in the Seychelles estimates a total of between 334,936 to 384,040,5 slaves imported to the Mascarenes by the French (2018, p. 34).

Catalysts

Secondly, creolization, came into being through the deliberate attempts of the plantation masters to quash the establishment of African cultures from the continent by separating slaves of the same tribe and by shifting them. It happened because the separating and shifting left a vacuum for a third possibility to emerge, since the slaves had to recreate their culture within the confines of the plantation (Trouillot, 2006, p. 10).



Catalysts

Third catalyst of plantation creolization:

was there enough of the same peoples to create a diaspora? For it would need a diaspora “to place the stamp of their tribal customs on New World behavior” (Herskovits, 1941, p. 39). This ‘stamp’ included the passing on of traditions and folklore, that would merge with, and become part of the New World’s creolized societies.



Catalysts: Indian Ocean Diasporas

- In the Indian Ocean context, with particular focus on Seychelles, Haring says that “the eastward diaspora of folktales is immediately visible” (2005, p. 294).
- Apart from the initial transfer of slaves before Abolition in 1835, Seychelles also received an added influx of slaves in the 1860s, who were ‘liberated’ by anti-slaving British naval expeditions in the Indian Ocean and dumped on the islands (Choppy and Salomon, 2004).
- This naturally means that in Seychelles, the linguistic and cultural influence of East Africa has been the strongest, compared to its neighbours, Mauritius and Reunion (Chaudenson and Mufwene, 2001, p. 293).
- Haring points out that Sounjoula (who happens to be the most popular folktale character of Seychelles) is recognized by the Seychellois people as part of their African heritage, and traces the origins of this trickster hero to the Nyanja people of Malawi (2005, p. 294).

Pre-slavery creolizations

The **fourth** catalyst which permitted the creolized societies of the New World to emerge was that *the African diasporas that were brought there were already accustomed to the creolizing process, prior to their enslavement*. Herskovits was struck by the impact of interpenetrating cultures and internal change during his field trip to West Africa in 1932 (Baron, 2003, p. 97). In fact, contrary to presumptions of the origins of slaves in the New World as being the coastal areas of West Africa, internal transfers and contact had been ongoing across the African continent for ages.



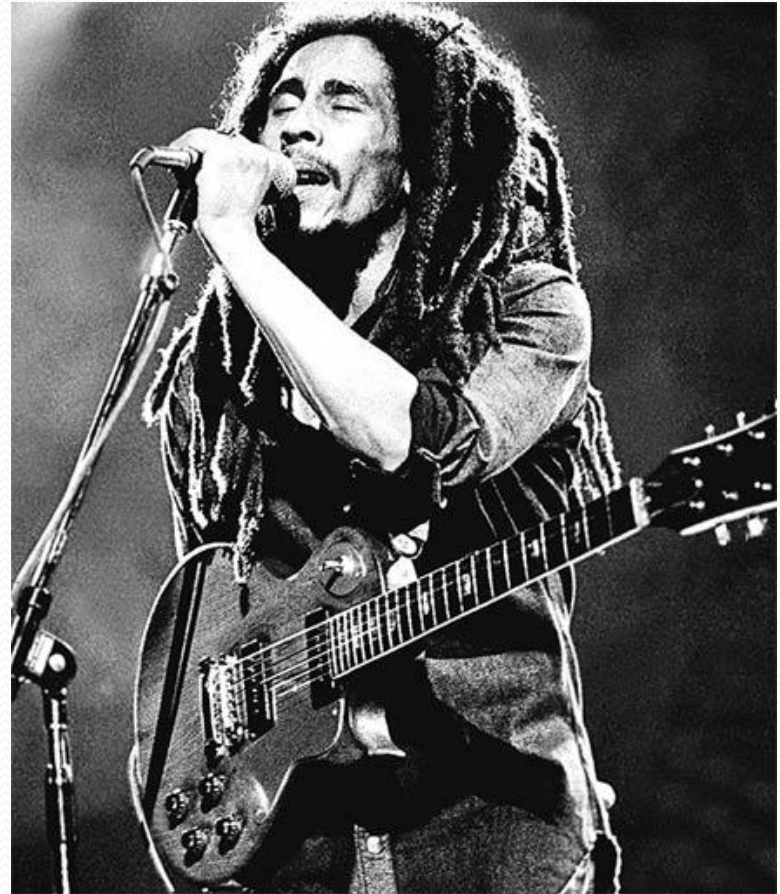
Figure 9.4 | The Queen of Sheba |
The Queen of Sheba as illustrated by Conrad Kyeser in the early fifteenth century.
Author: Conrad Kyeser
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Pre-slavery creolizations: Indian Ocean

- The similarities between folktales of the Indian Ocean region might also be due to encounters predating slavery.
- In both Seychelles and Mauritius, there is a type of story that turns “unpromising human characters” into heroes (Haring, 2005, p. 293), e.g. ‘Born ek Bosi’ (the blind man and the hunchback), which Haring says, comes straight from East Africa (2005, p. 293).
- However, similar storylines in European and Asiatic cultures as pointed out by Herskovits (1941, p. 18) suggests that these stories had spread well before the Indian Ocean societies were formed. Two examples of this are (i) the similarity between Baissac’s Mauritian version of *Seven defeat an orgre and take over his house* (Haring, 2005, p. 292) and the story of *The Musicians of Bremen* (Grimm, 1857), and (ii) the story of the defiant girl who is very picky over choosing a husband and ends up marrying a wolf / ghost (*Pti Zan, Zann ek Loulou*).
- Haring’s *Stars and Keys* (2007) makes clear that this latter story was spread from East Africa, then to Madagascar and the Comoros, before spreading to the Indian Ocean islands through the slave trade.

CREATING A THIRD SPACE

In spite of its painful beginnings and lingering stigmatization, plantation creolization is a wonder of resilience and creativity. This is because it was, and in many ways, still is, caught between two worlds, and in order to exist, it has had to create a Third Space. The 'third space' concept was first coined in postcolonial theory by Homi K. Bhabha (1990; 1994; 1996), who posited that hybridity is a form of liminal in-between space where the "cutting edge of translation and negotiation" takes place (Bhabha, 1996).



CREATING A THIRD SPACE

Using folklore as illustration, Haring puts the third space theory into perspective: “Where societies come into a colonized, multiracial existence for the benefit of a European minority, the normal reaction of the constituent groups is to renegotiate culture” (2003, p.19). He suggests that this renegotiation was a natural reaction of plantation slaves, who under the stress of being forcefully transplanted to a new location and under the conditions of slavery, found the “capacity for learning and switching among codes... a more useful component of one’s mental universe than an old language” (2003, p. 20). Thus, the emphasis here is on adaptation for the sake of survival.



CREATING A THIRD SPACE

The slaves' lives were regulated and their existence consisted of strict regimes of hard toil from dawn till dusk – and certainly, they were not allowed to gather in groups (Code Noir, 1685, Article 16). However, because slavery was essentially a business, there were always those who sought ways to save on expenses. Giving slaves the time and space to grow their own food so as to save their masters the expense of feeding them, enabled the creation of the 'third space'. These provision grounds given to the slaves, provided both time and space, within the plantation system, yet distinct from the plantation norms, where the slaves could recreate a new culture, by dipping into their memories of their old lives, and adapting to the conditions of their new environment.

THANK YOU -MERSI!



Achilles Kwame Luc - We came from Africa!