

Universalism and Creolization in Seychellois Proverbs

Penda Choppy

The proverb is one of the most enduring and popular forms of orature in Seychellois Creole. As in other Creole societies, this genre has shown a tendency to survive the general upheaval of slavery, colonialism and even the drive towards westernization. Since language is the medium of expression for all types of discourse, it is normal to expect that the proverb genre in Creole societies originates from all the languages and cultures that contributed to a specific Creole. Raphaël Confiant (2004) makes the point that because the proverb form is an incipient part of daily speech, it will naturally reflect the daily experience of its users; and the daily experience of Creole societies in their formative years for more than three centuries was that of slavery. He thus sees the proverb form in the Creole world as being divided into two main groupings: those that have been transmitted directly from an African or European language, which can more or less be categorized as universal wisdoms, and those that portray a world characterized by slavery, which Confiant says are the larger corpus.¹ In this paper, I intend to discuss universalism in Seychellois proverbs that occurs both as direct inheritances from the original languages of the early inhabitants and as local compositions firmly rooted in the Creole environment and culture, thus revealing the creolization process in action.

Methodological considerations

This paper is the result of a larger research that sets out to study the relationship between Seychellois identity, slavery and colonialism. The research is qualitative in nature since it deals with human subjects, through their oral narratives, in this instance, Seychellois proverbs. Though I chose not to engage directly with people through questionnaires or interviews, my research does aim to expose aspects of human psyche. To get at these aspects, I analyse instances of oral culture, which enhances the credibility of the research – and in which are embedded certain communal ideas and ideologies. My aim was to analyse data that represents the feelings and perspectives of a cross-section of the Seychellois population in their creative moments, spanning the centuries from the founding of the first settlement in the late sixteenth century to present times. It is important to note that the research material is generally considered as an inherent part of the Seychellois traditional heritage, and as such, reflects creations that are more or less in the past and have been

¹ Confiant (2004), p12.

handed down through the generations, and go as far back as the pre-settlement era in the Old World. My intention was to see how relevant the feelings and perspectives represented by this data still is to current Seychellois society. Analysis of secondary material relating directly to the primary material or to the socio-historical conditions under which this data (that is, oral traditions) was created enabled me to piece together an opinion as to its current relevance in our society, especially in the context of the impact of slavery and colonialism.

Proverbs within the context of orature

In terms of definition of the proverb, I find Arnaud Carpooran's summary of it as being:

... a sentence or maxim that makes economic use of words, often in metaphorical language, and is in popular use more often by lay people in a particular society.

quite appropriate. The sources he cites are the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie*, *Le Petit Robert* and an online source, *The Free Dictionary*.² The chief characteristics of the proverb thus seem to be the concision of expression and the semantic density of the final product. Confiant's discussion of definitions supports this approach and he places particular emphasis on context and meaning. Context here refers to the conversation in which the proverb is used. There are no specific situations or conditions for proverb use, Confiant points out, unlike other forms of orature.³ For example, storytelling occurs at bedtime or at wakes and often has a specific way of starting. Proverbs, on the other hand, are inserted within normal conversations, usually to illustrate or punctuate a point.

The different forms of orature that survived the cultural alienation and erosion of slavery and colonization might be casually dismissed today as irrelevant by modern Creoles, but they had been attached in their past to specific traditions and rituals that had given them significance. This is especially so in the case of proverbs. People were regaled with proverbs, riddles and folktales at traditional wakes. The older generation also taught the younger generation traditional values through these art forms.⁴ All of these art forms probably had a specific function in their original environment. Ngugi Wa Thiongo, for example, describes African drama as '*having its origins in the human struggle with nature and others*'. He mentions rites performed during harvests, at births, deaths, during the struggle against natural disasters and human invasions, as well as internal enemies such as idlers, evil doers, and notes that the medium by which they were acted out included oral forms such as songs,

² Carpooran (2013), pp 40-41.

³ Confiant (2004), p12.

⁴ Carpooran (2013) / Confiant (1998).

mimes, poetry, and stories.⁵ Ngugi also emphasizes the important role of orature in language development:

*Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words.*⁶

Thus, from Ngugi's viewpoint, language is the essence of culture; and orature, which nourishes language, might be seen as the manure that feeds cultures and situates them firmly with roots in a particular tradition. In this context, the proverb genre might certainly be said to be one of the richest elements of most cultures' oral repertoire that played an important role in specific cultural practices.

In their analysis of local attitudes amongst Caribbean writers and critics from the 1950s to the 1980s, both Braithwaite's *Roots*⁷ and the creolists' *In Praise of Creoleness*⁸, suggest that European ideals and literary canons have influenced expectations of literary norms, causing non-European forms to be marginalized. Yet, in parallel with the exploitation of the latent power of language in the written tradition, orature, and more specifically, proverbs, are just as exploited in their diverse forms. According to Graham Furniss, orature, especially proverbs, are used '*in political language, ethical language and, most particularly, didactics all of which involve an attempt to make the listener think or act in a certain way*'.⁹ Thus, besides the power that it wields in its own right, orature is also part of the power that is wielded by the written tradition because it often serves as a source for the latter. As for the theory that orality is dissociated from modernity, Herbert Chimhundu seems to explode that myth:

*Proverb coining by singers may also be compared with what happens in slang when young people substitute lexical items in older proverbs with new ones to incorporate new imagery reflecting a new environment and changed circumstances [...]. In this way, a symbiosis is established between lexis and ecology.*¹⁰

This use of oral sources to enrich new compositions is a reality of Seychellois society as well. Older musicians often complain that the youth is killing our culture with their imitation of rap, raga and other imported forms of music. Anyway, I, on the other hand, am much intrigued by the way young composers are engaging their own generation through their adaptation of modern black music forms to Seychellois contexts in the use of old

⁵ Ngugi (1986), pp36-37.

⁶ Ngugi (1986), p11.

⁷ Braithwaite (1993), pp72-75.

⁸ Bernabé et al. (1990)

⁹ Furniss, p132.

¹⁰ Chimhundu (2008), p153.

proverbs. For example, rapper Jarimba used several proverbs in his song *Tou lekotrer* (All the Contrary) on his new album *Douler Lo Zot'* (Tough on Them), which was released in December 2016.¹¹ *Pa tou bon lezo ki tonm dan lagel en bon lisyen* (Not every good dog gets a good bone) and *Si ou kras dan lezer i a tonm lo ou menm* (If you spit up, it will fall back on you) are two such proverbs used in this song. Both are well-known Seychellois proverbs though they were not commonly used among the youth until Jarimba renewed their popularity. As is the tradition among many rappers, Jarimba was using these proverbs to pass on a message to fellow youths in his circle, as well as people perceived as power-wielders in society. In an interview with Seychelles News Agency (SNA), he also says that he taps from Seychelles Creole because it is his identity and it is what makes his songs unique, and he advises younger artists that this is how they can be original and be themselves.¹² Similarly, popular rapper, Elijah, also created a jingle out of an old proverb, *Delo lo fey sonz* (Water on a taro leaf – being equivalent to ‘water off a duck’s back’ in English), to pass on a message to a perceived rival.¹³ Both artists participate in a developing tradition of renewing older forms of Creole in a medium, that is, popular music, that will help the survival of the language and culture rather than kill it. I believe that without music, Creole would lose much of its relevance to a good part of the younger generation. With the heavy influence of English in modern popular culture, youth music is a medium by which young people relate to each other in Creole. Thus, ‘oral literature is not at all that traditional and static but living and changing all the time’, Chimhundu says, quoting Kriel (1971).¹⁴ Though this was in reference to the Shona language and culture, it is applicable anywhere. In that respect, one might say that if orature may be considered as revealing layers of the postcolonial experience like a palimpsest, in borrowing from the oral tradition that is more ancient, modern culture in postcolonial societies, inclusive of the written tradition, is also a palimpsest.

Creole proverbs and their common roots

As in other Creole societies, the proverb genre in Seychelles Creole has shown a tendency to survive the general upheaval of slavery, colonialism and even the drive towards westernization. More importantly, it has survived the linguistic erosion of African characteristics in Creole languages. Confiant pays homage to the resilience of this genre:

*Ainsi lorsque la langue aura disparu, quand elle aura été effacée par d'autres terreaux linguistiques à cause des incessants bouleversements de l'histoire, le proverbe, lui, continuera à briller de son obscure éclat.*¹⁵

¹¹ Jarimba (2016).

¹² Bonnelame (2017).

¹³ Elijah (2016).

¹⁴ Chimhundu (2008), p154.

¹⁵ Confiant (2004), p7.

Confiant illustrates this by citing some Creole societies where the original French Creole was more or less obliterated by the advent of English, namely, Trinidad, Grenada and Louisiana, except for some proverbs and idiomatic sayings that still remain.¹⁶ In Seychelles, however, though the French Creole clung on stubbornly to its position as the mother tongue of a majority of the population, the original African languages and cultures from which we inherited some aspects of our oral traditions have more or less disappeared except for an insignificant number of words in our vocabulary; for example, *bib* (spider) from the Malagasy language and *maloumbo* (drum rhythm) from Swahili.¹⁷

Confiant acknowledges the contribution of the white colonists to the rich repertoire of creole proverbs in French-based creoles, particularly, French men from the Northwest region of France, who were, for the most part, illiterate peasants but who were also vectors of a rich oral culture comprising songs, tales, proverbs, and so on.¹⁸ This, he says, explains the fact that some French proverbs have entered the Creole language with very few changes except orthographical ones. For example: '*Cent ans pour le voleur, un jour pour le maître*'. In Martinican Creole, one says: *San tan pou volè, an jou pou met-la* (A hundred days for the thief, one day for the owner).¹⁹ In Seychelles Creole, it is *San-t-an pour le voler, en zour pour le met*.²⁰ In this case, it has even retained its original syntax. Confiant however emphasizes the role of the servant classes among the African slaves in the development of Creole proverbs, claiming that most of them have transferred directly from an original African language, which in the case of the Caribbean, includes West African languages such as Ibo, Ewe or Wolof.²¹ In the case of the Indian Ocean, this would include mainly East African languages. This seems to bear out in the Seychellois Creole repertoire. For example, the Swahili proverb, 'A monkey does not notice its haunch', has transferred quite easily into Creole as a criticism of people who notice other people's flaws and not their own.²² Thus we say: '*Zako i war lake son kanmarad, i pa war sa ki pour li*' (A monkey sees its neighbour's tail and not its own). This is a common criticism used among peers in the workplace, in the political arena or within the family circle.

Warner-Lewis' argument that West Atlantic proverbs have multiple African sources because of ethnic mingling, even before the transatlantic crossing, supports Confiant's theory. She offers several examples of parallels between Caribbean and Nigerian proverbs, as in the common tradition in Caribbean and Yoruba culture of advising against the substitution of a

¹⁶ Confiant (2004), p7.

¹⁷ De St. Jorre and Lionnet (1999), p40 and p197.

¹⁸ Confiant (2004), p11.

¹⁹ Confiant (2004), p11.

²⁰ Meriton (2003), p5..

²¹ Confiant (2004), p11.

²² Mulokozi (1999), p8.

serviceable item for one that seems deceptively similar: ‘Don’t swop black dog for monkey’.²³ Other such proverbs are also identified by their references to animals that do not exist either in the Caribbean or in Europe, for example, the elephant. As another point of comparison, in Seychelles Creole there is a common saying that when two elephants are fighting, no one should get in between. Though the origins of such a saying might most logically be attributed to tribes off the east coast of Africa, in the case of Indian Ocean Creoles, it is important to note that the nature of slavery meant cross-cultural mixing. One instance of mixing would have occurred from the slaves themselves being moved across different regions by their masters, by being sold or by running away, and the other would have occurred prior to capture through trade and mingling in their native regions.²⁴

The cross-pollination applies to English as well as French-based Creoles in both the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, and probably also to Spanish and Portuguese Creoles. In the table below, I have illustrated the similarity between a Nigerian and West Atlantic proverb given by Warner-Lewis, and a Seychellois proverb.

<i>Language</i>	<i>Proverb</i>
Ibo (Nigeria, West Africa)	He who will swallow <i>udala</i> seeds must consider the size of his anus.
Jamaican Creole (English Creole, West Atlantic)	Cow must know ‘ow ‘im bottom stay before ‘im swallow <i>abbe</i> seed. (<i>Abbe</i> seed is Twi for oil palm). The cow must know what his anus is like before he swallows the oil palm seed (my translation).
Seychelles Creole (French Creole, Indian Ocean)	<i>Ou pa kapab kaka pli gro ki ou trou deryer.</i> You cannot shit bigger than your arsehole (my translation).

The differences are interesting in that the Jamaican version, which is closer to the content of the original Ibo version, shows an adaptation to a new environment with the human subject replaced by a cow and the *udala* seed replaced by the *abbe* seed. The Seychellois version on the other hand has retained the human subject but does not mention the object that can block the anus, that is, the seed. The result though is the same in all three samples: they all advise against taking on something that is not in your capacity, or in proverbial terms, having eyes that are bigger than your stomach.

²³ Warner-Lewis (2004), p125.

²⁴ Warner-Lewis (2004), p125.

Seychellois proverbs with universal traits

Seychellois proverbs with universal traits occur both as direct inheritances from the original languages of the early inhabitants and as local compositions firmly rooted in the Creole environment and culture. An example in the latter case is: *Dibri lanmer pa anpes pti pwason dormi* (The noise of the sea does not stop the fish from sleeping). Confiant interprets this proverb as referring to the ability of living beings to adapt to their natural environment.²⁵ This is a universalism in that it might apply to any living being or society anywhere in the world. Yet it is so typical of the Seychellois wit and reflects the fact that we are a people surrounded by the sea and are dependent on it for survival.

In the case of direct inheritances from original languages, an example from French is, *Lonn propoz, Dye dispoz*, which means that Man may have his intentions but it is God who decides whether these will be realized or not. This is a simple transposition of ‘*L’homme propose, Dieu dispose*’, which is still in use today in the French language.²⁶ The original meaning would perhaps refer to man’s attempts to master his environment and consequently his fate, especially in those turbulent times of fortune-seeking in far climates in the case of the colonists. It also reflects the Christian influence on the philosophy of Creole culture.

An example of a Creole universalism inherited from English is *Boulwar pa kapab dir marmit i nwanr* (The kettle cannot call the pot black). Evidently, the universal message is that one should not point a finger at others when one has the same flaw. However, in a Creole society where the question of colour is primordial vis-a-vis identity, this has come to be taken almost literally. Calling a person black may be considered an insult and, in Seychelles, this would be a typical response from someone who considers that another person of black descent has insulted them. It is important to note though that a local version of the English ‘The kettle cannot call the pot black’ with its connotation of finger pointing and its ‘you are the same as me’ attitude also exists, depicting more local features: *Labou pa kapab riy lanmar*, (Mud cannot laugh at the marsh).

Another type of proverb in this category is that which is universal in its message, but which is specific to the Seychellois Creole culture in its imagery. The distinctive feature of this type of proverb is that it is most likely to have originated locally and uses local imagery within the local context. An example is *Gard lalang pour manz diri* (Keep the tongue to eat rice with). The significance of rice here is that it is the staple food of the Seychellois people, thus symbolic of basic survival. As a universal message, this proverb addresses people who are unable to keep a secret or who tend to spread rumours. Even if one of the tongue’s purposes is to enable speech, talking in this context is not considered wise, so it is best to keep silent

²⁵ Confiant (2004), p18.

²⁶ Ripert (2000), p109.

and use the tongue to assist in the intake of food, which is more basic to the survival of the individual. The slaves, to whom it would have seemed wise to ‘bite their tongues’ and live to eat another meal, possibly coined the proverb. This possibility is supported by the fact that Meriton’s list of proverbs, from which this one was taken, offers a variant in which breadfruit replaces rice – breadfruit being a staple of the slaves in colonial times.²⁷ However, it is important to note that Seychellois proverbs, as in other societies, are very often used in different contexts, and in a modern-day situation, this proverb would most likely be used to swear somebody to secrecy or to ask for discretion.

Another example of a universal message expressed in local terms is *Kaka anmontan, kraz andesandan* (Shitting on the way up, stepping in it on the way down).²⁸ In a universal context, this proverb’s intent is to warn against undesirable acts that might be revisited upon you. In a local context however, if taken literally, in the days when small footpaths in the jungle were most people’s means of going from one place to another, if you passed stool in the bushes, you were likely to step in it on your way back since you would normally take the same path. Thus, the proverb teaches people to respect common property or facilities but also refers to more abstract situations; for example, people who harm others to get ahead and then have to face these same people when they are in a vulnerable situation. A comparable proverb in this context is *Sa ki ou zet ek lipye, ou anmas ek lalang* (what you discard with your foot, you retrieve with your tongue).²⁹

Proverbs specific to the Seychellois environment

Seychellois proverb types that may be considered as very specific and local include those that reflect the local natural environment. Natural elements in these proverbs include the flora and fauna, the weather, the sea, geological features, and so on. In the following example, a very frequent occurrence involving specific species of the local flora and fauna is used to refer to human behaviour: *Golan pa fer serman pye bodanmyen* (The fairy tern never forsakes the Indian almond tree).³⁰ The fairy terns abandon the Indian almond tree seasonally when the tree sheds its leaves. However, as soon as it has sprouted new green leaves, the terns return to their nesting places. This proverb is used as a metaphor for different situations in Seychellois society: an erring husband who always comes back to his wife, friends who cannot forsake each other in spite of difficulties that may arise in their relationship, or members of the same family who return to the family fold in spite of differences. In a more interesting example, this proverb was the chosen slogan of SPPF, the

²⁷ Meriton (2003), p3.

²⁸ *Proverb ek Zedmo Seselwa*, p9.

²⁹ *Proverb ek Zedmo*, p4.

³⁰ Meriton (2003), p3.

then ruling political party in Seychelles during its 2001 presidential election campaign. This was meant to counter the opposition's suggestion that SPPF was losing its followers to them, and indeed, in spite of the opposition's conviction that they would win the election, SPPF won by 54.2%.³¹ This gave SPPF leaders more reason to use the proverb in the post-election rallies. In fact, the party leader, President France Albert René, referred to his party as the Indian Almond tree and, to this day, the party's paper, *The People*, sports a gossip corner entitled, *Pye Bodanmyen* (Indian Almond tree). The opposition countered by calling themselves *Karya* (termites), obviously intimating that they were eating away inside the tree and would eventually bring it down.³²

Another example of proverbs with a very local flavour using metaphors of nature to describe human behaviour or characteristics is *Zwazo menm nik, kakatwa menm bar*, (Birds of the same nest, angelfish of the same reef).³³ Certainly one may consider that the English proverb, 'Birds of a feather flock together' is an equivalent, but in its use of imagery, the Creole version is very typical of the Seychellois rhetoric. Contextually, this proverb may be used to warn someone against keeping bad company. Whilst it may be used positively as advice, it may just as likely be used negatively to suggest that someone is just as bad as the people with whom he/she keeps company. A less popular variant is *Zwazo menm nik i kouv menm dizef*, (Birds of the same nest lay the same eggs).³⁴ When compared to the English equivalent, we can clearly see the creolization process at work whereby the local population has developed its local sayings in the context of the local environment. Whereas birds universally have nests, only in the Creole region of the Indian Ocean are angelfish called *kakatwa* (written 'cacatois' in French) and the reef known as *bar*. Its message is very much put to proverbial use by the older generation when talking about the younger generation, which is prone to peer pressure. It has an equivalent in *Si ou frekant lisyen, ou bezwen ganny pis*, (When you keep company with dogs, you can expect to catch fleas) and is reminiscent of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*: 'If you bring ant-infested faggots to your yard, you can expect the visit of lizards' (1958).

All the proverbs discussed in this section so far, whether they are inherited universalisms or locally created wisdoms with universal aspects, may be categorized as truisms that reflect the society they represent. They may also generally be said to express society's censor of behaviour that deviates from what is normally acceptable. However, the younger generation is having less and less contact with this folkloric use of language because the latter is more or less phasing out with the older generation. In the case of riddling, for example, this is no longer a common practice. The contexts in which riddles were used are no longer relevant

³¹ *Parti Lepep* Documentation Centre (2001).

³² With progressively closing margins after each election in the support base of the two main parties, this seems to be proving prophetic.

³³ *Proverb ek Zedmo*, p3.

³⁴ Meriton (2003), p6.

to Seychellois modern life. There are no traditional wakes where people tell each other stories and riddles to pass the time. Children are too busy playing on their ipods and ipads to consider it a pastime, and favourite television programs have replaced story telling before bedtime. However, proverbs are still holding on through their unconscious use by the general population in everyday language; I say holding on because the Creole Institute's annual quiz program with secondary school students reveals a decreasing knowledge and understanding of this genre every year. A possible reason for this is the lack of research in Seychelles on all aspects of folklore so that the existing documentation is not being fully utilized.

As such, more research and analysis of the existing data on folklore should also open up a considerable corpus for language development analysis in all three national languages in Seychelles. It is thus recommended that the folklore corpora should not only be made publishable and published for pedagogical use but also translated into French and English for the same purpose. This would be in tune with the need for a cultural education model, designed to cope with the culturally alienated attitudes of such a Creole culture as the Seychellois society represents.

Finally, more research needs to be undertaken into the different genres of Seychellois folklore for the creation of a literary forum, simply because our literary tradition is still so young and inexperienced that our classical literature, as represented by our folklore, actually forms the bulk of our literature. With the creation of a new research institute for the Creole language and culture within the University of Seychelles, it is recommended that folklore should be included in the cultural research agenda, thus boosting the Seychellois people's sense of cultural identity, with all its baggage as an ex-slave and colonial society. This should renew the interest of Seychellois writers and researchers in folklore. It will encourage them to use the already existing corpus that has been documented as a source for new inspiration and productions in all sorts of domains, scientific or artistic, and for various purposes such as education, linguistic analysis (especially in the case of proverbs and riddles) and other such uses. In short, our folklore is a possible gateway to understanding our complex Creole identity.

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