

Creolisation and Translation of Creoleness in “La Passion de notre Sei

The history of contemporary Caribbean societies is characterized by creolisation, interpenetration and hybridisation.

La Passion was written during colonial times but in many ways resembles a postcolonial text; a text that challenges set rules about sociolinguistics. As a conclusion we will examine how *La Passion* compares with current debates about the re-evaluation of Martiniquan Creole identity. Indeed, one can draw a parallel between the translator's attempt to create a language that slaves in the Caribbean would understand and contemporary Martiniquan writers' attempt to conceptualise a Creole aesthetic.

La Passion

This version of the Passion story written by a non-native priest is a precursor of contemporary French Antillean Creole prose texts. *La Passion* is first a Creole text because it is written in Creole. It uses Creole as the language of narration thus promoting its literary value. The origins of “the Negro tongue” effortlessly handled by the translator are unclear since this tongue presents many variations that are now specificities of French Antillean Creoles. Lambert Felix Prudent, a Martiniquan linguist specialist in creolophone studies, hypothesises a Creole diasystem with many variants which could have evolved later into specific Creoles, and secondly that the various characteristics could have been a strategy to enable appropriate modification depending on the user and the community in which the text would have been read or said.⁵ The tongue used in *La Passion*, a product of the interaction/opposition process between French, West African, and Amerindian languages, is at an intermediary stage between a pidgin and a dialect. The maturity of the tongue is evident in the development of the morpho-syntax and lexicon. But what about the cultural and linguistic transfer?

This mid-eighteenth-century translation of the biblical story of the Passion of Christ is a precursor of the contemporary development of the language/culture thesis in translations of what Said calls “exotic cultures.”⁶ Translators have demonstrated that translation “is not a simple linguistic or semiotic analysis with the outcome being a translated text based on equivalencies but a process that implies *intercultural transfer* and therefore cultural awareness.”⁷ We cannot affirm that the translator of *La Passion* was in any way conscious of this aspect of translation; however, he seems to have adapted and integrated both linguistic and cultural specificities of the colonial Caribbean. This adaptation gave a “local colour” to the text—local colour that we will name a literary, linguistic and cultural creolisation effect. The detailed representation of Creole culture is quite extraordinary at a time when the concept of nation language had not yet been explored or developed. Under the Code Noir, French priests were asked to teach slaves. The Bible was used as a key text as the priests focused on teaching Christian principles to the slaves, hoping they would become believers. Some priests recognised the usefulness of Creole as mode of communication and so the so-called ‘Negro Tongue’ progressively became part of the priests’ pedagogical method. *La Passion*’s primary *raison d’être* might have been to serve purposes of evangelism—this translation of the bible story is being reinscribed in a near-revolutionary way (the translator developed a scripsist/oralist contrast throughout his text, integrating the oral tradition of storytelling and inscribing Creole, an oral language only at the time)—ironically, the cultural and linguistic creolisation seems to have been integrated to clinch the assimilationist project.

Before dealing with the ways in which the text reaffirms the colonial project, let us examine the various innovations, which make this version of the Bible story of the

Passion of Christ an exceptional text for its time. The writer/translator re-imagined and adapted the rather eurocentric vision of Christianity and Christian stories to the vernacular culture not only through language (creolised morpho-syntax, syntax and lexicon, the integration of Creole speech rhythm) but also through the exposition of that culture (culture-specific items drawn from flora, fauna, etc.). He used various translation strategies amongst which was the integration of culture-specific items (CSIs). Those CSIs are proper nouns, common expressions (objects, institutions, habits and opinions restricted to each culture), which are specific to only one culture or which would have

to ask)"] or "*Alors Soleil la té commencé vlé trempé dans Dio*" (15) ["While the sun was trying to go down in the sea" (At dusk)].

Apart from realising a linguistic creolisation of the biblical narrative, the re-writer/translator of *La Passion* married the textual and the oral. The text is written in an oral mode that will now be analysed. The narrator performs the story and becomes a storyteller. His hyperbolic free indirect speech, substitutions and additions give the story greater impact and make it more dramatic, even comical at times. The first example we will look at figures Jesus giving instructions to the disciples about preparations for the Passover: "*Zottes va suivre li jouque tant li entré dans case, tendéz;... Zottes va palé li comme ça, tendéz...*" (15) ["You will follow him until he gets to his house, understand... You will tell him like that, understand."] Note the repetition of the verb *tendéz* that recalls the "crick, crack" call/response of the Antillean storyteller with the crowd. The second example shows Jesus' announcement of his imminent death while eating with his disciples and here the writer creates his own equivalence:

zottes pas savé qui chose: avla Nous tous semblés, nous qu'a pleins vente nous bin bin, nous qu'a badiné, nous qu'a ris, nous tous qu'a palé; hé bin, zottes pas savé vrai, tini ïon Moune dans mitan zottes qui douet trahi Moé... (15)

[You know what? While we are all together filling our belly well, well, joking, laughing, talking, well you don't know really but someone among you will betray me...]

Suspense is introduced with the expression "*zottes pas savé*" a literal translation would read "you have no idea about," "you are not aware of," here we have translated it as "you know what?," as the expression is used as a rhetorical question that emphasises the storytelling mode around which the text is articulated. *La Passion* was obviously written

with an audience in mind – it is to be read and heard. The narrator seems to address an audience in the way he comments while telling the story (intratextual gloss):

*Li té raison, car tout suite avla Gida (Cila moé té parlé vous qui té
metté main dans gamelle avec Li) qui vini avec tout plein sodas qui té
faire complot avec li (16)*

[He was right, for Judas (the man I told you had put his hands in the bowl with Him) soon appeared with many soldiers who had plotted

death. Moreover, many illnesses, stomach-ache and *pian*

Linguistic assimilation was an important element in the colonists' attempt to annihilate

cultures to entertain the fiction of ‘assimilation’ as means of incorporating—
‘civilizing’—those cultures viewed as too different and ‘inferior’ to be comfortably
accepted into their norms.”¹³ Creolisation was also a process of adaptation of European
and African people of various cultures to the Caribbean milieu, resulting in the formation
of vernacular cultures distinct both from that of the colonists and that of the African
slaves. Nigel Bolland says, “Creolisation is not an homogenising process, but rather a
process of contention between people who are members of social formations and carriers
of cultures,”¹⁴ thus highlighting the process of interculturalisation rather than acculturation to
the dominant culture. French assimilation policy articulated itself around the propaganda
of French aesthetic norms, language and culture, and the Catholic Church was to be the
vehicle of that assimilation. Peter Roberts alludes to the fact that “the European-Catholic
response to the peoples (natives and others) of the New World in certain ways allowed
for greater cultural diversity than the English-Protestant response.”¹⁵ The translator’s use
of Creole as mode of narration and of items specific to the Creole culture challenges
accepted conceptions of Church/slave relations. It highlights the missionaries’ interactive
participation in the process of creolisation and their own creolisation, for that matter,
since this version in Creole supposed a study and understanding of the functioning of the

him tied and he was flogged again and again, I tell you, till his body was in tatters from the whipping.”] An obvious parallel can be drawn with the Code Noir’s stipulation of death for rebels. Indeed priests and missionaries had to make sure that their teaching did not go against the Code Noir¹⁹ legalisation of slavery and of certain corporal punishments. Article 38 of the Code Noir states:

A fugitive slave who shall have escaped for a month,... shall have his ears cut off and be branded with a fleur-de-lis on one shoulder; and if he repeats the offense for another month..., he shall be hamstrung, and branded with a fleur-de-lis on the other shoulder; and for the third time, shall be punished by death.²⁰

The teaching of divine grace was therefore limited as far as the slaves were concerned. Catholic priests deliberately studied the New Testament concepts of salvation and freedom for the Christian after death, rather than the Old Testament account of the history of the people of Israel, as slaves in Egypt who gained freedom from bondage. The latter presented a threat to the slave system in its depiction of anti-slavery concepts such as freedom on earth gained through opposition, the breaking from chains and escape from an unfair enslavement. The notion of obedience to God and his words was twisted to mean obedience to the white Master and his rules. From then on they entered into processes of “contamination,” of colonisation of the mind – the slaves were made to believe that they were pagans and the masters holy; that black was bad, and white good. The priests’ teaching of the Gospel would soon be revealed to be incompatible with the slave system they totally or partially tolerated and/or supported, an incompatibility they would come to face when landowners would refuse the instruction of their slaves and their attendance at Sunday services. Following their call to preach the Gospel and grace

to explore possible meeting points, a *modus vivendi* in the context of globalisation, where movements of people and adaptations of cultures are progressively becoming the norm. Contemporary Caribbean texts work against monolithic conceptions. *La Passion*, a precursor of these new strategies, constitutes a valuable text to discover in the light of current debates about the exploration and re-exploration of postcolonial Creole identity in the French Antilles, as it gives credence to discourses and theories developed around the notion of diversity.

¹ Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "The language of African literature" in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds., *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader* (England: Harvester Wheatsheaf, [1993] 1994), 439.

² The eleven-pages manuscript of "la Passion selon St. Jean" was found between the pages of a book in 1985, in France, at a second-hand bookseller's by professor Francois Moureau. In this article we are using Lambert-Félix Prudent's printed version of the text (five single-spaced pages long) as presented in Lambert Félix Prudent, "La Passion de Notre Seigneur selon Saint-Jean en langage nègre: premier texte créole de l'Histoire Linguistique Martiniquaise" in *Etudes Créoles*, vol. XXI, n.2, 11-35. Hereafter, we will refer to "La Passion selon St. Jean" as *La Passion*. Translations are mine.

³ Lambert-Félix Prudent, "La Passion selon St. Jean", 25.

⁴ All quotations from *La Passion* are from this edition and are accompanied by a page reference. All translations of these quotations into English are mine except where otherwise stated.

⁵ L-F. Prudent, "La Passion selon St. Jean" 26.

⁶ In his seminal work *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (London: Penguin, [1978] 1995),

¹² Carolyn Allen, “Creole: the problem of definition” in Verene A. Shepherd and Glen L. Richards, eds., *Questioning Creole: Creolisation Discourses in Caribbean Culture* (London: James Currey Publishers, 2002), 55.

¹³ Françoise Lionnet, *Post-colonial Representation: Women, Literature and Identity* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁴ O. Nigel Bolland, “Creolisation and creole societies: a cultural nationalist view of Caribbean social History” in Shepherd and Richards, eds., *Questioning creole*, 38.

¹⁵ Peter Roberts,