

**Refle Kiltirel****'Rencontres Créoles' international conference and co-creation Seychelles:**

# Reflections and outcome



The *Rencontres Créoles* international conference took place from March 5-7, 2024 at the Seychelles International Conference Centre in Victoria, Mahe Seychelles. There were two parallel events during this programme; that is the conference and the musical co-creation, which took place at the National Theater at Mont Fleuri. The conference was organised within the framework of the possible inscription of the Creole Cultures as an element on the Unesco representative list of Intangible cultural heritage for humanity. It was also organised in anticipation of the World Summit of Creole countries, nations, and regions which is due to be held in September 2024 in Cape Verde.

## The co-creation activity

The co-creation component of the *Rencontres Créoles* was a three-day activity which involved the participation of several prominent and accomplished artists from the Indian Ocean region, namely from Mauritius, Madagascar, Reunion, Rodrigues and Seychelles. The co-creation activity received a financial contribution from the *Ale Vini* Mobility Fund, which is a programme under the *Commission de l'Océan Indien*. A total of six foreign artists and six Seychellois artists participated in the co-creation activity. The artists wrote and composed a piece from scratch over three days and the song produced was entitled '*Nou Zanfan Lemonn Kreol*'. The end product of the musical co-creation was presented to the public during the closing ceremony of the conference at the National Theatre.

According to Jimmy Savy, who was the executive producer for the activity, this was an opportunity for the artists from the Indian Ocean region to come together, strengthened by their common Creole roots, and produce a song that reflects the sentiments of the Creole culture in the Indian Ocean region.

The co-creation process was in two parts; that is the pre-production work with the foreign artists well before they landed in Seychelles, involving a first draft of the lyrics, using the modern communication technology. The second part was the refinement of the lyrics and the music once the artists came together in Seychelles.

Mr Savy described the work sessions as intense, focused, with minimum breaks and long hours. He further described the group dynamic as amicable and enriching as the artists made use of each other's vast musical expe-

rience and was able to compose a song within three days.

Several traditional musical instruments from the participating countries were used in the composition of the piece, this included a homemade metal guitar (*gitar ferblan*) from Rodrigues, *bonm* (berimbau) and *moutya* drum from Seychelles and the *valiha* (tube zither) from Madagascar. These traditional instruments further contributed to the Creole feel of the music of the composition.

The final product was described by Mr Savy as catchy, moving, with a good flow which resonated with the audience.

It must be noted that the work sessions were under the direction of the Honorary Ambassador for Culture Patrick Victor, who was the artistic director for the co-creation. The "data" for the individual tracks are available and will be properly mixed down in a studio very soon. The song is a production of the Seychelles National Institute for Culture, Heritage and the Arts while the participating composers and musicians have co-production rights.

## The conference – participating countries

The *Rencontres Créoles* brought together delegates from various Creole-speaking countries such as Mauritius, Reunion, Rodrigues, Madagascar, Seychelles, Guadeloupe, Martinique and Haiti. Representatives from other countries such as Cuba, France and the United States also made presentations.

Note that certain participating countries opted to send their contributions via the internet and followers could follow the entire conference online globally.

## Value of the Creole culture

The conference was officially opened by the Secretary General for the Seychelles National Institute for Culture, Heritage and the Arts (Snicha) David André. In his trilingual speech, Mr André alluded to the need to continuously promote the Creole culture on the global stage and also find ways and means for the Creole culture to make an impact both locally and internationally.

The Creole values, he pointed out, may have the inherent cultural characteristics to resolve issues and be part of a new conflict resolution model. When a strong new culture comes together, it offers the opportunity to solve issues and look at them in different perspectives. Secre-

tary general André went on to say that at the heart of this encounter "lies the fusion of various cultures, the interweaving of histories, and the celebration of diversity that is emblematic of Creole societies worldwide."

Mr André emphasised that "it would be an opportune moment to examine the persistent traumas and identity conflicts running through the current Creole world, and to also recognise and celebrate its positive aspects. "The Creole encounter", he continued, "is not merely a historical phenomenon but a living, breathing force that continues to shape our world today." He further pointed out that the Creole culture is "a celebration of resilience, resistance, and the enduring human spirit."

"In the face of historical challenges", he concluded, "Creole communities have demonstrated an incredible ability to preserve their unique identity while adapting to the ever-changing tides of time."

The speech set the tone and direction for the conference, ensuring meaningful discussions, resulting in deep reflections around the future of the Creole culture.

The decor for both the conference as well as the National Theatre, where the co-creation took place, was done by Michel Desnousse. The conference setting was predominated by a collage of newsprints and magazine pages, which symbolizes the *metisage* characteristics of the Creole culture and the Creole people, complemented by traditional furniture as props, depicting that of a typical Seychellois Creole servant homestead of long ago. The back drop décor for the National Theatre basically represented the façade and surrounding of a traditional Seychellois Creole kitchen. Very befitting indeed.

## The speakers

The 13 international speakers for the conference were from organisations such as universities, research institutions, publishing house, journalists and heads of cultural organisations around the Creole speaking countries.

While the 11 local speakers from Seychelles were mostly from the Seychelles National Institute for Culture, Heritage and the Arts and the University of Seychelles, as well as professionals in the field of history, linguistics, hospitality, law, international corporation, creative industry, heritage professionals, conservation, lecturers, intellectual property specialist, media specialist, cineaste and writers.

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This high level group of trained cultural professionals and academics ensured quality level debate and discussions around the topics that were tabled.

### The local participants

The local participants were from various organisations and backgrounds; namely the Culture Institute, the University of Seychelles, the Seychelles Tourism Academy, the Citizens Engagement Platform Seychelles (Ceps), the ICOS-MOS, Cable & Wireless, poets, cultural agents, Ministry of Education, singers, song writers, researchers, heritage professionals, creative industry specialists, accountant, art teachers, human resource specialists, cultural animators, visual artists, archives and museums specialists, conservators, linguists, large scale events organisers and librarians.

### The Creole language explored

The conference explored several themes and one of the most discussed was the Creole language. This theme was explored mostly from a linguistic perspective, whereby the issues of semantics, translation, identity, typology, diversity and syntax were discussed by linguists and specialists in the Creole language.

Several broad statements were made within this context and the participants were enlightened with insight such as notions that “translation is a linguistic and cultural negotiation applied in different contexts, especially when the text has to be adapted and transcribed into the local language”. Other strong statements such as “...the Creole language has certain creativity and complex cultural identity as they represent the authentic identity of a people across time...” The Creole language is an evolutionary process, the mixing of vocabulary and culture forms the Creole culture”.

In-depth analysis of these notions warrant an entire conference in itself allowing for further dissecting and exploration.

### Globalisation and the Creole culture

The phenomenon of globalisation was perceived as both an opportunity and a threat, but mostly a threat. The positive side was that due to global connectivity, it allows for the fast promotion of the Creole culture across the world, through the media and other platforms.

On the negative side, the sheer volume of incoming information and cultural materials that small scale Creole societies absorb compared to their output, has major impact on the local cultural industries as well as the local population, particularly the susceptible youth. It was agreed that there needs to be a system to at least try to mitigate the process.

### Decolonisation, slavery and reparation

Decolonisation, slavery and reparation are very emotionally charged topics and were addressed from various angles. It was pointed out that the Creole society, culture

and identity were all built through oppression, repression, racism, hatred and exploitation. These exploitative and repressive habits prevented social mobility for the descendants of slaves at one point in our history, including poor health support and eventually leading to intergenerational lasting and impactful traumas. There is therefore the need for reparation both financial and proffered apologies at the highest level of the world system; namely at the United Nations.

In terms of reparation, it was pointed out however that attempts in Guadeloupe around 2016-2017 at financial reparation, became very complicated as it was difficult to establish certain linkages between the slave descendants and their ancestors.

It was generally agreed during the conference that the reparation process would be extremely complicated but necessary. The general consensus was that the “wound of slavery must be allowed to heal”, since the issue needs to be addressed, as it has often been ignored or conveniently swept under the carpet.

### The state of the Creole culture around the world

What is the state of the Creole culture around the world? The response to this existential question varied. Some participants believed that since there were many Creole speaking countries across the world, the state of the Creole culture around the world was quite “healthy”, while others believed that one must be careful as we may lose our cultural identity through globalisation due to external influences on small Creole communities across the globe. Examples were given referring to the dilution and morphing of the Creole dishes in hotels by foreign chefs in Seychelles, while others argued that the youth are at the same time creolising foreign dishes. Creole culture is evolving through contacts as is the case for most small scale cultures, and that is unavoidable, but we need to preserve it as much as possible. The loss of small Creole shop businesses to the Indian community in Seychelles was pointed out as an example of the younger generation not wanting to uphold family traditions, as they do not have the patience nor interest to follow in the footsteps of forebears or work in the shops of their parents. This depicts a major shift in cultural attitude and outlook and this could be detrimental to cultural continuity within the Creole community.

### Conclusion

The *Rencontres Créoles* conference and co-creation brought together some of the best minds from various Creole countries, which included academics, heritage professionals, cultural activists, cultural practitioners, singers, song writers, music and film producers.

The process led to profound reflection and analysis about the status of Creole culture around the world, which

pointed to certain ambiguities. The general consensus however was that the Creole culture is thriving and in the right evolutionary direction, but at the same time threatened in relation to larger cultural groups with better means of cultural production and dissemination. The final report produced from the conference as well as the song from the co-creation activity, are but a start to what may become another major cultural push towards the appreciation of Creole values and for humanity as a whole.

### Recommendations

Several ideas were put forward by the participants in order to ensure that the Creole values and Creole culture are preserved in their authenticity as best as possible. There were suggestions that there is an urgent need to meet often at international level to promote the Creole culture and also conduct an assessment as to the state of Creole globally. The need to try and mitigate the external cultural influences on small scale Creole societies was also indicated. This could be done through systematic and comprehensive cultural transmission programmes. There is also a need to promote Creole across the world. Despite its inherent evolution, which is inevitable, there is the need to ensure that as much of the Creole identity is retained.

The need to relook at the history of the Creole people, especially those related to slavery and set the issue in its proper social, cultural and political context. The need for financial reparation post slavery was deemed very important, but most crucial is the need for the “healing of the body and soul of the descendants”.

It was also suggested that the countries involved in slave trade make a formal apology to the descendants and to the world at the United Nations assembly. There is an urgency to develop solid culture transmission programmes aimed at the youth for cultural continuity, as well as the affirmation of cultural identity. It was strongly suggested that foreigners working long term in Seychelles for example, go through cultural training. Case in point are training and exposure to the traditional dishes of Seychelles, enabling foreign chefs working in large hotels in Seychelles to promote the traditional dishes on a more regular and consistent basis. It was pointed out that training should be compulsory. The need to use new technology to further promote the Creole culture around the world was considered as a must and doable. Finally, it was pointed out that it is imperative to recognise and establish the right of the Creole people to speak in Creole, in Creole countries, in any forum.

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