HISTORY OF CREOLE IN CUBA

Creole language and culture first entered Cuba with the arrival of Haitian immigrants at the start of the nineteenth century. Haiti was a French colony, and the final years of the 1791-1804 Haitian Revolution brought a wave of French settlers fleeing with their Haitian slaves to Cuba. They came mainly to the east, and especially Guantanamo, where the French later introduced sugar cultivation, constructed sugar refineries and developed coffee plantations. By 1804, some 30,000 French were living in Baracoa and Maisi, the furthest eastern municipalities of the province.

Later, Haitians continued to come to Cuba to work as brazeros (hand workers, from the Spanish word brazo, meaning "arm") in the fields cutting cane. Their living and working conditions were not much better than slavery. Although they planned to return to Haiti, most stayed on in Cuba.

**Creole Language and Culture: Part of Cuba's Cultural Patrimony**

by Susana Hurlich, Havana, 21 May 1998

The first question asked by all Haitians who visit Cuba from outside the country is about Guantanamo, which has been historically the most important region of the country for Haitian residents and descendants - that is, for Creole language and culture. Although no census of Haitians (residents or descendants) in Cuba has been done to date, in the 1980's a group of sociologists from Guantanamo did a study on genealogies of Haitians living in the province. At that time, they estimated that some 45,000 descendants of Haitians and another 4,000 native Haitians were living throughout the province.

Today, there are over 40 groups around the country that promote Creole culture, such as the fabulous choral group, "Desandann", which sings traditional Creole songs with a delicacy, harmony and passion that is gripping. Based in Camaguey and recently returned from a tour in New York, "Desandann" members are all descendants of Haitians.

An annual carnival, begun by Haitians and immigrants from Barbados who arrived in Cuba during the nineteenth century, still takes place. Cuba also participates in international festivals dedicated to Haitian culture - in July '94, such a festival was held in Santiago de Cuba. For years, many Haitians and their descendants in Cuba did not identify themselves as such or speak Creole. In the eastern part of the island, many Haitians suffered discrimination. But since 1959, this discrimination has stopped.

After Spanish, Creole is the second most-spoken language in Cuba. Over 400,000 Cubans either speak it fluently, understand it but speak with difficulty, or have at least some familiarity with the language. It is mainly in those communities where Haitians and their descendant live that Creole is most spoken. In addition to the eastern provinces, there are also communities in Ciego de Avila and Camaguey provinces where the population still maintains Creole, their mother tongue. Classes in Creole are offered in Guantanamo, Matanzas and the City of Havana. There is
PROMOTING CREOLE CULTURE IN CUBA

In February '91, the Association of Haitian Residents and Descendants was formed as a non-governmental socio-cultural organization in Cuba. Its objectives are to unite the Cuban-Haitian community and to recover their traditions, customs and culture. Formed initially as a national organization, provincial affiliate quickly appeared in Camaguey, Santiago de Cuba, Ciego de Avila and Guantanamo, as well as municipal associations in various locations.

In April '98, Bannzil Kreyol Kiba was officially founded as a cultural institution under the sponsorship of the Caribbean Association of Cuba. Plans are already underway to establish provincial affiliates in Cienfuegos - which has an active Creole theatre group - and Guantanamo. Members include Cubans, Haitians and students in Cuba from Creole-speaking countries. They pay a monthly fee of five pesos.

"The aim of Bannzil Kreyol Kiba is to rediscover and preserve Creole culture in Cuba," explains Hilario Batista Feliz, president of Bannzil. "We want to study and promote Creole culture and language as part of Cuba's national cultural patrimony."

This year's program of activities for Bannzil is ambitious. It includes seminars, courses, competitions, monthly "Creole Afternoons" full of cultural and educational activities, and much more. At the municipal level, many of these activities are done in collaboration with "Poder Popular" (local government structures) and Cultural Centres. The "Kiba Kreyol" musical group, consisting of twelve singers and drummers, has already been formed as part of Bannzil.

Other plans include organizing the "Kiba Kreyol 98" International Festival later this year, creating affiliated groups of Bannzil in other provinces, celebrating "International Day of Creole"(1) around the country, and assisting all groups interested in Creole.

In April of this year, the first Creole library in Cuba was inaugurated. Located in the library of the oldest trades school in the country, the"Fernando Aguado y Rico" Polytechnic Centre in Central Havana, it will provide a home to some of the substantial literature written in Creole.

The library "is an example of the struggle of a people to maintain its language and culture," says Alberto Mendez, deputy director of the National Commission of UNESCO in Cuba, who spoke at the inauguration.

In eastern Cuba, the Association of "Tumba Francesa" (tumba is drum) is another example of the vitality of Creole culture. Located in La Loma de Chivo (Goat Hillock), a part of Guantanamo City with a concentrated presence of Haitian descendants as well as descendants from English-speaking Caribbean islands, Tumba Francesa is a vibrant hub of cultural traditions for residents of the area. Here one finds the rumba - that spontaneous, sensual and playful dance that has its roots in Afro-Cuban culture - as well as traditional Haitian dances.
"CELEBRATING ROOTS"

Dalia Timitoc is one of the many "faces" of the resurgence and vibrancy of Creole culture in Cuba. A singer and song writer, she is the daughter of a Haitian father and Jamaican-descended mother.

"My father was a sugar cane cutter in a sugar central in Monte Verde de Yateras (Guantanamo province)," says Dalia. "In my songs, I am searching for and celebrating roots."

"I'm fanatic about the Caribbean," continues Dalia, "and I sing a bit in Creole."

In addition to singing old Haitian songs, Dalia also sings about nature, women as the saviours of the earth, indigenous Indian peoples, etc. When she sings, she accompanies herself on a special drum which she calls Oluboku ("drum of peace"). Abouta meter long, it hangs around her neck by a strap and tapers down to a point, much like a cone, encircled with several rings of small bells.

"I've had this drum for eighteen years, explains Dalia, "and I'm not sure if it has African or Haitian roots. I'm investigating this."

Growing up in Holguin, Dalia began singing at twelve years of age. She has written books, been in movies, holds a monthly song gathering in her home including a children's choir, and is conducting a research project called "Que no Muera las Raizes" (So that the Roots Don't Die) which involves a compilation of short songs going back to African and Spanish origins.

So that the roots don't die - whether African, Caribbean, European or a rich mixture of all. And at the end of the day, the blend is distinctly Cuban.

(1) Today, eight million people speak Creole worldwide. Because of the importance of this language, in 1979 the 28th of October was declared "International Day of Creole". It is celebrated in all Creole-speaking countries with festivals, workshops, competitions, seminars and cultural activities.