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CREOLE IDENTITY AND POSTCOLONIAL NATION-BUILDING EXAMPLES FROM INDONESIA AND SIERRA LEONE

Jacqueline Knörr

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SUMÁRIO

Título: Identidade Crioula e a Construção da Nação Pós-colonial. Exemplos da Indonésia e Serra Leoa

Resumo:

Este trabalho lida com algumas das dinâmicas sociais e políticas da crioulidade, focalizando seu papel no processo de construção da nação e sua influência sobre a formação da nacionalidade em contextos pós-coloniais. A autora analisa o interrelacionamento dos processos políticos e identitários nas situações sociais em que eles têm lugar. Buscando iluminar como diferentes condições e contextualizações da cultura e identidade crioula determinam seu potencial e suas limitações com relação a tais processos políticos e identitários, a autora examina os exemplos da identidade Betawi em Jacarta, Indonésia e, por razões comparativas, com a identidade dos Krio em Freetown, Serra Leoa.

Palavras-chave: Identidade Crioula, Indonésia, Serra Leoa, Krio, Betwai

Title: Creole Identity and Postcolonial Nation-Building. Examples from Indonesia and Sierra Leone

Abstract:

This paper deals with some of the social and political dynamics of creoleness, focusing on its role in processes of nation-building and on its influence on the construction of nationhood in postcolonial settings. The author analyzes the interrelatedness of identitarian and political processes in the context of the given social settings within which they are taking place. To highlight how different conditions and contextualizations of creole culture and identity determine its potentials and limitations with regard to such processes, she deals with two examples, namely with Betawi identity in Jakarta, Indonesia and – mainly for comparative reasons – with Krio identity in Freetown, Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Creole Identity, Indonesia, Sierra Leone, Krio, Betawi

Creole Identity and Postcolonial Nation-Building
Examples from Indonesia and Sierra Leone[1]

Jacqueline Knörr
Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology, Halle/Saale, Germanya

In this paper I would like to give an insight into some of the social and political dynamics of creole identity in postcolonial contexts, paying particular attention to its role in nation-building and in the construction of nationhood. Creole identities often have a profound impact on interethnic relations and on the development of transethnic and national identity in postcolonial societies with ethnically diverse populations – both as facilitating and as obstructive forces. To highlight how different conditions and contextualizations of creole identity determine its potentials and limitations in such processes, I will be dealing with two examples, namely with Betawi identity in Jakarta, Indonesia and – mainly for comparative reasons – with Krio identity in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I have done extensive field research both in Freetown and in Jakarta, dealing with the relationship between ethnic, local and national identities, focusing particularly on the role of the respective creole group – the Krio in Freetown and the Betawi in Jakarta – in the construction of these identifications and in the processes involved in interrelating and situating them in different social contexts.

Let me first briefly explain what I mean and do not mean by creolization, creole groups, creole identity. I do not adhere to those contemporary notions of creole and creolization whereby all sorts of mixtures with regard to different aspects of culture and identity are labeled. Neither do I restrict them to processes and identities which have occurred and developed in the American slave societies (like Sydney Mintz). I use those terms to denote specific structures of identity construction in specific historical – and potentially contemporary – contexts. I do this on the background of linguistic, historical and anthropological theory which I won't have time to go into today. Instead I will just give you a working definition: Creolization I understand as a process whereby people of different ethnic backgrounds develop a new collective identity of ethnic reference which gradually substitutes their respective identities of origin. The process of creolization includes interdependent processes of neo-ethnogenesis and indigenization. Creolization is likely to take place in environments where people of different – mostly foreign – origins come to live in close proximity to one another, an environment in which old identities of origin lose their social meanings and where a new home needs to be made. Thus, there is more to creolization than mixture – the processes of ethnogenesis and

[1] Paper presented at the University of Brasilia, 17 September 2007.

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indigenization which are involved differentiate creolization from other processes of modeling mixture, or métissage. The mixing of specific aspects of culture which may involve the development of transethnic identity among people of different origins, I call pidginization – not creolization – because it does not involve the development of new ethnic identities and the substitution of the respective identities of origins.

I argue, it is the historical legacy of creolization – creoleness as historical creolization's contemporary outcome so to speak – which can lead creole groups and identities to acquire a specific role and function in the creation of transethnic identities and concepts of nationhood in many postcolonial societies. "Creole" may allow for notions of nationhood which often suit postcolonial realities better than the classic European – or rather the French – model of nationhood. The latter focuses on processes of homogenization and states the ideal of "one people, on territory, one language" as a prerequisite for true nation-building, an ideal which does not fit most postcolonial, ethnically diverse societies – particularly in South- and Southeast Asia and in Africa.

Some empirical evidence, from Jakarta first. In the framework of my research there (mainly between 2000 and 2002), I have – more generally speaking – been dealing with the integration and differentiation of ethnic, local and national identity. Jakarta is one of the so-called mega-cities of the world (12 million inhabitants) and it has an extremely diversified population with regards to people's social and cultural backgrounds. Contrasts are marked and they are very visible.

More precisely speaking, I have been dealing with identity which is related to the categories "Orang Betawi", "Orang Jakarta" and "Orang Indonesia." "Orang Betawi" – or just "Betawi" – and "Orang Jakarta" are the two identity-related categories Jakartan culture and identity are ascribed to and by means of which Jakartan culture and identity is differentiated. Culture and identity related to the category "Orang Betawi" is considered a primarily ethnic category, whereas Orang Jakarta is a primarily transethnic category. Both "Orang Betawi" und "Orang Jakarta" are related – although in different ways – to the concept of "Orang Indonesia", referring to the national context. All these categories are closely interrelated and overlapping in ascriptions and boundaries. Their social, cultural and political dynamics can only be understood if studied in their interrelatedness.

At the very centre of these processes are a specific group of people – the Betawi – and the concepts of culture and identity related – but not restricted – to them. The Betawi came into being through processes of creolization during the time of Dutch colonialism when Jakarta was called Batavia. A considerable proportion of their ancestors had been exiled to Batavia from different South- and Southeast Asian regions from the 17th century onward, areas that had been conquered by the Dutch from the Portuguese. Later many were brought to Batavia from Bali and other islands of the Indonesian peninsula to serve as slaves and soldiers for the Dutch colonizers and as servants for other influential foreign populations like the Chinese. Due to the fact that the Dutch expelled the indigenous Javanese population from Batavia for fears of rebellions it was the Betawi who came to be considered the indigenous people of Jakarta, the new "orang asli" of Jakarta so to speak.

The Dutch tried to administer and settle the population of Batavia along ethnic categories for a while, but abandoned this strategy completely in 1828 due to its inefficiency. During the same period of time the slave trade ceased. These changes generally increased interethnic contact and mixture in Jakarta and beyond but also enhanced a more specific process of cultural creolization which was already taking place among those "new orang asli" I have just mentioned. This process also included

people of "real" indigenous decent, particularly the Sundanese. In the course of time people who used to identify as Sundanese, Ambonese, Chinese, Indian etc. came to identify as Betawi. Today, around 2,5 million people in Jakarta consider themselves Betawi, another 2.5 million in the neighboring communities.

The Betawi were long considered being backward, unwilling to modernize and anti-urban. As slaves and servants they had had little access to modern education and stuck to their traditions and to their Muslim faith more than those in closer contact to the colonial elite and their educational system. Education-wise they preferred to send their children to so-called *Pesantren*, a sort of boarding school dedicated to the teaching of Islam. Consequently, the Betawi – with very few exceptions – were not among those who came to be the Indonesian elite in Jakarta after independence had been achieved in 1949. The latter were of Javanese origin mostly, some came from other islands of the Indonesian peninsula.

In the following two decades the desire to develop a unique Indonesian national identity hampered the reflection upon the recent colonial past and all its unpleasant reminders – including the Betawi and their background related to slavery. Instead, a pre-colonial golden age was constructed, largely by means of employing concepts of common religious and spiritual origin, which were meant to serve as a source of national identity. Thus, after almost 350 years of foreign domination the early post-colonial leaders of Indonesia defined Indonesia in largely in precolonial terms. Whether it is the postcolonial construction of a precolonial Indonesian "spirit" or rather the colonial boundaries which have had a larger share in the construction of Indonesian national identity – already in the early 1960s Benedict Anderson noted that all his Indonesian acquaintances perceived of themselves as Indonesians, despite the fact that at the beginning of the century not even the term "Indonesia" had existed (1996: 10).

During the early postcolonial years especially the urban Betawi – the so-called Betawi Kota – were likely to hide their Betawi identity in public due to the negative stereotypes attributed to them. They often ascribed themselves to one of the other ethnic groups in order to decrease social discrimination and achieve upward social mobility.

However, since the late 1960s the Government of the City of Jakarta has changed its attitude towards the Betawi, who have since then received special attention and promotion. There are a lot of different forms through which the revival and (re)construction of Betawi culture and identity are enhanced. Research concerning their culture was initiated and steps taken to promote their (folk) culture. Special residential areas were reserved for them in order to enable them to maintain their customs and to enhance the practice of their traditions. During festivities related to Jakarta – like the *Hari Ulang Tahun Jakarta* – Jakarta's birthday – Betawi dances, drama and music are performed throughout the city, sponsored by the City Government. Every year a contest – "*None dan Abang Jakarta*" / Miss and Mister Jakarta – is organized by the Governor of Jakarta, a competition all young Jakartans irrespective of their ethnic identity can partake in but within which all candidates must prove considerable knowledge of Betawi traditions as well as of Jakartan history, society and politics in general.

How did this change of heart concerning the Betawi come about? Well, some 20 years after independence had been achieved it was obvious inter-ethnic conflict had not ceased in Indonesia and that postcolonial national identity needed more powerful symbols than the supposedly precolonial heritage of common mythology which Sukarno – the first president of Indonesia – was conjuring. It was then that reflection upon the colonial past set in and I argue that as a result of these reflections state institutions discovered the specific social and political potentials that lie in the creole

concept of Betawi group identity and culture with regard to the promotion of national identity. There are different reasons for this potential, particularly in a multi-ethnic and postcolonial context like that of Jakarta.

One reason is, that during the processes of creolization many features of the different local cultures – both foreign *and* indigenous in origin – were incorporated into the emerging culture of the Betawi. This made and makes it possible even for those *not* belonging to the Betawi in terms of ethnicity, to identify partly with their culture since traces of their own respective ethnic culture can easily be identified. Common history is also represented insofar as some of the forefathers of the Betawi were at some stage in history also forefathers of others who did not become creolized, who did not become Betawi, but maintained their Sudanese, Chinese etc. identity instead.

Another reason, which is more important politically is that as a creole group, the Betawi represent both a multitude of ethnicities due to their historical background, and – at the same time – the capacity of creating one group, one identity on the background of ethnic diversity. This two-fold representation fits the national motto of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* ("Unity in Diversity") very well, which is a vital element of the *Pancasila* – the five principles of the Indonesian state ideology.

Thus, through the Betawi it can be demonstrated that ethnic diversity does not need to prevent the development of common identity. On the contrary, the Betawi can function as a proof that "Unity in Diversity" can actually work. In the same way they integrated the different ethno-cultural features of their diverse backgrounds and became the Betawi – so the message goes – the different ethnic groups of Indonesia are supposed to become one Orang Indonesia, a people united by a national culture that integrates the elements of different ethnic traditions in a peaceful and fruitful manner. In postcolonial Indonesia, which is up to date torn by ethnic and religious conflict and strife the Betawi can therefore be put into the context of transethnic national integration and function as a counter-balance to the fear of national disintegration.

There's another reason for the attractiveness of Betawi-ness with regard to the promotion of national identity. The Betawi are not only mixed in origin, they are also *not* Javanese and therefore do not belong to the group of people that has long been the most dominant group in Indonesian society and politics. This Javanese dominance has been diminishing lately due to the democratization, liberalization and decentralization of the Indonesian political system, but the desire to counter-balance the Javanization of Indonesia and its capital Jakarta is still going strong.

By promoting a *creole* culture, the State can not only demonstrate against the reproach concerning the political Javanization of Indonesia, they can do so without promoting a feeling of neglect among other ethnic groups. Since the Betawi are mixed in origin, their culture can be perceived and promoted as encompassing the different ethnic traditions of Indonesia, making it possible for all ethnic groups to identify at least with their ethnic share in Betawi culture and identity. Thus, more than any other, merely *either* ethnic *or* merely transethnic category – Betawi culture and identity can represent and communicate *both* ethnic *and* trans-ethnic reference at the same time. As such it is instrumentalized and manipulated by state institutions in manifold ways as a means to enhance transethnic Jakartan and national identity and to lessen interethnic conflict. In an official brochure published by the Governor, it says: "In Jakarta, the Orang Betawi – the natives of the city – are the hosts of the different cultures living in Jakarta, having emerged from the melting pot of races, ethnic groups and cultures of Indonesia in the 19th century". And a prominent promoter of Betawi-ness said to me: "They are like gado-gado (Betawi dish, comprising of different vegetables and peanut sauce) – mixed

in its ingredients, and due to this mixture a very delicious and unique meal. Like Indonesia, many different cultures, that together make a wonderful Indonesia. The Betawi are among themselves what Indonesia should be as well: diverse in its origins, but united as Indonesians."

Due to the Betawi having the status as Jakarta's original inhabitant, they also supply the nation's capital with some degree of indigenous and ethnic tradition, without which a territory is not considered a real social place in Indonesia. Thus, to promote the Betawi is also a way to provide the mega-city Jakarta with indigenous tradition and authenticity, through which trans-ethnic Jakartan identity can be ethnically substantiated. As this ethnic tradition is constructed within the context of a creole concept of culture and identity, everyone in Jakarta can adhere to it irrespective of different ethnic backgrounds.

The fact that the Betawi territory is at the same time the *national* center of Indonesia helps to attach national meanings and functions to Betawi culture and identity. The stronger being Betawi goes along with territorial and local awareness, the more pronounced the Betawi's identification as both Jakartans *and* Indonesians becomes and the stronger they are identified as Jakarta's locals, the nation's capital's locals that is, by others. One example to illustrate this observation:

When in 2001 thousands of Indonesians from East Java threatened to overrun Jakarta in an attempt to prevent the overthrow of (former) President Wahid, the urban Betawi organized gangs of traditional Betawi militia to defend their city against the intruders. The Betawi presented themselves both as defenders of their town and territory *and* as defenders of national interests. While heavy tanks and thousands of soldiers and police-men filled the streets and guarded the parliamentary buildings, Betawi "warriors", wearing traditional uniforms and weaponry, presented themselves as their indigenous counter-parts. One of those "warriors" said to me: "We as Betawi have to defend our town. We own this town and because of that we have to make sure that everybody can feel safe here. We don't want outsiders to damage the reputation of Jakarta. That is important for the whole of Indonesia because Jakarta is the Indonesian capital."

In the context of Betawi-ing Jakarta and nationalizing the Betawi there has also been a shift in attitude concerning the role the Betawi played during the time of Dutch colonization and in the struggle for independence. The Betawi and their role in the anti-colonial movement were largely ignored by the early postcolonial elite, which celebrated itself as the emancipators of the Indonesian nation and mind. But since the late 1960s, when it had become clear that postcolonial nation-building could not be built on merely precolonial mysticism, the Betawi were discovered and re-valued as a group that maintained Indonesian tradition and self-respect even in the hey day of colonization and thereby set the path for regaining pride in being Indonesian. In that context tales of Betawi anti-colonial heroism were invented or rather re-invented and brought into the public sphere. For example, the legend of *Si Pitung*, a famous Betawi hero, who is claimed having fought and embarrassed the Dutch by using his spiritual powers and ingenious cleverness and wit, served as the background for films, television spots, comics and theatre productions. In 2002 a competition among teachers in Jakarta was carried out, which welcomed essays dealing explicitly with Betawi contributions in the fight against colonialism and the endeavor of nation-building.

The Betawi as an ethnic group re-value concepts of their community in order to advance as a community that has long been socially neglected and disadvantaged. They increasingly recognize the potentials of Betawi identity and culture and make use of their new (privileged) status by eagerly re-interpreting who and what is Betawi. On the

one hand intra-ethnic differences are being enforced in order to show the multitude and wealth of Betawi culture. On the other hand newcomers are welcome to join the Betawi in order to gain in both size and thereby influence. Groups who have been refused the status of being real Betawi by the urban and more well-to-do Betawi – the so-called Betawi Kota – because of their proclaimed backwardness are now incorporated as authentic Betawi since they have the expertise concerning Betawi traditions, that need to be known and practised in public to enforce one's status as authentic Jakartans. On the other hand, those Betawi living a more traditional life on the outskirts of Jakarta – the so-called Betawi Pinggir – have often been denying the urban Betawi, the Betawi Kota, the status as real Betawi because of their proclaimed lack of authenticity. Many of the former – the Betawi Pinggir – are now a lot more willing to accept the latter – the Betawi Kota – as real Betawi, since they are the ones most actively involved in promoting the Betawi as a whole. Thus, the Betawi Kota need the Betawi Pinggir to give the Betawi as a group some more traditional and authentic flavor and the Betawi Pinggir need the Betawi Kota as spearheads in the process of promoting the Betawi as one group. Also many Indonesians of Chinese origin now claim a Betawi identity in order to prevent the sort of discrimination they have suffered ever since they inhabited Indonesia. They join Betawi associations and actively take part in the development of Betawi arts and the promotion of Betawi tradition in public.

Some of the transethnic connotations of Betawi or Betawi-ness positively relate to the notion of "mixture" as such – the paradox being that many of the more traditional Betawi of today are on the whole not considered very dynamic and you often hear people say that "those Betawi always stay among themselves". This shows that creolization does not necessarily involve a continuous process of interaction and interethnic mixture – creolization can indeed come to an end. Nevertheless, even if this is the case, the concept of culture and identity underlying creole ethnogenesis may remain to be effective as what in linguistics is labeled a "creole continuum". With regard to culture and identity it is the historical semantics of creolization that are being re-configured to comply with a contemporary need, in our case a need for a notion of culture and identity which fits the contemporary urban, multiethnic and highly dynamic setting of Jakarta and Indonesia. As well as that the underlying creole continuum can serve – on the part of the Betawi – as a means of renewed processes of inclusion if desired. As one Betawi put it, referring to the need for the Betawi to "gain in size" to achieve more political influence: "We should open up to other ethnic groups. After all, that's what Betawi was all about in the first place, we accommodated people from different backgrounds. We should re-discover our integrative potentials."

The Betawi's alienation from state institutions used to be quite pronounced due to the low social status attributed to them and due to the social discrimination they had suffered in the years preceding and following independence. As a result of the increased awareness of both the neglect they had formerly encountered and of their political potential as the re-discovered "orang asli" of Jakarta, their engagement has become more and more politicized. For many years now the big Betawi organizations have been promoting prominent Betawi figures to become governor of Jakarta. They claim that as the original inhabitants of Jakarta one of them should become the official representative of the nation's capital. So, it seems, that as a result of the cultural promotion of Betawi-ness, the Betawi are less and less willing to function merely as Jakarta's aborigines, representing its traditional past, and increasingly resolved to play an active role in present day politics both on the local and national level as well. However, whereas Betawi culture and identity – due to its creole background and its location in the center

of an extremely heterogeneous postcolonial nation can – probably more than any other group's culture and identity – serve as a symbol of *Bhinneka Tunggal Ika* and as such can effectively represent the complexity of Jakarta and Indonesia, it still remains to be seen whether the Betawi as a group will be able to make a considerable move from symbolic gatekeepers of (historical) tradition to active stakeholders in (contemporary) political power on the national level.

Let me turn to the Krio of Freetown, Sierra Leone and to the contextualization of Krio culture and identity in postcolonial nation-building. Between the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century the Krios' ancestors arrived in what had been established as the Province of Freedom by British philanthropists. They consisted of different groups of former slaves who had been freed from slavery in America and of so-called Liberated Slaves, who were rescued from slave ships bound for the Americas. Thus, whereas the ancestors of the Betawi were brought to Batavia to serve as slaves and servants, the ancestors of the Krio were settled in Sierra Leone after they had been liberated to live there as free men and women. They were a privileged group from the outset, being put in charge as missionaries, teachers and civil servants by the British to Christianize and "civilize" the local population.
These different groups of people from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds underwent a process of creolization, whereby they developed an increasingly exclusive identity as Krio. Due to the advantages related to the proximity to their colonial masters and their privileged position in colonial society, a large proportion of the Krio incorporated a relatively British life-style, mixing it – to varying degrees – with African elements. Many set themselves apart from what they often derogatively labeled as "upcountry people", "uncivilized natives", "provincial people" etc. They incorporated members of other groups, but often classified them as a lower class of assimilated Krio, as "mixianies", as one Krio told me in the early 1990s. Thus, an African people originating from heterogeneous backgrounds came into being and managed to maintain an ethnic identity by differentiating themselves from others by cultivating a non-indigenous life-style and identity, while differentiating among its own members by ascribing different degrees of purity to them – with purity at its peak when lacking local influence. The Krio were inclusive insofar as they included local people – they had to in order to survive – but they were exclusive in that they excluded – or rather tried to exclude – the culture and identity the latter brought with them. Newcomers were expected to give up their original ethnic identity and adhere to Krio-dom – without thereby necessarily becoming accepted as "real", as "proper" Krio, as Krio-Krio.
Due to their elevated status and their proclaimed superiority, a gap developed between Freetown and the Krio on the one hand and all other groups and the Provinces on the other. The majority among the Krio opposed the declaration of both the Freetown Peninsula and the rest of the country as a British colony in 1898 (Freetown had been a crown colony before, the Provinces a British Protectorate). The majority among them later resisted independence from Britain. Their position had already been weakened in the later phases of colonialism and they were afraid to lose their influence altogether once the British had left. Anyhow, there were also outspoken supporters of the independence movement among the Krio, who knew that extended seclusion would lead to isolation rather than to elite positions in postcolonial society.
The Krio never managed to achieve a lot of political influence on the national level after independence had been achieved but they up to date figure prominently among the educated elite, in high-ranking positions in education and the judiciary. On the whole, it

seems, the Krio had a disintegrating effect on Sierra Leonean society. They did not emphasize the indigenous parts of their identity nor what they shared with the local people around them. They obstructed nation-building by emphasizing the difference between themselves and Freetown on the one hand and the natives and upcountry on the other.

It is interesting to note that despite the critical attitude many Sierra Leoneans have towards the Krio many Sierra Leoneans appreciate the Krio for having supplied Sierra Leone with a national lingua franca. It seems somewhat ironical that the Krio language is considered one of the major factors uniting Sierra Leoneans whereas the Krio are still seen as separatists by many. In fact, now that the civil war – which rampaged Sierra Leone for more than 10 years – has ended, the Krio language seems to gain in status as having a reconciliating effect on society at large.

It also seems, that now – in post-war Sierra Leone – the Krio – or rather, many young and educated Krio – are resolved to both play a more active political role in society at the national level. It seems that they are also discovering – or re-discovering – the integrative forces of creole identity on their part. Whereas the Krio until recently largely considered themselves integrative in that they integrated others into their group – making them Krio – these young Krio also want to integrate themselves into Sierra Leonean society, emphasizing their Sierra Leonean rather than their Krio identity.

For the large majority among those who creolized and became Betawi, proximity to European culture was *not* an option to achieve upward social mobility. The Betawi developed a creole culture which resisted, rather than incorporated European influence. Those becoming Betawi mixed different features of their different cultures of origin, but did not incorporate much European influence. They maintained their Muslim faith and those who came to Batavia as Hindus (mainly those who were imported from Bali) mostly converted to Islam as part of their becoming natives of Batavia, of becoming Betawi. Islam as the religion of the so-called natives (and Arabs) became a symbol both of religious and social attitude and of maintaining one's own culture and resisting and evading Dutch oppression. For the Krio, Christianity was a symbol of proximity to European culture. It was proximity to the colonizers that served as a benchmark of Krio identity and it was keeping a distance to the colonizers that served as a benchmark of Betawi identity.

Looking at the ethnogenetic make-up of the Krio and the Betawi it is not the difference in indigeneity which made the former look like elite strangers and the latter as "orang asli", as the indigenous people – it is the difference in status and attitude. There were large proportions of immigrants among both groups' ancestors. The cases of the Betawi and the Krio show that it is the difference in the social, historical and political contextualization of creole culture and identity as well as the positioning of the respective creole group in the respective society at large that determine its potentials and limitations with regard to the construction of nationhood and the processes of nation-building in ethnically diverse postcolonial societies.

Such variations and their meanings can only be discovered through systematic comparative research. Studying creole identity and the conceptualizations associated with it with regard to ethnic, transethnic and national identities in postcolonial societies comparatively may very well bring to light that there is more nation in the postcolonial world than has been acknowledged by Western scholars who have often neglected or denied the existence of national identities within territories whose national borders were fixed by colonial powers.

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