The creoleness of Betawi culture

Megacities of the 21st century have become contact zones where various cultures meet. These become places where not only commercial exchanges take place, but also where linguistic and cultural traits are translated between one culture and another. It is remarkable how often these sites of cultural translation include the great port cities of the age of colonization – like Lagos, Mumbai and the former capital of the Dutch East Indies, Batavia, present day Jakarta.

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The term “CREOLIDIZATION” has long been used to describe the phenomenon in the Americas whereby the languages of the children of immigrants and native languages merge within a contact zone, but equally, when the cultures converge to form new, hybrid cultures. Although a minority of scholars would like to restrict the use of the term to the Americas, or, even to the Caribbean only, there is a growing consensus that creolization is a useful heuristic concept that can be applied to the study of a variety of historical periods and in a variety of different places.

Cultural Anthropologist Jacqueline Knörr already applied the concept to West Africa, in this work she turns her focus to Indonesia's capital, Jakarta, the old Batavia. She thoroughly and convincingly reveals the political, social and economic forces that underpin a specific example of creolization that today is at the heart of Indonesia's official “Unity through Diversity” ideology. This is an important work as it exposes the lines along which creolization takes place and Knörr demonstrates how creolization comes to be instrumentalized by the creole group, whose “internal diversity of the Betawi” is thus redefined and strengthened. Furthermore, she argues that this process is supported by the Indonesian state authorities, who use the creole group, (by definition a unique group but nonetheless having mixed origins) as an exemplar around which this ethnically mixed nation can rally.

The creole group in question are the Betawis, a people descended from various 17th and 18th century immigrant groups from the Indonesian archipelago and elsewhere in Asia, but who are now “regarded as the original inhabitants of Jakarta” (p.11). Although most of them can be reminded of the fact, they are descended from slaves of the Dutch, and this is a key to the low social status they were long held in, in independent Indonesia, further aggravated by their low level of education. In the first decades after independence their colonial heritage and low social origins “made them incompatible with (Javanese) constructs of a precocious cultural community of Indonesians” (p.64). Knörr puts forth attitudes common among the Betawi - shunning education, deep religiosity, lack of investment in the future, a high regard for the simple life and an aversion towards official institutes - contributed to their further marginalization. But Knörr argues that a change occurred among the central authorities in the late 1960s and, by the end of the 20th century Betawi culture had been rediscovered, revived and was being actively promoted, leading to what she calls “social upgrading of the Betawis” (p.130). This process has contributed to a new national consciousness, a growing sense of Jakartan identity and has proved popular in the tourist industry. Betawi culture now being one of the city’s attractions.

Most interesting about this process is, how other marginalized groups, whose work also stretches back to colonial Batavia, have come to attach themselves to the Betawi and even have been incorporated within the Betawi, hence enriching “the internal diversity of the Betawi as a whole” (p.12). This is central to the Betawi integrative function, where “creoleness, on top of indigeneity, may significantly increase the potential for transcultural identification” (p.188). Knörr argues, and convincingly this reader, that the creoleness of Betawi culture is what allows the non-Betawi inhabitants of Jakarta to identify with Betawi culture, “irrespective of their own identities” (p.187). In other words, the Betawi have flourished because they are sufficiently unique as to be defined as a culture, but mixed enough and open enough, so that other groups can recognize something of themselves in the Betawi. Consequently, Betawiness is in fashion, it provides Jakarta with something special. Plus, it draws in the tourists.

This just skims the surface of what Professor Knörr has to say, her book contains much more. The author includes a number of critical remarks, on creolization methods which are to be applauded for their clarity. But I do feel compelled to add a number of critical remarks, alas. While these remarks may seem severe, let me repeat that this is a work that rewards close reading and will enhance the reader’s knowledge of contemporary Jakartan ethnic politics. But allow me three points of criticism.

Firstly, there is the chapter divider which deals with the relationship between the situation in Jakarta and national unity (and which makes up less than a tenth of the book). This is not as book sufficiently unique as to be defined as a culture, but mixed enough and open enough, so that other groups can recognize something of themselves in the Betawi. Indeed Knörr basically admits as much in the introduction: “We are concerned here with phenomena that exist in Jakarta and pertain to jakarta.” (p.7) Regions beyond Java are ignored, other cities on Java are glossed over. Then why in heaven’s name does the title plainly say “Indonesia”?

Secondly, among the many works of her own that she lists in the bibliography, Professor Knörr includes her book Kroatilität and postkolonial Ideologie: Integration und Differenzierung in Betawi (But even commas are used sparingly. I failed to find a single semi-colon in the entire book; I’m sure there must be one or two. But even commas are used sparingly. The following sentence is an example: “Thus, in the context of the Betawi revival is it above all those on their account of their relatively high social status or because they wanted to maintain or achieve such status used to conceal their Betawi identity who nowadays due to their social status are most likely to gain prominent positions both within the Betawi community and the public sphere more generally.” (p.102)

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