

Cape Verdean Kriolu in the United States

MANUEL DA LUZ GONÇALVES

The Kriolu language in Cape Verde is probably the oldest of the many different Creole languages still spoken today, distinct from yet related to them by shared linguistic and historical processes of development. It arose in the 15th century as a consequence of Portuguese slave trading on the west coast of Africa. Initially, business was conducted in a pidgin language based on Portuguese. Africans taken by the Portuguese on the coast as slaves were brought to Cape Verde for transshipment to the plantations of the New World. The work force for this transshipment process included Africans who had been captured earlier and had learned pidgin. Linguists theorize that the children of these enslaved workers learned the early pidgin as their first language. As the children grew, their innate linguistic capacities expanded the limited pidgin of their parents into a fully formed language, a creole, useful in all areas of human communication. The Kriolu of Cape Verde is also enriched by concepts, structures, and cadences from the languages of the many Africans who were brought there.

After the slave trade ended, Portuguese remained the language of empire, the official language of state institutions of justice, education, taxation, and defense. In colonial culture, using Kriolu was a mark of social inferiority. But among many workers and intellectuals, it became an element of cultural resistance to Portuguese colonialism. Poets wrote evocations of their native land and of the struggles of its inhabitants in Kriolu, while for independence leaders like Amílcar Cabral the use of Kriolu became a mode of anticolonial struggle.

After independence, Portuguese remained the *official* language in Cape Verde, used in classrooms and news reportage. Kriolu

is designated as the *national* language. Its use in grassroots organizations, labor unions, and children's programming in the media has grown, though hindered, in part, by its lack of standardization in both spoken and written forms. For example, the Kriolu of S. Antão differs markedly from that of Brava, and factions disagree about whether a back-tongued, unvoiced consonant should be represented as "k" or as "c."

In Massachusetts, the state in the United States to which Cape Verdeans first came, institutions have had a fairly open policy toward cultural and linguistic difference. On December 8, 1975, a little more than five months after Cape Verdean independence, a group of concerned Cape Verdean parents proposed legislation before the Massachusetts State House of Representatives that addressed Cape Verdean language and culture and their relationship to the educational system. Although the measures were not acted on by the House, their presentation before that body resulted in the inclusion of Cape Verdean Kriolu in the list of "living foreign languages." This attainment of institutional status had important and salutary effects. Because Kriolu now was recognized under the Transitional Bilingual Education Act of 1971, any school district with 20 or more children whose native language was Kriolu had to provide the children the opportunity to begin learning in their mother tongue while they studied English as a second language, until they reached such a level of proficiency that they could be mainstreamed. Before Kriolu was declared a living language, the state had considered it a dialect of Portuguese, which it certainly is not, and put small Cape Verdean children in the impossible situation of first being compelled

**MANUEL DA LUZ
GONÇALVES**
is a teacher,
researcher,
community activist,
and poet. He has
actively engaged the
issues involving
Kriolu in the United
States for more
than 20 years.

Batuku

KAOBERDIANO DAMBARÁ

*Nha fla-m, Nha Dunda, kus'é k'é batuku?
Nha nxina mininu kusa k'e ka sabe.*

*Nha fidju, batuku N ka se kusá.
Nu nase nu atxa-l.
Nu ta more nu ta dexe-l.
E lonji sima séu,
fundu sima mar,
rixu sima rotxa.
E usu-l tera, sabi nos genti.*

*Mósias na terreru
tornu finkadu, txabeta rapikadu,
Korpu ali N ta bai.
N ka bai. Aima ki txoma-m.*

*Nteradu duzia duzia na labada,
mortadjađu sen sen na pedra-l sistensia,
bendedu mil mil na Sul-a-Baxu,
kemadu na laba di burkan,
korpu ta matađu, aima ta fika.
Aima e forsa di batuku.
Na batuperiu-l fomi,
na sabi-l teremoti,
na sodadi-l fidju lonji,
batuku e nos aima.
Xinti-l, nha fidju.
Kenhá ki kre-nu, kre batuku.
Batuku e nos aima!*

Tell me, Nha Dunda, what is *batuku*?
Teach the children what they don't know.

My children, I don't know what *batuku* is.
We were born and we found it here.
We will die and we will leave it here.
It's off in the distance like the sky.
It's deep as the ocean,
hard as rock.
It is the ways of the land,
And it feels so fine, let me tell you.

Young girls on the dancing floor
with their hips ready to dance
under the clapping of *txabeta**
the body ready to die,
but I won't die.
The soul is calling me
to dance *batuku*.

There were dozens and dozens of people
buried in a common grave.

Hundreds and hundreds of people buried in a
shroud of stone in the disaster of the
Assistencia.**

Thousands and thousands of Cape Verdeans
forced to labor in São Tomé,
some were burned in the lava of the volcano.
The body dies but the spirit stays.
The soul is the strength of the *batuku*,
in the time of famine,
in the sharing of excitement,
in the longing for the son gone away,
batuku is our soul.

Feel it, my children,
Those who love us, love *batuku*.
Batuku is our soul!

(translation by Manuel Da Luz Gonçalves)

* *Txabeta* (*tchabeta*) refers to the rapid, synchronized hand clapping with open palms against cushions held tightly between the knees while someone dances the *batuku*.

** "Assistencia" was the popular name of the colonial government's soup kitchen and welfare building in Praia. The walls of the building were made of round boulders gathered on the beach and held together with very little cement. One day in the 1940s the building collapsed, crushing hundreds of people. The incident is a metaphor for colonial neglect in Cape Verde.

to learn Portuguese in order to learn English. No wonder that in the mid-1960s a New Bedford Model Cities program found an inordinate number of Cape Verdean immigrant children assigned to special classes for the emotionally disturbed or learning disabled. The institutional status of Kriolu also affects Cape Verdean immigrants' experience with other governmental agencies, from the courts to the employment office.

For Cape Verdeans in the diaspora, Kriolu is an instrument of culture, a tool of transnationalism and re-encounter. Whether in Cape

Verde or far from it, in places such as the Netherlands, the United States, Angola, Senegal, Brazil, France, and Portugal, Kriolu is the medium for sharing feelings of brotherhood, hospitality, and nostalgia, which are nurtured by this umbilical cord to the mother country. From California to Boston, Kriolu is part of our identity, our way of knowing, but also often our access to the world through radio, television, and the educational system. Cape Verdeans' struggle to legitimize their language affects both Kriolu speakers themselves and the societies in which they live.