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A Caribbean Taste of Technology: Creolization and the Ways of Making of the Dancehall Sound System

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The Caribbean has long been considered a melting pot of Old and New Worlds. Writer, director, and cultural researcher Julian Henriques looks at the Jamaican reggae dancehall sound system to explore how this street technology has found creolizing ways to prevail in the neocolonial power struggle between popular culture and Jamaica's ruling elite

Image 01: A Caribbean Taste of Technology album cover, Ariwa, 1985, artist unaccredited

This article takes its name and inspiration from Mad Professor's album A Caribbean Taste of Technology in response to the theme of this Technosphere issue.[1] This makes a good place to start a discussion of creolization and technology – the dub reggae tracks of this album produced British producer Mad Professor and released in 1985, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewDTHfJqLwI So what I present here is a text and ideas version of the album as it were.

The album cover artwork sets the tone. The Mad Professor himself lays back in a hammock enjoying the drink in his hand (the glass containing the entire Caribbean archipelago), the sun-soaked beach and the array the latest technological accoutrements of the era together with a selection of tropical fruits.[2] The technology is evidently not a threat, but a source of pleasure; he is relaxed about it. This is the key message: in the Caribbean context new technologies are an invitation to be creative, an impulse that leads to Afrofuturism.[3] This creativity is nowhere better expressed than in Jamaican music and the global influence this has in terms of sound, rhythm and phonographic performance techniques.

Image 02 Youth Ghetto Ology, Sizzla Kalongi, Greensleeves, 2009, artist Tony Dermott

Jamaican music technology – the stage show, the sound system dance and the recording studio – provide examples of positive spin on the idea of creolization. The concept of creolization describes the mixing of cultural forms specifically New World setting of the disruption of slavery and forced, migration has a long and contested history.

In post-colonial theory it has been criticised for its lack of account of the power relations in which cultures are constituted.[4] Stuart Hall councils that

with creolization “questions of power, as well as issues of entanglement, are always at stake.”[5] This limitation might have less of a grip on the ways of making of the street culture and technology of the sound system than other cultural forms.

While there are often skirmishes with the police and the open-air dancehall venues are invariably shifting, the dancehall scene is comparatively autonomous and self-generating. This is because as a street technology and culture of the ghetto whose creolizing mixes take place largely “under the radar” of the authorities. This is what makes the practices of the scene such an exciting prospect for investigation in terms of processes of creolization.

Seven key features of creolization are picked out in what follows.

1 Creolization as Bricolage: mobile sound systems

Image 11 Charlie Ace’s Swing-a-Ling mobile record and recording shop and studio, 1973, credit Urban Image, with permission

One important aspect of creolization is bricolage, as the activity of bringing together disparate components into a new assemblage. The components themselves are not new, in fact they are often re-cycled or re-purposed, far from factory setting. Their novel functionality lies in the assemblage as a whole. As a type of bricolage, creolization involves working practices of experimentation, trial and error and ways of knowing through in situ process of making. This contrast with the architect or engineer’s executing a pre-organized plan.

Bricolage is a quotidian, one-off personalized DIY practice that makes use of whatever materials or components are readily what’s near-to-hand, as is commonplace in a huge range of settings across the globe.[6] On the street it is seldom the standard issue put to standard use – instead it is re-engineered often subverting the manufacturers’ specifications and intensions.

Bricolage often involves a re-purposing of components. A good example of this would be Hedley Jones re-purposing a telephone handset microphone as the pickup for his invention of the electric guitar.[7] Street technology is the low art to the high art of the technology corporations.

This is vividly expressed with Charlie Ace’s Swing-a-Ling mobile record and recording shop and studio. Creolization provides local practical local solutions; note the vehicle is not only a shop but also claims to be a recording studio. The contingencies of the street culture exercise a considerable influence on the technology. Without the resources that permanent venue requires, mobility is most important.

Image 12 DJ Squeeze with his sound truck Thunder with Lightning generator in tow, circa 2002, photo the author

A more contemporary version of this same mobile technology is provided by DJ Squeeze and his sound system on wheels; though more polished it is essentially the same creolized solution of assembling together the two technologies of transportation and sound system. This is of course far from unique, with the sound floats of the Trinidad and Tobago carnival as an outstanding example.[8]

Both creolization and bricolage are sources of creativity and originality of the kind found with musical improvisation, as distinct from the interpretation of a musical score. Bricolage has also proved a valuable conceptual resource for the cultural studies approach to sub-cultures, as with Dick Hebdige's pioneering studies.[9] The critical edge of the term comes heterogeneity of the components its assembles together, as distinct from the operation of media theorists would now describe as "cultural techniques."[10]

2 Creolization as Mixing: Reggae dub music

Image 21: The desk in Lee "Scracth" Perry's Black Ark recoding studio
https://i.ytimg.com/vi/et3ccnR5RL0/maxresdefault.jpg

It is widely recognised that Jamaican patois and other creole languages mix cultures together to produce a distinctive new one. Similarly the standard music studio post-production mixing technique brings together the separate tracks on which the individual musical instruments were recorded. So mixing makes the assembled bricolage of components more intense by actually merging them together – as chemical elements combine form a new compound.

The technique of the dub mix has to be located in a New World geography specifically, that is, the recording studios in Jamaica in the 1960s and early 70s. Its famous originators include, Duke Reid, Coxonne Dodd, Lee "Scratch" Perry and many others. Further to a normal mix or re-mix, a dub mix, like Buccaneer's Cove on the Taste album removes all but a trace of lyrics, harmonies and instruments of the original track, to let the drum and bass predominate. To this it adds in echo, reverb and sound effects, copying (that's what dub means) and doubling and re-doubling back.[11] This idea of enfolding and repeating is also found Antonio Benítez-Rojo's concept of the repeating island in his book of that name.[12]

With dub creolization can be heard as un-mixing as much as mixing, taking elements out in what has been described as an subtractive aesthetic, by contrast with the additive technique of toasting, or the break beat sample that of the catchy bars.[13] Instead, the more taken out of the music track the more room it opens up for the listener to enter into the vacated space – filling it with their own associations, pleasures and re-membering of the vocal version.

Image 22 King Tubby Majestic Dub, 1976, reissue Culture Press, 2000

http://images.junostatic.com/full/CS2707612-02A-BIG.jpg

The dub mix itself is then subject to the creolization of bricolage assemblage in that it is a recycling of the music track on the A-side of the 45, finding within it additional value to make the B-side dub mix. These tracks were then put together as dub albums, further adding value. As a street culture technique, invariably in a context of scarce resources, creolization is often about making more with less, or indeed something out of nothing.

Like jazz music, dub music is energised by distinctly Old World musical traditions that are often rhythmic in character, specifically Nyabinghi in respect to reggae. These ancient elements are then "re-imagined" as would now be said, with New World technologies of the recording studio, itself re-invented as a musical instrument in its own right. Thus one of the elements of creolization is that it is about the mix, literally so with dub music mix.

Image 23a A Stone Love engineer with a dry paint brushes down the controls before a dance and Image 23b A Venus sound system engineer washes the inside of the bass bins, both suggesting a ritual purpose, photos the author

The geo-political forces of colonization meant it was New World where this technological mixing took place, just as it was for cultural and racial mixing, hybridity and Latin American mestiça societies. Creolization might be contrasted with that other New World phenomenon of syncretism where one cultural form is superimposed on another, as for example Yoruba Orishas are with Catholic saints in Haitian Voodoo. The mixture of creolization can be said to run deeper than that two elements blend to make a third.

On the sound system scene this creolization also runs in parallel with syncretic conjunctures, as the practice of washing inside the speaker cabinet or dusting off the mixer controls. It is a spiritual cleansing that is going on here, expressing the value system of scyence or Obeah (Voodoo in Haiti) rather than technological science.

3 Creolization as Repeating: Versioning

Image 31: Greensleeves single riddim albums, a selection
http://3.bp.blogspot.com/-_hJVLHVTj2o/ULz_P5xiyLI/AAAAAAAAKxY/KPVmdN_be9Q/s1600/1.jpg

A third musical example of creolization is the uniquely Jamaican musical practice of versioning whereby a single riddim (rhythm) track is used as the musical backing by a number of singers and DJs. There are innumerable examples of this practice, possibly the most widely-known being King Jammy's Sling Teng riddim which has been subject of literally

hundreds of versions.[14] Thus the creole cooking pot never empties however many meals it serves.

Greensleeves is one of the labels specializing in these single riddim albums. In terms of creolization this is another example of recycling a resource or component. In this instance reiteration creates a multiplication of value. As well as maximizing the use of a resource, it also illustrates something of the distinctiveness of the Jamaican music scene where the riddim track has its own autonomy and particular importance.

4 Creolization as Socialization: Staging the Session

Images 41 to 410: The dancehall crowd, photocredits Varun Baker, with permission

Another of the distinctive feature of the Jamaican music scene is the fact that the primary instrument for the enjoyment of Jamaican music is the sound system session; this rather radio, streaming, downloading, CD or indeed even the concert or stage show. This provides an example of a fourth characteristic of creolization, that is, a re-purposing not only different technological components and devices, but also the function for which the new assemblage is deployed.

Very often creolization consists of socializing a technology; to share what was originally designed as domestic technological appliance to one with a much wider community of users. Thus creolization can encourage a going against the grain of individual consumerist accumulation. The sound system exemplifies this reverse social re-purposing for the phonographic instrument of the gramophone. This is what the sound system remains, but at a size and scale that an entire community can enjoy.

Image 411 Building a speaker stacks

The sound system session draws attention to the contrast between social and individual orientated usage of technologies. This has the important effect of changing the nature of the experience of listening itself. The mobile personal listening experience first afforded by the Walkman and subsequently by mp3 devices insert the music into the listener by means of in- or on- ear headphones. This contrasts with the sound system listening experience in the session. As a travelled-to destination, this is where, in the company of others, listeners inserts their whole bodies into the music.

In order to achieve this each dancehall session each evening has to be transported to the open-air venue, configured in the most advantageous manner for that venue, assembled together (called "stringing-up") tested and sound-checked. This nightly practice of assembly and dis-assembly for every session mimics and the mixing and un-mixing of creolization.

5 Creolization as Intensification: the set of equipment
Image 51 Speaker stack
The fifth characteristic of creolization is intensification where the mixing produces a release of energy in a chemical reaction. But this is an affective energy that could be thought of as being necessitated by the extremes of the New World environment with its histories of enslavement and indentureship. In short, a creolized culture has a substantial amount of work to do reconstituting shattered identities and re-membering buried histories.

Image 52: Passa Passa, Spanish Town Road, Tivoli Gardens, Kingston, circa 2005
In the dancehall session this intensification takes place in the bowl of sound between the three speaker stacks or columns. This is a special kind of place of pleasure, that could be described in terms of Homi Bhabha's concept of a third space, or Hannah Arndt's space of appearance.[15] One of the ways these bass-heavy intensities are created is by what has been described as sonic dominance.[16] This achieves an immersive, visceral, full body intensive listening, as distinct from ordinary audition via the outer ear. The physical scale and shared sociality of the sound system encourage such intensities, but again the re-purposing techniques come into play. These auditory levels are furnished by historically ever increasing size of the amplification equipment.

Image 5.3 Notebook sketch of triangulation
The other way these intensities are created is with the inward orientation of the speakers onto the crowd (audience) in the centre, as distinct from the conventional PA where the speakers are on either side of the artist on stage. This simple re-orientation from outward-facing to inward-facing can be described as the crucial twist of creolization. Phonographic technologies are thus used to places the audience rather than an artist at the centre of the listening experience.

6 Creolization as separation: Frequency specialization
Image 61: Crossover separation the frequency bands before amplification, drawing by author

The sixth characteristic of creolization can be described as separation, that is, the kind of un-mixing by which dub reggae was described. This is the case with the separation of frequencies that is achieved by the sound system set, specifically by the crossover component. This assigns each of the five frequency bands (shown in rainbow colours) to separate amplifier connected to its own separate specialist speaker – from tweeters at the top to sub-bass at the bottom end. This is done for each of the three speaker stacks.

Image 62: Frequency rainbow from one of the three speaker stacks, drawing by author

The sound system engineers who have been responsible for these innovations have taken the phonographic instrument of the sound system to new levels of sophistication. They have nuanced fine-grained understanding of how sound works on human bodies as much as in electronic circuits. This returns us to the starting point of the mix as the first creolization in the way of making of the street technology, but transduced into the medium of auditory propagation itself.

7 Creolization as re-mixing

Image 7.1 Frequency rainbow from three speaker stacks, drawing by author

The idea of creolization has informed this brief account of sound system technology – but at the same time the ways of making of technology itself has also informed what the process of creolization might be understood to be. Re-mixing can be considered as the final seventh characteristic of creolization. Thus in addition to mixing, creolization creates value with both un-mixing as well as re-mixing. It is not only a music track that is re-mixed, but also the entire instrument of the sound system set, balanced and fine-tuned by the hands and ears of the engineers.

These thoughts on the aesthetic value of the mix take us back to the use of the word taste Mad Professor's album title. The idea of taste resonates in various modalities, not least the style and fashion of the Jamaican music scene. Taste is of course a social, political and cultural achievement as Pierre Bourdieu taught us.[17]

Most important taste foregrounds the pleasures of life, to be experienced, whatever your circumstances, in the intensities of the dancehall session. It is also what distinguished humans from animals – homo sapiens (the Latin for taste) – as Michel Serres maintains, is the sensory source of wisdom.[18] A sound system session gives a pleasurable taste of the experience of a creolised technology. For me it also recalls tingling sensation of electricity, as a schoolboy experimenter, testing the charge of a little 9 volt battery by touching the two terminals on the tip of my tongue.

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[1] The ideas this image essay is taken largely from chapters 1 and 3 of Sonic Media: Reggae Sound System Technology, Culture and Ways of Making (forthcoming 2018, Duke University Press) and from Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques and Ways of Knowing, (2011) London: Continuum. See also (2014) Rhythmic Bodies: Amplification, Inflection and Transduction in the Dance Performance Techniques of the "Bashment Gal". Body and Society, 20(3/4), pp. 79-112.

[2] Please see Louis Chude-Sokei's excellent account of this album, Chude-Sokei, Louis (2015) The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics, Middletown: Wesleyan University Press

[3] See Afrofuturism, Technology & Fiction, Harold Offeh in conversation with Julian Henriques, (forthcoming, Goldsmiths Department of Visual Cultures Public Lecture series) and also the talk with was based on https://storify.com/skindeepmag/skin-deep accessed 17th March 2017

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