OUT OF HIDING?
STRATEGIES OF EMPOWERING THE PAST IN THE
RECONSTRUCTION OF KRIO IDENTITY

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Abstract

The Krio are the descendants of liberated slaves in Sierra Leone who, on the
background of heterogenous origins, developed and maintained a new com-
mon ethnic identity. Distinguishing themselves from others by cultivating
a rather non-indigenous identity, they differentiated among themselves by
ascribing different degrees of purity to members of their community, with
maximum purity related to a lack in local influence. At the same time, the
Krio were not considered ‘proper’ natives by the majority of the local popu-
lation. Being a small minority living almost exclusively in Freetown and its
environment, both in the later phases of the colonial era and after indepen-
dence had been achieved, they were seldom considered for political office
beyond the local level. However, in recent years, since the end of the civil war,
an increasing number of Krio have become more engaged in public discourse
and involved in political activities on the national level. The Krio’s increased
political engagement evokes ambivalent reactions. Being somewhat less ‘one’s
own’ and somewhat less ‘native’ brings to bear ‘old’ negative connotations.
On the other hand, ‘new’ positive meanings have emerged from the decline in
reputation that tradition and indigeneity have suffered as a result of the war.
It seems that in this post-war context of contested loyalties and identifica-
tions the Krio are increasingly discovering and making use of the potentials
of transethnic connectivity that lie in their creole heritage.

Introduction

In my previous research on Krio identity in Sierra Leone I was con-
cerned with the period before the civil war, which lasted from the early
1990s until 2002. I have now, however, begun to explore how the Krio
are reconstructing their identity within Sierra Leone’s post-war society
and how these processes fit into the national context. Since the end
of the war, the Krio have been undergoing a process of politicization.
Many have begun playing a more active role in public debates and
have assumed offices in all major political parties. I will describe some
of the major discourses that are currently at the center of such processes and reveal which discursive strategies of intended inclusion and exclusion are employed. Current discourses concerning Krio identity in Sierra Leone’s post-war society are linked to recent war experiences as well as to pre-war and post-colonial perceptions and representations. Particular attention will be paid to the question of how the creole dimension of Krio identity is socially and politically situated and contextualized in a time of post-war reconciliation and social reintegration. Current discourses may both complement or contradict each other. They vary according to many factors and depend on given contexts and situational demands.

**Historical Background**

Between the end of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century, the Krio’s ancestors arrived in what had been established by British philanthropists as the Province of Freedom and which was declared a British crown colony in 1808. This area covers today’s Freetown Peninsula. 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. Many of these people were put in charge as missionaries, teachers, and civil servants by the British to Christianize and ‘civilize’ the local population.

These disparate groups of people from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds passed through a process of creolization, developing an increasingly exclusive identity as ‘Krio.’ Due to the advantages provided by proximity to their colonial masters and their privileged position in colonial society, many Krio exhibited a relatively British lifestyle, merging it—to varying degrees—with African elements. The Krio were inclusive insofar as they included local people—and they had to in order to survive. However, they often classified them as a lower class of assimilated Krio, as “mixianies”, as a Krio lady once told me. They were exclusive in that they excluded—or rather tried to exclude—the culture and identity of those whom they incorporated into their group. Thus, the Krio set themselves apart from others by cultivating a non-indigenous lifestyle, while differentiating among their own members by ascribing different degrees of purity to them, with maximum purity related to a lack in local influence, to being ‘Krio-Krio.’ The Krio have had a disintegrating effect on Sierra Leonean society in that they emphasized the differences rather than the similarities between them-