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“Creole Culture . . .”
by James Steel Thayer:
A Comment

Please allow me a brief comment on the contribution by James Steel Thayer, “A Dissenting View of Creole Culture in Sierra Leone”. In it the author seeks to replace what he declares to be “a virtual orthodoxy” — that the Creoles were largely of “European character, Christian in religion, bourgeois (and elitist in culture)” — with a different view of his own.

My attention was attracted to his contribution by his having referred to my own work. On his second page he comments that in my A History of Sierra Leone I see “even the Creole houses as reflecting bourgeois values”. He does not contest what I wrote, he merely quotes it with implied disapproval. He has no further reference to my very long book much of which is concerned with Creole culture. Nor does he mention an article I wrote in Africa (vol. LVII, n° 4, 1987) which spells out the social stratification of Creole society which (as he rightly observes) some historians have ignored. Indeed that issue of Africa, which was devoted exclusively to Krio (Creole) culture, the theme of his own article, and was published five years ago (time enough surely for it to have reached his base in Oklahoma), does not even appear in his bibliography.

His own allegedly different interpretation is based on his fieldwork in the villages round Freetown. He found there that the Creole inhabitants formed a cohesive group, that the older had skilled employment, that the younger had white collar employment, that they ran the villages, and that they felt a “sense of cultural superiority” over the Loko inhabitants. Thus, far from undermining what he calls “standard scholarship”, his findings uphold it!

I would not have troubled to write about this ridiculous article had it not contained a vicious footnote (fn. 7) deliberately misrepresenting the work of one of the leading Sierra Leone historians, Professor Akintola Wyse. Wyse’s The Krio of Sierra Leone: An Interpretative History (London, Hurst 1989) is a brief but important contribution by a Creole scholar (amplified recently in his more extensive H. C. Bankole-Bright and Politics in Sierra Leone, Cambridge University Press, 1990). He is critical of some of the “standard scholarship” Thayer refers to, and stresses particularly the socio-economic divisions in Creole society.


Cahiers d’Études africaines, 125, XXXII-1, 1992, pp. 143-144.
Thayer however makes out the contrary. He makes out that Wyse presents them as "a homogeneous group with uniform (and elitist) attitudes". To do this he quotes a passage in which Wyse in fact demonstrates exactly the opposite. He also sneers at Wyse for using the word "plebeian"—a word which doubtless never crosses the lips of self-righteous, middle-class Americans, dedicated to the faith that they and all their compatriots are equal.

What I find particularly offensive is that a white American professor, installed in a reputable American university, should in this envious spiteful and underhand way misrepresent the work of an African academic who, working under all the great difficulties that beset those who teach today in universities in Africa, nevertheless produces scholarly work of a standard that far surpasses his own.

*Edinburgh, 1992.*