

Creole, Syncretic or Hybrid? Taiwan, Understanding an Identity in Process, Part II

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.
Friday, 28 January 2011 09:48

In these troubled times, Taiwanese know they are different but they may not always be able to verbalize how different they are. From the Japanese era on, Taiwanese had begun to gain a unified sense of their difference. At that time, unlike under Qing rule, the Hoklo, Hakka and indigenous people realized that they should not let outside rulers play one group against the other. They became united in forging an identity. Thus, as Taiwan now distances itself from the martial law, propaganda and attempted indoctrination of the Chinese Nationalist Party's (KMT) one-party state, its citizens feel more free to claim their true identity; Taiwanese. In this process they should examine three terms, creolism, syncretism and hybridization.

Taiwan has emerged from the bonds of what some call the forced learning and Stockholm syndrome of its one-party state to become a democracy. Ironically, however, after gaining its present democracy, Taiwan now hears new dissonant controlling overtures from a different nation on the other side of the Taiwan Strait. Taiwanese hear phrases such as, "We are all Chinese. We are brothers." Of course they are not, and those overtures are always made over gun barrels and missiles. Taiwanese should instead first begin to examine in contrast, the term "Creole states." Benedict Anderson applied this term to people that may share a common language and common descent from another country, but who will fight any said oppressors of that country for their freedom.

Those willing to examine history closely will see that Taiwan's history is full of such experiences and so is different from China's history. Taiwan's identity is different from China's. And finally Taiwan's mentality, particularly with its newly achieved democracy is far different from China's.

Examine creolization. The term creolization was first associated with the field of linguistics but in the past decades scholars have taken it far beyond that and applied it to numerous other areas including culture and identity. Creole is applied to cultures of intrinsically mixed origins as in the US State of Louisiana or the Caribbean. In this regard, Taiwan with its indigenous cultures that mixed with Dutch, Spanish, Ming loyalists, Manchu Qing, Japanese and finally the fleeing KMT fits this bill.

Next take syncretism. Syncretism is often associated with and compared in usage with creolism; it is used to describe the reconciliation of different systems such as of religious belief or language where there are heterogeneous or partial results. One can view Taiwan in much the same way as it reconciled the many cultural and religious systems left by its past colonial forces. In this reconciliation, Taiwan is clearly heterogeneous not homogeneous from its many points of origin.

Creole, Syncretic or Hybrid? Taiwan, Understanding an Identity in Process, Part II

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.

Friday, 28 January 2011 09:48

The third term hybrid also is applied to mixed origins including those of genetic or language backgrounds. While this term has been used from grains to livestock to automobile engines I prefer it since it carries the aspect of hybrid vigor where there is a resultant increased vigor and/or other superior qualities as a result of the crossbreeding. Those who know the resiliency and adaptability of the Taiwanese with their island culture can relate to this.

Whether Creole, syncretic or hybrid, Taiwan's experience and its identity are its own. They are that of an island that has seen successive waves of colonization and immigration coming to its shores. These have all mixed with its native culture and here too is another element. In a separate growing field of study, Taiwan is seen as the origin of the Lapitan culture that linguistically and culturally has spread across the Pacific. This too contributes to make Taiwan, Taiwan.

It is no wonder then for example that Taiwan's experience with Japan is totally different from that of China's. It is also no wonder that the Taiwanese who in the 1940s had finally won for themselves the right to elect their own representatives to the Japanese Diet were also able to overcome 2-28 and the White Terror and wrest democracy from their autocratic rulers. To be sure there are still unresolved elements such as just retribution for the stolen state assets (the KMT remains one of the richest political parties in the world), and transitional justice for all the numerous past political crimes. Nevertheless, identity wise, Taiwanese have found in democracy the true expression of their Creole, syncretic or hybrid nature. This democratic identity and history is what they take with them into the twenty-first century to face any new oppressors.

Source:

Creole, Syncretic or Hybrid? Taiwan, Understanding an Identity in Process, Part II

Written by Jerome F. Keating Ph.D.

Friday, 28 January 2011 09:48

[Jerome F. Keating's writings](#)