

Celebrating Curaçaoan Creoleness in *Buladó*

Dewi Kopp

Abstract

In 2020, the film *Buladó* made history by winning the prestigious Gouden Kalf award, becoming the first movie spoken in Papiamentu to do so. Set in Curaçao, the narrative delves into the island's creolized society through its characters' struggles with identity. Drawing from “In Praise of Creoleness” by Bernabé

et al., this essay explores *Buladó*'s portrayal of creolization, oral tradition, and language dynamics. The essay argues that through its engagement with Curaçaoan identity and diasporic complexities, the film underscores and celebrates the multifaceted nature of Creoleness in postcolonial societies.

In 2020, *Buladó* won a Gouden Kalf, the most well-known Dutch award for best movie of the year. The film's victory was unique, as it was the first movie mostly spoken in Papiamentu to win this prize. *Buladó*'s story takes place on Curaçao, a Caribbean island part of the Lesser Antilles and a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. As on most Caribbean islands, creolization immensely influenced the Curaçaoan society (Rupert 7). According to Martinician writers Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant in "In Praise of Creoleness" (1989), creolization is "the brutal interaction, on either insular or landlocked territories [...] of culturally different populations" (893). This cultural melting pot forms the basis of the literary and cultural movement that they call *Creoleness*. In this essay, I use the definition of Creoleness from "In Praise of Creoleness" to examine *Buladó* (2020). I analyze the film's engagement with and celebration of Curaçaoan creolization, oral tradition, language dynamics, and the complexities of diasporic Creoleness, ultimately highlighting the multifaceted nature of Creoleness and its representation in postcolonial society.

Buladó premiered as the opener of the Nederlands Film Festival, where it also won the only award it was nominated for: Best Film. Director Eché Janga based *Buladó*'s story loosely on a Curaçaoan oral myth in which enslaved Curaçaoans, who worked in salt mines, would jump from the highest mountain and fly away to escape slavery (Beekman). However, they would only be able to fly if they had not eaten the salt. The movie follows 11-year-old Kenza who lives with her father, Ouirá, and her grandfather, Weljo, next to a salvage yard in Bandabou, the western part of Curaçao. Ouirá is a rational policeman, whereas Weljo is a spiritual man who relates to the slave myth, seeking to direct his death similarly. On the brink of becoming a woman and grieving her mother's early death, Kenza finds herself caught between the different world views of her family members while navigating questions of identity and religion.

Creoleness and Curaçao

Central to the theme of the movie is Curaçaoan Creoleness. In search of new literary art forms to represent the postcolonial condition in the Caribbean, Bernabé, Chamouiseau and Confiant wrote the essay “Éloge de la Créolité,” translated to “In Praise of Creoleness” by Mohamed B. Taleb Khyar. The Martinician writers wrote this text as a response to *négritude*, a concept coined by Martinician poet and politician Aimé Césaire in his long poem *Cahier d’un Retour au Pays Natal* (1939, final edition 1956). Translator Mireille Rosello says that “the word ‘Négritude’ [was] an attempt to reappropriate the word ‘nègre’ which had painful connotations for all Black people,” and that “it provided a positive image of their race for Black people all over the world” (46-47). To Bernabé et al., Césaire’s *négritude* focuses too much on the African origin of Caribbean culture at the expense of other cultures that are part of the Caribbean cultural ecosystem (889). Consequently, they find Césaire’s African focus an outward orientation that does not reflect the Caribbean reality. They comment that this African external cultural perspective is similar to the previous colonial superiority of French letters and culture (889).

While they recognize their indebtedness to Césaire, the authors argue that “interior vision,” rather than an “exterior” one, should define Caribbean literature and culture (890). This artistic interior vision centres the Caribbean reality without exterior involvement or orientation, resulting in a completely new rendering of this reality. Key components of this movement are the creole language (899), orality (895) and the rejection of Western universality (902). Bernabé et al. call this artistic aesthetic “Creoleness,” to acknowledge its origin in the creolized cultures of the Caribbean (891). According to them, the Caribbeans are “the real forges of a new humanity, where languages, races, religions, customs, ways of being from all over the world were brutally uprooted and transplanted in an environment where they had to reinvent life” (891-892). Those “brutally uprooted and transplanted” people were the enslaved, and as such creolization generally flourished in plantation economies, where enslaved people of different origins were forcibly “called

to invent the new cultural designs allowing for relative cohabitation between them” (892-893).

The process of creolization also lies at the heart of Curaçao. Even though Curaçao did not have a plantation economy, its society bears the mark of cultural synthesization as a result of multiple colonial occupations (Eckkrammer 74). After a Spanish period, the Dutch West India Company conquered the originally Caquetío island in 1634 and Curaçao became an official Dutch colony in 1791. On 10 October 2010, the island became a separate country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands, whereas before it was part of the federation that has been the Netherlands Antilles, which existed since 1954 (Allen 231). The island’s role as a major trading port for the Transatlantic Slave Trade has contributed to the diverse ethnic makeup of the population. This diversity still structures the social life and the identity of contemporary Curaçaoans, and it is particularly present in the languages spoken on the island.

Papiamentu, a Creole Language

Language stands central to the project of Creoleness. Bernabé et al. specifically praise the Creole language and emphasise that “[n]o Creole creator, in any field, can ever succeed without an intuitive knowledge of the poetics of the Creole language” (899). In their opinion, Creole should form the basis of Creole art, because the language represents the cultural complexity of creolization. The French language might have been conquered, as exemplified by Césaire’s work, but its use is still “unnatural” as the “language of the oppressors” (900). Yet Bernabé et al. do not completely reject French or any other colonially imposed language, as they argue that “perpetual bilingualism” typifies the creolized reality of the Caribbean (899). Confiant explains that the writer's

shared preoccupation with defending Creole language and culture and with making Antillean identity less Manichaean. We believed then, as we do now, that only Créolité can

deconflictualize French and Creole — the two cultures to which we lay claim. We have to think both of them anew, so that neither dominates the other (Chamoiseau et al. 132)

Thus, they value the Creole language for its reflection of the cultural reality of the Antilles while also recognizing that the French language is undeniably part of this reality as well. Consequently, they seek to abolish the power imbalances between colonial and creolized cultures through their redefinition of Caribbean identity (132).

Even though Bernabé et al. focus on the Martinican context, they do acknowledge how creolization has taken place throughout the Caribbean (Chamoiseau et al. 142). As diverse as the cultures that underpin creolization, as diverse are the locations and the consequent expressions of creolization. In the case of Curaçao, the local language, Papiamentu, exemplifies the cultural negotiation that has created the contemporary eclectic Curaçaoan culture. The language has a Creole origin consisting of African, Caquetío, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch elements (Fouse 61). Papiamentu reflects Curaçao's unique syncretism, but its position in society is still affected by underlying power relations rooted in colonialism. After the abolishment of slavery in 1863, the official language remained Dutch. However, most Curaçaoans spoke Papiamentu, causing the majority of students to receive education in a language that was not their native tongue (Fouse 70). For a long time afterwards, Dutch maintained a grander educational status, and only in 2007 did Papiamentu become an official language in Curaçao, next to Dutch and English (Pereira & Römer-Dijkhoff 26). Still, this tension between languages continues, and discrimination based on language remains ever-present (Pereira & Römer-Dijkhoff 26; Eckkrammer 84).

Buladó's director Eché Janga recognizes these tensions between Dutch and Papiamentu in an interview in *De Volkskrant* (Beekman) and has incorporated them in his film. A dinner scene at the start of the movie reflects Curaçao's language inequalities (*Buladó* 00:08:03-00:09:44). While Kenza and her father are eating dinner, Weljo comes in singing and drinking. Initially, Ouirá is angry at Weljo for not picking up Kenza from school, but later in the scene, it is revealed

that Ouirá thinks that Weljo is a bad influence on his daughter, especially concerning language. Weljo reacts to Ouirá's complaints in Papiamentu and Ouirá interrupts him with "Né-derlands" ("Dutch"), stressing every syllable. Ouirá adds: "Je weet dat ze het later nodig zal hebben." ("You know that she'll need it later.") Ouirá deems it important that his daughter learns Dutch for her future and thus recognizes the societal predominance of the language. Weljo then curses, "Dios mío," and mockingly addresses Kenza in Dutch with: "Jongedame... Jongedame... Smaakt het een beetje?" ("Young lady... Young lady... Does it taste a bit?") The inclusion of Papiamentu and Dutch testifies to the "perpetual bilingualism" on Curaçao, while the scene simultaneously reflects on the existing power imbalances between the languages.

Ouirá's and Weljo's preferences for language also exemplify the interior and exterior orientation that Bernabé et al. describe with regards to Caribbean culture. Bernabé et al. identify that colonial power has overwritten and "overdetermined" Caribbean culture and literature, which has caused an exterior cultural direction (886). Ouirá's preference for Dutch, the colonial language, marks such "exterior" focus towards the previous colonial power (886). His comment on the importance of Dutch for Kenza's future further emphasises this. Weljo's use of Papiamentu and his mocking of Dutch, then, oppose Ouirá's exterior vision. Consequently, the language preferences of Ouirá and Weljo characterise their perspectives towards Curaçaoan culture. This tension between characters and languages thus reflects how Curaçao is a "forge" where different cultures have encountered each other and together have created a creolized society infused with power imbalances.

Kenza's Interior Vision

Buladó engages with different facets of interior vision towards Curaçaoan creolization through the character arc of Kenza. Bernabé et al. find that Creoleness' interior vision is preceded by a crucial step of "self-acceptance," which develops after observing the world anew through

a new look capable of taking away our nature from the secondary or peripheral edge so as to place it again in the center of ourselves, somewhat like the child's look, questioning in front of everything, having yet no postulates of its own, and putting into question even the most obvious facts (890)



Figure 1. - Still from dinner table scene in *Buladó*. Reproduced with permission.

Kenza's character exemplifies this primary child-like look that can lead to interior vision. She is a child and initially she observes her environment. For example, she remains completely silent in the dinner table scene, even though her father and grandfather are talking about her. The shots of this scene serve to visually emphasise her liminal position (fig. 1). In the first shot, she sits in the middle of the table with Ouirá and Weljo at opposite sides (00:08:33). The second shot is a close-up of Kenza poking at her food, while her family members are bickering (00:09:13). In both shots, Kenza visually is the focal point, which reflects how she stands in the middle of her family's disagreement over language and culture. The presence of the external and interior perspectives of her father and grandfather make it possible for Kenza to consider both and to question them.

The differences between father and son also come to the surface in their engagement with the creolized culture. After Kenza's favourite stray dog dies, a sequence puts the two men in opposition to each other, mirroring their investments into Dutch and Curaçaoan culture



Figure 2. - Still of the funerary rite for Kenza's dog. Reproduced with permission.

(00:44:22-00:46:33). Kenza and her grandfather, presumably following Curaçaoan tradition, hold a funerary ceremony for the dog. In the red light of fire, they put the dog on a raft and chant as he drifts out to sea. The shots of the funeral alternate with shots of Ouirá deciding to destroy the tree of spirits, which Weljo has been building out of old car parts. Coloured in the blue hues of the electric lights, Ouirá takes his truck to pull down the tree. With their contrasting colour schemes, the alternating shots of the dog's funeral and the demolition of the spirit tree emphasise the different worldviews of the characters, as well as accentuate Kenza's choice to turn towards the spiritual and creolised nature that her grandfather embodies. This sequence marks how Kenza chooses between interior and exterior vision, after observing and questioning both of them.

In addition to placing an emphasis on Kenza's Curaçaoan heritage, *Buladó* expresses the interior vision of Creoleness through engaging with the oral transmission of stories. Bernabé et al. argue that Creole culture should derive from the oral culture that evolved on the plantations (895). This oral tradition is at the heart of *Buladó*, as Janga based the film's story on the orally transmitted slavery myth that his uncle passed on to him. Within *Buladó*'s story, orality also plays a significant role in Weljo and Kenza's communication. Speaking of his spirit tree, Weljo tells Kenza: "Als de noordoostpassaat verandert, zal er een magisch schouwspel plaatsvinden" ("When the northeasterly trade wind changes, a magical spectacle will take place"; 00:27:27). Because

of this act of oral transmission, Kenza can better identify the moment at which her grandfather wishes to exercise his myth-based death ritual. Significantly, the wind changes after Kenza reconciles with her father at her mother's grave by making him realise that ignoring her mother's death does not do her justice. Kenza's approach to death and knowledge of the rituals is built through Weljo's oral transmission of stories. At the end of the film, Kenza and Ouira adhere to the values of Creoleness by following Weljo's wishes that originate in the Curaçaoan oral tradition. Consequently, the importance of orality to Curaçaoan culture weaves through the movie in its origin and the story it represents, corresponding to how Bernabé et al. argue that oral storytelling should be the basis of Creole art (895).

Contextual Creoleness and Diaspora

The question of Creoleness and cultural interiority is complicated by the context of *Buladó's* creation. In their renunciation of Césaire's negritude and French cultural supremacy, Bernabé et al. reject the external orientation that Caribbean people have often employed (889). However, they do not mention how a perspective from outside the Caribbean, specifically a diasporic view, can complicate matters of orientation in "In Praise of Creoleness." *Buladó's* director represents just this outside-in perspective. While his paternal family is from Curaçao and his father was born there, Janga grew up in the Netherlands (Beekman).

Confiant and Chamoiseau engage with the Antillean diaspora in an interview with British anthropologist and filmmaker Lucien Taylor. Confiant is especially critical of Antillean intellectuals who have developed diasporic discourse from outside of the Caribbean (Chamoiseau et al. 151). He criticises how they have left their origins behind to make money and advance their careers and how, consequently, they have become less rooted in the creolized reality of the Caribbean. Yet, on the other hand, he notes that "the Antillean nation is [...] wherever there are Antilleans" (151). Thus, he recognizes that the diasporic community does carry Creoleness with them. Importantly, Confiant adds: "Diasporic discourse shouldn't override indigenous discourse. It should be complementary vision" (151).

Chamoiseau adds to Confiant's statement, arguing that one is more likely to develop an essentialist cultural imaginary away from one's place of origin (152). Thus, Confiant and Chamoiseau are highly suspicious of diasporic configurations of Creoleness yet they also relay a possible validity to a diasporic Creoleness as a "complementary" extension of their original conception.

In the case of *Buladó*, Janga demonstrates that Curaçaoans were positive about him making the movie because he did not paint an essentialized picture of Curaçaoan culture. In his *Volkskrant* interview, Janga mentions that Curaçaoans reacted positively to his project, especially when they realised he intended to show a different side of the island than the touristy white beaches and colourful houses (Beekman). Curaçaoans appreciated Janga's focus, since a Curaçaoan perspective is rarely present in mainstream media. Janga thus invests in stories that were overwritten by colonial power structures, "*the impenetrable areas of silence where screams were lost*" (Bernabé et al. 897). Hence, Janga's Antillean background made him create a story that centres and explores the complexity of Curaçao's creolized culture, reflecting "an imaginary of diversity," and thus rejecting a reductive gaze that only pays attention to the sunny side of Curaçao.

While Janga is able to portray an artistic diasporic Creoleness because of his Antillean roots, the production and distribution of the movie has depended on Dutch people and resources. In the blogpost "*Buladó: het Westen en de Curaçaose spiritualiteit*," Lex Veerkamp notices this tension between source and subject, as, despite portraying a Curaçaoan story, the dynamics of international movie distribution have made it so that *Buladó* was not screened on the island upon release. *Buladó* was selected for the Academy Awards as the Dutch entry for Best International Feature Film. To be selected, the movie could not be screened in any other country than the Netherlands, which is why the Netherlands claimed the movie. Veerkamp questions if Curaçao is a second country, noticing an unbalanced relation between the countries and tension around the fact that a movie with a Curaçaoan story was not visible in Curaçao.

Tension is inherently part of a diasporic Creoleness, since diaspora connects different identities and attached power imbalances. The Martinican writers configure Creoleness as complex and fluid. Confiant states: "Créolité is all about understanding mosaic, multiple identities" (Chamoiseau et al. 153).

Diaspora also brings forth identities that are mosaic and multiple. That is why, as Confiant proposes, diasporic discourse can form a “complementary vision” to Creoleness (151). *Buladó* reflects the diaspora’s multiplicity through its production, as it is bound by the complicated and ongoing, but also changing relationship between the Netherlands and Curaçao.

Janga is aware of the movie’s complicated position in relation to the two cultures. In an interview with *De Filmkrant*, he says that he hopes that Antillians connect to the movie and mentions that a film largely spoken in Papiamentu is very special for them (Shalmashi). He thus demonstrates that his prime audience is people from the formerly Dutch Antilles. However, Janga mentions that *Buladó* is also a Dutch movie (Shalmashi). He refers to Curaçao as part of Dutch heritage because of the colonial past, diaspora, and the island’s position as a constituent country within the Kingdom of the Netherlands. The interconnection between the Netherlands and Curaçao is also present in the choice of actors. All the actors have been born on Curaçao, but Felix de Rooy and Everon Jackson Hooi have lived and have been educated in the Netherlands. Janga’s consideration of Curaçaoan and Dutch public and the background of the actors reflect the ongoing colonial and diasporic relation between Curaçao and the Netherlands.

Conclusion

Buladó’s commitment to Creoleness culminates in the film’s last scene, which combines multiple creolized elements from Curaçaoan culture to express Creoleness’ interior vision. When the northeasterly trade wind changes, Kenza goes to steal the Caquetio headdress from the museum, as per Weljo’s instructions. Afterwards, she frees Weljo from the elderly home. Her father comes to pick them up with Weljo’s horse and they reconcile and hug (01:17:40-01:18:24). In Papiamentu, Ouira says: “Papa. Ik wist niet beter. Vergeef me.” (“Dad. I didn’t know better. Forgive me.”) Weljo replies: “Dankjewel voor mijn verlossing. Je bevrijding komt eraan. Het is al begonnen.” (“Thank you for my redemption. Your liberation is coming. It has already started.”) The family walks onto the plain together and afterwards, Weljo rides along the edge of the cliff, suggesting that he will fly away like their enslaved ancestors.

Besides the adherence to oral myths, it is notable that all this last dialogue happens in Papiamentu and does not include any tensions with Dutch, as in the earlier dinner scene. The dialogue rather talks of redemption and liberation. Next to the unopposed use of Creole language, this passage includes the combined markers of Curaçao's creolized culture, as the Caquetio headdress and the slave myth take the central stage. Additionally, Kenza's whole family participates in the rejection of the Western elderly home, and instead facilitates Weljo's wish to die as the ancestors did. Even Ouirá repents and reconciles with his Curaçaoan heritage, which he previously rejected. Like the rest of his family, he turns inwards and away from a Western Dutch orientation and thus practises "interior vision." This reconciliation and the communal participation in Weljo's last wish express the celebration of Creoleness within Curaçaoan culture.

This scene characterises how *Buladó* highlights different Curaçaoan dimensions of Creoleness and chooses to celebrate the island's creolized culture. It incorporates the culture, its language, orality, with a rejection of Western values that characterises the interior vision portrayed throughout the film. Together with this consideration of Creoleness as defined by Bernabé et al., the film prompts us to consider the complexities of diasporic Creoleness, particularly in the context of its production and reception. Janga's film reflects the multifaceted nature of Creoleness, weaving together threads of language, culture, and identity to shed light on the complexities of Curaçao's postcolonial society. Within the limitations and possibilities that accompany diaspora, Janga has thus managed to make a film that represents Curaçaoan Creoleness and a journey towards it. As a result, he might have opened a door for more works that explore and celebrate Curaçao's Creoleness.

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Biography

Dewi Kopp is a student of the RMA Comparative Literary Studies at Universiteit Utrecht. She retrieved her bachelor’s degree at Amsterdam University College. There, she majored in humanities focussing on literature, cultural analysis, art history and

anthropology. She is particularly interested in cultural memory studies and postcolonial studies. At the intersection of these fields, she researches the contemporary representations of identity and colonial perpetration in the former Dutch colonies.