

## UNIT 5

# Models of Caribbean Society

### Overview

We know that sociology focuses on social behaviours and the ways in which societies develop, organize and create networks and institutions. So, it should come as no surprise that Caribbean thinkers also are interested in these issues. The contribution of Caribbean thinkers to the understanding of social relations in the Caribbean is very important to the discussion of cohesiveness in Caribbean societies and the factors which impact the ways in which these societies progress. Despite the presence of social systems that encourage an adherence to patterned human behaviour, many Caribbean countries have had some periods of disruption in interactions that are considered necessary for feelings of inclusiveness.

In the previous unit we looked at Caribbean identity in the context of the cultures of the people who came, and some of the ways in which their various cultures have interacted, one with another. In this unit we will discover the main arguments put forward to explain Caribbean Societies – Creole Society, Plural Society and Plantation society – and critically review the relevance of each. The Caribbean thinkers whose work we will explore include: Edward Kamau Brathwaite (Creole Society); M.G. Smith (Plural Society) and Plantation Society (proponents such as Raymond Smith and George Beckford). Like others who have followed, these writers are categorized as thinkers who contribute to the development of a Caribbean Sociology.

These theories provide description, explanation and sometimes prescription, for the ways in which the history of colonialism, plantation slavery and indentureship, have shaped the peculiar development of Caribbean societies. They also provide a foundation for our discussions in Unit 6 when we will focus on Social Stratification in the Caribbean.

As you read the unit content and participate in the learning activities, you must remember what you have read about Comte's explanations as to why sociology came about and ask yourself if such a reasoning should not also apply to the Caribbean social's dynamics. To what extent can the behavior of Caribbean people be explained by the social environment they inhabit?

## Learning Objectives

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By the end of this Unit you will be able to:

1. Explain the social structure of the contemporary Caribbean.
2. Critically review explanations offered by Caribbean thinkers for the structure of contemporary Caribbean societies.
3. Apply understandings of models of Caribbean societies to explaining social phenomena.
4. Value the contribution Caribbean sociological perspectives to understanding social phenomena.

This Unit is divided into three Sessions as follows:

**Session 5.1:** Plural Society

**Session 5.2:** Creole Society

**Session 5.3:** Plantation Society



## Readings & Resources

### *Required Readings*

Bolland, O.N. (1998) Creolisation and Creole Societies. A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History. *Caribbean Quarterly*, 44(1/2). Available via [UWILinC](http://search.proquest.com/library.open.uwi.edu/docview/855606024?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537) at <http://search.proquest.com/library.open.uwi.edu/docview/855606024?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537>

Mustapha, N. (2013). *Sociology for Caribbean Students* (2nd edition). Module 1. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers. Available via [UWILinC](http://search.proquest.com/library.open.uwi.edu/docview/855606024?OpenUrlRefId=info:xri/sid:primo&accountid=42537).

**You are also advised to locate and read:** Additional papers relevant to the topics covered.

## Session 5.1

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# Plural Society

### Introduction

The term, **plural society**, is associated with J.S. Furnivall, a British colonial public servant and writer. The term as he used it, referred to groups of people in a society who mix but do not combine. In trying to make sense of colonial practice and intention in Java, Furnivall argued that different ethnic groups in a plural society meet only in the marketplace. In the original version of this theory, Furnivall studied Burmese society and found that although different groups lived and worked alongside each other, they mixed but did not really combine. He posited that such segregation happened because persons only mixed in the marketplace and he further said that because of this, the marketplace or economy was the single most important institution in Burmese society. It is a framework that was created to explain and analyse multicultural societies in which there appeared to be dysfunction.

M.G. Smith, a Jamaican social anthropologist, is credited for the application of plural society perspective to the Caribbean. He did more than a decade of work starting in the 1960s, deepening and refining the perspective over the years.

### Characteristics of the Plural Society

In the previous unit, particularly in Session 2 when we looked at Creole Culture, the readings you did from Mustapha (2013) would have prepared the ground for the understanding of these models of Caribbean societies. Let us return to Mustapha (2013) for a bit.



## LEARNING ACTIVITY 5.1

### *Read and Research*

Post your responses to the following instructions in the designated forum. Respond to the posts of at least two of your peers

1. Re-read [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) pp. 110-111 and explain in your own words how Smith's view differed from Furnivall's view of plural society.
2. Explain in your own words what you understand as the marketplace to which Furnivall refers. Then, using examples from your own society, explain the importance of the marketplace as an important institution for understanding social relations.
3. Which of the critiques of M.G. Smith's explanation of the Plural Society do you find most important? Explain your reason for the selection of the critique.

The matter of cultural pluralism is key to M.G. Smith's thesis. Bolland (1998) makes the important point that the cultural emphasis that Smith used as a lens to explain Caribbean societies was justified by the absence of a consensus of cultural values between the Africans and Europeans. Caribbean societies, then, and now, are defined by the diversity of the cultures which seem to mix but not combine.

### Session 5.1 Summary

In this session we looked at one of the explanations of models of Caribbean societies, the Plural Society. We looked at the explanations offered by M.G. Smith which were grounded in the understanding of these societies as diverse, as mixing in the marketplace but never combining. The evidence for this theory came from a recognition of the various cultures in the Caribbean as having common institutions but practicing different forms of each. Finally, we looked at the critiques of Smith's plural society thesis. One of the critiques that you might want to spend some time considering is the matter of whether culturally and socially homogenous societies are a given, an ideal or not realistic. In the following session we are going to be exploring another explanation for Caribbean societies: the Creole Society.

## Session 5.2

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# Creole Society Model

### Introduction

In Unit 4 Session 2, we had looked at creolization as a way to explain Caribbean identity. It is the same process of change and adaptation of cultures that is at the heart of the discussion of the Creole Society theory.

### Creole Society

Mustapha (2013) identified Creole society in the Caribbean as proposed by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, as a society with a rich mixture of peoples of different cultures which fostered Creolization and its processes of acculturation and inter-culturation. Remember: we learnt in the previous unit that acculturation is the process by which lesser cultural groups acquire new cultural patterns deriving from the contact of different cultural groups. Inter-culturation on the other hand “refers to the mutual, symbiotic exchange of cultural traits” (Mustapha, 2013: 112).

It is important to note that exchange in cultural traits, something apparent in the plantation setting, lead to a syncretism of “traditional traits and introduced traits”. You will find this view exciting and interesting when you begin to examine Afro- Caribbean religions in the Caribbean in the last unit for this course. Syncretism is an example of resistance to the repression and suppression by the Europeans of the culture of the enslaved.

The Creole society model as proposed by Kamau Brathwaite emerged out of Brathwaite’s study of Jamaica between 1770 and 1820. The model, like the Plural Society model, focuses on Caribbean cultures. However, the difference lies in the fact that while the Plural Society theory focuses on segmentation, Brathwaite’s Creole Society while recognizing that segmentation, looks to an ‘evolving cultural unity’ which would bring some wholeness to the society (Bolland, 1998). Brathwaite’s perspective has been criticized for its polarized presentation of the cultural exchange as he largely based this explanation on a black and white social relationship.



## LEARNING ACTIVITY 5.2

### *Read and Explain*

Read in Bolland (1998) the section entitled 'The Creole – Society Model'. This activity is designed to develop your understanding of the Creole Society Theory. Now, respond to the instructions outlined below in the designated forum.

1. Identify the processes identified by Brathwaite in his explanation of the development of the Creole Society
2. Provide a critical analysis of the relevance of each of the processes for contemporary Caribbean society.
3. In your own words explain the critiques and/or elaborations made to Brathwaite's theory **by two** of the following Caribbean thinkers: Rex Nettleford, Mervyn Alleyne and Orlando Patterson.
4. Finally, pose any question for which you require clarification so that your tutor or peers may provide a response. You must also, respond to any request for clarification that you are able to provide.

As you read and immersed yourself in this discussion did you note the following features of the Creole Society as explained by Brathwaite:

- The most important issue in the theory is not the 'imported' influence of the Mother Country but, rather, cultural action manifesting itself as a response by people within the society to each other and the environment.
- Europeans in the society responded to pressure to conform to European standards as these existed in the Mother Countries. This conformity is connected with the view that the Europeans held of themselves vis-à-vis the rest of the society.
- Slaves were pressured to conform to European cultural standards. In the process of creolization, then, the slaves were 'seasoned'.
- A noticeable feature of the creole society was the imitation of white society. Post-emancipation the imitation – mimicry – was seen in the behaviour of the black middle class.

## Session 5.2 Summary

In the session on the Creole Society model as explained by E. Kamau Brathwaite. We saw that Brathwaite like M.G. Smith focused on the cultural diversity of the Caribbean. However, Brathwaite saw this cultural diversity as potentially beneficial to the society providing the opportunity for cultural unity and, ultimately, social healing. We also examined the critiques and iterations of this view as have been offered by other Caribbean thinkers. In the final session of the unit we will consider the Plantation Society theory.

## Session 5.3

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# Plantation Society Model

### Introduction

The main proponent of plantation society theory is Raymond Smith (1967) who used Guyana as a model representative of Caribbean society. According to Bolland (1998), the thesis identifies the institution of the plantation combined with the experience and legacy of slavery, as central in Caribbean social life. The social organisation and culture associated with plantation production is seen as a microcosm of the wider society. The model gave an almost exclusive focus on economic arrangements and did not take into account other factors such as social factors, and the extent to which these shaped social organization in the region.

Let us learn some more about this model.

### Understanding the Plantation Society Model

Viewing social organisation in three epochs – the days of slavery, the century after emancipation and the post 1940 era – Smith contended that the coastland in Guyana had acted autonomously and had few interrelations in the absence of a centralized system. Thus, each plantation was a “totality”, a unit able to run on its own and as seen fit by the planters. Lives were controlled and regulated by the owners of these units.

In the post emancipation period the incorporation of the enslaved was used by Smith to identify societal patterns. He argued that the now free blacks demonstrated the same dependence as under enslavement, and the planter maintained positions of political and economic power. This pattern of power and authority was sustained into the 1940s.

There have been continuations of the plantation society perspective advanced by Smith. In these works by Horowitz (1971) and Patterson (1967) for example, there are arguments of plantation communities being a dominant type of organization. The writers put forward characteristics such as unstable forms of family organization and hierarchical relations. Can you think of any other characteristics that might be present? Other writers such as George Beckford (1970) contributed to the elaboration of the perspective through the application of economic models. What exactly he proposed has been left for you to explore and distill in the learning activity below.





## LEARNING ACTIVITY 5.3

### *Read and Explain*

Re-read [Mustapha \(2013\)](#) pp. 109-110 on the Plantation Society Theory. Also read Bolland (1998)'s section on Plantation Society Model.

We have discussed the perspective of plantation society but there are still some characteristic we have not outlined. Using no more than 8 slides, develop a PowerPoint presentation of notes which answer the following questions:

1. What are the characteristics highlighted by Beckford in his expanded view of the plantation society perspective?
2. With reference to one piece of scholarly work, explain one criticism of the perspective
3. Comment on the relevance of the Plantation Society Model to your own society in 2016.

Share your thoughts with your colleagues in the designated forum. Comment in the designated forum on the notes provided at least one other colleague.

Since the plantation society is understood as being closely embedded within the structures of international capitalism. Its future is likely to be shaped by two major factors: expansion of international capitalism and its manifestation in different forms and the strengthening of popular movements for liberation.

## Session 5.3 Summary

This session brought our attention to the plantation society model as an explanation for social organization in the Caribbean region. The structures which identified and organized the plantation structure pre-Emancipation are presented with some modification post-Emancipation. The model identifies the forces of capitalism in its various iterations – mercantile capitalism, industrial capitalism in Europe and international capitalism – as being central to the social organization in the Caribbean.

## UNIT SUMMARY

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In this unit, we explored the potpourri of different cultures that is, itself, both part of the problem for Caribbean identity definition and the projection what Caribbean identity is. We also examined Caribbean social theories such as Creole Society, Plural Society and Plantation Society. Below are some points worth sharing.

1. Brathwaite contends that his theory of Creolization is based on historical socio-cultural dynamics with spill over ramifications for social relations in Caribbean society. There are divisions in Caribbean society and, when syncretism takes place, can be categorized into multiple orientations – Euro creole, Afro-creole for example – making for more reflection on identity.
2. George Beckford argue that the modern Caribbean society still resembled structural forms of plantation society. Characteristics of the plantation, that he notes, includes a large resident labour force of unskilled persons, the presence of a small supervisor staff, it is a community, interpersonal and social relations reflect an authority structure which is related to the economic organization of the plantation. He notes that plantation society derives the status of groups within based on their relational occupational status.
3. Plural society makes a lens for understanding inequality and marginalization. Both of these experiences are linked to the control or access to power. M.G. Smith (1965) applied the plural society thesis to the Caribbean. Mustapha (2013) explained that Smith believed that “people’s culture” formed “the matrix of their social structure”. Smith was of the view that in homogenous societies a common view of the basic social institutions is shared.

In the next unit we will examine social stratification and see how as socially constructed concept, there is a big problem with its perpetuation of inequality.

## References

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