

# BOOK REVIEW

**Christoph Kohl. *A Creole Nation: National Integration in Guinea-Bissau*.** New York: Berghahn Books, 2018. xi + 235 pp. Illustrations. Maps. Bibliography. Index. \$97.50. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1-78533-424-5.

Christoph Kohl's *A Creole Nation: National Integration in Guinea-Bissau* addresses the issue of creolization, which has become an important topic in linguistic, anthropological, and cultural studies since its inception in the 1950s. It is an appealing subject, which has over time become associated with cross-cultural interaction across the globe, emanating from the study of the Caribbean's cultural heritage. West Africa has for decades constituted a niche in creole studies, mainly promoted by anthropologists and creolists. Besides creole languages with an English lexicon, such as Krio in Sierra Leone and Aku in the Gambia, the case of creole tongues with a Portuguese lexicon in Cape Verde (Kriolu) and Guinea-Bissau (Kriol) has attracted considerable attention. In this respect, the work by the anthropologist Wilson Trajano Filho stands out. Applying the notion of overlapping processes of cultural creolization in Guinea-Bissau and the Lower Casamance in current Senegal from the 1300s onward, Trajano Filho laid the groundwork upon which Christoph Kohl built his analysis of the formation of a "Creole Nation." Jacqueline Knörr's concept of cultural pidginization or trans-ethnicization, based on her field research in Sierra Leone, serves as a complementary epistemological thread for this study. In under 200 pages, Kohl's dense writing compresses a wealth of information on the dynamics of cultural creolization and pidginization in the region, taking the reader on a guided tour of cross-cultural change, past and present.

Kohl's book is divided into three chapters. The first, "Guinea Bissau: a Creole Nation?" gives an outline of his working hypothesis; the second, "Creole identity in Guinea-Bissau," discusses the different "creole" strata and their trans-ethnicization over time; and the third centers on the dynamics of creolization for "Building the Nation" and its significance for current-day Guinea-Bissau. The core of the author's research is formed by 133 interviews with representatives from the country's "creole society," based upon multi-sited fieldwork conducted in some of the country's main urban centers (Bissau, Bafatá, Cacheu, Farim, Geba, and Bolama) and the town of Ziguinchor in Senegal. Complemented by personal observations,

these oral data are then worked into a “thick description” with the aid of a large number of written sources.

Kohl’s painstaking research highlights the “strong commitment to nationhood” which Bissau-Guineans embrace despite the enormous diversity of ethnic and creolized groups and identities. The country, which gained independence in 1974 after a protracted armed struggle, has been beset by successive political crises, which has led it to be depicted as a “weak,” “fragile,” “failed,” or even a “narco” state. The transformation of Guinea-Bissauan Creole (Kriol) from a lingua franca spoken only in coastal towns or *prisas* to a national language (122–31), the spread of *mandjuandadis* based upon age-sets and Christian confraternities to strategic platforms for mass-mobilization in the post-colonial era (131–62), and the diffusion of carnival celebrations or *ntrudu* inspired by European religious customs centered on Bissau to a variety informal articulations in the rest of the country (162–87) all contributed to “interethnic, national integration” (131). In the process, Kriol terminology associated with these phenomena also changed, gaining new meanings as they shifted from exclusive to broader and more inclusive connotations to become “national” cultural signifiers. During a protracted process of trans-ethnicization, three sub-groups of what the author calls “creoles” have shaped the transformation of the country’s fragmented social fabric into a “creole nation.” In the process, the book provides illuminating insights into the lesser-known “ethnicized” *Kriston di Geba* (84–110), highlighting the key role of this Christianized stratum in the formation and spread of Kriol, the *mandjuandadadis* and carnival celebrations.

While the use of the ill-defined umbrella term “creoles”—which has been applied to Caboverdean creole society in the homonymous archipelago—as a social stratum is questionable for its universalist assumptions, and the epistemological grain adopted here would rather justify the banner of a “creolized nation,” the book puts forward a challenging hypothesis on shared cultural belonging and nationhood in this small and under-researched African country. One of the author’s great achievements is the skillful manner in which he synthesizes a myriad of data gleaned from oral and written sources in the *longue durée* and weaves them into a well-crafted and colorful tapestry of interlocking narratives on an African society in constant flux. Finally, the inclusion of a glossary of Kriol terminology with standardized spelling would have facilitated readers’ comprehension. All in all, however, this book is a must for academics working on cultural creolization, as well as for those specializing in the political anthropology of nationhood in sub-Saharan Africa.

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**For more reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:**

Green, Tobias. 2009. "Building Creole Identity in the African Atlantic: Boundaries of Race and Religion in Seventeenth-Century Cabo Verde." *History in Africa* 36: 103–25. doi:10.1353/hia.2010.0011.

Kohl, Christoph. 2016. "Limitations and Ambiguities of Colonialism in Guinea-Bissau. Examining the Creole and 'Civilized' Space in Colonial Society." *History in Africa* 43: 169–203. doi:10.1017/hia.2015.27.