

Chanting Down the New Jerusalem

*Calypso, Christianity, and
Capitalism in the Caribbean*

Francio Guadeloupe



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Chanting Down the New Jerusalem

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This study concerns itself with the manner in which popular disc jockeys on the binational island of Saint Martin and Sint Maarten (the French and Dutch West Indies) employ Caribbean music and creolized Christianity to put forth all-inclusive politics of belonging. It is about how on a multiethnic and multireligious island, where everyone's livelihood depends on tourism, all social classes seek and are often able to transcend their ethnic and religious differences. This is done paradoxically by employing creolized Christianity as a public religion that does not privilege any of the faiths practiced, not even itself. It is an ethnography that seeks to demonstrate that in a time in which ethnic- and religious-based identity politics are rampant, there are alternatives in the

world. There are places where people understand, because of their circumstances, that taking on an identity is about creating for oneself a space to act while taking others into consideration.

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Last, to my friend David Chidester, thanks for reminding me that as embattled as we may be, the human being is indestructible. Indestructible because we contradict all racial, ethnic, and religious divides we impose on ourselves.



Saint Martin and Sint Maarten



The Caribbean islands

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Introduction

A New Jerusalem in the Caribbean Sea

All demands for the recognition of difference presuppose extensive transcultural knowledge that would have been impossible to acquire if cultural divisions always constituted impermeable barriers to understanding.

Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*

Identity as a problematic category of practice, in which certain people are viewed as being identical to one another while others are regarded as totally different, is one of the leading themes in the human sciences. In study after study we are furnished with evidence that identity politics and the feeling of belonging, an explosive combination of bio-cultural racism and exclusive claims to territory, are common throughout the world (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000; Meyer and Geschiere 1999). In response to pressures associated with globalization and the weakening of the nation-state, ethnic minorities and recently arrived immigrants, demographic categories that oftentimes intersect with religious differences, are unequivocally portrayed as enemies of the “indigenous people,” the autochthons, to whom the territory supposedly rightfully belongs. Even within the social sciences one sees that the recognition of class differences, which are relational and non-essentializing differences, are abandoned for the lure of viewing groups as exclusive and wrapped up in their metaphysical core cultures (Cooper 2005; White 1990).

Ethnic clashes in Rwanda, Bosnia, and Sri Lanka; anti-Caucasian sentiments in Russia; the growth of neo-fascism in northwestern Europe; and the Bharatiya Janata Party’s Hindu fascism are all examples of the violence related to the need to assert one’s belonging by claiming exclusive roots in a territory or the fulfilment of God’s will. The evidence is overwhelming. The studies are convincing. This global trend poses a serious



Figure 1. The Franco-Dutch border



Figure 2. The islands

challenge to those who still believe that we need to work toward “humanism made to the measure of the world” (Césaire 1972: 56), or a planetary humanism based on an all-inclusive politics of human belonging (Gilroy 2000, 2006), or a future cosmopolitan humanism (Derrida 2001).

We who still believe in this project must ensure that in our writings we do not unwittingly resort to a Manichaeism that dehumanizes those of whom we are critical. We must not be racial, gender, ethnic, or religious missionaries. We must practice a systematic disloyalty to those toward whom we feel solidarity. We must deconstruct the naturalizing tendencies to feel a special connection, by virtue of our phenotype, sex, culture, or religious preference, to those whom we are historically connected. An important way of doing so is by constantly reminding ourselves of that old philosophical saying, “You never walk twice down the same river.” That is, the self that one recognizes as continuous with an unchanging core constantly changes, as do the places through which one ventures and the people with whom one interacts. Therefore, to some degree, native social scientists are outsiders in their own societies. This is especially the case when they have spent a considerable amount of time outside their country or region of origin and have imbibed the dialect of their professional discipline, with its a priori grounds of knowledge. I was no exception. I learned during my academic study to conceptualize society primarily in class terms. It became my privileged way of seeing, of rendering unfamiliar social processes familiar. There were classes. There was right and wrong.

Before I began my training in development studies and social anthropology, this was not the way in which I conceived of reality. It was only one of the ways in which I understood life in the Caribbean, where I had lived almost half my life. Conceptualizing society in class terms was a principle. It was based on my rejection of rigid hierarchies and on the reality that a privileged few consume more than their fair share of the world’s cake. However, in the Caribbean this principle is seemingly kept in check by pragmatism. Pragmatism does not exempt one from understanding that the world is unjust, but it does make one pay attention to the realities of everyday life. It made me realize where I stood, and what I stood to lose if I acted solely on the basis of principle.

I had never paid much attention to the discrepancy between my outlook as taught to me through the social sciences and the one I learned growing up in the Caribbean. But now, heading back to this region of the world to do fieldwork on the politics of belonging, I had to see things the way West Indians see them, and to understand why they see things

in that way, without neglecting my anthropological point of view. As I tired myself out by writing down self-reflexive notes on the airplane, practicing the Foucauldian art of not being governed by taken-for-granted epistemes, I was happily disturbed by a voice from the cockpit saying, “This is your captain speaking. Please fasten your seatbelts; we are about to land at the Princess Juliana Airport.” These words sounded heavenly after eleven uncomfortable hours in one of Air France’s flying birds. There I was, then, on lovely Saint Martin (French) and Sint Maarten (Dutch), where more than eighty nationalities live on an island of just thirty-seven square miles.

In a world of independent postcolonial states, Saint Martin and Sint Maarten (SXM) seems an anachronism. (The acronym SXM is the code used for passenger flights to the island. Today it has become the general abbreviation of Saint Martin and Sint Maarten.) The Dutch side of the island is part of the Dutch Antilles, which together with Aruba and the Netherlands form the Dutch Kingdom. All major decisions pertaining to the Dutch Kingdom are made by the parliament in The Hague. On Dutch SXM, Curaçao federal administrators supervise the activities of the local civil servants and ensure congruence with the island’s direct constitutional partners, Curaçao, Bonaire, Saint Eustatius, and Saba. Dutch SXM as a political entity belongs to three imagined national communities, namely, the wider Dutch nation, the Dutch Antilles, and SXM proper. However, as the Netherlands surrenders more of its autonomy to the European Union, it is widely believed that in the near future Dutch SXM will become a full-fledged member of the EU. A fourth layer of official belonging will thus be added.

The French side of the island already enjoys full membership in the European supra-nation in the making. It is part of the French overseas department of Guadeloupe and as such is an integral part of the French Republic and thus the European Union. On French SXM, Guadeloupean civil servants take care of affairs related to Guadeloupe as a federal entity comprising Guadeloupe proper, Grande-Terre, Saint Barthélemy, Marie Galante, Désirade, Îles de Saintes, and Saint Martin; specific local matters are left to the local administrators and politicians.

Interestingly, notwithstanding the administrative boundary dividing the island, the imagined community of SXM proper comprises both sides of the island. Thus, when the islanders claim belonging to the nation of SXM they are referring to both French and Dutch SXM (Klomp 2000; Rummens 1991). The fact that France’s influence in the European Union has ensured that the entire island has been designated a free port, where

stringent trade tariffs are not levied and there is little border patrol, has strengthened SXMers' sense of being one nation. The focus of this study is on the politics of belonging on SXM.

The jolly Caribbean music in the lobby of the airport welcomed me to this island where the sun in the sky has nestled itself in the souls of the people. This of course is a cliché. Postcard talk that obfuscates the whips that broke the slaves' backs and the contracts that strangled the indentured laborers (Hoefte 2005; James 1963). Talk that sugarcoats the ethnic and racial tensions for which the anthropological version of the Caribbean is best known (e.g., the facile readings of the nuanced texts of Williams 1991 and Hoetink 1967). As an anthropologist born in the Caribbean, I should know better. But it is exactly because I do know better than to think that Caribbean people are a people traumatized by their past, or a people totally alienated from one another, that I feel I can write that the sun has nestled in the heart of the people of SXM. To me SXM stands symbolic of the social fact that out of the atrocities against human rights that permeate Caribbean history, the peoples of the region have found a *modus vivendi* that is not perfect but is remarkable in light of the horrors of the past and the divide-and-conquer ideologies still operative today. We may have to stop making too much of the long groan that underlines the Caribbean's past (Walcott 1999: 68).

I resided on the island in the mid-1980s, between my sixteenth and eighteenth birthdays, and I have nothing but fond memories of SXM. In the two years that I lived there, I never once felt like an outsider. I was part of the welcomed stream of immigrants. The fifteen hundred inhabitants who had lived on the island before the 1960s tourism boom—primarily old folks and young children—knew nothing about waiting tables, building hotels, or developing tourist attractions (Kersell 1991: 60). Before the tourism boom, the island was little more than a postal-order economy, running off the money sent from relatives working abroad. As writer-photographer Philip Hiss observed in 1943, “St. Maarten epitomizes the condition of the Netherlands Windward Islands, which live with their memories of the past in a state of suspended animation. Many plantations are deserted, and the more virile elements of the population have emigrated. The people who remained exist largely on money remitted to them by relatives in Curaçao, Aruba, and the United States” (quoted in Badejo 1990: 122). By the 1980s, however, not even the virile “indigenous” elements—the *locals*, as the autochthons refer to themselves—who had returned to cater to the tourists had sufficient capacities to run the island. Without the manpower and financial investments of working-class and