

# 'Varieties of Creole in Suriname. The Art of Reading Creole Poetry'

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## bron

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Zie voor verantwoording: [http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/voor007vari01\\_01/colofon.htm](http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/voor007vari01_01/colofon.htm)

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## Varieties of Creole in Suriname

### *The Art of Reading Creole Poetry*<sup>1</sup>

**J. Voorhoeve**

Poetry is universal, because man is man in all times and all cultures. Every form of poetry in the world can be appreciated everywhere else, how remote the source of the poetry might be, culturally or racially. This does not mean, however, that the ears of every listener are tuned in to the beauties hidden in a special poem. Shakespeare lived in a different world. He refers to and reacts on situations, unknown to us now. The same is true for poems which do not lie far behind us in time, but which still refer to a different world. I should like to demonstrate this by reading a poem, written by a Creole from Suriname.

The poem is written in Suriname Creole (Sranan). To overcome the language difficulties I reproduce the poem with a quasi literal translation in English. I do not think the language used creates special problems. It is the poem itself which needs annotation.

The poem consists of four stanzas, of which the first three show a peculiar symmetrical structure. They have recurrent lines 1 3 4 5 and variant lines 2 6 7. The last stanza goes its own way, but shows internal symmetry. Line 1 is repeated with slight alternation in lines 6 and 7, line 3 is repeated in line 5. If not for line 2. the stanza would show a mirror image starting from the middle line *ala mi mati* (all my friends). This is a structure of great complexity, reminiscent of the structure of songs.

The title introduces a person in the first person singular pronoun. This man or woman has gone away (formerly) and is coming back (now). In the first three stanzas this person imagines the dry season wind on three different places putting before him the same question: Creole, how? This is the rather meaningless question people use in meeting each other. It certainly does not refer to a long absence, as suggested by the title. The Creole then imagines himself answering all three times with the same peculiar statement: Here I am. The question 'How?' would rather ask for the same meaningless answer: 'Not too bad.' Instead of this, the Creole answers: 'Here I am.' This peculiar statement makes us suspect more behind the simple question of the dry season wind than we thought before. This new interpretation is reinforced by the variant lines, added to the statement. These lines in fact contain a subtle comparison between Europe and Suriname. In three different stanzas the Creole throws in three different arguments in favour of his home country:

his life as a small boy, listening to the old stories of his granny; the cotton-trees, lively with spirits, as against the dead technical miracles of Europe; and the cake his Creole love used to prepare, as against the potatoes from Holland.

The simple meaningless question of the dry season wind now gets a bitter flavour. By going abroad the Creole has created serious doubts about his roots in life. One does not know where he really belongs. He is welcomed three times as if he was a stranger, by the most indifferent greeting formula in the language. But in asking 'how' the wind also asks about the place where he really belongs. Therefore he has to affirm three times: I am here, I belong to this country. He confirms this statement by telling in a very subtle way about his experiences abroad.

Then, the fourth stanza opens with the title line, which refers to a well-known song. In a more subtle way the whole poem refers to songs. I already mentioned the song-like structure of the poem. The words *trotji* and *pitji* also are technical terms in the musical culture of Suriname Creoles, referring to the roles of soloist and chorus in Creole songs. The dry season wind starts the song as a soloist, the Creole answers each time with his chorus. One of the most remarkable achievements in this poem is, that the Creole succeeds to answer each time in a different recognizable dance rhythm. So the last lines of the first three stanzas offer a display of Creole dance rhythms. The most fascinating point, however, is that the third stanza uses a closing rhythm, especially because the rhythmic repetition is for the first time absent in the third stanza. Every Creole listener will now realize that the dance is over.

The dance is over, the answer has been given. Imagination stops and reality begins. At that same moment a new song starts, a song, used in Suriname long ago to advertize a popular skeleton-show on the yearly fancy-fair. It suggests the spell visitors are in after witnessing the show: they go away, but they must come back to see the next performance. By a subtle change of tense of the first verb, it is suggested here: I have gone away, I tried to escape, but I failed, I realize now that I must come back.

But now the Creole realizes also the dangers ahead, which might prevent him from coming back: the sea is wide. He calls urgently on his friends back home to evoke the old magical words to help him overcome the dangers. These magical words prove to be no other than the same line of the advertizing song, but now in a shortened staccato way, almost whispered: I've gone, I come ... Small dots indicate that the words continue to be whispered, till he will be safely home.

Poem by Trefossa (in Suriname Creole)

### ***mi go - m' e kon***

te dreeten winti sa trotji  
na Mawnidan;

- krioro fa?  
 m' sa pitji:  
 - dja mi de,  
 - banji fu ba-m'ma seti keba:  
 - ertintin ... ertintin ...

te dreeten winti sa trotji  
 na kankantri:  
 - krioro fa?  
 m' sa pitji:  
 - dja mi de,  
 - Eifeltoren hee pasa,  
 - m'a n'a jorka, a n'a jorka ...

te dreeten winti sa trotji  
 na Moi-bon fu Bose:  
 - krioro fa?  
 m' sa pitji:  
 - dja mi de,  
 - s'sa Mina, ptata bun,  
 - ma bojo fu ju tjir-tjiri ...

mi go - m' e kon,  
 sootwatra bradi.  
 tak wan mofo,  
 ala mi mati,  
 tak wan mofo.  
 m'go,  
 m' e kon ...

### ***I've gone - I come***

if the dry season wind starts singing  
 in Mahogany Street:  
 - Creole, how?  
 I'll answer:  
 - here am I  
 - granny's bench has been set ready  
 - once upon a time ... once upon a time ...

if the dry season wind starts singing  
 in the cotton-tree:  
 - Creole, how?  
 I'll answer:  
 - here am I  
 - Eifel Tower is much higher,  
 - but has no spirits, has no spirits ...

if the dry season wind starts singing  
 in Big Tree of Bose:  
 - Creole, how?

I'll answer:

- here am I
- Sister Mary, potatoes are all right,
- but your cake is just the best ...

I've gone - I come,  
the sea is wide,  
say the words,  
you all my friends,  
say the words.  
I've gone,  
I come ...

## Eindnoten:

- 1 Dr Voorhoeve presented this poem and its interpretation at the 'Creole evening' preceding the conference discussions. It is reprinted here from Nomen: *Leyden studies in linguistics* (The Hague, Mouton, 1969) by permission of the publishers.