The Rise And Decline Of The Creoles Of Color Essay, Research Paper

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and Decline

of the Creoles of Color

The Creoles of color made many great strides in closing the social gap between blacks and whites. This they achieved at a time when most, if not all, basic freedoms were being denied to nonwhites. As a group, these Creoles achieved a great amount of success. many acquired vast fortunes, owning plantations and slaves.

What happened to this group of people during the course of history? When American culture began to take the place of French culture in Louisiana, the Creoles of color lost their special status. Their culture was in danger of being forgotten.

It is hard to give a specific definition to the Creoles of color. They are a people of mixed ethnic heritage. Today there is a dilemma over what constitutes a modern Creole of color. During the 18th and 19th centuries however, the definition was basically; a class of people of French or Spanish blood, mixed with the blood of Africans or Santo Domingos. Their families had been free for generations. This group is part of a larger social order known as gens de couleur libre, or the free people of color.

The Creoles of color made up a third caste in the ante-bellum south. They stood between, or rather apart, from both the blacks and the whites. They identified more with the upper caste, though they shared the humiliation of being associated with the enslaved. This group was unique to Louisiana.

Before the civil war the Creoles of color existed as a separate class. The average white accepted this middle layer of society and dealt easily with its members. This is the one exception in American history of an attempt to accord a third group special status. Historically, in the United States a person having any Negro ancestry has been considered a Negro. There is no reason why a person with half of his ancestry black and half white should be labeled as black. With equal logic that person could be defined as white. The Creoles of color overcame these labels, if only for a short time.

Though the Creoles of color had their own special status, they were by no means regarded as equal to whites. There was a caste system for Creoles of African descent:

Negro – Full Negro blood

Sacatra – 7/8 Negro – 1/8 White

Griffe – 3/4 Negro – 1/8 white

Mulatto – 1/2 Negro – 1/2 White

Quadroon – 1/4 Negro – 3/4 White

Octoroon – 1/8 Negro – 7/8 White

The degree of privledge received was dependent on this scale. In other words, the whiter a person was, the more freedoms that person had.

Origins of the Creoles of Color

There were free people of color in French colonial Louisiana as early as 1725. Some came from Santo Domingo and entered the colony as free people. Others were former slaves who had been given freedom.

In March of 1724, the government in France formulated a series of laws called the Code Noir, or Black Code. Though some fo the laws were meant to regulate the conduct of freed slaves, others were designed to protect them. Aothough there was an exception that said free pople of color could not marry whites, one of these laws granted free people of color the same rights as any white citizen of Louisiana.

When Louisiana was taken over by the Spanish, most of the free people of color were upset. They were very proud to be French and did not want to be ruled by Spain. However, Spanish rule proved to be favorable to them, as they did not have to give up their Frnch culture, and the predominant language in Louisiana continued to be French.

Under the Spanish regime many slaves were freed. This was partly due to the fact that there was a lack of white European women in the colony. Many French and Spanish men took slaves as mates. It was very common for these men to free the slave women and the children which resulted from thses relationships. After freeing the slaves the man would usually grant them some land and give them money to provide for the ileegitiamte family.

These relationships were the beginnings of a practices known as placage. Placage is a Franch word meaning to be placed. Wealthy French gentleman would choose the most beautiful light-skinned women of color, usually quadroons or octoroons, and enter into an illicit relationship with them. These women were raised in chastity and protected until they met with a suitable |protectorX. From childhood these girls were trained in social graces and French manners. When they were old enough, they were introduced into society at Quadroon Balls. These balls were glamorous, formal affairs where the wealthy French gentlemen went in the hopes of meeting a beautiful Creole woman. After the alliance was made, the couple got together and agreed in a formal contract on the manner in which the woman would be taken care of. The woman was usually given a gouse in which to live and raise the children that the coulple would eventually have. These women were usually taken very good care of. They were given fine clothing, jewels, and servants. Placage was common practice in New Orleans. It was rarer in the rural areas of Louisiana, however it ded occur. Basically it was accepted by the society and considered commonplace. These women of color lived as second wives to their white planter |protectorsX. Through these relationships they gained wealth and esteem. Their greatest hope was to have children who were light enough to pass for white. Many women of color preferred placage to relationships with men of their own kind, which they thought were too limiting.

Placage was not the only way in which Creoles of color increased their population and advanced their wealth. In the rural backcountry placage was looked down upon. There, people were expected to have a proper wedding in a church.

Criteria for marriage between Creoles of color definetly involved skin color. Marriages were usuallly arranged by the parents. They sought out parnters for their children hoping to find a match who had the same shade, or preferably lighter, skin.

Sometimes there was a limited number of Creole families of color living in a rural area. This meant a lack of mates for the newest genteration. When this happened Creole men of color were brought in from New Orleans. There were always many who were willing to move into the back country, live on a plantation, and marry a Creole woman of color.

The population of Creoles of color was becomming larger all the time. Another way in which Creole families grew was through the illegitimate children of slaves and white planters. Often, the fathers of these children wanted to steer them away from alliances with laves. These fathers would free their children and arrange a marriage with a Creole planter+s child.

The Rise of Creoles of Color

Outside of Louisiana, when a slave was freed, they often found themselves with no land, no money, and no way to earn a living. This left them in a situation that was little better than slavery. In Louisiana however, there was a place for freed slaves in society.

When slaves were freed in Louisiana, they were often given some land and money. Under Spanish and French rule, free people of color enjoyed many economic liberties. They could acquire land grants, and many of them did. They farmed this land and profited from it. Eventually many of these farms became plantations. These Creoles of color became wealthy, slave-owning planters.

The Creole family farms and plantations were usually larger than, or the same size as, those owned by whites in the same area. The early crops grown on these plantations were indigo, tobacco, and sugar. These crops eventually gave way to cotton. An average Creole farm in the rural back country had about nine slaves. obviously, on a large plantation there would be many more slaves.

As parents divided their holdings between numerous offspring, there was an inevitiable decline in the size of individual plantations. Familiy was very important to the Creoles of color. It was common proctice for parents to give entire platations to their children as wedding presents.

In their treatment of the slaves they owned, the Creoles of color couldn+t win no matter what they did. They were criticized by whites for being kind to thier slaves, as well as for being harsh. As a rule however, their slaves were treated just as well as, if not better than, the average white planter+s slaves. Creoles of color were also known to grant valued slaves freedom.

Although each free person of color had a background that included slavery, the Creoles were not morally against it. Many Creoles were afraid that if all slaves were freed they would lose their special status. Basically, they adopted the attitude of the larger socity in viewing slaves. The bottom line was that slaves were an economic asset.

The majority of Creoles of color did not own plantations. Louisiana was unique in producing many economic opportunities for free people of color. In other areas white business men had an aversion to hiring nonwhites. This made it extremely hard for them to make a living. In New Orleans, the most typical ocuupations that free people of color held were: tailor, barber, carpenter, mason, cigarmaker, hack driver, and shoemaker.

The Decline of the Creoles of Color

Early on laws were passed restricting the free people of color. However, it was not until the Americans took over Louisiana that any of these laws really took hold. For example, Esteban Miro+s decree was passed in 1786. This was an attempt to prevent placages. It ordered free women of color in placages to find new ways to support themselves, or be expelled form the colony. It also stated that free women of color were to stop wearing so many jewels. Form then on they were required to wear a tignon, a kerchief used as a headdress, as a symbol of their lower status. This decree was not really obeyed. The tignon+s were made of silks and decked with jewels. They were used by these women as a further asset to their beauty. The placages continued, though in greater secrecy.

In 1803 the United States bought Louisiana from France. This proved to be the first in a series of events that would eventually cause the downfall of the Creoles of color. After the Louisiana Purchase, Americans ppoured into the colony and took over. This was a lot like takeng over a foreign country. Not only was the French culture in danger, the culture of the free people of color was in danger of being wiped out all together.

The Americans viewed all nonwhites as being part of the same inferior group. The free people of color had previously enjoyed many rights and ummunities. They also expected the Americans to recognize their special status. When Louisiana became a state, its constitution ignored all the freedoms that the free people of color had been accustomed to. They were given no political rights at all.

In an attempt to remain a separate group, the Louisian free born people of color began calling themselves Creoles. They insisted that others call them this as well. In response to the invasion of Americans in their home, the Creole community drew into itself. The Creoles refused to learn English. They held themselves aloof form whites and newly freed men.

By the 1840+s the number of Creoles in Louisiana was reduced. Though the Creoles considered themselves a separate class, they suffered form the general anti-colored feeling in the late 1830+s – 1840+s. There were laws bing passed which made it increasingly more difficult for them to live in Louisiana. For examle, the Creoles of color were barred from attending publec schools, though they had to pay taxes for those schools. It became easier for them to leave, rather than live under a government that wouldn+t recongize their rights.

Among the Creoles who stayed, their determination not to blend into the society grew. In 1843 the first magazine of writings by Creoles was published. It was called L+Album Litteraire , and contained a collection of poems and short stories. Armand Lanusse published a book of poems by Creoles. These works were treasured by the Creoles of color. The stories and poems were memorized and cherished.

At the onset of the Civil War many Creoles left for Haiti, where they would be recognized as a special group. The Creoles who remained had mixed feelings abouut the Civil War. If the South won the war, the Creoles thought there was a chance of holding thier separate class. If the the North won, the Creoles feared they would be lost in the surge of freed slaves. At the same time there was hope that all people, black and white, would be treated the same. Until New Orleans fell to the Union army, many Creoles had supported the South and given their aide in the war.

The Creoles eventually gravitiated to the North. This was because the South drove them to it. Laws had been passed requiring free people of color to have a permit to walk the streets. The Creoles loved the south, but the South seemed bent on destroying them. Also, the North offered the Creoles many promises. The most improtant one being, that with so many illiterate slaves being freed, the well-educated Creoles would be awarded positions of power. They would become leaders of the nonwhite population.

After the war nearly all white Louisianians were deprived of their power because of their part in the war. Positions of leadership were abundant. In 1863, Lincoln said that all free people of color who were intelligent and had fought on the Union side in the war should vote. By 1868, the offices of Lieutenant Governor and State Treasurer, among others, were held by Creoles. It was a brief period of equality and opportunity for people of color.

After a while, the whites who had supported the Confederacy were allowed to vote again. They regained their positions in the community. The anti-black feelings returned and the Creloses were included. It was a time for the people of color to pay for the shor t period of equality they had enjoyed. During this time there were many vioulent acts committed against people of color. The Creoles still thought that they had a unique class, though they were seen as Negroes in the eyes of others. One drop of Negro blood made them black, when before one drop of white blood was enough to grant them a little freedom. Being black in the South at this time was equal to having no privileges at all. The public schools which had been opened to them again, were once again closed. Then came the Jim Crow laws, which made it increasingly hard for people of color to live.

Discriminatory laws piled up on one another for a number of years after 1900. Each one took more civil and economic rights away form the Creoles of color as well as from non-Creole blacks. Since there was really notheing they could do to improve their situation in Louisiana, many Creoles left the South. The Creoles who were light enough passed into white society.

After a while the Creoles of color realized that they could not remain totally separate from American society. They knew thsy would have to change in some ways in order to function in America. By the early yars of the twentieth centry, they had stopped speaking French. Today, only a few French words remain in their speech. Yet despited all the changes, the Creoles of color have maintined enough of their unique culture to distinguish them form other blacks.

There is a lot of tragedy involved in the sory of the Creoles of Color. They attained Civil rights nearly a century before the Civil Rights Movement in America. They came so close to achieving equality between blacks and whites, only to have it all taken away from them. One wonders how the course of American history may have changed if the brief period of opportunity that the Creoles enjoyed had been the trend that the United Stated had followed from then on.

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