



Creole patriotism vs. religious enthusiasm in 19th century Caribbean: The case of Peter Blair

Markéta Křížová

Throughout the course of the 19th century, Cuban thinker José Antonio Saco declared many times that the Africans were unable to fully integrate into the national societies of the New World and to share their patriotic ideals.¹ Similar opinions were in the same period voiced also in other parts of the Caribbean. The fears even led to the efforts to “repatriate” the liberated blacks back to Africa.²

Certainly the identity-making processes among the enslaved as well as emancipated populations of Africans in America had been painful and complicated. One of the reasons was the enduring of ethnic and tribal loyalties, the other the racial oppression embedded in laws and everyday practice that stimulated the sense of “Africaness”. But at least some of the “coloureds” acquired a rather intensive sense of belonging to their new homelands at surprising rapidity and with equally surprising intensity, combining it with other layers of identities, be those ethnic, religious or professional. The processes of “creolization”, that is, the cultural and social “regrounding”, the creation of new and coherent social formations out of the fragmentation brought about by the processes of colonization, represent today an important theme for the historians of the New World.³ An illustrative case offers the life story of Peter Blair, Afro-American of slave origin, member of the Moravian Church and long-term missionary on the Mosquito Coast in present-day Nicaragua. His insertion to this religious body and his calling for a mission service uprooted him from the young creole society of Jamaica, but he succeeded in maintaining his sense of belonging even at a distance.

1 See OPATRŇY, Josef, *José Antonio Saco y la búsqueda de la identidad cubana*, Prague 2010.

2 For the “repatriation” of Africans from America back to Africa see, for example, PETERSON, John, *Province of Freedom: A History of Sierra Leone, 1787–1870*, Madison 1969.

3 Out of the ample bibliography to the problems of creolization in the New World can be named the following: BRATHWAITE, Edward, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820*, Oxford 1971; BOLLAND, O. Nigel, *Creolization and Creole Societies: A Cultural Nationalist View of Caribbean Social History*, in: HENESSY, Alistair (ed.), *Intellectuals in the Twentieth Century Caribbean*, Vol. 1, London 1992, pp. 51–79; TROUILLOT, Michel-Rolph, *Culture on the Edges: Creolization in the Plantation Context*, in: *Plantation Society in the Americas* 5 (1998), pp. 8–28; COHEN, Robin — TONINATO, Paola (eds.), *The Creolization Reader: Studies in mixed identities and cultures*, London 2010.

MORAVIAN MISSION IN THE ENGLISH CARIBBEAN



The Protestant “Moravian Church” was established at the beginning of the 18th century in Saxony, in the newly founded city of Herrnhut, by religious refugees from Moravia who claimed to be direct successors of the church that arose in response to the Hussite wars of the 15th century and was known as the Unity of Brethren.⁴ In the 1730s, the Church launched a massive expansion, founding towns in many countries of Europe, but also in North America, and organizing them according to the model of Herrnhut. At the same time, missions began among native groups in Greenland, the Caribbean, Pennsylvania and Ohio, South Africa and India. By the end of the 18th century, the Moravian Church had developed into a broad network of *Ortsgemeinen* (i.e. settlement congregations) and missionary stations across all of the known world. Even though the religious enthusiasm was somewhat abated, the Church maintained until the 19th century its doctrine and its specific lifestyle.

While incorporating medieval reform Christianity and stressing a simple and peaceful life in the manner of Christ and his disciples, the Moravians also participated eagerly in local economies. Many of their towns became booming artisanal and commercial centers. Still, they resisted being dissolved and absorbed by the major societies in the regions where its members settled. Their ceremonies, festivals, use of specific codes, and the awareness of a distinctive group history all contributed to the creation and preservation of the sense of belonging of the Moravians.⁵ When in 1848, in the midst of revolutionary and nationalist upheaval, they were invited to join the newly created “national alliance” of German Protestant Churches, they refused with the argument that “the Church of the Brethren is not a purely German church, but, rather, it has members in all parts of the world. [...] The German part of the Church of the Brethren is united with the English and American parts to form a single whole, and therefore is this Church different from all German provincial

-
- 4 The members of the church that was established in Herrnhut referred to themselves originally as “brothers” and “sisters” and to their religious community *Brüdergemeine* (Unity of Brethren), which was the German translation of the Czech denomination of the original church (*Jednota bratrská*) or its Latin version *Unitas Fratrum*. Both the terms *Herrnhuter* and *Moravians* were designations used by outsiders, and were only hesitantly adopted by the *Brüdergemeine* itself. (LEMPA, Heikki — PEUCKER, Paul, *Introduction*, in: LEMPA, Heikki — PEUCKER, Paul (eds.), *Self, Community, World: Moravian Education in a Transatlantic World*, Bethlehem 2010, p. 21.) For the history of the Moravian Church see CRANZ, David, *Alte und Neue Brüder-Historie oder kurz gefaßte Geschichte der Evangelischen Brüder-Unität in den ältern Zeiten und insonderheit in dem gegenwärtigen Jahrhundert*, Barby/Leipzig 1771 (repr. Hildesheim 1973); MÜLLER, Joseph Theodor, *Geschichte der Böhmischesen Brüder*, Herrnhut 1922–1931, 3 vols.; HAMILTON, J. Taylor — HAMILTON, Kenneth G., *History of the Moravian Church*, Bethlehem 1967; MEYER, Dietrich, *Zinzendorf und die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine, 1700–2000*, Göttingen 2000; and also my study, KRÍŽOVÁ, Markéta, *Building a new identity: the first decades of existence of the Moravian Church*, in: BŮŽEK, Václav — ŠTEFANOVÁ, Dana (eds.), *Menschen — Handlungen — Strukturen* (Historisch-anthropologische Zugangsweisen in den Geschichtswissenschaften), České Budějovice 2001, pp. 407–422.
- 5 SCHUNKA, Alexander, *A Missing Link: Daniel Ernst Jablonski as the Connection Between Comenius and Zinzendorf*, in: LEMPA, H. — PEUCKER, P. (eds.), op. cit., p. 56.



churches.”⁶ Even though they submitted eagerly to the secular authorities at the locations where they settled, they ascribed to them just a minor importance.

The Caribbean islands were one of the first targets of Moravian mission and social-reform endeavor. They started in the 1730s on the islands St. Thomas, St. Croix and St. Jan, held by the Danes, with a view of spreading the Gospel to slaves deprived by the apathy of their masters of the chance to visit churches and improve their spiritual life. The same objectives led them in the 1750s to British islands of Jamaica, Antigua, Barbados, and St. Kitts etc. Since the beginning, they respected the institution of slavery as a worldly establishment, they were even buying plantations to provide themselves with land on which to build a church, obtain steady income and develop a central location for fellow brethren from Europe to settle. Of all the missionary congregations in the English and other Protestant plantation colonies, Moravians were the only ones who actually worked slave estates themselves. Even though other denominations also owned slaves, they purchased them merely for domestic purposes, and were thus not associated directly with the system of the plantation economy.

At the same time, the Moravian Church presented itself as welcoming the non-Europeans as “brothers”. The converts were offered basic education and encouraged in considering themselves to be on equal spiritual, if not secular, standing as the white Europeans. All this certainly had an effect of promoting the self-esteem of converts and of the Africans under Moravian influence in general. The common opinion in Jamaica (and probably elsewhere as well) was that “there are few, if any, negroes in this country so conceited, so foolishly proud, and consequently so difficult to manage, as those at Carmel [i.e. Moravian plantation], which evidently proceeds from too great a degree of indulgence, which negroes belonging to or under the care of the Brethren, will always experience”.⁷ Moravians in discourse advocated patriarchal order and depicted missionaries working on the fields or in shops side by side with their slaves as partners in the family of Christ, taking advantage of the long working hours for preaching, prayers and religious songs.

Besides, the Moravian Church from the beginning insisted in supplementing the work of white missionaries with that of local “national helpers” (*National-Helfer*), entrusted with the spiritual as well as secular care of their fellow believers, visits of the sick, admonishing of the erring, even supervision of prayers and spiritual singing during services in absence of the missionary etc. The avowed goal was to approach more effectively the non-Europeans: “When the Eskimo, the Negro, the Hottentot, the Cafre is being entirely won for the Lord, [...] he can then gain admittance of Evan-

6 “Die Brüder-Kirche ist nicht eine deutsche Kirche, sondern sie had ihre Glieder in allen Theilen der Welt. [...] Der deutsche Theil der Brüder-Kirche ist mit dem englischen und amerikanischen Theil zu Einem Ganzen verbunden, und dadurch ist die Brüder-Kirche von allen deutschen Landeskirchen wesentlich verschieden.” (Wilhelm Kölbling in *Nachrichten aus der Brüdergemeine* 1849, p. 132, cit. by METTELE, Gisela, *Erudition vs. Experience: Gender, Communal Narration, and the Shaping of Eighteenth-Century Moravian Religious Thought*, in: LEMPA, H. — Peucker, P. (eds.), op. cit., pp. 187–198.)

7 Quoted in FURLEY, Oliver W., *Moravian Missionaries and Slaves in the West Indies*, in: *Caribbean Studies* 5:2, 1965, p. 5.



gelium by his fellow tribesmen better and more permanently than the missionary, who to a certain degree will always remain stranger for the natives.”⁸ (At the same time, it was recommended utmost care in choosing men and women for the role of native assistants. Only men and women of reputable character and great inner strength were to be promoted to prevent fallbacks.) Besides, the leaders of the church hoped to “release men and money for new work” after older missions “raise their own ministry and cover their own expenses”;⁹ but also gave way to the establishment of Afro-American elites. These were firmly embedded in the new religious identity and, simultaneously, able and in fact forced to seek integration into the local society of colonial America.¹⁰

But even though the Moravian discourse ignored the problem of racial difference in the realm of the faith, the non-European members of the church still faced many forms of discrimination. Not only no African, Native American or Asian is known to have served on many of the official boards and committees of the Moravian Church in the 18th and 19th centuries, nor is there any record of their participation in congregational council meetings, or in the elections of church officers. In the official documentation as well as in the promotional texts produced by the Church, the race of non-Europeans was always specified. For example in periodical that reprinted the reports of Moravian missionaries from various parts of the world, the editors introduced letters of Peter Blair as following: “As it is well known, the brother Blair is a coloured from Jamaica, now transferred to a new post in Bethany [on the Mosquito Coast]. Recently had lost his (also coloured) wife.”¹¹ None of the letters by white missionaries, published in the course of the whole of the 19th century, had been accompanied by similar explication, with the place of birth and the ethnicity of wife. Thus the “coloured brethren” were constantly reminded of their specificity and prevented from identifying fully with the body of the Moravian Church.

THE BLACK BROTHER

Peter Denton Blair was born on January 11, 1835 in the township of Cheapside, Jamaica, in a family of ex-slaves, liberated only the year before (and in the subse-

8 Wenn ein Eskimo, ein Neger, ein Hottetott, ein Kaffer ganz für den Herrn gewonnen ist, [...] dann kann er unter seinen Volksgenossen in vieler Beziehung besser und nachhaltiger dem Evangelium Eingang verschaffen, als es ein Missionar vermag, der den Eingeborenen bis auf einen gewissen Grad immer ein Fremder bleibt. (Biography of the missionary Peter Blair, *Peter Blair, Ein Lebensbild aus der Moskito-Mission*, in: Mitteilungen aus der Brüder-Gemeine zur Förderung christlichen Gemeinschaft 1898, No. 1, pp. 179–180)

9 HUTTON, J[oseph] E[dmund], *A History of Moravian Missions*, London 1922, pp. 478–479, quoting the conclusions of the general meeting (Synod) of the Moravian Church of the year 1848.

10 See CATRON, John, *Slavery, Ethnic Identity, and Christianity in Eighteenth-Century Moravian Antigua*, in: *Journal of Moravian History* 14:2 (2014), pp. 153–178.

11 Br. Blair ist bekanntlich ein farbiger von Jamaica, jetzt auf dem neuen Platz in Bethany angestellt. Vor einiger Zeit hat er seine (ebenfalls farbige) Frau durch ihren Tod verloren. (*Missionsblatt* 32:11, 1868, p. 234)



quent years subjected to the system of “apprenticeship”, that is, the continued subjection to the white master).¹² They have been, however, for many decades members of the Moravian Church, a fact that had given them high self-esteem and a chance to improve their position in society. This information, as well as many others, is given in the biography of Blair, published on the occasion of his death in 1897.¹³

At this moment explication is needed of the peculiarities of the genre of Moravian biographies (*Lebensläufe*). Since the 1750s, members of the Moravian Church were expected to leave behind a description of their life histories and, above all, to give an account of their faith. The memoirs were either autobiographical or written by someone close to the departed (spouse, child, pastor). And even the autobiographical accounts always ended with a description of the person’s death. Memoirs were read aloud during the burial and formed a central component of the funeral liturgy. Some of them were later incorporated into diaries of the respective communities and the Church periodicals (like the *Gemein-Nachrichten*, the “News from the Community”, diffused first in manuscript form and since 1818 in print).¹⁴ In other words, the memoirs are highly selective as for the factual information and their interpretation, and markedly stereotyped and ritualized in their style, especially those — and this is the case of the biography of Blair — that were not written personally. (The “course of life” of Blair described his fellow-missionary from the Mosquito Coast, August Martin). On the other hand, they still contain valuable data and, especially, enable the researcher to understand the inner discourse of the Moravian community.

As for Blair, “Negro from Jamaica” (*Neger aus Jamaica*) whose parents and grandparents were all “real Negroes of pure, unmixed race” (*Eltern und Großeltern waren echte Neger von reiner, unvermischter Rasse*),¹⁵ the characteristics assigned to him by the biography are those of humility, work ethics and piety. Even though these were, of course, required from all members of the Moravian Church, they were especially accentuated in case of the non-Europeans. In the first decades of existence of the Church, in the first half of the 18th century, its leaders doubted the possibility to reform the European “Babylon”¹⁶ and announced that “when all the lands where nowadays live the Christians will revert thoroughly to paganism, then will come the hour of Africa, Asia and America”.¹⁷ By appraising the “rude simplicity”

12 For the institution of “apprenticeship”, see Charles H. WESLEY, “The Abolition of Negro Apprenticeship in the British Empire”, *The Journal of Negro History* 23:2 (1938), pp. 155–199.

13 Peter Blair, *Ein Lebensbild...*, pp. 179–196.

14 SCHMID, Pia, *Moravian Memoirs as a Source for the History of Education*, in: LEMPA, H. — PEUCKER, P. (eds.), op. cit., p. 169. See also *Moravian Women’s Memoirs (Their Related Lives, 1750–1820)*, trans. and ed. Katherine M. Faull, Syracuse 1996; METTELE, Gisela, *Erudition...*, pp. 187–198.

15 Peter Blair, *Ein Lebensbild...*, pp. 180–181.

16 von ZINZENDORF, Nikolaus Ludwig, *Eine Sammlung Öffentlicher Reden... in dem Nordlichen Theil von America der das Englische Canada ausmachet von allerley Christlichen Religions-Meetings gehalten...*, Vol. 2, Büdingen 1744, p. 145.

17 Wenn alle die Lande, darinnen die Christen itzo wohnen, ganz wieder zu Heidentum worden sind, alsdenn wird die Stunde von Afrika, Asia und Amerika kommen (Rede vom



(*Einfalt*) of the Africans and Native Americans, the Moravians opposed themselves explicitly to the intellectualism of the European Enlightenment and struggled to return to the very roots of Christianity. Later, however, they interiorized the racialized discourse and presented the non-Europeans as inherently depraved. The virtues of the elect ones of their midst were, therefore, presented more as an exception than logical outcome of the meeting of primordial simplicity with Christian doctrine, as was the case of earlier accounts.¹⁸ For Blair, it was stated explicitly that “his skin was deeply black. But in the black case lived a soul early awoken and vivid”.¹⁹

Blair grew up in the house of his grandfather. (The care for children within the frame of extended family was a common usage among the liberated slaves of the British Caribbean that enabled the parents to search for earnings out of home.) He attended one of the Moravian elementary schools, learned the trade of tailor and, at the same time, frequented the “Sunday school” for adolescents of the church. Here he drew attention of the teachers. “By his diligence and attention, as well as his quiet, humble conduct and his punctual obedience he distinguished himself so from the other pupils that he was recommended for acceptance to the teaching institute in Fairfield.”²⁰ After serving for short time as assistant teacher, he was in 1856 chosen for the recently established mission of the Mosquito Coast.

This mission region — a narrow stripe of land stretching along the Caribbean coast of present-day Honduras and Nicaragua — was rather specific even within the frame of the Moravian Church activities. It was a predominantly English-speaking enclave within Spanish America, on the frontier between the specific zones of influence of the two empires, never officially colonized, but thanks to a welcoming attitude of its inhabitants maintaining extremely tight political and cultural relations with Great Britain. At the same time, it became a place of intense cultural mixing and mutual influencing of various racial and cultural groups — Native Americans of several tribes, Africans who escaped from Spanish colonies in the hinterland or the Caribbean islands, as well as adventurers from Europe nations who intermarried with the local population and identified with the region, in spite of formally professing their allegiance to their sovereigns in the Old World.

Grund-Plane unserer Heidenmissionen (19-V-1746), in: von ZINZENDORF, Nikolaus Ludwig, *Die an Synodum der Brüder in Zeyst... gehaltene Reden*, Büdingen 1746, p. 188).

- 18 For the idealization of non-European in the early Moravian discourse, see KRÍŽOVÁ, Markéta, *La ciudad ideal en el desierto: Proyectos misionales de la Compañía de Jesús y la Iglesia Morava en la América colonial*, Praha 2004, pp. 159–169; for the image of non-European in Moravian discourse of the 19th century see also LASCH, Alexander (ed.), *Mein Herz blieb in Afrika. Eine kommentierte Anthologie Herrnhutischer Missionsberichte von den Rändern der Welt am Beginn des 19. Jahrhunderts*, Hildesheim — Zürich — New York 2009.
- 19 Seine Haut war dunkelschwartz. Aber in der schwartzen Hülle lebte ein von früh ange- weckter und lebendiger Geist. (Peter Blair, Ein Lebensbild..., p. 181)
- 20 Durch Fleiß und Aufmerksamkeit, sowie durch sien stilles, bescheidenes Wesen und seiner pünktlichen Gehorsamkeit zeichnete er sich so sehr vor den anderen Schülern aus, daß er zur Aufnahme in die Lehrerbildungsanstalt in Fairfield empfahlen wurde. (Ibi- dem, p. 181)



In the 19th century the Mosquito Coast turned into a point of intersection of imperial interests of the Great Britain, USA, the Central American republics, but also several of the German states. Within the frame of the (failed) Prussian colonization and commercial project came in the year 1848 also the first three Moravian missionaries. In the subsequent decades the Moravian Church succeeded in establishing a dozen of mission stations among the “Indian” populations in the interior, as well as “city congregations” in the principal clusters of settlement, Bluefields and Pearl Lagoon, located on the shore and inhabited primarily with the English speaking creoles of marked African appearance. Until 1860 there existed a formally independent “Mosquito” or “Miskito” Kingdom under the protectorate of the Great Britain. The polity was then incorporated into Nicaragua as a “reserve”, with a semi-autonomous status. In the year 1898 its independence was ended and the region was fully included into the Nicaraguan state.²¹

Due to their long struggle with the Spaniards and the equally long established economic and social ties with England the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast were markedly Anglophilic, English being the language of prestige. At the same time, the complicated demographic development brought to the fore individuals, lineages and groups of African origin. Between the 17th and the 18th century, the “Sambo Miskitos”, of mixed Afro-Indian descent, acquired dominance over the “Miskito Indians”, that is, the “native” demographical layer (although the historians and archaeologists are not sure how “original” these populations were, given the demographic collapse in the first decades of colonization and the subsequent intense populational shifts).²² From the end of the 18th century, the “Creoles” — blacks and mulattoes from the Caribbean Islands — acquired the political and economic predominance in the region, superimposing themselves over the Miskito Indians and Sambo Miskitos, hereafter lumped together under the denominations “Indians”.²³ It can be even stated that the Mosquito Coast was at the end of the 18th and throughout the 19th century one

21 For the history of the Mosquito Coast, see FLOYD, Troy S., *The Anglo-Spanish Struggle for Mosquitia*, Albuquerque 1967; NAYLOR, Robert, *Penny Ante Imperialism: The Mosquito Shore and the Bay of Honduras, 1600–1914 — A Case Study in British Informal Empire*, London — Toronto 1989; VILAS, Carlos M., *Estado, clase y etnicidad: La Costa Atlántica de Nicaragua*, México 1992. For the Moravian mission in this region see WILSON, John F., *Obra morava en Nicaragua: Trasfondo y breve historia*, Managua 1990; KŘÍŽOVÁ, Markéta, *Reyes, emprendedores, misioneros: Rivalidad imperial y sincretismo colonial en la Costa de Mosquitia, siglo XIX*, Prague 2015.

22 OFFEN, Karl H., *The Sambo and Tawira Miskitu: The Colonial Origins and Geography of Intra-Miskitu Differentiation in Eastern Nicaragua and Honduras*, in: *Ethnohistory* 49:2 (2002), pp. 319–372; HELMS, Mary, *Negro or Indians? The changing identity of a frontier population*, in: Pescatello, Ann M. (ed.), *Old Roots in new lands*, Westport, pp. 157–172; MAGNUS, Richard, *The Prehistoric and Modern Subsistence Patterns of the Atlantic Coast of Nicaragua*, in: STARK, Barbara L. — VOORHIES, Barbara (eds.), *Prehistoric Coastal Adaptations*, New York 1978, pp. 61–80; NEWSON, Linda, *Indian survival in colonial Nicaragua*, Norman — London 1987.

23 GORDON, Edmund, *Disparate Diasporas: Identity and Politics in an African-Nicaraguan Community*, Austin 1998.

of the few regions of America where African origin, especially if complemented by ability to speak English, was not only not a social disadvantage, but actually status that opened way for social ascendance. On the other hand, there was a considerable degree of biological mixing as well as cultural syncretism and the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast, “Indians” and “Creoles” alike, soon established a firm notion of being different from other Afro-Caribbeans.

Since the beginning the Moravian missionaries, many of whose were of German origin and could not speak English properly,²⁴ only with difficulties gained their respect. This, coupled with rapid expansion of mission work and the lack of European missionaries, provoked the calls for sending of “native assistants” from the Caribbean. As was explained in Blair’s obituary, they did not consider necessary that these were “from the same nation” as the neophytes on the Mosquito Coast. “Only a certain kinship of the various tribes is necessary. [...] In general there is not so great difference between the nations, as might be thought on the first glance.”²⁵ In other words, for the Moravians all blacks were essentially the same, enclosed in their physical distinctiveness and the stigma of slave origin. Besides, the leaders of the Church, themselves embedded in their transnational self-identification as permanent pilgrims, used to periodical interchange of pastors, missionaries, but also artisans or other professionals, certainly did not consider the relocation of bachelor or twenty years within the frame of the same tropical ecosystem of the Caribbean to be of any relevance. The more so, because he came of a family of ex-slaves, forcibly uprooted and removed from Africa to the New World.

However, for Blair the invitation — or rather the order — to resettle to Central America came as a sudden and unpleasant surprise. This is proved by a source that in

24 According to the North American engineer who wrote a thorough report on the Mosquito Coast at the end of the 19th century, the Moravians have labored “under a great disadvantage in being of German origin, and having to acquire both the English and the Mosquito languages for use in their work; and this detracts, perhaps, more than they are aware from their efficiency”. (de KALB, Courtenay, *Nicaragua: Studies on the Mosquito Shore in 1892*, in: *Journal of the American Geographical Society* 25 (1893), p. 268) Also the Moravian superiors themselves commented extensively the lack of knowledge of the English language from part of the missionaries and the problems this created in the management of the congregations. “The main complaint again and again brought against our schools, by which he tried to excuse all the irregular school attendance of his children, rested upon the fact that the youngsters did not get proper instruction of English,” reproduced the missionary August Martin the words of one of the local chiefs. (Ein Hauptvorwurf aber, den er unsern Schulen immer wieder machte, durch den er alle Klagen über unregelmäßigen Schulbesuch seiner Kinder zu entkräften suchte, bestand darin, daß die Jugend nicht genug in Kenntnis des Englischen gefördert werde. SCHNEIDER, Hermann Gustav, *Mosquito: Zur Erinnerung an die Feier des fünfzigjährigen Bestehens der Mission der Brüdergemeine in Mittelamerika*, Herrnhut 1899, vol. 2, p. 60)

25 Es ist nicht immer notwendig, daß ein eingeborener Gehilfe gerade unter dem Volkstamm arbeitet, dem er selbst angehört. Nur eine gewisse Verwandtschaft der verschiedenen Stämme wird erforderlich sein. [...] Übrigens ist hier der Unterschied der Nationen nicht ganz so groß, als man auf den ersten Blick zu denken geneigt is. (Ibidem, p. 180)



an interesting way complements his official biography: a collection of letters that he sent, approximately once in a year, to some of the members of the highest leadership of the Moravian Church, the so called Conference of Elders (Unitäts Ältesten Konferenz), who were able to read English. They are preserved within the collections of the central archive of the Moravian Church in Herrnhut. The first of these preserved letters, dated in November 1855 in Fairfield (Jamaica), that is, immediately after Blair came to know his new vocation, revealed his strong identification with Jamaica, his family and friends. “[I had] unexpectedly received a call through Mr. Buchner to go next spring with Mr. Feurig to the Mosquito Coast as teacher in one of the schools,” he wrote. “It came very unexpectedly to me. [...] It is true I am serving the Lord and his cause, but leaving my native country, friends, parents, and relatives, I cannot help saying that sometimes I feel my faith is weak when I think of the future. [...] However, I should consider it a favour, if after two years (sometime) I should be permitted to visit Jamaica again to see my friends, especially my mother.”²⁶

Blair thus submitted to the will of his superiors, giving proof of the supreme of virtues of the true Christian and member of the Church, obedience and discipline. In the subsequent letters, however, repeatedly appeared petitions to be allowed to spend some time in Jamaica — most of them being rejected by the Mission Department of the Moravian Church.²⁷ Fascinating is the lack of understanding in the basic social relations: Blair asked to be allowed to visit his mother, the superiors from Herrnhut explained that she is being taken care of by the congregation in Jamaica and thus the visit of her son was not necessary. Here clashed the usages of white Moravians, accustomed to the raising of children in “institutes”, frequent separation of families whose members were being sent after specific tasks around the world, and the caring for old people in “widow’s houses” and “widower’s houses”, with the strong familiar ties that characterized the social life of Afro-Caribbeans, in spite of — or maybe because of — the legacy of slavery. (Characteristically, the dedication to his mother was not mentioned in the obituary of Blair, as it did not fit into the repertoire of high-ranking virtues.)

Still, Blair in the subsequent years pursued his tasks with utmost sincerity, so that he was soon promoted from the rank of assistance teacher to that of regular missionary (1861). His letters revealed numerous interesting aspects of the everyday life on the Mosquito Coast. One of them regarded the different motivations and, as a result, different behavior of school children. For black pupils of Jamaica the Moravian schools, descendants of the ex-slaves, offered the opportunity of social ascendance. Therefore, they could be disciplined much more easily than the children of the inhabitants of the Mosquito Coast, who had never been direct subjects to anyone and for a long time maintained their economic independence, in spite of being partially in-

26 Letter of Blair to Heinrich Wullschlägel, Fairfield, 22-XII-1855, Archiv der Brüder-Gemeine, Herrnhut (hereafter ABU), R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1855.

27 For example in 1859 he wrote: “Now dear Sir I thank you for your Kindness, and obeying your admonition I have concluded, that I will give up and have given up already my thought and hope of going to Jamaica on a mere visit.” (Peter Blair to unknown addressee, 10-II-1859, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1859)



tegrated into Atlantic trading network. Commenting his work in the school in Bluefields, the principal town of the Mosquito Shore, Blair wrote: “It is indeed a very difficult task to attempt to govern them by the same rules with which I kept the children at Fairfield [Jamaica] in order, so I must of necessity have recoured to quite different methods. [...] Their general behavior is not such as would meet your approbation.”²⁸

In spite of these obstacles, Blair distinguished himself as teacher, and not only because of his knowledge of English. He apparently was an able linguist, the first of the Moravian missionaries to study thoroughly the local Miskito language and wrote a basic spelling book and reading book to be used in schools.²⁹ He also translated portions of the New Testament.³⁰ This legacy of Blair was the one most praised by the fellow Moravians. The superintendent of Mosquito Coast missions, Wilhelm Siebörger, wrote: “Thus passed away from the battlefield a warrior who [...] has left his mark. Truly of him it can be said, that [...] though he be dead, he yet speaketh; for his marvelous translations into the native tongue will be used, and will, doubtless, prove a blessing as long as this language is spoken.”³¹ But also in other respects he contributed to the utmost of his abilities to the mission work. He distinguished himself as amateur physician, “paid considerable attention to the treatment of diseases with native remedies — herbs and plants — having learned from the Indians their methods. He purchased for considerable money the knowledge of their methods and remedies for curing the bites of poisonous snakes.”³² Interesting is that the superiors of

28 Letter of Peter Blair to Heinrich Wullschlägel, 24-III-1857, ABU Herrnhut R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1857.

29 The manuscript entitled “Erstes Lesebuch in der Mosquitosprache”, s.d., ABU, R.15.H.II.a.1.7; see also the letter of Blair to Wullschlägel, in which he asks the printing of the manual: 24-III-1857, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1857).

30 The minutes of the meeting of all missionaries from the Mosquito Coast, the “mission conference”, of Conference minutes, 30-IX-1891, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.16.1.80, included the note that “it being the desire of the Br[ethe]rn to complete the translation of the N[ew] T[estament] into Moskito as soon as possible, it was resolved, that Bro. Blair shall be asked to translate Romans & Galatians, Bro. Ziock Ephesians & Calassians. [...] A new Grammar as well as a new Dictionary having been completed, the first by Br. Blair the latter by Bro. Ziock, it was resolved that both compilations shall be put into circulation.” The translation of the Gospels and Acts was published under the name *Dawan Bila* (Word of God) in 1888.

31 Cit. by OFFEN, Karl — RUGELEY, Terry (eds.), *The Awakening Coast: An Anthology of Moravian Writings from Mosquitia and Eastern Nicaragua, 1849–1899*, Lincoln 2014, pp. 85–86. On the other hand, the same Wilhelm Siebörger confessed some years earlier that the knowledge of the language remained limited even for Blair: “Br[other] Blair has for nine years been preaching in the Moskito-Indian language. Yet he recently told me that he cannot understand anything, when women carry on a conversation together.” (Periodical Accounts Relating to the Missions of the Church of the United Brethren (hereafter, Periodical Accounts) 31 (1878–1880), p. 200)

32 “Report of an Official Visitation to the Moravian Missions on the Moskito Coast, Central America, and to Jamaica, West Indies, and Demerara, South America, from August 9th, 1890, to July 29th, 1891”, Moravian Archives, Bethlehem, USA (hereafter MA), fund “S.P.G. Visitation Reports, 1880, 1891”, p. 81.



the mission were not altogether easy with his using of “superstitious” and “heathen” curing methods, often despised in the official publications of the Moravian Church.³³ Therefore, in the manuscript of the visitation report from which the previous quote was taken, the paragraph was marked with the words “*please omit*”, designating that they were not to be included into the printed version of the report, published within the frame of Moravian journal (the so called *Periodical Accounts*).

On the other hand, a letter of fellow missionary was published in the *Periodical Accounts* praising Blair’s conduct in 1877, when in his mission station Kukalaya broke out epidemic of measles “so that scarcely one person escaped; sometimes as many as five to six persons were to be found ill in one house, and nineteen persons died. Br[other] Blair has passed through a time of severe trial, as is wife was laid aside by sickness, and he had to do the work of preacher, sick-nurse, coffin-maker”.³⁴ Another “trial” came in October of the year 1865, when the Mosquito Coast was hit by a strong hurricane, “the combined violence of the rain, wind and sea. An awful night indeed it was, never to be forgotten by the present generation. [...] We found refuge [...] with our little children on a fallen tree and the open canopy of heaven for our covering”.³⁵ The vivid descriptions of the hurricane, sent by Blair to Europe, were used in promotional texts that asked the members and supporters of Moravian Church to help raise funds for the “unhappy land” of the Mosquito Coast.³⁶

LONGING FOR THE PARADISE

Blair was thus generally praised as a helpful member of the missionary community on the Mosquito Coast. However, the position of the “coloured brethren” within the Moravian Church remained that of inequality. They were not only stigmatized by the persistent use of the denomination *Neger* in front of their names and marginalized symbolically: on the photograph taken in 1890 on the occasion of the visit of the Moravian Bishop, Benjamin Romig, on the Mosquito Coast, the “native assistants” were placed at the very edge of the benches, while the white brethren were clustered around the Bishop. But, apparently, they were also deprived of some privileges automatically provided to missionaries, a fact documented by the petition that the coloured missionaries and teachers from Jamaica serving on the Mosquito Coast sent to

33 See, for example, the assault on traditional healing methods in the memoirs of the missionary August Martin: “The treatment to which the Indians expose their sick was so unreasonable, yes, so cruel and shameful, [...] that only the protection that we gave the patients against the worst faults of the Indian nonsense led to their improvement.” (Die Behandlung, welche die Indianer ihren Kranken angedeihen ließen, war eine so widersinnige, ja ungewollt grausame und empörende, [...] daß schon der Schutz, den wir den Patienten gegen die ärgsten Verirrungen indinischen Unverstandes gewährten, für sie eine Wohlthat bedeutete. SCHNEIDER, H. G., op. cit., p. 71)

34 *Periodical Accounts* 31 (1878–1880), p. 58.

35 Blair to unknown addressee, Bluefields, 4-IV-1866, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1866.

36 See the appendix of *Missionsblatt* 1 (1866), “Aufruf zur Hülfe”.

Herrnhut in September 1880. They asked that their children be hereafter educated at the expenses of the Church in the institutes on Jamaica or in Germany.³⁷

Interesting is that they contradicted the already quoted assertion in Blair's obituary whose author called him "native assistant" of the Mosquito Coast. From the petition it is clear that the coloured Moravians considered themselves to be civilized and thus distinct from the coloureds of the region, even though they could not hope to pass as Europeans. They voiced their fear of their children "as they attain the age of, from 6 to 8 years, learn to understand the corrupt conversation of the Indians amongst whom we live, and are thereby acquainted with the most wicked practices, whereby they may be spoiled for life". Therefore, they begged "the Brethren of the M[ission] D[eartment] to grant us help, to bring these our children early out of the evil influence of the Indians, amongst whom we labour".³⁸ After certain debates, the Mission Department consented in accepting these coloured missionary children to Moravian schools;³⁹ but the very fact that they had to ask for this proved their persistent inferiority within the Church. Besides, the children were not sent to the town of Kleinwelke (Silesia), where the offspring of all the Moravian missionaries from all over the world were educated, but to the industrial school in Kingston, where they were to learn some regular trade. None of the coloured missionaries was ever invited to visit the headquarters. While in the 18th century black, Native American or Asian Moravians from various mission stations were often sent to Europe, for the sake of promotion of missionary work as well as to accentuate their pertinence to the body of the church,⁴⁰ in the 19th century the duty and privilege of travelling around the world was reserved to the white members.

Ten years later the Moravian bishop Romig during his official visitation of the Mosquito Coast voiced certain disappointment with the employment of the black Jamaicans in the missions. (Again, the paragraph was marked by words "please omit".) Romig admitted that "most of those who have been called from Jamaica as ministers or teachers have done well, but there have also been sad failures. It has been questioned whether the calling of native brethren from Jamaica is attended with less

37 From the beginning of the Moravian mission project, the children of the missionaries — as there were usually married couples employed in the mission, the wives taking care of the female part of the congregation — were as a rule sent to Europe in a very young age, to enable their parents to employ all their time and strength in missionary tasks and, at the same time, to prevent the possible negative influences of the non-European milieu on their bodies and souls. (MOTEL, Hans B., *Heartbreaking: The Fate of the Children of German Moravian Missionaries*, paper presented at 3rd Bethlehem Conference on Moravian History & Music, Bethlehem, October 11–14, 2012)

38 "Petition of the col[oure]d Brethren from Jamaica in the service of the Mosquito Mission. To the Board of Elders who regulate the affairs of the Mission", annex to the protocol of the mission conference of the Mosquito Coast, September 14–15, 1880, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.16.1.65.

39 Protokolle des Miss.-Departments, 13-X-1880, ABU, R.15.A.65.1880, pp. 439–440.

40 See the fascinating life history of Rebecca Protten, mulatto from the island of St. Thomas: SENSBACH, Jon F., *Rebecca's Revival: Creating Black Christianity in the Atlantic World*, London — Cambridge 2005.





expense than the appointment of European missionaries. This is, of course, a secondary matter, but is still worthy of attention. In forming an opinion on this point, the questions of sustentation, journeys, education of children, pension etc. must be taken into consideration".⁴¹ Again, implicitly, the problem of unequal support of coloured missionaries from part of the Church is revealed, apart from the (equally implicit) problem of difficult communication and convivance of white and African mission workers.

In spite of these problems, Blair persevered in mission service. And more, his son Joseph Denton Blair was also employed as missionary, on the very Mosquito Coast.⁴² Again, in contrast to the children of white missionaries, who usually were not employed in the mission fields of their parents, to prevent their too firm enrooting, the coloured ones stayed close to the place of their birth. In one of his early letters from the Mosquito Coast, Blair stated: "I like this country very well, having not much aversion against it."⁴³ The lack of enthusiasm persisted in the subsequent years. Blair never fully identified with this region, considered his station only temporarily, and kept longing for his real homeland, that is, Jamaica.

It was already mentioned that the Moravian superiors often lumped together all of the non-Europeans. In the obituary of Blair it was mentioned that when he was, in 1890, promoted to a second grade of Moravian priesthood (that of the "dean", Diacon), this was "the first case when a native in Mosquitia received this consecration".⁴⁴ And it was also explained that in their petition the "coloured brethren" aimed at distinguishing themselves clearly from the local inhabitants of the Mosquito Shore. The same effort is clear from Blair's correspondence. His view of the "Indians" and "Creoles" of the region was that of barbarians, dirty and irrational, with "no proper religion of their own, no ceremony, no compliment, no adoration, no regulation, no prayer except for games".⁴⁵ He could feel pity for them, but no sense of belonging apart from that of Christian love and the notion of duty of missionary for his flock.

Interesting is that Blair married, in the early years of his missionary career, to a native of Mosquito Coast. And more, this girl was labeled "Indian" in the official obituary (christlichen Indianermädchen, without giving her name), that is, belonging to the older poblational substrate, with less obvious traces of African origin.

41 "Report of an Official Visitation to the Moravian Missions on the Moskito Coast, Central America, and to Jamaica, West Indies, and Demerara, South America, from August 9th, 1890, to July 29th, 1891", MA, fund S.P.G. Visitation Reports, 1880, 1891, pp. 105-106.

42 Short biography of Joseph Denton Blair in the document entitled "Mission Personnel" (Mosquito Coast), MA, fund Nicaragua Warden's Files, Box 4/5, No. 21, p. 27. According to this document, Joseph Blair assumed the missionary post in 1896. It meant that for less than a year father and son worked together, even though in different stations (Peter Blair in Bethania, Joseph in Tsabapauni).

43 Blair to Wullschlägel, 24-III-1857, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1857.

44 Es war das der erste Fall, daß ein Eingeborener in Moskito diese Weihe erhielt. *Ibidem*, p. 196.

45 Blair to the Brethren of the Mission Department in Berthelsdorf, Kukallaya, 13-II-1879, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.b.1879.



But after her death⁴⁶ he sought his second wife in Jamaica. The author of the obituary again did not name her, but felt the need to note that the couple was very peculiar on the first sight, “he being totally black, but she, although also of mulatto origin, almost white”.⁴⁷ Thus one more time the race comes to the fore as important issue for the white spokesmen of the Moravian Church.

Also, in 1880s, during one of his rare visits on the island, Blair bought a small estate close to the place of his birth, with the hope of retiring there after terminating his mission service in the Mosquito Coast. “He named this house of his and the garden Paradise.”⁴⁸ Interesting is that in Moravian discourse the topos of the paradise was very seldom used. At most it was mentioned in the historical treatises when referring to the work of Jan Amos Komenský/Comenius, distinguished member of the old Bohemian Unity of Brethren. The “paradise” was for Comenius — as one of his Moravian interpreters explained — the finally achieved peace of heart, union with God, but also harmony with people.⁴⁹ We can only speculate how far this image was known to Blair, and how far it possibly influenced him in his longing for a lost homeland, within the frame of the feeling that he was never fully accepted into the whole of the Moravian Church.

At any case, Peter Blair never returned to his estate in Jamaica and never enjoyed his earthly “paradise”. He died in the mission station Bethania on the Mosquito Coast on the first of January 1897, at the age of sixty-two, and was buried there.⁵⁰ There is no mention of the destiny of his widow, but it is probable that she, at least, returned to Jamaica. Her son Joseph was at this time already married, and thus the care of the female part of the mission congregation and of his household rested upon his wife. Besides, the common usage of the Moravian Church went against the joint housing of multi-generational, closely knit families, as this was considered detrimental to the maintenance of the unity of the whole Church.

46 Letter of Blair to unknown addressee, Bethania, 4-IV-1867, ABU, R.15.H.II.b.18.a.1867, reveals his grief after the loss of his wife, as well as his effort to find peace by submitting fully to his faith: “On Febr[uary] 15th [1867] [my wife] gave birth to a little girl and on the 20th she departed this life. It can be imagined how I felt, my dying wife before me two children clinging to me and a helpless infant needing a mother care. It is the Lord he has done that what he pleased, may his name be praised, and may see the wisdom of his dealing, or rather submissively resign my self to his control.” The newborn died few days later and was buried with the mother. (Peter Blair, *Ein Lebensbild...*, p. 185)

47 Merkwürdig war, wie verschieden die beiden aussahen. Er ganz schwarz; sie aber, obgleich mulattischer Abstammung, fast ganz weiß. (Ibidem, pp. 185–186).

48 In der Mitte der achtziger Jahre machte er noch einmal eine Erholungsreise nach Jamaika. Bei dieser Gelegenheit kaufte er sich in seinem Geburtslande eine Wohnstätte, an die er sich, wenn seine Kräfte im Alter zum Dienst nicht mehr ausreichen würden, zurückziehen wollte. Es war ihm ein lieber Gedanke, dann im eigenen Heim einzurufen. Diesem seinem Haus und Garten gab er den Namen Paradies. (Ibidem, p. 195)

49 HUTTON, J. E., op. cit., pp. 157–159, quoted COMENIUS, J. A., *The Labyrinth of the World and the Paradise of the Heart* (originally published in 1631 in Czech under the title *Labyrint Světa a Lusthauz Srdce*, English ed., New York 1901).

50 Peter Blair, *Ein Lebensbild...*, p. 196.



After his death Blair was continuously reminded in the historical treatises dealing with the history of Moravian missions as “efficient Negro assistant”,⁵¹ who was able to surpass — with the Divine help — the limitations posed by his origin. Their authors were thus conserving the stereotype of “Negro brother” inferior to white members of the Church, but at the same time obliterating completely his life before entering the Church and his multilayered loyalty that, apart the community of fellow-believers, encompassed also his home island. For his superiors in the Church, as well as the editors of the *Periodical Accounts* or *Missions-Blatt*, Blair was “black”, but never “Jamaican”, equally as they themselves did not feel to be “Germans” or “Englishmen”.

The “transnationality” of the Moravians, the fact that they were able to surpass the borders of the nation-states and colonial empires, maintain their inner cohesion as a community and at the same time communicate with local authorities and partially integrate into local economic and social networks without actually subjecting to them, has recently become a favourite object of study of authors specialized not only in the history of Moravian Church, but also of many others who aim at addressing the issues of cross-border interaction and the process of creation of modern world system.⁵² However, as was demonstrated on the previous pages, the sense of unity and exclusivity of the Church was not established only through elaborate rituals, networks of communication and explicit distancing from the sinfulness of the outer world, but also through homogenizing pressures and also by the marginalization or exclusion of the non-European members of its body. On the other hand, precisely the case of Blair puts in doubt the clear-cut assertions that the Moravians were cosmopolitans, “archetypal transnational people” who felt “*everywhere at home*”,⁵³ and poses new questions for the further study of the processes that accompanied their mission activity within the frame of the colonial empires of the Modern Era.

51 HUTTON, J. E., op. cit., p. 329.

52 See, for the specific case of the Moravian Church, METTELE, Gisela, *Weltbürgertum oder Gottesreich: Die Herrnhuter Brüdergemeine als globale Gemeinschaft 1727-1857*, Göttingen 2009, IDEM, *Identities across Borders: The Moravian Brethren as a Global Community*, in: STROM, Jonathan (ed.), *Pietism and Community in Europe and North America, 1650-1850*, Leiden — Boston 2010, pp. 155-177; for transnationalism in general, see MINTZ, Sidney, *The localization of anthropological practice: from area studies to transnationalism*, in: *Critique of Anthropology* 18 (1998), pp. 117-133.

53 The words “archetypal transnational people” used SENSBACH, Jon F., *Searching for Moravians in the Atlantic World*, in: LEMPA, H. — Peucker, P. (eds.), op. cit., p. 50. VOGT, Peter, *Everywhere at Home: The Eighteenth-Century Moravian Movement as a Transatlantic Religious Community*, in: *Journal of Moravian History* 1, 2006, pp. 7-29, explained that the often-used phrase “be everywhere at home” (überall daheim seyn) come from the important text of the founder of the Moravian Church, Nicolaus Ludwig von Zinzendorf, his *Litaney to Wounds* (*Litaney zu der Wunden des Mannes, XII. Anhang zum Gesangbuch der Evangelischen Brüdergemeinen, Herrnhut 1743*, pp. 1861-1866). See also RUHLAND, Thomas, *Religion, Space and Community: The Topos of ‘the World’ in Moravian Memoirs*, in: CARVALHO, Joaquim (ed.), *Bridging the gaps: sources, methodology and approaches to religion in history*, Pisa 2008, pp. 148-171.

ABSTRACT**CREOLE PATRIOTISM VS. RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM
IN 19TH CENTURY CARIBBEAN: THE CASE OF PETER BLAIR**

The article resumes the life story of Peter Blair from Jamaica (1835-1897), member of the Moravian Church and long-term teacher and missionary on the Mosquito Coast. On this background and in the broader context of the study of Moravian Church missions in the New World are analyzed the processes of identity making in the colonial and post-colonial Caribbean, the problems of racial, national and religious (self)identifications, but especially the mechanisms of “creolization”, i.e. the cultural and social “regrounding”, the formation of new and coherent social formations out of the fragmentation brought about by the colonization.

KEYWORDS

Peter Blair, Moravian Church, Jamaica, Mosquito Coast, mission, creolization

ABSTRAKT**KREOLSKÝ PATRIOTISMUS VERSUS NÁBOŽENSKÝ ENTUSIASMUS
V KARIBIKU V 19. STOLETÍ: PŘÍPAD PETERA BLAIRA**

Článek shrnuje životní příběh Petera Blaira z Jamajky (1835-1897), člena Moravské církve a dlouholetého učitele a misionáře na Pobřeží Moskytů. Na pozadí tohoto příběhu a v širším kontextu studia moravských misí v Novém světě jsou analyzovány procesy utváření identit v koloniálním a postkoloniálním Karibiku, problémy rasové, národní a náboženské (sebe)identifikace, ale zejména mechanismy „kreolizace“, tedy kulturního a sociálního „zakořeňování“, utváření nových a koherentních sociálních formací z roztříštěnosti způsobené kolonizací.

KLÍČOVÁ SLOVA

Peter Blair, Moravská církev, Jamajka, Pobřeží Moskytů, misie, kreolizace

Markéta Krížová

Center for Ibero-American Studies, Faculty of Arts, Charles University
marketa.krizova@ff.cuni.cz

