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Indexing whiteness: practices of categorization and racialization of social relations among Maroons in French Guiana¹

This article investigates racial/ethnic categorizations designating the majority in a minority language and their uses and meanings in everyday interactions to grasp the dynamics of racialization from the perspective of minoritized people. The investigation focuses on the varieties of the language called Businenge(e) Tongo locally or Eastern Maroon Creoles spoken by Maroon populations living in French Guiana and Suriname. We first examine the different terms used to refer to whiteness, such as *bakaa*, *wetiman* and *poyte*, from a historical perspective using historical documents before examining their uses in contemporary conversations. The analysis in the final part focuses on interactions at the hospital of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni. The paper combines two approaches: the sociology of social relations and social approaches to language rooted in ethnography. The distinction between the three terms allows considering race as indexing power relations. Naming whiteness is thus a way of providing a critical perspective on the social order.

Keywords: racialization, service interactions, Maroons, whiteness, French Guiana

¹This paper is a translation of an article published in French in 2020; the English version includes new data and discussion (<https://journals.openedition.org/cal/10631>).

Introduction

The metaphor of a mosaic – of peoples, languages, and communities – is often used in representing French Guiana in promotional images, ordinary descriptions, and scholarly exchanges (see the discussion in Jolivet [1997]). As Léglise (2007a:30) calls it “an ethnicist reading of social relations”, as found in lay discourses in French Guiana and among researchers, “divides the population into different groups whose boundaries are extremely complex and ever-shifting. In the collective imagination, Amerindians, Creoles, Metropolitan French, Maroons, Haitians, Brazilians, West Indians, Chinese, etc. all constitute ‘communities’ or ‘distinct ethnic groups’”.² This ethnicist interpretation has been reinforced in the case of French Guiana by the fact that researchers, whether anthropologists or linguists, generally investigate particular communities or languages instead of exploring relations of domination at work in any pluralist society (Benedict 1970). There is little research on Guianese society as a whole (see however Léglise and Migge [2007] and Collomb and Jolivet [2008]), including an analysis in terms of class (Migge and Léglise 2013) and race (Léobal 2018).

Although analysis of power hierarchies in terms of race are not new in the social sciences, this perspective is relatively recent in contemporary sociolinguistics. Like this special issue, quite a few recent publications adopt a perspective on language and race that divides people into “those deemed fully human (white) and those deemed not fully human (racialized)” (Flores 2021: 112) within the broader colonial histories of the world. In a similar way, this paper “interrogates the historical and contemporary co-naturalization of language and race” and “how institutionalized hierarchies of racial and linguistic legitimacy are central to processes of modern subject formation” (Rosa and Flores 2017: 622). To understand, from an intersectional perspective, how the different types of hierarchies – of class, race, and ethnicity – are interconnected (Mazouz 2017), we believe that it is important to identify the kinds of racial categories that exist in a given context, including both the minoritie(s) and the majority,

²In Suriname, the census classifies the population by ethnic group: Javanese (*Javanen* 14%), Hindustani (*Hindostanen* 27%), Creole (*Creolen* 16%), Maroon (*Boslandcreolen* 22%), Mixed-race (*Gemengden* 13%), with Indigenous (*Inheemsen*) and White (*Blank*) grouped in the category of Other (*Andere* 7%). In French Guiana the census does not apply ethnic categories, but ethnicized terms continue to be in common use. The official government sites generally adopt the classification of the population into ethnic groups (see Migge and Léglise [2013: 37-39] for a critique).

their alleged features and relations. If ethnicized or racialized categories vary situationally (Barth 1969), it is because they are manufactured via the power relations between majoritized and minoritized groups.³ In a dominant racist discourse the majority is rarely specified – white is not a color – while the specific character of the dominated groups is constantly reasserted. Colette Guillaumin (1972) proposed that we reverse this manner of speaking and bring out the historical, situated character of the majority. In contrast to the implicit self-definition of the majority as universal, the present article focuses on the analysis of whiteness as a specific property from the perspective of one of the minoritized groups in French Guiana, the Businenge(e). It investigates how they have, over time, classified the dominant group in their own language, (Busi)nenge(e) Tongo (to be referred to here as Nenge(e)) and what this reveals about the dynamics of local social power relations.

The Businenge(e) are descendants of Africans, shipped to Suriname by Europeans, who escaped from the plantations and fought to create autonomous Maroon societies along several rivers in the rainforest covering Suriname and French Guiana (see Price, 1996, for a presentation of Maroon societies in the Americas). The members of this cross-border population traditionally lived in small villages on both banks of the Maroni and its confluents but are nowadays predominantly urban dwellers. They speak one of the varieties of Nenge(e), either Aluku, Ndyuka, or Pamaka which also continue to play an important role in processes of individual and group conceptualization and identification (Léglise and Migge 2019). Together with Sranan Tongo (to be referred to here as Sranan), the linguistically related lingua franca of Suriname, it is also a vehicular language in western French Guiana (Léglise 2007a).

We focus on the Businenge(e) Maroon population because it is numerically dominant in the border region.⁴ Although the Businenge(e) nowadays make up a large part of the Guianese population, an investigation of their language must also take account of their history in Suriname.

After a brief presentation of the situation in French Guiana, we first discuss the terms referring to whiteness in Nenge(e) from a historical perspective, centered on the history of slavery and *marronage*. Since the only available sources come from colonial Suriname, we have to bear in mind that words from the past reach us through the colonial filter. Secondly,

³That is to say, “sociologically in a position of dependence or inferiority (minor either in power or in numbers)” (Guillaumin 1972).

⁴According to Price (2018), 77% of the population of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni is composed of Businenge(e), compared to 38% for French Guiana as a whole.

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we look at the use of racial categories in Nenge(e) in contemporary every day and mediated conversations. Finally, we analyze official interactions in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni in which these categories are applied, focusing on interactions between patients and caregivers in hospitals.

This collaborative work is based both on our collective knowledge of the contemporary and earlier literature and on long-term ethnographic work that the three of us have conducted over the past twenty years.⁵ In this article, we draw on our participant observation and audio-recordings of interactions in which interlocutors refer to whiteness and discuss power relations in Nenge(e). The analysis adopts social approaches to language, including historical sociolinguistics, critical and ethnographic sociolinguistics, and a sociological analysis (Elias 2020).

1 The predominant populations of French Guiana

During the colonial period, first the Amerindian populations and then enslaved populations from Africa were dominated and exploited in French Guiana. After emancipation, racial hierarchies persisted and dominated social life; nonetheless, a Métis (mixed-race) middle class, locally identified as ‘Creole’, emerged and gradually gained economic and institutional power. In 1946 the former colony became an overseas region, i.e. a region outside of Metropolitan France that is under its jurisdiction. This administrative change in status was not accompanied by a process of decolonization; the reign of French institutions has thus continued uninterrupted.

Since the 1960s and particularly the 1980s, coastal French Guiana has seen substantial population growth due to increased settlement of populations traditionally associated with the interior of the rainforest (Maroons, Amerindians), neighboring countries, Brazil and Suriname, and Haiti (Piantoni 2009), and due also to a high birth rate, particularly among the Businenge(e) and to a lesser extent among Amerindians. There are currently about 280,000

⁵Isabelle Léglise is a specialist in the multilingual situation in French Guiana. Since 1999 she has been working on language practices within the family and in various institutions including schools and hospitals. In 2004 she began an ethnographic survey, along with Bettina Migge, of usage and naming in Nenge(e) and Sranan. They also jointly conducted a survey of the sociolinguistic situation in Suriname. Bettina Migge has been researching the emergence and sociolinguistics of Nenge(e), since 1995. Together with Nenge(e) speakers she produced a Nenge(e)-French-English dictionary. Clémence Léobal is a sociologist who conducted her first ethnographic survey in Nenge(e) in 2013, on questions relating to urban living.

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inhabitants, a third of whom are Businenge(e) according to recent estimates by Price (2018); 30 percent of the population self-identify as (French Guianese) Creole, and 10 percent come from Metropolitan France (see Piantoni [2009]) and self-identify as “Métros”.⁶ The latter two groups form the bulk of the middle and dominant classes, most of them employed by the state. Despite a rise in professionalization among younger people in recent years, Amerindians and Businenge(e) still make up a significant section of the local working class and knowledge and usage of French remain variable.

Eight out of ten jobs in French Guiana are in the tertiary sector, where the use of French continues to play a gate-keeping role. This has an important impact on access to employment in this French region where three quarters of the population are non-French-speaking when they start school (Léglise 2017). Since the 1980s, French Guiana has seen a significant expansion of government services due to population growth. While there has been a noticeable growth, over the last decade, of Businenge(e) and Amerindians taking up employment in the government (and private) sector, the number of especially higher-level civil servants deployed from Metropolitan France remains non-negligible. Although a minority of Metropolitan French settle permanently in French Guiana, most of those who occupy positions in the armed forces, the education, judicial, or health system, leave after only a few years to take up other assignments in Metropolitan France or other overseas regions and territories.

Although elected politicians still predominantly come from major Creole families, Amerindians and Maroons are now more visible in French Guiana’s political life than thirty years ago when they first began to participate in local politics. Access to positions in the public sector, which accounts for a large proportion of all jobs in the region’s limited official job market, is thus controlled by civil servants from Metropolitan France and the Creole bourgeoisie. Some sections of the population – Amerindians, Businenge(e), and foreigners (Haitian, Brazilian, Surinamese, and more generally Caribbean) – continue to be marginalized in this social space. Although French education, originally religious and now national, has been firmly established for several generations among Creole families on the coast, and enabled their members to achieve a degree of social advantage, it is still a relatively recent

⁶ Although Metropolitan is preferred to White as a euphemism, it is still a direct equivalent as it “refers to Whites born in Metropolitan France” (Hidair 2008: 18).

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phenomenon for Amerindians and Businenge(e) in the interior and western municipalities where compulsory schooling was only introduced starting in the 1970s (Puren 2007).

As a former “plantation society,” French Guiana has been structured by a racist ideology that shapes its overall characteristics (Smith 1970). The colonies of the Americas functioned as a “laboratory” in racial matters: before the modern era, the notion of race was restricted to the nobility and its lineage, but in the colonies it was extended to the entire population. In the case of the French colonies, these ideological innovations began with the emergence of Whiteness, associated with melanin levels and a type of hair, which had to be preserved from hybridization (Dorlin 2009). The invention of Whiteness was accompanied by the invention of Blackness, which is closely associated with it, as we will see in the next section.

2 The terms for whiteness and blackness in the plantation period

Currently, several terms are used to designate whiteness in Nenge(e), chiefly *bakaa*, *weti*, and *poyte*, which are, however, not semantically equivalent. We start by tracing their historical emergence through an analysis of texts in Nenge(e)’s historical precursor, the Creole varieties that developed on the Suriname plantations also called “early Sranan” that survived from the colonial period.⁷ They were written by European missionaries, colonists, and travelers in Suriname, each from their own perspective and with different levels of familiarity with the language. We seek to glean information from the traces that these authors left behind, without letting ourselves be influenced by their points of view, as Stoler (2013) was able to do with colonial archives. These sources have been studied from a historical linguistics perspective (e.g. Arends 2017: 27-31).

Analysis of the dictionaries developed by German-speaking Moravian missionaries suggests the existence of two types of early Sranan in the seventeenth century (van den Berg 2007, 2013; Arends 2017): *bakra* or *bakkra tongo*, the speech of the Whites – the *bakkra* – and *ningre tongo*, the speech of the Black population, the *ningre* or *nengre*.⁸ This, in turn, indicates that at that time at least two racialized groups were identified. In the first dictionary

⁷Suriname was first an English and then a Dutch colony before it gained independence in 1975.

⁸The two terms are transcribed in different ways in the documents. See in particular the dictionary of Sranan compiled by Schumann (1783), quoted by Arends (2017: 166). Schumann’s Sranan dictionary is a key resource. He worked extensively in Suriname with speakers from various origins, whom he refers to throughout the dictionary (van den Berg 2017: 28)

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of Sranan (Schumann 1783),⁹ which is believed to be a fair representation of the language, the terms *bakkra* and *ningre* are defined as follows:

(1) **Bakkra** White person, European, White person born in Europe, he understands the language of the Blacks. For when the Blacks say <Bakkra-tongo>, they mean the language of the Blacks as it is spoken by European Whites.

(2) **Ningre** Black person.

However, according to Arends (2017: 168-169), the entry for the term *bakra* in a nineteenth-century German-Sranan dictionary (Wullschlägel 1856) gives the impression that changes in meaning took place during that century.¹⁰ The author believed that *ningre tongo* designates the language of the Blacks, but that the Blacks who came directly from Africa also call this language *bakra*. The term *backra tongo* was thus applied to the entire spectrum of this language, distinguishing it from African languages (Arends 2017: 169). As more enslaved Africans arrived, the term *backra* appears to have gradually shifted its meaning, to designate not only the language spoken by the White colonists but also that spoken by the Creolized slaves in this region.

The terms *bakkra* and *ningre* are distinct from the terms referring to the colors white and black, respectively. However, the term *blakka* ‘black’ also seems to have been used to refer to people of African origin and the color of their skin:

(3) **blakka, brakka** black; blue; being black; to blacken; ... a Black person (or a person of African origin) ... **alla Ningre de blakka blakka** ‘all African people are Black’.
(Schumann 1783)

Weti ‘white’ does not seem to have been used to describe or refer to a person as the entry for *weti* only applies it to things. We can tell from this that at that time (the 1850s) social Whiteness was distinct from the color white: the term *bakkra* thus refers to Whiteness as socially constructed, distinct from the phenotype, and referring specifically to the power relations within this colony.

⁹<http://www.suriname-languages.sil.org/Schumann/National/SchumannGerDict.html> (examples translated from German by one of the authors).

¹⁰Wullschlägel, a botanist and theologian, documented Sranan and translations from it. It is based on Schumann’s and Focke’s dictionaries and includes his own observations in urban areas and helps to document urban practices from that period.

In the mid-nineteenth century the distinction between *bakkra tongo* and *ningre tongo* disappeared, giving way to a new lexical stratum, derived from Dutch, which began to function as a distinctively urban marker. According to Arends (2017), this new distinction appeared at a time when the Black urban population was increasing. In addition to a growth in domestic slaves, there were also a growing number of freed slaves. This variety of Sranan (also called *bakkra*), spoken in Paramaribo, was thus associated with people who lived in the town rather than with people who were racially classified. After the abolition of slavery in 1863, a new intermediate group, a Black or mixed-race elite living in Paramaribo and speaking both Sranan and Dutch emerged.

The distinction between the two varieties of Sranan, as presented in the dictionaries, is thus not only a linguistic classification but above all a racial classification of the population. The categories of White and Black were constructed through separate processes: the *Ningre* group was classified by its color (*blakka*), while the category of White referred initially to colonists (*bakkra*) and then to the urban or bourgeois mode of life, but not to color, since, based on these sources, *weti* does not appear to have been used to refer to people at that time. The emerging Métis elite was also included in the category of *bakkra* by new arrivals from Africa. The term *poyte* derived from French ‘deportee’ is absent from the dictionaries of that time as the convicts that it refers to did not exist then, see below.

3 Contemporary uses of the category of *bakaa* and the emergence of the color white (*weti*)

We now turn to the evolution of these terms from a contemporary perspective, as we have encountered them in French Guiana and as they appear in recorded conversations. The meaning of some of these terms has in fact changed over time in both Sranan and Nenge(e). *Weti* is now clearly used to refer to light-skin bodies, while *Blaka* (in Sranan) and *Baaka* (in Nenge(e)),¹¹ ‘black’, continue to refer to racially minoritized bodies.

These terms in no way designate objective realities but seem to function as core terms for classifying individual people. During our research we are also subject to classification, in French and in Nenge(e), with reference to our Whiteness, especially through the use of *weti* and *bakaa*. Ndyuka interlocutors commonly replied to one of the researchers with “*Bakaa?*”

¹¹*Baaka* and *blaka* both derive from English *black*. In Nengee, English [l, r]+vowel sequences were generally replaced with long vowels.

That’s you!” pointing to her fair skin as if her body was sufficient explanation. However, the term *bakaa* is not exactly equivalent to the actual color white, designated by the term *weti*. Some people – especially children – have questioned whether we are really *bakaa*, because we know their language or culture.¹² In the following excerpt, Clémence is sitting on the terrace of a Businenge(e) woman’s house. As is common among Businenge(e) working-class families, a little stall is set up on the terrace to sell agricultural and commercially produced foodstuffs to people in the neighborhood. The buying and selling is often done by the children in the family. In this case, since Ma Dina’s children are not there, it is Clémence who gets up to sell a piece of candy to a child, resulting in the child’s surprised reaction:

(4) The child: Na wan bakaa de ya? ‘Is that a bakaa there?’

Ma Dina: Eeye. I ná e si fa a weti? ‘Yes. Don’t you see how she is white?’

The child: Neen a e taki a tal so? ‘And she speaks the language like that?’

Ma Dina: Eeye, a leri en, enke fa i e leri a tal fi en. ‘Yes, she’s learned it, just like you’re learning hers.’

Classification as *bakaa* denotes, in addition to a particular phenotype, a person belonging to a dominant social class and endowed with capital of all kinds: social capital, cultural capital, economic capital, a French educational diploma, and often also the privilege of French or other European nationality.

The term *bakaa* can even refer to people a European would not describe as White. At one point a Businenge(e) schoolgirl was talking to one of us about a teacher, describing her as *bakaa* with brown skin. The researcher subsequently learned that the teacher was of Caribbean origin. The little girl described this person as *bakaa* because she belonged to the French school and did not speak the local language, even though her skin was brown. She emphasized the contradiction inherent in the fact that this *bakaa* teacher criticized “the Whites,” despite falling in the same category. Dark-skinned people can thus be described as *bakaa* if they possess other characteristics that signify a position of domination. The term can therefore designate French Guianese Creoles or Surinamese Creoles,¹³ and, more recently,

¹²See also Léglise (2007a): “Mais madame, tu es pas Blanche ? Comment tu sais ?” ‘But madame, you aren’t White? How do you know?’

¹³That is, the descendants of Africans or members of the ‘Métis’ class now living in the towns of Suriname and French Guiana whose ancestors did not flee the plantations.

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also those Businenge(e) who work for the state or adopt a European way of life as in example (5):

(5) Mi na bakaa fasi mi e wooko (said by a Businenge(e)).

‘I conduct my business in a European way.’¹⁴

Here, uttered by a Businenge(e), the term has a laudatory connotation associated with valued professional practices, such as the ‘proper’ management of a business. But the term can also express disapproval of pretentiousness, that is, acting like the *bakaa* (*a e pee bakaa*). This judgment may be applied to people seen as showing off their social superiority, their conspicuous affluence, their alignment with things European such as their competence in European languages, going on trips to Europe, or even eating foods associated with the *bakaa* (salad, typically).

The term *bakaa* can also be combined with *nenge(e)*, a term that designates a person in general, but also more specifically a Black person; it derives from the colonial term *negro* or *neger*. The expression *bakaa nenge(e)* literally refers to (Black) people who have some degree of political power. It is used pejoratively to refer to non-White people who have gained positions of power as in (6):

(6) Neen den bakaa nenge(e) e teki ala den busi fu u.

‘And the “people from the Coast who have power” are taking over all our forest.’

The fact that *bakaa* and *nenge(e)* can be combined but that the two concepts (skin color and Western power) can also be distinguished when appropriate suggests that these two notions are not both conveyed necessarily by the term *bakaa*. In fact, *bakaa* functions as a racialized classification in which skin color plays an important but not a defining role. It is associated with the idea of domination and power – a political definition of race, in other words. Colette Guillaumin (1972) proposed a definition of race as a sign: the physical marker is the signifier in a semiotic process in which it is interpreted as the sign of radical otherness in a biological sense. The particular feature that constitutes this physical marker is of secondary importance and varies widely across place and time. What produces race is the meaning (the signified) attributed to this marker, where otherness is naturalized as if it were a genetic property. The

¹⁴Examples (5-14) in the text come from notes or conversational recordings carried out by Bettina Migge among Maroons.

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term *bakaa*, by being dissociated from the marker of lightness of skin color, as opposed to the marker of *weti*, enables us to deconstruct this racial ideology.

Weti and *bakaa* can be combined: *weti bakaa* seems to be used as the equivalent of *bakaa* but reinforcing its meaning (social Whiteness linked with the color white).

(7) K: A den faansi sikowtu e du en so. Da den biya ya ná e sabi, da iniwan weti bakaa di den si kon ya, da den e kay en poyte.

‘It is the French gendarmes who do this. Thus, the (young Maroon) guys from here don’t know this, so any White European they see coming, they call him *poyte*.’

(8) A wooko, a [be] abi weti bakaa fann.¹⁵

‘At work, there were some very, very pale Whites (meaning true Europeans).’

Lastly, there are two other terms that designate whiteness: *babilan*¹⁶ and *poyte*. *Poyte* is said to derive from French “déportés” (deportees) that designated convicts of the penal colony founded in French Guiana in 1857 (Pierre 2018). Unlike *bakaa*, this term is identified with lack of power, and although deportees came from different backgrounds, it is generally associated with people of European background. During one discussion, a Ndyuka village leader explained to a younger friend who came to visit him from Paramaribo with Bettina:

(9) K: Den poyte, a faansiman e kay sitaafuman so.

‘*The Poyte*, it’s the French who call the convicts that way.’

F: Eeye. ‘Yes.’

K: Depote, depote. ‘Deportee, deportee.’

F: Mmm! Iya, na fu ape den teli a nen. ‘Mm, yes, the name comes from there.’

K: Weeno! ‘Exactly.’¹⁷

¹⁵*Fann* is an ideophone that intensifies the color white, including both objects and body color.

¹⁶It apparently comes from reggae and is used to designate the police or gendarmes, especially when they are White ; it is mostly pejorative but can have a neutral sense as in the following example from a radio show : *Son leysi i e si taki a ini a libi a babilan abi fu de fu seeka sani poti* ‘Some times, you see that in some contexts, Babylon has to be there to set things right.’ Here it refers to law enforcement agents. For reasons of space, we cannot discuss it further.

¹⁷This excerpt is presented at greater length in example (12).

The term *poyte* was traditionally considered to be insulting and was used pejoratively to designate a non-present person of low status. It identifies Europeans as selfish (10) or positions them and their actions as illegitimate (11).

(10) Di mi be de anga a *poyte* uman, na mi be abi fu boli ala yuu.

‘When I was with the White woman, I had to cook all the time.’

In (10) by designating his ex-wife as *poyte*, the speaker, a man in his forties, identified her as being problematic and lacking in proper behavior (from a Maroon perspective). In other cases, when this term is used to designate administrative officials, as in (11), it foregrounds misuse of power or disrespectful behavior.

(11) Den *poyte* fu la mairie denki taki den sa du fa den wani anga wi.

‘The European people at the town hall think they can do whatever they want with us.’

The following excerpt from the same informal conversation as (9) shows the use of the three terms *weti*, *bakaa*, and *poyte* between two Ndyuka interlocutors, K in his 60s and F in his 40s, in Bettina’s presence in the village of Diitabiki in 1996.

(12) K: Fa a misi de ya, ná **poyte** tok. ‘Take this woman [the researcher], she’s not a *poyte*, okay.’

F: Eee! ‘No.’

K: A **weti sama**. ‘She’s a White person.’

F: Iya. ‘Yes.’

F: (laughter) ...

K: Den wetiman a **bakaa**. ‘The Whites, they’re the *bakaa*.’

F: Eehe!

While the terms *weti sama* and *bakaa* may be used to refer to the researcher and other Europeans when they are present, the term *poyte* was until recently less commonly used due to its pejorative nature. The terms *bakaa* and *poyte* are thus classifications of Whiteness that refer directly to the historical and social context in which these classifications were produced – the colonial slaveholding context in the one case, and the penal colony context in the other – and traces of their history are still present in their contemporary uses, marked by the presence of power relationships of class, race, and nationality. The synonymy relationship between

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bakaa and *poyte* on the one hand and *weti(man/sama)*, which explicitly refers to color, on the other, enables us to see the racialized dimension of these terms, and also allows us to deconstruct the racist ideology that instantly interprets skin color as a sign.

Although *poyte*'s pejorative use continues to exist, young Maroons in their twenties are now using *poyte* instead of *bakaa* or *wetiman/sama* to designate Europeans in a neutral manner. For example, a young Businenge(e) woman working in a new *crepe* restaurant in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni used *Na so den poyte e nyami en* 'That's how the Europeans eat it' after having provided an explanation of the makeup of this arguably European food to an older Businenge(e) man. Here, *poyte* is used purely descriptively. The ongoing semantic bleaching of *poyte* also came to the fore during a radio program of the popular nightly Businenge(e) broadcast called *Loweman Pansu* on Radio UDL/Kam in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni in May 2022.¹⁸ The presenter, a Businenge(e) woman in her 40s, wanted to provide an example of how European-origin administrative staff, unlike Businenge(e) colleagues, were nowadays much more willing to help less educated Businenge(e) with their paperwork. She started off using *poyte* but then changed to *bakaa* following a metalinguistic commentary about *poyte*'s undesirable overtones and usage patterns:

(13) Da a **poyte** uman – ná so den yonkuu sama e taki en nownow? Beyna mi á mu taki en so bika **poyte** geli tumisi grofu gi mi – da a **bakaa** frow sende en go na en busikondee kolega...

'Thus, the *poyte* (European) woman – isn't that how young people say it nowadays? I nearly shouldn't say it that way because (the term) *poyte* seems too vulgar [i.e., lacking in respect] to me – thus the *bakaa* (European) woman sent her to her Businenge(e) colleague...'

(13) confirms that generation-based change is affecting the naming of Europeans and the term *poyte* whose negative connotations are being bleached.¹⁹ The increased use of *poyte*, which traditionally embodies powerlessness, in a non-pejorative manner instead of the traditionally

¹⁸Semantic bleaching is used "to refer to a perceived loss or dilution of meaning in a word as a result of semantic change" (Crystal 2008: 56).

¹⁹Other Businenge(e) in their 40s and older held similar views and generally argued that younger Businenge(e) are simply ignorant of the origin of the term *poyte*.

power-imbued term *bakaa* may be indicative of (younger) Businenge(e)'s rejection of what they see as their elders' overtly deferential (i.e. polite) behavior towards Europeans' which locates Europeans socially above Maroons. Through discursively denying or erasing Europeans' greater social power, young Maroons are possibly asserting social equality between Businenge(e) and Europeans.

Since the above examples suggest that the meanings and functions of these terms are situationally variable, the last part of this paper further investigates Maroons' uses of these situationally variable terms and what interactional goals they allow them to accomplish in two broad social domains and involving different social actors.

4 Naming Whiteness in order to challenge the racial order

To understand the interactive dimension of power relations, we analyze the use of these terms to designate Whiteness in the context of service interactions where representatives of the authorities such as administrators and service personnel meet the public and categorize racialized subjects. Discrimination in French Guiana has been widely documented, particularly in interactions for obtaining social housing (Léobal 2019) and in access to care (Carde 2016). We would like to show here how the authorities are being categorized at the same time by users of governmental services. We describe how the Businenge(e) users of these services “get on” when they have to deal with government officials; this may mean being socialized to accept government norms or finding ways to create critical interstices, “poaching,” and “maneuvering on the margins” (Ossipow and Lambelet 2007).

We already mentioned that the term *bakaa* connotes a position of administrative dominance. In fact, it is often associated with government authorities, as in the example below where an older Pamaka man is talking about his youth in the late 1990s:

(14) Di mi be go a Soolan na den bakaa be e seni kaa mi.

‘When I left for Saint Laurent, it was the authorities who asked me to come.’

The Businenge(e) inhabitants of Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni describe this municipality as “bakaa land,” (*bakaa konde(e)*) an area dominated and governed by the *bakaa* and contrast it with the upriver region which is referred to as *busikonde(e)* ‘forest land’, that is, Maroon territory; though in other contexts, such as when viewed from Cayenne or among people who grew up in “*Soolan*”, ‘Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni’ is described as a Ndyuka town. In the same

vein, social housing units can be described as *bakaa* houses to emphasize the specific characteristics of Western architectural forms, such as a house with solid walls that contains spaces for sleeping, cooking, washing, and gathering, or an apartment in a collective dwelling, without a garden, with neighbors living above and below. In the same way, the norms and formulas imposed by the government can be described as *bakaa* to emphasize their cultural specificity. Businenge(e) women who apply for social housing can thus note that “the *bakaa* do not allow for the possibility of having two wives” (Léobal 2016).

As previously noted, there are continuities in working relations from the beginning of the colony and the slave economy to the present-day situation. Division of labor along race and ethnicity lines continues to be visible. At the hospital in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, where Isabelle Léglise carried out ethnographic fieldwork and audio-recordings in the mid-2000s, doctors and nurse were predominantly from Metropolitan France whereas nurses’ aides were of local origin, either of French Creole or Businenge(e) background. There was no official linguistic policy in favor of the local languages, so more than 90% of doctor-patient interactions were carried out in French, with very few of the patients having sufficient competence in French to answer when they were addressed. Patients and their families were (and in large part still are) effectively excluded from making decisions about and discussing their health issues with medical professionals (Léglise 2017). It shows the reproduction of a colonial model whose aim is to make mastery of French a pre-requisite for citizenship. In the eyes of administrators, when educated, the population should employ French and this is asserted by the medical establishment through discourses about people’s ability or willingness to speak French and by consistently addressing people in French no matter what their linguistic background is. Ethnographic observations and recordings also showed that care providers rarely switched to a local language even if they were able to. When employing local languages, caregivers often use phenotype to determine patients’ ethnicity and thus the language to be employed. Nurses and nurses’ aides thus appear to conceptualize language as a feature of the race/ethnicity category that they assign to patients (Léglise 2007b). In excerpt (16), for instance, the caregivers first addressed a person in Nenge(e) (called *taki-taki*),²⁰ before realizing that she understands French. The interlocutors in the excerpt are a hospital

²⁰A term which is sometimes used pejoratively when applied to the English-based Creoles – Nenge(e) and Sranan – see Migge and Léglise (2013).

resident and two nurses from Metropolitan France helped by two nurses' aides from Saint-Laurent:

(16)

Resident: Madame comme vous allez vous allez probablement aller au scanner passer un scanner [...] à Cayenne euh donc on vous mettra dans la machine d'accord il faudra pas bouger ça fait pas mal d'accord il faudra pas bouger

'Madame, you will go you will probably go to the scanner to have a scan... in Cayenne, uh, so we will put you in the machine, all right, you will have to keep still, it doesn't hurt, all right, you will have to keep still'

Nurse1: Elle comprend ? 'does she understand?'

Aide1: Mais oui elle comprend très bien 'oh yes, she understands just fine'

Resident: Oui je crois qu'on s'est rendu compte que 'yes, I think that we realized that'

Aide1: Elle comprend très bien parce que on lui parlait taki-taki / d'un seul coup elle nous parle français 'she understands just fine because we spoke taki-taki to her / all of a sudden she speaks to us in French'

Nurse1: Elle comprend bien 'she understands fine'

Aide2: Je pense pas qu'elle est Businenge(e) hein 'I don't think she's Businenge(e), eh'

Aide1: Tu es Businenge(e) ? 'are you Businenge(e)?'

Nurse2: Vous êtes Businenge(e) ? 'are you Businenge(e)?'

Aide1: Oui ? ha ha ha ha et puis tu nous fais parler taki-taki là ? et tu sais parler français ? alors ? 'yes? ha ha ha ha and then you make us talk taki-taki? and you can speak French? so?'

(silence)

In (16), the caregivers ask the patient about her ethnicity, not by posing a direct question about her origin, place of birth, or nationality but by offering a pre-categorization²¹ – “are you Businenge(e)?”. Ethnic classification, which is prevalent in French Guiana, and the choice of language that goes with it, is thus underpinned by a racialized reading of patients’ phenotypes, not their declared origins.²² Most probably, the caregivers in this case also interpreted the patient’s style of dress and physical *hexis* or self-presentation, concluding that she belongs to a disadvantaged social and racial category of people. Although ethnic classifications such as Businenge(e) vs. Creole vs. Metropolitan French are used directly in official interactions, classifications in terms of color (Black/White) are not used directly by either caregivers or patients. It then appears that racialization is expressed euphemistically here through the use of ethnicized categories such as “Businenge(e)”; but on the contrary, from a Businenge(e) point of view, Whiteness is denominated in various ways, as we will see below.

Interactions also show which terms for Whiteness they use. The denominations *weti* and *wetiman* are used in conversations among family members of Businenge(e) patients to refer to White Metropolitan French caregivers, but they are not used when directly addressing the people concerned. In the following excerpt, in a hospital room in Saint-Laurent-du-Maroni, the nurses ask a patient about the number of children they have, probably with the aim of removing people, more distant relatives, from her room. The family members present in the room do not answer the question directly, but begin to converse in Nenge(e) about the Whites’ interactional behaviors. The term *wetiman* appears here:

(17)²³

Nurse2: Combien de garçons? combien de filles? vous savez pas?

‘how many boys? how many girls? don’t you know?’

Girl5: Na Baa Levi uman pikin de ya oo

²¹We call this pre-categorization because an initial categorization or classification is offered to the person who is being addressed. The term used, Businenge(e), is not a specific ethnic designation like Ndyuka, Aluku, Pamaka, and Saamaka; it refers to Maroons as a whole. The question being asked is also a hetero-designation in an affirmative form, with a rising intonation, that is to say a closed question.

²²This patient, who happens to be Haitian, has very dark skin, like many of the Businenge(e) who live in Saint-Laurent.

²³In order to represent the use of various languages, Nenge(e) is underlined and French is in a roman font in the original and in the translation. Words referring to Whites are in bold.

‘it’s Monsieur Levi’s daughters who are here!’

Girl1: Na Baa Levi uman de ya / ala sama a Baa Levi pikin a ini ya

‘It’s the daughters of Monsieur Levi / everyone who’s here are Monsieur Levi’s children.’

Nurse2: Regardez moi quand vous parlez! pourquoi vous parlez comme ça là?

‘look at me when you speak! why do you speak like that, huh?’

Girl2: Weeno ala sani den wani sabi

‘of course, they always want to know everything’

Nurse2: Luku mi je suis pas belle? je suis moche? il y a quelque chose qui va pas? luku mi

‘look at me aren’t I pretty? am I ugly? is there something wrong? look at me!’

Girl1: A wetiman noyti i e sabi sani fu den! Ma ala sani den wani sabi non c’est pas possible

‘White people you never know anything about them! But they want to know everything!
no, it’s not possible’

Nurse1: C’est pas facile de quoi?

‘what isn’t easy?’

Girl3: Noyti, ma den sama ya i ná sabi sani fu den, noyti! Na a sani de mi e taygi Ma Thérésa

‘Never, but these people, you don’t know anything about them / that’s what I’m saying to Madame Thérésa’

Girl1: Non c’est pas possible!

‘no, it’s not possible!’

Nurse1: C’est pas facile de quoi?

‘what isn’t easy?’

Girl4: C’est pas bon ala sani fu yu nanga den wani sabi!

‘It’s not good. They want to know every single detail about your life’

Girl2: Ma san a akisi i?

‘But what did she ask you?’

Girl3: Ma noyti wan fa **den wetiman** noyti den ná e taygi i fu den famii, fa den famii

de, wisi den libi anga yu seefi den ná e taygi i taki a somen famii den abi

‘Never any of **the White people**, they’ll never tell you anything about their families, about how they are, even if they live with you, they don’t tell you how many people are in their family’

In this confrontational exchange, the family members challenge the caregivers’ order that they leave the room, naming their Whiteness and their habit of questioning the people they are in charge of as the reasons. The conversation among those present grows heated, and the caregivers demand verbal communication and eye contact, which the patient’s relatives refuse to give them – Businenge(e) gestural codes in which looking away is an expression of respect are in conflict with the White nurse’s expectation of direct eye contact. The relatives are well aware of the point of this interrogation – to make all those who are not the patient’s own children leave the room – but they contest the asymmetry of power relations with the White institutional representatives, who ask the questions but never give any information about themselves. Thus, overtly bringing up Whiteness enables them to challenge medical authority and respond as a united group, demanding to stay with the patient. In their own language the people invoke an ideal of conversational reciprocity, pointing out that since the Whites never provide answers about their family composition, seen as a private matter, they themselves do not see why they should submit to it. A little later on in this same conversation, other remarks addressed to the doctor in Nenge(e) also exemplify the epistemic issue of asserting a form of knowledge opposed to medical knowledge (see Léglise [2018] for the analysis of these subsequent exchanges).

These exchanges thus show the Businenge(e)’s relation to institutional power and in particular how they perceive the questioning they must undergo in order to have access to the social benefits of the state. They also adopt strategies that enable them to comply with these *bakaa* administrative requirements while still maintaining a sense of self: these forms of resilience and subversion include the oral use of Nenge(e) by the Businenge(e) when dealing with French authorities (Léobal 2016). Exchanges in the hospital thus create a place to observe the preservation of the “sense of self,” defined as the act of “taking up time and space for oneself,” which is manifested in the “activities and desires through which individuals, alone or in groups, attempt to escape the demands and orders coming from ‘above’ or from

‘outside’” (Lüdke 1991). The mere fact of naming the unspecified majority opens the way to a critique of the racialized order.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated the changes in the way classifications designating whiteness take on meaning in the Nenge(e) language in Suriname and western French Guiana. During the plantation period in Suriname, according to the dictionaries of the time, the word for white was not used to designate people; rather, the dictionaries offered the word *bakaa* (in a number of variant spellings), which is still in use today though possibly losing in importance. This classification of whiteness as well as newer ones like *poyte* do not have a biological origin: without mentioning the biological marker of color, the terms refer to power relationships, the outcome of the history of slavery common to the entire Caribbean and the French penal colony, respectively. So, the fact that ‘white’ becomes a racialized meaning is also a product of colonial history.

Our journey through racial classifications in Nenge(e) thus helps us to think about race by departing from the naturalizing evidence produced by that ideology. In fact, race is a relationship of political domination, in which the biological marker of color is the signifier of a radical otherness, supposedly genetic in origin. But this marker is in reality only secondary in the semiotic process of interpreting it. For this reason, some terms referring to whiteness can exclude any reference to this marker (namely color).

The variety of expressions designating whiteness shows that these categories are not fixed, but evolve depending on the situation. They can refer either to a power differential (*bakaa*), a lack thereof (*poyte*), or to the color (*wetiman*). Use of *weti/wetiman* to refer to Whites has become more common but is still in no way the main way of referring to Europeans. Historical analysis thus demonstrates the contingency of ethnic and racial identifications and boundaries, which change over time.

Lastly, racialization is constructed in interaction because there are no official, administrative racial or ethnic categories. The fact that *weti* may be used to designate White people shows that Businenge(e) sometimes uses racializing categories to better challenge the processes of domination. Using the categories that designate White people in Nenge(e) makes it possible for its speakers to assert solidarity when interacting with the authorities or the police, when the Businenge(e) are minoritized by the institutions and their agents who convey the norms of

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the majority. Naming Whiteness thus turns out to be a way of expressing a critical perspective on the local social order.

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