

## **Indian Heritage in the French Creole-Speaking Caribbean: A Reference to the Madras Material**

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### **Abstract**

*Madras appeared in both Guadeloupe and Martinique during colonization. This southern Indian material has not only been used for the national costume but also for domestic purposes and decoration. It is common to see tablecloths and bags made of madras. A house may be decorated with Madras curtains, lamps or dolls. Madras as a symbol for Creole identity has spread to the commercial sectors. Madras colours have been reproduced in advertisements, websites as well as on locally made products such as yogurts or rum.*

**Keywords:** Madras, chemise-jupe, douillette, gwan wòb', French Creole identity

### **Introduction**

The madras material reached the French Caribbean shores during the seventeenth century. The French women who settled in Guadeloupe and Martinique used madras as a headpiece. In the early twentieth century, most Guadeloupian and Martiniquan women wore a madras headpiece with their Gwan wòb<sup>1</sup> and chemise-jupe.<sup>2</sup> In recent times, Madras has been used for decoration, craft and advertisement. When it comes to gender and age, madras is not only associated with women pertaining to a particular age bracket. In modern times, children and men also wear madras pants and shirts. The name madras has also been given to a drink in Guadeloupe. The purpose of this article is to examine how the city of Madras and the Madrasi immigrants have made a contribution to the French Caribbean heritage. The first section focuses on the origins of the madras fabric. The second explores the development of the French Caribbean national costume. The third section explores the use of Madras in the commercial sector. The final part discusses French Creole identity with reference to Madras.

### **Origins of the Madras Fabric**

The Real Madras Handkerchief commonly called Madras owes its name to the southern Indian city of Madras that is located in the province of Madras. (Benoist, Desroches, L'Etang & Ponaman, (2004) suggest that the city of Madras<sup>3</sup> was the capital of the province of Madras ( 60). After India's Independence in 1948, Madras became the capital of the Tamil Nadu State. However, another source indicates that the Madras material was named after an Arab Muslim institute called Merdésá where it was manufactured ("Le Madras dans tous ses états"). The Madras fabric was made in the village of Paliaka and the French were involved in the Madras trade in India (Les guides pratiques de la famille créole, 212).

During the twelfth century, the city of Madras was well-known for its plain cotton. However, stripes were added to create the first Madras fabric. It was exported to Africa and the Middle-East where it was used as a head-wrap. In the 1500's, a more refined block-printed Madras piece with various floral and temple designs came into fashion ("The History and Making of Plaid Madras").

In the 1800's, the Scottish who occupied India were well known for their tartan plaids. The Madrasi reproduced these plaids on their material.

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<sup>1</sup> French Creole word for French "grande robe" meaning "large dress".

<sup>2</sup> See section on Development of the French Caribbean national costume.

<sup>3</sup> Madras is now called Chennai

The name “Madras checks” was given to the reproduction of the Scottish tartan plaids (“The History and Making of Plaid Madras”). Madras is a hand-woven and light cotton fabric with squares. The process of making Madras designs requires the use of weaving tools such as plain weaves, dobies or jacquard. Sometimes, manufacturers resort to combed and carded yarns based on the quality of the material. Furthermore, it is common to see colourful madras pieces with stripes and plaids. According to fabric historians, “the first madras cloth was made of yarn that was spun from the tip-skin of old trees” (“The History and Making of Plaid Madras”). Afterwards, the fabric was hand-dyed. The dyeing process requires manufacturers to soak their material in a mixture (boiling water, soda, salt and stabilizers).

As mentioned earlier, Madras made its inroads into the French Caribbean colonial societies around the seventeenth century. The first Frenchwomen who settled in Guadeloupe and Martinique wrapped their heads with a piece of Madras fabric. Two types of Madras material are brought to our attention. The first one called “Real Madras” which costs more than the Mouchoir<sup>4</sup>. It also has brighter colours and a stronger texture. The second named Mouchoir is woven out of natural fibers. Research states that navy blue, red and pink are the main colours of the Mouchoir (“Mais d’où vient le Madras?”). The spicy scent that is generated by the Real Madras Handkerchief is noteworthy. The Real Madras Handkerchief was given the name of “Pulicat” and in the eighteenth century, the name “Madras” replaced “Palicat”. At first, the name “Palicat” was given to the Madras fabric (“Madras et têtes marrées aux Antilles”). The French expressed interest in Indian textiles as much as the British did. Several types of Madras handkerchiefs existed: “There were seven types of handkerchiefs according to its texture-those of 23,26,28,32,36,40 and 48 conjons and they were sold in pieces of 10” (Sinha, 2003). Alamkan (2012) argues that the Madras fabric was hand-woven and dyed by Mr. Talon in the Norman city of Rouen.

### ***Development of the French Caribbean Costume***

The French Caribbean national costume called *douillette* is the end-product of creolization. The concept of creolization has been brought to our attention by linguists, anthropologists and other scholars. Knight (1997) defines creolization as follows: “throughout the Caribbean this process of creolization represents the evolution of a distinctive, though highly variegated, Caribbean cultural milieu, and cultural forms-sometimes in conflict with metropolitan standards, norms and expectations-by the pragmatic and sometimes random amalgamation of African, Asian, East Indian, European and indigenous American cultures” (273).

Roberts (2008) explains that creolization is considered to be a “synthesis of European and African elements. The concept of creolization is further discussed by Cullen Rath (2000). The term “creolization” was coined by linguists during their first international conference in 1959. They used it to account for the different stages of development of Creole languages. Rath Cullen (2000) describes both cultural and linguistic creolization as two different processes but he points out the close relationship between language and culture. Buisseret (2000) views self-importance, material abundance, climate, environment and economic motives as vital “ingredients” in the process of creolization (8). In that context, Buisseret’s view on creolization as useful elements is central in the development of the French Caribbean national costume. As far as self-importance was concerned, both French and Free Coloured women attached great importance to their appearance. Frenchwomen were allowed to wear hats while Free Coloured women chose Madras for headpiece. Undoubtedly, style may have also played a significant role in the history of the *douillette*. Here, reference is made to the influence of the French and Indian styles. The St.Lucian Folk Research Center provides a description of the headdress: “a white kerchief was wrapped around the head or sometimes shaped into a bonnet... French provincial woman” (“National Dress of Saint. Lucia”). Both the French and oriental influences were observed in the “Tête Calendée”: “La coiffure est une “tête calendée” appelée aussi “Chaudière”. C’est un turban qui tient par ses origines de la coiffure provinciale, et du turban oriental<sup>5</sup> (Les Guides pratiques de la famille créole, 213).

<sup>4</sup> French name meaning “handkerchief”

<sup>5</sup> The hairstyle is a “Tête Calendée also named “Chaudière”. It is a turban holding its origins in the provincial cap and oriental turban”.

Prior to the existence of the *douillette*, the *chemise-jupe* was first worn by the Creole women. The *chemise-jupe* comprises a calf length skirt and a white cotton or poplin blouse. Red ribbons were added to the collar and the sleeves (Les Guides pratiques de la famille créole, 212).

Frenchwomen also wore a wide flower-printed cotton or silk skirt. They used a piece of fine white cloth to cover heads. Later, they resorted to the Madras material for the same purpose. The French civil servants' wives wore embroidered blouses and several satin and lace skirts. A satin *foulard* completed the *chemise-jupe* style. By mid-seventeenth century, the French brought various plain and Indian cotton pieces to their colonies. Sinha (2003) describes the plain cotton fabric as follows: "among the plain textiles the long cloth was very much in demand by the Europeans and foreign traders. The long cloth measured 37 yards in length and 1 yard in breach... The cloth was made from staple cotton".

The literature turns our attention to the changes that occurred in the *chemise-jupe* after the arrival of the plain and Indian cotton fabric in colonial French Caribbean. At the end of the seventeenth century, Frenchwomen wrapped their heads with a piece of Madras and created a one piece dress called "robe-chemise" or a "gaule". They added a long trail to the dress. In contrast to their French counterparts, both the Free Coloured and Free Black women adopted the *chemise-jupe*. They also wrapped their heads with a piece of Madras. Their half-sleeved chemise was made of batiste and lace. In Hearn's view (2001), red ribbons were usually found in both the sleeves and the collar. Embroidered petticoats in crimson or lace came into fashion (242).

The Black Code regulations required female slaves to wear a white blouse, two skirts and silver jewelry. The first skirt was colourful whereas the second one was made from cotton and muslin. A piece of white cotton was used as a headpiece. Hearn (2001) adds that the Free Coloured and "Affranchies"<sup>6</sup> put a piece of madras material around their waists. They also added an embroidered scarf with pastel colours to the *chemise-jupe* ensemble. The ladies usually folded their scarf diagonally and rested it on their shoulders. Different pieces of jewelry including brooches, egg-shells (*zanneau-à-chenilles*) and studs were in fashion. The "Affranchies" women were forbidden to wear hats. Therefore, they used the Madras fabric as a headpiece (242).

Former French colonies of Dominica and St Lucia inherited both the *chemise-jupe* and the *douillette* from their colonial history. In St. Lucia, the *chemise-jupe*, also labeled "Madras", comprises a Madras headpiece, a white cotton blouse called "chimiz décolté"<sup>7</sup> and a lace skirt. The collar and the sleeves of the chimiz décolté are decorated with a red ribbon. The lace skirt is covered with a low Madras skirt as well. The Madras skirt also called Jip<sup>8</sup> is an "offspring" of the Wòb dwiyèt ("National Dress of Saint Lucia"). Details on the Dominican *chemise-jupe* are presented in an article entitled "Adrianna Henderson on the National Dress of Dominica". Similarly to their French Caribbean and St. Lucian counterparts, women cover their heads with a Madras headpiece, *chimiz décolté* as well as lace and Madras skirts. Either a floral printed fabric or a Madras can be used for one the skirts. The late Mabel "Cissie" Caudieron created the "Jip outfit as a smaller version of the Wòb dwiyèt" (Teleica, 2012). As historian Lennox Honychurch notes, Mrs. Caudeiron was a teacher and a Creole activist who defended the French Creole heritage of her homeland Dominica. Her zeal for preserving Dominican culture led her to write several French Creole folk songs. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the *douillette* "overthrew" the *chemise-jupe*. Hearn (2001) attempted to account for the gradual disappearance of the *chemise-jupe* : "Probably the question of health had also something to do with the almost universal abandonment in Martinique of the primitive slave-dress, -chemise and jupe-which exposed its wearer to serious risks of pneumonia..."(p.242)

Subsequent research (Honychurch, n.d.), Auguste (1986,13), Phillip (1998) and (Adriana Henderson on the National Dress of Dominica, 2003) highlights the different French Creole names given to the *douillette*. In Dominica, it is known as "wòb" or "wòb a gwan jipon". The term "dwette" is popular in St .Lucia. In the French Caribbean, the *douillette* is referred as "gwan wòb" or "dwiyèt". This dress comprises a Madras headpiece, a long back trail, a petticoat and a triangle-shaped like foulard (scarf). The narrow sleeves of the *douillette* go down to the wrists. Women attached their satin foulard and protected their *douillette* by holding its fold and placing it over their arms.

<sup>6</sup> French word meaning "Free Black women".

<sup>7</sup> French Creole word deriving from French "chemise décolletée" meaning "low-cut blouse"

<sup>8</sup> French Creole term deriving from French "jupe" meaning "skirt".

There are two styles of *douillette* : *douillette de cérémonie* and the *douillette de tous les jours* (Costumes Créoles Modes et Vêtements Traditionnels des Antilles Françaises. The former consisted of flounced satin or taffetas petticoats. Women wore it for special occasions: weddings and church. As its name suggests, the latter was worn everyday at home.

It consisted of various designs such as stripes, flowers, rainbows of different shades. In Hearn's view (2001, 263), the choice of the *douillette*, petticoat and foulard was generally "dictated" by a number of dressing codes regulations:

Dress	petticoat and foulard (scarf)
Yellow	blue
Dark blue	yellow
Pink	green
Violet	bright red
Red	violet
Chocolate (cocoa)	pale blue
Skye blue	pale rose

The Madras headpiece deserves careful attention. It is usually made from either the Real Madras Handkerchief or "Mouchoir" also named Imitated Madras. As previously said, the colours of Mouchoir are darker than those of the Real Madras Handkerchief. Nevertheless, a new technique named "Calender/Calendage" was borrowed from the first Indian indentured workers who came to the French West Indies around 1853/1854. Even though the "calendage" is still in use it is not as common as before. It consists of brightening up the colours of the Mouchoir by painting all the pink squares of the "Mouchoir" with an Arabic gum and yellow chrone. Prior to the calendage process, the calendeuse washes the Madras with vinegar or sea water. Afterwards, the fabric is starched with cassava flour. In order to prepare the starch, the calendeuse mixes castor oil, oil, wax (candle) and a pinch of salt. She adds some boiling water to the paste which has to cool for 24 hours. After soaking the madras in the mixture, the calendeuse puts it to dry away from the sun and the light. Once the material is dried, it is pressed. (La Gazette du Costume Créole , 260). The Madras headpiece is referred as "Tête Calendée". The "calendeuse" is the lady who executes the "calendage" technique. She stretches the Imitated Madras across a wide piece of board and begins to paint the pink squares in yellow. Afterwards, she folds the material into spirals on a thick piece of paper. The Madras headpiece has been commonly called "Tête Chaudière" because it is shaped like a cauldron. Auguste (1986) reports that St .Lucians refer to their madras headpiece as "Callendée"(13). It is not unusual to find the term "Têt anlè". Dominicans proudly name their headpiece "Tete en lè" or "Tête Cassie".

A link between Tête Cassie and the gum that was used for the calendage process was established by Lennox Honychurch: "A shawl or foulard is laid around the shoulders and an elaborately tied and starched Madras handkerchief, the "tete en lé" or "tete cassie" (from chassie, the gum used for its preparation) forms the head piece"(Notes on African Influences in Dominica).

Although the *douillette* and the *chemise-jupe* are no longer worn everyday as they used to be in the past, both styles have a close relationship with special events such as Carnival, Balakadri<sup>9</sup> and Swaré Bèlè. During the Balakadri, the ladies perform the Quadrille dance in their *douillette*. Nevertheless, they keep their *chemise-jupe* for the Bèlè dance. In Dominica and St. Lucia, women are dressed in their *douillette* when they execute the Quadrille<sup>10</sup> steps. They dress in Madras for their Bèlè<sup>11</sup> performance. Special events including Independence Day, Jounen Kwéyòl (Creole Day), Miss/Madam Wòb Dwiyé shows, and Market Day A Difference pay a large tribute to *Madras* and *douillette*. During these cultural events, both Dominican and St. Lucian women parade in their *Madras* and *douillette*. In the early days, Madras was associated with women of a certain age group. Women who were over 50 wore their Madras headpiece and *douillette*. However, the trend has changed. Children and men have been seen in their Madras shirts.

<sup>9</sup> French Creole terms meaning respectively Quadrille party and Bèlè Night. The two words derive from French "Bal de Quadrille" et "Soirée de Bèlè. The Quadrille dance is performed during the Bal de Quadrille. The Swaré Bèlè is catered for the Bèlè dance.

<sup>10</sup> The Quadrille is a square dance of French origin. It was brought into Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique and St. Lucia during the latter half of the eighteenth century.

<sup>11</sup> Bèlè is a seventeenth-century dance of African origins that emerged in the Martiniquan plantations.

### ***Use of Madras in the Commercial Sector***

Souvenir shops have attracted both locals and tourists with their amazing Madras footwear, purses, bags, dresses, shorts, pants, dolls just to name a few. Technology has transformed the Madras industry. Due to the high price of the Real Madras Handkerchief, manufacturers have been producing an “imitated” version of the Real Madras.

Madras has indeed been used in the field of decoration. A plethora of Madras tablecloths, runners, napkins, dolls, lamps have found their niche in many French Caribbean homes and restaurants. A woman can cook in her Madras apron and wipe her dishes using a Madras towel. In her living-room, she may have a doll dressed in *douillette* or Madras standing on her divider or table. Creativity led designers to make paper napkins, plastic table cloths, plates and glasses with Madras colours. French West Indians often refer to them as “les assiettes et les verres de couleur madras” (plates and glasses with Madras colours). Many of these glasses and plates feature a printed map of Martinique or Guadeloupe as well.

Madras and its attractive colours have entered the commercial sector. For example, Madras colours have been reproduced on the cover of yogurts, post cards and envelopes and advertisements. Tropic Marché, a Martiniquan supermarket, advertised several local products: arrowroot powder, green bananas, avocado, red/green peppers, and fruit juices by means of a leaflet depicting a Madras background. A Martiniquan distillery known as La Mauny<sup>12</sup> has been producing both rum bottles and glasses featuring the picture of a woman wearing a Madras headpiece. La Mauny labels sometimes show a Martiniquan market scene where some women are wearing their *douillette* and a madras headpiece. Géant Supermarket has followed the same path as Tropic Marché. Géant Supermarket presents its products in a leaflet that has been designed with Madras colours. The Madras phenomenon has also reached the Guadeloupian commercial sector. In 1933, Jean Bichara launched his first rum punches, liquors and juices and founded the Madras Industry which was initially called Société Bichara.

The company offers to the public a wide variety of colourful drinks conjuring up the bright colours of Madras. It is stated that the name Madras was given to the company in 1983 in order to reach the international market (Madras: 75 ans de jus et de liqueurs). The majority of Madras beverages include sugar cane syrup, vanilla, guava, mint, pineapple, coconut, passion fruit and barley water. Aida Souka (2012) describes a French Caribbean gravy named “Madras”. Some cooks prepare their Madras gravy using tomatoes, onions, garlic, ginger, pineapple, olives, sweet peppers (red, green and yellow), spices and vegetables. The tomatoes, onions and sweet peppers are cut into small squares. All these ingredients are fried for thirty minutes. The colours of the ingredients mentioned earlier are similar to those of the Madras fabric, hence the name.

Nadia Elphenor advertises her Madras craft via her website known as Madrasibèl. The name “Madrasibèl” can be read as follows: “Madras si bèl” (Madras is so beautiful). This message may be intended for the local population who is invited to appreciate its heritage through Madras craft, clothes and bags while tourists learn more about the history of the islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Comments should be made on “Madras Design”. The owner of the store has incorporated the English word “design” into the name to attract a more diversified clientele.

### ***French Creole identity***

The question of identity has generated heated debates over the past decades in the Caribbean. Mahabir (2009, 72) defines identity as follows: “Identity emerges from the collective consciousness of groups that share a common community and a common culture and allows individuals to identify where and with whom they fit socially”.

Rohlehr (2013, 377) views “self-perception” as a form of “inner resistance of the slaves to the self imposed on them by the plantation system and slavery”. Rohlehr’s statement is relevant in the case of the French Caribbean “*affranchies*” who sought to enhance their self-esteem in a racially and socially divided society by wearing their Madras headpieces. From the post-colonial period to the first half of the twentieth century, beauty, self-esteem and marital status and social class remained vital elements in the lives of many French Caribbean women. The various peaks found in Madras headpieces revealed women’s social and marital status. Let us analyze some examples. According to the literature, a Matador was a woman who dated several men for money and jewelry, had her own style (Costumes Créoles, 3). According to the literature, there are two different headpieces that were worn by the Matadore de Saint-Pierre (the St. Pierre Matadore) and the Matadore du Sud (Matadore of the South of Martinique). The former comprised a small triangle at the front and a pleated tail at the back whereas the latter consisted of a fan in the front and in the back (Costumes Créoles, 3).

<sup>12</sup> La Mauny plantation was named after Count Mauny. Its existence dates back to 1749. See article entitled La Mauny (<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:FLjaW4xP>>)

In Guadeloupe, “La Shat”<sup>13</sup> headpiece was linked with the status of a married man’s mistress. A woman covered her head with the “vwèl o van” whenever she had to run errands. The “kwatè” headpiece has given rise to many discussions. Some people believe that this headpiece was essentially reserved for women of bad reputation while others argue that women wore their “kwatè” to inform people that they were dating several men even though they were already in a relationship.

In the French islands, Madras headpieces conveyed some interesting messages to men in both Dominica and St. Lucia. Creole women revealed their marital status through the peaks of their Madras headpieces. Indeed, the wrapping process of Madras headpieces produced some beautiful peaks. Research (“Foulard, Madras et Collier-Choux”) and (“Traditional Dress in Dominica”) focuses on the meaning of the peaks. One peak: my heart is free. Two peaks: my heart is engaged. Three peaks: I am married. In Dominica, the messages are in French Creole. One peak: Ché mwe ouvè (my heart is free). Two peaks: Che mwe engage mais ou sa pon yon chance (my heart is engaged but you take a chance). Three peaks: Ché mwe pon déja. Four peaks : Mwe ni yon place pou tout yo ki vlé mwe. In St Lucia, the peaks carried various messages. One peak (I am single). Two peaks (I am married). Three peaks (I am a widow or I am a divorcee). Four peaks (I accept everyone who tries).

Madras headpieces won popularity among female vendors and political activists. In their work, Réache and Gagar (2009) acknowledges: the “marchande”<sup>14</sup> and the Zambo. In Guadeloupe, La Zambo headpiece was credited with women who were involved in politics. Martinique was well-known for its “matadore” headpieces. In the contemporary French Creole societies, Madras is no longer limited to social and marital status and women. The Madras material was accepted in Europe, particularly England and France. Nevertheless, it reached the heights of popularity in African territories such as Cameroon, Benin, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Senegal (“The Handloom Export Promotion Council”).

Little has been said about the dressing code regulations for domestic slaves. Did slave women of the “Great House” cover their heads with a piece of Madras? The French, Africans and Creoles have attached a great value to Madras as much as Indians have. For instance, Indo-Martinican Hindu sacrificers protect their cutlasses using Madras for its valuable properties. Both Matalom and Woulkè drummers cover their instrument with Madras as well. According to Benoist, Desroches, L’Etang & Ponoman (2004) Indians allocated a symbolic value to Madras colours. Yellow is Goddess Maryamman’s favourite colour. Nevertheless, Goddess Kâli prefers red and white (Benoist & al, 2004). The name “Madras” was initially given to southern Indians to differentiate them from their northern counterparts who were often referred to as “Calcutta”.

For Afro-Creoles, Madras is a beautiful material. It is more than an Indian legacy since it has been adopted for different purposes. Madras has presented itself as a symbol in the construction of French Creole identity and culture. It is part of the national costume of Dominica, Guadeloupe, Martinique and St Lucia. These four islands share a common history, Creole language, national costume as well as cultural expressions (Bèlè and Quadrille dances).

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<sup>13</sup> French word meaning “female cat”.

<sup>14</sup> French word meaning “female vendor”.

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