

# Federico Alberto Cuello Camilo

Embracing **Dominican Creole** Cultures

Federico Alberto Cuello Camilo is Ambassador to the United Kingdom for the Dominican Republic. As one of the foremost economists and diplomats for the Republic he has served as an ambassador to several European nations as well as the United Nations in New York, the European Union and the World Trade Organisation in Geneva. Kreol Magazine recently interviewed him to learn about his views on Creole culture in his country and his endeavours to advance the progress of Creole culture throughout the Caribbean region.

In the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic stands out as an economic powerhouse of the region - serving as an important market for exports from surrounding Caribbean countries. It is also most emphatically a Creole country. With the second-largest territory (after Cuba), over three quarters of its population of ten million people identifies itself as Creole. The country is also the most visited tourist destination in the Caribbean, making it the recognizable face of Creole culture to the people of North America and Europe. It also has a growing presence in international affairs. For all of these reasons, the Dominican Republic has taken a leadership role to organize and advance the development of Creole nations in the region.

Kreol Magazine had the opportunity to meet Federico Alberto Cuello Camilo, one of the Dominican Republic's foremost diplomats. Since 2011, he represented his country as Ambassador to the United Kingdom, but has also served as Viceminister for Economic Cooperation and Reforms (1995-99), Ambassador to the UN and the WTO in Geneva (1999-2002); to Belgium, the European Union, Poland and the Czech Republic (2005-9); and to the United Nations in New York (2009-11). Born in 1966, he earned his BSc from the Santo Domingo Institute of Technology, followed by an MA and PhD in Economics from the University of Illinois.

Trade and other economic issues are central concerns to Ambassador Cuello, but he is also deeply involved with advancing recognition of Creole culture. While our discussions with him ranged from Dominican life and culture to trade negotiations, we did not neglect to learn more about him as a person.

### Creole culture in the Dominican Republic

For Ambassador Cuello the Dominican Republic is very much a tropical country with a Creole culture. *"The Taino culture in the island of Quisqueya, later known as Hispaniola, was that of a mixed race even before the Europeans arrived. Research by experts in the British Museum demonstrates - based on chromosome analysis performed on pre-Columbian tombs - that there was no such thing as a single race in the Caribbean. There were already different races from around the Americas coming together in the Caribbean, well before the arrival of the Europeans".*

This became a heady mix of influences from Africa, the British, the French, the Dutch, and the Portuguese. Eventually, the Lebanese and many more arrived resulting in a mixed culture, a mixed race, a Creole race, a Creole culture.

### A Creole Diplomat: culture and influence

As a diplomat, Ambassador Cuello has found that this cultural mix facilitates his job tremendously. It is very

difficult to represent the interests of small countries in such institutions as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the United Nations or in negotiations with the European Union. Small countries have to punch above their weight, and according to the Ambassador they do this by *"building alliances with those countries with Creole cultures, in the Caribbean, in Africa and the Pacific"*. In promoting these alliances on the basis of issues of common interests, he was elected Chairman of the African-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP) Group in Geneva (2002) and while stationed in Brussels he repeated the feat as President of the ACP Committee of Ambassadors (2006).

He was key in organizing the first ACP culture festival in the Dominican Republic followed by the first meeting of ACP Ministers of Culture (2006). People came to the Dominican Republic from all over the world and it was a revelation. It reinforced awareness of the African element in the mixed heritage of Creole culture in the Dominican Republic. Delegates represented not only the Caribbean, but also Africa and the Pacific states.

In the UK he has regrettably found that the interactions of the Creole countries in the diplomatic corps is not as great as it has been in other venues where he served. It may be because many Creole countries are part of the Commonwealth and they have their own dynamics.

In Geneva, he recalls meeting on a daily basis to coordinate common positions. In Brussels, the coordination was even more systematic. *"We had an ACP Secretariat as the venue for our joint coordination vis-à-vis our dialogue on politics, cooperation and trade with the European Union. This allowed us to negotiate as one with any and all counterparts, thus strengthening our bargaining position."*

He comes back constantly to the belief that there is a new phase in the history of the Dominican Republic. *"in which there is greater self-awareness of our Creole culture, and our common roots and triple heritage from the aboriginal, the European and the African."* He is convinced that this awakening allows him and his fellow Dominicans to reach out more effectively to their neighbours and to fellow members of the Creole culture of the world.

### A journey to secure fairness for developing countries

Ambassador Cuello's work has centred on trade negotiations to ensure that the best interests for developing countries are negotiated. His main pursuit has been the quest for balanced outcomes for all countries around a table. *"A balanced outcome for partners with different levels of development is no easy feat. In sports, a boxing match between a heavyweight and a featherweight is not allowed. In the international scene, a balanced outcome requires recognition of the differences so that the result is a level-playing field for all parties. This can be achieved only through special*





ABOVE:  
H.E. FEDERICO ALBERTO  
CUELLO CAMILO WITH  
MICHELE CAMILO  
(TO HIS RIGHT), HIS  
WIFE, NATALIA MARIA  
FEDERIGHI DE CUELLO,  
(FOURTH FROM LEFT)  
AND EMBASSY STAFF  
DURING THE RECEPTION  
AFTER PERFORMANCE  
OF MICHAEL CAMILLO,  
LONDON  
PHOTO: FEDERICO  
ALBERTO

*treatment, with the stronger partner liberalizing faster than the weaker partner."*

He was part of the team, appointed by Caribbean ministers of trade and development, who achieved such a balanced outcome in the negotiations for the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between Caribbean countries and the European Union and its Member States.

### **Ambassador to UK, promoting the Dominican Republic**

He describes London as, "a wonderful posting in an exciting city. I am thrilled by its multicultural, civic and respectful nature, as well as by its sense of history". He appreciates the overall package of London and highlights the excellent infrastructure as well as the priority given to sustainable transportation, so much so that it inspired him to purchase - and use as frequently as possible - his own foldable bicycle! With his wife, Natalia, a love has grown for London and they are enjoying their stay as much as possible.

He regrets there is a deficit of activities in the UK involving our Creole diaspora. In his opinion this

is an opportunity for our embassies to do much more, both individually and as a group. "Yearly, within the scarce resources available, Dominican day (27 February) and Dominican Week (usually early in June) are the means for engaging our diaspora, our network of UK contacts and an ever increasing number of delegates coming from the Dominican Republic. Other embassies from creole countries could very well consider organizing an annual event or a series of events celebrating our common creole culture. As an embassy from a creole country in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean, we would be more than glad to join such an unprecedented effort", said the ambassador.

His focus in the UK has been to utilize his experience to connect UK importers and investors with Dominican exporters and potential partners. This year's celebration of the 4th Dominican Week brought to London a large delegation of exporters from the agricultural sector, getting a number of deals signed. "We were lucky to get the single-largest stand in the London Produce Show, allowing us to showcase the quality and variety of our supply as well as the creativity of our culinary artists", he added.





Dominican exports to the UK have grown 14% since 2011. It is no longer concentrated only on conventional bananas, but now includes major and growing exports of organic bananas, mangoes, avocados and exotic vegetables, grown increasingly under very strict conditions for fair trade.

The Dominican Republic is the main ACP exporter of bananas and the third largest exporter to the UK of exotic vegetables. This has been achieved by gaining the confidence of British importers, who helped set the strict standards now being met by Dominican growers.

A key factor in the DR's success has been the availability of frequent transportation links by air and sea. Products can arrive from the Dominican Republic to the UK in 9 days by sea. *"No other country in the Caribbean or Central or South America is as close to the UK as the Dominican Republic"*, said the ambassador.

There are also daily flights to the UK, so mangoes and avocados arrive fresh, fully ripened and ready to sell. No need to store them in a ripening facility; they can go straight to market.

UK tourism to the DR is on an upward swing, thanks

to daily charter flights from Thomson and Thomas Cook and to twice-weekly flights by British Airways to Punta Cana, which serves both as a tourist and as a cargo airport. 2014 saw 120,000 arrivals from the UK, a year-on-year increase of 35%. For 2015 a total of 170,000 are expected.

Punta Cana has become a major trans-shipment hub for the rest of the region. One salient example: those beautiful roses from Ecuador which we can buy in London, travel from Quito to London via Punta Cana. The Dominican Republic sees itself as a logistics hub for the Caribbean and the whole of the Americas.

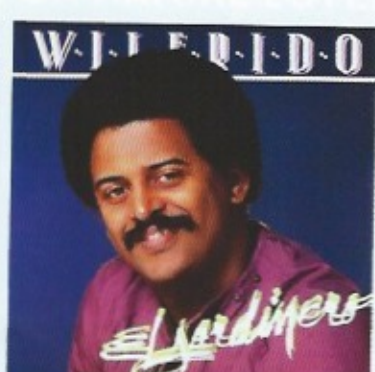
### Family life for a busy diplomat

Ambassador Cuello has three children from his first marriage. They grew up during his postings in Geneva, Brussels, New York and now the UK. All are fully trilingual, in Spanish, English and French and truly multicultural.

*"Just last July, the marriage of my eldest daughter in Punta Cana seemed like a mini-UN meeting, with guests from all races representing over 30 countries"*, said Ambassador Cuello. She is a progressive

ABOVE FROM LEFT: AMBASSADOR CUELLO WITH HIS WIFE NATALIN AND GUEST DURING THE EXHIBITION OF DOMINICAN ARTIST SORAYA ABU NABEH AT LONDON'S LA GALLERIA PALL MALL.





ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT:  
JUNOT DIAZ, WINNER  
OF THE 2008 PULITZER  
PRIZE FOR HIS NOVEL  
"THE BRIEF WONDROUS  
LIFE OF OSCAR WAO"

PEDRO MIR, A  
QUINTESSENTIAL  
CREOLE POET

WILFRIDO VARGAS, A  
MERENQUE SINGER

American-style girl, very much into health-conscious eating habits. "She has become a nutritional guru, developing and marketing her own app for locating vegan and juicing restaurants in the main US Cities while working toward a master's degree in food studies at NYU", said the ambassador.

His son is the European of the group, having read economics and philosophy at Nottingham University and concluded a Masters' degree in Public Policy in Maastricht University's UNU-Merit, all the while leading over 30 model-UN meetings across Europe and the UK. His youngest, a daughter, is the Orientalist of the family, having learnt Japanese and now moving onto Korean. As the more artistically oriented of the three, she wants to study industrial design in Japan.

Now, in his second marriage, his spouse is a Spanish-Italian, Natalia, who is committed to Creole cultures. He admits that Natalia's collection of African and Pacific music is even better than his! When he relates her activities it is clear she is a remarkable woman. She is Head of government relations and institutional affairs for Yara International, a big Norwegian multinational, manufacturing mineral fertiliser and air quality industrial products. She focuses on promoting corporate sustainability, food and nutritional security, and sustainable agriculture. She leads on this by representing her firm in UN meetings and the UN private sector mechanism for sustainable development, the Global Compact.

### Dominican Republic: the artist component

There is pride when the Ambassador considers literary Creoles. This includes the immense Aimé Césaire from Martinique and the Nobel prize-winner Derek Walcott, hailing from St Lucia. He met the latter when he came to lecture at the 2008 Book Fair in Santo Domingo.

The national poet of the Dominican Republic is a quintessential Creole poet, Pedro Mir, a descendant from immigrants coming from Puerto Rico and Cuba. His poem, "Hay un país en el mundo" (There is a country in the world) makes the reader shiver for its strong social content. Read in French it becomes even

more dramatic:

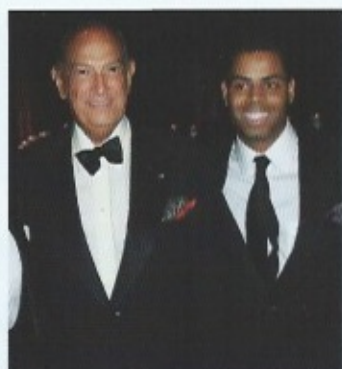
*Il existe  
en ce monde un pays  
Placé  
sur la trajectoire solaire,  
originaire de la nuit,  
Placé  
dans un incroyable archipel  
de sucre et d'alcool,  
Naïvement  
léger,  
Comme un aile de chauve-souris  
posée sur la brise,  
Naïvement  
clair,  
come la trace du baiser sur le visage  
des vieilles filles  
ou le jour sur les toits,  
Naïvement  
fruitier. Fluvial. Et matériel. Et cependant  
naïvement torride et peloté  
comme les hanches d'une adolescente.*

Another poem of his, "Contracanto a Walt Whitman" (Countersong to Walt Whitman) elaborates on the theme of his Caribbean creole roots:

*I,  
A son of the Caribbean,  
Antillean to be exact,  
The raw product of a simple  
Puerto Rican girl  
and a Cuban worker,  
born precisely, and poor,  
on Quisqueyan soil,  
Overflowing with voices,  
Full of eyes  
Wide open throughout the islands,  
I have come to speak to Walt Whitman,  
A Kosmos,  
Of Manhattan the son.*

More contemporary writers are best represented by Dominican-US writer Junot Diaz, winner of the 2008 Pulitzer prize for his novel "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao". "Mr Diaz exemplifies the continued capacity of Creole culture to grow and transcend. His literary output is recognized worldwide, and his





academic stature in US universities is at the very top", said Ambassador Cuello.

He is very animated when describing Creole poetry and Creole novels, particularly from Haiti. "Dominicans admire Haitian novelists (Rene Depestre, Jacques Stephen Alexis...), poets and painters for their high quality and creativity in depicting the history and reality of our common heritage", the Ambassador added.

For a speech on cacao in Côte d'Ivoire he came across an anthology of West African poetry in French. Opening the book in a random page, revealed a poem written in Senegal by Haitian poet Jean-François Bierre about the Flamboyant tree that adorns so many a Creole country:

*Feuillages étagés saignant de tâches rouges  
Qui prolongent le jour, en fanaux dans la nuit  
Arbre de Noël de l'été...*

In a short article published by Ambassador Cuello in First Magazine, he tried to convey the message that the Dominican Republic is a connected, creative and cool country. Specifically identified were multiple Grammy award-winning artists such as the poet composer and performer Juan Luis Guerra, whose merengues and bachatas were sang in chorus by a packed-full attendance in his 2014 Royal Albert Hall concert, including his signature merengue "El costo de la vida" (The Cost of Living):

*Somos un agujero  
En medio del mar y el cielo  
Quinientos años después  
Una raza encendida  
Negra, blanca y taina  
¿Pero quién descubrió a quién?*

The ambassador enthuses about Michael Camilo, the piano player and composer of Latin jazz, who has performed twice in London already, most recently in June 2015 at the Queen Elizabeth Hall. Other personal favourites of his are merengue singers Johnny Ventura, Wilfrido Vargas and Sergio Vargas (no relation). Among the many bachata players,

Aventura still remains at the top, in spite of having broken up a few years back. Their former lead singer, Anthony Santos, continues to be very successful in his solo career.

The top fashion designer ever produced by the Dominican Republic, Oscar de la Renta, succeeded in Europe and then went on to create a fashion empire in the U.S. "He exemplified the creativity and the chivalry of Dominicans, through his courtesy, his humility and his solidarity with those in need", said Ambassador Cuello. This admiration has resulted in a planned exhibition of the life and legacy of De la Renta at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

## Cuisine and palatal delights

The favourite Dominican dish of Ambassador Cuello is the Creole goat ("chivo a la criolla"). It is stewed and a bit spicy. He points out that Dominican cuisine is not really very spicy, but this culinary delight is an exception. It originates in the Northwest of the Dominican Republic, which happens to be the main banana growing region

Another favourite culinary tradition of his is that of the Samaná peninsula, where all dishes are seasoned with coconut. "Samaná is developing fast as an emerging tourist destination. Las Terrenas and the city of Samaná have a wealth of boutique hotels, diverse cultural heritage and culinary experiences, revealing a strong influence from the descendants of liberated slaves coming from the US earlier in the 19th Century", he added.

His favourite international dish? Impossible to have just one! He enjoys Thai food, as many of the ingredients are the same as Dominican dishes, having the same fruits, including coconut, mango and pineapple. Frequently on the menu are Peruvian, Indian, Spanish, Japanese and Italian dishes, but also Lebanese, which many Latin Americans consider to be part of their cuisine. In London, when he visits Tesco looking for the ingredients of Lebanese dishes, he finds them in the Brazilian aisle!

Coming from a Creole country and serving in such a cosmopolitan cauldron of peoples as London is, it is no wonder Ambassador Cuello is so happy to be posted there. ☺

ABOVE LEFT TO RIGHT:  
JUAN LUIS GUERRA,  
PERFORMING IN ROYAL  
ALBERT HALL 2014.

OSCAR DE LA RENTA  
WITH HIS SON  
MOISES

MICHAEL CAMILO, A  
PIANO PLAYER AND  
COMPOSER OF LATIN  
JAZZ  
PHOTO:  
FREDERICO ALBERTO