Language use in spiritual practices, cultural resistance, and Creole genesis

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A connection between

- language use in spiritual practices of enslaved Africans and African descended people in the Caribbean
- secrecy
- cultural resistance
- creole genesis
• Deeper, more basilectal and African influenced forms of creole language in religious ceremonies and rituals.

• These deeper forms of language are a reflection of cultural and linguistic resistance by enslaved Africans and their descendants to the European cultures and languages imposed on them.

• This resistance had an impact on the emergence of Creole languages
✓ Jamaican Maroon spirit language

✓ Haitian Vodou langaj

✓ The secret languages spoken by maroon-descended communities in Suriname

✓ Guené in the Papiamentu speaking communities of Curaçao,

✓ Palenquero (or Lengua) spoken by African descended people in Colombia, and

✓ The ritual lengua of Palo Monte spiritual practice in Cuba.
What is their story?

- There is a need to privilege oral history in the research on the origins of Creole languages.

- In addition to the scribal records available we need to tap into oral modes of representation: oral transmission, retellings, legends, myths, testimonies, rituals, songs, etc., as valid historical records coming from the original creole speakers themselves and their descendants.
• Historian Lawrence Levine (1993) argues that African-American slaves used songs to connect themselves back to their African heritage, position themselves in the present and project themselves forward to a world of freedom.

• Edwina Ashie-Nikoi in the article: “A Multifunctional Space: The Uses of Rituals among Enslaved and Freed Afro-Caribbean Peoples” (2005) proposes that a more nuanced reading of the Afro-Caribbean past is available through a critical examination of the region's main rituals.
What other oral or living records are there?

What can the creators of Creole languages themselves tell us about the origins of Creoles?
1 Jamaican Maroon Spirit Languages

- In his article “How the “Older Heads’ Talk: A Jamaican Maroon Spirit Possession Language and its Relationship to the Creoles of Suriname and Sierra Leone” (1983) Bilby remarks that the Jamaican Maroon “spirit language” provides us with a special kind of entrée into the past and he affirms that this kind of phenomenon in other parts of Afro-America should become the subject of careful study.
2. Saamaka

- According to the anthropologist Richard Price in his article “Kikoongo and Saramaccan: a reappraisal”, Saramaka is [...] a society founded by rebel slaves, and they long ago developed rather sophisticated linguistic devices to maintain their cultural privacy vis-a-vis westerners (see Price and Price 1972b and T. Price 1970).
3. Guene of Curaçao

- In Curaçao Efraim Frank Martinus Arion (p 4) tells us about Guene, “a group of Afro-Portuguese Creoles that reached Curaçao together with Papiamentu but remained limited to small groups of slaves and were therefore considered secret languages”
4. Elements of secrecy in Colombian Palenquero

- Yves Moñino in his article, « Les rôles du substrat dans les Créoles et les langues secrètes: le cas du Palenquero, Creole espagnol de la Colombie » states that there are functions of Creoles that have not received enough attention. These functions include: 1) the affirmation of the distinctive identity of a particular community of enslaved Africans (more so when they become Maroons) through a language that is distinct to that of their so-called masters; and 2) the use of a Creole language as a secret language in order not to be understood by the masters.
5. Lengua (the ritual code of Palo Monte).

- Armin Schwegler and Constanza Rojas, in their article entitled “La lengua ritual del Palo Monte (Cuba): estudio comparativo (Holguín/Cienfuegos)”, - Based on field work in Holguín and Cienfuegos (Cuba), demonstrate that the ritual language of Palo Monte exhibits strong (diatopic) parallels in its structure and style. The study offers a series of suggestions regarding the genesis of Palero practices, and examines recent research (2000-2008) on the topic:

“Our detailed analysis of a ritual text (collected during the initiation of a Palero) confirms that Kikongo is the sole African substrate of lengua (the ritual code of Palo Monte). The texts gathered in the field further reaffirm the mixed tripartite character of Palo Monte’s ritual tongue, which consists of Bozal Spanish, Kikongo, and Cuban Spanish elements.”
6. Hatian Vodoun Culture Language
or
Langaj

My own research
In my two and a half years of research I have been able to locate a considerable amount of data in the Port-au-Prince and Leogane areas alone. There is much more in the rest of the country. What I have located include:

1. A Glossary of Langaj Vodoun (or Pawol Langaj Vodoun-la) with 431 entries
2. A published compilation titled La priye Ginen
3. Le Grand Recueil Sacré, ou Repertoire des Chansons du Vodou Haitien, a published compilation of Vodou Chants
4. An unpublished manuscript entitled Petit Poemes Sacres en Prose Rythme du Vodoun, which is a partially explicated collection of 65 chants used in the diverse Rites of Vodou ceremonies.
Mambo (Vodou priestess) and scholar Dr. Dowoti Desir’s article “Vodou: A Sacred Multidimensional, Pluralistic Space. Teaching, Theology and Religion”

In this article, Desir affirms that, in general, the spiritual or religious practices of Afro-Caribbean peoples encompass:

- a pluralistic vision, reflecting the harsh new global order [which] permitted spiritual sustainability by reconfiguring African ontologisms. Embracing pluralism through annexation of non-native spiritual practices augmented the power of the Africans […], providing them with other epistemes and access to spiritual forces they believed enhanced their position. […] (p. 91). “Our religious institutions, the sosyètes (congregations) that make-up our kai’s (houses) and hounfours (temples) became underground spaces of marronage, of liberation or resistance that served as spaces of worship. But they also existed to maintain the space of segregation that whites of European descendence persisted in emphasizing in their social, legal, architectural, and ritualistic existences. Africans responded with subaltern spaces of lakou, cofradia, cabillo, and other volunteer associations, providing social and economic support to Africans throughout the Diaspora.” (p. 95)

“As Vodousyan (servers of the lwa, God’s divine emissaries)” she asserts, “we enter into the priesthood informed that Black religiosity is a form or resistance.” (p. 94).
But what is langaj as defined by Vodou practitioners and what do these definitions point to?

- In Désir’s words:

Priests of Vodou must learn langaj, the language of Alada, the holy city of ancient Dahomey- literally the language of our ancestors so that we recognize the members of our covenant and have the capacity to call on Spirit. Like infants, we learn to speak. Even priests living in Ayiti and/or those who speak Ayisyan everyday – we still must learn langaj. The weight of language, while prosaic on one hand, is essential practical knowledge for Manbo and Houngan. [...]o call on the lwa – to sing the songs of our ancestors, to recite our prayers we need to be grounded in our native Ayisyan and the sacred language of Spirit. By learning the language of Vodou we unshackle the folds of history and reform identity”. (p. 94)
The late Vodou practitioner Estelle B. Manuel:

Vodoun Culture has its own jargon. In fact, a lot of seemingly incomprehensible words that are part of Vodoun culture come from the sacred, the religious. It is the language of the ancients, what we call langay or langaj. These are the objects or actions that our ancestors found no other words to describe. Some of these words can be recognized today by people from West Africa, but we must bear in mind that the meanings have shifted over the centuries and that - foremost in our minds - Vodoun is a seventeenth century composite of the cultures of different African nations mixed with that of the surviving American aborigines. All they had in common was that they had lost their freedom and that their ancestors and gods could not be honored in the open. The common ritual language they elaborated is a "creole" of the original ritual languages. It is Vodoun’s very own. It is LANGAJ!
Max G. Beauvoir is the compiler of *La Priye Ginen* and *Le Grand Recueil Sacré, ou Repertoire des Chansons du Vodou Haiti*. He is the Ati or Chef Supreme of Haitian Vodou, a scholar and a scientist.

In the introduction to his work *Petit Poèmes Sacres en Prose Rythme du Vodoun*, he wrote:

“On ignore totalement la date de la création de ces textes et leurs auteurs. Mais ils engagent toujours la Sacralité Cosmique et constituent pour le Vodoïsant son très précieux trésor mythologique et littéraire amassé par de doctes hommes et femmes au cours de nombreuses générations. Il ne serait pas du tout surprenant qu’à l’origine ils aient été produits en verse puisqu’ils le furent pour satisfaire les besoins d’un système de liturgie cosmique qui se base sur la tradition orale. Car il est, en effet, toujours plus facile de se rappeler les vers que la prose.
“Faute d’un meilleur nom, nous avons choisi d’appeler la langue Africaine dans laquelle elles furent produites à l’origine « la langue Vodoun », « la langue Houn » ou « la langue Lwa ». Celle-ci existait déjà depuis de nombreux millénaires avant le Chrétienté, rendant certaines de ces chansons bien plus vieilles que tout ce que l’on peut trouver dans la Bible ou dans Homère ou dans le poèmes épiques de l’Inde.”
Conclusions

- All of the above mentioned works as well as my own research on Hatian Vodoun Culture Language or Langaj reveal African language retentions which are utilized at least partially to establish and maintain secrecy as a part of a strategy of conscious resistance manifested in spiritual practices and language use.

- These living oral documents open the doors to a vast source of information and knowledge that deserve our attention as linguists dealing with the origins of Creole languages.
• I firmly believe that we may never have a comprehensive and completely accurate theory for the origins of creoles. Nevertheless, I think it is extremely important that we stop attempting to develop theories for the origins of Creoles that are based only on formal linguistic categories and on written documents recorded and filtered through European ears, the majority of whom were possibly totally ignorant about the cultures and the history of the people they were dealing with.
• We need to study more profoundly the history of Africa and the African languages and the history of our own Caribbean nations like Haiti, Suriname, Jamaica, Saint Croix, and even Puerto Rico.
• We need to enter into the deepest waters, the spaces of spiritual practices as living oral historical sources and listen with open ears and without prejudice to what they are telling us.
• After we all do all of this, we may just have a glimpse of the tip of the ice-berg, but at least we will have a more comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the numerous and multi-faceted and multi-dimensional factors which constitute the driving forces behind the emergence of the Afro-Atlantic Creole languages and cultures.
Mesi anpil!

¡Muchas gracias!

Thank you very much!

Meda ase paa!