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THE AFRICAN LINGUISTIC DIASPORA: GULLAH AS A CREOLE CLAIMANT

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Introduction

Language and how it transforms and functions is a basic building block in the study of civilizations. This paper examines Gullah—a language spoken primarily on a string of islands facing the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, as well as on the coast of these states—as it relates to the family of West Indian Creole languages. Originally, the concept of Creole was derived from the idea of an evolved pidgin. The latter was considered an amalgam of languages basically the result of one language which emerged from borrowings from other languages. It was not considered the mother tongue of any of its speakers. It was viewed as a second language designed for a specific function such as commerce. At the outset, pidgins were very simple in terms of both grammar and vocabulary due to limited purposes such as local or kinship communication. Over a period of time, however, a pidgin often became the first language of people who had lost their original language. Gradually, it developed a more complex grammatical structure. This language transformation process, sometimes called Creolization, takes place all over the globe. Quite often, the resultant language symbolized a group's social or political status within a larger cultural/social order. Yiddish, for example, evolved in central and Eastern Europe from German with Slavic admixtures as a mode of communication among Ashkenazi (Eastern European) Jews as a common language for trading purposes.

During the great period of Indian Ocean commerce before the 16th century, two other amalgamated languages transformed themselves from pidgin to Creole. Swahili, for instance, combined Bantu grammar and syntax with the Arabic alphabet to become a national language in several African countries today. It is now an official language in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Overall, it is today spoken in nine central and eastern African countries.²

On the other side of the Indian Ocean, the aptly named Bazaar Malay evolved from mostly Malay with an admixture of other languages. Today, it is the official language of Indonesia and is used in several other southeastern Asian countries. These include Malaysia,

Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, and the Philippines.

In a further instance, you have the development of Afrikaans. This language derived from standard Dutch with some mixtures from other European and African tongues. Ultimately, it became the symbol of Afrikaner nationalism before majority rule in South Africa.

It is in the West Indies that the fullest development of Creole languages took place. In virtually every island as well as Belize, Guyana, and Suriname, there was a fusion of African elements with Dutch, English, and French. The status of Creole languages varied from wide-spread use in informal situations in the smallest Anglophone islands to religious usage in the francophone islands as well as St. Lucia and Dominica. Consequently, as a medium of instruction as well as use in the media, it enjoys quite extensive usage, especially in some of the larger islands, such as Trinidad/Tobago and Jamaica. In Haiti, Aruba, and the Netherlands Antilles, the Creole tongues (Creole in Haiti; Papiamentu in Aruba and the Antilles), enjoy official status.³

Although somewhat dated, a half-century ago, the anthropologist, Melville J. Herskovits, established a typology for Creole culture using a number of criteria such as folklore, music, art, religion, and language in terms of African use of European terms.

It is the contention of this paper that although the connection between African influences and European forms is well known in the West Indies; it is less well-known that the same pattern is evident in the Gullah culture. Therefore, a discussion on Creole language and related aspects of Creole culture should automatically include Gullah along with West Indian Creoles.⁴

Geographical and Cultural Background

For purposes of definition in this paper, I will define West Indian Creole culture as encompassing the following area: the former Dutch, English, and French-speaking areas in and around the Caribbean. This means that it deals with the islands of the Caribbean not directly influenced by Spain (although even in the Spanish influenced area, the same process of Creolization took place), at least over the past two centuries. Obviously several islands in the West Indies, including Jamaica and Trinidad, were under Spanish rule for a long time. In addition to the islands, this cultural definition includes Belize in Central America and Guyana, Suriname, and French Guiana on the northeast corner of South America.

The Gullah culture (named after the Spanish term of Guale Isles)

includes the string of islands off the South Atlantic Coast of the United States called the Sea Islands, which stretch from northern South Carolina to the Georgia/Florida border. It also includes the coastal strip, which extends 250 miles on the mainland. The Sea Islands are separated from the mainland by salt-water rivulets. The coast of the mainland is composed of marshes and swamps interspersed with forests of oaks, palmettos, and pines. Although the Sea Islands are often used synonymously with the Gullah culture, in fact, parts of the mainland are also part of the culture.⁵

The juxtaposition of African and European elements as part of Creole culture in relationship to the arts, religion, and folklore, are widely known in the West Indies and justly celebrated. The brightly colored buildings, clothing, pottery, and other artifacts attest to continued African influence, as does the more recent Afro-Cubism artistic movement. West Indian music, such as calypso and reggae, has become part of world culture, as have dance crazes such as the limbala, the samba, and mambo.

Religious syncretism is evident in the Rastafarian sect, Voodoo, Santaria, and other religious expressions of spiritual possession. As elsewhere in African-influenced areas, there has been a reinterpretation of African traditional feelings in terms of European forms. The Yoruba goddess, Yemeri, associated with purity, is associated with the Virgin Mary among Catholics. And the Shango cult is known as Macumba in parts of the Americas including the West Indies and the Sea Islands. West Indian folklore resonates with African elements concerning the trickster spider and cunning rabbit, such as the Anansi spider and the hare.⁶

Less prominent, but equally pervasive, is the continued African influence along the Sea Islands. Spirit possession so dominant in West Africa is evident among the Gullah people. The ultimate spiritual expression is possession by God whereby one becomes one with God. The person loses conscious faculties and merges with the ultimate deity through dancing, drama, and singing. All three elements are present at various services especially in the largest religious denomination—the Baptists. The pattern of recitation and response (present throughout the American South among African-Americans) is apparent, as is its African source.

The attachment of religion to cycles of the season has been passed from West Africa to the Gullah where there are often commemorations of the planting and harvesting seasons. In African cultures, death is a

central event and the funeral, which marks the passing from one stage of the cycle of existence to another, is a seminal event. In the Sea Islands, the funeral is also considered an event that is not to be surpassed by any other event in this life. As a result, having money available to cover the costs for ceremonials and rituals connected to the funeral is a very object of life. Accordingly, burial associations and societies, which save money for this purpose, are very common.⁷

As in the West Indies, the African influence can be seen in brightly colored cloth. The houses, which originally lodged slaves, were built upon West African models. Also as in the West Indies, pottery including jars and cooking pots, were based on African motifs and mirror the unglazed clay earthenware common in West Africa. Many slaves were craftsmen in wood carving and iron working so that decorative devices in these media resemble work in West Africa. Everyday crafts such as baskets, quilts, and walking sticks virtually replicate models in West Africa, as do the often elaborate sculptures found in graveyards.⁸

Music and folklore also reflect the desire to continue homeland traditions transmitted through European modes. In both Gullah society and West Africa, European string music, in both secular and sacred circumstances, were augmented by percussion and brass instruments, such as drums, cymbals, trumpets, and trombones. Syncopated rhythm found its way into boat song, work songs, and religious services, as did the use of the xylophone and fiddle.

Of course, it is the spirituals, which evolved into gospel, then blues, then ragtime, then jazz, and thereupon entered world culture, which are the most famous. In the Sea Islands, as elsewhere where slavery existed, spirituals were a way of connecting peoples from disparate backgrounds and served as an escape from everyday drudgery. Folklore also was a conduit to Africa. In the Sea Islands, the trickster spider became anansi then was reconfigured into "Aunt Nancy," and the Hare became "Brer Rabbit." Both were meant to show that weaker, smaller creatures could triumph over larger, stronger ones. The symbolic importance of this message in a world of subservience is all too obvious.

Language Heritage and African Linkages

A pioneer anthropologist, William Bascom, has documented the relationship between Krio in Sierra Leone, Gullah, and West Indian dialects, especially in Barbados and Jamaica. It is surmised that a pidgin developed from the southern Gold Coast and the Gambia River and soon spread from Senegambia to Southern Nigeria, with a slight admix-

ture from Angola. With the slave trade continuing until the early 19th century, the pidgin evolved into various Creoles, depending on the mixture of languages and the ratio of Africans to Europeans. Slaves were often transported from Barbados and other parts of the West Indies and later some of the Maroons from Jamaica were settled in Sierra Leone. This created ongoing connections in a triangular fashion among peoples of the West Indies, the Sea Islands, and West Africa.¹⁰

A specific instance of the above comes from a study that took 570 common words in Creole dialects and did a cross comparison. Of 181 Krio words (the language of Sierra Leone derived from English, former slaves from Jamaica and Nova Scotia, and local African languages), half have the same origin in Gullah, Krio, and Jamaican speech. Three hundred and ninety four words are of the same or similar origins in the Sranam language of Surinam, Jamaican Creole, and Gullah. In the latter part of the 17th century, slaves taken by the Dutch and English to Barbados were later transported to Surinam, Jamaica, and South Carolina.

Further cross-pollination took place when the Maroons of central Jamaica (escaped slaves and their descendants) were settled in Sierra Leone at the end of the 18th century. In addition, freed slaves, who had fought for the British during the Revolutionary War in return for freedom, had been resettled in Nova Scotia; and not being happy there, were also resettled in Sierra Leone.¹¹ They formed part of the Creole elite which dominated Sierra Leone until the last three decades. In addition, loyalist slave owners from the tidewater south, mostly coastal South Carolina and Georgia, took their slaves with them to the closest part of the West Indies, the Bahamas, so that today, Gullah and Bahamian are more closely related in lexicon, phonology, and syntax than any other Creole languages.¹²

Patterns of intonation link Gullah with other Creole languages. Despite efforts of decreolization in terms of standard speech, speech inflections remain, whatever the use of standard language, in formal situations. In other situations, non-formal social discourse with other language speakers, Creole patterns of speech prevail. For example, in Gullah as well as in other Creoles, a syllable may end with a vowel in spoken languages.¹³ Linguists who have listened to Jamaican Creole speakers without being concerned with word meaning have detected an almost exact correlation between the speech inflections and rhythms prevalent in Yoruba speech from West Africa.¹⁴

Grammar and syntax also tie Gullah to other Creoles in its rela-

tionship to African forms. Gullah has no passive voice, reminiscent of African languages. Thus, "a man was hit" would become "they hit the man" in Gullah.¹⁵ Gullah resembles some African languages in using more than one verb for one idea. For example, "Dat mek dem to go to school" instead of "you must go to school" would be a Gullah substitution.¹⁶ Gullah also resembles African languages in placing the adjective after the verb—for example, "a child good."¹⁷

Gullah, as in its African progenitors, does not differentiate between nouns and pronouns when it comes to subjective, objective, or possessive. They are used interchangeably. As an illustration, you might say, "we make everything for we-self" without further explication.¹⁸ Overall, in terms of morphology (case, gender, tense, number), there is continuity between Africa and the Americas. Therefore, there is no difference in singular and plural usage and one could say "two and twenty black-bird" without worrying about the "s." Similarly, there is no distinction between "she go" and "they go."¹⁹

In respect to subject-verb agreement, this pattern also is seen in West Indian Creoles. The popular Jamaican poet, Louise Bennett, has lines which go as follows: "Me Sweety Sue, I goes for you..." and "Let I takes in hand wine glasses..."²⁰

Also, Jamaican Creole uses reduplicated adjectives typical of African languages, such as *blak-blak* for black and *rof-rof* for very rough.²¹ Noun and verb bases can be interchangeable in a fashion similar to Gullah. Thus *maka-maka* can mean many thorns or having thorns and *faya-faya* can mean many fires or hot fiery burning.²² Finally, unmarked verbs in Creole Caribbean languages can take the any tense whether it is past, present, or perfect, depending on the nature of the discourse in which it appears. Thus in Sranan from Surinam, "A pikin wani go sribi" means the child wants to go and sleep while "A kamara kowru bikaa me opo a fensre" means the room is cold because I opened the window. In the English-influenced Belize, you have "Jan noo di ansa fu da problem" or John knows the answer for that problem, while "I kyeri di sou, di red sou de an I kros a wid I boo" means he took the sow, the red sow there, and he crossed her with the boar.²³

Present Status of Creole in the Americas

In the West Indies, certain subjects related to Creole can be taught at the secondary level in the French Caribbean. More typical is schooling in Creole at the primary level in places such as Curacao, Aruba, and Bonaire for Papimientu, and in Haiti and Trinidad/Tobago. Official

writing materials for education in local languages are widespread only in Haiti, Aruba, and Curacao so far, although centers of linguistics are busily developing materials for dissemination throughout the area.²⁴

In contrast, Gullah is now offered as a second language as there are written versions compiled in part by missionaries and by the Summer Institute for Linguistics—a Texas-based evangelical group which translates the Holy Bible into every language, as does the Wycliffe Society.²⁵

There is a great gap between written and oral use of Creole in all societies. The degree of literacy determines the size of this gulf. Thus Haitian Creole is available throughout the country, but unless people are literate in French, the access to Haitian Creole is limited. Unless literacy is tied to the use of Creole, written versions of the vernacular languages are futile. Nevertheless, in Suriname there is a writing system called Srinan, the local name for Creole (it is Patwa in Jamaica, Creolese in Guyana, and Bajan in Barbados). The Lesser Antilles has a written version of French Creole, written versions of Papimientu are available, and Jamaica has had a written system available based on the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* in 1967.²⁶ Gullah also has a dictionary, but written use of the language is limited to religious literature in local churches and news sheets published in a couple of islands.²⁷

In the mass media and the arts, as well as in popular religion, one can measure the role of vernacular languages. Both Papimientu and Haitian have long been printed in periodicals, even though low literacy in Haiti limits its effectiveness. St. Lucia and Dominica, which had a long history of French rule before the British colonial era, also have had some limited dissemination in French Creole materials, as have the French departments.

Jamaica has newspaper reports which quote verbatim Jamaican Creole comments by witnesses of current events and in interviews. It has in the past also had newspaper columns written in Jamaican Creole. Drama and poetry have been published routinely in Creole languages.²⁸

Most Gullah writings thus far have been collected and published by researchers and anthropologists. There is greater representation in the oral outlets.²⁹ Radio programs that feature talk- and call-in shows are a favorite outlet, as are religious programs, which feature traditional songs for both Gullah and West Indian Creoles. Creole vernacular dialects are used for proselytizing. St. Lucia and Haiti have news formats in Creole. Television, which now takes its cue from North America, has less focus on Creole. Nevertheless, local television outlets have local programs that use Creole vernaculars and include interviews

on news shows from vernacular speakers, whether in Trinidad or in some of the larger sectors of the 250,000 Gullah-speakers with T.V. links, as on Jekyll or St. Helena.³⁰

It is in popular art and music and popular religion that Creole cultures, including Gullah, have had the most pervasive influence on culture and society at large. West Indian music, as indicated earlier, has entered world culture. Such genres as reggae, dub, zouk, kadans, soca, dance halls, and calypso, have entered world culture. The link between spirituals and work songs, on the one hand, and jazz on the other hand, in which Gullah-speakers took part, has already been recounted.

Rastafarian and various spirit-possession cults arising in the West Indies have spread throughout the world.³¹ The Pentecostal movement was influenced by the Black religious experience in regions such as the Sea Islands. It spread throughout the South and took roots in the North where there was a profusion of so-called "storefront" churches from the 1920s onward. In Creole culture, including Gullah, there is also an element of shamanism inherited from Africa, whereby healing, magic, the supernatural, and religion are tied together. The Supreme Being is looked upon as the Divine Healer. As reinterpreted throughout Creole culture, religion and healing are one—hence the prevalence of the faith healer and the charismatic evangelist in both Caribbean and American culture over the past eight decades.

One of the first of these figures, in fact, was from the Gullah culture, Father Divine, a dominant figure on American radio in the 1930s. Religion and popular media also led to the short-lived "Back to Africa" movement among American Blacks and West Indians led by the West Indian, Marcus Garvey.³² On a more mundane level, people from the Americas purchase Creole/Gullah handicrafts, whether quilts, pottery, masks, canes, baskets, or other artistic endeavor, on a daily basis.³³

Conclusion

Gullah and West Indian Creole evolved from the African need to make sense of a new, alien, and often hostile environment. Syncretism took place in language, religion, the arts, and the material environment, giving displaced people hope so that after survival, a new synthesis could emerge. The resulting outcomes, whether in language, religion, or the expressive or material arts, led to a new and complete culture.

The anthropologist, Leslie White, has held that culture has three components: technological, sociological, and ideological. Technological includes the material objects and techniques that people

use to live; sociological deals with interpersonal relations and the associations people use to come together; and ideological means the ideas, beliefs, and knowledge of a culture, and their way of expression.³⁴

Julian Huxley termed the outcome of the above systems as artifacts, sociofacts, and mentifacts.³⁵ As slaves, the Africans who came to the Americas were forced to use tools and techniques to survive, and in fact, their agricultural and craft skills made them desirable in the first place as skilled laborers and craftsmen. We can see their artifacts today when we view colonial and ante-bellum structures and sculptures.

The emancipated Africans formed a number of associations, particularly the organized church and self-help associations, including burial associations, so that a social structure, or sociofact, was created. Finally, and most importantly, through language, religious beliefs, and artistic communication, they combined their past culture with external, often imposed, forms to create the ideological subsystem, or mentifact. Friedrich Hegel would call this the old idea or thesis (African traditions) meets the new idea or antithesis (European traditions) to form a new synthesis (Creole Culture). Gullah is part of this functioning and growing tradition today.

Notes

1. See, for example, *The Legacy of Ibo Landing* by Marquetta Goodwine (Atlanta: Clarity Press, 1998).
2. Jerome Fellman, Arthur Getis, and Judith Getis, *Human Geography* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1999), chapter 7.
3. Lawrence Carrington, "The Status of Creole in the Carribean," in Pauline Christie, ed., *Due Respect* (Jamaica: University of Jamaica Press, 2001), pp 24-33.
4. Melville J. Herskovits, *Man and His Works* (New York: Knopf, 1952), p. 616.
5. Consult *The Gullah People and Their African Heritage*, by William Pollitzen (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999) especially chapters 7, 8, and pp 4-5
6. Carrington, op. cit., pp 26-28.
7. Pollitzen, op. cit., pp 138-143
8. *Ibid.*, pp 159-160.

9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, pp 123-129.
11. *Ibid.*, p.246
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247
13. *Ibid.*, p. 115.
14. See Hubert Devonish, "On the Sierra Leone-Caribbean Connection, Hot on the Trail of Tone-Shifted Items," in *Christie*, Chapter 10, for a discussion of this topic.
15. Pollitzen, p. 118.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. Velma Pollard, "A Singular Subject takes a Singular Verb and Hyperconnection in Jamaican Speech and Writing," in *Christie*, pp. 101.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Sylvia Krouwenberg and Darlene La Charitie, "The Mysterious Case of Diminutive yala-yala," in *Christie*, pp. 128-131.
23. Donald Winford, "A Comparison of Tense/Aspects in Caribbean English Creoles" in *Christie*, pp. 158-166.
24. Carrington, p.26
25. *Ibid.*
26. *Ibid.*
27. Fellman, op.cit.
28. Carrington, pp. 30-31.
29. *Ibid.*, pp .32-33.
30. See Pollitzen, chapter 9,
31. *Ibid.*, pp. 126-128.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

34. Getis, Getis, and Fellman, *Introduction to Geography*, 6th edition (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1998), pp.233-240.

36. *Ibid.*