

Hidden Roots: The African Element in Bahamian Speech

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There is a view of the African ancestors of New World Blacks which has them stripped of all culture, even language, by the Atlantic crossing. The brutal experience of enslavement deprived them of all their original culture and a new social order, new arts, new language, had to be developed under conditions of servitude. According to this theory, this emergent Afro-American way of life had no connection with their former life in Africa, save possibly for a few atypical rebel communities. Such a culture, born in poverty and oppression, was presumed to be self-evidently worthless, leading to statements such as that of Myrdal (1944):

“In practically all of its divergencies, American Negro culture is not something independent of General American culture. It is a distorted development, or a pathological condition, of the General American culture.” (1)

The Black language varieties, according to this view, would have derived in the same ‘pathological’ way, learnt from the simplified pidgin talk their masters deliberately used with them; the characteristics of present-day Afro-American languages would be the hodge-podge expansion of such simplification, along with a selection of preserved archaisms and regionalisms from Britain.

Without attempting to minimise the traumatic effect of enslavement and enforced shipment upon these Africans, scholars recently have questioned whether it did, in fact, result in the obliteration of all but a few insignificant remnants of their previous culture. Since direct historical evidence of slave life and customs is scarce, information must be sought by looking at the distinctive features of New World Black culture today and analyse how far they can be interpreted as a continuation of the West African civilisations from which they came.

Authors such as Davidson (1961) have recently tried to dispel the notion (regrettably, because of Eurocentric education, still widely held even amongst Blacks) that West Africa was, at the time of the slave trade, a region inhabited solely by primitive tribes living in enmity in jungle enclaves. A picture emerges, instead, of a region of great linguistic diversity but basic cultural similarity, in culture and social complexity equivalent to the Europe of the time. Evidence is also growing that the bases of New World language varieties were forged on the West African coast as a result of prolonged business contact, the linguistically-sophisticated Africans rapidly acquiring sufficient of the European language to use in trade.

Within the multilingual society of well-established trading posts, then, a common English pidgin will have evolved, and it is reasonable to assume that this was transmitted to differing extents to the slaves who waited sometimes up to a year for transshipment. It is indeed the most reasonable explanation of the remarkable similarities in grammar and vocabulary² in the English of New World Africans, whether inhabitants of South American forests, of the Jamaican hinterland or of Bahamian Family Islands. Why otherwise would African items from one particular language be the chosen word throughout our region, such as Fula **dzuka** = jook 'to stab'³ and identical African idioms be found in translation, such as Twi **ani bre** 'big eye' = greedy? It would also explain why particular changes in meaning or use of English words should be common throughout the region, such as **red** including shades of yellow and brown as in "red inside like pawpaw" (Holm 1980b:58), **carry** meaning 'accompany' and **foot** meaning 'lower leg including foot'.

It is easier to assume that the birth of the New World languages was on the African coast in the free communities in and around the trading posts than that the African slaves arrived knowing only their native languages in their new lands thousands of miles apart, yet subsequently were intermingled enough to bring about remarkable similarities of linguistic detail. Although most British colonies had contact with each other, with slaves quite often shipped between them, for the most part the contacts between, say, Guyana, Belize and the Bahamas were minimal compared to all of these with England. Wholesale transfer of slaves as social units, such as occurred when the Loyalists brought all their house and field slaves to the Bahamas, will have affected the course of language change (Shilling 1977) but the more usual sale of a few dozen will not.

Thus the language of the Bahamian people, like those of the rest of the New World Africans, is best explained as the result of cultural contact and bilingualism, rather than the outcome of impoverished baby-talk of a people stripped of humanity. As the experience of World War II death camps has shown, one can treat humans like animals, but it does not make them permanently act as such; their humanity is submerged, it does not disappear. The Black languages forged by these Afro-American ancestors contained elements from their homeland. Research is only now revealing that White New World English has been influenced also by this African element. Quite probably it will eventually be recognised that this has been a powerful influence in making New World English different from that of the mother country.

Some Afro-Caribbean varieties of English such as Sranan of Surinam became isolated not only from African origins but from mainstream English development when a British colony was taken over by another colonial power. From such varieties it is easy to see how pervasive African input must have been in the New World languages in the beginning. Because there are similarities between these and varieties such as Bahamian, whose people retained continuous contact with Britain, it is likely that these latter had as strong an African element at first, which may well have been submerged and absorbed rather than truly lost; there may well still be an African 'flavour' to the English vocabulary of Bahamians. It is this way in other cultural manifestations; Bahamians use many of the same hymns as their northern coreligionists, yet their rhythmic ebullient rendition can hardly be recognised as having the same words and tune as in Anglo-Saxon mouths.

Vocabulary is the most conscious level of the language, the most easily modified. If you wish to become identified with a group in society it is hard to change your accent, far easier to use the 'right' words. Thus, where the top echelons of the society speak the prestigious Standard dialect, words that are blatantly foreign would be edited out when upward mobility became possible. Far more pervasive are more subtle kinds of influence; African metaphors and imagery, translated word-for-word into English, offend far less, so can fulfil the need for richness of expression without barring the speaker from climbing the social ladder.

Sometimes a word can survive this social editing by disguise. There are Bahamian Dialect words of English form whose meaning has shifted radically in a way that is only comprehensible when we find that there exists an African word of similar sound and the new meaning. Why should Bahamians call a particular kind of heron a **poor Joe**? This name has no reason until we learn that in the African language Vai a similar bird is called a **pojo**. Often an African word will amalgamate with an English one so that in the Dialect the word has both African and English meanings, as with **cuss-cuss** derivable from both English **curse** and Twi **kasakasa** 'to quarrel'. This phenomenon, known as 'convergence', has resulted in many words with two linguistic 'parents'; unfortunately at present only the English one is recognised.

Influence upon vocabulary undoubtedly is far wider than we will be able to prove. If an English word has a range of meanings, and in the Bahamian context only some of these are used, or if, conversely, a word is used in a far broader range of contexts than would be usual in Standard English, or if what is merely a possible metaphor in Britain is a common turn of phrase in the Caribbean, all these may have underlying them an African substratum which motivated the New World use.

It is not probable that such influence comes from native Indian languages. The widespread similarities mentioned above between New World mainland and island Black languages could not have been due to Indian influence, for tribal tongues differ greatly from each other. Also, island Indians were in the main exterminated before the widespread importation of Blacks. New World Indian languages have contributed some words to general English and among them are a few from the islands, such as **iguana**

(Spanish from Arawak **iwana**) and **cay** (Spanish from Lucayan: Albury 1975). In Bahamian we have a few extra regionalisms such as the names for some

islands, and plants such as **guinep** and **hog plum**. However, it is unlikely that many of the regional words and phrases whose source is still uncertain will be found to be Indian in origin.

The European languages that could have contributed to the making of New World English are few and well-documented. Thus, when the Bahamian word **crawl** 'a turtle pen' is investigated, one can easily discover the provenance in colonial Dutch **kraal** related to Spanish **corral**. There are many words in Bahamian Dialect from archaic or dialect English (see Holm 1980 a for details) but these varieties too are fairly well documented so that on the whole links between these and Bahamian will be found where they exist.

For words and phrases, then, whose source is still unknown, an African source is the most likely. There were many languages spoken by the ancestors of present-day Bahamians and even today some of these languages are not well documented. This means that research into probable sources for Bahamian items will proceed slowly, hunting through a score or more of dictionaries and phrase-books, themselves often incomplete or with scanty definitions.

Amongst the items whose origin has been determined is a small group of African words which have entered general English usage. A few vegetables were brought from Africa such as **okra** (Igbo **okura**), some musical terms such as **banjo** (Kimbundu **mbanza** or names like **Sambo** (of varied origin). Dialect geographers are slow to accept African origin for any word used by the White community. A prime example of the lengths to which derivation will go before an African source is considered is provided by the word **O.K.** The Oxford English Dictionary accepts the derivation of this typically American word as initials from "oll korrekt" without seeming to wonder why Americans only should institutionalise the misspelling of two words in this way. Had an African source even been considered, it would have been easy to find, since expressions similar in sound and meaning (e.g. Mandingo **o ke** "all right"; see Dalby 1972:183) exist in several West Coast languages. It may well be that if an impartial analysis were done of internationally-known English words which have been born of unknown parentage since the sixteenth century, the African contribution would be found to be far larger.

Where there are well-known elements of Caribbean culture which differ markedly from European tradition, there has been little resistance to linking them, and therefore the vocabulary associated with them, with African origin. Such "exotic" practices as **obeah** (with several African relatives, e.g. Efik **ubio** 'a death charm', and culturally related to voodoo of African origin) and items associated with the occult (e.g. **jumby** = Kimbundu **nzumbe** 'ghost') are accepted as African. Although the exact origin of **Junkanoo** is uncertain, African sources are mostly cited, such as Bantu **djan** 'dance'. Shakers used in the parade seem to derive simply from English, but in fact this is another example of convergence, since Yoruba **skekere** means 'calabash rattle'.

Folk tales are another repository of local culture, and a few names from African sources survive, some more common than others. **Nansi** 'spider' is rare here, though it does appear, as does **Boy Nasty**, a probable anglicisation of it. The dull-witted foil of the usual trickster hero, **B'Rabby**, is **B'Bouki**, a character found also in Haitian folk-lore and probably related to Wolof **bouki** 'hyena', although convergence with **buck** 'male goat' of English is also possible. Other names in literature such as **Con Jessie**, **Bamakansa** or **U Sange Wiley**, all probably African, seem little known today, but **Shine** flourishes in small boys' scatology, a convergence of Hausa **shaitan** 'a devil' and English. Names for two Androsian creatures are of uncertain origin; the **chickcharney** may have elements of English **chicanery** 'little people'; the Yehoe is probably from Hweda **yahue** or Kambari **yoho**, both 'devil', and the Caribbean legends of such a man-sized hairy monster may well have inspired Johnathan Swift's **Yahoos**.

African day-names, given to a child according to the day of the week on which he was born, are not used here now, though hints that they were so in the past are found in the survival of **Cuffy** and **Cushie** as nicknames, and in the Nassau street name **Quakoo** Corner. Tribal names have all but disappeared also (though see Eneas 1977 for recent recollections of these) though we have **Congo** Town, the **Nango** team and the **Your-A-Bar** (Yoruba) hall on Meeting Street. Evocative too is the Andros tale of Ibos as ghosts walking the sea-shore.

African traditions in the Bahamas were given impetus with the liberated Africans who were brought here in the nineteenth century, and a few old people can still remember from their childhood speakers of a strange tongue. A lady from Fox Hill recalls "these two old lady come; they were talking in this different language what we can't understand, saying 'arey-arow arey-arow'" (recording G. Saunders). These traditions are fast dying; only a few remember the African dishes **fufu** or **moi-moi** (Yoruba idem), although Williams (1974) still has a recipe for **accra** (Yoruba **acara**). Ingredients seem to fare better; many people will not even know the general English name 'sesame' for Bahamian **beene** (Wolof and Bambara **bene**) and only specialists such as Mrs. Leslie Higgs know the term 'art pumpkin' for **serasee** (probably related to Twi **nsuro** 'climbing plant'; French **cerace** "waxy" (see Cassidy & PePage 1980) is unlikely as the plant is not waxy.

Some Bahamian words are not well-known because the items themselves are discussed only rarely. Of the many bush plants a few seem to have African names, such as **gumma** bush (Kongo **ngumba** 'thatch grass'), **tee-essie** (Kongo **nti** 'tree') or **sacu-vine** (Kongo **saku** 'dry plants') as do the fish **pudding-wife** (Kongo **mpudi** — a similar fish), the bird **killy-hawk** (Kongo **ngelele** 'guinea-fowl') and the **thunder-snake** (Vai **tumbu** 'large snake'), these last showing the Anglicisation which so often disguises African words.

Many words, some of quite general use, are of unknown origin, either completely foreign in form, such as **bouflacker** and **semcounger**, or with an English form which bears no relation to the meaning. Why would a starchy plant be called **danish**, a shell-fish **(s)curb** or a small crab **Joe Sanky**? The origins of **camolly** 'bump on the head', **wumpers** 'shoes from tires' or **dipna** 'thin gruel' seem equally unclear. The term **switcher** — a sweet cold drink — appears in the northern United States, but no plausible derivation from English can be found. For these and many others far more research is needed, and it is quite likely that the answer will be African.

When we turn to the area of African expressions translated into English, we find, as I mentioned above, that they are far more socially unremarkable than the openly non-English words. A few African grammatical devices appear, such as the doubling of a word to provide emphasis; with adjectives like **green-green** or **last-last** this is very common, but it is also found with nouns — **piece-piece** — adverbs — **right-right** now — or verbs — **chat-chat**. Another African characteristic is the stacking of two or even three verbs in a series, as in "They come want beat me", as is the use of **he** to mean 'he, she, it' without gender difference. The indicating of an action as habitual with **does** ("She does act so cute") as completed with **done** ("I done tell you say she no good") or as past with **did** rather than a verb ending ("I did finish that before he come") are all similar to African verb markers in meaning, and the latter two are similar in form also, converging with English (**done** with Mandingo **tun** and **did** with Yoruba **ti**).

It seems to be in the area of social commentary that African-derived idiom is so rich in the Bahamas. Personal appearance is commented upon with **hard-hair** or **red** 'light skin'; one's character is described as **hard-head** **big-eye** or **sweet-mouth**. When you **cut your eye** at someone or suck your teeth you are performing an African gesture as well as naming it with a word-for-word translation from African.

Here too there is sometimes convergence, as with **My mind tell me** or **pick up your foot**. Sometimes there is doubt as to the direction of the influence. Equivalentents of the modern-sounding expressions **give me five** and

give me some skin as well as the hand-gestures involved are found in Twi, but it is always possible, of course, that these have been imported from the States; it would still remain a mystery as to how they originated there. Some characteristic Bahamian sayings such as **hand go, hand come** are of African origin, as is **me and you** when threatening a fight. Many still require investigation; consider only the idioms with mouth — **have plenty mouth, mouth ain't got cover, cry poor mouth, mouth hang on hinges**. The customs associated with some expressions are themselves of unknown source, such as the inciting two others to fight by tossing a stone in your hands, saying 'fire bun'.

A close inspection of the language of a country leads inevitably into an examination of its history, customs and social values. The stories behind Bahamian words reveal a rich heritage from the Old World, and complex links with many parts of the New. The historical ties with European tradition have been well researched and documented. Much work remains to be done, with material of a more fragmentary nature, to understand as fully the relationship of Bahamians to their African relatives in the Old World and New.

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Notes

1. This is quoted in Alleyne 1980:3, a brilliant analysis of African influence upon New World languages.
2. Details of these are available in Hancock 1969.
3. All etymologies are taken from Holm and Shilling (forthcoming), in which can be found sources and further details. African words have been given English spelling equivalents to facilitate reading.

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