Anansi's Defiant Webs
Contact, Continuity, Convergence, and Complexity in the Languages, Literatures, and Cultures of the Greater Caribbean
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CHRISTIANITY, LITERACY, AND CREOLIZATION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY ANGUILLA

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The sociohistory of Anguilla's English-lexifier Creole, Anguillian, raises questions about creolists' views of the nineteenth century as a period of superficial language change. As discussed below, archival information about the establishment of schools for enslaved Africans suggests that processes of change associated with linguistic creolization may extend into the first part of the 1800s. These sources point to ways in which social norms and events at the local level interact with language change and related sociolinguistic phenomena and thereby enrich understandings of context.

Anguilla, the most northerly of the Caribbean's Leeward Islands, is a relatively small and dry landmass, with a size of approximately sixteen by four miles and a surface that consists mainly of limestone. It has no rivers or streams, and very few sources of fresh water. Higman (1995: 42) describes it as a "marginal colony" with thin soil, bare rock, and sand. This somewhat atypical geography explains why European planters' cultivation of sugar was less successful there than in other British colonies. It also situates a political-economic history distinct from that of the places more frequently studied by creolists (e.g., Barbados, Guyana, and Jamaica).

Britain's official settlement of the island in 1650 marks the beginning of the "founder period", which many linguists identify as key to understanding creole language origins. This period is usually framed to exclude the time it was inhabited by Caribs, as there appears to have been minimal contact with them after the English colonization. In recent years prominent linguists have asserted that European norms predominated from 1650 onward, but socio-historical data from Anguilla suggest a more complicated picture in which Africans' cultural practices coexisted alongside those of their owners.

The first five decades of British colonization include settlement by a small number of Europeans, the forced migration of Africans, and significant social interaction between these two main groups. Anguilla's migratory fluxes (often linked to geopolitical conflicts in Europe and elsewhere the Caribbean) proved dramatic during the 1600s, with significant numbers of migrants moving into and off the island. Early on, the European population was quite small, limited to less than a few hundred. At
least 100 enslaved Africans can be documented for the 1680s (Bonnet Benitez, 1977) and their numbers grew to 879, i.e. 57% of the total population (including its militia), by 1720. Demographic information and evidence of hierarchy (e.g., African enslavement; indentured servitude; distribution of land and resources; ideas about race, labor, property, and religion) indicate that substantial diversity characterized linguistic interaction among the inhabitants in this period. Chaudenson (2001) holds that throughout the Caribbean during the founder period, which he calls the société d’habitation, quotidian patterns of living and experience led Africans and their owners to speak in a very similar, if not identical, way (Chaudenson: 12). The idea is that through locally-defined sets of conditions, persons of African ancestry, purportedly the subjects of strong linguistic assimilation, spoke like Europeans, including those who bought, owned, and sold them. But neither the “Robinsonian conditions” nor “the absence of a social gap” between slaves and their masters that are projected by Chaudenson (2001) accurately characterize Anguilla’s early colonización (see Walicek, 2009: 356-366). This finding takes issue with the assertion that Africans necessarily spoke close approximations of the lexifier during the founder period. It also opens up the possibility that enslaved “founders” maintained fluid but identifiably African socio-cultural traditions that extend chronologically into subsequent periods, perhaps even into the first half of the nineteenth century.

While a comprehensive history of Christianity on Anguilla falls outside the scope of this essay, it should be noted that a church for the European population existed on the “glebe land in The Valley” in the late 1600s (Mitchell, 1978: 46). Legal documents from the same period show that several English property owners could not write their names. These papers include comments on illiteracy and examples of transactions in which some signed wills and depositions as “X”.

The first few decades of the nineteenth century stand out as a time of noteworthy shifts in the religious and linguistic practices of Africans. An early guide for converting African slaves to Christianity describes a situation in Anguilla that is relatively distinct from that of other Leeward Islands where churches for Africans were strong in the 1700s (e.g., Montserrat, St. Christopher, and Antigua). It specifies the absence of parishes in Anguilla and notes, “the minister has been long dumb for want of maintenance” (Ramsay, 1784: 266). This changed by 1813 when Christians formally ministered to the enslaved and promoted literacy in English among converts. The “introduction of religion” to Africans in Anguilla is sometimes erroneously equated with the official establishment of Methodism. Such was the view of the Deputy Governor of Anguilla in 1817. That year Methodist members of the British parliament inquired about missionary work and he responded:
“The unexpected introduction of religion took place in the year 1813 in which I received a letter from John Hodge, a free coloured man and native of the island importuning my sanction for the establishment of it. Deeming it essential to the reformation of the slaves who before that period, were conducting themselves in habitual violation of the whole system of morality and with a view to discipline them in their duty to God and man, I readily offered every encouragement to the petitioner.”
(quoted in Hodge, 2003: 22)

The Deputy Governor’s statements indicate that the island’s social landscape was characterized by distinct socio-cultural norms. Like most examples of social discourse preserved in the archives, the letter characterizes the transfer and perpetuation of African religious practices and beliefs to the Caribbean as undesirable and problematic. His response suggests that religion and morality are limited to Christianity (or perhaps just Methodism) and its European practitioners. Hodge’s testimony tells a different story and his status as petitioner and free “coloured” native emphasizes the significance of networks among a diverse group of people of African ancestry.

Two factors complicate the idea that Christianity was simply introduced to Anguilla with the establishment of churches. First, in contrast with the view alluded to in the excerpt referenced above, Christianity was introduced to several parts of West Africa well before the 1800s (see Sanneh, 1983). In addition, some of the Africans (including those purchased elsewhere) may have been exposed to Christianity on other Caribbean islands. While the Deputy Governor is obviously uninterested in these convergences, both raise questions about the assertion view that Christianity was introduced as simply altogether “new” in 1813.

Within just a few years of Hodge’s 1813 request, churches and day schools were built with the support of the Wesleyan Missionary Society of England. Various groups contributed to these projects. An important shift marks European attitudes toward the conversion and education of the enslaved. Distinct from the situation in the eighteenth century, funds for them were secured locally through collections at public meetings. Some estate owners also donated money. Enslaved Africans provided physical labor for the construction of church buildings in The Valley, The Road, and West End. In addition, as Hodge’s letter indicates, free people of color played a role in creating these institutions.

The establishment of churches and expansion of mission activities for the enslaved transformed social practices on the island. Methodist missionaries began to hold religious services on the estates, often with the permission of owners. One of their first priorities was organizing Sunday school classes for the religious instruction of
children. Gradually, night classes focusing on adult education were introduced. The curriculum for both included reading, writing, and arithmetic. Many missionaries believed education could act as a vehicle for challenging prevalent views among Whites, especially the notion that Christianity was beyond the moral and cognitive capacity of the enslaved. Literacy brought with it skills that could serve as counterevidence to owners and others who questioned the cognitive capacities of the enslaved and the value of religious education. Significantly, skills taught in Sunday school and night classes had long figured in social and economic relationships. In his study of the region, Roberts (1997: 112-114) notes that the Bible was used to control the minds and the actions of populations through religion, while the record book and written law were revered as important mechanisms in management and business.

By 1815 Anguilla's new Methodist community alone numbered 250 (Hodge, 2003: 22). Missionary records state that a larger number wanted to join; however, potential members were rejected for "unacceptable" behavior such as dancing, drumming, drinking, and having children outside unions sanctioned by the church. Some testimonies suggest that the traditional socio-cultural practices of enslaved Africans changed rather quickly. When Reverend James Whitworth visited from St. Barths the same year, he spoke with a "resident proprietor" who applauded Methodism's arrival. He told Whitworth, "Since its coming there has been an almost entire cessation of dancing, wakes, and carousing among the slaves; they enjoy good health and scarcely have any need of doctors" (quoted by Hodge, 2003: 22). Previously the resident provider opposed the establishment of churches for the enslaved, indication that views toward Africans and their proselytization may have shifted rather quickly among a segment of the population.

Local residents of European ancestry and missionaries who organized church activities generally had different interests when it came to the education of the enslaved. Most European slave owners were interested in preserving the status quo, but a small minority did allow those they owned to purchase their freedom; some, in recognition of shifting attitudes and faithful service, granted slaves freedom in their wills. In contrast, the primary concern of missionaries was winning over an ever larger number of African and Afro-Caribbean converts. Religious leaders saw widespread European ideas positing the inferior intellectual abilities of Africans as more of an obstacle to their goals than they did the institution of slavery itself. This helps explain why missionaries frequently taught converts to accept the established order and disregard practices that Europeans typically associated with inferiority and heathenism. Submission and acculturation were advanced through the rituals of baptism (usually children) and marriage (between slaves as well as between enslaved women and free men with whom they were living) (Cummins, 1828). Some missionaries even taught Africans that they were morally obligated to accept
obedience and bondage. Apparently they did so in order to strengthen their alliances with slaveholders and ensure ongoing access to the enslaved (Coke, 1811: 442).

By 1824, the same year that the British government placed the island under the control of St. Christopher, Anguilla’s Methodist mission saw itself beginning to prosper. Worship services were well attended and according to missionaries, local circumstances afforded slave owners “favourable opportunities for the teaching of the Gospel” (Report, 1838: 73). In 1828 Anguilla’s National School had better attendance than did Sunday schools in the Spring Division and The Valley. While the National School served slaves, most students were free. Bringing together diverse groups of speakers, its enrollment, which included 32 slaves, had recently increased to 182 (i.e., 109 boys and 73 girls) (Report, 1838: 73).

Christian missions sought to marginalize practices that represented African sociocultural traditions at the same time that they tied formal education to good health and specific social values and norms associated with the most “presentable” among the island’s European population. As already suggested, the establishment of the churches differentially impacted the island’s African population. Churches and schooling for the enslaved appear to have been organized in opposition to what Alleyne (1980: 17-21) identifies as “symbolic dimensions of culture”, such as religion, magic, verbal arts, and music. As he explains, these are components of social life shaped by African traditions that generally endured in the Caribbean to a greater degree than more structural aspects, such as technology and political organization. The former traditions survived across the first 150 years of the island’s history, but appear to have come under fire after Black churches were founded.

Alleyne’s “symbolic dimensions” of culture include communicative phenomena and ideas relevant for better understanding linguistic creolization. Anthropological research on the Central and West African origins of the Caribbean’s enslaved populations indicates that African religious traditions encompass spiritual beliefs as well as ideas about language and its relationship with social reality. Maureen Warner-Lewis (2003: 139) explains:

“The metonymic and verbal metaphoric relationships sought in African supplicatory religious ritual are consonant with the world view of non-literate cultures, in that words are conceived as conveying power, and the relationship between sound and reference is closer than obtains in societies where long use of literacy forges distance and greater abstraction between the two.”

Her explanation indicates that learning to read and write in English may have exposed the enslaved to ideas about language that differed from those of their ancestors. It also
nuances notions of assimilation, indirectly situating changes in ideas about language and meaning as a crucial component of the religious conversion of the enslaved. Nevertheless, exposure to the linguistic ideologies contextualizing European notions of literacy and spirituality did not necessarily mean the total or complete displacement of Central and West African beliefs about language and its relationship to social life. In fact, African literacies can be imagined as having influenced situations of contact through the persistence of non-European norms and resistance. Goveia (1965: 303), in her description of the missions of the Leeward Islands, points out that when the enslaved "testified" about experiences of salvation; "they found a congenial outlet for their old love of dramatic eloquence in proclaiming their new consciousness of their value as souls to be saved." When juxtaposed with observations by Hodge and Whitworth, this statement implies a contact situation shaped by a diverse set of speakers' ideas about the relationship between language and social life, a heterogeneous set of grammatical forms, and shifting sociolinguistic norms. Within this milieu, enslaved scholars who were transformed by the experience of formal education but still led lives in which African practices were epistemologically meaningful may have been bicultural or bidialectal and can be thought of as agents of creolization.

Two final testimonies underscore the significance of contemplating language contact and change in terms of the meaning historically attributed to linguistic difference and social experience. They include metalinguistic commentary that assists in imagining the experiences of those who attended classes in the newly established churches as well as information about Africans that did not pursue affiliation with them. In the first Mr. Coleridge, a visitor to the island, recalls church activities that he observed in 1825:

"The serenity of the neighborhood was disturbed in the evening when I was there, by the worse than Poppish mummerly of class meetings; the young women and children were screaming out by rote some hymns and songs with an asperity and discordance of tone which seemed to make Nature angry, and exhibiting a scene of such mechanical superstition and senseless perversion of Christian worship as might well have caused a wiser man than me to weep for the possible absurdities of mankind." (Coleridge, 1826: 228)

The anecdote that Coleridge records corroborates the connections among the evolving symbolic and linguistic dimensions of Afro-Caribbean culture on the one hand, and sometimes negative attitudes about linguistic creolization that took root among powerful owner classes in British Caribbean societies, on the other. Roberts (1997: 263) contextualizes these in terms of dominant language attitudes:
“There could then be little admiration for the cultural mixture and creativity of creole languages, which were on the contrary considered as deviations from the purity of the standard European language forms and structures; there then could be little admiration for the feat of general communication among disparate peoples and the fashioning of a common culture [...]”

Coleridge suggests a complex situation in which members of the European elite tolerated the religious instruction of the enslaved at the same time that they mocked and regarded their verbal performance as abnormal and unnatural.

A second observer from the 1820s, a missionary named Fleming, reports that a few of the best students were elevated to the status of teacher or tutor. Pupils promoted in this manner earned less than other teachers and thereby saved the church money. Comparing those under the supervision of tutors and those who do not study, he writes, “some have learned our language, but others stay behind and believe it constricts their freedom of speech” (Fleming, 1826: 2). Enslaved tutors, those who learned and taught “our language” are likely to have been bidialectal, familiar with the prestigious variety of English that their contemporaries associated with standard European forms. Fleming’s reference to “others” suggests that some Africans rejected either Christianity and/or “proper English” for practical and/or ideological reasons. Members of this group appear to have associated education under the direction of the Christian church with a loss of liberty.

Even with the abolition of slavery just a couple of years away and acculturation on the horizon, access to formal education and the acquisition of skills in reading and writing did not necessarily mean greater freedom or personal autonomy for the enslaved. In an 1832 letter, Reverend Matthew Banks writes of a recent visit to the jail, the local place where slaves were bought and sold. He laments the sale of a student for $25, referring to her as “a fine coloured young woman of good character, a member of our society, and a scholar in our Sunday School” (Weekes, 2003: 51).

In subsequent cases like this one, Banks and other ministers sought official permission to purchase slaves’ freedom with church funds. They appear to have made special efforts to prevent the transfer and possible departure of individual scholars who studied in their schools. Such actions were controversial and do not appear to have been widespread across the Leewards at the time. Hodge (2003: 22) remembers Banks, perhaps an advocate for the enslaved, as a “most original and earnest” minister, qualities which he sees as explaining why the Methodist Church had grown to include a membership of 617 by 1834, the year slavery was legally abolished and apprenticeship instituted.
Information from historical sources suggests ways in which the theorization of creole origins can give attention to variation in specific local contexts and differentiation across the Eastern Caribbean and wider region. This evidence is important for linguists because it suggests how language use, ideas about language, and social life more generally pattern in relation to the emergence of a church for persons of African ancestry on Anguilla. The archival data presented above indicate that when the enslaved learned to read and write English in schools they had to distance themselves from the socio-cultural traditions and practices of their ancestors, especially aspects of heritage that defined their community as distinct from that of the European elite; however, these same records repeatedly make reference to a group that remained outside the purview of churches and schools established for the enslaved in the 1800s. This shows that not all Africans on the island had adopted European norms prior to the establishment of these institutions. Significantly, even enslaved scholars who strived to become model church members and students were subject to ridicule, discrimination, and sale. The archival anecdotes presented above suggest that the complex array of social, historical, linguistic, and ideological phenomena characteristic of “a high contact environment” (Ansaldo & Mathews 2007: 4) and associated with creolization may extend into the nineteenth century. To borrow a phrase from Roberts (1997: 7), they assist in tracing the development of the region's varieties of English as “first and foremost, human responses to extreme and inhumane situations”, a task that history itself identifies as long overdue.

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