

African Linguistic remnants in *Cuba* Spanish

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Usually, the human being does not become aware of his innate faculties, or of anything he may be able to create through the long process of evolution. Sometimes we become conscious that we are the only species on the planet that has developed a wonderful means of communication: articulate language. Those that populate this planet have diverse means of communication or languages, flowers and monkeys alike, in fact our closest link in the animal world, the chimpanzee, has developed a language much more complex than the one of other simians however he has never been able to forge a language as articulate as ours. That is to say, we, human beings, have been capable of combining sounds that we identify as vowels and consonants to form syllables, unite syllables to create words and coordinate words to form sentences, and then associate sentences to express ideas much more complex ideas.

To live in society, animals have developed their own languages. The human being went further in his struggle to overcome nature and mold it to his needs, therefore giving birth to what we now call culture. Language is part of culture. There cannot

exist a culture without a language that supports its expressions and communications, just like there cannot exist a language without cultural support.

On the other hand, humans, in their socioeconomic and political evolution, have developed different types of communities, from the primitive horde to the national state. In every one of the evolutionary stages language has developed important unifying functions and has forged ethnic groups and nations.

After many archeological findings as evidence, Africa is considered today the birthplace of humanity. In reality, four immense linguistic families constitute the basis of today's African culture. We will not delve into the European languages which, after a long period of colonial occupation, also served to disseminate the various cultures as official language of specific countries in the continent just as it similarly occurred in America. So today English is the official language of many African countries: Botswana, Cameroon, Gambia, Ghana, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Mauricio, Namibia, Ngwane, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda,

Zambia, and Zimbabwe. Other languages also operate in some of these countries, such as Chichewa in Lalawi, French Creole in Mauricio, Swazi in Ngwane, Kinya-rwanda and Swahili in Rwanda, Swahili in Tanzania, Kiganda and Swahili in Uganda, and Ndebele in Zimbabwe. The same happens with the French language in Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, Comoros, Gabon, Guinea, Madagascar, Maui, Mauricio, Mauritania, Niger, Reunion, Senegal, Togo, Central African Republic, and the Congo Democratic Republic. On the other hand the Portuguese is the official language of Angola, Cape Verde, Guinea Bissau, Mozambique, Sao Tome and Principe. Spanish is the official language only of Equatorial Guinea. All in all, in all these countries the European languages that were imposed on them during the shameful colonial past, are now representatives of the various African peoples that have made it their own. Ethiopia and Somalia are unique in that they have kept the native majority language as their official language, as for example the Amharic language in Ethiopia, and the Somali in Somalia, even when both countries speak English. South Africa is also interesting because its official policy recognizes all native and European languages spoken there.

Now we will discuss those linguistic families that existed in Africa before the European and that have survived the colo-

nization process. First we will mention the Afro-Asian family, a group of spoken languages proceeding from Asia. Here we have (a) the Semitic sub-family represented by the Hebrews and the Arabs, (b) the now extinguished Egyptian sub-family, and (c) the Berber family, (d) the Cushitic and (e) the



Chadian family. Three languages from this immense Afro-Asian family have influenced the birth and format of the Spanish language: the Hebrew, the Berber, and the Arabic languages. The Hebrew gave little to the Spanish, but its influence is due to the translation of the Bible into Greek, Latin, and finally into Castilian. There are very few Hebrew words in Spanish: querubin, aleluya, and words like Sara, Marta, Maria,

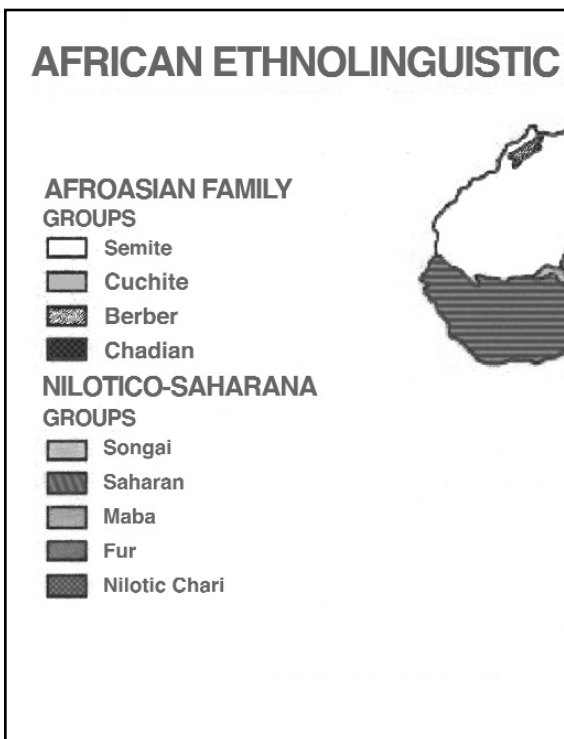
among others. However, the influence of the Arabic language on the Spanish is very vast, since the Arabs controlled Iberia during almost eight centuries. The Berbers arrived with them since the Moorish troops were made up of mostly Muslim Berbers, whose military and religious language was the Arabic.

Nowadays, despite the time and the lack of use of words from the Arab and the Berber, Arab words continue to weigh on the Spanish language, the Portuguese and the Catalan identities. This fact differentiates these languages from other Romance languages such as the Galician, the Italian, the French, the Rotorroman, and the Romanian. The Spanish spoken in Cuba has many Arabic words (and to a lesser degree Berber ones) that arrived through the Spaniards, for example: azotea, alcoba, aduana, azucar, and many more; the word ardilla and others from the Berber. We cannot trace the influence of these languages to Arab immigrations from Syria, Libya and Palestine in the end of the 19th Century.

On the other hand we must make clear that not all Arabic words that we presently use in Iberian Spanish are used in the Americas, since many of them allude to objects or concepts that did not become part of the history of the Americas. This is precisely one of the characteristics that differentiates the Spanish used in the American continent from the one in Spanish Peninsula. The idiomatic family is the nilotico-saharan, whose languages did not influence the Spanish for it was spoken only as part of the Slave trade. The last linguistic family, the khoisan, includes the hotentotes and the bosquimanos. This last family is very diverse. It is divided into (a) the Nigerian-Congolese and the (b) Cordovan. Due to the Trans-Sahara and Transatlantic slave trades,

this extensive linguistic family has influenced the Spanish in general. Some of the linguistic remnants come from the following languages: the Mandingo, Yoruba, Ewe, Fon, Efik, Ibibio, Kikongo, Kimbundo. Words from these languages are used in the Spanish on this side of the Atlantic, but not in the European Spanish.

In summary, we must stress that Africa entered America first through Spain. From Spain we received words from the Magreb (Western Arab), in concrete, from the



Andalucian Arab, already immersed in the cultures and languages of Spain and Portugal. That is why all those Arab words used in Spain are used in America. Even those used in Cuba are shared with Western Andalusia, East Extremadura and the Canary Islands—but not with East Andalusia, Murcia and Catalonia. All this is

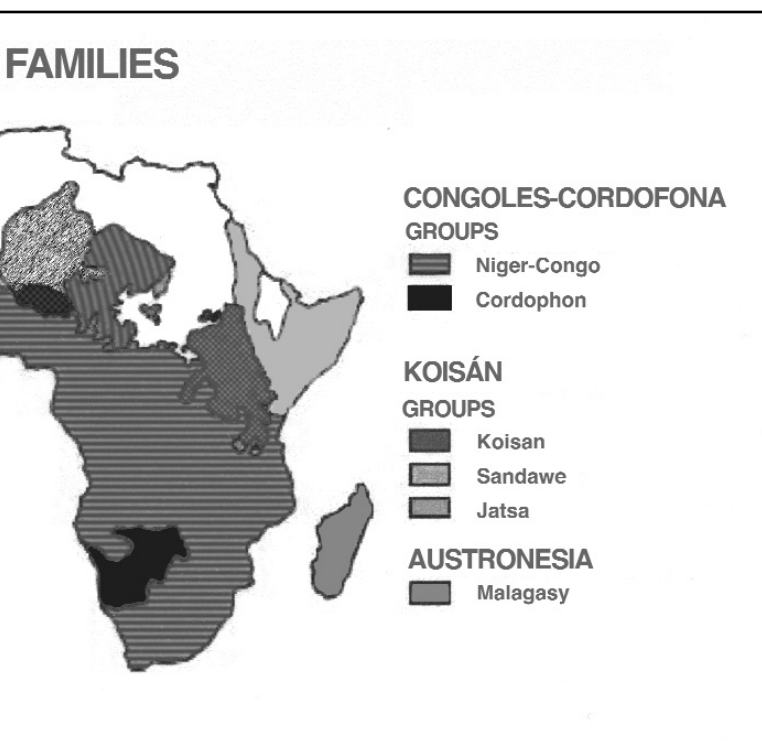
evident by the way that Cubans have of speaking Spanish.

The Sub-Saharan African legacy also came to Cuba through Spain. We must not forget that the first Black slaves were Spanish Blacks, born in Christian homes, already speaking Spanish, and faithful companions in their condition as domestic slaves to the Spanish colonizers. But there were also untamed slaves originating from Portugal, introduced to Spain and later sent to the West Indies. Therefore, the first Sub-

until the end of the 19th Century. A kind of “native gumbo” (ajiaco criollo) gave birth to our culture. The Sub-Saharans provided many if not most of the seasonings that flavored our national language.

Let’s not forget that the transculturation we speak of was violent and bloody. We must acknowledge and remember the sacrifice that our forbearers made, regardless of skin color or ethnolinguistic origin, to leave for us our mixed Cuban culture with its own linguistic support, a national variance of

the Spanish language. This variation forged our nation and identity, since, as Felix Ramos y Duarte points out in his *Diccionario de Mejicanismos* (1895) “The internal life of a people is revealed in its language, which constitutes a way of being: their intelligence, their thinking, their essence of being, their country, their everything”.



Saharan words that became rooted in our nation as part of the Spanish language came through the Spaniards, words like ‘cachimba’, ‘yame’ or ‘mucama’. These are examples of indirect lexicon, since the Spaniards disseminated them although they did not speak those languages.

Last but not least, the children of Sub-Saharan African arrived in Cuba from 1517

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