African Fundamentalism in the New World
The Case of the Haitian Mandingo

Traditionally, the term ‘creolization’ has been perceived as a unidirectional process which, at least as far language is concerned, leads from simple to more complex forms which are generally named after the colonial target-culture: for example, “French-based” creoles, “reduced French” or even “corrupted” French. The assumption that these languages (and cultures) may contain an African substratum had been abandoned by the 1960s, and for good reason: the popular view of creole languages as a “mixture” of European vocabulary and African grammar was tortuously ingenious and difficult to prove, insofar as

1 As a linguistic theory, the idea of an ‘African Grammar’ appeared first in 1883 in a study by Lucien Adam (Les idiomes négro-aryen et maléo-aryen) and has since been defended mostly by local linguists in quest of an ‘African’ identity. A notable case is the Haitian linguist Charles Fernand Pressoir, who, after an initial study in his Dèbats sur le créole et le folklore (1947), went on to expand his ideas in newspaper articles, where he labels Haitian creole languages as ‘fongbé haïtien’ (Le Nouvelliste, 13

no one African language can account for all or even a majority of the ‘African’ elements in Caribbean Creole, nor is any significant ‘African’ feature in Creole shared by all or even the majority of native languages of the slaves.\(^2\)

Today, a notable reorientation of African substratum theories can be observed which points in two directions:

1 linguistic issues are not longer seen and treated as isolated phenomena but as embedded in general processes of cultural transfer and change. Thus linguistic change becomes comparable to other forms of creolization, among which religious syncretism is of particular interest, since it contributed in the same – or even in a more prominent – way as a language to the maintenance of African identities;

2 creolization is seen as a process of cultural change which had already begun within the Old Continent; it was particularly the areas mostly affected by the Atlantic slave trade that witnessed a convergence and change of traditional ethnic cultures which enabled the slaves to adopt new ‘tribal’ identities in Africa, during the Middle Passage and henceforth in the American colonies.

This new orientation, however, is not reflected in the perception of creolization as a unidirectional and unilateral process which – through a continuous process of ‘decreolization’ – will eventually end up in the adoption of the dominant European-based mainstream culture. The reasons for the continuous loss of the African substratum are obvious: Europe-based cultural traits are too strongly associated with prestige, modernity and the acquisition of wealth to allow much space for the open demonstration of “African” cultural traits. Thus Africa-based cultural elements are without name and substance; they are unstable, and they are rarely named openly and admitted as part of a valued cultural heritage.

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