ON THE PROVENIENCE OF THE PORTUGUESE IN SARAMACCA TONGO

BY

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The great number of Portuguese words in the language of the Saramacca tribe of Bush-Negroes has been noticed by all those who have studied the speech of these people. As one penetrates deeper and deeper into the interior of the Suriname bush, along the upper Suriname River to the region where the Saramacca people live, the language of the coast, „taki-taki”, or „Negro-English”, as it is called, becomes less and less spoken, and the dialect heard takes on a character peculiar to itself. This dialect, as is well known, is not understood by the people of the coastal region. This is due to the fact that in spite of the basic similarity in structure and historical development of the two dialects, the speech of the interior contains not only many Portuguese terms not found in the coastal speech, but, what is more, a great number of African words, something that has not been as generally realised.

The question of the provenience of these Portuguese words has, in the main, been accepted as solved when it was said that they were introduced by Jewish refugees who, driven from Brazil in the middle of the seventeenth century, settled in Suriname and brought with them their Negro slaves. These slaves, it is held, took with them the Portuguese expressions they had learned from their Jewish masters when they fled to the bush with other insurgents among the Negroes, and incorporated these expressions in the language which later became the „Saramacca tongo”. So strongly has this hypothesis been accept-
ed that we find, as the unofficial designation of the Saramacca speech, the term "Djoe-tongo".

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Perhaps the most exhaustive analysis of the language of the Saramacca tribe of Bush-Negroes is that of Schuchardt 1). To indicate his recognition of the importance of the Portuguese elements in Saramacca tongo, and to make clear the prevailing theory of the manner of their incorporation among the Saramacca Negroes, the following may be quoted from the preface to his dictionary 2):

"Neben der englischen Sprache, aber erst einige Zeit später setzte sich hier eine andere Sprache fest: die portugiesische. Es siedelten sich portugiesische Juden an, die aus Brasilien und Cayenne geflüchtet waren; sie erhielten 1659 einen Freibrief von der Westindischen Compagnie. Der Hauptreichtum dieser neuen Ankömmlinge scheint in Sklaven bestanden zu haben, woraus wir mit Sicherheit auf das Dasein eines Neger-portugiesisch schliessen dürfen."

Another example of the prominence given this hypothesis of the provenience of Portuguese in the Saramacca language is to be seen in the discussion of language in van Panhuys' article "Boschnegers", in the Encyclopaedie van Nederlandsch West-Indië, from which I quote the following (p. 159):

"Het gebruik van Portugeesche woorden bijvoorbeeld, bijzonder sterk bij de Saramaccaners, voert terug tot de tijden, dat de voorvaderen van die Boschnegers slaven waren op de plantages van de uit Brazilië verdreven, Portugeesche Joden. In het artikel "Iets over de Neger-engelsche taal", in het tijdschrift West-Indië, 1855, I, 286—295, is door Wullschlaegel medegedeeld, dat de genoemde stam zich in de 18de eeuw van het neger-Portugeesch, Jodentaal of Djoe-tongo bediende, en worden door de Hernhutters vervaardigde handschriften in die taal vermeld."

2) p. XV.