WHY DIDN'T AFRICAN LANGUAGES SURVIVE IN THE NEW WORLD AND IN THE INDIAN OCEAN?

Salikoko S. Mufwene
University of Chicago
The starting point is colonization and its effects on the colonized and enslaved populations:
The experience of African slaves in the New World and Indian Ocean is not quite the same as that of indentured servants in Hawaii:
Quite a few factors account for the differences:

- Hawaii was colonized, and its indentured labor was imported, just when slavery was being abolished in the New World and Indian Ocean (except in Cuba and Santa Domingo).
- The indentured laborers were imported successively, within spaces of about 20 years, in groups that were relatively homogeneous ethnolinguistically.
- The laborers from the same nationality resided in their own separate camps/houses.
- There really was no ethnolinguistic mixing of the kind experienced in the New World and Indian Ocean.
However, societal multilingualism among African slaves was not the only critical factor

- The Yoruba indentured servants in post-Emancipation Trinidad did NOT maintain their heritage language despite their life in relative segregation from the Creole ex-slaves during the 19th century.
- East Indian indentured servants in post-Emancipation Trinidad and elsewhere did not do better.
Prohibition by the European masters is not a convincing account

- No conceivable policing system could have prevented the slaves from speaking African languages in the privacy of their cabins if it was possible.
- There were places where plantation owners requested slaves from specific parts of Africa, which created relative ethnolinguistic homogeneity.
- This was possible especially during the second half of the 18th century.
- There was also constant supply of bozal slaves until the Abolition of slave trade, which means continued introduction of African languages into the plantation societies.
- There is evidence of usage of West African languages as secret codes during the Haitian Revolution, except that these languages were not spoken by all soldiers.
Other evidence questions the claim that the African languages died early in the evolution of plantation settlement colonies.

- The Kumina songs in Jamaica
- The Santeria rituals in Cuba
- The Candomblé rituals in Brazil
- Although they seem to be evidence of survivals from late developments, they all show that African languages could have survived if there had been more favorable conditions for maintaining them as vernaculars.
As a matter of fact, prohibition to speak one’s heritage language was not a factor at all among Chinese traders in Southeast Asia, the Malay-speaking Peranakans:
European colonists of nationalities other the dominant one also gave up their languages, adopting that of the dominant group as their vernacular

- The main difference is that they shifted to the dominant language later than the African slaves did
- The reason is that Europeans were not integrated until late in colonial history...
- Often until the late 19th century they lived in nationally segregated communities that functioned in their heritage vernaculars
- Ironically, the Africans were first to be integrated in the economic machinery, in which they also were strongly discriminated against and of course exploited...
- But they also needed the language of the same socio-economic system in their struggle to adapt/survive
The evolution suggests a gradual elimination of African languages aggravated by a number of facts, including the following:

- The plantation societies grew incrementally in size, having started as homestead communities.
- African Creole slaves would become the first populations adopting the language of the dominant European population as their vernacular...
- because they were minorities, absorbed in small family units, in which it was as difficult to maintain their parents’ languages as immigrants’ children today in North America and Europe.
- African Creole slaves served as models to the bozal slaves.
The initial conditions of African societies in the New World and Indian Ocean did not favor maintaining African languages

- The homestead conditions favored the adoption of European languages as vernaculars by children of Africans
- They did not make it impossible for Creoles to acquire African languages when conditions were met
- But they certainly made it impracticable for African languages to emerge as vernaculars
- The small size of homesteads and the sometimes prohibitive distances between them made it difficult for Africans to find cohorts speaking the same heritage vernacular or lingua franca
The evidence of African languages cited above does not prove that they functioned as vernaculars in Haiti, Jamaica, Cuba, or Brazil

- It only shows that Yoruba, Kikongo, Ewe-Fon, and the like were still spoken by some members of the community in the late 18th and during the 19th centuries
- The speakers may, or are likely to, have been late arrivals...
- at a time when it was possible for them to play important roles in the development of African-based religions...
- and at a time when they could continue to bear African names
- This hypothesis is consistent with the gradual loss of Yoruba among descendants of African indentured servants in Trinida... and the loss of Yoruba in Brazil and elsewhere
Language evolution in plantation settlement colonies is not so different from that in Black African cities.

Generally these started from colonial trade or administrative centers, or from Christian missions.

They favored the emergence of one particular language, typically a lingua franca (e.g., Lingala, Swahili, Town Bemba, Wolof), as an urban vernacular.

They disfavored the maintenance of traditional ethnic languages, marginalizing them to the status of home languages.

Children born in the city or who migrated young with their parents became critical agents in the spread and entrenchment of the urban vernaculars, serving as models to newcomers.
Language evolution among descendants of Africans in the New World and the Indian Ocean is another illustration the Founder Principle/Effect

- The language practices of the earliest Creole slaves had far-reaching effects in the new societies
- The languages they adopted as their vernaculars became the vernaculars of the emergent plantation colonial communities
THANK YOU