

## Africanisms in Afro-Bolivian Spanish

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### 1. Introduction

At first glance, one of the least likely places to look for Africanisms in Latin America is Bolivia, a nation whose population is some 75% Native American or *mestizo*, and where individuals of visible African ancestry are an exceedingly rare sight. A glance at the history of Alto Perú, as the territory now known as Bolivia was called in colonial times, presents a much different picture.<sup>1</sup> Early in the colonial enterprise, the enormous silver deposits of Potosí were discovered, literally a mountain of silver ore, and the village of Potosí quickly grew to become the largest city in Spanish America, rivaling Madrid and Seville in Spain. After failing to engage indigenous laborers in sufficient quantity, Spain began its first massive importation of African slaves to the region first known as *Alto Perú*, then as the *Audiencia de Charcas*. The African slave population in Bolivia was never large, many mixed with indigenous or European residents, and the cultural, linguistic, and demographic profile of Afro-Bolivians declined steadily from a high point in the early 17th century, when Africans represented nearly 5% of the population (Crespo 1977: 28). A small collection of songs and indirect descriptions of Africans' dances and language survives as testimony of a much larger cultural patrimony (Lipski 1994, 2005a; Arellano & Eichmann 2005: 163-217).

In view of the socio-demographic history of Africans in colonial Bolivia, a big surprise awaits researchers who assume that all traces of Afro-Hispanic language and culture have long since vanished from this country. Despite the overwhelming adversities and the time span of more than four centuries, in this primarily indigenous and *mestizo* nation, a tiny but vibrant Afro-Bolivian community has survived to the present day, together with many Afro-Hispanic cultural and linguistic retentions. In the area of language, the speech of some of the oldest and most isolated Afro-Bolivians is a fully intact restructured Afro-Hispanic language (spoken alongside contemporary highland Bolivian Spanish) that represents the most fully preserved survival of what was once the language of some nine million *bozales* (African-born second language speakers of Spanish in the Americas) forced into servitude far from their birthplace and unable to communicate with one another except in desperately acquired approximations to the colonists' language.

Most contemporary Afro-Bolivians live in scattered communities in the provinces of Nor Yungas and Sud Yungas, in the department of La Paz.<sup>2</sup> The Yungas are tropical valleys no more than a few thousand feet above sea level, surrounded by some of the most

<sup>1</sup> Beckington (2006), Crespo (1977), Pizarroso Cuenca (1977), Portugal Ortiz (1977).

<sup>2</sup> Angola Maconde (2000) is the principal source for contemporary Afro-Bolivian culture. Others include Llanos Moscoso & Soruco Arroyo (2004), Montaña (1992), Rey Gutiérrez (1998), Spedding (1995).

forbidding mountain terrain in all of South America, with peaks reaching more than 15,000 feet. The torturous terrain, nearly vertical geography, lack of adequate roads and other infrastructure, and frequent mud and rock slides, have effectively cut off the Yungas communities from much of Bolivian society. The region is principally inhabited by an Aymara-speaking indigenous population together with a considerable *mestizo* component. Most residents do not travel to La Paz or other highland areas, due to the bad road, the discomfort caused by the high altitude and cold temperatures of the *altiplano*, and the lack of funds to pay even the very modest cost of transportation. Black Bolivians remain linguistically and culturally separate from Aymaras; they learn enough Aymara to function efficiently in the Aymara-dominant local markets, but maintain a separate life style through networks of extended families. The traditional dialect is now restricted to only a handful of small communities, all in Nor Yungas province; these include Mururata, Chijchipa, Tocaña, Dorado Chico, and Coscoma. Most older Afro-Yungueños in these Nor Yungas settlements have at least passive competence in the Afro-Bolivian dialect; an undetermined but shrinking number (which does not exceed one hundred individuals) have total active fluency.

## 2. Overview of traditional Afro-Bolivian Spanish

The Afro-Bolivian dialect differs from other highland Bolivian dialects in terms of segmental and suprasegmental phonology. More to the point, it differs from all other monolingual varieties of Spanish worldwide in the structure of noun phrases and verb phrases, both of which exhibit morphosyntactic reduction suggestive of the first stages of Afro-Hispanic restructured language. These significant grammatical features, together with a radically altered phonetic/phonological system, demonstrate that traditional Afro-Bolivian speech is not really a "dialect" of Spanish but is in effect a restructured semi-creole language. The principal grammatical traits of the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect are:<sup>3</sup>

- Suspension of grammatical gender in nouns and adjectives. Only remnants of the Spanish masculine gender are used: *lu mujé* 'the women'; *tudu lu gente* 'everyone'; *lu taza di cajué* 'the cup of coffee'.
- Invariant plurals; nouns do not take the normal Spanish plural form: *lu persona mayó* 'the older people'; *lu mujé* 'the women'; *lu patrón* 'the landowners'.
- "Bare plurals", marking plural /-s/ (if at all) only on the first element of the noun phrase: *esoh fiesta* 'those parties'; *algunoh cosa* 'some things'.<sup>4</sup>
- Elimination of definite articles in subject position (required in other Spanish dialects): *perro ta flojo* [*los perros están flojos*] 'dogs are worthless'; *patrón huasquiaba mujé* 'the landowners beat the women'; *nube ta bien rojo* [*las nubes están bien rojas*] 'the clouds are very red'.
- Restructured subject pronoun system, including no formal-familiar 2nd person distinction and no masculine-feminine distinction in the 3rd person: *yo, oté, ele* (masculine and feminine), *nojotro, otene, eyu* (masculine and feminine).

<sup>3</sup> This dialect is described in detail in Lipski (2005b, 2006a, 2006b, 2006c, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> In many lowland varieties of Latin American Spanish (as well as, e.g., Western Andalusian and Canary Islands Spanish), postnuclear /-s/ has an aspirated allophone [h] or is elided altogether (the latter also obtains in Eastern Andalusia). Highland Bolivian Spanish almost always conserves sibilant /-s/.

- Placement of object clitics between auxiliary verbs and infinitives: *yo va ti decí* 'I'm going to tell you'; *¿por qué no viene mi mirá* 'why don't you come see me?'; *¿quién va ti bañá?* 'who is going to bathe you?'
- Non-inverted questions: *¿cuánto hijo pue oté tiene?* 'how many children do you have?'; *¿ande pue oté vivó?* 'where do you live?'; *¿Andi pue oté ta trabajá?* 'where are you working?'
- Use of the Spanish 3rd person singular as invariant verb form for all persons and numbers in each tense: *nojotro tiene* [*tenemos*] *jrutita* 'we have fruit'; *yo no conoció* [*conoci*] *hacienda* 'I never knew the haciendas'; *yo miró* [*miré*] *jay* 'I saw it'.
- Constructions based on invariant *ta(ba)* + infinitive instead of conjugated verbs: *¿quién ta comprá?* 'who is buying [coca]?'; *¿andi pue tía ta i?* 'where are you going, ma'am?'; *eje taba mirá* 'she was looking'; *eje perro ta ladrá* 'that dog is barking'.
- Elimination of the prepositions *a* and *en*: *yo nació* [*en*] *Mururata* 'I was born in Mururata'; *nojotro va* [*al*] *trabajo* 'we're going to the work site'.
- Plural possessives are formed by the combination of singular possessive particle + *lu*: *mi lu huahua* 'my children'; *su lu cosa* 'his/her/their things'; *nustru lu hermano* 'our brothers'.

## 3. Possible Africanisms in Afro-Bolivian Spanish:

Despite the existence of a significantly restructured form of Spanish – evidently the result of an earlier pidginization of Spanish by African-born *bozal* slaves (L<sub>2</sub> learners of Spanish) and their immediate descendents, Afro-Bolivian Spanish contains few elements of demonstrable African origin. Among surnames, only *Angola* and *Maconde* bear witness to the former presence of an African slave trade. Vocabulary items of possible African origin are equally scarce; the majority of the Afro-Bolivian lexicon consists of patrimonial Spanish words – including many rustic and archaic items – as well as numerous words adopted from the neighboring Aymara language. Showing greater promise in Afro-Bolivian Spanish are some structural or phonetic modifications that can be associated with Afro-Hispanic linguistic contacts during the colonial period. The following paragraphs review the few putative or possible Africanisms in the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect.

**Angola.** One of only two surnames of African origin found among Afro-Bolivians. The surname *Angola*, a toponym in Africa, was applied in slaving stations in Africa or the Americas to slaves shipped from ports in Angola, and presumed to belong to an Angolan ethnic group. Similar toponyms or ethnic designations *cum* surnames are found among Afro-Ecuadorian communities. The existence of the surname *Angola* in Bolivia suggests that the search for influence from Kikongo and Kimbundu, as postulated, for example, by Rey Gutiérrez (1998), might be rewarding.

**candambira.** A word of unknown origin forming part of the *mauchi* song (see below). One of the repeated verses of the *mauchi* is *candambira mauchi, candambira*. Rey Gutiérrez (1998:188) also offers a Kikongo etymology for *candambira*:

...es la deformación de KANDA que significa familia y MBIRA que es llamada. En la concepción religiosa de la negritud, la persona muere cuando su familia que está en el más allá lo ha llamado. ('[It] is the deformation of KANDA, which means family, and MBIRA which is a call. In the black concept of religion a person dies when the person's family which is already in the beyond calls for the person' – my translation).

**Maconde** (sometimes written *Makonde*). An Afro-Bolivian surname, presumably derived from the Maconde people of northern Mozambique and the immediately adjacent region of Tanzania. During the final stage of the Portuguese slave trade, slaves were brought from Mozambique to the Americas, particularly to Brazil. The presence of the surname *Maconde* in Bolivia may point to the Portuguese and their African colonies as suppliers of slaves, a not unwarranted assumption given the proximity of Brazil and the well-documented route that brought African slaves from Buenos Aires to the Andean mining region, including Potosí in Bolivia.

**mauchi**. The traditional Afro-Bolivian funeral chant, performed upon return from the cemetery after an adult has been buried. Rey Gutiérrez (1998:188) suggests a Kikongo origin for the word *mauchi*:

MA: *prefijo Kikongo que indica la pertenencia*. UCNI: *es la deformación de UNSI que significa dentro de la tierra*, U: *dentro*, NSI: *tierra*. *Mauchi se refiere a la tierra [...]* ('MA, Kikongo prefix that indicates belonging; UCNI is the deformation of UNSI that means within the earth; U within, NSI earth. *Mauchi* refers to the earth [...] – my translation).

**ñanga**. 'A timid person, a crybaby' possibly < Aymara *ñanqha* 'cruel, scornful, evil'; the derived word in Afro-Yungueño Spanish is *ñanguerío* 'timidity'. Despite the partial semantic and phonetic overlap with an Aymara lexical item, *ñanga* also resembles the Afro-Cuban items *ñañigo* 'a practitioner of an Afro-Cuban cult', and *ñángara*, now applied (mostly by Cubans in the diaspora) derogatorily to communists.

**saya**. A traditional Afro-Bolivian dance, accompanied by drums. Rey Gutiérrez (1998: 102) derives *saya* from Kikongo *nsaya*, meaning 'communal labor'.

**zemba**. A traditional Afro-Bolivian dance similar to the Rio Plata *candombe*, now rarely performed. Rey Gutiérrez (1998: 216) suggests a Kimbundu word meaning 'navel' or 'striking the navel' as a possible source:

"[...] de ahí que una de las figuras de este baile sea, precisamente, la "ombligada". Fue traída por los esclavos provenientes del área cultural Angola-Kongoleña. Semba es lo mismo que Samba. En la semba los bailarines se chocan o empujan con el vientre. También se la denomina "golpe de frente" o "golpe pélvico". [One of the dance steps is precisely the *ombligada* 'belly thrust'. It was brought by slaves from the Angola-Kongo region. *Semba* is the same as *samba*. In the *semba* the dancers bump each other and thrust with the belly. The dance step is also called "frontal bump" and "pelvic bump". – my translation.]

These proposed etymologies remain to be verified, particularly given the lack of demonstrable presence of Kikongo in colonial Bolivia.

In addition to the aforementioned lexical items, the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect exhibits some phonetic modifications of patrimonial Spanish or indigenous Aymara words that are consistent with Afro-Hispanic language contacts in other regions. These include:

**anchancho**. An evil spirit manifested by an echo in abandoned houses or other frightening places, also a mythological creature that frightens travelers < Aymara *anchanchu* 'malignant spirit said to inhabit abandoned mines', also an echo, especially in abandoned houses and dark hollows' (Deza Galindo 1989: 33; Miranda S. 1970: 111; Van den Berg

1985: 24). Since some Afro-Bolivians believe the *anchancho* to take an animal form, there may be some crossover with Sp. *chancho* 'pig' with the possibility of a prenasalized consonant (Lipski 1992). There is no other synchronic evidence for prenasalized consonants in Afro-Bolivian Spanish, but some literary texts containing imitations of pidginized Afro-Hispanic language from colonial Bolivia do contain numerous examples of prenasalization, so the process may once have been more widespread (Arellano & Eichmann 2005: 163-217).

**ayere** < Sp. *ayer* 'yesterday'. The addition of final (paragogic) vowels to Spanish and Portuguese consonant-final words ending in a stressed syllable was a common feature of early *bozal* language, as well as of borrowings into African languages (cf Lipski 2002 and the references therein). The scattered appearance of paragogic vowels in Afro-Yungueño Spanish suggests that this process was once more widespread, affecting numerous consonant-final words ending in tonic syllables. This is the one phonetic feature found in Afro-Yungueño speech that cannot be attributed either to regional dialects of Spanish or to contact with Aymara-influenced Spanish, since it occurs in neither. Of all the African languages known to have come into contact with Spanish during the colonial period, few have word-final consonants, and none has word-final liquids or /-s/. When borrowing Spanish or Portuguese words containing syllable-final consonants into African languages, a frequent strategy was the addition of a paragogic vowel. The final paragogic vowel (whose timbre was normally dictated by processes of vowel harmony) was almost invariably added after a stressed syllable; when the final syllable was *unstressed*, the Portuguese final consonant was most frequently lost. A number of instances of paragogic vowels are also found in Afro-Brazilian Portuguese, where the Kikongo and Kimbundu input was very strong. Some of the modified forms have become fixed in nonstandard rural varieties, especially in place names and nicknames.

**ele**. Third person singular subject pronoun, used for both masculine 'he' and feminine 'she'. This item probably derives from the Spanish subject pronoun *él* 'he', through the addition of a paragogic vowel (see the entry for *ayera*), although the cognate Portuguese subject pronoun *ele*, which has left traces in the Afro-Iberian creole languages Palenquero and Papiamentu (and possibly also in Philippine Creole Spanish) cannot be entirely ruled out. The fact that the third person subject pronouns are unmarked for gender – a configuration not found in any Romance language but found in all Romance-derived creoles – reflects an African areal feature, since none of the West and Central African languages known to have interacted with Spanish in colonial Latin America distinguishes grammatical gender.

**eyu**. Third person plural pronoun, used for both masculine and feminine, from Spanish *ellos* 'they' (masc.). Once more the lack of gender in the third person pronoun system coincides with a broad array of African areal features.

**mama** 'mother'. In contemporary Bolivian Spanish, the usual word for mother is *madre*, and the colloquial term is *mamá*, with accent on the final syllable. In the traditional Afro-Bolivian dialect *mama* receives the stress accent on the first syllable, a difference that Afro-Bolivians acknowledge. The use of *mama* rather than *mamá* is also found in the Afro-Ecuadorian communities of the Chota Valley in highland Ecuador (Lipski 1986, 1987) and also the coastal black populations of Esmeraldas, and coincides with cognate terms in several African languages.

*mujere* < *mujer* 'woman'. The most frequent Afro-Bolivian pronunciation is *mujé*, with loss of the final /-r/ from Spanish, but a few older residents pronounce the word with final paragogic vowel, once more evoking earlier periods when Spanish words ending in a stressed vowel plus final consonant received an additional vowel to accommodate the word to pan-African phonotactic patterns.

#### 4. Conclusions

It may seem paradoxical that the most radically restructured Afro-Hispanic variety shows so few Africanisms, especially when compared with Maroon Creoles such as Palenquero (Schwegler 1996) or the rich African-derived lexicon of Afro-Cuban Spanish (Fuentes Guerra & Schwegler 2005). Upon closer consideration of the known history of Afro-Bolivian Spanish, the paucity of indisputable Africanisms is less surprising. The traditional dialect probably arose sometime in the late 17th century, or as late as the early 18th century, when black Bolivians migrated to the Yungas from the highland mining regions and from the estates around Cochabamba. By this time the arrival of slaves from Africa had dwindled to a trickle in Bolivia, thereby limiting the main source of African lexical items in other Afro-American dialects. At the same time, Afro-Bolivian Spanish did not develop in Maroon communities in which African linguistic and cultural values were foremost; the retention of the significantly restructured Afro-Bolivian dialect into the 21st century is due in great part to the fact that until the agrarian and educational reforms of 1952, Afro-Bolivians in the Yungas were surrounded by an essentially monolingual Aymara-speaking population. Black Bolivians arrived in the Yungas speaking an evidently partially restructured variety of Spanish, which they used for in-group communication against the backdrop of a very different surrounding language, much as Sephardic (Judeo) Spanish survived for centuries while surrounded by Balkan languages, Turkish, and Greek. This would account for the survival of semi-creole grammar long after new arrivals from Africa ceased to enter the speech community. In any event, the continued existence of the isolated and until very recently unknown Afro-Bolivian dialect provides an incentive for additional exploration of small linguistic enclaves whose historical development was compatible with the emergence of creole languages.

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