

SAINT-CHRISTOPHE: THE ORIGIN OF FRENCH ANTILLEAN CREOLES

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The small Lesser Antilles island of Saint-Christophe, now known in English as St Kitts, was the first French slave-based colony in the Caribbean. Slaves of African origin were in contact with the French on the island from about 1626. A study of censuses and other contemporary historical records allows the language contact situation on the island to be described in detail. It is argued that the linguistic environment of Saint-Christophe produced a creole, defined not by typological factors, but by demographic and socio-historic ones. The linguistic environment of the colony was transmitted to other colonies in the region and is the origin of the French Antillean creoles.

1. HISTORY

Saint-Christophe was a French slave-owning colony for only three generations, yet the origin of all lexically French-based Caribbean creoles. The island was also the first English colony in the Caribbean, being settled by Thomas Warner in January 1623 (Moreau 1992:187) following the success of an experimental crop of tobacco planted there in 1622 (Hamshere 1972:27). The French did not show any interest in the island until the Norman privateer d'Esnambuc emulated Warner in 1625, and sailed with a tobacco harvest to Paris, leaving "eighty men and also about forty slaves" on the island to safeguard his interests (Petitjean Roget 1978:1496). The slaves, France's first African slaves in the Americas, must have been taken from the Spanish by the privateer. Most of the eighty men were Normans, for d'Esnambuc's crew, when he left France in 1623, was mainly from Normandy.

D'Esnambuc's tobacco profit led Richelieu to give him official backing to found a colony on Saint-Christophe in late 1626. The Norman decided that the settlement's workers would be recruited from his home province, rather than taken from Africa (Margry 1863:28). Labourers signed on for a three-year term, with the promise of an allotment in the colony at the end of their indenture time. Two-thirds of the *engagés* (indentured labourers) whose origin is known were Normans; 10% were Parisians, 7% from French ports, and the rest, bar one Portuguese, from other French provinces (Petitjean Roget 1978:61).

Three ships left Le Havre in February 1627 with 532 people, mainly *engagés*, on board. They landed at Saint-Christophe in May, and the crew immediately made peace with the English (Abenon 1992:21). Both sides feared the superior numbers of the Caribs on the island, but overcame their apprehension in 1628 by massacring them in a surprise attack

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(Pignefk 1682:3). A Spanish raid in the same year forced the abandonment of Saint-Christophe (Coppier 1645:37), and while most of the French and English returned after a few months, some of the French founded a settlement on Tortuga, which led ultimately to the colony of Saint-Domingue (Haiti).

In the early 1630s Saint-Christophe grew rapidly. Indentured labour proved ineffective, since the labourers protested that they were treated like slaves and severely punished for the slightest misdemeanour (Casta-Lumio 1906:67). Indeed, one historian has described them as "white slaves" (Goslinga 1971:354). The planters' reaction was to buy black slaves to replace them. Thousands of African captives were taken across the Atlantic and sold in Saint-Christophe. Most were carried by Dutch traders, who dominated the Caribbean in commerce, if not territory, at that time (Coppier 1645:32; Du Tertre 1667–71, II:462). With the rush of settlers from France came the first missionaries. They were the principal chroniclers of daily life in the colonies, for official correspondence tended to dwell on military and economic matters. Father Bouton (1640) was the first to publish an account of life in the French Antilles and other priests followed, notably Pelleprat (1655) and du Tertre (1654, 1667–71), each devoting chapters to slavery.

A shortage of arable land led d'Esnambuc to expand his colony to Martinique in 1635 (Petitjean Roget 1978:5–6). In the same year, an expedition from France settled in Guadeloupe (Abenon 1992:25–26). Overproduction of tobacco caused prices to tumble and tobacco-growing on Saint-Christophe was banned in 1639; many planters went to Guadeloupe with their slaves and planted tobacco there. Saint-Christophe reached its carrying capacity in the early 1640s. The slave population would have reached its maximum in the late 1640s or 1650s (see Table 1 below), and slavers would have turned to other colonies to sell their human cargo. Once this maximum was reached, only a few slave ships a year were needed; enough for planters to replace the slaves who had been worked to death. The lack of land on the island no doubt contributed to the rebellion of 1645 that forced some settlers to flee; they went as far as the Guianas in attempts to found their own colonies.

By the 1650s there were slaves, settlers and former indentured labourers from the island scattered throughout the French Caribbean. Although Saint-Christophe was experiencing zero growth, unlike Martinique, Guadeloupe and other colonies, it still had the prestige of being the first settlement and the capital of the Antilles. However, this situation was to change with the arrival of new immigrants and a boom in a new crop: sugar. The loss of Holland's Brazilian colony in 1654 created Portuguese Jewish and Dutch refugees, many of whom were experienced sugar refiners (see Jennings 1995). Several hundred of them arrived with slaves in Guadeloupe and were well received. Sugar refining was a complex process, requiring a much higher labour input and larger plantations than other crops. It boomed in Guadeloupe and Martinique, but on overcrowded Saint-Christophe, the transition from tobacco to sugar was very difficult.

War in Europe spread to the Caribbean in 1666, forcing a battle between English and French forces for Saint-Christophe that saw the English expelled from the island. Several thousand slaves fought alongside their owners on each side, according to a possibly exaggerated eyewitness account (C10B/1, juin 1666).¹ However, the 1667 Treaty of Breda stipulated that France must return to the English the land it had won (Crouse 1966:83). It took until the early 1670s to iron out financial and legal obstacles, and only then did the two

¹ C10B/1 refers to register 1 of sub-section C10B of the French National Archives in Paris. Similar references also indicate archival sources.

colonies coexist as before, although for only nineteen years. The French expelled the English in 1689, but their victory was short-lived, for the English conquered the entire island the following year. "The greater part" of the French were sent to Saint-Domingue, where it was hoped they would settle and not try to return to the Lesser Antilles (Crouse 1966:166). The "lesser part"—mainly the governor and powerful landowners—were sent to Martinique (C8A/6). The French colony of Saint-Christophe was essentially at an end, aside from a brief occupation several years later. The slave-based plantation society which had existed there since the late 1620s, and which had had a reasonably stable population for three generations, would not exist again under French rule.

2. DEMOGRAPHY

The demography of a community is, like its history, a key to the description of its linguistic environment. In the case of Saint-Christophe, information on the numbers of inhabitants in the colony during the three generations that saw the creole arise is derived from three surviving censuses, as well as occasional reports.

TABLE 1: THE POPULATION OF FRENCH SAINT-CHRISTOPHE

Year	French	Slaves	Source
1626	80	40	1627 contract (in Petitjean-Roget 1978:1496)
1636	4,000–5,000	500–600	Margry (1863:44)
1640	8000		Petitjean-Roget (1978:611)
1666	5,000?	4,000?	C10B/1, juin 1666
1671	3,461	4,518	G1/471
1685	1,784	2,761	C10B/1 [for part of the colony only]
1687	3,192	4,470	C10B/1

Table 1 shows how the colony rapidly reached its carrying capacity of 8–9,000 people. The French population attained this level less than a generation after colonisation. It decreased after indentured labourers were replaced by African slaves. The first generation of Africans on Saint-Christophe were heavily outnumbered by the French, and children born to these slaves would have learned to speak in a linguistic environment that was almost entirely French. As these children grew up, they saw the African part of the population increase to the point where it was nearly on a par with the French population. Although there would eventually be more slaves than colonists, neither side would dominate significantly in terms of numbers.

After the initial dominance by the French population, there were roughly equal numbers of Africans and Europeans for about two generations, from about the late 1640s. Such a demographic history is significantly different from that of other French colonies where a creole language emerged. A typical colony would buy slaves in great numbers once the settlement had been established, and the colonists would find themselves heavily outnumbered within a decade or two of the founding of the settlement. In Cayenne, for example, slaves outnumbered their owners by about four to one within two decades of the arrival of the first slaver (Jennings 1993:32).

TABLE 2: THE 1671 AND 1687 CENSUSES

Year	Colonists				<i>Engagés</i>		African slaves			'Free coloureds'	Amer-Indians
	M	W	B	G	M	W	M	W	Ch		
1671	998	577	696	574	583	33	1,653	1,677	1,188	76	25
	Total: 3,461 Europeans						Total: 4,518 slaves			Total: 101 others	
1687	900	588	773	850		81	1,694	1,665	1,111	120	?
	Total: 3,192 Europeans						Total: 4,470 slaves			Total: 120+ others	

Of the three surviving censuses, the most comprehensive is that of 1671, which gives a breakdown of slaves by household. The other two censuses, from 1685 and 1687 (C10B/1), give totals only, but the 1685 census is not complete, and probably refers to only one of the French quarters of the island. In Table 2, the 1671 and 1687 totals are shown. Differences of classification can pose some problems: unmarried men may be counted under the heading B 'boys' or under M 'men'; likewise, unmarried women may be under G 'girls' or W 'women'. However, these difficulties are minor in comparison with the wealth of information the censuses provide.

The slave population of French Saint-Christophe in 1671 was almost identical to that of 1687, which shows that few slavers called at Saint-Christophe during that period. Mongin confirms the rarity of slavers when he wrote in May 1682 that slave ships called only a few times a year (Chatillon 1984:133–134). The colony did not need any more slaves, except to replace those who had died. If the slave population decreased by about 5% per annum on Saint-Christophe (see Debien 1964:27), then some 200–300 captives were bought by the colonists each year. Such a low rate of new arrivals would have favoured the stability of the island's contact language, for the new slaves could not have had much influence on the linguistic environment. They were pidginisers who sought to communicate with the people around them without trying to change the contact language.

There are two reasons for the equal ratio of African men to women in 1671 and 1687. Firstly, the French believed initially that slave numbers could be maintained through natural growth, and sought equal numbers of men and women slaves, hoping to establish a source of labour independent of the growing African slave trade, foreign interests and piracy. Contemporary observers on Saint-Christophe noted that planters encouraged slaves to form families. It was apparently not unusual to see an entire slave family over two generations working on the same plantation (Clodoré 1671:46). However, when it became apparent that the brutal working conditions of the slaves resulted in deaths greatly exceeding births, male captives came to be in much higher demand, and slavers would often cross the Atlantic with twice as many men as women on board (see Klein 1978:150). Secondly, once the population had reached its maximum, the low numbers of new arrivals meant that there was a high proportion of locally-born slaves who were, of course, born in roughly equal ratios.

Saint-Christophe also had a high number of European women from the 1630s onwards (Margry 1863:58), showing France's intention to use Saint-Christophe not so much as a get-rich-quick plantation settlement as a base for their colonial enterprises in the Caribbean. Colonies were usually male-dominated to the point where it became normal to take young women (*filles du Roy*) from prisons and orphanages in France and ship them across the

Atlantic where they were married within days of landing. Only among the *engagés* was there a high ratio of men to women; however, this system had almost ceased by 1687. Although it was significant for only half a century, the indentured labour system existed at a time when a language of communication between French and Africans had developed. The predominantly Norman labourers, who often went on to become landowners, worked with the African slaves and played an important role in developing this language. At the end of the three-year term, a labourer was often given a plot of land and remained in the colony as a settler; Coppier is one example of this (see Coppier 1645; Dampierre 1904:88), and many former labourers became important figures in Saint-Christophe or in other colonies.

Economic information from the 1671 and 1687 censuses also supplies information on the population of Saint-Christophe. There were only seventeen plantations with fifty or more slaves in 1671; the majority of slaves worked on smaller holdings of thirty slaves or less. In 1687 there were 101 *sucreries* ('sugar estates') and 62 indigo plantations, and an average of 27 slaves per plantation. Sugar mills were highly labour-intensive and needed at least about 50 slaves each to be efficient. This number was rarely attained in 1671 or 1687; big sugar mills with over a hundred slaves were an exception on Saint-Christophe. Furthermore, the colony was too small for plantations to be isolated, so there would have been a lot of mixing of slaves. This contrasts with other colonies where slaves could easily find themselves working on a large isolated plantation in a remote district.

In short, Saint-Christophe had a high population density with, after a generation of a predominantly French population, roughly equal populations of Europeans and slaves for some two generations. The smallness of the plantations and the low numbers of new slave arrivals suggest slaves had excellent access to the language of their owners compared to slaves in other French colonies.

3. LANGUAGE CONTACT

From the late 1620s, Saint-Christophe had a population of African-speaking slaves working in a French-speaking environment. The mutual incomprehensibility of the slaves' languages and the dialects used by the French resulted in a problem of communication which needed to be solved urgently. For the first few years there were only a few dozen slaves, who worked alongside Norman French labourers on small holdings. The variety of French the African captives heard in Saint-Christophe would have been heavily influenced by Norman French, and to a lesser extent by Maritime French (see Hull 1979) and may be referred to as colonial French. The slaves would have had good access to the language of their owners and co-workers, and the initial result of language contact would have been that the first slaves on Saint-Christophe learned to speak a variety of French as a second/third...language.

Later, when thousands of Africans were taken to Saint-Christophe during the 1630s and 1640s, the language contact situation changed. The first contact with French for many of these captives was on Saint-Christophe, for the Dutch dominated the trade at the time. It would appear in fact that captives had no knowledge of French even if transported by a French slaver; Mongin (in Chatillon 1984:133–134) and Clodoré (1671:43–44) state that interpreters were needed when the captives were first landed in the colony, and that newly-arrived slaves were placed with slaves who spoke the same African language (i.e. non-native speakers of French).

The urgent problem of communication was rapidly resolved through a compromise between the colonial French of the labourers and slave-owners, and the Africans' "way of speaking" (Pelleprat 1655:53). Bouton (1640:100) had noted a generation before Pelleprat that the French of the slaves lacked articles and "other particles". Indeed, the only articles present in attestations from Saint-Christophe are from stock-in-trade religious expressions like *le Bon Dieu* 'the Good Lord' or *la Bonne Vierge* 'the Holy Virgin' (Mongin 1682, in Chatillon 1984:104). The description of "other particles" may well include copula deletion, as in example (1), from a 14-year-old boy on Saint-Christophe in 1655:

- (1) *Moy bien fâché.*
1SG very angry
I am very angry.

(Saint-Christophe: Pelleprat 1655:63)

Bouton may also have been referring to deletion of the unstressed clitic *ne*, which in French precedes the negated verb while *pas* follows it. Examples of negation on Saint-Christophe show that *pas* or an early variant *point* was retained, although it preceded the predicate.

- (2) *Toi pas connaître moi.*
2SG NEG know 1SG
You don't know me.

(Saint-Christophe 1682; Chatillon 1984:96)

The boy whose speech was recorded by Pelleprat used *point* as the negative marker in five clauses; it always precedes the verb, but in some cases seems to negate the whole clause and not just the verb, as in examples (3) and (4).

- (3) *Point luy iurer.*
NEG 3SG swear
He hasn't sworn.

(Saint-Christophe: Pelleprat 1655:63)

In fact, the word order of certain negated phrases may reveal a non-French influence in the language of the slaves of Saint-Christophe.

- (4) *Point aller luy à femme d'autre.*
NEG go 3SG to woman of.other
He hasn't been with another woman.

(Saint-Christophe: Pelleprat 1655:63)

As far as the missionaries were concerned, however, the slaves spoke a jargon based purely on a simplified version of French:

It consists of the infinitive of the verb, never conjugated, to which are added a few words to explain the tense and the person discussed. For example, if they wish to say 'I want to pray to God tomorrow', they will say 'me pray God tomorrow', 'me eat yesterday', 'you give food to me' and so on. This jargon is very easy to teach to the slaves and also to the missionaries so they can instruct them, and so it is used all the time. (Mongin 1682, in Chatillon 1984:34–35)²

² "[Le jargon] est par l'infinitif du verbe, sans jamais le conjuguer, en y ajoutant quelques mots qui font connaître le temps et la personne de qui l'on parle. Par exemple s'ils veulent dire: je veux prier Dieu demain, ils diront moi prier Dieu demain, moi manger hier, toi donner manger à moi, et ainsi en toutes

The linguistic compromise of the French-speaking inhabitants of Saint-Christophe may have been limited to the use of 'foreigner talk', but within the African-speaking community, the compromise was much greater, for there were immense linguistic differences among its members. Slavers bought captives from a region covering millions of square kilometres of the African continent; Pelleprat noted thirteen different languages in the slave community (1655:53), while Mongin suggested ten or a dozen (in Chatillon 1984:134). The chaos of so many different languages meant a language of compromise was needed within the slave community. The language used to communicate with French-speakers was the obvious choice, and would no doubt have been employed for interethnic communication within the slave community. This additional use of the French jargon would have led to the language being rapidly conventionalised, especially in a colony too small to allow any dialects to form, and in turn nativised by the children born to slaves on the island.

The language contact situation in Saint-Christophe can be summarised as follows: in the first generation of settlement, colonial French was spoken by all the settlement's inhabitants, including the few African slaves present. Later, the arrival of thousands of Africans in the space of a decade or two led to a jargon based principally on colonial French, with some structural features from other sources. This jargon was used for communication within the slave community as well as between slaves and owners and, as the next section shows, was transmitted to other French settlements in the Americas.

4. TRANSMISSION TO OTHER COLONIES

France's Caribbean colonies were not isolated entities. Ships crossing the Atlantic would often call at more than one colony before returning to France, and there is evidence of interaction among the colonists and slaves of different colonies and of a consequent linguistic transmission from Saint-Christophe to France's other colonies. Firstly, Saint-Christophe was the capital of the French Caribbean for three decades. Its frequent dealings with other French colonies of the region ensured homogeneity of the linguistic environment until the 1650s. The jargon used between slaves and French-speakers in the capital would have been the same used elsewhere in the French Caribbean in those early years. An attestation from Martinique in 1671 (Carden et al. 1990) shows many similarities with the language described by Mongin in 1682 and Pelleprat in 1655. The order of object pronouns is a case in point.

- (5) *Toi pas connaître moi.*
 2SG NEG know 1SG
 You don't know me.

(Saint-Christophe 1682; Chatillon 1984:96)

- (6) *Moi pas voir li.*
 1SG NEG see 3SG
 I didn't see him.

(The perfective aspect is context-specific)

(Martinique 1671; Carden et al. 1990:3)

sortes de choses. Ce jargon est fort aisé à apprendre aux nègres et aux missionnaires aussi pour les instruire, et ainsi ils le donnent à entendre pour toutes choses."

In the French versions of (5) and (6), the object pronoun precedes the verb. Furthermore, the strategy employed for negation in the Martinique text is the same as that used in Saint-Christophe; deletion of the French clitic *ne* while retaining and shifting the stronger *pas*.

When the colonies began to diverge in their demography the language situation would have changed. While numbers on Saint-Christophe remained stable for reasons of limited space, other islands saw a large increase in the slave population. The colonial French of the settlers would have remained stable, but the 'jargon' would have changed as increasing arrivals of slave ships brought thousands of African captives to Martinique, Guadeloupe and other colonies. The larger size of Guadeloupe and Martinique allowed dialects to arise in isolated areas. In Guadeloupe, the future marker had several variants until the late nineteenth century, which Hazaël-Massieux (1986:120) assigns to demographic differences. Abbé Goux's description (1842:20) of Martiniquan creole describes "the most widely-spoken language", which in itself is evidence of dialects. The 1671 Martiniquan text was based on an interview with three slaves in an isolated southern part of Martinique and differs in several respects from Mongin's and Pelleprat's attestations on Saint-Christophe. These differences are occasional non-French features where the Saint-Christophe texts retain a French structure. In Saint-Christophe, the French reflexive clitic pronoun *me* is used:

- (7) *Moi me dépouiller.*
 1SG 1SG undress
 I undressed.
 (The perfective aspect is context-specific)

(Saint-Christophe 1682; Chatillon 1984:104)

Three of the four Saint-Christophe slaves whose speech was recorded by missionaries use a reflexive, and in all cases the structure is identical to that of example (7). In the Martinique text, the structure differs markedly from French. Two of the three slaves interviewed use a plain pronoun as a reflexive.³

- (8) *Li caché li.*
 3SG hide 3SG
 He hid himself.
 (The perfective aspect is context-specific)

(Martinique 1671; Carden et al. 1990:4)

Another factor supporting linguistic transmission from Saint-Christophe to other colonies is that new colonies were often founded by people with experience on Saint-Christophe. The best example of this is the settlement of Martinique in 1635. Experience played a key role in the survival of a colony; for every successful settlement, there were countless failures, and the colonies that failed tended to be those founded by pilgrims and naïve adventurers who sailed from Europe.

The leading families of many of France's colonial administrators could trace their origins back to Saint-Christophe. Auger, a company commander in the 1671 census, was governor of Marie-Galante in the late 1680s. The Orvilliers family, which governed French Guiana for three generations in the 1700s, had its origins in Saint-Christophe; the first of the governors was stationed there, and the second was born and raised there. Many of the names encountered in the archives of Saint-Christophe are also to be found in the archives of other colonies. This family connection in the Caribbean is important in the context of linguistic

³ For a discussion of reflexives in French creoles, see Carden (1989).

transmission when it is remembered that the richest families had the most slaves. When an administrator was posted to another colony, many of the slaves went with their owners, and were in this way able to introduce some of the Saint-Christophe jargon to the slaves of the new colony.

Slaves were useful in other ways to the founders of new colonies. Experienced and reliable slaves were needed to get the settlement off to a good start, and also to act as interpreters for newly-arrived captives from Africa. The Jesuit priest Father Jean Grillet, who was sent to French Guiana in 1667, brought slaves with him from Saint-Christophe so that he might baptise and instruct the slaves of Cayenne before they died (Archives Françaises de la Compagnie de Jésus, FGu5).

The greater the distance from Saint-Christophe a colony was, the smaller the linguistic transmission was likely to be. Cayenne creole was, according to Barrère (1743:40), "less ridiculous" than—and therefore different to—the creole of the Islands. For this creole, a scenario of independent genesis with influences from Saint-Christophe would appear to be the case. In Louisiana, the creoles are separated by both distance and time from Saint-Christophe, and would appear to have been relatively independent in nature (Speedy 1994).

5. CONCLUSION

Good access to the colonial French of the small colony of Saint-Christophe meant that a relatively stable vehicular language of enslaved Africans arose rapidly. The locally-born children of the first slaves acquired this language, and it was transmitted to other French Caribbean colonies. As these colonies evolved separately, the contact language diverged and became the group of interrelated French Antillean creoles. Colonies further afield, such as Louisiana and Cayenne, may have been influenced by this initial creole, but to a lesser extent.

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