

## **Kromanti**

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### **Background**

The work of Alleyne (1988:122), in keeping with previous work on the subject, identifies the language variety labelled Kromanti by the Maroons of Jamaica as very closely related to the Akan dialect/language cluster of West Africa. The best known language within this cluster is Twi-Asante. The label 'Kromanti' owes its origin to a major slaving port on the Gold Coast, modern day Ghana, which was known to the Europeans as Coromantyn. This port was located in the Akan-speaking area of West Africa and would, therefore, have been a source for large numbers of slaves of Akan ethnic and linguistic background. In many parts of the Americas, including Suriname, Guyana and Carriacou, Coromantee and similar labels have been used for ethnic, linguistic and cultural groups with what appear to be Akan origins. Alleyne (1988:122) suggests that people of Akan linguistic and cultural origin were dominant in the early years of plantation slavery in Jamaica, both on the plantations and amongst the runaway Maroons. Not surprisingly, therefore, it is an Akan variety, Kromanti, that has endured as a form of African linguistic heritage dating back to the very earliest days of plantation slavery in Jamaica.

### **Usage**

The language is reported by Harris (1994:39) to still have been spoken 'freely' in Moore Town up to the early 1930s. Kromanti was, he claims, used alongside an archaic variety of English-lexicon Creole styled in the literature as 'Maroon Spirit Language' (MSL). This language is, however, referred to by its speakers as Deep Patwa. Even though, in the 1930s, an English Creole vernacular was the most common means of communication within the community, Kromanti was used in preference to Creole at certain times. These included Christmas time which was a prolonged period of merriment, and during the frequent stagings of the Kromanti Play. The Play, a ceremony involving the summoning of the ancestors, involves the use of Deep Patwa (Maroon Spirit Language) for communicating with the more recently dead, Jamaica born ancestors. Kromanti is employed for communication with the earliest Maroon ancestors, many of whom were born in Africa (Bilby 1983:38).

There is considerable discussion in the literature as to whether Kromanti can be viewed as a dead language. In one sense it is. It is a language used for communicating with the spirits of the dead. However, this is in a culture in which the dead, though absent in material form, are always present in spirit. Speaking of them is regarded as invoking their presence. This is a language used by the living as part of their normal daily communication acts. It is simply that, within the culture, normal communication networks include the dead. In this latter sense, Kromanti is a living language.

The other issue is that of the level of competence which users of Kromanti actually have. Bilby (1983:38) suggests that Kromanti "... is not a functioning language, but rather a highly fragmentary ritual "language" consisting of a number of set phrases and expressions." Alleyne (1988) takes only a marginally more optimistic view. He comments that though Kromanti is dying, it is not dead. He notes that the language is hardly every used in ordinary everyday contexts, but that "Scott's Hall and Moore Town Maroons can carry on conversations in the old language on request, but that they use fixed and stylized expressions, and all creativity is lost" (Alleyne 1988:126-7). This is supported by Bilby (1994). Bilby concedes that no living Maroon retains it as a fully functioning language able to express an limitless number of ideas, but nevertheless suggests that a minority of Maroons "... can provide English glosses for a large number of words and expressions and can communicate a wide variety of messages with Kromanti" (Bilby 1994:77).

### Language Samples

Kromanti Akan (Twi-Asante)

*paki apaki* 'small calabash'  
*sènsè asense* 'type of fowl'  
*kamfo nkamfo* 'type of yam'  
*afana afana* 'machete'  
*abukani abukani* 'cow'  
*anansi anansi* 'spider'  
*aprako prako* 'pig'  
*awisa wisa* 'pepper'  
*obroni oburoni* 'European, white person'  
*obroni o ko oburoni o ko* 'the white man has come'  
(Source: Alleyne 1988:126-131)

The examples above show cases where Kromanti has lost the noun class prefixes, *a-*, *o-* and *n-*, by comparison with its Twi-Asante equivalents. We also see cases where these prefixes have been retained in both Kromanti and Twi-Asante. There are, as well, cases where it is Kromanti that has retained the historical noun class prefixes as in *aprako* and *awisa*, above.

### References

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