

## *Lengua suto é ngande* [our language is great]: Emerging Discourse Markers in Revitalized Palenquero (Afro-Colombian Spanish Creole)

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### Abstract

Due to recent language revitalization efforts in the village of San Basilio de Palenque, the traditional creole language Palenquero is now taught in the community's schools and many young residents are acquiring Palenquero as a second language. At the same time recent changes in community attitudes, coupled with frequent visits by linguistic researchers, have resulted in heightened metalinguistic awareness as traditional speakers strive to produce the "best" Palenquero creole. The present study examines emergent traits in young learners' Palenquero as well as apparent recent innovations in the speech of adult bilinguals, which in their totality provide a glimpse into the possible future of the Palenquero language.

**Keywords:** Palenquero language, creole languages, language revitalization, ethno-education

### Resumen

Debido al proceso de revitalización etnolingüística el palenquero (lengua criolla afrocolombiana) se enseña en las escuelas de San Basilio de Palenque (Bolívar) y muchos jóvenes adquieren el palenquero como segunda lengua. Al mismo tiempo los cambios recientes en las actitudes hacia la lengua palenquera y las visitas de investigadores de lenguas criollas han producido un aumento en la conciencia metalingüística de los hablantes tradicionales, quienes compiten para hablar el "mejor" palenquero. Este trabajo examina unos rasgos emergentes en el palenquero hablado por jóvenes aprendices así como aparentes innovaciones en el habla de adultos bilingües, que en su conjunto apuntan hacia el futuro de la lengua palenquera.

**Palabras clave:** lengua palenquera, lenguas criollas, revitalización lingüística, etnoeducación

### 1. Introduction

Speech communities in which a creole language is in contact with its historical source are frequently scenarios of ambivalent attitudes towards both languages, and more recently—among educators and social activists—explicit reflection on language usage. When the community is characterized by a past history of slavery, marginality, and resistance, the stage is set for a range of variable phenomena that cannot all be derived directly from one language or the other, but rather emerge from the social dynamic within which the languages and their speakers interact. This is nowhere more evident than in the Afro-Colombian village of San Basilio de Palenque,<sup>1</sup> where the Spanish/Portuguese-derived creole language known to linguists as Palenquero and to the speakers themselves simply as *Lengua* 'the language' or *Lengua ri Palengue* 'the language of Palenque' is spoken in contact with local vernacular dialects of Spanish.<sup>2</sup> Retained for several centuries as a legacy of cultural resistance, the Palenquero language was reduced to an object of ridicule in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as linguistic and cultural contacts with neighboring communities became commonplace and as Palenqueros sought employment opportunities outside of their village. Considered an endangered language as recently as two decades ago, *Lengua ri Palengue* has experienced a remarkable renovation through community activism and educational programs, and most Palenqueros now regard their ancestral language with pride. The renewed vigor of the language—now being taught to young people in the village's schools and spoken without reluctance by older residents—has been supplemented by numerous visits by anthropologists, linguists, and Afro-diaspora activists from around the world, which has led to an enhanced metalinguistic awareness among many community members. One of the most interesting results of this rapid shift in the linguistic fortunes of *Lengua ri Palengue* is the scramble to recover the most "authentic" forms of the language in replacement of elements felt to be unnecessary accretions from Spanish. In the absence of widespread knowledge of the linguistic history of Spanish and *Lengua ri Palengue*, many concerned speakers, implicitly adopting the viewpoint that distance from Spanish equals "pure" *Lengua*, have hit upon several strategies that produce the desired effect. Although many Palenqueros consciously or unconsciously take part in the "new" Palenquero language, older traditional speakers and eager, young second-language learners are following very different paths. The present study will analyze two of the most prominent innovations that may herald the future of the Palenquero language revival.

## 2. San Basilio de Palenque

San Basilio de Palenque is a compact village of around 3000 inhabitants some 70 km to the south of the Colombian port of Cartagena de Indias. Nearly all residents are of African descent, and very little racial mixture is noticeable. Residents adhere to a superficially plausible but highly speculative account of the creation of the village, but accurate historical data are not easily obtainable. According to many popular accounts, in 1599 enslaved Africans in the Spanish Caribbean port of Cartagena de Indias revolted and fled to the partially forested interior to the south. One of the most charismatic leaders was Domingo Bioho ("King Benko"), whose resistance movement was so effective that the Spanish government was forced to sue for peace in 1603. Bioho continued to engage in anti-colonial resistance, until he was captured and hanged in 1621. During this period of active struggle Bioho and his followers founded at least one *Palenque* or fortified village; the residents of San Basilio de Palenque believe that their community was the one founded by Bioho and his name has been inextricably linked with the village's multi-secular history of cultural resistance. A statue of "Benkos" adorns the village plaza, the secondary school bears his name, and his feats are taught to schoolchildren and recited by community elders. According to historians, however, the origins of the contemporary community of San Basilio de Palenque cannot be so clearly delineated. There is some evidence that Bioho's *Palenque* was not the one that has survived today but rather another site some distance away (Navarrete 22-23), one of many maroon communities that dotted the region from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through the 18<sup>th</sup>. Colombian historians generally converge on the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as the probable period in which the Palenque de San Basilio came into existence. The fact that Domingo Bioho himself may not have founded the Palenque de San Basilio is substantially irrelevant to the linguistic and cultural history of this community, which is clearly the product of the maroon resistance movement originally led by Bioho. "Benkos" is indisputably the spiritual founder of San Basilio de Palenque.

The first unequivocal mention of the Palenque de San Basilio (with its original name, San Miguel Arcángel) comes in a document relating a peace agreement made in 1713 (Escalante 229; Navarrete 155-166), which is consistent with a founding date somewhere towards the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. A document dated 1772 stated that the Palenqueros "hablan entre si un particular idioma en que á sus solas instruyen á los muchachos sin embargo de que cortan con mucha expedición el castellano de que generalmente usan" (Gutiérrez Azopardo 34; Urueta 1328). The Palenquero language has presumably been in continuous contact with Spanish ever since.

## 3. Salient Features of Palenquero Grammar

*Lenguari Palenque* is a Spanish-lexified creole language, with a few words apparently derived from (possibly creolized) Portuguese, as well as a number of lexical items of African origin, most identifiable as Kikongo (Schwegler 1996, 2002, 2011). Although sharing many recognizable lexical items and grammatical patterns with Spanish, the Palenquero language exhibits numerous grammatical differences that make the language nearly unintelligible to Spanish speakers. Palenquero verbs (usually derived from the Spanish infinitive) are not inflected for person and number, but rather combined with preverbal particles, including *ase* (habitual), *ta* (progressive), *a*, (past/perfect), and *tan* (future). Nominal plural is marked by the particle *ma* prefixed only to the noun phrase instead of attaching /-s/ to all elements of the noun phrase as in Spanish. Palenquero lacks any expression of grammatical gender: adjectives cognate with Spanish are derived from the Spanish masculine form. In Palenquero the negator *nu* is placed clause-finally, rather than pre-verbal *no* in Spanish. A single set of pronouns is used for subject and object: *i*, *bo*, *ele* (singular); *suto*, *enú* or *utere*, *ané* (plural). *Ané* and *enú* are of Kikongo origin. Possession is expressed by placing the possessor after the possessed object: *posá suto* 'our house,' *moná mi* 'my child,' *ngombe Raúl* 'Raul's cow(s).' An example of Palenquero grammar is *ma mujé suto ta pilá aló nu* 'our women are not pounding rice' (Sp. *Nuestras mujeres no están pilando arroz*).

## 4. Enhanced Awareness of "Authentic" *Lengua ri Palenque*

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Palenqueros were painfully aware of the scorn and mockery heaped upon them and their way of speaking by *ma hendé ri juela* 'people from outside.' Over the past three decades, attitudes towards *Lengua ri Palenque*—held by community members and outsiders—have begun to change, at first gradually and with little total effect, then more comprehensively. Colombians first became aware of this village when the late Palenquero boxer "Kid Pambelé" (Antonio Cervantes) won a world championship in 1974, only a few years after the first (dirt) road was extended into the previously isolated community (Salcedo 2005). The village suddenly became the scene of visits from journalists and politicians, and the fame (and friendship of the son of Colombia's president) resulted in the first electrical lines extending into the village. In 2005 Palenque was declared Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. The Colombian Ministry of Culture has declared San Basilio de Palenque part of the "immaterial patrimony" of Colombia, although the town is still without generalized running water or a sewer system, and the nearest paved road is still the main highway leading to Cartagena, 7 km. outside of Palenque. Several documentary films on Palenque have been produced and circulated in Colombia, and annual music and drum festivals draw even more media attention to the community.

One of the direct results of the shift in community attitudes towards the Palenquero language has been an implicit and explicit competition to identify the “best” Palenquero language and the “best” speakers. As part of their assignments in Palenquero language classes, school children are sent out to interview elderly speakers who know traditional stories and legends, and many of the same speakers have been visited by successive groups of students. Visiting students and scholars are likewise taken to substantially the same group of proficient Palenquero speakers known both for their loquacity and for their willingness to share their language with others. Tourists and other visitors not specifically interested in studying the Palenquero language are often intercepted by other, self-acclaimed expert speakers, who demand a cash payment up front in exchange for samples of the traditional language. The end result is a considerable awareness of language variation among Palenqueros who have frequent contact with school students, teachers, and visiting researchers. Most of these individuals have been acknowledged by name (and by photograph) in published scholarship by Palenqueros and outsiders, which reinforces the sense that some speakers/speech varieties are to be preferred over others. These “expert witnesses” can be (over)heard proclaiming the superiority of one speaker over another as specimens of “real” Palenquero and in conversations involving more than one speaker challenging one another with obscure words and expressions and explicitly correcting others’ use of Palenquero or momentary lapses into Spanish. Thomas Morton suspects that “the behavior of someone correcting another’s speech when the speaker was thought to have “slipped” into PSp [Palenquero Spanish] while speaking or demonstrating Lengua only started to occur after linguists and anthropologists began their research looking for Lengua in Palenque” (164).

### 5. Adults’ “New” Palenquero: The Extension of *-ba*

In addition to the reintroduction of obscure or obsolete lexical items and hypersensitivity as to the separation of *Lengua ri Palengue* and Spanish, many fluent speakers of traditional Palenquero sprinkle their speech with validators created from detached verbal suffixes, evidently an innovation meant to signal “authentic” Palenquero speech.<sup>3</sup> The most frequently used element is *is-ba*, which in the Palenquero language provides a past imperfective meaning. In Spanish, the obvious source, *-ba* only attaches to verbs having /a/ as stem vowel (infinitives ending in *-ar*): *hablaba*, *trabajaba*, etc.; Spanish verbs ending in *-er* and *-ir* take the suffix *-ía* (except for *ir*, whose imperfective forms are based on *iba*): *comía*, *vivía*. In Palenquero, *-ba* attaches to all verb stems irrespective of the theme vowel:

- (1)
- a. ma hende *quela-ba* cu boca abieto ‘people remained open-mouthed’

- b. majaná mí *quele-ba* pa yo miní nu ‘my kids did not want me to come’
- c. ele *ta-ba* casi po *mori-ba* ‘he was just about dead’

Just as in Spanish, Palenquero has many two-verb combinations. In Spanish, all complex verbs are inflected only on the first element, the second element being an infinitive, gerund, or past participle. Traditional Palenquero has no constructions corresponding to Spanish perfect forms (derived from *haber* + past participle, e.g. *ha trabajado*, *hemos vivido*), and only occasionally makes use of Spanish-like progressive constructions (derived from *estar* ‘be’ + gerund, e.g. *estamos trabajando*). Most two-verb combinations in Palenquero correspond to Spanish FINITE VERB + INFINITIVE combinations; the first verb in two-verb combinations is typically *asé* (< Spanish *hacer*) for habitual or repeated action, *polé* (< Sp. *poder*), *sabé* (< Sp. *saber*) also used for habitual meaning, *quelé* (< Sp. *querer*), as well as *ta* (< Sp. *estar*) for progressive constructions. In two-verb imperfective constructions, it is most frequent in Palenquero for *-ba* to attach only to the first verb; this corresponds to the only possible configuration in Spanish:

- (2)
- a. yo ablá ané que ese casa *pole-ba* vendé nu ‘I told them that the house couldn’t be sold’
- b. suto *ase-ba* bae caya ‘we would go out in the street’
- c. i *quele-ba* pasá allá má nu ‘I didn’t want to go back there’

Less frequent but still relatively commonplace is the attachment of *-ba* to the second verb of two-verb constructions. This configuration in effect represents the re-analysis of the two verbs as a single verb, with the suffix *-ba* attached to the end:

- (3)
- a. cuando ma mamá *asé bae-ba* suto *asé pelea-ba* ‘when our mothers would leave, we would fight’
- b. el *asé vivi-ba* abajo ‘he lived down [the street]’

Occurring less frequently still is the attachment of *-ba* to both verbs of Palenquero two-verb combinations. These instances represent an innovative abandonment of Spanish-derived combinations, “liberating” the suffix *-ba* from solely occupying its Spanish-like position and creating in effect a system of multiple agreements in which *-ba* optionally attaches to BOTH components of a compound verb:

- (4)
- a. que jue-ba lo que i *ta-ba abla-ba* cu monasito? ‘what was it that I was saying to the child?’

b. *i pole-ba jabla-ba* que jue lo que i ta ablando cu ané nu 'I couldn't say what it was that I was telling them'

Students who have learned Palenquero in school apply *-ba* only to the first verb of two-verb combinations, following the Spanish pattern as well as "canonical" descriptions of Palenquero as analyzed by creole scholars (e.g. Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli 1983, Megenny 1986, Schwegler 1996) and also found in recently published sources written by native Palenquero speakers: Cásseres Estrada (2005), Pérez Tejedor (2004), Simarra Obeso et al. (2008), and Simarra Reyes and Triviño-Doval (2008). However, most of the more than one hundred adult speakers of traditional Palenquero interviewed by the author produce all three configurations (V1-*ba*+V2; V1+V2-*ba*; V1-*ba*+V2-*ba*) in varying proportions, and in an implicational fashion: all speakers who attach *-ba* to both verbs in two-verb combinations such as (5) also produce combinations in which *-ba* is attached only to the second verb (example 4) as well as combinations in which *-ba* attaches only to the first verb (example 3). There are, however, many Palenqueros who produce only combinations with *-ba* attached to one verb or the other (examples 2 and 3) but not to both verbs, and some speakers who have never been observed to attach *-ba* to the second verb of two-verb complexes, producing only examples like (2). In a sample corpus comprising some six hours of free conversation involving a representative cross-section of fifteen adult Palenquero speakers, there were 256 two-verb combinations marked with *-ba*; of these, 70% marked *-ba* only on the first verb, 19% marked *-ba* only on the second verb, and 11% marked *-ba* on both verbs. These implications as well as the relative proportions of examples like (2), and (4) suggest an evolutionary trajectory from (2) to (3) and finally to include (4).

Although the *-ba* suffix is also shared by Spanish first-conjugation verbs (in *-ar*), the existence of numerous Palenquero verbs in *-eba* and *-iba* (by far the most common single verbs in the corpus are *teneba* 'have, exist,' *queleba* 'want,' *jueba* 'be,' and the habitual marker *aseba*) adds prominence to *-ba* as a "true" Palenquero element, not just an encroaching Spanish suffix. This validation of *-ba* as a characteristic Palenquero element, together with the variable placement options for *-ba* in two-verb combinations sets the stage for a more sweeping innovation: the emergence of *-ba* as a discourse marker associated with affirmation of Palenquero identity, not restricted to verbs and no longer essentially linked to a past-tense meaning. It is precisely this innovation that can be observed among a subset of fluent adult Palenquero speakers with heightened sensibilities but with little or no concept of grammatical analysis.

The most common extension of *-ba* to non-verbal elements is the attachment of *-ba* to personal pronouns, including *mi* 'me,' *ané* 'them,' *bo* 'you,' *ele* 'he/she,' *eni* 'you (pl.),' and *suto* 'we.' In most of the observed cases, *-ba* attaches to pronouns in sentences without any past/imperfect

meaning. Examples collected by the author include:

(5)

- a. el asé nda *mi-ba* mucho idea 'he gives me many ideas'
- b. bo cansá *mi-ba* nu 'you are not tiring me'
- c. yo bae cu *bo-ba* nu 'I won't go with you'
- d. bo a ten como cuatro ría aquí, *bo-ba* 'you've been here about four days, you'
- e. ma cusa *suto-ba* lengua suto lo tené awé 'our things, our language that we have today'
- f. i a quelé llevalo-*ba* andi Dioso pa Dioso lo guatiá *suto-ba* 'I want to take [you] to God so God can look at us'
- g. tó mundo disé ablálo cu *ané-ba* que ané ta ngañao 'everyone says talk to them, since they are deceived'
- h. ma familia mi ta decuidá maí *ané-ba* ma moná *ané-ba* 'the families are not taking care of their corn, of their children'
- i. i tan ablá *ele-ba* 'I will tell him'

Earlier examples of *-ba* attached to pronouns were described by Patiño Rosselli (125) and Davis (155), but always in sentences with past reference. In contrast, most of the examples collected by the present author occur in the absence of past reference, which indicates that detached *-ba* has become simply a signpost marking the use of the Palenquero language.

The extension of *-ba* to pronouns has been found only in a subset of Palenquero speakers, nearly all of whom have frequent interactions with school students, teachers, community cultural activists, and visiting researchers. Among this same general subset of fluent speakers *-ba* is often extended to nouns, adjectives, and adverbs. Among the dozens of examples found in the present corpus, however, few have clearly past reference. In fact for the speakers in question, *-ba* appears to be an optional attachment to nearly any grammatical constituent:

(6)

- a. tó lo que quelé *dinero-ba*, *batante-ba* 'all those who want money, lots'
- b. é un cusa muy *ngande-ba* 'it's a very great thing'
- c. uto moná ané a ndalo tiro po *cabeza-ba* 'another one of their children was shot in the head'

d. ané sabé ni ponelo *nu-ba* ‘they don’t even know how to put on [diapers]’

e. i necesita *hende-ba*, pa hende lo miní ‘I need people, for people to come’

f. uto ría *conejo-ba* a bae andi cucaracha ‘the next day the rabbit went to see the cockroach’

g. *bo-ba* a miní aqué *viaje-ba* bo *solo-ba* ‘that trip you came alone’

h. enú ablá mí pero utere é *numano-ba* nu ‘you all talk to me but you are not my brothers’

In addition to the fact that the attachment of *-ba* (at least those cases with non-past reference) to non-verbal elements has only been documented for adult Palenquero speakers with demonstrated hypersensitivity toward the language, another indication that *-ba* in these contexts is acting as a discourse marker signaling Palenquero authenticity is the fact that in the overwhelming number of cases, non-verbal *-ba* occurs phrase finally, also noted by Schwegler (1992: 236) and Davis (1997: 54). Leaving aside the attachment of *-ba* to pronouns, out of 67 examples of *-ba* attached to nouns, adjectives, or adverbs, 52 instances (78%) occurred phrase-finally, giving greater prominence to this inserted suffix. Several speakers produced eloquent discourse literally peppered with *-ba*, often several times per sentence, with none of the instances of *-ba* clearly analyzable as indicating past reference. All of the examples of *-ba* attached to non-verbal elements were produced by the approximately two dozen frequently-visited Palenquero language consult; there were no cases of non-verbal *-ba* produced by young speakers or by older Palenqueros who do not routinely interact with school children or visiting researchers.

#### 6. Young Speakers’ “New” Palenquero: The Extension of *ma*

Whereas many adult Palenquero speakers have adopted the suffix *-ba* as a marker of Palenquero discourse, young learners of Palenquero exhibit a different conversion of a grammatical element into a validator of Palenquero identity. In the Palenquero language, plural noun phrases are marked by placing *ma* at the beginning: *ma hende ri Palengue* ‘Palenquero people,’ *ma cusa ri ante* ‘things from the past,’ and so forth. If plurality is otherwise indicated, e.g. by a number, *ma* is not used: *ndo moná* ‘two children.’ Adult speakers of Palenquero never deviate from this pattern, but nearly all of the young speakers who learned the Palenquero language in school freely use *ma* not only to mark plural but also with unambiguously SINGULAR noun phrases. This usage has been documented in a variety of contexts, both experimental and natural. In one experiment conducted by the author (Lipski 2012), twenty-five young (18-25) speakers who had learned Palenquero mainly in school were asked to translate sentences from Spanish into Palenquero. Nine of

the young speakers consistently used *ma* with unmistakable singular reference, both in spontaneous speech and in response to explicit requests for translation from Spanish; moreover, three of the young speakers explicitly asserted (spontaneously and with no prior prompting about plural markers) that *ma* could mark singular or plural.

Another group of ten young Palenquero speakers responded to a picture-naming task. In response to slides presented on a computer respondents were asked to describe the content of the pictures using only the Palenquero language. The slides included both singular and plural objects; plural objects included bunches of flowers, groups of children, and groupings of animals. Singular items included two pictures of churches, two pictures of houses, two pictures each containing a single woman, a picture of a tree, and pictures of a girl, a donkey, a mountain, a bee, a chicken, and the distinctive Palenque arroyo, the community bathing and laundry spot. All of the young speakers identified at least some of the unmistakably singular items with the Palenquero plural marker *ma*. These same young Palenquero speakers also used *ma* with all plural items, even when numerals were also involved. When the same pictures were presented to twenty adult speakers, *ma* was never used with singular reference. Some specimens of young speakers’ Palenquero usage in which *ma* is used with singular reference are:

(7)

- a. e *ma* posá jue dí to suto ‘that house is ours’
- b. e *ma* posá é ri ele ‘that house is his’
- c. ese *ma* mujé ta ngolo ‘that woman is fat’
- d. e *ma* flo ta amaría ‘that flower is yellow’

In a naturalistic setting one of the Palenquero language teachers in the high school assigned students group projects in which they collected traditional stories and then prepared illustrated pamphlets in the Palenquero language. Since the stories were written and illustrated over a period of several days there was clearly time for reflection and correction; nonetheless in several of the assignments *ma* accompanies clearly singular nouns. On another occasion a Palenquero language teacher asked students to spontaneously write a page in the Palenquero language on a topic of their choice. Once more, numerous examples of *ma* + singular noun were produced. One example extracted from the in-class assignment is shown below; *ma* is redundant since a single fisherman is being described:

*asendá un begá un ma pekadó a bae a peká ku moná  
A JUA B. moná a. ele ke a ten 8 año*

*a sendá un begá un ma pekadó a bae a peká ku moná  
ri ele ke a ten 8 año*

‘Once upon a time a fisherman went fishing with his child who was eight years old’

Despite the frequent production of *ma* with singular reference by young Palenquero speakers, the Palenquero language teachers do not appear to have noticed this innovative and nominally ungrammatical usage, and expressed surprise when the present author pointed out numerous written and recorded examples of *ma* with clearly singular reference. This apparent indifference to a grammatical anomaly may be due to the fact that whereas all young Palenqueros now study the traditional language in school (currently Palenquero language classes are offered from pre-school through high school), there does not seem to be a general expectation that they will achieve anything approaching native-level fluency or that they will spontaneously use the language with adults. This can be taken as a tacit admission that the revitalization efforts included in the ethno-education program are only aimed at emblematic use of the Palenquero language in acknowledgement of the community's Afro-descendent history, but that true restoration of Palenquero as a natively spoken community language may lie outside the realm of possibility. The author has observed several Palenquero language classes, and has never witnessed any explicit correction of grammatical structures. In the absence of corrective feedback, many young speakers freely employ *ma* not as a plural marker but simply as a badge of initiation into Palenquero culture. As to why *ma* has emerged as the discourse authenticator of choice among young speakers, it is worth noting that Moniño (2007) believes that *ma* and other non-Spanish items were deliberately introduced by maroons "para despistar a los no miembros de su comunidad y no ser entendidos de ellos," i.e. in order to create an "exotic" speech that could not be easily understood by non-initiates. Realistically, simply adding *ma* does little to affect intelligibility (uninitiated Spanish speakers cannot usually understand Palenquero in any case), but *ma* is an indisputably Palenquero "exclusive" whose presence at the beginning of noun phrases is easily noticed.

### 7. Conclusion: Re-inventing the Language of Resistance

San Basilio de Palenque was born out of resistance to slavery, and proudly boasts of being "el primer pueblo libre de América" (Arrázola 1970). Despite this fact, by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the traditional Palenquero language had

fallen on hard times, being rejected by outsiders as some kind of broken Spanish, and serving as fodder for the many racist diatribes directed at Colombians of African descent (Hernández Cassiani et al. 2008: 95; Lipski 2012). By the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century scholars were predicting the demise of the Palenquero language (Montes Giraldo 1962: 447; Bickerton and Escalante 1970: 266; Friedemann and Patiño Rosselli 1983: 191; Schwegler 1996: v.1, 42; Moniño 2002: 228, fn. 2). The rapid shift in community attitudes towards Afro-descendent language and culture has taken many Palenquero speakers by surprise, and has resulted in considerable metalinguistic reflection and a scramble for cultural bragging rights. Linguistically self-conscious adults, many of whom are still dusting off a language once felt to be an embarrassing throwback and implicitly feeling the scrutiny of students and visiting researchers, have hyper-extended the verbal suffix *-ba* as a tacit affirmation of the "best" Palenquero speech. Young community residents, often with more enthusiasm for Palenquero symbolism than competence in the Palenquero language, have liberated another quintessential Palenquero grammatical element (the plural marker *ma*) to serve as a free-floating identifier of linguistic authenticity.

Many scholars are attracted to the study of creoles because they are "new" languages, formed relatively recently under conditions at least partially documented, and sometimes evolving at faster rates than more "established" languages (e.g. McWhorter 2001). Palenqueros young and old are re-living the exuberance that the founders of the community must have felt some three centuries ago, as they free themselves from another form of captivity, one based on linguistic prejudice. In so doing, these speakers are making a new language even newer, reworking pedestrian grammatical affixes into symbolic affirmations of recovered pride. Whether the specific innovations discussed in this essay will become permanently embedded into *Lengua ri Palengue* remains to be seen, but change is undeniably upon San Basilio de Palenque and the rapid reshuffling of linguistic and cultural icons is an integral stage in the history of a community that has successfully resisted exclusion and effacement for more than three hundred years.



## Notes

- 1 The traditional name for this community is "Palenque de San Basilio," but more recently community-based activists and intellectuals prefer the name "San Basilio de Palenque."
- 2 Although *Lengua ri Palengue* was formed in contact with Spanish and is lexically most closely related to Spanish, there is evidence that some early form of São Tomé Creole Portuguese, brought via the Portuguese slave trade to Cartagena, was important in the formation of LP. Schwegler (1996) and the references therein explore this matter further.
- 3 Fieldwork by the author was conducted in San Basilio de Palenque from 2008 to 2011. I am grateful to Bernardino Pérez Miranda, Víctor Simarra Reyes, and Sebastián Salgado for their assistance during all phases of the research. Special thanks to all who have made Palenque so much more than a research project: Raúl Salas, José de los Santos Reyes, María Luisa Reyes Simarra, Florentina "Yayita" Salas, Trinidad Cásseres, Magdalena Navarro, Basilia Pérez, Neis Pérez, Juana Torres, Venancia Pérez, Manuel Pérez, Evaristo Márquez (who once starred in a film with Marlon Brando), Moraima Simarra, Francisco "Siquito" Cañate, Gregorio Cassiani, Rafael Cassiani, Narcida Cásseres, Narciso Padilla "El Cubano," Faustina Valdés, Joaquín Valdés Hernández "Panamá," and the more than one hundred other Palenqueros who have generously shared their memories and their language with me.

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