GARÍFUNA: THE BIRTH AND RISE OF AN IDENTITY THROUGH CONTACT LANGUAGE AND CONTACT CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Garífuna is the language of the Garífuna people, African descendants who live mostly on the Atlantic coast of Belize, Guatemala and Honduras (including some communities in the United States). Labeled linguistically as an Arawak language, Garífuna also displays influences from other languages as a result of a series of language contact events beginning around the 16th or 17th century in the Lesser Antillean islands of the Caribbean. The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss the linguistic origins of the Garífuna language and give a chronological account of its history to modern times. There is evidence to suggest that there were not two separate languages spoken on St. Vincent (Arawak and Carib) but rather one shared language (Arawak) alongside a Carib pidgin that was spoken only by the men when engaging in trade with South American mainlanders. Central to this dissertation is the application of theories in contact linguistics to explain how it was possible that a group of Africans could have experienced a complete assimilation, in language and in culture, to the Native Indian inhabitants of St. Vincent. Finally the voices of the modern Garífunas of Livingston, Guatemala are included in sections on the current status of Garífuna language and plans for language planning and revitalization.