Editorial

The Discovery of Words. Linguistic Situations of Religious Contact during the Early Phase of European Colonization

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ABSTRACT The special issue *The Discovery of Words* is devoted to situations of religious contact resulting from the encounter of European discoverers with indigenous populations. The discovery of a new world challenged the former framework of religious thinking. Here, the European explorers not only discovered new worlds but also new words, notions and concepts that resulted from communicative contact. Finding a suitable common means of communication became a salient task for the religious experts of the time although they could only imagine the other as a subject of mission. However, religious contacts in a context of discovery and early colonialism are not expressions of a mere one-way street of impact, as a reflection on one's own language and conceptual framework became necessary for the Europeans. The meta-communicative ideas developed in colonial settings all over the world are an integral and important part of the dynamics of the history of religion between Asia and Europe.

KEYWORDS Age of Discoveries, meta-communication, meta-language and object-language, situations of contact, Columbus

In the age of discoveries, prominently inaugurated by Spanish and Portuguese seafarers, the European explorers not only discovered new worlds but also new words, notions and concepts. These words, notions and concepts resulted from (communicative) contact. A reflection on language became necessary when the explorers met human beings inhabiting the newly discovered lands and tried to establish communication—and the other way around; although,

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unfortunately, we have, due to well-known reasons, mostly documents of only one part of the encounter.[1]

Apart from the greedily desired gold, the presence of people living in a paradise-like original state—and, following Columbus' propaganda,[2] both ready and willing to adapt Christianity—triggered the most interest in the European public after the news of the journey had spread throughout the old world. Reaching their intended destination, Columbus, and some years later Cortés, optimistically expected to be able to communicate in Hebrew, Arabic, and, above all, in Latin (see Columbus 2010, 66)—and, accordingly, were confronted with severe linguistic problems (see Konetzke 1964, 72).[3] In particular in the case of the Americas, due to the extraordinary diversity of languages found there (a fact that was stressed in 1809 by Alexander von Humboldt[4]), problems of translation and communication became most obvious.[5] The presence of peoples obviously not capable of any language the explorers could provide posed a severe and, not in the last place, theological and religious problem on a meta-communicative level. Moreover, the discovery of a new world challenged the former framework of religious thinking. As John Marenbon puts it, it provided irrefutable evidence that was contrary to the widespread belief upheld before. In fact, there "were large parts of the world where the Gospel has never been preached. This realization would eventually change thinking about what was required for salvation […]" (2015, 249). Soon the explorers realized that it made no sense to simply recite the Latin *Ave Maria* or the Lord's Prayer to the Indians to achieve missionary success. They learned that mission is not merely proclamative preaching performed by missionaries, but rather a communicative event (Dürr 2010, 171).[6] As the explorers interpreted utterances and actions of the Indians according to their linguistic, cultural and religious framework, misunderstandings inevitably took place that often resulted in violence, hampering both economic interests and missionary attempts. Finding a suitable common means of

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1   Though there are some traces left; Alexander von Humboldt reports on the mixture of ideas (*Vermischung der Ideen*) of Christianity and Aztec religiosity in the Aztec ritual books (here, for instance, the holy eagle is identified with the Holy Ghost, see Humboldt 2008, 182). See also Prosperi and Reinhard (1993) and Hasselhoff (2021).

2   The linguistic problems were, however, not reduced to communication with the New, but also very present in communication with the Old World. See Ferdman (1994, 488) on Columbus' language in his reports on his journey, particularly on his 'rhetoric of the marvellous other' as a means to present his findings to the European public and the results of this rhetoric to the European attitude towards the New World. On Columbus reporting languages of 'awe and wonder' and 'profit and gain,' see also Paul (2014, 46) and Rodríguez García (2001, 24): In Columbus' reports, "the language of religious emancipation is inextricably bound up with the language of economic promotion." Ferdman characterizes Columbus' linguistic problem regarding the Old World, his solution making him the 'last one of the medieval travel writers', as follows (1994, 489): "The new world confronts Columbus with the problems of representation in language, of translation and metaphor. He must find a way to say what he has seen and make it show before our eyes. The relation between what is, what is seen, and how it is made to be seen to his readers orients Columbus in a system of writing and rhetoric which has persisted in Latin American literature through the present century."

3   On the Biblical basis of this optimism regarding the common origin of all languages as based on Adam's naming of all beings, the story of the tower of Babel, and the Pentecostal event, see Dürr (2010, 165).

4   See Humboldt (2008, 167): "[…] und würklich beweist die große Mannigfaltigkeit von Sprachen, welche heutzutage im Königreich Mexiko gesprochen werden, eine ebenso große Mannigfaltigkeit von Rassen und Abstammungen. […] Diese Mannigfaltigkeit von Idiomen bei den Völkern des neuen Kontinents (man darf sie ohne Übertreibung zu mehreren Hunderten annehmen) ist, besonders im Vergleich zu den wenigen Sprachen in Asien und Europa, ein äußerst auffallendes Phänomen." Compare on the difficulties in learning European languages ibid., 186.

5   On the linguistic diversity of the Spanish Empire in the Americas, see Konetzke (1964, 77).

6   On the later councils in the New World that made the mastering of the indigenous languages obligatory for missionary purposes, see Konetzke (1964, 80). As Konetzke stresses, the use of the indigenous language led to a separation of Spanish and indigenous services and mutual isolation, thus hampering the unity of the church's flock.

communication thus became a salient task, above all for the religious experts of the time who could only imagine the other as a (possibly willing) subject of mission. Conveniently motivational to Christian theology, successful communication could be taken as proof of the effects of the Holy Spirit in a kind of Pentecostal event (see Dürr 2010, 168).

Facing the unexpected discovery of 'new' worlds, the discovery of words becomes a pivotal concern, but it is, however, also not un-preconditioned. Known frames of reference are eagerly, and of course prematurely, applied in situations of contact, causing and solidifying misapprehension and misunderstanding; the prevailing situations of contact being represented in the explorer's reports on their journeys. However, in any case, as Sandra Ferdman observes, "[…] the moment Columbus puts pen to paper on that small ship, America and Europe are joined in one system through European writing and language" (1994, 492). Known frames employed by the explorers work insufficiently, but nevertheless they worked in a discernable manner.[7] To quote an early and most significant example: Columbus' ship diary from his first journey of 1492-1493 was explicitly intended to provide a true picture of what was going on on the journey (see Columbus 2010, 17–18). Here, an original scene of contact is described as follows. On November 1, 1492, the expedition encountered a people whom he describes as follows:

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> 'These people,' says the Admiral, 'are of the same appearance and have the same customs as those of other islands, without any religion so far as I know for up to this day I have never seen the Indians on board say any prayer; though they repeat the *Salve* and *Ave Maria* with their hands raised to heaven, and they make the sign of the cross.' (Columbus 2010, 65)

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On Columbus' translational expertise, Heike Paul comments: "Columbus's skills at reading and translating the gestures and exclamations of the Natives are certainly poor and symptomatic of his wishful thinking, yet his judgments are brought forward with utter self-confidence and with no attempt at self-reflection" (Paul 2014, 49).[8] However, flawed as they may be,[9] Columbus' interpretations and translations are an expression of contact and a starting point of communication. Here, in Columbus' description, religion appears as discernable as a linguistic and performative act. What the indigenous population might have considered as an action of politeness for their Spanish guests or perhaps a political custom would afterwards be considered their first contact with religion in the occidental sense of the word. That is, for instance, something to be performed as an act of politeness if someone tells you so. Thus, religion is understood as a linguistic demand of a particular situation of communication. Nevertheless, this comfortably meets with the at least official aims of future expeditions

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7   On the act of naming as a pre-eminent feature of Columbus linguistic discovery of the New World, see Paul (2014, 47–48).

8   Las Casas, as the editor of Columbus' journal, even hints at Columbus' misunderstandings by means of a footnote. In his journal, Columbus interprets the word *Bohio* to be the name of a city full of gold and pearls, whereas Las Casas remarks: "*Bohio* was their name for a house. The Admiral cannot have understood what they were saying" (Columbus 2010, 68). On the many possibilities of linguistic and performative variety of Native official or formal language, see also Harvey (2015, 36–39).

9   In his journal, Columbus elaborated on the acquisition of suitable translators who could serve as mouthpieces for Christians and of Christianity—by (following the Portuguese practice in Guinea) bluntly seizing them by force and taking them to Spain (2010, 73 and 75). Stephen Greenblatt even considers the "primal crime in the New World" to have been committed in the "interest of language": kidnappings of indigenous people in order to secure translators and interpreters for the Europeans (see Greenblatt 2007, 24). It is interesting to notice that Columbus is well aware of the failure of this precedent case as the kidnapped would-be translators of Guinea escaped the Portuguese as soon as they returned to their home.

to the New World. On the record, Columbus' second and third journey accordingly had as its main task the conversion of the indigenous peoples of the New World, performed in a mild and friendly manner, whereas the establishment of trade posts was merely a secondary aim.

Despite this strategic optimism, the problem of language for the European explorers and, in their wake, missionaries remained virulent. Monolinguism thus seems to be a common problem of sixteenth-century explorers and scholars of religion alike. Knowing only one language does not allow discovering new worlds. Leading scholars of Religious Studies, among them most firmly Jonathan Z. Smith (see 2004, 173), claim that current scholarship still has not yet met the challenge of Friedrich Max Müller's both comparative and generalizing approach to the study of religion performed nearly 150 years ago. Famously, Müller assumed that the only secure way to understand religion is language (see 1882, 12–13). In Columbus' *Journal* it says correspondingly on the inhabitants of the newly discovered islands: "I hold, most serene princes that if devout religious persons were here, knowing the language, they would all turn Christians" (2010, 71). Examining language, however, seems not to be enough—scholars of the history of religions also have to examine the contact situations they emerged from.   [6]

In the present special issue *The Discovery of Words,* devoted to situations of religious contact resulting from the encounter of European discoverers with indigenous populations, we follow the basic idea of the Käte Hamburger Kolleg *Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe,*[10] that is, the salient significance of a contact-based perspective in the study of the history of religion. By doing so, we focus on examining occasions where the perspective is applied by the religious traditions *themselves,* i.e., in situations of contact. Here, it is the scholar's task to scrutinize the object-language reflections regarding the presuppositions *for* as well as the possibilities *of* the perspective. In general, situations of contact trigger object-language contemplation on their own concepts and notions that are to be used to cope with the challenge of the religious other. It is the process of notion-building that might be observed and analyzed by the scholar of religion. By observing these processes, one may witness the emergence of meta-language, that is, of comparative concepts and notions *within the object-language itself*. It is thus the prevailing religious traditions themselves that introduce *tertia comparationis* in order to understand and to cope with the phenomenon of the other and the situation of contact. The elaboration of these *tertia* well depends on the prevailing cultural framework comprising notions, ideas or founding myths that were utilized to decipher the other and to promote communication. By describing this process and employing the concepts and notions evolving here, scholars may, on the one hand, keep close contact to the material itself without imposing scientific vocabulary on the phenomena in question, on the other hand.   [7]

Therefore, methodologically, the *role of the religious other* in the emergence of a language a religious tradition uses to deal with the situation of contact cannot be over-estimated. For   [8]

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10   The KHK's interest focused mainly on the cross-over areas of reciprocal perception that is, for instance acceptance and denial, delimitation and inclusion, tolerance and rejection, of religious traditions themselves. The trans-disciplinary, material-based and comparative approach employed at the KHK combined material and systematic studies as well as historical and contemporary research on religions. It also links the perspective of religious semantics with the perspective on social structures. The research especially focused on relational aspects as constituents of religious formation processes enabling the characterization of geographically-extensive networks of cultural and religious traditions as protracted processes of orientation and exchange. The innovative interest in relational aspects that is prominently, in the dynamics of contact, therefore, does not mean replacing traditional research interests or subjects, but first and foremost, expanding the field of vision, and, furthermore, an additional complementary focus on factors which to date have received little attention but could be significant in the formation of religious traditions. See: https://khk.ceres.rub.de/en/

such considerations on the object-language level do not appear out of the blue, but are—and this is the important hypothesis of the editors of the present volume—triggered in situations of contact between religious traditions, or rather, of traditions that might evolve from the situations of contact *as* religious traditions. The formation of religious language in this sense is, therefore, another example for a particular assumption guiding scholarly research, which "[…] consists of the claim that the formation, establishment, spread and further development of the major religious traditions (as well as other religious traditions) have been affected by mutual influences, as well as that the formal unity of the history of religions mainly consists of religious contacts, i.e., of mutual perceptions of religious traditions as religious entities that constitute regional religious fields and, in the long run, lead to a global religious field" (Krech 2012, 192). Facing the religious other, a religious tradition is forced to contemplate its own status as well to develop certain patterns of language to comprise both itself and the other in order to obtain possibilities to deal with the other in a general way. Of course, one cannot expect this meta-perspective to be balanced in the way the neutral observer wishes it to be, but some paramount level of observation and analysis is, nevertheless, established which might be described.

Admittedly, there are many situations of contact imaginable, from direct contact of individuals, by chance or within an institutional framework, to indirect forms such as translating texts from another tradition. It is, however, these very situations which provide the opportunity to describe processes of emergence of meta-language on the object-language level, and accordingly prevent oneself from merely imposing one's notions to the traditions examined. "Metalanguage can best correspond with religious-historical material and avoid a sterile scientism when it links in with the reflection abductively identified as religious, in which an object-linguistic awareness of the religious arises and is actively promoted" (Krech 2012, 195). [9]

Challenges of communication for contacting parts become all the more important in situations where a *common* frame of reference provided by a shared cultural memory is lacking. The situation complicates if an assumed common frame of one part of the contact is challenged by certain 'internal' developments. In the beginning of the sixteenth century, a crisis of theology leading to the Reformation and the discovery of a New World resulting in the European colonization of great parts of the planet were in significant coincidence. The relation of both, however, was and is a disputed matter.[11] To many, above all in retrospect, the former was mainly a problem of theology, while the latter was a matter of ethics, law and politics. The theological challenge manifested in writings and actions of the reformers outshone the theological challenge that was established by the discoveries and the subsequent conquests of the early sixteenth century. As Fernández-Santamaria has put it: "The discovery of America faced contemporaries with a baffling problem: how to reconcile a society founded on premises alien to European experience with that familiar world whose social and political catechism depended so narrowly upon the moral and ethical truths of Christianity" (1977, 59). The problem was how to describe and analyze the other if the common frame of understanding that somehow, though rudimentarily, was present in previous encounters, above all with Islam, is clearly not to be expected. Language and communication, however, were already important issues at the time of the explorers. As Harvey observes, "Europeans colonized the Americas in an era that devoted considerable attention to language, rising out of the [10]

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11   Luis Valenzuela-Vermehren has described the two fundamental challenges in politics and society differently but correspondingly as the impact of the Renaissance state under the shadow of the fracturing unity of Latin Christendom on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the introduction of the new morality of Machiavellism (see 2013, 100).

centralization of kingdoms, the Protestant Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution" (2015, 8). It is not by chance, then, that explorers such as Columbus were optimistic, hoping for small-scale progress in communication and knowledge: "But now, if our Lord pleases, I will see as much as possible, and will proceed by little and little, learning and comprehending; and I will make some of my followers learn the language" (Columbus 2010, 90).

Not surprisingly, in their efforts to understand, the explorers fell back on elements of col-   [11]
lective European memory: "Echoing the religious and secular legends that formed part of the consciousness of Christian Europe in his time, Columbus presented these islands as a combination of the terrestrial paradise described in the Bible and a secular wonderland of untapped wealth" (Phillips Jr 1992, 162). Words used to describe their findings, in this context, gained significance that transcended mere reports. Regarding Columbus and the chronicler of the Pilgrim Fathers William Bradford, José María Rodríguez García states correspondingly: "They both enact a nominalist return to the language of revelation, in which ideals cannot be tainted or thwarted, and in which words are spiritual events in their own right" (2001, 15). The application of a mythological framework also played a salient role in the encounter of the Europeans and the indigenous peoples. Likewise, the repercussions of the discoveries can be traced to the self-reflection of and the communications about oneself in religious traditions that are commonly not associated with the era of exploration and colonization, such as Western European Judaism. In his article "*The agendas of the first conversos on Israel and the Portuguese Empire (16th century)*," **José Alberto Rodrigues da Silva Tavim** (2022) shows how, regarding the question of how to narrate the medieval expulsion of Jews from France, the explorations performed by the Iberian countries were interpreted and consequently utilized in Early Modern Jewish self-interpretation by means of inscribing the event of the discovery of a New World into 'their old patrimonial memory about the Lost Tribes,' thus transforming the Indians brought to Europe by Columbus into 'Hebrews sons of Israel'.

Of course, the struggle for concepts is not reduced to religious encounters in the Americas   [12]
but also occurred in other parts of the world reached by European explorers. In his article "*The Enemy, the Demon, Lucifer: Jesuits coming to terms with the Devil in sixteenth century Japan,*" **Tobias Winnerling** (2022) scrutinizes the Jesuit's reaction to their conceptual environment in Japan. In their need to take the Japanese conceptions of spiritual forces and beings into account, via recurring on notions of the devil as their primary enemy as taken from contemporary Catholic demonology, the Jesuits flexibly refigured the question of a transcendent or immanent force of evil conceptually with regard to their challenging environment. At least for the Jesuits in Japan, the terminological question of how to address the devil in foreign parts was solved by tacitly assuming that the diabolical persona they had to deal with was the "conceptually ambiguous Demon devil, oscillating between transcendence and immanence," thus allowing for a flexible adaptation to corresponding ideas of Japanese thinking.

Words and reflections on words developed in settings of discovery and early colonialism   [13]
were also communicative events. The challenge of the unrelated other that manifested in the inhabitants of the New World had major repercussions in the Old World. The most visible effect is displayed regarding *meta-communication*. **Knut Martin Stünkel**'s article "*A Theologian's Answer to the Challenge of Colonization. Francisco de Vitoria on the Meta-Communicative Aspects of Religious Contact in a Colonial Setting*" (2022) examines an object-language attempt on meta-communicative issues involved in the contact of Spanish conquerors and missionaries and the indigenous population in the New World. Based on the examination of language as the pre-eminent element of human communities and criticizing former missionary practices,

Vitoria aims at establishing both the notions of reason and purity of conduct as *tertia comparationis*, allowing to connect the Christian discourse to the Indian audience of missionary efforts. His attempt resonates with basic challenges connected to the discoveries. "The discovery of America and other lands where, from all appearances, Christianity had never been preached (or, as some would hold, the traces of it had all but disappeared) did not transform discussions but it changed them" (Marenbon 2015, 285). Practical issues of communication in situations of primary contact during a journey of discovery and in the newly established colonies connected to discussions on language in Europe (Dürr 2010, 169). In theory and praxis, the prevailing situation of communication as a basis for understanding and insight gained more relevance in the New World than it had in the Old World before, and, with some delay, this relevance was also acknowledged for situations of contact within the Old World (see Dürr 2010, 164).

Of course, the dark and repulsive aspects of the development of language related to early [14] modern colonization cannot be ignored and have to be integrated into the analysis of the language used to describe situations of religious contact taking place here. As an exemplary case of the radical asymmetric hierarchy of encounter, **Roberto Hofmeister Pich** (2022) examines the phenomenon of European slave trade to the New World by means of a detailed analysis of the emergence of the ideological notions an outstanding object-language document. In elaborating on "*Race, Religion and Slavery in Alonso de Sandoval's S. J. De instauranda Aethiopum salute,*" a book that describes the traffic of African slaves to Latin America and offers clues to understanding the emergence of an "ideology" of black slavery, justifying it in the Roman Catholic Church and the Iberian world, Pich shows how religious discourse and practice play a salient role in the ideology of slavery and the manipulation of race triggered by the contact with the New World and are employed to justify the practice of forced contact as manifested in the deportation of slaves to the New World. Here, religious language was conceived and used to establish, justify and confirm a status of inferiority, subjection and even natural or constitutive distance towards God that is, in order to sketch a contrasting picture, very useful for colonization and the slavery system: true Christian religion and whiteness versus false African religion and blackness.

In the analysis of situations of contact, linguistic asymmetry, ideological atrocities and their [15] practical consequences, as performed by the Christian side, however, must not result in ignoring and silencing (and, thus, repeating the colonialist attitude) its prevailing counterpart and its capacities regarding language and discourse. The subaltern can and, in fact, does speak in many tongues, their variety often handled in a virtuoso manner. Documented religious contacts in a context of discovery and early colonialism are not expressions of a mere one-way street of impact. Rather, they manifest a dynamic process leading to a meta-stable state[12] of affairs to be used as a basis for further elaboration and future contacts. After all, Europe itself at the verge of the Early Modern Age was intrinsically multilinguistic and well used to problems and praxis of communication (see Dursteler 2012)[13], above all the merchants and sea-farers

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12   On the relation of dynamics and (meta-)stability in the contact of religious traditions, see Stünkel (Forthcoming).

13   As Dursteler points out, contrary to modern nationalism-based monolingualism, "[…] widespread individual and societal multilingualism […] was an essential component of the spectrum of early modern communication" (2012, 53). Surprisingly, language in early modern times was used for communication, not for demarcation. Clarifying his point, Dursteler explains: "When speaking of multilingualism, I am not suggesting a modern ideal of language mastery or proficiency. Rather, what is at play is 'communicative competence': that is, the process of negotiating effective communication. In this multilingual environment, communication was a question not of fluency but rather of necessity, where language was a 'tool for

of the Mediterranean countries. "Thus individuals in the early modern Mediterranean were multilingual not in the sense that they were polyglots who had mastered multiple languages, but rather that they were able to navigate this vibrant linguistic world through varying levels of ability in one or more regional languages, a lingua franca, or even through the use of gesture" (Dursteler 2012, 76).[14] These experiences provided the explorers with a framework of linguistic religious encounter as well: The very moment traditions pragmatically get into contact, prevailing forms of communication become translatable as they now develop in reference to each other and are, thus, involved in a process of cooperation that allows the emergence of a shared world.[15] As Keehnen, Hofman, and Antczak persistently stress: "Contributions of indigenous peoples to colonial encounters in the Americas were profound, varied, and dynamic. Instead of mere respondents, let alone passive bystanders, indigenous peoples were active agents in processes of colonialism, vital in the negotiation and recreation of new colonial realities" (2019, 1). Language is a vital part of this collective endeavour.[16] There is, for instance, the inversion of the assumed colonial hierarchy in the process of learning a native language between the native teacher and the European pupil who faces considerable difficulties and frustrations due to his improper framework of understanding as well as to an "agonizing dependency they felt as students of Native teachers" (Harvey 2015, 31)—which led to a reconsideration of the way language and the ways of learning a language was thought about. Therefore, the meta-communicative ideas developed in colonial settings all over the world[17] are an integral and important part of the dynamics of the history of religion between Asia and Europe as well as the contacts triggered by the European expansion to Asia proper.

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getting… things done', for addressing the 'immediate exigencies of communication'. This is evident in the famous figure of Christopher Columbus, who 'was used to speaking a thousand languages badly', and could 'not express himself correctly in any of them'" (2012, 75).

14 Compare the rise of pidgin languages for the purpose of trade in the Americas, a language that may well have served the Natives for communication as well as a sociolinguistic buffer "against the surveillance and interference of the newcomers" (Harvey 2015, 25).

15 For the need to overcome the Eurocentric and totalizing concept of 'conversion' as a linguistic tool to describe the processes triggered by contact, see Fisher (2012, 8).

16 See Harvey (2015, 32) on the salience of native interpreters in translating the supposed universal key concepts of Christianity into native tongues. Introducing his book, Harvey stresses the interrelation of native and European language in a situation of contact: "Philology in many ways resulted from the collision of Euro-American linguistic colonialism and Native consultants' efforts to maintain linguistic sovereignty. […] Such participation allowed Native people to shape how Christian concepts would be conveyed to their people and, at least potentially, to influence how Euro-American viewed their communities and their way of life. […] Just as language was crucial for practical and ideological aspects of colonialism, so too was language central to the maintenance of peoplehood" (2015, 4).

17 On the possible influence of Columbus African experiences in his dealings with the New World, see Phillips Jr (1992).

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