

A NOTE ON DE LA FOSSE'S 'MINA' VOCABULARY OF 1479-80

P. E. H. HAIR

The vocabulary collected by Eustache de la Fosse in 1479-80, and re-printed in the last issue (Vol. II, No. 2) of the JOURNAL OF WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGES, was the subject of an article by René Basset (the Berber scholar) fifty years ago - 'Notes sur la langue de la Guinée au XVe siècle', DOLETIM DA SEGUNDA CLASSE, ACADEMIA DAS SCIENCIAS DE LISBOA, V, 1911 [1912], pp. 417-22.¹ Basset began his article by pointing out that since the spelling of names of European towns in de la Fosse's MS was highly individual (e.g. Bourghes for Burgos, Calix for Cadiz, etc), no exactness in the transcription of African terms was to be expected. Basset might have added, however, that some of the oddities may have arisen because of misreading of foreign terms in the MS by the editor - and certainly any definitive attempt to identify de la Fosse's West African vocabulary should begin with a re-examination of the MS.

Basset's own attempt to identify the vocabulary is disappointing: he was not an authority on West African languages, and he failed to make full use of the sources he cited, the main ones being Delafosse's 'Manuel de la langue agni' and Christaller's Twi dictionary. The vocabulary therefore requires further study, particularly by a qualified Akanist. However, Basset's identifications may provide a few starting points. I summarize below his suggested identifications, and I add in square brackets my comments and additional suggestions. I believe the vocabulary to be basically Akan throughout and would like to have compared the terms with any comparable ones in de Marées (1602) and Müller (1673), if these had been available to me: instead, my suggestions are drawn solely from Christaller's dictionary (revised edition) and are intended only as further starting points.

manse 'roy' - mansa (Mandingo) king, from which mantše (Ga)

caramanse 'viceroy' - kora-mandsa (Vai) king, principal chief

[Before they reached the Gold Coast, the Portuguese had met genuine Mandingo mansa on the Gambia and Casa-mansa rivers; and moving east they continued to inquire for mansa. They found mansa on the Gold Coast either (a) because the Mandingo title had reached there earlier, or (b) because the first Portuguese interpreters, who were most likely Mandingo-speaking, imposed the term in their conversations, until it was eventually accepted locally, or (c) because there was already a local similarly-sounding title or name, which the Portuguese and later Europeans took to be the Mandingo term - the title might arise from ɔ-māŋ, ɔ-māne 'town', e.g. ɔ-māŋ-soáfó 'minister of state'. As regards caramanse, the Vai origin proposed is improbable, since the Vai had no contact with the Akan and the Portuguese no contact with the Vai, at least as far as is known. An earlier writer, Ellis, looked for an Akan name corresponding to caramanse and suggested Kwamiara Ansa - though Basset would not accept this, the possibility of a name ending Ansa, or Mensah, might be re-examined. Lastly, could caramanse have some connexion with krāmó 'Muslim' (modern meaning)?]

¹Summarised in R. Mauny, 'Tableau géographique de l'Ouest africain au Moyen Âge' (MÉMOIRE DE L'IFAN, No. 61), 1961, p. 451.

berenbuc ['qui descendoient des montaignes et venoient pour achapter noz marchandise'] 'marchands' – Basset suggested that the last syllable was a copying error, apparently for *bue*, which was a mishcaring of the Agni *fwe* 'man': but, added Basset unhappily, 'merchant' in Agni is *gwa-fwe*.

[If the last syllable is really -buc, cf. *mary-buck* 'marabout', Mandingo religious leader in the Gambia (Jobson, 1620), suggesting that *berenbuc* was either Mandingo or, like the terms above, a Mandingo-ism. But Basset's emendation to -bue is attractive and sounds more like Akan. The normal Twi terms for 'merchant' do not seem to fit, but cf. ɔ-prɛwani 'peddler, hawker', from mpɛwá 'to peddle, hawk', for the first part of *berenbuc*. Alternatively, cf. béw 'mountain', pué 'to come forth'.]

chocqua 'or' -sika (Twi) 'gold'

[In French, de la Fosse wrote 'che' for 'ce', and 'seque' for 'sec'.]

enchou 'eau' – nsu 'water'

berre-bene 'vous soyez les bien venus' – Basset emended to *berre-berre*, as in de Barros, and suggested *e-bere* (Twi) 'prosperity, beauty', *berèbere* 'agreeable, friendly

[? *berèbere* 'softly, gently']

choque choque ['une josne garce . . . me demandent sy je vouloye choque choque' cf. 'massa want jig-jig' (Graham Greene, *HEART OF THE MATTER*)] 'jeu d'amour' [no suggestion from Basset: ??*beresaa-kyére* 'sexual connexion'.]

barbero 'enfant' – Basset suggested *brrō* (Kru) 'male'

[sic!: Twi ɔ-bá 'child', ɔbábarinɔ, ɔbábarimá 'son', ɔbábea 'daughter'.]

baa 'blanc' – Basset suggested *fūa* 'white', 'in Dē, Pā and Gora'

[sic!: see below.]

barbero baa 'enfant blanc'

[A curious phrase, at a time when there were only white adults on the Gold Coast: suppose that the adjective was originally applied instead to the next noun (cloth) and was misinterpreted, could it be *bahaa* 'plentiful'?]

fouffe 'toile' – fufwe (Agni) 'white', noun omitted

[Twi efufu 'white thing']

conque roncq 'poulet' – Basset ruled out *akokaba* (Twi) and suggested *kōra-kuka* (Padebu) 'Guinea hen'

[Initial 'r' and initial 'c' are often difficult to distinguish in a fifteenth-century hand, and de la Fosse perhaps wrote *conque conq*: almost certainly a feeble transliteration of *akókɔ* 'fowl' (*akókɔ-ba* 'chicken', *akókɔ-beré* 'hen', etc.)]

conque ronconcq agnio 'œuf' – Basset ruled out, rightly, *kesuá* (Twi) 'egg', and could only point to the ending of *nope-nyō* (Taoui)

[Or cf. *azi* (Ewe) 'egg', *enyi* (Yoruba) 'egg' – but there is more probably some Akan explanation, perhaps involving a gross misreading.]

bora 'un anneau à bouter au bras de letton' – Basset suggested mbole (Kra), presumably for 'bracelet'

[De la Fosse visited the Pepper Coast on his way to the Gold Coast, as the Portuguese usually did: the appearance of a Kra word in his vocabulary is therefore plausible. But an Akan explanation is more likely – cf. ?ε-bo 'piece of brass', ??bàre 'to wrap around'.]

dede 'c'est bon' – dedé (Twi) 'pleasing'

[i.e. dε, dεdε 'pleasing': ?adedé-de 'a sweet, pleasant thing', adedé-sɛm 'goodly or flattering words'.]

fanionna 'c'est mauvais' – Basset suggested afoñ (Ga)

[??ɛmfanim ɛno '(this is) less bad than that'.]