

## ROY CLIVE ABRAHAM, 1890-1963

ROBERT G. ARMSTRONG

It is fitting that in this first volume of *The Journal of West African Languages* we should honour the name of Dr. Roy C. Abraham, who died in June 1963, at the age of 73, one of the most productive – and at times controversial – figures in African linguistics. He published deep studies of no less than six African languages and had finished collecting materials for a seventh, Ibo. He was a pioneer in his insistence on the importance of full-scale, detailed studies of African languages, including the careful notation of their tonal aspect. To an astonishing degree his works on particular languages are synthetic wholes. His method of work was usually to begin by publishing a grammar. Then he would work on a dictionary and texts and produce the whole study, with a revised grammar, perhaps ten or fifteen years later. His dictionaries and his texts are unified structures of thought of great complexity and internal consistency. Every word and sentence in his texts and in the examples of usage in his dictionaries reflect his grammar of that language in meticulous detail. His books are poles apart from the impressionistically and inconsistently written texts and from the 'dictionaries' which are mere alphabetized word-lists with which the student must work in most parts of Africa to this day.

Before World War I, Abraham studied several European languages and Chinese. He served for ten years with the Indian Army, where he learned Persian and Hindustani and became a gold medallist in Arabic.

He was Brassey Scholar of Balliol College, Oxford, where he took an honours degree in Arabic. He studied Ethiopic at Leipzig. In 1925, he was appointed to the Administrative Service of the Nigerian Government, and was soon seconded for two years as linguistics officer to assist the Reverend Bargery in the preparation of his great *Hausa-English Dictionary*. Many years later, in 1961, he told the First West African Languages Congress at Accra that it was from Dr. Bargery that he learned the principle of tone in West African languages; 'a phenomenon', he said, 'which I hotly contested'. (See also his article 'Writing African Dictionaries' in *West Africa*, 12 July, 1958, p.659.)

After this assignment, he was soon studying Tiv, an important language of Benue Province. His first serious publication was *The Grammar of Tiv*, (Kaduna: Government Printer, 1933). It was the first book on a Nigerian language in which tone was systematically marked, and he overcame the lack of special symbols by the use of different type. Low-tone syllables were printed in lower case, while large and small capitals were used to indicate high- and mid-tone respectively – an effective, if unconventional, device. The following year he published *The Principles of Hausa* in the same way. It was designed to be used in connection with Bargery's *Dictionary*, which appeared in the same year; and it has virtues which still attract the attention of serious students. Also in 1934 he published the first edition of his ethnography of the Tiv, *The Tiv People*.

For five years Abraham had also been studying the Idoma language, which borders Tiv to the west. In 1935 he published *The Principles of Idoma*, a bound volume of 429 cyclo-styled pages, for which he cut the stencils himself. It was the first complete and practical grammar of an eastern Kwa language; and in the whole Kwa family the only earlier works with which it can be compared are Christaller's grammar of Twi and Westermann's

grammar of Ewe. It contains a long, tone-marked text, the first published in any eastern Kwa language. Only twenty copies of this work were ever sold.

In the years before the Second World War, Abraham received the support of Sir Bernard Bourdillon, the Governor of Nigeria. This enabled the publication of no less than five books in 1940: the revised and re-worked *An Introduction to Spoken Hausa and Hausa Reader* (completely tone-marked), his *Dictionary of Tiv, Grammar of Tiv, Tiv Reader*, and a revised ethnography, *The Tiv People*. And in 1941 a sixth appeared, his advanced *Modern Grammar of Spoken Hausa*. He received a D.Litt. from the University of Oxford for his Tiv work.

In 1942, during his last tour there, the Idoma Native Authority gave him a subvention of £170 for the production of a grammar and reader of Idoma. His military service, however, delayed this work and also the production of his Hausa dictionary.

He saw war service in Egypt, Ethiopia, Kenya, South Africa, France, Italy, and Russia. (He learned Russian.) While continuing to work on the Hausa dictionary, he undertook a full-scale study of Amharic. Of this, he published only a preliminary work, *The Principles of Amharic*. He has left a much fuller grammar and a large dictionary of Amharic complete in his papers, however.

After the War he became Lecturer in the Languages of Ethiopia in the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. In this post he undertook the study of Somali, which he continued, with interruptions, for most of the rest of his life. He regarded it as the most difficult language he ever studied.

What is from one point of view his greatest single work, the *Dictionary of the Hausa Language*, was published in 1949. The entire job of preparing it had been done while he was serving in non-Hausa areas. He did it as a 'freelance in the field of lexicography, being neither commissioned by the Government to do it nor assisted financially'. An *acte gratuit* of the first order! When the work was completed, however, the Nigerian Government paid the very considerable subvention necessary to have it set into type and printed. (It is over 1000 pages long, and every syllable is tone-marked.) The boldness of Abraham's academic initiative is breathtaking.

The following year he completed his Idoma work, four small books bound into one volume and produced by photo-offset from his typescript: *The Idoma Language* (107 pp.), *Idoma Wordlists* (59 pp.), *Idoma Chrestomathy* (61 pp.), and *Idoma Proverbs* (32 pp.). (Total, 259 pp.) There was an administrative storm in the Government over the propriety of the N.A.'s giving a subvention to a political officer. It took a direct order from the Secretary of State for the Colonies to effect delivery of the stock, 114 copies, to the Idoma Native Authority, over the objections of the Lieutenant Governor. Like its predecessor, it was still, in the year of its publication, 1951, the first really complete and usable grammar of an eastern Kwa language. Its 61-page *Chrestomathy* is quite a good collection of texts. To this day Ida Ward's texts in her *Introduction to Ibo* (1936) and *Introduction to Yoruba* (1952) and Abraham's *Idoma Chrestomathy* remain the only published, phonemically written, fully tone-marked texts in Eastern Kwa languages.

In 1951, after leaving S.O.A.S., he put out *The Principles of Somali* in cyclostyled, bound form. It is a preliminary work, and can be compared with his first grammars of Hausa, Tiv, Idoma, and Amharic.

In the summer of 1952 he began the final and perhaps greatest phase of his career by embarking on the study of Yoruba. Acting once again as a 'freelance in the field of lexicography', he set out for Ibadan on his own initiative. He had an advance of £200 from his

publisher; he persuaded some Ministry in Lagos to give him another couple of hundred pounds. At the young University College, Ibadan, practically the entire staff had gone away on leave; and the West African Institute of Social and Economic Research was left in charge of Dr. Paul Hair, in those days much too young and enthusiastic to worry about the administrative and policy implications of supporting a maverick. So W.A.I.S.E.R. gave Abraham hospitality and helped him to find a good informant during the crucial three or four first months of the study. When Yoruba turned out to be not quite such a 'primitive' language as Abraham had expected ('small vocabulary; a grammar you could write on a postage-stamp'), W.A.I.S.E.R. gave him money to pay an informant in London. (By then Donald Leich and Professor Hamilton Whyte were back 'on seat'.) Instead of the three or four months that Abraham had thought would suffice for him to 'do' Yoruba, he spent three and a half years of incredibly hard labour. At the end of that time he wrote me, saying wearily, 'Yoruba is an endless ocean!' (He was of course referring to a single dialect, that of Oyo.) His method was historical in principle, since most of the words and examples of their use were taken from the quite extensive printed literature of Yoruba which is available. By this time he had three times as much material as he had contemplated at the beginning; and even when he had typed his master-sheets in a kind of compression-code, the book was twice the size that the publisher had originally agreed to accept. It should be realized that the whole form of this book results from the fact that from the beginning it had to be planned as a commercial venture.

A mountain peak may be measured either by the height it reaches above sea-level or by the extent to which it rises above its own base. Measured the first way, Abraham's *Hausa Dictionary* is probably his greatest work; but it stands on the shoulders of many distinguished predecessors, such as Bargery, Robinson, Mischlich and Schön. I have expressed my opinion of the *Dictionary of Modern Yoruba* in another place (*Africa*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, Jan., 1959, pp. 90-2). Here it suffices to repeat the view that 'It is a very great work (and) a monument of British scholarship and initiative'. And it rises sheer from its base to an outstanding height. It has no serious predecessors except Abraham's own experience with five other African languages. It is, I believe, his outstanding single achievement. It should be said, finally, that it is not an easy mountain to climb; but it offers many rewards to those who persist.

Abraham in early 1956 plunged directly into the collection of materials for an Ibo dictionary and into the labour of completing his Somali dictionary and grammar. The latter was done under a contract with the Somaliland Government. By 1960 he had finished his *Somali-English Dictionary* and his *English-Somali Dictionary*, together with a revised grammar of Somali, which is incorporated in the first volume. As in other fields, so in Somali his work means a great step forward, as he was the first to indicate tone throughout in both his grammar and his dictionary. The dialect dealt with in the grammar is that of the Isaaq, or Ishaak, which has also been the basis of most previous grammatical works, such as those of Reinisch, de Larajasse, de Sampont, and others. The Republic of Somalia has not yet released this book for publication, very likely because the dialect involved is inconvenient. What was central to former British Somaliland is quite peripheral to the present, much larger Republic. One can sympathize fully with the political problem which Somalia faces in trying to select and develop a suitable dialect as the standard and national language. One may justly hope, however, that the scientific world may soon have this book, which represents many years of very hard work.

In 1961 he published a revision of his Hausa grammar and reader and a re-print of his Hausa dictionary.

Abraham's Ibo materials are complete, but a long way from being ready for publication. He has left to this writer the task and challenge of finishing the work. Fortunately he has written a grammar which is a most useful guide to his intentions and which it is hoped to issue quite soon. The Ibo dictionary is a larger work than the Yoruba dictionary, and is likewise a basic contribution to the study of the Kwa languages. It is his seventh deep study of an African language, his fifth Nigerian language.

For the last eight years of his life he had to combat poor health. He had a case of diabetes that was bad enough to affect his physical balance. In 1957, he had a coronary thrombosis. In 1960 he was hospitalized for a nervous breakdown. For a year before he died he suffered from the effects of a severe stroke. Despite all of this, he managed to complete the Yoruba dictionary and the Somali dictionary and to type the revisions of his Hausa work on a Vari-typer. He was engaged in the final check-through of his Ibo material when he died.

His outstanding qualities as a linguist were his indefatigable zeal and energy, his acute powers of aural observation, his great talent for grammatical synthesis, and his really fabulous memory. 'If you cannot remember words, how can you compare them?' he used to remark. He was a perfectionist of the first water, and yet he was able at the appropriate time to close the books on a particular study and bring it to publication. In a world of race prejudice, his works have enormous political and psychological importance in that they are direct and massive evidence of the high and subtle quality of African thought. And yet he suffered from the strange paradox of having to be himself his own first pupil in this respect. Nobody could have been more astonished than Abraham when instead of being 'an impoverished language' Ibo turned out to be as endlessly rich and as intricate a system of thought as Yoruba or Hausa – or Arabic or Greek! He had to compile material for an Ibo grammar and dictionary that will reach 1400 pages in order to learn the lesson.

This obituary begins with a reference to the often bitter controversies that surrounded his life. It is too soon to assess these. Justice surely did not lie entirely on one side; and many of the conflicts were probably unavoidable, in the nature of things. Abraham represented a secular principle in a field of study that had been almost the exclusive preserve of missionaries until his time, and he was not at all tactful in comparing his work with theirs. He was never much of an 'organisation man'. His first work of linguistic collaboration, that with Bargery, was his last. His work is a triumph of the human spirit over obstacles, some of which, with great talent, he created for himself. But this too was inevitable under the circumstances. One might perhaps say that he was born before his time; but this sentiment seems banal in Abraham's case, and it seriously understates his rôle. Rather was he one of those men who change one epoch into a different epoch. He demonstrated the necessity and possibility of really serious scholarship in West Africa, and in five works he laid a solid foundation for it. In so doing he has, I think, brought to a close the day of the *virtuoso* 'Africanist'. He has cut him down to size and provided a measuring-rod a mile high – made of granite – with which to compare the achievements of other would-be *virtuosi*. And in so doing he destroyed any possibility of a *virtuoso* career for himself as well; for his works are forbiddingly difficult to the layman, and to the specialist they cry for correction and amplification at a hundred points. From a scientific and scholarly point of view, this is their innermost virtue, for they serve to mobilize, irritate and stimulate many other minds to carry the work forward.

ROY CLIVE ABRAHAM, 1890-1963

Abraham is survived by his son, Donald, and by his wife, Sadie Abraham, without whose devotion and care the Yoruba, Somali and Ibo works would certainly never have come into being. In the days when Abraham was combining the duties of a political officer with the study of Hausa, Tiv and Idoma, she was, one knows, the enabling factor that made it all possible. She came to know much of northern Nigeria the hard way, by touring on foot and horseback. Science and scholarship owe her a great debt.