

# REV. GEORGE PERCY BARGER, D.Litt., 1876-1966

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The Reverend Dr. G. P. Barger, whose Hausa Dictionary was one of the outstanding linguistic achievements of the first half of this century, died on 2nd August, 1966, in his ninetieth year.

He was born in 1876, in Exeter, Devon, and was ordained in 1899 as a chaplain to the Church Missionary Society. In 1900 he went as a missionary to Northern Nigeria and worked there till 1910, being thus one of the earliest of the missionaries of the period of British occupation. In 1910 he was invalided home as unfit for further service in the tropics, but very soon joined the Colonial Education Service and came back to Northern Nigeria, where he remained until 1930. He started the first government school among the Tiv people and gained a mastery of their language in the process. Some of his best stories, and he was a great raconteur, infecting his hearers through the zest of his telling, were about this period. He had to grope his way towards a solution of new problems, and his keen sense of local realities sometimes led to argument with the more remote view of official authority.

After Tiv, his interest in language turned to Hausa, and in 1921 he was seconded by the Governor, Sir Hugh Clifford, to compile a Hausa Dictionary. He immersed himself in the study of the language, gaining to a remarkable degree the confidence of the Moslem mallams with whom he worked. He was honoured by receiving from the Hausa people the nickname of Sarkin Hausa, "King of Hausa". That, and the name 'Dan Hausa, "Son of a Hausa", given to his friend Hanns Vischer, who was also in the Education Department, are eloquent of the attitude towards the language of British officials in the north.

Dr. Barger's Hausa-English Dictionary was published in 1934 and reprinted in 1951 and is still a major work of reference for scholars all over the world, in addition to having been the practical guide for countless colonial servants in Northern Nigeria. Another distinguished Hausa scholar has said of it: "Apart from its lexical riches it is to Barger's Hausa Dictionary that we owe the first, and still scarcely challenged, tonal analysis of the language". It will be remembered that in the early thirties Ida Ward was working on the tonal systems of Efik and Igbo. She and Barger were colleagues at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, Barger having been appointed Lecturer in 1930. Their work on tone was of seminal importance in the study of African languages and inaugurated a period of intensive and fruitful research which continues to this day.

Barger was made Reader in Hausa in the University of London in 1937 and continued his work there till 1947, taking part in the outburst of teaching activity which followed the Second World War. The School of Oriental and African Studies was stretched to the limit in providing language courses for the administrative cadets going to Africa, and he went on in 1947, to continue his teaching, under the Colonial Office, in Oxford and Cambridge. His Notes on Hausa Grammar have now been microfilmed by the University of Ibadan.

In 1953 Barger was 77, but accepted an invitation from the British and Foreign Bible Society to return to Kano to superintend and advise on a retranslation of the Bible into Hausa, of which the New Testament was published shortly before he died. He stayed in

Nigeria till 1959, and Mrs. Leith-Ross, who was in Kano at the time, has described the popularity his genial and kindly personality won for him among the European community there. He gave his willing service to their church, and no account of his life in Kano, from beginning to end, would be complete without a reference to his constant solicitude for another accomplished Hausa speaker, Ethel Miller, whose brave missionary efforts he strove to turn into channels more acceptable than might otherwise have been chosen.

He was awarded the O.B.E. in 1957 and two years later finally returned to England. Several severe illnesses and his greatly failing sight, for which he had two operations, never extinguished his gaiety and his enjoyment of a talk about Nigeria with his friends. He had indomitable courage and at his last hospital, in a geriatric ward, with whose occupants he had almost nothing in common, he none the less remarked to a visiting friend: "I think I've managed to cheer them up."

Bargery was twice married, first in 1906 to Eliza Minnie Turner, who died in 1932, and then again in 1940 to Minnie Jane Martin, who died in 1952. He had one son by his first marriage and was with him when he died.

## RESEARCH NOTES

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The object of this publication is to make available data and research notes from members of the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages; and, from time to time, from other people working on West African languages who care to contribute to RESEARCH NOTES. The object is NOT to publish finished articles and papers, but rather word lists, texts or folktales, and short notes, etc., on West African languages.

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