

## PROFESSOR MALCOLM GUTHRIE (1903–1972)

Professor Malcolm Guthrie, Emeritus Professor of Bantu Languages in the University of London, who died on November 22nd, 1972, aged 69, had been on the staff of the School of Oriental and African Studies from January 1942 until his retirement in September 1970. For eighteen and a half of these twenty-nine years he had been Head of the Department of Africa; and so, although he is best known for his contributions to Bantu studies, he was closely involved in the developments in the study of African languages and kindred subjects that took place there during the last twenty years. He was a founder member of ASAUK and a member of Council from 1963 to 1966; and he was the first Africanist outside the field of anthropology to be made a Fellow of the British Academy.

His interest in Bantu languages was aroused during the eight years he spent in the Belgian Congo from 1932 to 1940 as a missionary of the Baptist Missionary Society. His first degree had been a London B.Sc.(Eng.) in metallurgy, and he was an Associate of the Royal School of Mines; but soon afterwards he felt called to the Baptist ministry, and after training at Spurgeon's College in South London, and two years as Baptist minister in Rochester, he and his wife went to the Congo in 1932.

His linguistic prowess had been evident in the high marks he obtained for Greek, Latin and Hebrew at Spurgeon's; and he is remembered as a 'truly precocious' member of Alice Werner's Swahili class at SOAS, which he attended before going out to the Congo. Here he devoted his spare time to language study, quickly becoming fluent in Lingala, and acquiring a usable knowledge of a number of other local languages. He wrote a Lingala grammar and dictionary, translated the New Testament and many hymns into Lingala, and also wrote some original hymns and composed Lingala-style tunes for them. After his retirement he returned to Zaire for two months to bring his Lingala up to date to help with the revision of his grammar – a task that was almost completed when he died.

The variety of Bantu languages in the Congo stimulated his interest, and when on furlough in 1935, he returned to SOAS for further study; and after his wife's ill-health had made it necessary to leave the mission field, he was appointed as Senior Lecturer in Bantu in the Department of Africa under Dr. Ida Ward – with a panel of Additional Lecturers that included Sir Hanns Vischer, Dr. L.S.B. Leakey, and Jomo Kenyatta.

For the first eight years of his appointment he was able to concentrate on Bantu studies. He enlarged his first-hand knowledge by an extended tour of British East and Central Africa, making a survey for the British Council, but also collecting sufficient material to classify, and establish the tonal system of, over 120 languages. A paper read to the Royal Society of Arts on his return won for him that Society's Silver Medal. His studies of Sukuma and Yao and particularly Bemba were sufficiently deep to form the foundation for later work by students and colleagues, as well as for his own Ph.D. on Bemba tonal structure, awarded in 1945. He received the title of Reader in Bantu Languages in 1947, and in 1951 became the first holder of the Chair of Bantu Languages.

His appointment in 1950 as Head of the expanding Department of Africa involved extra responsibilities both within and outside the Department. But he was able to continue his own studies, as well as lecturing on various aspects of Bantu and supervising a number of students and departmental colleagues in Bantu and other languages. He also played a large part in the planning and supervision of the Bantu Line survey, to establish the northern limit of Bantu languages.

His first classificatory work, the authoritative 'The classification of the Bantu languages' had appeared in 1948, and return visits to the Congo, combined with tours of Moyen Congo, Gabon and Cameroun, in 1949 and 1956–7 enabled him to collect first-hand material on the languages of those territories, much of it incorporated in a volume on the Bantu languages of western equatorial Africa, in the International African Institute's 'Handbook of African Languages' – a series which he had helped to plan.

A succession of publications on the morphology and syntax of Bantu languages appeared between 1948 and 1962; but he found himself drawn more and more into a comprehensive study of all the main aspects of comparative Bantu linguistics, which led to the eventual publication of his 900-page 'Comparative Bantu', the four volumes of which came out at intervals from 1967 to 1971.

While accepting that the ultimate purpose of the comparative study of languages lies in the realm of history and pre-history, he insisted that in the Bantu field, in the absence of any significant historical evidence of the kind available to Indo-European studies, a rigorous division of the investigation into two stages is essential – the first concerned with the collation of the basic data, the second with the interpretation of the data in historical terms. In the first stage, any feedback of historical implications, such as had vitiated the preceding work of Meinhof, must be rigorously excluded, and every rule must be free from exceptions, if the facts that emerged were to be a valid basis for inferences about Bantu pre-history.

This first stage involved the detailed comparison of words and elements from some 200 languages, leading to the setting up of over 2000 'comparative series', consisting of items from various languages which had a common meaning and a proved relationship established by means of regular sound correspondences. Each comparative series was symbolised by a 'starred form', representing the whole series of items from the various languages; the totality of these comparative series was called 'Common Bantu' – a term chosen to stress the synchronic nature

nature of the material, without any historical implications – and the final process in the first stage was the topological analysis of the distribution of Common Bantu.

Only then did Guthrie feel justified in developing theories about the sources of Common Bantu, the possible nature of the original ancestor language, where it might have been spoken, and the possible stages of development; and even then he stressed the inferential and hypothetical nature of the picture presented.

Guthrie inevitably came under fire – mainly because of his caution – from historians and others anxious for an unequivocal statement of the linguist's views on Bantu pre-history; from those whose ideas of pre-history differed from Guthrie's reconstruction (with particular controversy over the question of the impenetrability of the equatorial forests); from some linguists (especially those who accepted Greenberg's classification, treating the Bantu languages as a sub-group within the large Niger-Congo family) who criticised his Bantu-centric focus, with its relegation to a later stage of 'Bantuisms' in West African languages; and from others who felt that Guthrie's rigorousness had excluded much data which, with a less strict approach, could have led to more significant conclusions.

While he might have appreciated the force of his critics' arguments from their point of view, he remained convinced of the rightness of his own rigorous approach in the establishment of *linguistic* relationships, and the separation of the linguistic and historical stages; and he would have defended his Bantu-centricity as a starting-point, on the grounds of the cohesiveness of the Bantu languages, and the comparability of much of the grammatical material. Whatever the arguments on these points, 'Comparative Bantu' remains a monumental work of scholarship and an authoritative statement from which future comparative work on these languages must develop.

As Head of the Africa Department, Guthrie fostered not only a major increase in the range of languages covered, but also the development of studies in African literature – oral as well as written – and African music and art. He was responsible for the inception of 'African Language Studies' – with the widest possible interpretation of 'language' – in 1960, and also for the introduction in 1958-9 of a B.A. involving the combination of an African language with Anthropology, later with Linguistics or African history. And he encouraged collaboration with Africanists in other fields; for while he perhaps found it difficult to view matters sympathetically from the standpoint of another discipline, and could appear a reluctant collaborator, chary of compromising his position as a linguist, nevertheless his own experience had taught him the interdependence of the various facets of African studies.

Outside SOAS he sat for many years on University Boards concerned with Oriental and African Languages and Literatures, Anthropology, Comparative Linguistics, Theology, Colonial Studies, and Religious Studies, and was on the Committee of Management of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies. In 1958-9 he visited the University Colleges of Ibadan and Ghana as External Examiner for Indigenous Beliefs; and as a member of the Senate Committee for Colleges Overseas in Special Relation, he visited Salisbury in May 1962 to advise on developments at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland (as it then was), and thereafter maintained a keen interest in progress there.

In addition, as the leading British specialist in African languages, he was involved in a number of activities outside the University. He had been a member of the Interim Committee of the International African Institute during its formative period, was Chairman of the African Sub-Committee of the Cambridge Syndicate's Advisory Committee on Overseas Examinations, Chairman of the Executive Committee responsible for organising the 7th International Congress of Linguistics in London in 1952, and later Chairman of the CCTA/CSA Inter-African Committee on Linguistics, which arranged the 1962 Colloquium on Multilingualism at Brazzaville.

He had attended his quota of international conferences, playing an important part in many; and in 1969 he spent three months as Visiting Professor at Northwestern University in Evanston – a visit that was as rewarding to him as it was appreciated by faculty and students there.

Guthrie always insisted on sound academic standards, and the paramount importance of science and logic in the humanities as in science. He had no time for loose thinking or obscurantism; his lectures, like his writing, were models of clarity and lucid exposition, his economical notes in his clear hand-writing including carefully selected examples; and he would impress on his students the importance of the four great canons of Adequacy, Clarity, Economy and Consistency.

He had an encyclopaedic mind, with information carefully pigeon-holed on a wide variety of subjects, many of them reflecting his scientific training or his practical interests. He gave as much attention to the detailed planning of a projected journey, or of his garden (with heather, Alpine flora and other flowers selected to provide all-the-year-round blooms) as he did to the meticulous sorting out of his Bantu material. As avid a reader of catalogues as of the 'New Scientist', he was a keen handyman and mechanic, and set up his own stereo equipment for listening to his favourite Vivaldi records and, with gadgets of his own contrivance, linked it to a VHF set to get BBC 2 sound without the picture. He could talk with knowledge on such varied matters as meteorology, the technicalities of printing, and the theory of transistors, and could be a source of helpful practical hints on innumerable topics. He was also an accomplished pianist and organist, as well as a very good photographer, who always did his own processing and enlarging while living in Africa.

As a person he was somewhat of an enigma. Even in his school and college days he appeared aloof and detached, and he often gave an impression of austerity, of unbending superiority which tended to rankle. Yet he was always courteous, and is remembered for his beaming smile and warm handshake for the old and lonely; and those who

were able to get through the veneer found a genuine humanity underneath. Perhaps the truth is that, although at ease in academic discussion, he was fundamentally shy, even hypersensitive. Finding difficulty in personal relationships at his own level (he was always chary of using Christian names), he tended to withdraw into a protective shell whenever he felt unsure of himself, covering his uncertainty with a veneer of self-confidence, and a coldness which could sometimes hurt. Combined with this were his own high standards, which made him wary of letting himself go.

It may be too that for someone with such a precise and tidy mind, who lived to an ordered plan, his responsibilities as Head of Department, combined with the time-consuming demands of his work on Bantu, left little time for what he might feel were unnecessary superficialities. And few knew how much time and care he devoted to his wife, who had contracted typhoid in the Congo in 1938, and whose death from cancer in 1967 he felt so deeply; or realised how much he himself suffered from perennial migraines and from the intestinal trouble which needed emergency hospital treatment in 1964. It seemed as though from that time he came to terms with himself; and many have remarked on how much more relaxed and approachable he became in the last few years.

He was sustained throughout his life by his deep personal Christian faith – expressed in a series of talks which were later published under the title ‘Learning to Live’; and even during his academic career he continued his active participation in Christian work – as lay pastor and deacon, on the Council of Spurgeon’s College, on Bible Society committees, and in preaching appointments which continued up to the time of his death.

D. W. ARNOTT

ASAUK Presidential Address given at the Birmingham Conference, September 1972

## CHANGE IN AFRICAN VEGETATION

R.W.J. KEAY

A common element in all African studies is the background of the African environment. My first real sight of Africa, thirty years ago, was in the long train journey from Lagos to Zaria. As a botanist, I was fascinated then by the changing patterns of vegetation – different kinds of forest and savanna, a rich diversity of plant species. I suppose all members of our Association have seen something of Africa’s vegetation and, especially on long journeys, may have thought it monotonous and dull. However, as with all forms of scholarly inquiry, what at first sight seems uniform becomes, on close inspection, a puzzling jumble, and only after a fair amount of study do meaningful patterns and causal relationships emerge. My interest was aroused by that very obvious part of the African environment and over the years I found that my vegetational studies were often relevant to researchers in quite different disciplines. I thought, therefore, that it might be of interest if I spoke today about this vast and varied back-cloth to all African studies.

I am not going to attempt to describe, even in brief outline, the vegetation types of Africa, though I would in passing draw attention to an excellent new vegetation map of Africa on the scale of 1 : 5 M, which has been compiled by Mr. Frank White of Oxford and is due to be published within the next year or so. It replaces the 1 : 10 M map which I helped to produce in 1959. My intention rather is to discuss in a very general way some of the changes which may be discerned in African vegetation, the nature of the evidence for, and the causes of, these changes. I hope this will be of interest to a wide section of the Association’s members for, as I shall hope to show, the vegetation reflects a complex series of inter-actions with man and provides evidence of past events. Furthermore, a recognition that the vegetal back-cloth to African studies and to African development is a changing one, is important practically as well as academically.

I appreciate, of course, that vegetation is only one element of the ecosystem and that the plants have intimate inter-relationships with the animals, and that both are profoundly influenced by – and to some extent influence – the climate and the soil. I wish, however, to concentrate attention in this address on the vegetation which is usually the most obvious part of the ecosystem – at least it does not run away when you try to observe it!

Succession is a basic concept of plant ecology. The series of vegetation types which follow one another in the colonization of completely bare ground is known as a primary succession. For instance, the germinating seeds of mangrove trees colonize fresh mud in the brackish deltas and estuaries of African rivers between latitudes 15 North and 30 South (on the East coast). The resulting mangrove forest does not regenerate itself *in situ* and is eventually, as ground water becomes less brackish, replaced by fresh-water swamp forest and later by dry land types. Another example of a primary succession in Africa, is the colonization of volcanic lavas; the eruptions of