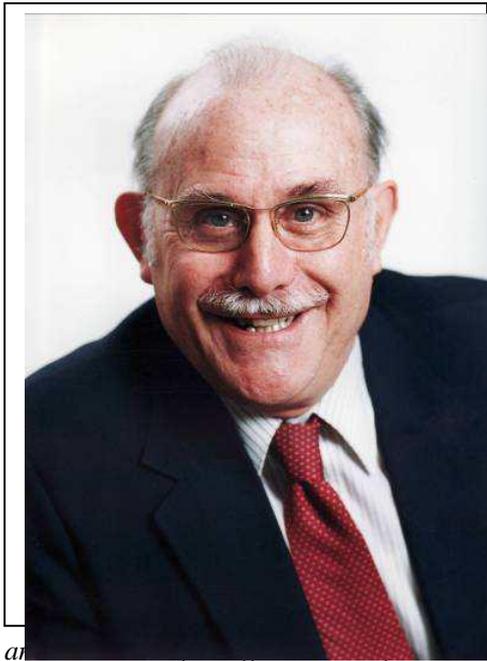


Tribute to Dr. John Theodore Bendor-Samuel 9.6.1929 - 6.1.2011¹



The sudden death on 6th January 2011, of John Bendor-Samuel (widely known among colleagues as JBS, or among Africans as Uncle John) shocked both the world of missions and the academic world. He was knocked down by a car close to his home near the Wycliffe Centre Buckinghamshire UK. He was a man loved and respected in whichever country he travelled to, but particularly in West Africa, with which he was associated for more than half his life.

John Bendor-Samuel was one of the founding members of WALS and of JWAL, and was a longstanding member of WALS Council. He was Editor of JWAL for 12 years, and its Consulting Editor thereafter till his death. He was known as a linguist, and administrator, and was involved in academia and mission work. Recognizing the need for Bible translation to be owned by the churches and Christians in each country, John encouraged the formation of local organizations with their own governing bodies. He vigorously promoted and fostered local partnerships with both governmental and non-governmental agencies, with University departments, with churches and church leaders, with mission agencies, and with local Bible Societies. He was able to use incredibly creative approaches. He was in effect the initiator of the vast expansion of language analysis and development and Bible translation in many countries of West Africa in the last fifty years. He held several high posts in Wycliffe and SIL, sometimes more than one at a time, yet remained a humble servant of the peoples of West Africa. Tributes have poured in from all over the world, uniformly attesting to his great qualities. The following are some extracts which give an idea of how he was regarded.

John Watters, President of SIL International, says, “John longed to see Africans from the growing Church in Africa trained in the very language related skills SILers had just been trained in and participating fully in the ministry of Bible translation. He had a passion for partnership, cooperating with others wherever possible to benefit these lesser known language communities. This would include partnership with government institutions, universities, churches, and Bible societies and agencies.

As he gained responsibility as a leader, he used his knowledge of people to evaluate those he supervised to determine where they might best fit in the overall work of translation and language development. As the testimony of many bear witness, when John had opportunity to speak, especially to young adult Christians, he could motivate them with a vision for what they might contribute with their talents in the

¹ **Acknowledgements:** Apart from named contributors of tributes, I also wish to thank the many nameless ones from whose fulsome tributes I have extracted passages. Due to lack of space I could not include everything they said.

ministry of Bible translation and its associated intellectual endeavours. And to younger leaders he was always an encourager, seeking to strengthen them in their roles...He was willing to take risks and push the boundaries of current practice. These risks bore fruit but also sometimes failed. He recognized those risks that eventually achieved success, but he also recognized cases where things did not work out as expected... John believed in others even when they did not have confidence in themselves... He was a man of personal integrity. What he expected of others he also expected of himself. He believed strongly in the place of authority and its crucial role in leading others. For example, on some topics John could vigorously argue his case. However, if his colleagues disagreed with him and decided to go a different direction, John was able to submit his will to those in leadership and follow their decision.”

Other SIL and Wycliffe colleagues say “.....John was a towering figure on the international mission scene. He was well known and widely respected around the world for his passion for God’s word and the needs of minority people groups. He was also a humble and devoted disciple of Jesus Christ and a wonderful example to those who knew him....man of vision and passion, a true giant....No one matched his power of persuasion... He was knowledgeable but always wanting to learn more... His vision put him far ahead of others, but he was patient and would present it again and again over several years until people caught on...He was wise, perceptive, strategic, rugged, buoyant, yet gentle... inspiring, encouraging...He was more than a leader, he was a father... We were motivated by his energy and enthusiasm...His actions were always transparent and full of wisdom... As a person he was always easy to relate to... he managed to separate out the director role from that of brother and friend. ...he never stood on rank... he made you feel at ease...he was warm, kind, welcoming, and excited about what you were doing... He made one feel valued as a person... He listened to you, and always gave good advice....He practised what he preached... We have never seen him angry or unkind or scornful... John was not one to hold grudges, seek revenge, or let bitterness take root in his heart. This humility allowed him great freedom...He had a great memory for names and personal details... When SIL was asked to leave Nigeria, John didn’t only see a closing door, he sought and saw other doors opening...”

Professor Ayo Bamgbose says, “...We owe to John and his dedication to linguistic scholarship in Africa, the continued outlet for publications of articles in African languages, particularly in an era in which language description was becoming more and more unfashionable and being replaced by theorizing, with scanty language data. The history of the West African Linguistic Society cannot be complete without reference to the role played by John Bendor-Samuel. As leader of the SIL Group, he mobilized his colleagues to participate actively in the Society by regularly attending the West African Language Congresses and presenting papers. He himself was a formidable presence in the Congresses. He was one of the longest-serving members of the WALS Executive. Even when he relocated to the U.S., he made sure that he organized his visits to West Africa to coincide with the WALS Congresses. In the passing on of John Bendor-Samuel, African linguists have lost a versatile scholar of great depth, a committed promoter of scholarship in African languages, a warrior in the struggle against endangerment of small group languages, and an organizer with rare leadership qualities.”

Professor Beban Sammy Chumbow says, “John Bendor-Samuel belonged to the first generation of African Linguists who worked tirelessly as pioneers on research in

African linguistics as exemplified by his rich research on Niger-Congo and principles of sociolinguistic surveys, translation etc. His life and work in Ghana, Nigeria and East Africa have left their mark on scholars and scholarship in linguistics.... John was everybody's choice for member of council of WALS. John was not only a founding member of WALS but he was a pillar of strength for the growth of the society. He worked for the Society in various capacities from the early years of its existence. By the late 70s, when the Society's funds were low and JWAL the emblematic symbol of the society was flagging, John stepped in as Editor, and together with his wife Pam, dedicated much needed time, resources and energy to nursing the journal back to buoyant health. He turned the Journal's fortunes round to make it the respectable and authoritative, academic and scientific journal that it is today.

Dr Michel Kenmogne General Director CABTAL Cameroun says, "Dr. Bendor-Samuel was a man of great vision and nothing could hold him from pursuing a cause he believed was noble and God honoring. The work of language development and Bible translation as envisioned by Cameron Townsend, the founder of SIL, was premised on the fact that the West had resources in terms of well trained people and finances for the task. There was really no room for the contribution of the citizens of the recipient countries of Western missionaries. But Dr. John was one of the pioneer people who believed in the capacity of Africans and other local people to also impact the task of language development and Bible translation. That is why he championed the creation of National Bible Translation Organizations in the sixties. A few years ago, a significant decrease of the number of expatriate linguists and translators was recorded in Africa. But conversely, there was a significant increase in the number of languages undergoing development and translation. This increase happened mainly thanks to the contribution of National Organizations such as CABTAL in Cameroun, BTL in Kenya, GILLBT in Ghana, NBTT in Nigeria, ANTBA in Burkina Faso, etc., which mobilize resources from within their countries to impact the task of language development and Bible translation. The legacy of Dr. Bendor-Samuel to our organizations is immeasurable."

Writing on behalf of the Forum of Bible Agencies in Cameroon Dr. **Michel Kenmogne** continues, "In 1989 John Bendor-Samuel undertook to work with Dr. Fergus McDonald, (General Secretary of the United Bible Societies). to form the Forum of Bible Agencies. Today the Forum of Bible Agencies in Cameroon brings together eight organizations...His legacy is immeasurable."

Dr. Paul Opoku-Mensah, Director of GILLBT Ghana says, "*Odupon Atutu*, "A great tree has fallen, an Akan/Ashanti phrase announcing the death of kings, nobility and the great. .. In the Akan/Ashanti worldview, there is concern about "fallen mighty trees" being replaced by inconsequential ones, hence the proverb: "*Odupon tutu aboferenaesinanan*, (lit.: when a mighty tree falls, it is replaced by pawpaw trees)". ..He certainly was the mightiest tree in the forest of Bible translation and language development in Africa!... Fortunately, we don't need to replace him! Fifty years after his pioneering work in Ghana, and Africa, what is needed is not another mighty tree like him. Rather, what we need is a flourishing forest in which "a thousand flowers bloom". That is, a mass movement that will complete the task he began, and faithfully remained committed to. Practically what we need, and what JBS wanted to see, is a movement that will work towards true ownership, and embeddedness, of the task of language development and Bible translation in Ghana, and the African continent in general... For us at GILLBT, he was our "Founder", and we were his "First born"... Through the years he played critical and varying roles to support our development. I can confirm that he remained one of our most ardent supporters to his last day."

Professor Ekkehard Wolff says, “John was a kind of personalized landmark for me in the vast field of African linguistics during long periods of my career as an Africanist, since we first met when I was still a student with Johannes Lukas in Hamburg in the 1960s, getting ready for my first spell of fieldwork in Nigeria in 1968/69 and having become a fresh member of WALS/SLAO around that time. I recall quite a few hours filled with rewarding both academic and private talks with John, particularly on occasions of the West African Languages Congress when we were both members of WALS Council. I learned a lot from him over the years, always enjoyed his sense of humour, and admired him for what I took him to be: a perfect manifestation of postcolonial British gentlemanhood, representing the finest of traditions. The international academic community of African linguistics has lost a precious member who was wonderful to know and to associate with. I have lost a fatherly friend and a stimulating colleague.”

Professor Thomas Bearth says, “I cherish his memory as that of a great linguist. Though looking at the number of publications that appeared under his name, he was less prolific than others, those few works he found time to author, apart from many others which he supervised or co-edited, have been particularly influential on me and won him the deep and lasting respect of the linguistic community in West Africa... What accounts for this, is the unique blend between an essentially Firthian dual approach to language and the empirical realities of West Africa, with a constant concern for the needs of OWLs (Ordinary Working Linguists) as well as full-blown academic linguists, I think it is reflected in JWAL downstream all these years. I cannot but also mention the privilege that was mine to help extend SIL's work under his guidance mainly in two of the francophone countries where it is well established now, Burkina Faso and Togo. I can honestly say that most of what I have learnt about handling such matters in a sensitive way I owe to him.”

Professor Philip Mutaka, JWAL Assistant Editor, says, “Most African linguists, at least those of my generation, know John Bendor-Samuel because of the book entitled ‘The Niger-Congo Languages’ that was published by SIL in 1998 and that he edited. For a long time, that book has been the reference book for many works on African linguistics. He is the one who recommended both Keir Hansford, the current JWAL Editor and me, as the JWAL assistant Editor. We have always considered him as our real supreme boss... For people who have closely worked with him, we consider him as extremely wise. Whenever we had an intractable problem, we always relied on his wisdom to solve it... Most importantly whenever he foresaw that there is a problem, he always thought about solutions, and he would act in the background to obtain such solutions... He did not always have solutions, but he looked for solutions by talking to people and identifying those who were likely to help find the solution.

Keir Hansford, JWAL Editor, says, “Having known John and Pam as colleagues, and John as a director, since 1971, I have had a deep love and respect for them both. John's wisdom and help as Consulting Editor of JWAL has been invaluable and will be sorely missed. He was one who loved to delegate, and took risks in giving others with little experience great responsibilities, into which they grew, as much out of respect for him as for the sake of God. It has been a privilege to serve as Editor under his guidance. I heartily endorse everything that has been said above about John, and as judges would say, I have nothing more to add.”

Who then was this extraordinary man?

Life story² John was the eldest son of Theodore and Ruth Bendor-Samuel, and was born in Worthing, England, on June 9th 1929. He had a brother David and a sister Marguerite. Theodore was a well known and highly esteemed pastor. The family moved from time to time as his father was called to one church after another. At school John was academically bright, and at the age of 18 he was awarded an Exhibition to Christchurch College, Oxford, but chose to do his compulsory two years of 'national service' before going up to Oxford. He was assigned to the Royal Army Service Corps, serving most of his time in the Middle East and being promoted to the rank of sergeant before his two years were over. It was here that he was exposed for the first time to an Islamic rather than a Christian culture. He came back to England and civilian status with a mind set on serving God, preferably in some missionary capacity, but with no clear conviction about the details of the latter.

Upon graduation in 1952, he still had no clarity about where God wanted him to serve, so he undertook a year's study to get a Diploma in Education from the University of London, since this seemed to be something which was likely to be a useful qualification, wherever he might serve. It was in the summer of 1953, that SIL first offered in England its linguistic training for prospective missionaries, with American linguist Kenneth Pike and his wife Evelyn, together with Canadian George Cowan, as the principal teachers. John heard about this, and decided that he ought to take it, since he was preparing himself for missionary service. It was then that he met Pamela Moxham who was one of the other students that year, and who was accepted to serve with Wycliffe at the end of the course.

Pike was quite unlike any teacher he had previously had—a whirlwind of energy and full of illustrations from his own fieldwork but at the same time very approachable and indeed treating neophytes like him as if we were his equals, eager to debate every point of linguistic analysis.

In following years John somehow found time to go round the country on a motorbike stirring up interest in Bible translation work, and meanwhile to make arrangements for the next course, and a new place for the course, known now as the Wycliffe Language Course, at a derelict anti-aircraft site at Chigwell, Essex. In between these meetings he was preparing by correspondence courses to take the examinations for a London University Diploma in Theology – exams for which many people spent two full years of study in preparation, gained in 1954. He got his M.A. from Oxford in 1955.

In addition to this he somehow managed to complete his application for membership with Wycliffe, and also to develop a friendship with Pam Moxham which culminated in their engagement and marriage the following year. The second summer, three of them who had done well were invited back as apprentice teachers. John taught Syntax. Pam also taught a course.

As soon as John joined Wycliffe, Ken Pike urged him to study with Professor J. R. Firth at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London. Pike and Firth could hardly have been more different both in temperament and in their linguistic theories, but they had a sincere respect for each other. Pike welcomed what he perceived was Firth's rejection of the rigid Bloomfieldian formalism which dominated linguistics in the US in the forties and fifties. Both men were unashamed

² This account is compiled mostly from a tribute to John by his brother David Bendor-Samuel, and from an article by Dr Francis Manana of Uganda, and from John's own account of his life in Word and Deed, 5.1 of 2006: SIL International.

students of meaning. With Pike's recommendation and on the strength of two summers at SIL, Firth accepted John as a graduate student and indeed acted as his supervisor for the first period of this study. So in 1954 he began a year at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS). At the same time he continued to make arrangements for the next session of the Wycliffe Language Course to be held the following summer, and for his wedding. He and Pam got married on a 'long weekend' during the Wycliffe Language Course!

That year having completed the necessary preliminaries to be registered as a PhD student, and on the advice of SIL and with the approval of Professor Firth, John and Pam set out for Peru in the summer of 1955 for one year to begin linguistic research, as a necessary part of his Ph.D studies. This was on an Amazonian language, Jebero, located in a remote area in the jungles of eastern Peru between the confluence of the Marañon and Huallaga rivers. Pam had a much better preparation than John, having obtained a degree in Latin and Greek at London University. During his year in Peru, John and Pam collected linguistic data and analysed the language spoken by the Jeberos, and learned to speak it.

In the fall of the following year they returned to England, where he and Pam spent another 18 months analysing their data. John's thesis was 'The verbal piece in Jebero.' for which he received his PhD in linguistics in 1958.

By that time, he had also assumed two major responsibilities for Wycliffe and SIL. One was the leadership of the annual Wycliffe Language Course at Chigwell, which regularly attracted well over a hundred students each summer, drawn not only from the UK but increasingly from a number of European countries. From 1955 John's brother David ran the administrative aspects of the language course, and himself joined Wycliffe two years later, serving in Brazil and in UK as Director.

In 1958 John and Pam were assigned to the Brazil branch of SIL and the Terena language in the central part of that huge country. His article on Terena was one of the more influential or cited articles from his earlier linguistic studies. But each summer the family returned to England to lead the Wycliffe Language Course. So began a pattern of life and work which was to continue for many years.

John's linguistic training had been in Pikean Tagmemics and Firthian Prosody. As he ran the Wycliffe Language Course he began to develop a simpler model of grammar for the purposes of teaching linguistic analysis. This was like Tagmemics only in that it was linear, but it was called Structure-Function. Each level was described in terms of the structure of each of its segments, and then each segment's function in the level above was described. He used this model in 1963 to describe Terena phrases. This model became the standard for teaching grammar until it was finally abandoned in 1990 in favour of a modified Transformational Grammar, which later gave way to Role and Reference Grammar as the preferred model for grammatical description, as taught in what is now known as European Training Programme UK Campus.

It is in 1959 that JWAL's present Editor's home town of Southampton UK comes into the story. A Ghanaian student named John Agamah was studying at the University there. He was invited to spend his summer break being a language teacher at the Wycliffe Language Course. Some time into the course he realised that the students were being trained to study unwritten languages, to develop a writing system for them, and eventually start Bible translation. He was an Ewe man, and the Ewes had had their Bible since 1931, but most of the languages of Ghana had nothing of the sort. So he begged John to send recruits to start work in northern Ghana. At first the response was, 'We have no such plans.' But 1960, SIL founder W. Cameron

Townsend and the SIL Board decided it was time to give serious consideration to starting work in Africa, so John was sent to explore possibilities.

In the north of Ghana, he found there were at least 15 languages without any Scriptures, and for the most part with little or no linguistic research having been carried out. He also found out that the Government was not interested in the kind of partnership that had served SIL well in other parts of the world, and he was referred by Government officials to the University. At that time, the University of Ghana Legon had just begun establishing a new institute, the Institute of African Studies. This Institute was to include the study of African languages and welcomed the possibility of cooperation. So the University of Ghana approved a cooperative agreement between the Institute of African Studies and SIL, which served as the basis for SIL's work in Ghana. John was recognised as an "Associate Fellow" of the Institute. In October 1962, John and Pam and their young family David, Paul and Ruth, took up residence and lived at Achimota, University of Ghana. Before long Joanna and Esther were added to the family.

Six months later, linguistic research began in the Kusaal language of Ghana in November 1962, and an introductory training course in linguistics was held at Enugu, Nigeria, in November-December 1963 followed by the first work in the Ejagham language. By now John and family moved over to Nigeria for the next 14 years, living first in Enugu and later in Zaria. A month after the agreement with IAS in Ghana, the University of Nigeria (Nsukka) approved a similar cooperative agreement.

By 1967, there were 19 teams working in Ghana and Nigeria. Then the Biafran civil war broke out. Almost all the teams in Nigeria were in the war zone and had to withdraw. Some of the languages they were working in extended into Cameroon, so John went to Cameroon and looked up a scholar at the University of Yaoundé, whom he had met two years before. He introduced him to the Rector of the University and to the Minister of Education. He left three weeks later with a cooperative agreement between SIL and the University with Government approval.

Another cooperative agreement was made with Ahmadu Belo University in Zaria. In 1984 he also established a partnership with the University of Ilorin.

Every time John set out to establish a new agreement he would do his homework first, with a sketch of the language situation, the relationships between the languages, population details, the religious situation, language attitudes and other sociolinguistic factors, gathered from Government officials, university staff and church leaders.

John also carried out linguistic research in a number of languages in the Gur and Benue-Congo language families, in cooperation with several other researchers, publishing a number of articles in their joint names. The sixties were an exciting time for language study in West Africa. New universities were founded and Departments of Linguistics established. The West African Linguistic Society was founded in 1965, and John served on its Council for 35 years. WALS ran an annual congress to stimulate the study of African languages. Those Congresses, though now on a two-yearly cycle, continue to this day. He attended most of them. These WALS Congresses gave opportunities to meet scholars from many African countries. The Society published the *Journal of West African Languages (JWAL)* with two issues every year. He served as Editor for twelve years (1982-1993), and, together with Pam as Associate Editor for some of the years, kept it going through some of its difficult years, and set it on its course to be as it is today. From 1994 to his death John was Consulting Editor, and it was his wise counsel that helped the subsequent Editors through some difficult patches. He was encouraged to see the significant increase in the number of articles that are now written by African scholars working in West

African institutions. A new generation of Africans, competent in linguistics and enthusiastically committed to the study of the languages of their countries, has grown up, and it was an inspiration for John to work with them. In fact most of the articles accepted for publication in JWAL today are from African linguists.

From Nigeria John directed SIL's work in West Africa, which expanded to Togo (1967), Cameroon (1968) and Ivory Coast (1968). At the same time he remained in the 1970's as the Africa Area Director of SIL, visiting many countries, and discussing with church and mission leaders the needs for future Bible translation work. He was responsible for starting work in Ethiopia (1974), Sudan (1975), Kenya, Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Niger, Chad, DRC (former Zaire), Congo Brazzaville, Central African Republic and Mozambique. He made the initial allocations of SIL teams to each language, guiding the teams in their linguistic research, setting up and supervising the development of SIL branches in each country.

Recognizing the need for Bible translation to be owned by the churches and Christians in each country, John encouraged the formation of local organizations with their own governing bodies. He vigorously promoted and fostered local partnerships with both governmental and non-governmental agencies, with University departments, with churches and church leaders, with mission agencies, and with local Bible Societies. In Nigeria, in 1976 when the SIL work was terminated by order of the government, the work was transferred to the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust. In 1979 a similar transfer was made in Ghana. SIL Ghana handed over responsibility for all its work to the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT). CABTAL in Cameroun was started because of what happened in Nigeria. In Kenya, from the outset of SIL's work, the Kenyan organization, Bible Translation and Literacy (East Africa) was in charge. These national Bible translation organizations cooperate with the local Bible Society, but exercise a complementary ministry, focusing on languages where no Bible translation has been undertaken. There are now local translation organizations in many African countries.

John had an amazing capacity for hard work, and did not need so much sleep as most of us. He was therefore able simultaneously to hold down more than one post. In all this time John remained, in fact for 31 years, the Director of the Wycliffe Language Course, later known as SIL UK, and now as the European Training Programme UK Campus. He regularly taught there as well as being Director. With staff and students coming from all over the world he benefited greatly from this annual refresher and the exhilaration from the enthusiasm of both staff and students. This linguistic training carried over into the work in Africa. He was SIL Africa Area Director from 1971 to 1983. He was also Executive Director of SIL and Wycliffe International from 1984 to 1991. Then he was Director of Wycliffe UK for 7 years. Even after his retirement in his seventies he took up the task of archiving all the work in Africa of which he had been the initiator. That task was unfinished at the moment of his untimely death.

His wife Pam remained quietly in the background, faithfully supporting him in every way, whilst bringing up five children. She is a linguist and Bible translation consultant in her own right, who in her time has taught on courses and helped translation teams in West Africa.

John was rightly proud of his family. For them he was a hugely loved husband, father and grandfather, the gentle patriarch who gave himself unstintingly in love, wisdom and practical care. He is survived by Pam, by his brother David, by his children Esther, Joanna, Ruth, Paul and David, and by 15 grandchildren.

Keir Hansford