

A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF R. C. ABRAHAM— LINGUIST AND LEXICOGRAPHER

P. E. H. HAIR

When the bibliography which follows was begun, it was intended to be offered as a tribute to Dr R. C. Abraham on his 70th birthday. Circumstances delayed its completion, and in 1963 Roy Abraham died. A notice of his life and work has already appeared in *THE JOURNAL OF WEST AFRICAN LANGUAGES*, Vol. I, No. 1, and it will therefore only be necessary here to draw attention to those points in the personal record which account for certain features of the bibliography.

Roy Abraham was a scholar in what appears to be a dying intellectual tradition, that of individual research unconnected with, and hence unsupported by, any academic body. His earlier works were produced while he was employed by the Nigerian government as an administrative officer (though he was frequently seconded to full-time research assignments) and later during war-time service with the British army in Africa and Europe. His most massive works, however, appeared after his retirement, and were largely prepared at his Hendon home. The prefaces of all these works display an undisguised and infectious enthusiasm for the labour of understanding and explaining African languages, and a mounting sense of urgency in relation to the investigation of those particular languages – a dozen or so – whose study he had felt called on to undertake. But the prefaces also thematically refer to the obstacles and hazards which beset the path of individualistic enthusiasm; particularly if the enthusiast has a very limited personal income. Roy Abraham was perpetually engaged in a verbal and epistolary battle to win for his research studies the minimum recognition of a decent published form. At first, he had to cope with inefficient colonial government presses which mangled some of his earlier writings: later, the financial problems of publishing became his main practical worry. The very heavy cost of printing specialist material, much of it in phonetic type, in small editions for very limited markets, forced him to expend overmuch energy in wrestling for subsidies with bureaucratic purse-holders in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The price of freedom in his case was a tedious search for funds. This continued even into his last years, though it must be added that on the whole governments and research institutions showed a growing understanding of this unusual man's needs, and a greater generosity. Because of lack of funds, it was often not possible for him to present his material in a form other than that of a reproduction of his own typescript. As a reviewer wrote only a few years ago – 'While the author has striven mightily within the limits of resources available to him, it must be said that his work has not been given the physical embodiment it deserves. . . . His work is deserving of the support for which he cries out in the Preface.'

Dependence on relatively haphazard financial support was the main reason why Dr Abraham was unable to present his research in a neat sequence of publications, moving regularly from one language to another. Instead, publications in the same language were often separated by many years and by publications in other languages. Sometimes material was prepared and never found a published form. Occasionally a whole field of research had to be abandoned because there was no possibility of publication. A review of one of his dictionaries began – 'All lexicographers from Dr Johnson downwards have

inevitably been something of individualists'. It might have been added that many lexicographers 'from Dr Johnson downwards' have had their inherent individualism sharpened by lack of support during long years of grinding compilation. One aspect of the necessary appeal for patronage in Dr Abraham's case was his habit of announcing in his publications work in hand or work proposed. It has been thought useful to refer to these in the bibliography since they indicate the development of his study and sometimes the scope of unrealized ambition.

All of Dr Abraham's writings had a practical aim, as witness their titles – 'Tiv reader for European students', 'Modern grammar of spoken Hausa', 'Dictionary of modern Yoruba', etc. The declared aim was generally the instruction of those endeavouring to learn the language (though some of his later works endeavoured to address vernacular interest), and he never found time to discuss in learned papers points of linguistic analysis. Nevertheless, almost all of his books are based in no small part on highly original linguistic research, particularly from the point of view of tonal analysis. As a result, they are never easy works (it may be doubted whether many learners have proceeded beyond the first chapters of his courses): they have not become, and are not likely ever to become, works of wide circulation. Indeed, one wonders if Dr Abraham would have cast them in their practical form had it not been for the demands of the bodies which allowed him opportunities to prepare them or dispensed funds to subsidise their preparation and publication. Their ultimate interest is likely to lie in their academic testimony to the regularity but complexity of African languages.

The course of Dr Abraham's studies was as follows. After cutting his teeth as a practical linguist by acquiring proficiency in half a dozen Asian languages while serving in the Indian army, he turned to African languages when he joined the Nigerian administrative service in the difficult years after World War I. Through his knowledge of Arabic, he was encouraged to begin HAUSA studies, which remained his major interest for nearly twenty-five years. In the early 1930s, the government of Northern Nigeria sent him south to investigate the lower Benue languages and peoples, and by 1940 he had published a dozen works on HAUSA, TIV, and IDOMA, had more material ready, and was eager to extend his inquiries west and south to YORUBA. But at this point World War II removed him from Nigeria. Serving in Eastern Africa, he prepared a grammar of AMHARIC in 1941 and began to take an interest in SOMALI. More publications in AMHARIC would have followed – immediately, had war-time publishing conditions permitted, and later, had any of the support he sought been forthcoming: in his last years, he frequently referred to the hundreds of pages of AMHARIC material lying on his shelves, and he hopefully planned to resume work on these as soon as he had fulfilled his other commitments. The later 1940s saw the completion of many years' labour on a Hausa dictionary, and its publication. In 'retirement', he accepted and completed commissions from two sides of Africa, from the British Somaliland authorities to prepare material on SOMALI, and from the Idoma N.A. to publish further works in IDOMA. These disposed of, he was able to turn at last to YORUBA, a study he had long promised himself. Though now in his 60's, it was with youthful zest and unlimited energy that, after having received an assurance of financial support during a visit to Nigeria in 1952, he at once threw himself into the study of this new language. Six years later, he had produced the dictionary which he had first proposed to undertake twenty years earlier. While this was in its last stages, he turned again to SOMALI, and at the request of the authorities (first colonial, then national) he drew on his unpublished material to prepare a dictionary. But at the same time he was

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negotiating to begin work on yet another language, and when the interest of the government of Eastern Nigeria had been obtained, and an acceptable orthography agreed upon, he began to study IBO. He had completed a grammar and had collected most of the material for a dictionary before his health finally broke down, in 1962.

The bibliography covers writings on seven different and highly distinct African languages, totalling about 5000 printed pages, half of them lexicographical. The comment of a reviewer on a particular work may be applied to the corpus of Roy Abraham's writings on African languages: it was 'the product of an astounding feat of industry and devotion.'

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The following abbreviations are employed: BSOAS – BULLETIN OF THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL (AND AFRICAN) STUDIES, London; JRAS – JOURNAL OF THE ROYAL AFRICAN SOCIETY, later AFRICAN AFFAIRS; ZFES – ZEITSCHRIFT FÜR EINGEBORENEN SPRACHE; BULL. IFAN – BULLETIN DE L'INSTITUT FRANÇAIS D'AFRIQUE NOIRE, série B.

HAUSA

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IBO

[A grammar and dictionary were nearing completion when R.C.A. died. It is hoped that at least the grammar will be published shortly.]

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