



[*Elliott and Fry*]

MALCOLM GUTHRIE

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OBITUARY

MALCOLM GUTHRIE

Malcolm Guthrie, Professor Emeritus of Bantu Languages in the University of London, who died of a heart attack on 22 November 1972, at the age of 69, was the leading Bantu scholar of this generation; and as Head of the Department of Africa at the School of Oriental and African Studies for 18 years, he was closely involved in the post-war developments there in African studies. He had joined the staff in 1942 after eight years as a missionary in the Belgian Congo, and had retired in 1970. But in fact his links with the School spanned more than 40 years; for he had attended Swahili classes under Alice Werner in the Finsbury Circus building in 1930 before going to the Congo, and even after his retirement, when he was made an Honorary Fellow, he continued to avail himself of his membership of the Senior Common Room until a few days before his death.

Guthrie was born on 10 February 1903, his father being an engineer of Scottish ancestry, his mother of Dutch extraction. His early life and schooling were at Ipswich, where he is remembered as a shy and uncommunicative, but well-respected boy, who could memorize an entire wall-chart of scientific formulae with the greatest ease, and who—surprisingly—failed School Certificate French at his first attempt; characteristically, he reacted by retaking this examination in December, and passing his Higher Certificate after only one year's preparation instead of the normal two. He went on to Imperial College, London, where he took a B.Sc. (Eng.) in metallurgy, also becoming 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, he was for two years minister of the Baptist church in Rochester. In 1931 he had married Margaret Near, daughter of the minister of Penge Baptist Church, and in 1932 they responded to an appeal by the Baptist Missionary Society for a young married minister to go to Kinshasa (later Leopoldville, now once again Kinshasa) in the then Belgian Congo. So began the contact with Africa which was to lead to his distinguished academic career.

His linguistic prowess had been apparent in the high marks he obtained for Greek, Latin, and Hebrew at Spurgeon's. And in the Congo—having already learned what he could about Bantu languages at SOAS—he devoted his spare time wholeheartedly to language study, quickly became fluent in Lingala, and acquired sufficient knowledge of a number of other local languages to make use of them in his missionary work. He wrote a grammar and dictionary of Lingala (he was engaged on a revision of the grammar at the time of his death), translated the New Testament and many hymns into Lingala, and also wrote some original hymns in Lingala and Mfinu, and composed Lingala-style tunes for them.

When on furlough in 1935, Guthrie returned to SOAS for further study, this time under Mrs. E. O. Ashton, and fellow-students were even then impressed

by his probing intellect and amazing width of knowledge. After a further tour in the Congo, his wife's serious illness made it necessary to leave the mission field in 1940. He used to tell of his eventful journey home via North Africa, when his plan to return through France had to be abandoned owing to the rapid advance of the German forces, and he eventually reached Britain via Marseille after crossing from Algiers as a supernumerary working passenger in a coal-ship!

He applied to the School for further training, but instead was offered an appointment as Senior Lecturer in Bantu Languages from January 1942, which he accepted, not without heart-searching about the rightness of leaving the full-time Christian ministry. The Department of Africa was then under the headship of Dr. Ida Ward, with a small staff consisting of the Reverend G. P. Bargery and Dr. A. N. Tucker (Readers), Mrs. Ashton, and Miss M. M. Green, supported by a panel of Additional Lecturers that included such well-known names as Sir Hanns Vischer, Dr. L. S. B. Leakey, and Mr. (later President) Jomo Kenyatta.

For the first eight years of his appointment Guthrie was able to concentrate on Bantu studies. He soon enlarged his first-hand knowledge by an extended tour of British East and Central Africa from August 1942 to April 1944, which was combined with a survey for the British Council, and concluded with two months at the University of Witwatersrand with the eminent Bantuist Clement Doke. He collected sufficient material to classify and to establish the tonal systems of over 120 languages, and studied Bemba at depth and Sukuma and Yao in some detail. On his return he read a paper to the Royal Society of Arts on 'East Africa's reactions to European culture', for which he was awarded the Society's Silver Medal; and in 1945 he obtained a Ph.D. for his thesis on *The tonal structure of Bemba*, based on material collected during his tour. In 1947 he received the title of Reader in Bantu Languages, in 1950 he was appointed Head of the Department of Africa, and in 1951 he became the first holder of the newly established Chair of Bantu Languages.

In spite of growing administrative responsibilities, he was able to continue his own studies, finding himself drawn more and more into a comprehensive study of comparative Bantu linguistics. He made return visits to the Congo, combined with tours of Moyen Congo, Gabon, and Cameroun in 1949 and 1956-7, collecting first-hand material on the languages of those territories, some of them previously undocumented. A succession of articles and monographs on the classification of the Bantu languages and on various aspects of their morphology and syntax, and on their possible prehistory, eventually led to the publication, between 1967 and 1971, of the four volumes of his magnum opus *Comparative Bantu*, with its 900 double-column pages. These publications established his reputation as the leading Bantu scholar of his time: and his pre-eminent position was recognized when in 1966 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy—the first Africanist outside the field of anthropology to receive this honour.

As Head of the Department of the Languages and Cultures of Africa (he preferred this full title to the usual convenient abbreviation), Guthrie continued

the developments in the African field which had been initiated by his predecessors, on the basis of the Scarborough Committee's recommendations. His tenure of the Headship saw a doubling in the size of the department, with a corresponding increase in the number of languages studied and taught; a diversification of interests to cover not only languages, but also African literature—oral as well as written—Islam in Africa, music and art; and the establishment of a Readership and then a Chair of West African Languages, and Readerships in Bantu Languages and in Hausa. He was responsible for the introduction of African languages into the undergraduate programme in 1958, in combination with Anthropology, and later with Linguistics or with African History; this was the first such combination of two subjects in the Faculty of Arts, and experience in the planning and operation of this degree was to prove helpful with the subsequent introduction of somewhat similar degrees involving other subjects taught at the School. He was also the initiator and first Editor of *African Language Studies*, the series of occasional papers largely based on the work of the Department; and he was touched and gratified by the presentation to him of a special volume in the series, comprising articles written in his honour to mark his retirement. The acceptance and success of all these developments were in large measure due to Guthrie's own vision, initiative, and convincing advocacy.

Guthrie also served in a number of capacities in the wider context of the School and the University. For a short time he had been an Adviser to Students. He served for long periods on the Library and Publications Committees and the Editorial Board of the *Bulletin*, as well as on the Academic Board, and had also been a member of the Governing Body. He was for 20 years a member of the Board of Studies in Oriental and African Languages and Literatures, and its Chairman from 1960 to 1965; and for nearly as long he was on the Boards of Studies in Anthropology and Comparative Linguistics, and the Board of the Faculty of Arts, being Vice-Dean in 1966–7. He was a long-serving member of the Advisory Board in Colonial Studies and the Committee of Management of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, and of the Senate Committee for Colleges Overseas in Special Relation; and in this last capacity he paid a visit to Salisbury in 1962 to advise on developments at the University College of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, subsequently maintaining a keen interest in progress there. He was also a member of the Board of Studies in Theology and the Advisory Board in Religious Studies, and External Examiner for Indigenous Beliefs to the University Colleges (as they then were) of Ibadan and Ghana, and as such he visited West Africa in 1958–9.

In addition, he was involved in a number of activities outside the University. Early on, he was a member of the Interim Committee of the International African Institute, and of the Linguistic Advisory Committee responsible for the Handbook of African Languages, Chairman of the African Sub-Committee of the Cambridge Syndicate's Advisory Committee on Overseas Examinations, of the Executive Committee responsible for organizing the seventh International

Congress of Linguists in London in 1957, and of the CCTA/CSA Inter-African Committee on Linguistics, which arranged the 1962 Colloquium on Multilingualism at Brazzaville. He was also a founder member of the African Studies Association of the United Kingdom, and a member of its Council from 1963 to 1966; and he was closely associated with the formation of the SOAS branch of the Association of University Teachers, of which he was the first Chairman.

At the same time, he was able to continue his active participation in Christian work—as a lay pastor and deacon in his local churches at Amersham and Kingston, on the Council of Spurgeon's College for over 20 years, and on committees of the British and Foreign Bible Society, and in preaching appointments which continued until shortly before his death. Those who knew him best were well aware of the deep personal Christian faith which sustained him throughout his life, and which he expressed in a series of talks given in 1955, later published under the title *Learning to live*.¹

Even before joining the staff of the School, Guthrie had contributed to this *Bulletin* an article on tone ranges in Lingala,² which shows the same clarity of presentation and exposition that were to mark his later work, and reveals his acute perception of tonal and intonational phenomena, and his musical expertise. His publications during the next 20 years were solid rather than prolific, a distillation from copious material in a wide variety of Bantu languages. On the one hand there were a number of seminal articles which established the grammatical categories and terminology that were later to form part of the framework of *Comparative Bantu. Bantu word division*³ is a lucid analysis of the problem of word division in Bantu languages, demonstrating the possibility of resolving on reasoned grammatical grounds the 'disjunctivist'/'conjunctivist' argument between those who would regard various morphological elements as separate words, to be written as such, and those who would treat them as affixes. This was followed by articles on 'gender' (in the sense of associated noun classes), number and person,⁴ on nominal classes and their characteristic prefixes,⁵ and on the classification and syntactical implications of verbal radical extensions,⁶ and a monograph on Bantu sentence structure, expounding an analytical technique which he had developed on the basis of concepts borrowed from some of K. L. Pike's early syntactical work.⁷ On the other hand there were two articles on individual languages⁸ and two important monographs concerned

¹ London, Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1955.

² 'Tone ranges in a two-tone language (Lingala)', *BSOAS*, x, 2, 1940, 469–78.

³ *Bantu word division; a new study of an old problem*. London, OUP for International African Institute, 1948.

⁴ 'Gender, number and person in Bantu languages', *BSOAS*, xii, 3–4, 1948, 847–56.

⁵ 'Observations on nominal classes in Bantu languages', *BSOAS*, xviii, 3, 1956, 545–55.

⁶ 'The status of radical extensions in Bantu languages', *J Afr. Lang.*, i, 3, 1962, 202–20.

⁷ *Bantu sentence structure*, London, SOAS, 1961.

⁸ 'Some features of the Mfinu verbal system', *BSOAS*, xviii, 1, 1956, 84–102; 'Teke radical structure and Common Bantu', *Afr. Lang. Stud.*, i, 1960, 1–15.

with classification. One⁹ set out his criteria (sometimes regarded as controversial) for recognizing a language as Bantu, and presented his reclassification of the Bantu languages, originally in 16 zones with a now standard numerical system; while the other¹⁰ provided a detailed account of the languages of western equatorial Africa.

During this time he was being progressively drawn into the large-scale comparative study that resulted in the eventual publication of *Comparative Bantu*. Early on, he had found Meinhof's reconstructions of 'Ur-Bantu' roots inadequate and unreliable as a basis for his own attempts to establish tonal correspondences between certain Bantu languages in which he was interested; he therefore decided to make a fresh start himself, working from his own and other reliable material, and building up his own sets of confirmed phonological and tonological correspondences. These he organized on large cards, each containing a 'comparative series' of items from different languages, having the same meaning and a relationship established by regular sound correspondences, and headed by a 'starred form' symbolizing the whole set of correspondences involved. As he obtained more basic data, the scale of the project increased, so that, even when for practical reasons he had pruned the material, the number of distinct comparative series had risen to over 2,300, with more than 21,000 items in valid series, from nearly 300 languages and dialects.

Guthrie accepted that the ultimate purpose of the comparative study of languages lies in the realm of history and prehistory. But he insisted that in a field such as Bantu, where significant historical evidence of the kind available to Indo-Europeanists is almost entirely lacking, a rigorous division of the investigation into two stages is essential—the first concerned with the collation of the basic data, the second with its interpretation in prehistorical terms. In the first stage, any feedback of diachronic implications, such as had vitiated Meinhof's otherwise impressive work, 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 prehistory. It was for this reason that he used the term 'Common Bantu' for the totality of his comparative series—a term chosen to stress the synchronic nature of the starred forms, without any diachronic implications.

It was only after establishing the comparative series on the basis of rigorous linguistic analysis, and charting their geographical dispersion, that Guthrie felt justified in attempting to theorize about the implications for prehistory. He described his general approach in 1962 in 'A two-stage method of comparative

⁹ *The classification of the Bantu languages*, London, OUP for International African Institute, 1948; reprinted, Dawsons for IAI, London, 1967.

¹⁰ *The Bantu languages of western equatorial Africa*. (Handbook of African Languages), London, OUP for International African Institute, 1953. Guthrie also supplied much of the data for *The Bantu languages of Africa* (compiled by M. A. Bryan, London, OUP for International African Institute, 1959).

Bantu study' ¹¹, as well as in two lectures given in French in Paris in 1960 ¹²; and in a paper to the Philological Society in 1963 ¹³ he discussed the way in which arithmetical computation could help to solve certain problems in comparative studies. His prehistorical inferences—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—were also outlined in 1962, ¹⁴ but here again he stressed their tentative and hypothetical nature. *Comparative Bantu* itself (subtitled *An introduction to the comparative linguistics and prehistory of the Bantu languages*) contains, in Vols. III and IV, the whole set of 2,338 starred forms, with lists of attesting items and a detailed commentary on each; while in the first two volumes Guthrie gives a full account of the methodology and processes involved in their compilation, codification, and analysis, a list of possible Proto-Bantu forms, many analytical indexes, and a detailed exposition of the considerations leading to his reconstruction of Bantu prehistory.

His 'tentative new hypothesis' suggested that Proto-Bantu might have been located between the upper Lualaba and upper Kwilu rivers, to the north-west of the Katanga in what is now Zaïre, with proto-dialects developing to the west and east, tentatively suggesting that 'Bantuisms' in some West African languages might be the result of relatively late developments. While this hypothesis was consonant with some of the archaeological evidence that was coming to light, it was at variance with some of the conclusions about African prehistory to which historians were being led; and it was also directly opposed to the hypotheses advanced by J. H. Greenberg and widely taken up in America, according to which the Bantu languages were regarded as simply a sub-group in a sub-family within the large Niger-Congo family that included most of the languages of West Africa.

Guthrie inevitably came under fire, not only from those whose views of linguistic affiliation and of prehistory differed from his (with particular controversy over the question of the impenetrability of the equatorial forests, which might or might not have prevented movement of substantial populations between western and central Africa), but also from historians and others who wanted from linguists a more unequivocal statement on prehistory and a greater readiness to argue in historical terms. Some linguists criticized his Bantu-centric focus, while others felt that Guthrie's rigorousness had excluded data which, with a less strict approach, could have led to more significant conclusions. While he might appreciate the force of his critics' arguments from their

¹¹ 'A two-stage method of comparative Bantu study', *Afr. Lang. Stud.*, III, 1962, 1–24.

¹² cf. 'La classification des langues bantoues: approche synchronique, méthodes et résultats', *Travaux de l'Institut de Linguistique de l'Université de Paris*, IV, 1959, 73–81; 'Problèmes de génétique linguistique: la question du Bantu Commun', *ibid.*, 83–92.

¹³ 'Some uses of arithmetical computation in comparative Bantu studies', *TPS*, 1964, [pub.] 1965, 108–28.

¹⁴ 'Bantu origins: a tentative new hypothesis', *J. Afr. Lang.*, I, 1, 1962, 9–21; 'Some developments in the prehistory of the Bantu languages', *J. Afr. Hist.*, III, 2, 1962, 273–82.

point of view, Guthrie remained convinced of the rightness of his own rigorous method, and refused to be drawn into arguments which he considered outside his field of competence; 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 rights and wrongs of these arguments, *Comparative Bantu* remains a monumental work of scholarship and an authoritative statement from which future comparative work on these languages must develop; and even judged only by the reactions it provoked, it has made a significant contribution to the dialogue about Bantu prehistory.

In his linguistic work Guthrie took pride in his pragmatic approach, insisting on an impartial study of the facts of a language—‘the data’—rather than basing one’s investigations on a preconceived theory. He considered the linguist’s task to be that of ‘discovering and organizing the patterns that occur in a language’, as he said, adding ‘we can only accept things as we find them’ and ‘if rightly investigated, the problem . . . should yield a rational solution’.¹⁵ He was fully in agreement with the modern linguistic emphasis on the use of formal rather than semantic categories in grammatical analysis, but would not accept the overriding validity of any one of the current linguistic theories, although he was prepared to make use of any of their methods which might serve his particular purpose. He tended to be rigid, even obstinate, in these as in some other matters; and one sometimes suspected that his out-of-hand rejection of some new approach was because he was not sufficiently familiar with it to argue in detail, nor sufficiently interested to discuss it from a purely theoretical standpoint. At the same time, he always insisted on the highest standards of scholarship, and the paramount importance of science and logic, in the humanities as in pure science. He had no time for loose thinking, obscurantism, or mere jargon. His lectures, like his writing—and his sermons—were models of clarity and lucid exposition, meticulously prepared, with economical notes in his clear handwriting and a careful selection of apposite examples; and he would impress on his students—and colleagues whose Ph.D. theses he supervised—the importance of his four canons of Adequacy, Clarity, Economy, and Consistency.

He was an excellent committee man, and as a chairman—particularly of the Board of Studies in Oriental and African Languages and Literatures—he was always conscientious and well informed, with a good memory for precedent. He was a master of academic tactics, and with his long experience he was adept at preparing proposals in the form most likely to commend them to higher bodies. On both School and University committees his judgment was valued for its integrity and impartiality. He would insist on the importance of principle, rather than expediency (even though there were times when he might be found arguing strongly and logically for a point of view entirely different from one he

¹⁵ *Bantu word division*, 32.

had previously supported with equal vigour); but at the same time he was prepared to accept the worthiness of special cases. In debate, his contributions carried considerable weight, often being made at the end of a discussion, giving clear and coherent form to ideas thrown out by others.

As a Head of Department, Guthrie's policy was not to regiment the Department's activities, or to interfere in the development of the individual's interests and research, but to be available, when advice was sought, to guide, stimulate, and encourage. This attitude, combined with the heavy administrative pressure on his time and the strict routine he imposed on himself and expected of others, could give the impression of lack of concern, and during the middle period of his headship this led to a reputation for remoteness, even of indifference to the feelings of others. Yet he could still command loyalty—perhaps because when the need arose he was himself a staunch champion of his colleagues. Anyone who went to him with a problem, academic or personal would usually come away with a practical solution, and there are many who have become aware later of ways in which he had helped them without letting them know that he was doing so. With undergraduates too he was aloof, finding it difficult to be on easy terms with them, and yet experience showed that in fact he had the welfare of individual students very much at heart. He was a firm believer in the cohesive value of regular seminars attended by all members of the department; yet as a seminar chairman his own forthright views tended to dominate and inhibit; for although he could be a ready listener, he lacked the sympathetic touch that draws out and stimulates discussion.

He had a phenomenal memory and an encyclopaedic mind, with information carefully pigeon-holed on a wide variety of subjects. He was extremely practical, a keen handyman and mechanic, who studied catalogues as regularly as he read the *New Scientist* which he had himself recommended to the Senior Common Room. Characteristically, his report on his 1949 study leave had an appendix giving a detailed report on the operation and performance of the Wirek wire recorder which was the recording equipment available for field trips at that time—with two 6-volt accumulators, a rotary convertor to change the 12-volt direct current to 230-volt alternating current, an extra battery, and a small generator. And in later years he set up his own stereo equipment for listening to his favourite records, and, with gadgets of his own contrivance, linked it to a VHF set to get BBC 2 television programme's sound without the picture, which he did not want. He was an accomplished pianist and organist, and a very good photographer, who did his own processing and enlarging while living in Africa. He took a keen interest in the appearance of the printed page, and his informed knowledge of the technicalities of printing was invaluable when he had to decide on the format and other technical aspects of the production of *African Language Studies* and *Comparative Bantu*. He would talk with authority on such varied matters as meteorology and the theory of transistors, and could be a source of helpful practical hints on innumerable topics from the heating of a greenhouse or the building of a wall to the choice of specialized tools for particular jobs.

And he would give 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 bloom—as he did to the meticulous sorting out of his Bantu material.

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, and a coldness which could sometimes hurt. 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 reserve found a genuine humanity underneath. Perhaps the truth is that, although at ease in academic discussion, he was fundamentally shy, even hypersensitive, while his own high standards 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 have felt were unnecessary superficialities. Not many knew how much time and care he devoted to his wife, whose companionship he valued so much, who had contracted typhoid in the Congo in 1938 and who died from cancer in 1968; and few realized how much he himself suffered from his perennial migraines and from the intestinal trouble which needed emergency hospital treatment twice in the early 1960's. It seemed as though from that time he came to terms with himself; and many have remarked on how very much more relaxed and friendly he became in the last few years. Indeed, when he spent a term at Northwestern University, Evanston, in 1969, both faculty and students, knowing his erudition and his reputation for being somewhat remote, were delighted to find him the most approachable and helpful visiting professor that the African Studies Center had ever had.

As so often in the academic world, there was more that Guthrie had hoped to do in his retirement; but many will be thankful that he had already achieved so much, both in developing African studies in general, and in vastly adding to our knowledge of the languages of Africa.

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