

Research in African Literatures

BOOK REVIEW

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Gerard M. Dalgish, *A dictionary of Africanisms: contributions of sub-Saharan Africa to the English language*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982. xviii + 203 pages. \$35.00 cloth.

Being a collector of African-derived English words myself, I was eager to get this book in my hands after being asked to review it, since apart from the few articles by Dalby (1970, 1971, 1972), nothing on the contribution of African languages to English has been attempted, and certainly not a full-length book. However, it turned out to be not what I expected at all. Indeed, most of the Africanisms and possible Africanisms listed by Dalby are not in it. Instead, it consisted of some 187 pages of items which have been used at one time or another in writings about things African. Although the book has no bibliography, its "approximately 3,000 entries were collected from a wide range of sources: novels, newspapers, magazines...some forty dictionaries of African languages were consulted..." (p. xi). Not one of the latter is listed, although magazine quotes are sometimes given with their sources in the entries themselves, *National Geographic* apparently providing the majority of them. A typical entry (p. 27) reads:

bubu /'bu:bu:/, n a loose-fitting, shapeless,
full-length robe worn in West Africa.

Whether the bubu, or cotton robe, worn by the
Fulahs decreases their resistance to tuberculosis,
I do not know. National Geographic, 6/35, p. 28.

[< a West African language].

Professor Dalgish worked for a period as a dictionary editor for C.L. Barnhart, Inc., and presumably therefore has some background in lexicography. But the present volume falls far short of offering what the title promises, and is excessively uneven in its treatment of the entries; one wonders how many speakers of English would know any of these words, randomly selected from the Dictionary (p. 50): *ekpwele*, *ekuru*, *elongo*, *emabutfo*, *emahiya*, *emakhulungwane*, *emalangeni*, *emasi*, *emgalla* and *Engai*. Many of the entries are not originally African at all, but Africanized foreign words: *banco*, *basta*, *bority*, *bhanga*, *chai*, *chigger*, *chinchin*, *daktari*, *dash*, *kobo*, *lappa*, *Merikani*, *Naira*, *samosa*, *senti*, *shilingi*, *sobabi*, *trotro* and so on; and if *cat*, which is traced through Germanic and Late Latin, and "thought to be" ultimately Berber in fact is, that still doesn't qualify it for inclusion as a "sub-Saharan language". Very many entries are accompanied by the notation "thought to be" or "said to be", but we are nowhere told by whom. Sometimes the missing etymologies or specific language sourceforms could have been easily located by consulting one of the forty dictionaries which the compiler had at his disposal, e.g. for *katemfe* or *orisha* (from Yoruba), or for *osagyefo* (from Twi). Sometimes too an imperfect understanding of the orthographic conventions of the various languages has led to some wrong approximations of their pronunciation (*oba* 'chief' and *sokoto* 'a men's garment' are said to be pronounced /'oubə/ and /'soukoutou/ respectively, although their graphemic representation in Yoruba is *ọba* and *ṣokoto*, with dotted *o* and *s*, representing [ɔ] and [ʃ]). Its pronunciation accompanies each entry, based (presumably) on Prof. Dalgish's own, sometimes giving some rather unusual results. Doubly articulated stops and syllabic nasals are apparently too much for English speakers (*gbo* 'a magic charm' is /gə'bou/, *mbuni* 'coffee plant' is /əmbu:ni:/), but the clicks of Nama-Kwe remain (!*Kung* 'a people of Angola' is /!kuŋ/, and *Xhosa* 'a people of South Africa' is /'//ousə/).

If the 'about the author' note at the end of the book hadn't told us that its compiler had taught in East Africa, the pro-KiSwahili bias throughout the book would have tipped us off. At the entry *wari*, for example, a word found throughout West Africa, the Caribbean and northeastern South America for a game played with seeds or pebbles, we are asked to cross-refer to *bao*, the KiSwahili name, for its definition. *Hincty*, meaning 'snobbish' in U.S. Black English and probably related to northern British and Scots *hinkty* 'hesitant, stand-offish', is traced all the way to KiSwahili *-pinga* 'obstruct', with no explanation of how its form would have changed so drastically, or how the word made its way from East Africa to North America. *Kwela* and *patha-patha*, both strictly South African music and dance forms, have the etymologies listed respectively as "Nguni *khwela* 'climb on, mount' ~ Swahili *-kwea* 'go up, mount'", and "Nguni, reduplication of *patha* 'touch', ~ Swahili *pata* 'get, seize'". While providing an opportunity for the compiler to demonstrate his skills in Bantu linguistics, it adds little to the information someone consulting the work is likely to need. The symbol ~ is used on each page, but is nowhere explained. Definitions are sometimes vague (*banana* 'the well-known fruit', *dengue* 'the well-known infectious viral disease', *zombi* 'the well-known walking dead specter'; equally well-known are *tango*, *jazz*, *okra*, *samba* and *zebra*) and the etymologies are sometimes imaginative (*dinge* 'derogatory, slang term for a black person' is given the pronunciation /'dingi:/ and the ChiLuba *(mu)dingi* 'rascal, hypocrite' suggested as its source. The word is in fact pronounced /dindʒ/ and is an extension of the English word 'dinge' meaning 'dull (color)'). ChiLuba etyma turn up frequently throughout this dictionary and seem to be traceable to Vass' *Bantu speaking heritage*

of the United States (reviewed in RAL 12, 1979), for although that book is not mentioned anywhere, it contains the same entries as those found in the volume under review.

The acknowledgements (p. *ix*) are unduly chatty and eager for a purportedly scholarly work; in the space of a page we learn that Professor Dalgish visited Tanzania with his wife, that he has two little girls one of whose godparents is Charles Whitmore, and that "Sol", his editor, never doubted that the book would be finished. Seemingly hastily compiled and containing many misprints, the book sadly gives the impression of being the result of "pressure to publish", so often responsible for the appearance of mediocre scholarship. In a short paper subsequently presented at the DSN Conference in Delaware in June, 1983, the author made a nugatory attempt to justify its appearance with "a brief discussion of the intent of the book's coverage", perhaps feeling that one was necessary. The same paper concluded with the observation that "it is fortunate that lexicographers can be flexible in their dictionary-making, and still produce worthwhile and interesting material". But as the Creole proverb says, salt shouldn't praise itself in the stew.

Black language studies ought to meet the same stringent scholarly criteria as are expected for any other academic area. Unfortunately *A Dictionary of Africanisms* does not do so.

References cited

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