

Arts and Africa

BBC

AFRICAN SERVICE, LONDON

ARTS AND AFRICA

3394

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey welcoming you to another edition of Arts and Africa. We begin this week with the end product of some very hard work indeed - a new dictionary of the West African language, Krio. One of the many forms of Creole, Krio, is spoken by four percent of the population of Sierra Leone but is used as a Lingua Franca by nearly ninety percent. Now the Oxford University Press are bringing out a Krio/English dictionary compiled by Sierra Leonean Clifford Fyle who is currently an advisor in African languages at the UNESCO regional office for education in Africa in Dakar, Senegal. David Sweetman spoke to Clifford Fyle and began by asking him whether this was the first dictionary of Krio.

CLIFFORD FYLE

There was Jack Berry's dictionary which came out in '76 I think, published privately at North Western University in Evanston, Illinois in the U.S.A. The problem, however, was that Berry, first of all, didn't have any grammatical or scientific basis for his work. He said this was coming but it never came. Secondly he did not treat the language as a language. He treated it as a kind of English so that he had lots of words with English spellings, you know, and lots of words with phonetic spellings. So that, in fact, the dictionary wasn't the dictionary of the language. This is the first attempt to treat this language, or in fact any Creole language for that matter, as a complete homogeneous language.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But it's a bit strange isn't it. I mean most languages in Africa of as wide a diffusion as you're saying Krio is, have already had a dictionary. I mean the Swahili dictionaries go back into the last century and so on. Why has it taken so long for a scholar like yourself to create a dictionary?

CLIFFORD FYLE

Well, you should understand the history of these languages. They're new languages, the Creole languages and here we're talking about Creole, C-r-e-o-l-e which is a whole class of languages developed out of other languages and Krio which is this one particular language, K-r-i-o. The point about the Creole languages is that they are new languages and for a long time have not been in fact regarded as languages. The first thing one had to do was to work on the grammar of the thing, you see, to show that it has a coherent grammar before you can begin to think of it in terms of a language.

DAVID SWEETMAN

I always think though of these as if one could perhaps call them 'compound' languages, would that be what we were saying, languages that are made out of more than one sort put together?

CLIFFORD FYLE

Compound languages are interesting. But that would cover it, I think.

DAVID SWEETMAN

They are in a sense living very vibrant things that tend to sort of grow quickly in different ways and to swallow words from different sources. By making a dictionary aren't you sort of slightly burying it and saying 'well that's it, it's fixed, it's now as any other language, it's slightly dead'.

CLIFFORD FYLE

No, no. It is a language and the chronological patterns are fixed you see for a long number of years. The grammatical patterns are fixed, the grammatical words are fixed. As in any other language, what is changing is the content vocabulary, the vocabulary of content words. And this perhaps, in some cases, changes faster than in other languages because these languages have always existed and continue to exist in a contact situation. But this doesn't mean that it is not a fixed language. It is. Just like English or any other language.

DAVID SWEETMAN

Putting together a dictionary sounds to me a really horrendous task. I mean there was a book recently about the chap Murray who did the first Oxford English dictionary and how he had a room filled with boxes of little scraps of paper on which every word he came across was written down and eventually he managed to classify them all. How on earth did you put together a dictionary from scratch?

CLIFFORD FYLE

Well, first of all we started with 3,000 cards. By the time we were getting to the end, we must have got well over 40,000 cards, ones we had preserved not counting the discards. And these were not cards which we had written on one at a time. You have an index card and one index card may contain about 4 entries on this side and perhaps 6 on the other side.

DAVID SWEETMAN

But you didn't do this yourself?

CLIFFORD FYLE

Well, I did quite a bit of it. For a number of years, for about 6 years, I worked on it single-handed. Towards the end I had 12 helpers.

DAVID SWEETMAN

So, how long has it taken altogether? When did the project begin?

CLIFFORD FYLE

It has an interesting history. It was begun in 1966, by Eldred Jones, the other major author working privately as well. We came together in 1970 and I took charge of the work because he is primarily a literature man and he was having other commitments. So all in all it took about, but he was working all the same, so that it took about 14 years of his time and 14 years of mine, one year at least of their people's time. So if you put all that together, it comes up to something like 14 man years.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

An extraordinary achievement. Sierra Leonean, Clifford Fyle talking there to David Sweetman about the new Krio dictionary published by the Oxford University Press. And this is a song in Creole sung by Pedro Renner.

GRAMS

MUSIC EXTRACT - AZIZOR

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

And now to literature and another prize. No sooner had we heard that the first Noma Award for publishing in Africa had gone to Mariama Ba for her novel 'Une si longue lettre' than news came through that this year's Grand Prix de Literature Noir, (the grand prize for black literature), had been won this year by Lamine Diakhate for his novel, Chalys D'harlem. Mactar Gueye of our French/African Service went to Paris to cover the award which takes place every June. Mactar's here with me in the studio. Tell me, who gives this award?

MACTAR GUEYE

It is supported by UNESCO in Paris and run by the Association of Francophone Writers based in Paris. I guess your listeners may not know very much about it because it is a purely Francophone business.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Well, what is the story of this winning novel?

MACTAR GUEYE

Well it is a fairly simple straight-forward novel but very moving. Lamine Diakhate went to New York in 1959 as the cultural attaché of President Sengor in order to meet various black leaders in the States. He met also, he told me when I met him in Paris, John Kennedy who was to become President a couple of years after that. While he was in New York, he went down to Harlem, one of the places all black people want to visit when they go to the States. In 25th Avenue in Harlem, which is a true story, he saw a restaurant with a typical Senegalese name 'Laye'. So he went in, he was puzzled, he couldn't believe that he could find such

a typical Senegalese name in Harlem. So he went in and in Wolof, the national language of Senegal, asked the proprietor, the restaurateur, if he was Senegalese. Funnily enough, the answer was yes. So the man who answered 'yes', was Chalys Laye and he sat down and started telling him about his own personal life. He had come to the United States in 1919. Therefore, when Lamine Diakhate was there in 1959, it was already 40 years that Chalys was established in Harlem and he had never been back. He had never heard of Senegal while he was in the States so Chalys was very glad to meet the first true Senegalese after 40 years. So that's the story of Chalys in this book. Chalys explains how he survived in America, how he became American totally, how he associated himself in the black struggle at the time. At one point he was a representative of the Marcus Garvey Movement in Harlem and went through a lot of trouble. It's a very simple straightforward novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now, what is your own assessment of the book. You said earlier that it was beautiful, in what way?

MACTAR GUEYE

Well, in a way that it is not a history book, so let's make that clear. Lamine Diakhate is not an historian. He thought at one time to go and see an historian in Senegal and ask him to write it as an historian but he thought that it may hinder many people from reading it because when you talk about history books, it's only people interested in that particular history who will be reading it. While if you present something like this, a personal experience of someone in a novel form, it's more of an easy relaxing reading and you grasp many of the things. Of course, it doesn't follow a very precise chronological order as far as history is concerned but if someone is aware, as myself, about the black diaspora in the United States, then they can easily find out what he meant when he talks about the big march in 1927. When you know about the history of blacks in the States, you will know that in '27 there was this very big march called mainly by Marcus Garvey. So it is not a history book again but very pleasant to read as a novel and if someone is interested, he will go now and dig into history books in order to compliment whatever is missing in the novel.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Did you meet the author at the presentation?

MACTAR GUEYE

Well, I just arrived the day after the presentation but I managed to see him the following morning and we had a long, long chat and surely I am going to see him again on my way to Paris very soon.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What did he say about his win?

MACTAR GUEYE

Well he wan't absolutely over-excited, he was not expecting anything out of this. He wrote it, he said, faithfully trying to recall exactly what Chalys had told him and he was not expecting anything out of this. He was glad that he was chosen for the 1979 Grand Prix de Literature.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

What attends the award financially?

MACTAR GUEYE

Well financially it doesn't involve a lot of money. But on an honorary basis, yes. It carries a certain weight. You become the best writer, if you want, of the Francophone world, that is everywhere where French books published in French are written. So he, for 1979, is the best writer in French.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Mactar Gueye thank you very much indeed. And that's it from Arts and Africa for this week and as we leave you with a little more music from Sierra Leone, this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.