

ROBERT GELSTON ARMSTRONG, 1917–87

Professor Robert Armstrong, the Odejo of Idomaland, died in retirement at Otukpo in Nigeria and was given a full Idoma funeral on 29 and 30 May 1987. The following account of his work, by Professor Kay Williamson of the Department of Languages and Linguistics at the University of Port Harcourt, was originally published as part of the twenty-page programme for those funeral ceremonies.

[EDITOR]

Professor R. G. Armstrong taught anthropology in the USA for a few years, but his true life's work began in 1950–53 when he had a research fellowship to study the Idoma people of Nigeria. He returned to Nigeria in 1959–60 to study Yoruba language and law. From 1960 he was Field Director of the West African Languages Survey, which later crystallised into the West African Language Society and was supported by the Ford Foundation. He played a major role in the development of this successful international academic body, and served on its Council for some years.

From 1962 to 1983 he held the post of Research Professor of Linguistics in the Institute of African Studies at the University of Ibadan, and was the Director of the Institute during 1966–75 and 1976–77. After retiring from the University of Ibadan, he was Visiting Professor of Linguistics at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, from 1983 to 1985, serving as head of department for part of the period. From August 1985 until his death he lived in retirement at Otukpo, Benue State, working chiefly on the Idoma dictionary with a grant from the US National Endowment for the Humanities.

Professor Armstrong's research and publications began in the discipline of anthropology and moved increasingly into linguistics, emphasising particularly the interface between language and culture. Initially he concentrated on Idoma traditional law, drawing attention to the inquest as an important social mechanism and as a form of traditional verbal art. This work led him into increasingly deeper studies of traditional oral literature, transcribed from tape recordings of actual performances and translated with the care that is often given to classics in the European languages but too seldom to those of African origin. This culminated in the publication of bilingual Yoruba–English editions of three Yoruba operas and of *Iyere Ifa*, a collection of the deep chants of Ifa, and in the large but chiefly unpublished corpus of Idoma–English texts which deal with crucial matters of Idoma culture and classical oral literature, as well as simple human texts of immediate appeal. Some of the recordings have been published as discs with accompanying original and translated texts.

Another side of Professor Armstrong's work was devoted to descriptive and comparative linguistics. He published two major papers on Idoma grammar, and described and compared other languages, such as Yala (Ikom), Akpa, Igede, and Eloyi, which together constitute what he has named the Idomoid group of languages and on which he was the outstanding authority. He also worked on Igala (publishing comparative word lists of Igala with two dialects of Yoruba), on Igbo (producing a comparative word list of five Igbo dialects), on Fulfulde (showing that it is an authentic West African language and not of mysterious outside origin) and on the sound system of Tiv (where his studies resulted in a major reform of the Tiv orthography). He was also an editor of the fourth in the series of manuals on Nigerian orthographies published by the National Language Centre, Lagos, a publication which reached him in the last week or so of his life. His paper 'Yala (Ikom): a terraced-language with three tones' convincingly analyses for the first time a previously unrecognised phenomenon, and he never failed to challenge conventional wisdom, as when he argued for the classification of Eloyi as an Idomoid and Benue Plateau language, a demonstration which has finally been accepted by his fellow linguists.