

A PRELIMINARY STUDY OF THE NZIMA LANGUAGE

INTRODUCTORY

NZIMA is the language spoken along that portion of the Gold Coast which extends from the mouth of the Ankobra River westward to the frontier of the French Ivory Coast. The people who speak it occupy a territory which they themselves call Nzima, but it has not been known by that name to the outside world. To Europeans it has sometimes been known as Amanahea, but generally as Appolonia,¹ and it is under the latter name that at the present time it is administered as a portion of the Axim District. To the Fanti people, further East, the region was known as Amrehia, from the name of an early ruler, whose fame spread beyond the confines of his country. The land of Nzima is bounded by the Ankobra River on the East, by the Tano River on the West, by the Gulf of Guinea on the South, and on the North by a line roughly parallel to the sea, and at no point more than thirty miles distant from it. The permanent habitations of the Nzima people, however, are almost all within ten miles of the sea and the great majority on the coast itself. River fishing and the timber industry take some of the people into temporary camps in the more northerly parts of Nzima. The total population according to the official census of 1921 fell somewhat short of 40,000. Hitherto the development and progress

¹ Or Apollonia.

that have been proceeding so rapidly in the rest of the Gold Coast Colony have left Nzima practically untouched. Heavy forest and swamp cover the whole country almost to the margin of the sea and have made the construction of roads such as have done so much to open up other portions of the colony, a task too formidable for the scanty manhood. Many of the enterprising and able-bodied have been in the habit of seeking their fortunes outside their own country in places where there was more activity, and particularly in trade and finance, for which they have shown a rather special aptitude. Nzima is a small country, not much more than 1000 square miles in area, and those who at present speak the Nzima language are comparatively few, but the stock is sturdy and virile and it is quite clear that here we have to do neither with a disappearing people nor a dying tongue. The process of development is approaching Nzima, and, so far from shrinking from contact with it, Nzima is more inclined to greet it with a cheer, to profit by its opportunities and to enjoy the enhanced interest it will give to life, which to the brighter spirits has been at times of a maddening monotony, in the gloomy evergreen forests with their heavy rainfall; on the swamps, lagoons and rivers; and along the straight unbroken coastline of fifty miles of sand in the fierce glare of the sun and the unceasing roar of the Atlantic. Peace Nzima has now long enjoyed in common with the remainder of the Gold Coast and when to that are added increased prosperity and the blessings of medical and sanitary attention, there is no doubt that the population will increase. The same vitality that makes the people of Nzima eager for a more vivid and eventful life makes them also tenacious of their mother-tongue, and so we find that, while all the ambitious are determined to learn English, there is a growing desire that their own language should be the medium of instruction in the lower classes in the schools instead of Fanti, which has inevitably been used, because there are no books in Nzima

and the teachers as a rule have received their own education in the Fanti tongue. The Nzima language has not hitherto received very much attention. The study and the reduction to writing of Gold Coast languages have been almost solely undertaken by the admirable Christian Missions which have done so much for the education and the general welfare of the people. It was a member of the Wesleyan Mission who settled the script at present in use in Fanti books. Similar work was done for Twi, Ga and Ewe by members of the Basel Mission and the North German (Bremen) Mission respectively. Nzima was rather distant from Cape Coast, which was long the centre of the activities of the Wesleyan Mission, the nearest to it of the missions mentioned, and seemed even more than now an uncivilised and outer land, while to the Fantis and those who had cultivated their language, Nzima may well have appeared to be a difficult, uncouth and barbarous speech. And so, while good religious and educational work was done among the Nzimas both by the Wesleyans and by the Roman Catholic Mission, the language was not systematically reduced to writing and used, as in other cases, for the production of school textbooks and versions of Holy Writ. Consequently we have in Nzima the phenomenon of a language in what to-day is a very accessible situation on the seaboard of the Gold Coast Colony which is still unwritten. It was that feature of the language which first appealed to me and led me to undertake the present preliminary study. During the leave in Europe which preceded my return to the Gold Coast in May, 1924, I had prepared myself for the chairmanship of a Conference to consider the possibility of removing certain differences in the representation of similar sounds in the written Gold Coast languages by a study of modern phonetic principles at University College, London. Apart from the primary purpose for which I undertook this study my interest was stimulated and I was infected by the enthusiasm of the experts from whom I received instruction. I had been

stationed at Axim twelve years ago and was aware of these facts regarding the Nzima language. For my awakened keenness to transcribe a hitherto unwritten language according to the principles of the International Phonetic Association, this seemed an opportunity as if made. I determined to try and avail myself of it in the course of the next twelve months. The Conference which I have mentioned completed its work in November 1924, and made definite recommendations for a common script to be used for all Gold Coast languages. Just after this the Director of Education, who had been a member of the Conference, sent me two little books in manuscript, which he had received from the Commissioner of the Western Province, in which a Mr. B. B. Anaman of Atuabo, had spent much time and labour on the production of a Child's Primer of the Nzima language and an English-Nzima manual. In forwarding these books for consideration, the Provincial Commissioner mentioned that Nzima was spoken by a large proportion of the population West of Axim and had affinity with other dialects common in that part of the Colony; that there was great difficulty in obtaining interpreters in these dialects, and that anything that would help in this respect should be encouraged. I must confess to having had a slight feeling of disappointment at first that I should not be absolutely the first in the field. A perusal of Mr. Anaman's manuscripts, however, made it clear that while he could be of great assistance to me in my investigations, I could also be of use to him and to a good birth of Nzima into the world of written languages by putting the sound-representation on a more scientific basis and by revising his little books both in that respect and also as regards the English of the one in which use was made of this language. Moreover, there were many points that it would be interesting and useful to investigate, which were not covered by Mr. Anaman's productions.

In January 1925, I was able to visit Nzima and arrived in Atuabo by motor-lorry along Nzima's only motor road so

far, the natural one of its miles of sandy seashore at low tide. I was very kindly received and everything possible was done to assist me in my mission. Between Axim and Atuabo the Chief of Essiama handed me a printed copy of a tiny Nzima Primer, consisting of 18 pages including the title and the preface, written by Mr. Frank Couloo Ainooson and printed at the Catholic Press, Cape Coast, in 1920. Soon after, at Atuabo, an old acquaintance, Mr. S. D. Kwofie, handed me a small "Appolonian Reading and Spelling Book" in manuscript, which he had prepared some years ago "at the request of the Atuabo Sunday School Members' General Meeting." These are indications of the growing demand for the study of the Nzima language and of the efforts already made by local patriots to meet it. Mr. Anaman, whose acquaintance I made on the day of my arrival, expressed himself entirely at my disposal and ready to work with me all day and every day during my stay in the interest of the survival of the Nzima language. I cannot sufficiently express my admiration of the unjealous, cheerful and whole-hearted way in which Mr. Anaman assisted me. The Assistant Secretary for Native Affairs, Mr. J. C. de Graft Johnson, was with me. He is himself a Fanti, and has a good and scholarly knowledge of his own and of the Ashanti language. Not only did Mr. Anaman come and sit with us for several hours almost every day for two weeks and supply me with all the words I asked for and answer patiently my many, many questions and make the same sound over and over again until I felt that I had got it faithfully represented on paper, but he was also of the greatest use in assembling various illiterates of mature years to assist me in eliminating individual peculiarities of pronunciation and getting a just idea of the sounds of the language as spoken by the people. Mr. Anaman might often have referred me to one of his books, but I thought it important that I should approach the language free from preconceived ideas and as if no one had attempted its transcription before.

I was therefore careful not to study Mr. Anaman's books at all closely until after I had finished my independent investigation, and the same applies to the other two booklets which were placed at my disposal. The method I followed was to take down what I heard in the script of the International Phonetic Association, while Mr. de Graft Johnson at my request made his notes in the script which we had recently recommended for general use in the Gold Coast. During the two weeks we were able to stay in Nzima we also visited Beyin, in order to check our impressions of the language by hearing people of other localities than Atuabo. The Chief of that part of Nzima, Omanhin Annor Adjaye, had been given previous notice of our visit and kindly gathered together a suitable selection of scholars and elderly people, with whom I conducted a series of tests and counts, which proved of great assistance in elucidating various sounds and terms in the Nzima language.

The time appointed for the termination of our visit to Nzima was alas inexorable, and a moment came at which I had to leave off my investigations with the tantalising knowledge that I was leaving various important lines of inquiry untouched or uncompleted. However, such as it is, I consider it worth while to put forth the contents of this little volume, keeping still some material in reserve, which is available for the use of myself or any one else who, failing me, may be in a position to carry the investigation further. The present output is no more than its title calls it, a preliminary study, and as such, in addition to its obvious incompleteness, I have no doubt that it contains many words which further inquiry will show to be incorrectly transcribed, and many mistakes of statement and inference, while even what is sound is susceptible of better arrangement and classification. But at least there is now something substantial on the table to be corrected and improved, and it is to be hoped that those whose knowledge and opportunities enable them to interest themselves in the

subject will communicate with the Native Affairs Department at Accra regarding anything that they may find requires to be altered. It has happened too often on the Gold Coast that persons approaching the end of a comparatively short residence in that Colony have felt that what they knew or were qualified by their situation and experience to find out of local interest, was too little to be worth recording, and so a great deal of valuable knowledge has been lost instead of forming a basis on which by this time a considerable body of sound information could have been built up. I should like to indicate briefly the direction in which I think the work which I have commenced might profitably be carried further, so that, even if I am not able to fulfil my hope of doing something more in the same field myself, others—perhaps, for instance, Administrative Officers with a taste for language and ethnology who find themselves stationed in the regions affected—may add their contributions to a definite line of investigation. I have dreamt at times of a linguistic survey of the Gold Coast by a body of expert scholars, but as the appointment of such a body appears likely for some time to remain a dream, there is no reason why, in the meantime, interesting and useful information should not be collected and placed on record by those on the spot who will take the trouble to qualify themselves to a modest degree while on leave in Europe, and to be careful and conscientious in their collection and preparation of material. It should, I think, be possible for an enthusiast to knock out the equivalent of a fortnight's work on the collection of material in the course of twelve or eighteen months without detriment to the fulfilment of his ordinary avocations, and the working up of results can always beguile the tedium of the long voyage home and out again, and prevent ones leave from hanging heavy on ones hands. Well, I think that preliminary studies on somewhat the same lines as the present one of Nzima might usefully next be made of several other languages or dialects in the vicinity. General

statements have been made by various authorities as to the Nzima language and its affinities, but it is not clear on what evidence they are made. One says :

“ Their language, so far as can be traced, bears no close resemblance to the Akan group, but it is intimately allied to that of the Ahantas, Aowins, Gwiras and Pepisas.”

The same writer elsewhere, referring to “ the Gwiras, the Jomoros, the Valoas and the Apollonians,” states :

“ The languages of all four are very similar and closely allied to Ahanta and Pepisa.”

I have often read these authoritative utterances with awe and wondered how the writer knew.

Another writer states that one wave of immigration into the Gold Coast “ consisted of the forebears of what have become the Ahantas (Nyantas), the Awowins and the Nzimas. At that time, it may be supposed, they had the same language and customs. They are not so very different now.”

Elsewhere we are told :

“ The language . . . has an affinity with the Aowin dialect and with Gwira, Ajumora (the dialect of the Apatem villages) and Evalueh (Axim).”

It is time we knew the facts about this group of languages or dialects on a foundation of definite, patiently collected evidence. We have been long enough on the Gold Coast. It is already clear from the present detailed examination of Nzima that a considerable proportion of the language is of Akan origin, sometimes heavily veiled by peculiarities of diction, but exactly what proportion and what is the origin of the other elements cannot yet be stated. What is needed now is :

(a) Preliminary studies of the following languages or dialects—

Aowin.

Ahanta (Nyanta).

Gwira.

Pepisa.

Jomoro (Ajumora).

Valoa (Evalueh).

- (b) Further study of Nzima and collection of as many words as possible, followed by comparison with the other languages or dialects and careful analysis of the results with a view to determining the extent to which Nzima is of Akan derivation, and, if possible, its other source or sources.

Investigation on these lines may well produce some very interesting results, and not only from a purely linguistic point of view. I sometimes hear the complaint that there are so few antiquities on the Gold Coast. It is true that apart from the old forts and castles of European origin, dating from the fifteenth century and later (and I venture to suggest a doubt in passing whether they have received as much attention as they deserve), there are no remains of ancient buildings. This is only to be expected in a land where conditions have not compelled the use of other than quickly and completely perishable materials. Also there are no indigenous written records. But, apart from stone weapons and implements, which have been found by some, and possibly other traces of primitive man; apart from the customs of the people, which still await comprehensive, detailed and systematic study; apart from the elusive, shifting and corrupted element of oral traditions; there is a perfect mine of information as to the origins, history, movements and relationships of the people who inhabit the land in the languages they talk and in the vestiges of archaic language still in some parts to be found in priestly songs and rituals. One great advantage of this source of information is that, at any rate as regards the words on the lips of the people, it cannot be perverted by any individual or political party to advance some ephemeral interest. This is a branch of archæology in which the Gold Coast is very rich

and so far it has not been exhaustively explored. To apply these reflections to the particular case of Nzima, further study of the language may contribute to a definite solution of the problem of the racial constituents of the Nzima people, especially if it were accompanied by anthropometrical work on the part of one moving about the district.

SPECIAL NOTES ON THE PRESENT STUDY

This has been my first detailed acquaintance with a language hitherto unwritten, and I have found or thought I found, what I suppose is a common feature, a certain fluidity or want of definition in Nzima, owing perhaps to its not yet having been written or grammaticised, following, though not always rigidly, certain laws and formations like any other natural organism, but without consciousness on the part of those who use it. For instance, when one tries to obtain an independent, impersonal, general form of a noun, one frequently gets an article or a pronoun included. The same applies to the sounds of the language, which vary considerably according to locality and individual, not having yet been standardised.

Nzima adjoins a sphere of French administration and influence, and I have found what I think are traces of French influence in certain words, *e.g.*

aseti,	plate,	(assiette)
ajixa,	brass,	(airain).

Other instances may come to light.

I have doubled my labour by giving the Nzima throughout the book both in the script of the International Phonetic Association and also in the Gold Coast script as recently recommended by the Conference over which I presided. I did this because, while I myself prefer the Phonetic Script as

being more exact, logical and consistent and based on *international usage*, thus making the work more convenient for purposes of comparison for the many persons of different nationalities outside the Gold Coast who are familiar with this system, at the same time I naturally desired that the book should be comprehensible and useful in the Gold Coast, where my experience at the recent Conference has taught me that there is no likelihood of securing the acceptance of the script of the International Phonetic Association for ordinary use. I must here record my general impression after working with the two scripts that the Gold Coast script comes very well out of the comparison. Its special conventions are few and easily learnt, and although it makes use of more diacritical marks than the Phonetic script, these marks are simple and cannot be said to be too numerous.

I have found it desirable in the present book to make one or two departures from strictly phonetic representation in the Phonetic script, to which I here draw attention.

(a) *Modification of a*

It appears to be the rule in Nzima as in Akan languages that if the next vowel after an a is a close vowel, *i.e.*

e, i, o, u—Phonetic

e, i, o, u—Gold Coast

the a becomes modified and pronounced like

ε—Phonetic

e—Gold Coast

In cases where by etymology or analogy the letter in question was clearly a modified a, I have thought it desirable to show it as such by means of two dots over the letter (*e.g.* ä), and not to write what strictly speaking I heard, *i.e.* ε. There are probably cases where the fact of the sound being originally an a has escaped me, and I have written ε. In a note on p. 94.

will be found a case in which the principle of writing ä instead of ε might perhaps with advantage be extended. In the Gold Coast script I have not marked the a in such cases, but have left it to be pronounced according to the rule, which in the Gold Coast is familiar.

(b) *Neutral or Atonic a*

There are cases where a vowel, which is known to be a, and is so pronounced if the word is isolated and spoken slowly, is given a neutral or atonic quality. We are very familiar with this in English in such cases as *again*, *about*, *hymnal*, etc. Such sounds are generally represented in the system of the International Phonetic Association by the symbol ə. I have not thought it desirable to adopt this for ordinary use, though one could, of course, use it in making what is known as a "narrow transcription" for a limited scientific purpose.

(c) *Sign of vowel length*

I have preferred to use the familiar stroke over a vowel, thus ō, to indicate length, instead of the symbol of the International Phonetic Association, thus o:

In order to avoid multiplication of diacritical marks, I have not in either script used ̃ or ˘ to indicate a nasal vowel which is also long, but have contented myself with marking only the nasal. I am not sure that this is desirable and perhaps it would be well in future to use the single sign ˘ in such cases.

ɛ and d

The sounds represented by these two symbols, which are fully explained in their place in Chapter I, gave me a good deal of trouble. They are not found in Fanti, Twi or Ga. The former I found Mr. Anaman regarded as a kind of h, and the same idea is to be found in Mr. Ainooson's Primer and in Mr. S. D. Kwofie's manuscript. For a time I accepted it as

such provisionally, but as time went on and I became more familiar with the sound, I felt so dissatisfied with the representation that the symbol became known to us in our round-table conferences by Mr. Anaman's name for it of the "trouble h." I formed my own opinion of the sound on careful hearing and observation and reserved it for discussion with the experts at University College, London. The symbol adopted is the result and has to be used in both scripts, it having been recognised by the Conference regarding a common script for the Gold Coast that special symbols would require to be added to represent sounds peculiar to any particular language.

With regard to d, this represents a sound which Mr. Anaman originally represented by th, and explained as being like the soft English th in *then*, *there*, etc. For a time, therefore, I tried the phonetic symbol ð, but this proved to be inexact, the sound having an undoubted d in it and only thereafter a slight ð (soft th) tendency. Consultation at University College led to my adopting d for this sound and using ɖ to represent the alveolar d, more familiar to English people, which is also found in Nzima. I invite special attention to the fact that it is the plain d which is for English readers the queer one, while it is the ɖ which is natural to them which is represented with a dot—ɖ. This is the case in both scripts. Here again we have a special sound represented by a peculiar symbol (or rather by a familiar symbol used in a peculiar way).

Two little points I still must mention. First, I am not sure whether it may not be found on further investigation that a following z causes some modification in an a. At present I can only mention two instances, the word ɖaza and the word sanza, in both of which those natives of Nzima I met who had any knowledge of letters seemed clear that the first vowel was an a, but what I heard was deza in the former case and sænza (a sound like the a in Southern English *man*) in the second. The point requires further study. Secondly, although the equivalent of dw in Gold Coast script is dʒ^w in

my Phonetic Script, there are certain words of Akan origin with a dw in Fanti or Twi, which I have had to write simply with dʒ in the Phonetic Script (and hence in Nzima with gy in the Gold Coast script), because that is how they sounded—that is to say, the subtle little w sound had apparently not passed over into Nzima. A very familiar example is the well-known Fanti word *adwuma* (work), the equivalent of which I have written in Nzima *ädzuma*. This will look very strange to those accustomed to Fanti and Twi when written *agyuma*. I may be mistaken in this and further study may prove that the sound is identical in the Akan languages and in Nzima.

In conclusion I desire to record my thanks to Mr. de Graft Johnson for helping me in many ways and especially for the “List of Nzima words which appear to be of Akan or Fanti origin,” in Chapter VII, which he prepared at my request; and to Mr. Anaman for his very great assistance, and in particular for the translation of the fable of the North Wind and the Sun at the end of the book, and for lists of words which he completed for me after we had taken our departure from Nzima.

October, 1925.

C. W. WELMAN,

Secretary for Native Affairs, Accra, Gold Coast.

A PRELIMINARY STUDY
OF THE
NZIMA LANGUAGE

BY

C. W. WELMAN, M.A.

SOMETIME SCHOLAR OF PEMBROKE COLLEGE, OXFORD
OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW
SECRETARY FOR NATIVE AFFAIRS, GOLD COAST

Published by
THE CROWN AGENTS FOR THE COLONIES
4, Millbank, London, S.W.1

Copies may be obtained at the Office of the Colonial Secretary, Accra,
or from the Crown Agents for the Colonies, 4, Millbank, London, S.W.1

Rik