



*[Courtesy BBC]*

WILFRED HOWELL WHITELEY

## OBITUARY

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The news of the sudden death of Professor W. H. Whiteley on 16 April 1972, while on a brief visit to Indiana University, came as a great shock to all who knew him. It was wholly characteristic of him that a few only of his closest friends knew that he suffered from a physical condition that could result in a sudden fatal attack. In fact it was his total disregard of himself in the way he carried out his chosen activities that made it difficult even for those who did know to realize that the health hazard was as real as it proved to be. Those of us who had worked with him closely and knew him well had come to appreciate his attractive and outgoing personality, which heightens our sense of personal loss quite apart from our concern at the far-reaching effects his death will have in the field of African studies. An outstanding personal characteristic for which he will be remembered was his single-mindedness in respect to whatever he happened to be doing, coupled with the astonishing variety of things he was interested in, which showed itself in a number of ways. He always gave the impression of lack of haste or impatience in conversation, whether talking to a student in difficulties or to a senior colleague about some finer point of academic research. This was all the more noticeable since it was frequently not easy to catch him at a moment between his many commitments, but when one did it was difficult to realize that he had anything else on his mind. Another way in which his unusual personal qualities could be seen was in the professionalism that characterized all he did. Even in interests that lay outside his academic work he was never amateurish, whether in the search for the secret habitats of wild terrestrial orchids, or in the photography that produced records of the flowers he found; and he was regarded as an equal by those who had had professional training in these matters. It was never wise for the ill-informed to pontificate on any of a wide variety of subjects in conversation with him, although usually his innate courtesy inhibited him from making embarrassing comments. In fact it was only when frequently confronted by someone who appeared unable to refrain from saying stupid things that his patience might suddenly be exhausted. Thus even before an attempt is made to outline his academic career and to describe his contributions to scholarship, it will be clear from what has just been said that we are all the poorer for the loss of a very unusual personality.

Wilfred Howell Whiteley was born in Liverpool on 19 November 1924 and was educated at King Edward's High School, Birmingham, the last two years being at Lancaster Grammar School, to which his own school was evacuated. His education was interrupted by a period of National Service that among other things took him to East Africa for a time, and which lasted until the end of the war when he became a student at the London School of Economics, graduating in Anthropology in 1949. He then took up a Research Assistantship with the International African Institute but after a very short time accepted

an appointment as Government Anthropologist in Tanganyika (now Tanzania). Before leaving for Africa he paid a visit to S.O.A.S. when I was able to advise him about research methods into Bantu languages. Once in Tanganyika, where his duties took him mainly to the Southern Province, he became increasingly interested in the local languages, and on one occasion when back in London on leave he showed me the draft of an interesting article he had written on the Makonde language, although in the event this does not appear to have been published.

Early on in this period he was also in close contact with the East African Institute of Social Research at Makerere in Uganda, and when his three-year contract as Government Anthropologist came to an end, he was appointed a Research Fellow of the Institute, a position he occupied for six years. Having decided to concentrate mainly on linguistic research he came to discuss his plans with me, and as a result he switched his interest to the languages to the east of Lake Victoria in both Tanganyika and Kenya. From these researches he collected a large amount of important material, some of which he used in writing a thesis for which in 1955 he was awarded the degree of Ph.D. by the University of London. In one of our discussions, as I recall it, he asked me what I thought about Iraqw, a non-Bantu language of central Tanganyika, my advice being that it was likely to prove too difficult for him. He characteristically ignored my warning, and later on when asked what made him work on this particular language, he replied that the main motive was provided by my comment that he would find it too difficult.

A quite different kind of challenge that came to him almost as soon as he had taken up the Fellowship concerned Swahili. This language he had learned at the beginning of his East African experience, and over the years he acquired a very high degree of competence in its use. It was not surprising therefore that he was asked to become secretary of a committee that had been formed in 1930 at Kampala to co-ordinate work on Swahili throughout what was then British East Africa. Under his leadership the East African Swahili Committee, as it became known, was rescued from a period of ineffectualness and given an important role in raising the status of Swahili, a development that was especially significant at a time when the various East African territories were achieving independence.

It is worth recalling also that during the years he was in East Africa he took steps to remedy his lack of formal linguistic training by reading practically everything that appeared in the various fields of theoretical linguistics, whether in the form of books, monographs, or articles in journals. As a result he was to bring to bear on his researches considerable insight into the problems he encountered without ever being committed to any particular school of general linguistics. It was not surprising therefore that when a Readership in Bantu Languages at the School was established by the University of London in 1959, he was appointed as its first incumbent. Thus he came to the School with some nine years of field experience behind him and immensely strengthened

our resources in the Bantu field, particularly in teaching and research in Swahili. Fairly soon he began investigations into the Yao language with the help of a vernacular speaker engaged by the School. Before long he decided he would like to study the language in greater depth, consequently he was granted overseas research leave in the session 1961–62, which he spent partly in Nyasaland (now Malawi) working on Yao and partly in Kenya studying Kamba, each of these projects leading to an important publication. In 1963 he was seconded to the University of Wisconsin where he had been invited to become a Visiting Professor for nine months to May 1964. Meanwhile plans had been finalized, mainly on Whiteley's own recommendations, to establish a Department of African Languages and Linguistics at the University College (now the University), Dar es Salaam, and the School was asked to second him for three years to become Professor and Head of Department. This was agreed to and he spent the three academic sessions 1964–67 in Dar es Salaam, where in addition to his work in the Department he became Director of the Institute of Swahili Research that he had persuaded the University College to establish, and which in fact took over the functions of the East African Swahili Committee of which he had been the secretary years earlier. In 1965, while he was still on secondment, the University of London conferred on him the title of Professor of Bantu Languages. Returning to the School in 1967 he was appointed to succeed me in 1968 as Head of the Department of Africa. He was nevertheless prevented from taking up this latter responsibility until October 1969 due to his deep involvement in a Survey of Language Use and Language Planning in East Africa under the auspices of the Ford Foundation. This reflected the significant spread of his activities into sociolinguistics which his early training and later experiences peculiarly fitted him to carry out. Wishing to play an active part in the actual survey he asked for and was granted secondment for the session 1968–69 to become Director of the team dealing with the Kenya section of the Survey. Thus in October 1969 he effectively became Head of the Africa Department, and on my retirement a year later he also succeeded me in the Chair of Bantu Languages. At his death therefore he had had no more than two and a half years to exercise leadership of the Department, long enough to have begun to formulate a number of plans for the future but too short a time to have brought any of them to fruition or even to have made it possible for his colleagues to carry on smoothly from where he had left off.

Any attempt to deal with the scholarly activities of W. H. Whiteley in terms of their tangible results comes up against a number of problems due mainly to the very diversity of his interests. It would be difficult to fit everything into a chronological framework since, for example, the dates of his publications do not always reflect what we know about the sequence of his research interests. For this reason it is preferable to deal separately with each of the main areas where the impact he made can be seen, without necessarily trying to provide dates as cross-references.

If we look first of all at his published contributions to our knowledge of things African, the quantity alone is daunting, there being some 50 titles of which about half deal with language or literature. The largest proportion of these are concerned with language and linguistics, and it is here that some of his most significant work is to be found. On the purely descriptive level, three works must be mentioned in particular. *Studies in Iraqi—an introduction*, Kampala, 1953, was his first monograph on a previously undocumented language, which showed his ability to develop techniques for handling a rather peculiar type of language. *A practical introduction to Kamba* (with M. G. Muli), OUP, 1962, is a work that provides a good example of his flair for dealing with difficult features in a practical down-to-earth way, yet within a sound linguistic framework. The mention of M. G. Muli illustrates Whiteley's practice of including the name of his principal informant in the authorship of some of his works, even where one suspects that the contribution of the informant to the actual description may have been minimal. His book *A study of Yao sentences*, Clarendon Press, 1965, is an important descriptive work that also illustrates an ambivalence in his attitude toward general linguistics. When he asked my opinion of it I said I thought there was so much linguistics that the facts about the language tended to be obscured, to which he replied that another scholar had told him the work displayed too much interest in the language itself which meant that he had not done justice to his competence in general linguistics. Whiteley's final comment, with that broad smile of his, was that he had a feeling we were probably both right.

Inevitably many of his published studies were in the Swahili field including outlines of a number of previously undocumented dialects and in fact in one of our last conversations he was clearly excited about the work he was doing on Kimvita, the Mombasa dialect of which he was hoping ultimately to produce an authoritative description. The subject that occupied him increasingly was Swahili syntax, and in 1960 a paper entitled 'Some problems in the syntax of a Bantu language in East Africa' was published in *Lingua*, ix, 2, in which he laid the foundation for one of his most original contributions to grammatical studies. It was here that he first introduced the concept of 'entailment' which provided for the handling of syntax the first credible alternative to the descriptive theory known as 'transformational grammar', whose basic assumptions he found it impossible to accept. From then on he pursued relentlessly solutions to the many problems of Swahili syntax, setting out his results in various papers, and particularly in a monograph *Some problems of transitivity in Swahili*, SOAS, 1968. It is significant that the last two of his published linguistic articles were in this same field, 'Notes on the syntax of the passive in Swahili', *African Language Studies*, x, 1970 (which had been written some time before its publication), and 'Focus and entailment, further problems of transitivity in Swahili' (with J. D. Mganga), *African Language Review*, VIII, 1969. During the last year of his life he frequently mentioned his current work in this direction, and his death has almost certainly deprived us

of many other significant contributions to what is probably the most difficult area of linguistic description.

The diversity of his linguistic interests is to be seen in articles on various subjects throughout the years. For example 'Kinship terminology and the initial vowel', *Africa*, xxix, 3, 1959, contains a skilful comparison of the morphological characteristics of kinship terms in two closely related languages, Gusii and Koria. An article entitled 'Linguistic hybrids—a note', *African Studies*, xix, 2, 1960, is in fact an interesting study of Bantu-like features in Mbugu, using his own original material. He also attempted to establish some correlation between the various prefix classes in Yao and categories of meaning in 'Shape and meaning in Yao nominal classes', *African Language Studies*, II, 1961, and although this was one of his less convincing studies, it nevertheless contains some important documentation on the language, presented with his usual skill. The question of loan-words also fascinated him and formed the subject of several papers, as for example 'Loan-words in Kamba', *African Language Studies*, iv, 1963.

His high level of operational competence in Swahili enabled him to undertake a number of studies in the literature, and among his published papers are to be found translations of Swahili literary texts. In addition he produced a monograph on *The dialects and verse of Pemba: an introduction*, Kampala, 1958. Later his interests widened and as one of the editors of the series 'Oxford Library of African Literature', he did a great deal to stimulate interest in the study of African oral literature. He was himself solely responsible for editing the first two volumes which appeared in 1964 under the title *A selection of African prose* (Vol. I, *Traditional oral texts*, Vol. II, *Written prose*, to both of which he wrote an introduction).

It was also natural for a man of his training and instincts, when he became involved in the study either of vernacular languages or of Swahili, to be constantly aware that language is used in social situations. As a result he recognized that unless this fact is taken into account any study of a language remains incomplete. One of his earliest contributions along these lines was 'Formality and informality in Yao speech' (with K. Mbagala), *Africa*, xxxi, 2, 1961, but increasingly he developed his interest in sociolinguistics with respect to Swahili. The use of this language as a lingua franca gave rise to a number of specific problems that he was well qualified to consider. He had in fact published preliminary studies in this field during his period as a Research Fellow, including 'The changing position of Swahili in East Africa', *Africa*, xxvi, 4, 1956, and 'Language and politics in East Africa', *Tanganyika Notes and Records*, 47–8, 1957. Latterly, however, he devoted more and more of his energies to what may be called the sociolinguistics of Swahili as is shown by 'Problems of a lingua franca; Swahili and the trade-unions', *Journal of African Languages*, III, 3, 1964; *Swahili: the rise of a national language*, London, Methuen, 1969; and 'Language choice and planning in East Africa' in P. H. Gulliver (ed.), *Tradition and transition in East Africa: studies of the tribal element in the*

*modern era*, London and Berkeley, 1969. The volume *Language use and social change: problems of multilingualism with special reference to Eastern Africa*, OUP (for IAI), 1971, consists of papers presented to an International African Institute seminar on problems of multilingualism held at Dar es Salaam of which he was the principal instigator and chairman. These selections from his titles in this field serve to show his involvement in sociolinguistics, but what was perhaps his biggest contribution arose from the part he played in the Survey of Language Use and Language Planning in East Africa to which reference has already been made in the biographical outline. He had completed the report on the Kenya section of which he was director, and fortunately had corrected the page proofs of the volume. To round off this review of his contributions to the study of language in society, mention must be made of an article of his on 'Social anthropology, meaning and linguistics' in *Man*, New Series, 1, 2, 1966, concerning which the comment has been made that 'this is an outstanding statement, a taking up in new terms of the tradition stemming from Malinowski and J. R. Firth'.

Another side to W. H. Whiteley's activities arose from his concern with the establishing of University departments in which Swahili and other African languages could be taught, and there is little doubt that he was impelled by the belief that the development of institutions as well as the encouragement of individuals was the way to ensure continuity of scholarship. It is equally clear that it was his own vision and high ideals that made him willing, if necessary, to undertake administrative tasks to further his plans.

Mention has already been made of his three-year secondment to the University College, Dar es Salaam, where he personally planned the courses, and in particular was able to develop a first degree course in Modern Languages (including Swahili) of a kind suited to Africans in newly independent countries. So successful was his work at Dar es Salaam that in what is now an independent university the Department of Language and Linguistics he built up has been split into two, a Department of Swahili and a Department of Foreign Languages and Linguistics. With characteristic far-sightedness, almost before the first students had enrolled, he was planning a link with the Department of Languages at the University of York, so as to provide opportunities of post-graduate study for suitable graduates who might then ultimately return to join the teaching staff at Dar es Salaam. In parallel with this arrangement there was also the development of his own relationships with the University of York, in which as a North-countryman he felt a considerable interest, and to which he gave much help in the introduction of Swahili into undergraduate studies. At the other East African universities, at Nairobi and Makerere, his contacts were not so close, but frequent visits gave him the chance to urge the setting up of comparable departments. His advocacy resulted ultimately in the establishment of a Department of African Languages and Linguistics at Nairobi University, although at Makerere that stage has not yet been reached. His influence also reached into West Africa, where in the Department of Modern

Languages in the University of Ghana courses in Swahili were introduced, but staffing problems arose and arrangements had to be made with Professor Whiteley at Dar es Salaam for an undergraduate to go there for his final year. Subsequently the Department in Ghana relied heavily on his advice, and although he was not able personally to visit the University there, his continuing interest made possible the retention of Swahili teaching as an integral part of the first degree courses. A quite different situation in which he was able to help was in the University of Wisconsin where he introduced the teaching of Swahili, and fulfilled an important role in the advance planning for the creation of a separate Department of African Languages and Literature. In all these activities it may well be that his drive was at least partly due to his awareness that he personally had a very limited future only. But in any case the institutions he fostered are indeed a living memorial to him.

Limitations of space mean that no mention is possible of the many ways in which his enthusiasm and encouragement acted as a trigger to start other people off into fruitful research projects or of his impact in other situations such as international conferences. Suffice it to say that whether in the Department of Africa at the School, or in any of the places where his activities played a significant part, there is a bleak feeling whenever we recall that we no longer have with us this man who seemed to have within himself an inexhaustible well of ideas and inspiration. There is, however, some consolation in the fact that he had succeeded in passing on to many who worked with him not a little of his knowledge and insights, so that a number of the studies in which he was personally involved will be carried on by people who also owe to him their high scholarly ideals and many of their skills.

In concluding this appreciation of an outstanding colleague I must express my thanks to all those who replied so promptly to my inquiries and provided me with much valuable information and comments about Wilf Whiteley's achievements. Inevitably I have had to be selective in the material I used, since in writing about someone so versatile omissions are unavoidable. Understandably it has been a somewhat melancholy task to prepare this tribute to a scholar of such promise who died before he was 48, but this has been in some measure tempered by the recalling of the innumerable occasions when a short encounter or a discussion was enriched by the combination of personal qualities that made him always stimulating and refreshing.

MALCOLM GUTHRIE

[The Editorial Board records with deep regret the death of Professor Guthrie. An obituary will be published in a future issue of *BSOAS*.]