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V

KAY RUTH M. WILLIAMSON (1935–2005)

HER LIFE AND WORK

Ozo-mekuri Ndimele

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Kay Ruth M. Williamson was born in Hereford, Britain, on 26 January 1935. She obtained a BA and an MA in English Language and Literature from St Hilda's College, Oxford, in 1956 and 1960 respectively. She completed her PhD in Linguistics at Yale University in 1964. Her area of specialization was Ijo linguistics.

She started her career as a teacher of linguistics in the Department of English, University College, Ibadan, in 1957. She was appointed Professor of Linguistics in the Department of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages, University of Ibadan, in 1972. She moved to the University of Port Harcourt in 1977, first as Director of Studies (Language), and later as Head of Department of Linguistics and African Languages, 1982–4, 1987–9, 1993–5. In 1984–5, she was a Visiting Scholar at the University of Leiden. She was appointed Dean, Graduate School, University of Port Harcourt during 1990–1, and was Visiting Scholar at Wolfson College, Oxford, in 1991. After retiring from active service, she was employed on contract as Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Communication Studies, University of Port Harcourt, in 2000–2. In 2002, she was appointed UNESCO Professor of Cultural Heritage, University of Port Harcourt, a position she held until she died.

She was an active and dependable member of the following academic associations: International Phonetic Association (Life Member), Linguistic Society of America, International African Institute, Linguistic Circle of New York, African Studies Association of the United Kingdom, West African Linguistic Society, Linguistic Association of Nigeria.

Her initial area of research interest was syntax. In fact, her PhD thesis was on the grammar of the Kolokuma dialect of Ijo. But later on she totally abandoned syntax in favour of phonology and historical linguistics. In an interview she granted Professor E. N. Emenanjo and

me, when we produced the first festschrift in her honour, she said she was first attracted to syntax under the influence of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures*. This interest in syntax, according to her, did not last because 'syntactic theory changed so fast that it was not possible to keep up with it outside the United States'. Another explanation which she gave for the change in focus in her studies was that a great many Nigerian languages were not properly described – hence the more urgent need to document them systematically, and to produce pedagogical materials in them.

The desire to save minority languages and cultures led her – and close associates like Professors E. J. Alagoa and Otonti Nduka – to institute, through funding from UNICEF and the Rivers State government, the famous Rivers Readers Project to produce primers and readers in 23 languages/dialects of old Rivers State. The project also organized workshops for writers, teachers and speakers of these languages/dialects. It was through these workshops that many people in the Niger Delta area of Nigeria learned how to read and write their own native languages. Although she produced a dictionary and wrote a couple of articles on Igbo, her major interest was to develop the minority and endangered languages of the Niger Delta region.

Williamson's contribution to knowledge is far-ranging; apart from publishing articles and books on almost all the Niger Delta languages, she succeeded in training at least one linguist for each of these languages to continue her good work.

She was a celebrated and committed international scholar who cared much about details of analysis, simplicity and grace of expression. To be supervised by her as a graduate or undergraduate student opened an entirely new world of rewarding life experience.

Three areas are outstanding in her contribution to knowledge. First, she introduced multi-valued features in phonological analysis, especially for consonants. Second, she developed very simple and scientific procedures for linguistic classification of languages with little or no documented past. She also developed a practical orthography manual which has continued to serve as a useful guide for dealing with the peculiar sounds of Nigerian languages. Many Nigerian languages today have excellent and reliable orthographies courtesy of Williamson's manual.

In her later days, she became fascinated by other areas outside mainstream linguistics. Working in collaboration with scientists like the late Charles Bruce Powell, she developed an interest in ethnoscience. She became a collector of living and dead specimens of the flora and fauna of the Niger Delta. With her digital camera, she took photographs of her collections, and used native speakers of the local languages to identify them. She was more interested in their scientific and local names for inclusion in the dictionaries of the local languages which she was writing with a number of other collaborators.

Her main regret would be that she did not live long enough to complete some of the major research projects that she started, the most outstanding being 'Comparative Ijoid' and 'Comparative Igboid'.

She entrusted her numerous unfinished projects to some of her close associates, particularly Dr Roger Blench and Dr (Mrs) Chinyere Ohiri-Aniche.

FOR KAY WILLIAMSON FROM HER NEIGHBOUR

Robin Horton

For twenty-five years at the University of Port Harcourt, Kay Williamson was my campus neighbour; and I could not have asked for a better one. As I used to tease her sometimes, my only problem with her was the high standards she set in her life; standards which sometimes made lazier and less conscientious fellows like myself a little uneasy. Even this, however, was not really a problem; for she inspired by quiet example rather than by preaching and reproaching.

As her colleagues have told us, Kay was an outstanding, internationally respected linguist. Now all too often, outstanding academics are so immersed in their own research and writing that they have little or no time for colleagues or students. Famous examples abound. For Kay, however, it was never so. Somehow, despite her bodily frailty, she managed to combine enormous research productivity with seemingly limitless concern for junior colleagues and for students at all levels. Whenever I went across to her house, the parlour was full of students reading. To many of them, she was not Professor or even Prof; but simply Mama Kay—a second mother as much as an academic supervisor. Even with senior colleagues in other departments needing advice on linguistic matters, she gave liberally of her expertise. I remember a time when I was trying to teach historians the use of linguistic evidence in historical reconstruction. It got to a point where I seemed to be taking a tutorial from Kay on one day, and regurgitating what I had learned from her to a class of students on the next.

It was hard to get Kay totally off duty. But I was quite lucky in this respect. Both of us had been told by doctors to take evening walks for medical reasons; and whenever she was free from evening tutorials, we tended to go round together. Here, it has to be said that walks with Kay were a mixed blessing. Inside our residential area, she waged a relentless battle against rubbish, picking up dozens of unsavoury bits and pieces and carefully piling them on the nearest dumping heaps. Since I couldn't bring myself to participate in this, I had to stand around rather sheepishly, trying with no great success to look like some kind of supervisor. The great thing was to get her away from the residential area and its rubbish, and either down to our local river or into what is now rather grandly called the Biodiversity Area. Once into these byways, she succumbed to her fascination with unusual birds, animals and plants. To me, her enthusiasm lit up what I would otherwise have seen as a

rather dull environment. I came to think that, had she not been drawn into linguistics, she might well have become a great field naturalist.

As two human beings, of course, we could hardly avoid punctuating our walks with at least a little university gossip. Like most of us, Kay was troubled by many aspects of life in the university. But in talking of these things, she always expressed faith in peaceful persuasion rather than protest and confrontation. Although I found it hard to go all the way with her on this, I had to acknowledge that, both in her department and in the university at large, she achieved a great deal by sticking to her gentle ways.

The news of Kay's death was a great shock to those to whom she was near and dear—a shock all the greater for coming just as we were getting ready to celebrate her triumphant return from months abroad in hospital. But I take a little consolation from something I thought I saw in Kay herself. I believe she was well aware that from now on she would be frailer than ever before. I also believe she was someone who could not endure the prospect of a slow decline into infirmity, of being forced to turn from caring for others to being cared for by others. In this situation, I think, she had decided to carry on in top gear, regardless of the risk. And after an eighteen-hour intercontinental journey followed by a family wedding for a cherished niece, that indeed is how she went.

KAY WILLIAMSON: PUBLICATIONS

The list below was compiled by Ozo-mekuri Ndimele. He notes: 'It is only a fraction of her publications—the few I am able to assemble. Her personal acquisitions, including her own publications, have been securely locked up in boxes, pending the time when a befitting centre to house them will be built in her honour by the University of Port Harcourt.'

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