

Portuguese Communication With Africans on the Searoute to India

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When Vasco da Gama arrived in Calicut in 1498 he was eleven months and 12,108 nautical miles from Lisbon.¹ On the best ships Portugal could build, manned by the best seamen trained in the previous 80 years of exploration, were seventeen language specialists: four African interpreters of African languages, three Portuguese speakers of Bantu and Arabic, and ten Portuguese *degradados* (convicts) who had been taken along to scout unknown shores for which they had to acquire local languages. By the time of this historic voyage Portugal had been following for years a systematic approach to the problem of languages. It deserves study, for it was a development perfected through long and arduous experience. When the Portuguese first began to explore the African searoute early in the fifteenth century they had no such skills. They were confronted by coastal peoples who spoke languages totally unknown to Europeans then, and they needed information and help.

Their first venture into this unknown linguistic world came with the passage of Cape Bojador, which lay on the African coast opposite and a little to the south of the Canary Islands. For a millenium, Bojador had been an impenetrable geographical and psychological barrier. No one had ever been known to pass the Cape and return.² It was the western end of the known world. When Captain Gil Eannes finally solved the riddle of the Cape in 1434 he found himself standing on an unknown shore, without a person in sight. Sent to proceed further a year later, he explored another 150 miles south of Bojador. Still, he found no people. But he did find footprints of men and camels in the sand and returned to Portugal to report this single hint of human habitation.³ For Prince Henry the Navigator, who had launched these southward explorations as part of a drive to reach India by sea, gaining further information became an obsession. Commissioning a third voyage in 1436, he issued to his captain an earnest royal command:

¹E. G. Ravenstein, *A Journal of the First Voyage of Vasco da Gama, 1497-1499* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1898), vol. 99, p. 202.

²Gomes Eannes de Azurara, *Chronica do Descobrimento e Conquista de Guiné*, ed. Visconde de Santarem (Paris, 1841), pp. 50-55; (Eng. ed.) C. R. Beazley and Edgar Prestage, *The Chronicle of the Discovery and Conquest of Guinea*, 2 vols. (London: Hakluyt Society 1896, 1898), pp. 30-32, 312(n.49).

³Azurara, *Chronica*, pp. 56, 59; (Eng. ed.) Beazley, *Chronicle*, p. 32-34.

It is my intention to send you in your boat again to serve me while increasing your honor. I order you to go as far as you can to try to take an interpreter from among these people. Surely you know that seizing someone through whom we can become familiar with this land would in no small way carry out my aspirations.⁴

Throughout the fifteenth century this expedient became a settled policy that played a major part in the success of the exploration of the coasts. As this royal directive indicates, the key persons in this effort were Africans who, captured at the farthest point reached by each succeeding voyage, were taken to Portugal, placed in homes where they were baptized Christians, taught Portuguese, and then returned to their homelands with a later sailing, to serve as interpreters.⁵

Complicating the application of this policy was the very great number of African languages encountered as exploration proceeded southward. A modern African historian writes that "many dozens of languages are spoken on the windward coast. Hence people had been living in isolated groups for a long time."⁶ On the Guinea coast alone there were more than 25 distinct languages which are still spoken today.⁷ Interpreters had to be found and trained for each new tribal group encountered. Every ship was to have on board an interpreter who knew the language of the last trading post reached by a previous voyage and it was hoped of the coast that lay just beyond it. These interpreters were used to scout the shore of the next area, take their blows (sometimes death) to acquire information about new peoples, explain the interests of the Portuguese crown, identify goods wanted in trade, and negotiate agreements. Their work made possible the earnings in trade that supported economically the systematic exploration of Africa's long seacoast.

In 1441, on the fourth exploratory voyage, the first captives were taken near Rio D'Ouro. They were Asanegues, who were desert people, not black Africans, and spoke a Berber language that was not understood by the one interpreter of Arabic on board the ships. Among the Berber captives, however, was a man named Adahu who could speak Arabic. He provided the only communication that could be effected between Berber and Portuguese speakers. He and eleven other Berber captives were taken to Portugal where Adahu gave to Prince Henry his first significant information about Africa below Cape Bojador. He also persuaded Prince Henry to send him and several of his companions back to Africa where, Adahu assured him, his Berber people would surely be willing to ransom them by offering in exchange ten black Africans from more inte-

⁴Azurara, *Chronica*, p. 60; (Eng. ed.) Beazley, *Chronicle*, p. 35.

⁵Azurara, *Chronica*, pp. 109-110, 135-138; (Eng. ed.) Beazley, *Chronicle*, pp. 64, 65, 83-85; G.R. Crone, tr. and ed., *The Voyages of Cadamosto and Other Documents on Western Africa in the Second Half of the Fifteenth Century* [Includes the Voyages of Diogo Gomes and Pero de Sintra] (London: Hakluyt Society, 1937), pp. 55, 56, 84; João de Barros, *Decadas da India*, 10 Decadas, (Lisboa, 1777-1788), vol. 1, bk. 1, ch. 6, p. 50; Vitorino Magalhães Godinho, *Documentos Sobre a Expansão Portuguesa*, 3 vols. (Lisboa, 1943-56) *Doc. II*, p. 173 (n.10).

⁶Christopher Frye, "People of the Windward Coast," *A Thousand Years of West African History*, ed. J.F.A. de Adayi and Ian Espie (Nigeria, 1965), p. 150.

⁷P.E.H. Hair, "Ethnolinguistic Continuity in the Guinea Coast," *Journal of African History* 8, 1967, p. 247 ff; P.E.H. Hair, "The Contribution of Early Linguistic Material to the History of West Africa," in David Dalby, ed., *Language and History in Africa* (New York, 1970), pp. 55, 56.