New Introduction to the Reprinting of P. E. H. Hair’s
*The Early Study of Nigerian Languages*

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In the Preface to the original edition, P. E. H. Hair confesses apologetically that he is not a linguist. A quarter of a century later, it seems clear that the continued scholarly value of his very interesting monograph is due precisely to the fact that it was written with the sensitivity and perspective that only an excellent historian could provide. Not only is this book a valuable bibliographic tool for linguists, it is also a wonderful study in miniature of the intellectual history of Nigeria in particular and West Africa in general. It contributes to the history of West Africa by providing an appreciation of the richness of the early linguistic sources available and by painting a picture of the 19th century individuals who carried out the pioneer research (see also Hair 1970; Heintze and Jones 1987).

Although Hair’s monograph, which consists of three self-contained chapters, was restricted to 19th century studies, it would seem that the best way to bring it up to date would be to cite recent general surveys of a bibliographic nature covering the languages that he treated. (Meier’s (1984) massive bibliography of African languages in general is also relevant here and should not be overlooked.) To begin with, there are two essential works that provide an over-all inventory of the 350 or so languages and ethnic groups that are found in Nigeria, a number that far surpasses Hair’s estimate of “well over one hundred” (p. 1), namely Hansford, Bendor-Samuel, and Stanford (1976) and Wente-Lukas (1985). With respect to Yoruba (chap. 1), which can boast an enormous amount of vernacular literature in addition to linguistic studies, Adewole (1987) is the most important additional bibliographic source. For Hausa and Kanuri (chap. 2), we [p. x] are fortunate in having Baldi (1977), Newman (1974) and Newman (1991) [for Hausa], and Hutchison (1977) and Seidensticker and Adamu (1986) [for Kanuri]. Valuable supplementary information on the languages of the Lower Niger and Benue region (chap. 3) is to be found in Anafulu (1971) Ekpiken (1970), Gundu and Jockers (1985), Ita (1971), and Ombu (1970).
If one had to point out any flaw in Hair’s book, it would have to be the omission of Fulani (= Fulfulde = Fula = Peul). It is true, as Hair notes (p. 1n), that Fulani extends throughout West Africa, far beyond the reaches of Nigeria, and that the earliest studies of the language tended to focus on dialects spoken in Senegal; nevertheless, excluding it from this book gives the false impression that Fula is not a major language of Nigeria, whereas it indeed is. There are, of course, many people of Fulani ancestry in northern Nigeria who have lost their original language and now speak only Hausa, the so-called “Hausa-Fulani” of the historian, the political scientist, and the popular press; but, in terms of number of speakers, Fulani still remains one of the dozen largest languages in the country. To be complete, the update provided here thus should include the bibliographies by Seydou (1977) and McIntosh (1991).

Hair’s book appeared as number 7 in the West African Language Monograph series. During its ten years of existence from 1964–1974, the series included works by many of the scholars who were to go on to epitomize modern African linguistic research in post-colonial West Africa. The complete series included the following works (in chronological order): Ladefoged (1964), Williamson (1965), Sapir (1965), Crabb (1965), Bamgbose (1966), Innes (1967), Hair (1967), Carrell (1970), and Newman (1974). It is thus fitting, in reprinting Hair’s monograph, that his study of the history of West African linguistic scholarship in the 19th century can itself be said to constitute a part of that intellectual history in the century that followed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


