Looking for Interpreter Zero: (10) The Guinea Coast Interpreters–Part I

In search of ivory, gold and slaves, the Portuguese explored the west coast of Africa in the 1400s - and quickly realized they would need interpreters.

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… they were to contrive to bring away a negro … so that he might be interrogated through the many negro interpreters to be found in Portugal, or in the course of time might learn to speak, so that he could give an account of his country.” [ii]

In the 1400s, navigators commissioned by the Portuguese royal family started to sail along the Guinea Coast, the shoreline from the Senegal River to South Angola. They hoped to obtain directly from the source the goods that were traditionally bought from Moorish merchants in North Africa. There was no need to brave the interior as the trading centres that developed on the coast provided them with what they were after: ivory, gold and slaves. Their approach, with its minimal settlement and reliance on middlemen had an interesting side-effect: the development of a class of intermediaries who facilitated the foreigners’ dealings with African rulers and traders. Theirs is a strong but often nameless presence from the early Portuguese navigation on the coast through to that of eighteenth-century British slavers.

There is evidence of the use of interpreters on the earliest of these voyages.

At first, when the ships had not yet gone beyond the Sahara coast, these translators were Arabs or Arabic-speaking Europeans. Of course, as the voyages progressed southward, Arabic became less and less useful as a contact medium.” [iii]

Arabic was used as the language of communication with some Berber captives taken to Lisbon from the Rio de Oro region (ex-Spanish Sahara) in 1442 since one of them could speak it. It was decided, however, that it would be best for the group to be taught Portuguese and it became common practice to take Africans back to Portugal for training.

The need for such interpreters was clear. In 1456 Gomes Pirez tried to show his peaceful intent by placing a cake, a mirror and a piece of paper with a cross drawn on it on the shore.

And the natives when they came there and found these things, broke up the cake and threw it away, and with their spears they cast at the mirror till they smashed it, and the paper they tore." [iii]

It appears that Prince Henry the Navigator, sponsor of fifteenth-century Portuguese exploration of
Africa, gave explicit instructions to the ships’ captains to capture potential interpreters. He was aware that silent trade might be possible if it was a matter of exchanging goods in straightforward transactions, but any real communication would require a common language or intermediaries. Portuguese did become a lingua franca in the sixteenth-century but until it was more widely-spoken, Portuguese-speaking Africans were used. They and other slaves taken on the coast meant that by 1500 there were more slaves in Lisbon than elsewhere in Europe; black people from the Guinea Coast made up 15% of the city’s population. [iv]

Alvise Cadamosto, the Italian navigator who explored the coast of Africa for Henry the Navigator in 1448 and 1449, confirmed the general reliance on interpreters. On his 1448 journey he hired some from their Portuguese owners; his fee was to be one new slave per interpreter taken on the journey. (Any interpreter who captured four new slaves for his master was to be freed.) His account makes frequent reference to the interpreters’ mission to convey peaceful intent and interest in trade. They were not always successful: one interpreter sent to shore to investigate trade possibilities was killed. Cadamosto regretted that the Africans “… must be very cruel to do such a thing to a negro of their own race.” [v] On another occasion, a local inhabitant boarded his ship and offered to take him to meet one Lord Batimaussa. The meeting took place, with an interpreter conveying eagerness to trade, and resulted in gold and slaves for the Europeans.

Any lack of communication was discouraging and it was bound to occur on a continent with some 400 languages. On the Rio Grande (now the Jeba), two canoes approached, waving a white flag tied to an oar. The voyagers responded in kind.

Then I, wishing to gain information of this people, caused my interpreters to speak with them, but none of them could understand what was said, nor could those on the other caravels.” [vi]

The same thing happened in the Bissagros Islands (off modern-day Guinea-Bissau), causing the party to return to Europe with yet more captives to add to the pool of interpreters.

By 1482, Portuguese interest in trade with West Africans was such that it seemed advisable to build a castle on the Gold Coast – São Jorge Da Miña, now Elmina Castle. The account of Diogo da Azambuja’s negotiations with King Caramansa (Kwamin Ansah) is full of pomp, circumstance - and interpretation. The king was formally greeted with music playing and then he in turn made his gesture of peace,

which was to touch his fingers and then to snap the one with the other, saying in his language 'Bere, bere', which in ours means 'Peace, peace'; the captain returned the compliment … When all were again seated and a signal for silence given, the captain began his speech, with the aid of a negro, familiar with the language, who forwith interpreted it.” [vii]

The fort went up quickly as prefabricated sections had been brought from Portugal. The construction was not without incident or conflict, however, as the outsiders made use of some rocks that were sacred to local people. The settlement had long-term effects on the region, its people and its languages, to be considered in a later piece.

To read earlier chapters of Looking for Interpreter Zero click here.

Read Part 2 here.


[v] Crone, p 56.

[vi] Ibid, p 76.


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