

Bailey-bridge to oil doom:  
Kay Williamson reveals S.I.L.'s official role in the maladministration of the post-Biafran Niger Delta

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12 June 2007, updated 24 June/2 July 2007

Unexpectedly perhaps, the 23rd Congress of the West African Linguistics Society (University of Buea, Cameroun, August 2002) heard an insider's tale of how the ostensibly nationalist *régimes* of Generals Gowon, Murítaalá and Ọ́basanjó helped Euro-American missionaries subvert community control of minority first-language literacy in the Niger Delta, even before the end of the Nigerian Civil War. Not by coincidence, the Delta at that time was well on its way to becoming the resource-extraction sacrifice area, and theater of oil doom, which it remains today.

The 2002 paper, eventually published as Williamson (2006), merits study. Compared to earlier accounts of the Rivers Readers Project by the same author (1975, 1976, 1979), her last review is more critical of the government effort, partnered by “initial take-off grants from UNESCO and the Ford Foundation,... to enable children of the Rivers State in Nigeria to learn to read and write in their own language” (Williamson 2006, 98). Williamson, the project's intellectual head, shared her downbeat retrospective near the close of a brilliant career in the comparative and synchronic linguistics of the Niger Delta region—a career which began with a magnificent Izõn grammar (Williamson 1965) and continued through four decades of strenuous research and writing, university teaching and administration (Óhirí-Àníchè 2005).<sup>1</sup>

Evaluating “how far we succeeded and failed” (p. 100), Williamson mentions some early groundrules:

The committee agreed to encourage grassroots participation as much as possible, and treat all the languages equally. Because the project operated in an area of great linguistic diversity (the old Rivers State of Nigeria), we had to establish the communities involved. We took them to be those who were self-defined as speaking the same language. This meant that in some cases communities whose speech-forms were mutually intelligible were treated as distinct... We adopted the term ‘local language’ to name the entities for whom a single reader was provided; this cannot be equated with either ‘language’ or ‘dialect’ as usually defined by linguists. In the early days, we contacted individuals from the communities involved and asked them to invite others to form a language committee. (pp. 98f)

Orthographic separation of mutually intelligible languages, and sidelining of indigenous politics through appointments from above, were undoubtedly easier in a zone only just reconquered from Biafran separatists and still facing a heavy presence of federal troops. In being able to pick and choose their local collaborators—a role with historical precedent (Gailey 1970; Áfiigbo 1972)—the scientific staff were somewhat conscious of their political role:

The language committee formed a bridge between the community and the Rivers Readers Committee, and the Rivers Readers Committee formed another bridge between the community and the Rivers State Government. (p. 100)

In practice, however, this “bridge” was only a Bailey-bridge ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bailey\\_bridge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bailey_bridge).)—a temporary expedient designed to open occupied terrain to outside forces, as Williamson goes on to explain:

Because the original members of the Rivers Readers Committee were academics with full-time university posts, we were unable to spend as much time as we would have liked on checking how things were going. [...] In many language communities, we were able to work with people, especially retired teachers, who were both knowledgeable and enthusiastic about their languages. Quite a number of such people already had, or were inspired to create, books of their own, which they often asked us to help get published. Where these were initial readers, we had to regretfully decline, as we already had our own pattern; [...] Finally, in communities where the SIL, later succeeded by the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust, had already begun work and were producing readers following a different pattern, we arranged to accept their books into the project and publish them with our cover design where requested. (p. 100)

In this passage, Kay doesn't hide that Nigerian Bible Translation Trust was the cover of WBT/SIL, a multinational mission first expelled from Nigeria in 1967 then for the second time in 1976 — a pattern later repeated in Latin America (Stoll 1982, 243f, 320; cf. Diamond 1989). She also says that independent language text were systematically

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1. At the outset, I emphasize how lucky I have been to learn from Kay, about the phonology and syntax of southern Nigerian languages., not just from her scholarship but also during my times in the country between 1976 and 1987. Whether engaged in research, university teaching or federal consultant work on Pan-Nigerian typography, I never lacked Kay's analytical and pragmatic help, even as theoretical and political disagreements emerged which eventually led me to dismiss her “Lower Niger” and “New Kwa/New Benue-Congo” hypotheses (Manfredi 1989, 2006). Between the lines of her 2002 W.A.L.S. address echoes a tone of regret which is understandable given the abjection of the Niger Delta and its peoples for whom Kay felt such obvious sympathy. This brief note is therefore intended in a constructive spirit, to further the reassessment which she broached in 2002.

rejected if authored by Niger Deltans, but automatically stapled between Rivers Readers Project covers if produced by WBT/SIL. Why? On this point, Williamson is less frank but makes one telling remark:

After the first reader, we tried to go on to a more advanced one. Texts were produced in a number of languages, but the only ones published were those handled by the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust teams who were, unlike us, full-time on the job and were only dealing with one or two languages [*per team* --VM]. Apart from the shortage of time to properly check the texts, we lacked money to produce them. (p. 101)

Williamson concludes pessimistically:

The Ministry of Education proved unable to ensure the distribution of the books to the schools as arranged or to ensure that they were used in the classrooms. [...] The absence of this requirement reinforced the existing perception of the local language as unimportant compared with English. [...] This perception, a deep-seated prejudice stemming from attitudes instilled in the colonial era, can only be modified by an active campaign, by increasing numbers of committed people, leading to a new vision of the place of local languages in relation to English; we were unable to achieve it. I present this largely negative picture with reluctance. I would like to point to signs of hope, but there seems to be few of these. (p. 102)

Overall, this insider's description is a proverbial 'smoking Bible', confirming that Rivers State explicitly allowed WBT/SIL to control minority language teaching materials. Before considering why, a useful 'reality-check' is provided by the Ogoni martyr Kenule Saro-Wiwa who, after seeing the town of Ogale near Port Harcourt in June 1968, described it in a poem (1989, 201) which includes these lines:

*A lone lean dog  
Scrounging for food  
Reaps human skulls  
In a shallow gutter.*

Reaching Port Harcourt a few days later, Saro found that "[c]itizens of the state were brutalized and locked up on the flimsiest excuse" by Federal troops (1989, 202). With misgivings, he joined Rivers State Government six months later as Commissioner of Works, Land & Transport (1989, 206), a full year before the remaining Biafran leaders—minus Òjúkwú who'd fled to Abidjan—finally turned themselves in to 3 Marine Commando in Òweré (Òbásanjó 1980, 133).

From his temporary government perch, Saro watched with alarm as the Federal Minister of Finance, Chief Awólòwò—not long after receiving Gowon's reprieve from his own spell of political imprisonment—"recommended the destruction of derivation as a basis for allocating federally-collected revenue" (Saro-Wiwa 1989, 217). In the event, the derivation principle remained on paper, but Rivers people:

...were soon to know that as minorities in a Nigeria seen to be the preserve of the three majority ethnic groups, our resources were to be purloined remorselessly for the overwhelming benefit of the latter. (p. 217)

Under General Gowon's

decree modifying the system of revenue allocation which became effective on April 1, 1970, a sizeable chunk of the oil revenue of Mid-Western and Rivers States was seized from them and transferred to the Federal Government. [...] Those of us who had placed so much hope on the emergence of a new society were to feel a great sense of betrayal in the years after the war. (p. 387)

State addiction to OPEC-era oil rents, and to less liquid indulgences from U.S. and British administrations and oil companies, further centralized the Nigerian economy and entrenched army rule there for a quarter-century (Naanen 1995) until 10 November 1995, the day General Abacha hanged Saro and eight other Ogonis (Ámadí 1996). Some three years later, after General Abacha and his prisoner President-Elect Abíólá had both died in still-mysterious circumstances, same-old General Òbásanjó alias "Baba" (Olise & Oluwòle 2007) was recycled as civilian head of state through electoral tricks worthy of Jeb Bush's Florida, and the squeezing of the Delta continued for eight more years through the end of Baba's second reign (Okonta & Douglas 2001; Douglas *et al.* 2003; Rowell *et al.* 2005; Polgreen 2006; Ghazvanian 2007). During all this time, U.S.-based pentecostal churches did not cease to spread across the region, but more than ever before also appeared local armed resistance to the oil industry and its government protectors (Okonta 2007).

Williamson's late but unflinching take on Rivers State language policy helps explain how "genocide" (Saro-Wiwa 1992) could proceed alongside an official intention to allow "grassroots participation as much as possible" (Williamson 2006, 98). There's no mystery: a similar convergence marked WBT/SIL's operations in Latin America, where Rockefeller oil companies and Cold War death squads rolled across indigenous peoples literally in synch with Cam Townsend's bush Bible corps (Hart 1973; Colby & Dennett 1995). SIL professions of concern at "language endangerment" (Krauss 1992, 4) are at best "paternalistic" (Ladefoged 1992, 810), eloquently unaccompanied by protests at paramilitary massacres in their zones of operation. By her own admission, Kay's committee helped the SIL to

run minority literacy in the Niger Delta under an assumed name, and helped the Nigerian army and successor regimes to bypass literate, organic intellectuals whose voluntary participation the committee chose to “regretfully decline” (2006, 100). In this way, Rivers Readers Project enacted a paradigm of “artificial negativity” (Piccone 1977), knowingly dividing communities of mutual intelligibility into postwar-invented, easier dominated ethnicities: “local languages” or “small languages” (Williamson 2006, 99; 1979).<sup>2</sup>

On the other track, and to her enduring credit, Williamson also fostered indigenous scholars including a substantial Ogoni grammar (Ikoro 1996), but it was too little too late: Ikoro’s high-quality work was completed, ironically enough, only a few kilometers from Shell World Headquarters in North Amsterdam, and only a few months before the defiantly resistant necks of Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogonis were finally broken with the collusion of Brian Anderson, Shell’s managing director in Nigeria (Ghazi 1995; Wiwa 1996, cf. Lean 1995).

Thus some primary history of the Rivers Readers Project, told dramatically though “with reluctance” (p. 102) in Kay Williamson’s own words, illustrates an even more forthright thesis about the objective limitations of field linguistics as a means of progressive social intervention:

In conclusion, I feel compelled to say that some of the suggestions I have made above must be considered utopian until there are fundamental changes within this society. The required redistribution of wealth, of power and of opportunity to engage in intellectual endeavor which will enable local communities to develop their cultural resources can be achieved only under a form of socialism which seems an extremely remote possibility in a country whose government at present serves a ruling class dedicated to preventing change toward socialism over most of the world. In this is also to be found the key to a problem which is important to all sciences—namely, the problem of ensuring that knowledge is used for, rather than against, the people. (Hale 1972, 394f)

Such unflattering self-awareness by academic intervenors—awareness which Professor Williamson publicly shared towards the end of her own life—demands self-critical contextualization. In area studies generally, the problem becomes more urgent as negative globalization proceeds (Barnes 2004). But what to do? Civil society has invoked boycotts against *Apartheid* Zuid Afrika and Israel (Ascherson 2007; <http://www.israel-divest.org>), and with such precedents implicit in mind, the Linguistic Society of America was recently told that “partnership between academic linguistics and SIL/Wycliffe should... be abandoned” on the grounds that “[m]issionary linguists... engage in coercion” and that “the mission endeavor... contradicts self-determination” (Epps 2007; Epps 2006; Epps & Ladley 2007). But even granting all the facts, a tactic of intellectual exclusion is still obliged to answer classical liberal objections. One such response is the theory of “repressive tolerance”:<sup>3</sup>

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2. The same authoritarian process proceeded on the national scale in Gowon’s preemptive creation of 12 states on the eve of the war (Dudley 1973), continuing through the civilian interregnum (Joseph 1987) and two more army *juntas* to yield the present 36-state structure which facilitates one-party civil rule. More abstractly:

The process of homogenization and fragmentation meant to destroy or integrate all pre-capitalist and entrepreneurial capitalist left-overs in order to usher in the full domination of capital in its advanced and state-directed phase turned out to be too successful for the system’s own good. [...] Thus the system is forced to reconstitute artificially that negativity which it had hitherto sought to ruthlessly eliminate... (Piccone 1977, 33f)

Other examples of state-sponsored opposition in dominated social space include not just overt ethnic gambits like *Apartheid Bantustans* (Biko 1972) or Likud promotion of Hamas in post-1967 occupied Palestinian lands (Hanania 2003), but also ostensible economic reforms such as New Deal/ColdWar recognition of U.S. industrial unions [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress\\_of\\_Industrial\\_Organizations](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congress_of_Industrial_Organizations). Such moves can backfire: although postwar antagonism between Ìgbo and non-Ìgbo speakers in the Niger Delta was stoked by the Rivers Readers Project, smoothing the federal oil grab, heightened resistance to Ọbásanjó’s second reign has evoked new solidarity between Izõn and Ìgbo separatist movements (Olise & Oluwole 2007).

3. A currently pointed example of “false tolerance” is how corporate right-wing talk radio and punditry rules the U.S. broadcast commons. This striking outcome, though technically unintended, has been analyzed as

the result of multiple structural problems in the U.S. regulatory system, particularly the complete breakdown of the public trustee concept of broadcast, the elimination of clear public interest requirements for broadcasting, and the relaxation of ownership rules including the requirement of local participation in management”. (Halpin & al. 2007)

Without recognizing this colonization of public discourse, part of the “manufacture of consent” (Lippmann 1922, quoted by Chomsky & Herman 1988), it’s impossible to explain the astonishing fact that

more than four years into the war in Iraq, as many as four in ten Americans (41 percent) still believe Saddam Hussein’s regime was directly involved in financing, planning or carrying out the terrorist attacks on 9/11, even though no evidence has surfaced to support a connection. (Braiker 2007)

[T]he conditions of tolerance are “loaded”: they are determined and defined by institutionalized inequality. ... In such a society, tolerance is *de facto* limited... by the predominant interests and their “connections”. (Marcuse 1965, 84f)

Conversely, the assertion is that

political rights (including both speech and practice)... are politically regressive insofar as they encourage, sustain and mystify the nature of domination... in the marketplace of ideas. (Lichtman 1988, 198)

Interpreting this premise pessimistically in light of the twin horrors of Nazism and Stalinism, leads to conclude

that the ways should not be blocked on which a subversive majority could develop, and if they are blocked by organized repression and indoctrination, their reopening may require apparently undemocratic means. They would include the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination... [T]his distinction is not a matter of value-preference but of rational criteria. (Marcuse 1965, 100f)

Kay herself was not opposed to boycotts, on the contrary she herself publicly refused to attend the 34th Annual Conference on African Linguistics, held at Rutgers University in New Jersey in June 2003, by way of a personal protest against the U.S. invasion of Iraq (C. Óhirí-Ànichè, p.c.). For this reason, it's not easy to say how long Kay's professional tolerance for the SIL would have lasted. By the time of her address in Buea, it was already wearing thin.

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