

Mem  
 PL  
 + 8017  
 H35  
 1992

## BARBOT'S WEST AFRICAN VOCABULARIES

Jean Barbot's vocabularies of four West African languages were for long known only through their inclusion in the printed version of Barbot's account of Guinea. This account he first wrote, in French, in the mid 1680s, but an enlarged version, in English, finalized at his death in 1712, was not published until 1732.<sup>1</sup> The vocabularies were actually collected during Barbot's two voyages to Guinea, in 1678-9 and 1681-2. His journal of the first voyage has survived, and when this was published in 1979 an earlier version of one vocabulary, the Gold Coast one, became available in print.<sup>2</sup> Earlier versions of all four vocabularies were copied by Barbot, apparently from journals of both voyages, into the French account, an edition of which will be published by the Hakluyt Society in 1992.<sup>3</sup> That edition will not contain the vocabularies, which are instead printed and examined in the present publication.

The four vocabularies are of the Wolof and Fula languages of Senegal, of the Akan/Twi language of 'Gold Coast' (modern Ghana), and of the Ewe/Fon language of Dahomey (today 'Benin'). In his printed account Barbot also included a brief and hybrid vocabulary allegedly of a language spoken at New Calabar (in modern Nigeria), and this is discussed in Appendix A below. A vocabulary of Manding wrongly attributed to Barbot is discussed in Appendix B.

\* \* \*

From their first arrival on the coasts of Black Africa, Europeans wrote down occasional terms in African languages, and from the sixteenth century onwards short lists of useful words and phrases in a few of the very many

<sup>1</sup> John Barbot, *A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea ...* (London, 1732), 414-20. To match the Hakluyt Society edition, this text will in subsequent annotation be cited as 1732.

<sup>2</sup> Gabriel Debien, Maurice Delafosse and Guy Thilmans, eds, 'Journal d'un voyage de traite en Guinée, à Cayenne et aux Antilles fait par Jean Barbot en 1678-1679', *Bulletin de l'Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire*, sér. B, 40 (1978) [1979], 235-395. To match the Hakluyt Society edition, the journal will in subsequent annotation be cited as 1679. The text of the vocabulary as given in this edition has been checked against that of the original manuscript (British Library, Add. 28788) by Dr Adam Jones and myself and a few errors in the edition have been detected. Hence certain terms in the list below vary slightly from the forms given in the edition.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Barbot, 'Description de la Côte d'Afrique, depuis le Cap Bojador jusques à celui de Lopo Gonzalves' (Public Record Office, London, ADM 7/830 A and B; Adam Jones, Robin Law and P.E.H.Hair, *Barbot on Guinea: the writings of Jean Barbot 1678-1712*, 2 vols, Hakluyt Society, London, 1992. To match the edition, this text will in subsequent annotation be cited as 1688 (this being the date of its completion).

languages of the West African coast found their way into print.<sup>4</sup> Jean Barbot, a young commercial agent aboard French slaving vessels, collected c.1680 vocabularies of five African languages. One vocabulary he mislaid and never recovered.<sup>5</sup> But four fairly extensive ones he included in both his French and English accounts of Guinea. Substantial vocabularies of one of the languages, Akan/Twi, had been collected and put into print earlier in the century, and a publication in another of the languages, Ewe, had appeared. Barbot copied into his French account one of the earlier Akan/Twi vocabularies, and later printed it, together with his own vocabulary.<sup>6</sup> But Barbot's vocabularies of

---

<sup>4</sup> I have discussed the earliest collection by Europeans of terms in African languages, all known pre-Barbot vocabularies of western Africa, and various later collections of vocabularies, in the following articles: 'The use of African languages in Afro-European contacts in Guinea 1440-1560', *Sierra Leone [later African] Language Review*, 5 (1966), 5-26; 'Ethnolinguistic continuity on the Guinea coast', *Journal of African History*, 8 (1967), 247-268; 'An ethnolinguistic inventory of the Upper Guinea coast before 1700', 'An ethnolinguistic inventory of the Lower Guinea coast before 1700', *African Language Review*, 6 (1967), 32-70; 7 (1968), 47-73; 8 (1969), 225-256; 'The contribution of early linguistic material to the history of West Africa' in D. Dalby, ed., *Language and History in Africa* (1970), 50-63; 'Collections of vocabularies of Western Africa before the Polyglotta: a key', *Journal of African Languages*, 5 (1966), 208-217; 'The languages of Western Africa c.1770: a note and a query', *Bulletin of the Society for African Church History*, 1/1 (April 1963), 17-20; 'A further note on Oldendorp's informants', *Plantation Society in the Americas*, 2/3 (1989), 343; 'An introduction to John Clarke's "Specimens of Dialects..." 1848/9', *Sierra Leone Language Review*, 5 (1966), 72-82. The following articles are more specific in relation to individual languages; [with D. Dalby] 'Le languaige de Guynee: a sixteenth century vocabulary from the Pepper Coast', *African Language Studies*, 5 (1964), 174-191; 'An early seventeenth-century vocabulary of Vai', *African Studies*, 23 (1964), 129-139; 'A note on De La Fosse's "Mina" vocabulary of 1479-80', *Journal of West African Languages*, 3 (1966), 55-57; [with D. Dalby] 'A further note on the Mina vocabulary of 1479-80', *ibid.*, 5 (1968), pp 129-132; [with D. Dalby] 'A West African word of 1456', *ibid.*, 4 (1967), 13-14; 'The earliest vocabularies of Cameroons Bantu', *African Studies*, 28 (1969), 49-54; 'Early Kanuri vocabularies', *Journal of West African Languages*, 6 (1969), 27-29; 'Early Gold Coast vocabularies', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, 11 1970, 123. For comparison of the West African experience with that of certain other regions of Black Africa, see the following articles: 'The brothers Tutschek and their Sudanese informants', *Sudan Notes and Records*, 50 (1969), 53-62; 'Milho, meixoeira and other foodstuffs of the Sofala garrison, 1505-1525', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines*, 17 (1977), 353-63; 'Portuguese contacts with the Bantu languages of the Transkei, Natal and southern Mozambique 1497-1650', *African Studies*, 39 (1980), 3-46; 'The earliest extant wordlist of Swahili, 1613', *ibid.*, 40 (1981), 151-153 (correcting William Payton to Walter Payton). For post-Barbot West African vocabularies, see also Edwin Ardener's edition of the 1972 reprint of John Clarke, *Specimens of dialects ...* (Berwick-upon-Tweed, 1848); and a series of articles on the vocabularies in S.W. Koelle, *Polyglotta Africana* (London, 1854; reprint Graz, 1963) appearing in *Sierra Leone [later African] Language Review*, vols 3-8 (1964-9).

<sup>5</sup> "I would have given you another [vocabulary], that of the Quabes-Mounou, who occupy the banks of River Sess and the neighbourhood, but unfortunately I have mislaid my record of it ..." (1688, 2/193 (in translation); cf. 1732, 414, "... have lost that paper"). The vocabulary was presumably one of Krao, or at least of one of the Kra languages, and it would have been the only substantial vocabulary of any of those languages before the nineteenth century - for an earlier collection of a few terms, see Dalby and Hair, "'Le languaige de Guynee" (previous note).

<sup>6</sup> For the Akan vocabulary of P[ieter]. D[e]. M[arees], *Beschryvinghe ende historische verhael van het Gout Koninckrijck van Gunea* (Amsterdam, 1602), 125-9, the vocabulary reprinted by Barbot (in 1688, 194-5; cf. 1732, 415-6), see the English translation, ed. Albert van Dantzig

the two Senegal languages, Wolof and Fula, were among the earliest vocabularies of these particular languages to be collected and certainly the earliest to appear in print - even although they did not in fact appear until half a century after they were collected.<sup>7</sup> For all four languages Barbot's vocabularies, despite their patent limitations and defects, provide valuable evidence of linguistic and cultural continuity and change. And, as it happens, these four languages relate to large ethnicities, important, in terms of the historical development of West Africa, not only in the past but also today.

### Collecting the vocabularies

The vocabulary of the language Barbot termed 'Gold Coast', i.e. Akan/Twi, was collected in 1679, as indicated by the journal of the 1678-9 voyage, at an unstated place on the Gold Coast, on an unstated date or unstated dates, but most probably in February. Before inserting the vocabulary in his journal Barbot commented briefly thus. "As to their language, it is something like Bas-Breton ... Here are a few of the words more commonly used among them which I obtained from a slave who spoke Portuguese and which I have arranged alphabetically, apart from the numbers and a few other forms of speech which I have put one after the other, for quicker consultation."<sup>8</sup> This is all that Barbot tells us about the mode of collection. He obtained the vocabulary from an African informant, presumably a speaker of Akan/Twi, but we are not told whether the informant was interviewed ashore, or aboard the ship, or even, if he was a slave for export, during the Atlantic passage. The reference to his speaking Portuguese is intriguing. Barbot's own command of that language seems to have been meagre and this may indicate that a third party translated for Barbot, a procedure which would most likely have

---

and Adam Jones, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)* (Oxford, 1987), 246-59, which identifies the terms. For the Akan vocabulary of Wilhelm Johann Müller, published in 1673, see Adam Jones, *German sources for West African history 1599-1699* (Wiesbaden, 1983), 269-328, which identifies the terms and relates some to terms in Barbot's vocabulary. For material in Ewe, see Hair, 'Ethnolinguistic continuity', 257; 'Ethnolinguistic inventory ... Lower Guinea coast', 230 and note 57.

<sup>7</sup> Only odd words of Wolof and Fula were collected, or at least were written down in extant sources, manuscript or printed. See Hair, 'Ethnolinguistic inventory ... Upper Guinea coast', 34-7. Substantial vocabularies of both languages were however collected by agents of a French *Compagnie Royale*, at an uncertain date c.1700, perhaps even in the later 1680s or 1690s (but probably not earlier because the set of nearly a dozen vocabularies collected for the company included vocabularies of several languages located south of River Gambia in a region only penetrated by the French after 1685). The Company vocabularies of Wolof and Fula are therefore later than 1682, the date of Barbot's collection. In content Barbot's vocabularies bear little resemblance to the Company's vocabularies. Barbot's vocabularies also preceded the Company's in print, the Company's vocabularies remaining in manuscript until the nineteenth century ([M.A.P. d'Avezac de Castera-Maya], 'Dictionnaire de langues française et nègres dont se sert dans la concession de la Compagnie Royale du Sénégal', *Mémoires de la Société Ethnologique de Paris* 2 (1845), 205-67). In general, these vocabularies even today have not been adequately described or studied. But in the course of studying Barbot's Wolof vocabulary, M. Charles Becker of the Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique in Senegal, compared Barbot's terms with those of the Company vocabulary, and he reported (in a personal communication of 1986) that the latter was more reliable in its phonetic and semantic representation of Wolof terms.

<sup>8</sup> 1679, 340.

introduced a further measure of phnoetic and semantic confusion. However, it is possible that by 'Portuguese' Barbot was referring to a simplified pidgin language thought to have been often spoken at the time in Gold Coast (and taking its name from the earlier Portuguese presence), whose Romance content derived from standard Portuguese may have enabled it to be grasped with fair ease by a Frenchman (and perhaps particularly one who also claimed to have some knowledge of Italian). It is plausible that verbal communication was helped out by sign language - as was normally the case in Afro-European contacts. Whatever the mode of collection, and although there appear to be occasional errors of meaning in the African terms, study of the vocabulary does not give the impression that its collection entailed regular and gross misunderstandings.

The other three vocabularies must have been collected on the 1681-2 voyage - the journal of which is not extant - although Barbot never actually specifies this or refers to the mode of collection. But since on his first voyage he did not visit either Senegal or any part of the coast where Ewe was spoken, there can be little doubt that these vocabularies were collected later than the Gold Coast vocabulary. Almost certainly the Wolof and Fula vocabularies were collected when Barbot visited the French base of Gorée Island (off modern Dakar), over a period of some weeks, in December 1681; and the Ewe vocabulary when he visited the port of Whydah, very briefly, in April 1682 - he terms the language that of "Juda and Ardres", i.e. Whydah and Allada, but never visited the latter place. Barbot was in contact with French officers, certainly at Gorée, as he related, and probably at Whydah, as he failed to relate; and it is very likely that he obtained the vocabularies through these contacts. Since at a slightly later date the French trading company in Senegal appears to have arranged for its officers to collect a series of vocabularies of local African languages, it is possible that already its officers were showing interest in the exercise of vocabulary collection.<sup>9</sup>

Whereas Barbot's statement about the Gold Coast vocabulary implies that he collected it orally, that is, he wrote down terms spoken to him by an informant, it is conceivable that the other vocabularies were not collected this way but were passed to him in writing, having been earlier collected orally by a French officer or French officers. The orthography of the African terms in all the vocabularies indicates that they were written down by someone used to writing contemporary French - and also that they had been heard by a French speaker's ear, although this is more difficult to prove - but this does not of course distinguish between Barbot and his compatriots.<sup>10</sup> It can be argued that since Barbot went to the trouble of obtaining a vocabulary orally from an African informant in 1679 he was capable of setting himself to do so again in 1681 and 1682. Furthermore, the later vocabularies undoubtedly follow the Gold Coast vocabulary in the selection of terms to be listed, therefore

---

<sup>9</sup> For the French Company vocabularies, see note 7 above.

<sup>10</sup> Barbot wisely drew attention in his English account to the French orthography, hence 'pronunciation', thus: "... only I fear the pronunciation of the English alphabet may cause some difficulty to render the pronunciation as intelligible to the natives of those different countries, as it is when spoken by a Frenchman, according to whose pronunciation I writ this vocabulary." But he was of course mistaken, through lack of linguistic knowledge, in supposing that French 'pronunciation' was an adequate representation of African phonetics.

Barbot did not simply copy vocabularies handed to him by others. Yet there is one argument in favour of an unknown collector. Not only did Barbot collect a vocabulary of the Fula language but he acquired a certain amount of information about the Fula people. The Fula lived far inland, it is unlikely that any resident groups were to be found on the coast, and Fula slaves were uncommon. But the French company did have officers who had been up-country and had contacted the Fula. There can be no doubt that Barbot gained information about the Fula from a French informant, and thus the possibility that the Fula vocabulary was collected by Barbot, not directly from an African, but from a Frenchman, cannot be easily dismissed. This argument does not apply with the same force to the Wolof vocabulary, since the Jolof lived on the coast and Barbot is known to have been in contact with individual Wolof speakers. Nevertheless it cannot be ruled out that Barbot also gained this vocabulary from a Frenchman, possibly even the same Frenchman. However, a compromise viewpoint, indicating perhaps the most likely procedure, is that Barbot contacted French officers who provided him with African informants. These may have been their own interpreters, in which case it may well have been a single African who spoke Wolof and Fula, command of both languages being not unlikely in a local agent of the French.

In the case of the Ewe vocabulary, we have even wider scope for speculation about its mode of collection. Although Barbot supplied an account of Whydah, at no point in his two texts did he actually refer to his having visited there (but we know he did, from the marking on a map of the course of his ship). He recorded the presence at Whydah of a handful of Frenchmen, the agents of a French company, together with one missionary. Thus he may have collected the vocabulary either from or through one of these Frenchmen, or else directly from an African, and if the latter, either ashore or aboard ship.<sup>11</sup>

We do not have the original form of any of the vocabularies. The Gold Coast vocabulary is first found in a clean copy of Barbot's voyage journal, prepared for presentation to his employers. But it must have been copied into this, from an original draft of the journal, if not directly from notes taken on the voyage; and it may have been copied twice, first from the notes into the rough journal and then again into the clean copy. The later vocabularies may similarly have found their way into a clean copy of a journal, but this is not extant, and they now first appear instead in Barbot's French account, into which they must have been copied either from the clean copy or, if Barbot was exercising care - which is doubtful - from his original notes. Thus the vocabularies as we find them, even in the earlier of Barbot's extant writings,

---

<sup>11</sup> Barbot was certainly willing to collect material orally from Africans. Apart from the Gold Coast vocabulary, he stated that he had collected a vocabulary at River Sess which he subsequently lost, and at this point on the coast there were no resident Europeans from whom he could have collected a written vocabulary or used as an oral informant. However, a further logical possibility needs to be considered, that the three vocabularies were not in fact collected on Barbot's second voyage but were supplied to him, therefore perhaps in writing, after his return to France, by acquaintances within the French company for which he worked, who had themselves collected them while serving in Africa. Barbot knew, for instance, a M. Mariage who it seems had served both in Senegal and at Allada, an Ewe-speaking district neighbouring Whydah. While this alternative mode of collection cannot be ruled out there is no evidence to support it and it seems very unlikely.

are copies, if not copies of copies. The significance of this is related to the nature of early vocabularies collected by Europeans. In general, Europeans did not understand the languages whose terms they were recording. Therefore, when copying they were copying what was to them so much gibberish, and they could not be guided, as when copying one's own language, by fore-knowledge when it came to deciphering what they (or others) had earlier written. That in Barbot's case mistakes occurred with each copying of sets of African terms can be proved by comparing versions of the same vocabulary, and in particular by comparing the two manuscript versions of the Gold Coast vocabulary, the one in the clean copy of the journal and the other in the French account written only half a dozen years later. And it is further suggested by comparing these versions with the version in the printed account of 1732, although of course here we must allow for misprints, the responsibility in this case solely of the printer and his proof-readers, since Barbot himself was no longer alive to check. As it happens, Barbot had a very clear hand, and no doubt because of this the number of proven miscopyings is limited. Nevertheless, what all this means is that, because we lack the original notes, it is more difficult to gain clues as to Barbot's mode of collection from an analysis of the vocabularies than it would otherwise be, since certain of the peculiarities may be the product not of the mode of collection but of the modes of transcription and transmission.

#### **Why did Barbot collect vocabularies?**

In the later version of his account Barbot included a vocabulary of Akan/Twi published, in 1602, in a Dutch work on Gold Coast by Pieter de Marees, a work Barbot extensively used for other information even in the earlier version of his account.<sup>12</sup> But Barbot's Gold Coast vocabulary first appeared in the journal of the 1678-9 voyage and this journal lacks evidence that at this earlier date Barbot was acquainted with the Dutch work. It would seem therefore that whatever persuaded him to collect a Gold Coast vocabulary in 1679, it was probably not the example of this particular earlier vocabulary or any desire to update the Dutch material. After his return to France in 1682, and after the generation of the idea that he should use what he had seen in Guinea and what he had recorded in his journals, in order to enlarge a proposed translation of the material on West Africa in a recent compilation on all Africa by another Dutchman, Olfried Dapper, Barbot began to read extensively in the early literature on West Africa in several languages. In these works, including that of De Marees, he could not fail to encounter examples of African terms and word lists of African languages.<sup>13</sup> Yet there is no trace of any such reading in the 1678-9 journal - if the missing 1681-2 journal did contain traces this might indicate that he began his reading

---

<sup>12</sup> See note 5 above.

<sup>13</sup> Barbot does not seem to have read German, or at least to have had any acquaintance with German writings, and there is no evidence that he knew of the Akan/Twi vocabulary in Müller's 1673 book. Dapper's work, in its section on West Africa which Barbot translated at length, quoted odd African-language terms and at one point ran through a large number, cited each separately within a text (see Hair, 'Vocabulary of Vai', note 4 above), yet it contained no formal vocabularies, not even the Akan/Twi vocabulary in De Marees, a work from which Dapper borrowed heavily.

during the course of his second voyage, and he certainly implies in the introduction to his later account that on this occasion he carried books with him. It is therefore plausible that the collection of a vocabulary in 1679 was his own idea. True, he was a man of some education, with a reading knowledge of several European languages, so that forming a vocabulary as a means of approaching an unfamiliar language would have been already part of his stock of ideas. Yet, since there is no evidence that he ever thought of acquiring competence in any African language, it is reasonable to ask why he troubled to collect African-language vocabularies.

It is plausible that Barbot collected the vocabularies partly out of curiosity, perhaps sharpened by the growing academic and scientific interest of the period in things exotic - he himself never explains his motives. But we can be sure that they included a firm practical one. In earlier centuries Europeans visiting West Africa had managed their contacts with the local Africans by means other than the acquisition of knowledge of African languages, that is, by sign language and by the Africans learning to speak 'broken' forms of various European languages or a mixed lingua franca.<sup>14</sup> But possibly because of the increasing rivalry between the various European nations operating in Guinea, made concrete in the establishment of permanent bases and the building of forts, the seventeenth century saw among the Europeans a new interest in developing better informed and closer contacts with local Africans. This took various forms, one of which was a more systematic interest in the local languages. The French in Senegal, where they were well established on the coast and busy pushing inland, saw it worthwhile by the end of the century to collect extensive vocabularies of nearly a dozen African languages. But on Gold Coast the French were commercially and politically well behind their rivals, so that one of the aims of the second voyage on which Barbot served was to investigate, on behalf of the crown, the practicality of establishing for the first time a French base there. In fact Barbot collected his Gold Coast vocabulary on his first voyage, which had, as far as we know, no official content, but his journal proves that he was well aware that his nation was disadvantaged on Gold Coast by its ships having to deal with Europeans who were entirely non-French, and often enemies. He therefore collected his vocabulary partly to help French sailors and traders and to give them some advantage over their rivals. This is shown by his choice of phrases and terms, mainly those of practical use in Afro-European trading relations - although it must be conceded that he did not limit himself to what was immediately useful when selecting terms but was occasionally carried away by enthusiasm, since the vocabulary also contains a number of terms highly

---

<sup>14</sup> For Africans acquiring European languages, see Hair, 'The use of African languages' (note 4 above). While visiting Europeans did not acquire African languages, those Portuguese who had very close contacts with Africans, particularly the hundreds who made their homes on the mainland and formed unions with African women, must have acquired a capacity to converse in the local languages, at least to some extent. But it is notable that no word lists in Guinea languages, and no attempts to describe any one language, appeared in Portuguese before Barbot's day, certainly not in print but also seemingly not in any known extant manuscript. Even the few Portuguese missionaries who served in Guinea, although some must have had at least a slight knowledge of the local language, failed to record any systematic knowledge. This is somewhat surprising, inasmuch as Portuguese missionaries in Congo/Angola did produce linguistic work (following the splendid example of their colleagues in Brazil) - as in fact did Spanish missionaries in Eweland.

unlikely to enter into regular Afro-European verbal contacts. The later vocabularies used almost the same selection of phrases and terms as the first, yet it is possible that Barbot made a point of collecting a vocabulary at Whydah because French interests there were developing, and indeed he may have included the vocabulary in a report to the authorities which he says he made on his return.

### **The shape of the vocabularies**

The Gold Coast vocabulary was organised in three sections, each containing items in French and in Akan/Twi equivalents or supposed equivalents. The first section is a list of 21 short phrases of the kind useful to a European visitor to Africa, particularly a sailor or trader. The second is a much longer list of terms, some 215, mostly simple single terms in French and Akan/Twi, generally represented by single words in each, although the French nouns are occasionally with a definite or indefinite article. The verbs, a smaller number of these than the nouns, are in the infinitive in French, and there are a few adjectives. The third section is a list of numerals.

The second list is arranged, as Barbot said, alphabetically, that is, by the French terms. There is no evidence that Barbot was copying a standard or earlier list and we presume that the selection of terms was his. This makes it plausible that his procedure was to draw up the list and then work through the items with an informant, to obtain the equivalents in Akan/Twi. But it is unlikely that at this stage the terms were arranged alphabetically since it would have been easier to ask about them if arranged in semantic groupings. However, since the later vocabularies followed the same list, which by 1682 Barbot had incorporated in alphabetic form in his 1678-9 journal, in collecting them he may have had to follow the alphabetic order, unless he retained his original notes or rearranged the terms. A fair number of the terms could be obtained by addressing the informant in sign language, especially those denoting parts of the body and common tools, and it may well be that Barbot used this technique with oral informants. Indeed some errors in the vocabularies suggest this strongly. If so, however, this does not of itself make it the more likely that in each instance Barbot dealt directly with an African informant, since such errors could have arisen when another European used sign language.

In both his accounts Barbot presented the four vocabularies in matched entries across the page, with the French phrases and terms appearing in an initial column on the left. This makes it clear that the later vocabularies were based on the earlier Gold Coast list of phrases and terms. However, a handful of Gold Coast terms were not found equivalents in the Senegal languages, apparently because they were not appropriate, or were thought to be not appropriate, to that region (e.g. terms for banana, orange, Guinea pepper, potato); hence blanks were left in the Wolof and Fula columns. Probably certain of the blanks in the Ewe column can be similarly explained (e.g. lead). Other blanks in all the later vocabularies were probably instead the result of the informant not knowing the correct word, or more likely, not understanding what Barbot was asking him. Conversely, Barbot showed some flexibility by adding a small number of terms to the later vocabularies, some of them terms thought peculiarly appropriate to the localities (e.g. for Senegal, terms for ostrich and couscous, and for Whydah the term for cowries),



others seemingly the result of fresh inspiration (e.g. thunder, sheep, nostrils). On the whole Barbot was successful in matching entries across the four vocabularies - three-quarters of the vocabulary items have an entry in each of the four columns.

No doubt the number of items in the Gold Coast vocabulary was determined by the length of time Barbot could devote to the exercise, and this number influenced the number of items in the other vocabularies. Although supplying only a tiny part of the total vocabulary of the languages, by the standards of the day in relation to African-language vocabularies Barbot's vocabularies were of unusual length. They were however to be exceeded in length very shortly after his collecting them, by the vocabularies collected in Senegal by the French African Company.<sup>18</sup> But the company's collectors were (presumably) resident agents, whereas Barbot was a passing visitor, therefore his vocabularies remain of commendable length.

The selection of phrases and terms in them was reasonable, given his motives for the exercise. Barbot did not intend to present material illustrating the structure of the languages or the culture of the ethnicities, but was mainly aiming to provide a handy vade-mecum for use in current Afro-European contacts. His phrases included the following: 'come aboard', 'bring me a sheep quickly', 'I would sleep with a girl'. Among his terms, one third of the nouns denoted obvious trade goods, while a smaller proportion related to local produce, agricultural and mineral, and to animals, some of the animals being involved in trade, not least as food. A small proportion denoted tools, including weapons, which could or might be of use to Europeans. A very small proportion related to the status of individuals (man, woman, boy, etc) or to household effects, elements possibly of use to Europeans. A larger, but still small proportion covered miscellaneous items - the weather, celestial bodies, religious features, and certain artefacts that signalled the European presence such as ship, fort and flag. While most of the items were included because of their practical significance, a number appear to have reflected merely European curiosity about the exotic, for instance, the names of wild animals. Again, European systematising stretched at times beyond the useful -

Barbot supplied a substantial number of body terms and it is difficult to believe that terms for the navel or the toe nails had any practical value in Afro-European relations, not even in relation to the close body inspection that preceded the purchase of slaves.

Whether in the event the vocabularies were ever of any practical use is doubtful. Barbot may have used his 1679 vocabulary when he visited Gold Coast again in 1681-2, although he nowhere states this, but after 1682 he did not again visit Guinea. His vocabularies remained in his possession when he fled to England in 1685, and although he eventually translated the French terms into English the revised vocabulary was not published until 1732. By that date some of the trade terms were outdated, and in any case the vocabularies were imprisoned in a massive folio volume unlikely to be part of the equipment of a trading vessel. We have no evidence that they were ever used in Guinea. However, despite the half century delay between collection and publication, in 1732 Barbot's vocabularies were still either the fullest or among the fullest available in print for all four languages, and indeed were

---

<sup>18</sup> For which, see note 7 above.

certainly the fullest available in accessible volumes throughout the eighteenth century (the works by De Mairées, Müller and other collectors being comparatively unknown and rare). But academic interest in African languages did not develop significantly until the nineteenth century. Meanwhile, even if Barbot's vocabularies had been consulted for practical purposes, their value would have been limited. Like all early representations of non-European languages, they are inaccurate phonetically and sometimes crude semantically, and as such would have been of only very limited help to a novice European attempting to communicate with the relevant Africans in Guinea. Their ultimate value has been other than practical. In the later eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century the printed vocabularies perhaps did something to convince those few Europeans who read Barbot's folio volume (reissued in 1746 and 1752), if they needed convincing, that Black Africans had complex languages and that this suggested that they had rich traditional cultures and were fully human. Today the vocabularies have academic value, as a historical document whose study throws a little more light on the obscurities of the Black African past and the history of Afro-European relations.

### Comparing versions of the vocabularies

Barbot did not number the items in his vocabularies but this has now been done. The Akan/Twi vocabulary contains, apart from the numerals, 236 items - 21 phrases and 215 terms. When we compare the version in the 1678-9 journal (hereafter 1679) with that in the French account written 1683-8 (hereafter 1688) - assuming the latter to have been copied from the former, although it is just possible that both derived from the same source, the original notes made on the voyage - we find the following differences, some significant. (For ease of reference we shall describe the French term as the 'gloss' although strictly speaking it is the African terms which are glosses on the French term.)

(1) Three items have wholly dropped out, presumably by miscopying. I have added these at the end of the list given below, as items 254-6.

(2) One term, item 124, is omitted while its gloss has changed from 'fers pour en forger' to 'des fers pour les piéz' - the omission may be due to miscopying or may relate to the changed gloss.

(3) Many other glosses are changed, although usually only slightly. The definite or indefinite article is regularly added to nouns and where 1679 gave the imperative of verbs in both the singular and the plural forms (e.g. *venés*, *viens*), 1688 gives it in only in the plural. Spellings are frequently varied. Changes which appear significant are noted in the list below (e.g. 'les bras' becomes 'le bras' and 'laver' becomes, misleadingly, 'laver les mains').

(4) Through miscopying, items 127-32 are wrongly lined in 1688 and set against the 1679 glosses here numbered 128-33. This has been corrected in the list below.

(5) Barbot adds in 1688, by deducing their shape from the numerals already given in 1679, the following numerals: 11-19, 1,000. He adds to the last 'Etc' and on a new line for 1,200 a remark which is partly illegible but perhaps reads 'de meme du reste'.

(6) Barbot adds in 1688 four new terms which seem to be borrowed from his printed sources, the terms for God, gold, cloth and maniguette

pepper.

(7) Many of the Akan/Twi terms change their spelling slightly, but it is not clear whether this was due to re-thinking the orthography or just careless copying.<sup>16</sup> The changes include the addition of an accent or accents to a number of terms, in some instances an additional accent. But Barbot was so very slapdash in putting accents on French words that it is very doubtful whether the accents on African terms mean much.

While some of the miscopyings can be corrected and probably most of the changes are of little consequence, this comparison of the Gold Coast vocabularies serves as a warning that all the vocabularies are to some extent crude ones. Barbot not only failed to exercise sufficient care when copying but did not wholly understand what he was doing, such ignorance about linguistic niceties being inevitable at that time. Hence any conclusions to be drawn from this material must make allowance for its formal deficiencies.

The Senegal vocabularies contain, apart from the numerals, 224 Wolof items and 219 Fula ones, only slightly fewer than the Gold Coast vocabulary, omissions being partly made up by additions. Although for these vocabularies we do not have two manuscript versions to compare, as was the case with the Gold Coast vocabulary, nevertheless certain copying errors between the missing earlier version and 1688 can be detected. The Fula term 177 is the equivalent of gloss 176, and the Wolof term 169 is wrongly placed in the Fula column. In item 153 the original gloss in 1679, 'laver', interpreted as meaning to wash a material object, is correctly represented by the Fula term; but when, Barbot mistakenly conflated two sequential Akan/Twi items in 1679 to produce in 1688 the altered gloss of 'laver les mains', the new meaning of 'laver', to wash a person, is not that of the Fula term.

The Ewe vocabulary is much shorter than the other three. It contains, apart from the numerals, 160 items. It has one additional phrase (although this is only a variant on a phrase in the other vocabularies) and only one term additional to those found elsewhere. Presumably it was collected either more hastily - Barbot was in Whydah very briefly, probably only for two or three days - or else from a less well-informed source, or perhaps both. A few misplacements other than those noted above appear in this vocabulary which if not the result of miscopying into 1688 may have been slips in his original notes.

In the printed English version of his account, which Barbot was still finalizing at his death in 1712, the vocabularies were recast, with the French glosses being translated into English and the items rearranged alphabetically by the English terms.<sup>17</sup> The English glosses occasionally clarify the exact meaning of a French term but the translation, almost certainly by Barbot

---

<sup>16</sup> However, two spellings had already been provided in 1679 for no.4, linked by 'ou'; and alternative terms had been given for no.103. In 1688 an alternative term for Akan/Twi no.218 appeared, matching two terms for Ewe/Fon no.218.

<sup>17</sup> The English version of Barbot's account was probably not begun until the 1700s and was therefore prepared some twenty years after the French account. It is unlikely that Barbot had retained his original notes and that he referred to them when preparing the English version of the vocabularies. Nothing in the vocabularies themselves suggests other than that he recast them by working from the version in 1688.

himself, cannot always be relied on. 'Bough' for 'bow', the weapon, seems to be a spelling error rather than an instance of the (admittedly flexible) contemporary English orthography. The English is rather more forthright than the French with impolite terms. But the printed version omits three items, wrongly lines up certain items, and otherwise simply repeats the African terms in 1688, sometimes copying them inaccurately. Apart from the English glosses, the printed version is hereafter ignored.

### **Identifying Barbot's vocabularies**

The titles Barbot gave to his vocabularies leave no doubt as to which languages they were intended to represent. "La langue des Foules" is Fula, a language today spoken in isolated regions right across the grasslands belt of West Africa. We should expect Barbot's Fula to represent the dialect spoken today in Senegal, along the middle River Senegal. "La langue des Jaloffes" is Wolof, the language of the Jolof people, the major ethnicity of coastal Senegal. "La langue de Côte d'Or" is the Twi component of Akan, the major language of historical 'Gold Coast' as of modern Ghana. "La langue de Juda et Ardres", that is, of Whydah and Allada, is the language spoken today in that district of the state formerly known as Dahomey and recently (and absurdly) as Benin, the Ewe language, most probably in its Fon dialect. We must however be cautious about ascribing early vocabularies to specific modern dialects, since this tends to beg an important question. Linguists and historians study early vocabularies in an attempt to learn about the development of languages and cultures. But it is axiomatic that languages change over time, so that, among other features, their division into dialects may well have been not the same at the date of the early vocabulary as it is in more recent times of synchronic study.<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, the limited content of early vocabularies makes it dangerous to draw from them other than broad conclusions. Although the phrases and terms in Barbot's vocabularies must be, and below will be, 'identified' in terms of modern lexical sources which often relate to specific dialects, it has seemed best to use language names in this introduction which are as broad as possible - hence, for instance, 'Akan/Twi'. It will be for later scholars more learned in African linguistics than the present author, a historian, to be more specific about the language provenance of Barbot's vocabularies - if indeed this proves possible. But after this caveat, it must be said that there is absolutely no doubt about the ascription of the vocabularies, if not to specific dialects, at least to the languages named above.

The purpose of the present publication is the 'identification' of individual items in Barbot's vocabularies. Little has been done in this way

---

<sup>18</sup> In certain regions of Africa, notably the vast zone speaking the closely-related Bantu languages, one would have to be even more cautious, since the distinction between languages and dialects is one that is often debatable, and the division between 'languages' even over a mere three centuries might have changed. However, the longer-rooted languages of West Africa appear to be today in general more discrete, and hence it is likely that they were clearly distinguishable in Barbot's day.

previously.<sup>10</sup> For each term supplied by Barbot an attempt is made to find some term in the appropriate modern language that appears to have a close phonetic and semantic resemblance. The relationship is indicated by the symbol =. But this should not be taken to mean that the modern term exactly represents or exactly corresponds to the vocabulary term. Apart from phonological and semantic changes in the language over the intervening centuries, the inexactitude of the early vocabularies, in particular their crude orthography, reflecting both an inadequate form of transcription and the failure of the collector to hear the phonetic peculiarities of languages other than his own, in itself makes it often difficult to be sure that a Barbot term is the same as a modern term. Equally, since the stated meaning of a Barbot term is sometimes too general, too vague, patently inaccurate, or culturally irrelevant because referring to an item outside the contemporary African experience, the matching of Barbot terms and modern terms is at times a good deal less than straightforward.

To be more specific. At best, the form of a term as it appears in Barbot's manuscript can only have been a crude representation of the actual term in the language as then spoken. Some of the reasons for this deserve to be spelled out.

(1) Barbot's handwriting is clear and in general transcription from his manuscripts is easy and reasonably secure. However, following to some extent contemporary usage, he failed to distinguish between /u/ and /v/, so that, for instance, 'oua' can be read 'ova'. On French words his marking of accents was not wholly regular or consistent, therefore his placing of accents on African terms may not be comprehensive, reliable or even meaningful. The accents on African terms appear to be only phonetic modifiers, not stress or tone indicators.

(2) Barbot spoke none of the African languages (indeed no African language) and had no knowledge of, or probably notion about, their structures. He simply wrote down what he heard, or thought he heard, and

---

<sup>10</sup> In the papers cited in note 4 above I have occasionally suggested identifications of odd terms, and Dr Jones has done the same in his identification of De Marees's Akan/Twi vocabulary in Jones, *German sources* (note 5 above). Since Barbot's printed account has been widely used by twentieth-century historians of West Africa, it is plausible that odd terms in his vocabularies have been identified in other works. The most extensive reference to Barbot's vocabularies known to me is as follows. In a detailed study of the African-language terms in a collection of worldwide vocabularies published at St Petersburg in 1790 (P.S. Pallas ed., *Sravnitel'nyj slovar' vsech jazykov i narecij .../Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia comparativa*, 2 vols, 1787/1789; 2nd enlarged ed., ed. Theodor Jankowitsch de Miriewo, 4 vols, 1790-91), Fodor has commented on a small number of Barbot's Fula and Wolof terms, and tabulated about sixty terms in each of these languages with corresponding terms in nineteenth and twentieth century sources (István Fodor, *Pallas und andere afrikanische Vokabularien vor dem 19. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg, 1975), 44-52, 79-81, 97-9, 100-103, Tables 1-5). While this material is of considerable interest, Fodor was only able to use 1732 for the Barbot items (and his references to Barbot's biography are not wholly correct). The identifications in the present publication were prepared independently of Fodor's work. That two of Barbot's vocabularies were still being cited in a work of 1790 as authoritative sources is noteworthy. But the St Petersburg editor extracted Barbot terms, not from 1732, but from a 1748 German translation of Churchill's *Voyages*, *Allgemeine Historie der Reisen*, which admittedly copied the African-language terms accurately. Thus he produced a transcript in Russian script of a German transcript of an English transcript of a French source, and so added another stage to the corruption of the original African-language terms.

was unable to correct the informant or check the result by means of previous knowledge of the rules of the language. There is little or no evidence that he gained that knowledge as he went along (exceptionally, he may have gained some insight into the construction of numerals). Thus, for instance, he was unable to seek a correction if an informant gave a plural form for a required single form. In other words, what he wrote down was to him, in the main and perhaps in toto, gibberish.

(3) Because the shape of most African terms was meaningless to Barbot, when he came to copy the words it was easy to miscopy.

(4) When Barbot sought a term from an African informant and had to address the informant himself, he presumably addressed him in either French or 'Portuguese', the latter having been most likely a form of pidgin easily acquired, and he probably backed up verbal address with sign language. It is unlikely that any African informant had a command of either language exactly matching Barbot's, so misunderstandings were likely to arise, as they also could with sign language. And Barbot would be unable to detect many such misunderstandings.

(5) There being no exact phonetic correspondence between French and the relevant African languages, Barbot misheard some of the sounds in spoken terms; and he misrepresented them further by adjusting them to forms in French orthography.

(6) Certain terms in contemporary French selected by Barbot had no exact semantic equivalent in the African languages, and equally certain terms in African languages proffered by the informant had no exact equivalent in French and therefore did not actually correspond to the gloss. There is evidence that the African informants at times employed some skill in casting about for near-equivalents. However this difficulty can be exaggerated. Afro-European contacts were not new, so that, by Barbot's day, those Africans involved in the contacts could most probably call up traditional near-equivalents - or even terms, traditional or novel, that were gaining acceptance within the languages as being full equivalents, at least in the context of those contacts.

Thanks to the ingenuity of the scholars concerned (who are listed below), the above and certain other difficulties have not prevented them from 'identifying' the majority of Barbot's terms. The identifications listed below, having the character of primary material only initially processed, are made available in this publication in the interests of further research. That is, in the expectation that they will allow, invite and encourage study of the vocabularies as evidence documenting important aspects of the historical development of Black Africa.<sup>20</sup> But scholars making this further detailed and intricate study will have to allow in their conclusions for the difficulties and defects of 'identification' noted above.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> For instance, in the purely linguistic aspect, Professor Boadi has drawn attention to an extent of palatization in the modern language that appears to have occurred only since Barbot's vocabulary was collected.

<sup>21</sup> M. Becker kindly supplied me in 1986 with an extensive report on Barbot's Wolof vocabulary, from which I quote the following remarks. "Les erreurs de transcription sont très nombreuses: elles s'expliquent peut-être par le fait que Barbot utilisait des documents recopiés

## The scholars identifying the vocabularies

I am extremely indebted to the scholars who, during the mid 1980s, at my request, worked on the vocabularies and made identifications of most of the items. In some cases this involved lengthy discussion and correspondence. Since the 1960s, when in conjunction with Dr David Dalby a scheme for publishing all early vocabularies of West African languages had been proposed, I had made preliminary identifications of a proportion of the terms within Barbot's vocabularies, using the French Company vocabularies and a few later lexical sources available to me. These were now in most instances replaced and the number of proposed identifications enlarged, by firmer identifications from experts in the respective languages, some of them native speakers.

The items in Wolof were examined and identified by M. Charles Becker of the Centre Nationale de Recherche Scientifique in Senegal. The items in Fula were examined and identified by Professor David Arnott, formerly of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, who in some instances was able to supply dialect variants. The items in Akan/Twi were first sought in a standard dictionary drawn up originally a century ago and therefore representing an older form of the language than its presentday form (J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante language called Tshi (Twi)*, 2nd ed., Basel, 1933). But my non-expert attempt to trace words was followed up, in part corrected, and much supplemented, when, through the good offices of one of my collaborators in editing the Barbot account, Dr Adam Jones of the Institut für Historische Ethnologie, University of Frankfurt, the items were examined and a large number identified by three Ghanaian scholars, Professor Lawrence Boadi, Professor Kofi Sey, and Dr Albert van Dantzig. Finally, the items in Ewe were, through the good offices of my other collaborator in editing the Barbot account, Dr Robin Law of Stirling University, examined and many identified, in terms of Ewe/Fon, by M. Roger Gbegbonvi, Dr Anselmo Guezo, now of the University of Cape Coast, and Dr Law himself. The notes on individual vocabulary items were largely supplied by the scholars named above. The notes on Wolof and Fula were largely supplied by M. Becker and Professor Arnott, those on Akan/Twi by Professor Boadi and Dr Jones, those on Ewe/Fon by Dr Law.

## Acknowledgement

I am indebted to my colleague, Alan Harding, for finding time, at short notice, to read through the above introduction and suggest an improvement.

---

plusieurs fois, par les personnes ne comprenant pas le wolof, et introduisait ainsi des graphies qui rendent les mots et les phrases difficiles à comprendre, sinon incompréhensibles. Il est certain que Barbot lui-même ne maîtrisait pas la langue wolof, tant les erreurs sont nombreuses et importantes. Ainsi ce document illustre largement le fait que les sources européennes de cette époque, et jusqu'au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle, n'apportent que des informations très imparfaites sur les langues africaines ... Mais, d'une manière plus générale, des documents de ce type attestent à quel point la connaissance des réalités et des sociétés africaines restait partielle ... Toutefois, l'apport de Barbot - même à travers de telles pièces qui laissent le linguiste historien sur sa faim - est très important. En effet, les renseignements fournis et publiés par cet auteur sont remarquables et utilisables par l'historien après la critique et l'étude de toutes les pièces qui lui sont dues ou qu'il a rassemblées." While I question whether Barbot used a previous written vocabulary, and my overall assessment would be somewhat less severe, I am very much in accord with M. Becker in stressing the need of a "critique".