

A CONCISE DICTIONARY OF THE BINI LANGUAGE OF SOUTHERN NIGERIA. By HANS MELZIAN. pp. xviii, 233. London: Kegan Paul, 1937. 15s.

This modest but careful and painstaking work on a language spoken, according to the author, by between 90,000 and 100,000 people, embodies the result of about two years of field work among the people, and was rendered possible by the benefaction of the Rockefeller Fund.

The author has confined himself to a one-way compilation, namely, a vernacular-English vocabulary. In order, as he explains, not to increase the size of the volume unduly, a collection of proverbs and sayings originally intended for the dictionary has had to be omitted. One cannot help regretting the omission—proverbs seem to be such a feature of dictionaries of West African languages. On the other hand, the author leaves very little to guess-work as to the usage of words, and there is no lack of illustrative sentences and phrases. These sentences are mostly under verbs which, as in Yoruba, almost without exception begin with consonants. These same sections on verbs afford eloquent proof of the industry and thoroughness of the author in the way he has followed up the various uses of each verb and its combination with various other parts of speech. In another sense, too, the book is in large part encyclopædic, a point that will be taken up below.

The book serves two purposes: it is first and foremost a Bini pronouncing dictionary written in phonetic orthography (with copious tone marking) intended for the use and guidance of foreigners; it is secondly a Bini-English dictionary of the conventional type.

The phonetic orthography in which it is presented may still be Greek to the educated Bini in company with the other peoples of Southern Nigeria. This is not, however, an insuperable obstacle, and one feature of the dictionary that ought to make a strong appeal to the native is the botanical names of trees and plants that are scattered throughout its pages. Interest in native pharmaceutical knowledge is increasing not only on the part of the outside world but also of the educated natives themselves. As the author is at present engaged on a similar work for the Yoruba, it is to be hoped that he will perform the same service for the Yoruba as he has done for the Bini. The usefulness of this feature of the dictionary is considerably diminished, however, by the fact that the work provides

only for a Bini-English vocabulary and not vice versa. Short of taking a native to the tree and having him name it after it has been pointed out to him, how can a foreigner who wishes to speak or write of the *Irvingia Barterii* or the *Chlorophora Excelsa* do so without an English-Bini vocabulary? This brings out one point of criticism of the work, namely, it does not attempt as much as it might easily have done. The reverse side of the Bini-English vocabulary need not have taken half as much space as the latter, and could have been obtained at less than half the expenditure of time. It would not have needed to include phrases, historical, mythological, and anthropological notes, or illustrative sentences. It would have been sufficient to be but a list of single-word items, and a large part of it that had not already appeared in the Bini-English vocabulary could have been obtained more or less incidentally in the course of compiling the latter. Even if it had contained nothing additional to what had already been given in the Bini-English part, it would still have been very useful to those foreign students whose memory for native words might be evanescent and treacherous, and for whom the English-Bini vocabulary would have offered additional aid. It would have taken up very little additional space, especially if the Proper Names (with their long historical and geographical explanations) and English loan-words had been left out.

It has been of absorbing interest to a Yoruba reviewer to note the large number of Bini words that are of Yoruba origin. They easily outnumber those borrowed from all other neighbouring languages together.

It would appear, however, that in spite of the large number of words borrowed from Yoruba, there is no close affinity between that language and Bini other than the fact of both belonging to the same Sudanic family. Otherwise the borrowings should have extended to verbs as well as relational words. Instead, nouns furnish the largest number of loan-words. Of the other parts of speech verbs cannot number much more than a score, while the rest together would yield less than that figure all told. Both internal evidence as well as what is known from the history of both the Bini people and the Yoruba would seem to show that these words are borrowings from the Yoruba.

Dots as a means of indicating tone are not as helpful to the eye as dashes, especially when they are printed so close to each other as in this dictionary.