

In the summer of 2012, I traveled to Liberia, West Africa to gather more background information on the subject of my dissertation, Thomas Narven Lewis. The life and work of Thomas Narven Lewis (also referred to as Thomas Flo Darvin Lewis and Thomas Gbianvoodeh Lewis) was enigmatic. No official biographies or academic studies have been written on him.¹ Yet, despite the limited primary source material on the man and his life, numerous historians have found it difficult to resist referencing his story. It was certainly a compelling biography. Lewis was born in Liberia around 1870² and died in 1935³. During the course of his life he traveled extensively, received a first-rate education at some of the most prestigious schools in the United States and invented the Bassa Vah script, a writing system based on the language of the Bassa peoples of Liberia.

While consensus on what inspired Lewis to create the Bassa Vah script has yet to be achieved, Lewis' story has nonetheless captured the imagination of cultural historians, anthropologists and linguists alike with his fabled travels to Brazil and the West Indies at the turn of the twentieth century. Allegedly, Lewis serendipitously encountered descendants of the Bassa peoples (whose ancestors were captured and taken to that region for forced labor) in the region who had managed to preserve the script in its rudimentary form. Inspired by this, Lewis began working on rendering the script as a syllabary with the assistance of a printing press.⁴

¹ To date, there is only one academic biography on Thomas Lewis which was authored by Augusta H. Clawson, the daughter of his "sponsor" and friend Frank Clawson. See Clawson, *Thomas Narven Lewis: An African Bushman, A Scholar, A Doctor and a Man*. This biography is unpublished as are the two biographies written by Liberian scholars Joseph Gbadyu (1974) and Dr. Abba Karnga (2002).

² Thomas Lewis admitted to the Syracuse University Post-Herald that his birthdate and consequently his age was unknown to him. He estimated that he was "between 27 and 28" years of age in 1907. He was listed on the ship manifest of the *Liberia*, a German steamer, which carried him to the United States as a twenty-year old male in 1892. As such, the approximate birth year I concluded must be 1870, a year that is cited in one of his unpublished biographies.

³ This information was gleaned from his youngest daughter, Utopia, during our interview.

⁴ Based on archival records, this was done during his time at Syracuse University. Fascinatingly, he utilized the printing press at a local shop he was interning that was owned and managed by L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Utilizing the available archival sources here in the United States, I managed to piece together a relatively full composite of Dr. Lewis' life in America. However, the archival trail proved fruitless whenever I attempted to explore life in Liberia for Dr. Lewis before and after his visit to the United States. I recognized early on that there was only one way to gather information about his life in Liberia—that was to travel to the country personally and interview surviving family members, friends and institutions familiar with and/or affiliated with him.

I gained access to critical information concerning Dr. Lewis and the Bassa Vah script through the oral interviews I conducted. Beginning with the former, one of the most frustrating aspects of my archival research in the United States was my inability to locate a formal obituary. As a consequence, I was unable to speak with any confidence on the exact dates of his birth and death. Fortunately, one of the people I interviewed was Utopia Lewis-Greenfield Johnson, the youngest daughter of Dr. Thomas Flo Darvin Lewis.⁵ Mrs. Lewis confirmed for me that her father, Dr. Lewis, died through a malicious act of food poisoning perpetrated by his younger brother (Paul) and his first wife, Yeotoe. It appears to have been a conspiracy between his wife, brother, and members of the settler government who increasingly viewed him as a threat to their national project. In the 1920s Liberia was pressured by the Western powers to demonstrate authority over the entire country. If an instance were to arise where Great Britain, France or Germany felt that authority over a particular territory in Liberia was rhetorical, they proceeded to annex the territory and append it to their respective colonies. The Liberian government responded by launching a nationalization campaign that forced the indigenous peoples to relinquish land for mining and other commercial interests, pay a hut tax, and pledge their allegiance to the Liberian polity. Dr. Lewis, witnessing the gruesome torture techniques being employed against the Bassa peoples (and other indigenous communities) to

⁵ Utopia is now 82 years old. It was truly a chance encounter as she usually resides in another part of the country but only traveled to Grand Bassa to assist in the construction of a new home.

force them to pay taxes utilized his legal background to defend the community from the marauders. He paid for his intervention with his life as his wife confessed she was paid off by the Liberian government to kill him.⁶

Some of the most fascinating information I received through the oral testimonies however concerned the Bassa Vah script itself. It was generally agreed upon by the interviewees that the Bassa Vah script existed long before Thomas Narven Lewis was born. Oral history suggests it emerged in the sixteenth or seventeenth century as a tool for resistance against European and African slave raiders. Members of the Bassa secret societies would chew leaves that left particular indentations and toss them in areas known for considerable slave raiding activity. This method of communication was widely understood by the Bassa peoples who heeded the warnings and avoided these identified areas. This creative resistance strategy adds texture to the contemporary literature on African resistance to the slave trade, which has so far focused on armed combat and the creation of maroon spaces.⁷ This finding also (partly) provides a possible explanation as to why cliometricians have concluded that the windward coast region was the least affected region in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.⁸

Lastly, new vistas of West African history were opened through the oral testimonies. One of the subtopics I explored in this work is the construction of “ethnicity/tribe” in West Africa. Cultural anthropologists such as Terence Ranger have convincingly demonstrated how particular ethnicities

⁶ Mrs. Utopia Lewis Greenfield-Johnson was not the only person to verify this event. Two other interviewees shared the same story about Dr. Lewis’ ultimate demise. Unfortunately, the bulk of Liberian periodicals published during this period were destroyed in the civil war of 1989 so it was difficult to impossible to find an “official” organ to corroborate the story.

⁷ See Sylviane A. Diouf. *Fighting the Slave Trade: West African Strategies*. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press (2003)

⁸ See Adam Jones and Marion Johnson, “Slaves from the Windward Coast,” *Journal of African History*, 21 (1980): 17-34

in West African were not rooted in a deep past, but were in fact recent inventions.⁹ The same observation applies to the Bassa peoples. According to the oral testimonies, the Bassa peoples resided in Ethiopia until they were forced to flee in the sixteenth century because of the Ethiopian-Adal War (1529-1559), which signaled the triumph of Muslim forces and the forced migrations of Christian and animist groups. In the course of the migration, Bassa peoples settled in various countries such as Nigeria, Cameroon, Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone. As a consequence, despite the divisions engendered by national borders, Bassa peoples can still communicate with one another regardless of national affiliation. This research is exciting and should lead to the academic devaluation of the arbitrarily constructed borders established during the Berlin Conference that did not consider the realities of African people themselves.

It is said in Africa that when an elder dies, it is as if a library has burned down. For this generation of scholars, the challenge is to (urgently) create opportunities for Africans to tell their own narratives, to treat it with the same legitimacy as narratives forged from archival materials. Many of these stories were passed down through griots and cultural custodians trained to repeat the essentials of the narrative and resist exaggeration. If these elders are not consulted, African history in the academy will have missed out on a wonderful opportunity to gain insight on the evolutionary history of African societies. My research findings were much more than I expected. I am forever grateful to the elders who graciously took time out their schedules to share their wisdom, the faculty and general members of the Liberian community that supported me in tracking down information on Dr. Thomas Narven Lewis. His biography has much more depth now that I have been able to add aspects of his life in Liberia to the narrative around his residency in the United States.

⁹ See Terence O. Ranger. *Dance and Society in Eastern Africa*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1975. Also see, J.D. Y. Peel. *Religious Encounter and the Making of the Yoruba*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2003 and Sinfree Makoni and Alastair Pennycook. *Disinventing and Reconstituting Languages*. Tonawanda, NY: 2007.