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“Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Community through Language” On View at the Anacostia Community Museum through March, 27, 2011

The Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum presents the groundbreaking exhibition “Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Community through Language” on view from Aug. 9 through March 27, 2011. Curated by Alcione Amos and the first exhibition based almost entirely on one of the museum’s special collections, “Word, Shout, Song” looks at the life, research and scholarship of Lorenzo Dow Turner, perhaps the first African American linguist. It also focuses on how his discoveries linked communities in Africa to the New World through language.

“In assembling this exhibition, most exciting to me was how I was able to connect words from Portuguese, Gullah and English to their African origins, 80 years later, based on Turner’s work in the 1930s,” said Amos. “His work is still relevant today.”

“Word, Shout, Song” is three stories in one: scholarship and success against the odds, a quest to crack a linguistic code and a discovery spanning continents. The exhibition presents Turner’s pioneering work, which in the 1930s established that people of African heritage, despite slavery, had retained and passed on their cultural identity through words, music and story wherever they landed. His research focused on the Gullah/Geechee community in South Carolina and Georgia, whose speech was dismissed as “baby talk” and “bad English.” He confirmed, however, that quite to the contrary the Gullah spoke a Creole language and that they still possessed parts of the language and culture of their captive ancestors. Turner linguistic explorations into the African diaspora led him to Bahia, Brazil, where he further validated his discovery of African continuities.

The exhibition begins with a look at Turner’s early life. He was profoundly influenced by his Howard University-educated father—a fourth-generation freed man forced to flee his home after an altercation with a white man—on the importance of academic excellence. Turner (1890-1972) obtained successively higher degrees in English from Howard, Harvard University and the University

of Chicago. Denied teaching positions at white institutions, he built his career in academia at several black colleges, including his alma mater where as a student he had become interested in languages. A summer stint teaching at the now-South Carolina State University, however, is where he first heard and was captivated by the Gullah dialect. Convinced that the speech pattern was not illiterate English but instead a distinct language incorporating words and structure from African languages, Turner focused his interest into a lifelong project.

Turner studied various African language, including Twi, Ewe, Yoruba, Bambara and Wolof as well as Arabic, to make linkages to Gullah vocabulary. Through his pursuit of information, he often became the first African American member of many organizations, including the Linguistics Society of America.

“Word, Shout, Song” recounts his travels to South Carolina and Georgia and abroad to London, Paris and, finally, Africa to record and compare the speech of hundreds of informants. His journeys feature fascinating stories of adventure and discovery as well as the difficulties he encountered with bulky equipment and remote access.

A major linguistic achievement occurred when Turner determined the possibility that the “ring shout,” a Gullah religious dance, was directly inherited from enslaved Muslims—the name “shout” derived from the Arabic word *Sha’wt*, which had to do with movement around a sacred object rather than sound. Resulting from Turner’s early Georgia recordings is a later major discovery by scholars Joseph Opala, Tazieff Schmidt and Cynthia Koroma who, in 1990, realized that a song passed down through generations connected the Mende people of Sierra Leone to their American descendents in Georgia.

A section of the exhibition focuses on Turner’s research on culture in Bahia where a much larger number of Africans had been brought as captives than to the United States, along with the same languages influencing the Gullah. African survivals were particularly seen in the Afro-Brazilian religion, Candomble, and when informants recognized words in the Sea Island recordings, Turner, again, saw language connecting the worlds of the African diaspora. Turner’s many writings, presentations and publications included his book, *Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect*, published in 1949, and still the standard reference for Creole language research today.

Highlights of “Word, Shout, Song” include:

- The Bilali Diary written by a Muslim slave
- Turner’s recording device and special-character typewriter
- The vestment of a Candomblé initiate

- Rare recordings of Gullah speech and songs and rare photographs of informants produced by Turner
- Audio and written comparisons of words that are similar and from languages spoken in the Americas and Africa
- The section “Singing for the Ancestor: A Song that Made the Roundtrip to Africa”
- The section “The Black Seminole: The Gullah that Got Away” that recounts the history of fugitive slaves from Georgia and South Carolina, whose descendents are now found in Florida, Mexico and Texas and who speak an ancient form of Gullah

About the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum

The Anacostia Community Museum opened in southeast Washington in 1967 as the nation’s first federally funded neighborhood museum. Adopting its current name in 2006, the museum has expanded its focus from an African American emphasis to examining the impact of contemporary social issues on urban communities. For more information on the museum, the public may call (202) 633-4820, (202) 633-1000 or (202) 633-5285 (TTY); for tours, call (202) 633-4844. Website: anacostia.si.edu.

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