

Tucker Childs, African Linguist, Anthropological Linguist, and Field Worker, dies at 72

“Better pass boldly into that other world, in the full glory of some passion, than fade and wither dismally with age.” – James Joyce



Tucker Childs with Mani speaker Ma Hawa Camara, Bentley, Guinea

G. Tucker Childs (1948-2021), a prominent African linguist, anthropological linguist, and life-long field worker, who devoted decades of research to the documentation and preservation of endangered West African languages and their cultures, died on Jan. 26 in Portland, Oregon due to complications related to legionella.

Born in Wayne, Illinois, Childs received his A.B. from Stanford University in English Literature in 1970 and continued his studies at Trinity College, University of Dublin, where he earned a diploma in Anglo-Irish literature with Honours (1975). He subsequently taught secondary school at Woodbury Forest in Virginia, where he concurrently completed his M.Ed. at the University of Virginia (1980). An emerging interest in linguistics and a burgeoning desire to return to the site of his Peace Corps work in Liberia to document the endangered language Kisi, he began his linguistics career at Georgetown University where he received an M.S. in Sociolinguistics (1982). He moved to University of California, Berkeley to study under the direction of John J. Ohala, where he completed both an M.A. and Ph.D. in Linguistics (1988). His doctoral dissertation was later published, *A Kisi Grammar* (Mouton, 1995), followed by *A Dictionary of the Kisi Language*, in collaboration with Herrmann Jungraithmayr and Norbert Cyffer (Köppe, 2000). He was given the Kisi name “Saa Chakporma” by Fayia McCarthy, his Kisi father (*Kèkè*): “Saa” for the first-born son and “Chakporma” for his “born-town”, where Fayia was born.

During his 40+ year career, Childs produced grammars, dictionaries, readers, and primers, as well as numerous academic articles, on several languages of the West Atlantic Bolom group, which includes Kisi, Bom, Mani, Kim, and Sherbro. His research has been funded by a number of prestigious institutions: Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project, Bremer Stiftung für Kultur- und Sozialanthropologie, National Science Foundation (NSF), School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London (UCL), and Fulbright Research Foundation. In going beyond lexico-grammatical information, his work provides a model for the documentation of endangered African languages by considering the theoretical and methodological issues related to language documentation in its social context, from greater emphasis on naturally occurring conversational data and the adoption of metadata conventions for more nuanced descriptions of socio-cultural settings to considering the impact of language policy and planning. Most

importantly, he strove to overcome the way in which Western language ideologies have unjustly influenced language documentation practices in non-Western societies.

Professor Childs taught linguistics at a number of prestigious institutions, including Temple University (Philadelphia), University of Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa), Universität Freiburg (Germany) University of Toronto (Canada), and ultimately Portland State University (Portland, Oregon). He served tirelessly for many years as the editor for *Studies in African Linguistics*, a public forum for African language scholars to discuss issues in the field of African Linguistics which might not have a place in more widely recognized journals. He was recognized in a 2009 [New York Times](#) article, “Linguist’s Preservation Kit Has New Digital Tools”, regarding his work documenting the Kim language in Tei, Sierra Leone. And in 2017, he was the recipient of the [Kenneth L. Hale Award](#) which recognizes scholars who have done outstanding work on the documentation of a particular language or family of languages that is endangered or no longer spoken.

An overview of his fieldwork was documented in 2012 in video blogs (“vlogs”) by Senior Producer Bart Childs of *Voice of America*:

- [Lost Voices Part 1: Getting there](#)
- [Lost Voices Part 2: Dancing](#)
- [Lost Voices Part 3: Palm Oil](#)
- [Lost Voices Part 4: The children](#)

Some of his most influential work includes:

- [A Grammar of Kisi](#) (Mouton de Gruyter, 1995)
- [A Dictionary of the Kisi Language](#) (Köppe, 2000)
- [An Introduction to African Languages](#) (John Benjamins, 2003)
- [A Grammar of Mani](#) (de Gruyter, 2011)
- [Documenting the Sherbro Language and Culture \(SLC\)](#)
- [Documenting Kim and Bom](#)
- [Busy intersections: A framework for revitalization](#) (Oxford, 2015)
- [Beyond the Ancestral Code - Towards a Model for Sociolinguistic Language Documentation](#) (2014)

In “Forty-plus years before the mast” (*Word Hunters: Field Linguists on fieldwork*, H. Sarvasy and D. Forker (Eds.), John Benjamins, 2018), Childs wrote,

People ask me why I persist in this research given all the travails. It has become easier than in the past to talk about the satisfaction and the rewards of the job, especially in the past seventeen years when there has been some support for studying languages on the edge. The old people are particularly glad of the attention of the field linguist; they have known a life of marginalization and welcome the interest in their language. They are particularly happy that their descendants will hear their words. People open up, people are friendly, people laugh and they feel valued. That’s enough for me (p. 78).

Rest in peace, Tucker Childs. Delight in your accomplishments and trust in a life well-lived.

For donations, please visit the [Sherbro Foundation](#), a non-profit founded by a former Peace Corps Volunteer, which follows the Peace Corps model of empowering grassroots organizations on community-led development to support them in meeting needs they identify for themselves, focusing on girls' education and economic development. Please include "Tucker Childs" in the special instructions. He would be truly honored.

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