Language is the steed that carries one into a far country." This Arab proverb peeps into the continuum of language as it’s carried through the world, especially the African Diaspora. It is illustrative of the Lorenzo Dow Turner exhibit at the Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum in southeast DC.

“Word, Shout, Song: Lorenzo Dow Turner Connecting Communities through Language” traces the life of Professor Lorenzo Dow Turner (1890-1972), and his contribution to American linguistics. The exhibit, on view until March 27, 2011, highlights his lifelong quest to bring knowledge of Africa to America, his journey through the African Diaspora, and the importance of his work decades later. Through language, Turner, the first African-American linguist, has linked communities in Africa to the New World.

Curated by Alcione Amos, this is the first exhibit based mainly on one of Anacostia’s special collections. It features three stories: scholarship, success against the odds, a quest to crack a linguistic code and discoveries spanning continents.

Turner’s work showed that African descendants, despite slavery, retained and passed on their cultural identity through words, music and story, no matter where they lived. His research focused on the Gullah/Geechee in South Carolina and Georgia, whose speech was dismissed as bad English. His research confirmed, though, that the Gullah spoke a creole language, and still possessed parts of the language and culture of their captive ancestors. Turner’s linguistic explorations led to Bahia, Brazil, where he confirmed this continuum. According to Amos, the above quote “fits what the exhibit is about,” and this is the key element the 63-year-old independent scholar wanted to portray.

“I wanted people to see that slavery didn’t destroy elements of Africa,” she said. “The slaves could keep their language. You can’t take language out of the memory. Elements of it are still alive even now in the United States. They keep it alive.”

Amos, originally from Brazil, is retired from the World Bank after 27 years. “Word” took about two years to complete.

“Part of that was research,” she explained. “I went to New York and Chicago, and I had to make sense of the work as it was complicated. It’s a lot of work to be put on paper.” She visited the community where Turner did research. Visiting the Gullah on St. Helena Island was the “most interesting part” of her research, she said.

“I couldn’t understand a word they said,” she recounted. “It was like another language. It was exciting to me and I began to think how it was for Prof. Turner; I could imagine how difficult it was for him,” with limited recording devices. “It just shows how outstanding his work was, even for today.” She connected Portuguese, Gullah and English words to their African origins, based on Turner’s work.

The Gullah are African Americans in the Low Country region of South Carolina and Georgia, which includes the coastal plain and Sea Islands. According to the official Gullah/Geechee website, boundaries run from Jacksonville, NC, to Jacksonville, Fl. They boast...
African influences in Gullah language and culture. In 1949, scholars began frequenting the region to study Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect, was published academics soon reversed course. After Turner's book, became one of the first 40 African Americans to obtain a doctorate; and the first African-American professor to be appointed in 1946 to a teaching position outside a black college. He built his career at several black colleges, including his alma mater where as a student he became interested in languages. A summer stint teaching at South Carolina State University is where he heard, and was captivated by the Gullah. Convinced the pattern was not illiterate English, but instead a distinct language incorporating words and structure from African languages, Turner focused his interest into a linguistic achievement occurred when he determined that the “ring shout,” a Gullah religious dance, was inherited from enslaved Muslims—the name “shout” derived from the Arabic word Sha’wt, which dealt with ritual circling around the Kaaba in Mecca. His early Georgia recordings are invaluable to researchers even today. In 1990, based on Turner's recordings, three scholars discovered that a passed-down funeral song connected the Mende people of Sierra Leone to their American descendants in Georgia. In the exhibit is an African American singing the Mende song—learned from her mother—to African women in Sierra Leone. Separated by the Middle Passage, 200 years later, the song made the round-trip from Africa to the New World and back. Another section focuses on Bahia where more Africans were brought as captives, with the same languages influencing the Gullah. African survivals were in the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé. When interviewees recognized words in the Sea Island recordings, Turner saw language connecting the African Diaspora. “I thought it was very cool,” said Ward 7 resident Antonio James, who visited recently with two young daughters. “I’m interested in history, and I liked learning about this language connection between Africa and America.” One of his daughters mentioned being afraid of the statue featuring the vestment of a Candomblé initiate—Onolu, the Orisha of sickness and smallpox. Other highlights include a Biláli diary from a Muslim slave, Turner’s recording device and typewriter, recordings of Gullah songs and rare photographs of interviewees, and audio and written comparisons of words from languages spoken in the Americas and Africa. Another section on the Black Seminole recounts the history of fugitive slaves from Georgia and South Carolina, whose descendants are in Florida, Mexico and Texas, and who speak an ancient Gullah. This is curator Amos’ expertise.

The Museum’s Upcoming Events

Smithsonian’s Anacostia Community Museum, 1901 Fort Place, SE, which houses this display, opened in southeast D.C. in 1967. Like other exhibits, there are several sessions related to the topic. Anacostia hosted a lecture on the Gullah Islamic Connection with Amir Muhammad, co-founder of America’s Islamic Heritage Museum; Gullah tales by actor Dylan Pritchett; a film, Family Across the Sea on Turner and the connection between the Gullah and Sierra Leone; and Gullah jewelry and art.

To mark its 43rd anniversary, the museum used the theme, “Word, Shout, Song,” for its Sept. 15, celebration. The keynote speaker was Marquetta L. Goodwine (“Queen Quet”), chiefess of the Gullah/Geechee Nation, a native of St. Helena Island, and an expert commissioner for South Carolina for the Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor, one of 40 congressionally designated National Heritage Areas.

Upcoming is a symposium, “Connecting the Words of the African Diaspora: The Living Legacy of Lorenzo Dow Turner,” on Nov. 12 and 13, that’s integral to the exhibit. It presents how the pioneering linguist’s work inspired the research of diverse scholars in recovering connections among various Diaspora communities. Historians, linguists and anthropologists continue to build on the foundation of Turner's research.

Keynote is Emory S. Campbell, chair of Gullah/Geechee Cultural Heritage Corridor Commission, who will discuss Gullah, 60 years after Turner’s book. Amos will discuss the exhibit and the Gullah connections on the Black Seminoles. She’ll be joined by Herb Praizer, a journalist; Dr. Thomas Klein, linguistics professor at the Georgia Southern University; Dr. Livio Sansone, anthropology professor at the Federal University of Bahia, Brazil; and Kelvin A Yelvington, anthropology professor at the University of South Florida.

For more information on the symposium in November, contact Alcione M. Amos, AmosAl@si.edu or 202-633-4832.