

Research on minority languages of Nigeria in 2001

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Fieldwork on assessing the status of minority languages in Nigeria was undertaken in January and February of 2001 with additional visits in 2002. This report covers the results of that trip with additional insights from various individuals via correspondence.

A first record of Sambe, a language that is nearly extinct

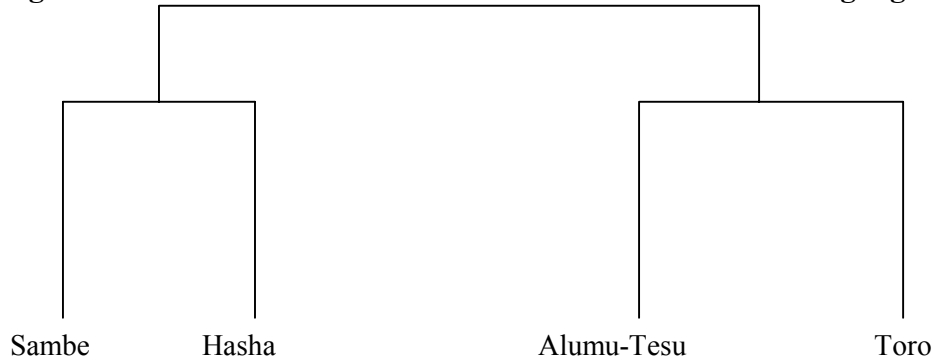
On the 11th of February 2001, I was working on the Ayu language, with the assistance of Barau Kato. We asked if there were other languages spoken in the area, and the name of Sambe came up. No such language is listed in any reference source on Nigeria, so we went in search of it. After several wrong directions we came across the last speakers the Sambe language, spoken in a single village, Sambe, some 10 km. west of the town of Agamati, on the Fadan Karshe-Wamba road in Kaduna State, Nigeria. A short wordlist was collected by Roger Blench with the assistance of Atsar Musha and group of villagers. The name of the language and people, as well as the settlement where they live, appears to be Sambe; we were unable to clarify this issue further.

Sambe is spoken by six people, three men and three women. All of these are extremely aged and our principal informant was said to be over 100 years old. Recall of the language is good and it is apparently still spoken between these individuals, though Ninzo is the usual language for communication with the rest of the village. Many other people of a slightly younger age have some knowledge of the language and can produce isolated words, but were apparently never fluent speakers. Sambe has given way to Ninzo and is effectively moribund; within 5-10 years it will be spoken no more.

Analysis of the language showed that it is of considerable importance linguistically. The external cognates show without doubt that the closest language to Sambe is Hasha, although the relationship is not that close and that the Arum-Təsu and Toro languages are also related but further apart. Sambe is geographically between Hasha and Alumu and links together what were previously isolated Plateau languages.

The best guess for the internal structure of this group is;

Figure 1. The relation of Sambe to Hasha and the Alomic languages



Sambe is a nearly extinct language and our informants were all very aged, hence the shortness of the list. We hope to return and extend the list at some future date.

The strange case of Ganang

Languages become threatened in different ways and occasionally gender rather than generation and ethnicity form part of the nexus. Ganang seems to represent a rather extreme case of gender differentiation in the process of language loss. Ganang or Gashish is often listed as one of the dialects of Izere, a significant Plateau language spoken north of Jos in Central Nigeria. No data on this language has ever been published and no Izere informants in Jos could tell us about the language. As a consequence I and Selbut Longtau decided to go to try and resolve its status.

As we approached the Ganang-speaking area, we found that the Ganang, locally known as Gashish, are considered to be Berom (the dominant ethnic group in this region), and indeed culturally they share much in common with their Berom neighbours. The Ganang language is spoken in Gashish Kuk village in Plateau State, Nigeria. Gashish Kuk is one hour's drive southeast of Jos, beyond Kura falls.

We encountered an old man sitting under a tree and requested him to help us fill in a wordlist. He readily agreed, but it very soon became clear that he did not speak the language, although he claimed to be Ganang. However, a group of women had gathered around us and began answering the questions in his stead. We soon switched to using them as the principal informants and Mrs. Cundung Bulus and Mrs. Cingun Mandong were able to help us complete a basic 400-word list on the 18th of January 2001.

Despite gathering quite a crowd it became clear that none of the men present could speak Ganang, despite the linguistic competence of their wives. However, the women were unable to produce vocabulary from the male world, particularly in relation to hunting, and so I was not able to elicit words such as those for 'arrow' or for large mammals. The men speak principally Berom, and increasingly Ron, a Chadic language spoken by recent migrants to the area, as well as Hausa, the *lingua franca* of the area. The men said that these other languages were 'better' or 'more prestigious' than Ganang, while the women said they would continue to speak Ganang with their children. Indeed, young male children were heard speaking Ganang, so they must 'stop' speaking it at a certain age. Husbands and wives communicate with each other in Berom, or increasingly in Hausa. Long-term bilingualism in Berom was later confirmed by the data analysis which indicated high levels of interference between the two

languages. Linguistically, Ganang turns out to be a form of Izere that has been Beromised. The phonology and noun-class system have taken on features of Berom and it is for practical purposes unintelligible to mainstream Izere-speakers.

It turned out to be very hard to gauge the number of competent Ganang speakers, as most individuals are multi-lingual, also speaking Ron, Hausa and Berom. Almost all settlements are mixed, with Ron and other outsiders. The nearby settlements of Hye and Iṅyɔ were reported to be principally Ganang but the same gender division of linguistic competence applies. Overall there are unlikely to be more than 3000 ethnic Ganang, but many fewer speakers. This unusual gender division makes it hard to predict the future of Ganang but it should definitely be regarded as threatened. It would also seem to be of considerable typological interest in the broader study of language endangerment and present a strong case for intensive sociolinguistic research.

Cen

As part of a dialect survey of Izere, I visited the Cen people in the company of Bitrus Kaze, my co-worker on the Izere dictionary, on the 9th of February 2001. Bitrus is a fluent speaker of standard Izere and found that the Cen people could understand his speech although he was not able to understand Cen. The centre of the Cen people is Duruk Kamang, a village about half an hour's drive SE of Foron, a major centre of Berom speakers, itself half an hour SE from Jos. Gauging the number of Cen speakers is not easy as their settlements are scattered in broken, hilly country and contain unknown numbers of Berom speakers. We guess there are about five villages and that these contain about 2000 speakers.

Locally, the Cen people are regarded as a type of Berom, as are the Ganang, although their language is definitely a type of Izere. This is derived from the fact that the Cen people have largely adopted Berom ritual and marital customs. Nonetheless, they have a complex oral history which we recorded in some detail and hope to transcribe in due course, which clearly indicates their Izere links.

Our informant was the chief of the Cen, Dung Gwom, a man of about sixty years old. He told us that this was the first time he could remember anyone coming to take a record of the language. Given that the Cen are only about an hour's drive from Jos and that this has been a centre of linguistic research for over thirty years, it doesn't say much for the motivation of some of those resident there.

Cen speakers are all fluent in Berom and most are also fluent in standard Izere. As far as we could tell the language is still widely spoken and is being transmitted to the children. The Cen are in very isolated country and are not much exposed to the influence of Hausa, the dominant lingua franca. However, as the Foron road is improved, their contacts with the outer world will increase.

Cen is interesting because although influenced heavily by Berom, the end-result has been quite different from Ganang. Ganang has tended to reduce the nominal affix system, in line with the fragmentary system in Berom. Cen has adopted Berom prefixes into its existing system and has thus developed a more complex system than standard Izere. However, it also shows some intriguing cases of consonant alternation which are clearly adapted from Berom, as this is not a feature of standard Izere morphology.

Ayu: a threatened language with many speakers

The Ayu language appears in many sources classified as Plateau IV ?, in other words part of the group of languages that include Mada and Ninzo. Published data are very scarce, confined to a few citations in the Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist, most of which have turned out to be highly inaccurate. To remedy this situation, I visited the Ayu area with Barau Kato on the 10th of February 2001 to try and obtain more definitive information. We first visited the chief, who is resident in Fadan Ayu [=Iciyai], a large settlement on the road from Fadan Karshe to Wamba, some 15 km. south of the junction. The chief and his councillors turned to no longer speak Ayu and they recommended us to the chief's brother in Ungwar Nungu, a large village some 5 km. north of Fadan Ayu in Kaduna State. We eventually contacted Mr. Shittu B. Salihu who kindly assisted us with a very complete wordlist.

Ayu speakers live in the following villages:, Kongon, Gwade, Tayu, Arau, Diger, Ikwa [=Mayir], Agamati, Anka Ambel and Amantu all in the hilly region around Fadan Ayu. These are mixed settlements and many of the ethnic Ayu living there have only a limited command of the language. The dominant language in this area is Hausa and almost the entire population seems fluent in it. The Ayu are almost entirely Muslim, in contrast to most other groups in the area which may account for the prestige of Hausa. Children appear to have a passive knowledge of Ayu but do not speak it on a daily basis. Even the older generation are easily at a loss for words in Ayu and it seems that it is not regularly spoken. Despite this, the Ayu are intensely proud of their culture and history and it clear that Ayu identity is not under threat. Consequently the loss of the language could probably be reversed. The number of ethnic Ayu might be as high as 10,000 given the relatively large settlements, but the number of truly fluent speakers is probably only in the hundreds. Nonetheless, there are large number of individuals with a fragmentary knowledge of the language.

Upon analysis, it became clear why the classification of Ayu has been problematic. It seems to have adopted many lexical items, phonological features and morphology from a wide range of languages in the region. One striking feature of Ayu is its nominal morphology. Ayu employs the following pluralisation strategies;

- a. prefix alternation or addition
- b. consonant mutation
- c. tone-change
- d. nasal insertion

plus combinations of the above strategies. Ayu is notable for consonant mutation, a procedure well-known from the Beromic languages, notably Berom, Cara and Aten, as well as the Hyam group. However, its presence in this area is more surprising. The alternations occasionally include the addition of nasals, a process recorded in Ninzo.

Cognates in the basic wordlist are extremely scattered, and it seems that Ayu must have had a complex migration history, interacting with numerous groups on their travels. A final statement on its classification is not yet possible.

A document was prepared and distributed, setting out the transcribed wordlist, the tentative phonology and making some suggestions for an orthography. I hope to be able to be able to follow up on this in the coming year.