

Notes on the Seni people and language with an addendum on the Ziriya

Roger Blench, Mallam Dendo Ltd.
John Garah Nengel, Jos University
Friday, 16 January 2004

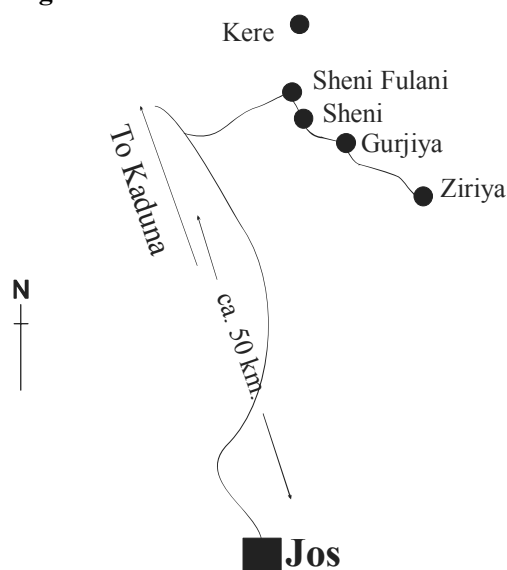
The Seni (=Sheni, Shaini, Shenne) language is an East Kainji language spoken north of Jos town in Central Nigeria. The earliest reference to this language is Temple (1922:18) who links the Sheni with the Srubu and mentions their presence in Dan Galadima District of Zaria Emirate. Charles Meek, the Nigerian government anthropologist, evidently visited, because his notes are reprised in Gunn (1956:44). He left a manuscript wordlist, found in his 'Linguistic Notes', Vol. 2, Pt II: 509-516. He noted that the Sheni were divided into three clans and that they totalled just 216. He also mentions their links to the 'Kerre' and 'Njiria' (=Ziriya). All subsequent references repeat the same information until the 1974 visit by Shimizu (1982:104 ff.), who recorded a somewhat muddled wordlist from two elder speakers in Gurjiya. Nengel (1999) includes some historical information on Sheni based on a visit in the mid-1980s.

Given this record, it seemed likely that the Sheni language was completely moribund or extinct. Interestingly, this is not the case, although any work on the language should be undertaken soon. This note makes further information available on the status of the language. The survey was conducted on 30th December 2003.

The Seni live east of the Jos-Zaria road which runs north of Jos, in Lere Local government area, Kaduna State, although still on the Jos Plateau. Figure 1 is a sketch map of the location of the Seni. There are three Seni settlements;

No.	Name	Location
1	Sheni-Fulani	N10° 23, E 8° 45
2	Sheni	N10° 22.6, E 8° 45.9
3	Gurjiya	N10° 21.5, E 8° 45.2

Figure 1. Location of Sheni



The first village is largely inhabited by Fulani and Hausa, and although some residents identify themselves as Sheni, none speak the language. Sheni village itself has but one remaining speaker and the remainder are in Gurjiya. There are at present, six fluent speakers of Seni and perhaps 10-15 semi-speakers. These are;

Musa Sheni
Doya Sehni
Idrisu Tinu
Musa Idi
Abdullahi Tinu
Habila Yunana

Most of the speakers are over 60, but the youngest, Habila Yunana, is in his 40s.

The Seni people have essentially switched to becoming Hausa-speaking and are broadly Muslim. They now call themselves the Shenawa and their language Shenanci. The loss of the language is taken as a *fait accompli*. There is no interest in reviving it and its continued existence is simply a curiosity to most residents. Nonetheless, the remaining speakers are reasonably fluent and it seems that Shimizu was probably unlucky with his informants.

Photo 1. Four of the remaining speakers of Seni



The following are the correct names for people and language in the Seni language;

one person	ònòSeni
people	anaSeni
the language	tìSeni

The Seni language

A list of some 200 words of tiSeni was compiled in a group elicitation session. Shimizu suggests that the tone system of Seni is High, Low, Downstep; this would be atypical but possible for this group. I began by recording tones but found they were rather unstable between speakers. I think there is significant interference from other languages and that if speakers spent more time interacting, the tones would ‘settle down’. Shimizu did not record plurals and Meek only gives the plurals for only a few words; these indicate that tiSeni has prefix alternations resembling other East Kainji languages. However, tiSeni appears to have a quite exotic plural morphology which rather suggests interference from an unknown but typologically quite distinct language. Some examples are given below;

Gloss	sg.	pl.
seed	ùgbérù	ùgbégbérù
forest	ùshirím	ùshiríshím
neck	iyâw	iyâwyâw
ear	ùtùway	tutuway

The first element of the stem is reduplicated according to a variety of patterns. Contrast this with the more conventional plurals;

Gloss	sg.	pl.
mouth	ùnù	tunù
leaf	ùba	màba
mother	nɛnɛ	kanɛnɛ
cow	ùná	màná

This system where a quite distinct new plural morphology has come in and restructured the conventional Bantu-like plurals is quite remarkable and should be of considerable typological interest. Something similar has occurred in the Plateau language Hasha, although this is sufficiently remote to be unrelated.

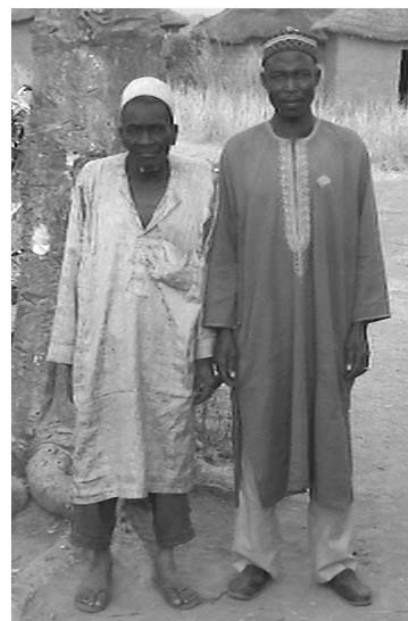
Note on Ziriya and Kɛɛ

The Ziriya language seems to be first referred to in Shimizu (1982: 108 ff.) where a brief wordlist is given. Our Seni informants insisted it was the same language as Ziriya; the wordlists in Shimizu seem to differ from one another, probably as a result of faulty recall. We were able to visit Ziriya on 30th December 2003 and to interview Sarki Abubakar Yakubu, probably the last person with any recall of the language (Photo 2). Ziriya village is situated at N10° 22.6, E 8° 50 (Figure 1). Ziriya was divided into a number of wards as follows;

Ziriya, Salingo, Kajakana, Wurno, Ungwar Marika, Funka and Farin Dutse.

The language has definitively disappeared, and even Sarkin Yakubu

Photo 2. Sarkin Yakubu (left), the last person to remember the Ziriya language



had only spoken it as a child, some sixty years ago. He could recall some greetings and some numbers, all of which corresponded to Seni, suggesting that the assertion that they were the same language is correct. There is a third village, Kεε, somewhat further north where the language was dropped even longer ago.

References

- Gunn, H.D. 1953. *Peoples of the Plateau Area of Northern Nigeria*. IAI, London.
- Nengel, J.G. 1999. *Precolonial African intergroup relations in the Kauru and Pengana polities of Central Nigerian Highlands, 1800-1900*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Shimizu, Kiyoshi. 1982. Ten more wordlists with analyses from the northern Jos group of Plateau languages. *Afrika und Übersee*, 65(1):97-134.
- Temple, Olive 1922. *Notes on the Tribes, Provinces, Emirates and States of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*. Argus Printing and Publishing Co. Capetown.