

# The coded language of the *orim*, the ancestral spirits of the Tarok of Central Nigeria

Paper for the Conference on "Spirit, Languages, Silence and Secrecy" African secret languages

Köln, December 2-3rd, 2005

*Ubi tunc vox inauditae melodiae? et vox inauditae linguae?*

Provost Wolmarus,  
letter to Hildegard of Bingen

[DRAFT REVISED POST CONFERENCE]

Roger Blench  
Mallam Dendo  
8, Guest Road  
Cambridge CB1 2AL  
United Kingdom  
Voice/ Fax. 0044-(0)1223-560687  
Mobile worldwide (00-44)-(0)7967-696804  
E-mail R.Blench@odi.org.uk  
<http://www.rogerblench.info/RBOP.htm>

Cambridge, Wednesday, 04 January 2006

---

## Abstract

### The coded language of the *orim*, the ancestral spirits of the Tarok of Central Nigeria

The Tarok people of the Langtang area, Plateau State, Central Nigeria, have an ancestral cult which retains considerable prestige and importance, despite major inroads of Christianity into the area. The ancestors, **orim**, are represented by initiated males and post-menopausal women. Cult activities take place in sacred groves outside almost all Tarok settlements. **Orim** are mostly heard, but emerge as masked figures under some circumstances, especially for the disciplining of 'stubborn' women and for making prophecies. **Orim** figures speak through voice disguisers in a language dotted with code words although framed in normal Tarok syntax and their utterances are interpreted by unmasked figures. The paper describes some of these code words, and the social and linguistic context in which they are used.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>1</b>
<b>2. Tarok society and culture</b> .....	<b>3</b>
2.1 Social structure .....	3
2.2 The position of women .....	4
2.3 Conflict .....	4
2.4 The ancestors .....	5
<b>3. Tarok language</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>4. The language of the Orim</b> .....	<b>7</b>
4.1 Main categories of substitution words .....	7
4.2 Contexts of use .....	8
4.3 Other aspects .....	8
<b>5. Conclusions</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<b>References</b> .....	<b>9</b>

## TABLES

Table 1. Orim lexical items .....	7
-----------------------------------	---

## PHOTOS

Photo 1. Hildegard of Bingen .....	2
Photo 2. Tarok masquerade .....	2
Photo 3. Playing the .....	5
Photo 4. Barrel-drum ìgàngàṅ .....	8



## 1. Introduction

The use of secret languages in Africa is widely referred to but poorly documented. This partly reflects the fact that they are ‘secret’ of course, although this seems to be a limited barrier for the serious researcher. More likely, the study of such languages is problematic for most linguists, who prefer more structured situations for elicitation. Informants for secret languages are not necessarily those you would choose and the rules of secret languages may not obey those taught in the classroom. As a consequence, few secret languages have been well documented by linguists, and little is known of their social context. A valuable, though out-of-date review of secret societies in general is Butt-Thompson (1929) which also includes some original data on the Poro language of Sierra Leone and provides a preliminary map of ethnographic descriptions of societies using such languages. Also mentioned is *Shelta*, the Irish Tinkers’ Language, which appears to show many structural features akin to African secret languages (Stewart Macalister 1937).

Spirit languages are a subset of secret languages; those that are enunciated by supernatural beings. Other types of secret language are the argots and special types of speech, that usually exist to exclude society at large. Thus professional, caste groups such as blacksmiths often have argots or other types of hard-to-understand speech to exclude non-blacksmiths (see Kastenholz 1998) and similarly with hunters and other outgroups in highly structured societies. Somali society for example, is well known for its special languages spoken by subgroups. A related phenomenon are avoidance languages; better known from the Pacific, they have also been reported from various parts of Africa (cf. e.g. the lexical taboos on the names of the dead in the Muri mountains described in Kleinwillinghöfer 1998). However, these specialised speech-forms are generally not difficult to elicit and are not necessarily surrounded with spiritual prohibitions.

Spirit languages are;

- a) quite literally spoken by spirits, i.e. are heard without being attached to a physical entity
- b) spoken by masquerades

A related category are initiation languages, typically spoken by initiates in puberty and circumcision rituals, and intended to exclude non-initiates, usually women and children.

From a linguistic point of view, spirit languages can be broadly classified into three types;

- a) Substitution languages, where the syntax of the primary language is maintained, but key lexical items are substituted (either displacing or maintaining the original morphology)
- b) Replacement languages, where the spirit language is a completely different language (often reflecting the origin of the ceremony or an incoming population)
- c) Surrogate languages, using musical instruments or whistling, that mimic the lexical tones of the primary language (for example, male initiates in Western Kenya are obliged to speak in whistle-speech)

A number variants of these three types are possible, especially a) where replacement can take many different forms especially where tone is concerned (see, for example, the literature on the To initiation language among the Gbaya of Central Africa, Tessmann 1931; Noss 1977). Surrogate languages, such as drum-speech, are extremely common, but most operate outside the spiritual sphere and indeed work *because* they are commonly understood. It seems likely that substitution languages are the most common of the three types, although the data is hardly rich enough to draw statistical conclusions. There seems every reason to think that spirit languages are disappearing all over Africa, because their contexts of use, typically masquerades and male initiation, are disappearing as world religions displace local belief systems.

A fourth type of spirit language is that recorded in Papua and Australia, which consists of a major reduction of the vocabulary of the primary language, so that individual words must encode much greater semantic zones. In Humpty-Dumpty’s terms, words must work harder and so be paid more. A well-known example of this type of ‘reduced’ language is Damin, the men’s language of the Lardil of Mornington Island off the northern coast of Australia, which has just 250 words. Damin is also famous for its phonology, which includes many sounds, not otherwise associated with Australian languages and probably intentionally

invented to give the language a strange ‘feel’ (Hale 1973, Hale and Nash 1997). A similar reduced language is spoken among the Kalam people of the New Guinea Highlands during the month when they collect *Canarium* nuts, and the entire vocabulary is similarly boiled down to some 200 words (Pawley 1993). I know of no examples of African spirit languages being constructed on this principle.

A classic case of a substitution language developed in a mystical context is the *Lingua Ignota* of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). This is her description of her first spiritual revelation:

*"When I was 42 years and 7 months old... the heavens were opened and a blinding light of exceptional brilliance flowed through my entire brain. And so it kindled my whole heart and breast like a flame, not burning but warming... and suddenly I understood of the meaning of expositions of the books... But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and low opinion of myself and because of diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time a call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by a scourge of god, I fell onto a bed of sickness.*

Hildegard’s secret language included some 1101 words, glossed in one manuscript and apparently consisting mainly of nouns (Portmann & Odermatt 1986). She took no steps to promulgate this language but seems to have circulated occasional poems including ‘secret’ words. The association of sickness with mystical visions and the creation of a code to express spiritual ideas are themes that re-occur in the worldwide literature of secret languages.

**Photo 1. Hildegard of Bingen**



Across Central Nigeria and probably from Sierra Leone to DRC, masquerades represent a major focus of spirit languages. Typically, a masquerade will speak in a disguised language, often using a voice-disguiser such as a mirliton. Mirlitons work on the same principle as a kazoo, a stretched membrane distorts the vocal timbre making it hard to understand. In Nigeria, these are often made from spherical bush-fruits, *Oncoba spinosa*, with a spider-web stretched across the hole. The masquerade speaks or sings and there is an ‘interpreter’ who translates the utterances of the masquerade into normal speech. Murphy (1980: 195), describing the masquerades among the Kpelle in Liberia, says; ‘*ɲamù* also speaks an esoteric language which a special interpreter translates so everyone in the houses can understand the message’. Sometimes a voice-disguiser can be enough, but elsewhere, substitution languages are used as well. Bullroarers are also used to represent the noises made by spirits.

Explaining the culture of masquerading is beyond the scope of this paper, but a major element is the enforcement of order within acephalous societies. Masquerades are very various and can range from humorous ones that chase children to those that are sent to discipline women, children and non-initiated males. Most ‘serious’ masquerades come out at night and women must generally stay inside their houses. The function of their transformed language is to act as a barrier between ordinary reality and the spirit world. Those outside the group must be prevented from having direct access to the utterances of supernatural beings.

**Photo 2. Tarok masquerade**



The Tarok have no spirit possession and no occasion when glossolalia occurs; indeed it seems that these two might be mutually exclusive. Spirit languages are essentially a collective product, generated by diverse means, but once accepted, then common to a particular group and formally transmitted. The Dogon express this well, when they say of their secret language;

*Ce sera la langue des masques. Tu iras a parler sur l’eau du marigot; ainsi tous ceux qui voudront apprendre boiront l’eau et comprendront mieux les paroles.*

Griaule (1938 :66)

Where ecstatic cults occur, for example, the Hausa *boorii*, there are no spirit languages. Moreover, although the appearance of the masquerades is connected with the punishment of inappropriate behaviour, there is no transgressive behaviour by masquerade or audience.

This paper<sup>1</sup> looks at the speech of the **orim**, the ancestors, among the Tarok people of east-central Nigeria. It describes the structure of Tarok society and sketches the beliefs around the **orim**. Cognates of the term **orim** spread across the Plateau languages and very similar beliefs are spread across this region. It is unclear how many peoples in this area also have a coded substitution language, as few Plateau languages are known except through wordlists and grammar sketches.

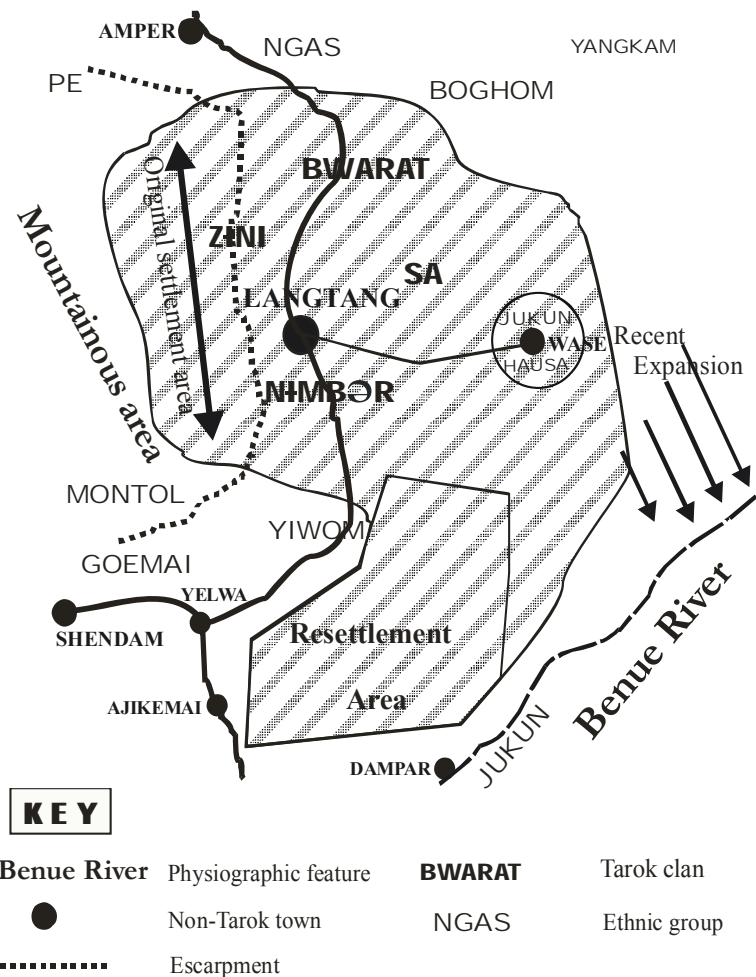
## 2. Tarok society and culture

### 2.1 Social structure

The Tarok people live primarily in the region around Langtang in south-east Plateau State, Nigeria (Map 1). They are principally subsistence farmers, depending on guinea-corn and small ruminants. Interaction with Fulbe herders over the twentieth century has sharply increased their cattle holdings and some households are best described as agropastoral. Tarok society has been largely undescribed in the anthropological literature, apart from a paper on kinship systems by Smith & Smith<sup>2</sup> (1990). There are also recent local Nigerian publications which contain valuable descriptive material, but which must be treated with care; local publications usually have an agenda (e.g. TWA 2000; Lar & Dandam 2002; ). A journal, *Ngapak*<sup>3</sup>, has recently been published and should offer much of interest on general Tarok culture.

Broadly speaking, the Tarok consist of a number of exogamous clans, historically recognising no central authority and many originating with the immigration of other ethnic groups such as Ngas and Pe (Longtau 1991). Clans are linked together by complex networks of joking relationships that surface in marital alliances and funeral ceremonies. Inheritance is patrilineal and residence patrilocal. A recognised ruler, the Ponzhi Tarok, whose origins lie in the colonial era, now exists and acts as a partial counterweight to structures imposed by the Nigerian State, notably

**Map 1. The Tarok area, showing major clans and neighbouring peoples**



<sup>1</sup> Although this paper has been written by Roger Blench, the data has been supplied by Selbut Longtau, my long-term collaborator, with whom I am producing a dictionary of standard Tarok.

<sup>2</sup> This paper should be treated with great care, as it describes fieldwork conducted two decades previously and much of what it says is not easily interpreted by Tarok speakers.

<sup>3</sup> This is the name of a cruciform wooden whistle used for surrogate speech and as such iconic of Tarok communication

Local Government Councils. The ancestors, **orim**, essentially a powerful male society into which young men are initiated, remain a powerful force for social order despite the considerable inroads made by Christianity.

## 2.2 The position of women

Tarok society is strongly patrilineal and has highly authoritarian attitudes to women. Women are expected to be respectful and submissive. TWA (2000:29 [original spelling maintained]), which is written by women, says the following;

‘A good house wife is known by the manner she conducts herself towards her husband and other men. A Tarok woman, therefore, armed with this at her finger tip would never stand to talk to her husband but would rather prostrate or squat especially when the man is seated. It needs to be mentioned that women generally never walk on to men any how in the society; rather, they bow with their hands on their knees as a sign of respect after taking the excuse “**m̄ba wo**” meaning “May I come to you?”.’

There is an air of fantasy about these prescriptions; modern times have meant that as women have moved to town and pursued their education, with many becoming relatively wealthy. As a consequence, their attention to traditional respect patterns is declining. However, Tarok society has developed such an elaborate system of sanctions for ‘stubborn’ women, that it suggests they never were as submissive as the ideology might suggest, and had to be kept in line regularly, precisely because they tended to question their husbands’ decisions. As with many societies, post-menopausal women are regarded as classificatory males and can even take part in **orim** rituals on payment of a number of goats.

## 2.3 Conflict

Nigeria is rich in sources of civil conflict, and the Tarok area is no exception. In June 2002, a serious conflict broke out in the Langtang area. Fulbe and Hausa live in the Tarok area, especially around Wase. The Tarok have maintained good relations with the Fulbe for a long time and are now themselves substantial cattle owners, often as a result of sending their sons to be trained in herding by the Fulbe. The Tarok are overwhelmingly Christian, although traditional religion also plays an important role in maintaining social order, whereas the Hausa and Fulbe are strongly Muslim. The Tarok, moreover, have a long tradition of military service, and many of their leaders are ex-generals. A fight broke out in Yelwa, near Shendam (in SE Plateau State) at the end of June between Christian and Muslim residents, over relations between Christian girls and Muslim boys, resulting in the burning of churches. Fleeing Tarok families brought the news to Langtang South, inciting attacks on Hausa-owned businesses in various settlements in the region. Intervention of the security services brought about a temporary calm. A substantial number of Hausa and Fulani, armed with modern weapons and some at least from outside the region, regrouped and began attacking Tarok settlements from a base near Wase. At this point, Tarok church leaders seem turned funds collected for evangelisation to the purchase of modern weapons. Igbo traders had guns in readiness for self-defence and were soon able to supply automatic weapons from Enugu. Insecurity continued in the region for the next two years, culminating in a massacre in Yelwa in April 2004, when ‘several hundred’ Muslims were killed. This followed the creation of a pan-tribal alliance between the Tarok and some of the neighbouring peoples such as the Montol. Details are hard to come by, but it seems that the warriors reverted to extremely traditional dress and have also resuscitated a dormant martial culture and revived a hitherto faltering war magic. Government eventually restored order and since then the region has been relatively quiet, but this may be only temporary.

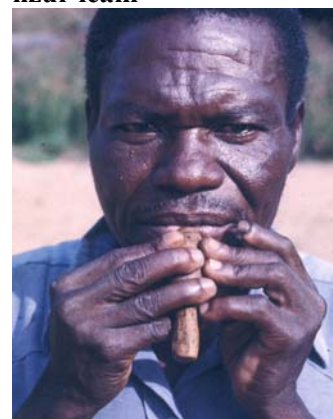
## 2.4 The ancestors

Each Tarok settlement of any size has a sacred grove outside it, which is conserved as the place of the **orim** or ancestors<sup>4</sup>. The singular form, **ùrim**, is applied to a dead person or an ancestor, while **orim** refers to the collective ancestors and the cult itself. Men above a certain age are allowed to enter the grove and engage with the ancestors. These inhabit the land of the dead and are thus in contact with all those who have died, including young people and children who were not admitted to the **orim**. On certain nights when the ‘**orim** are out’, women and children must stay in their houses. **Orim** can also be seen ‘dressed’, i.e. appearing as masquerades, when they engage with women through an interpreter. Surprisingly, most Tarok are Christian and Langtang hosts some large churches, but the association of the **orim** with power ensures that these two systems continue to co-exist. Indeed it is said that the **orim** take care to visit the houses of the retired generals and other influential figures at night to cement the bonds between two very different types of power. **Orim** society is graded, in the sense that there are members who are not fully initiated and so cannot be let into the inner secrets of the society. Some of the **orim** vocabulary is therefore for internal concealment, that is, there are code-words among the elder members to conceal the meaning of what is being said from junior members.

The main function of the **orim** from the external point of view is to maintain order, both spiritual and actual, within the society but also to prepare for warfare and other collective action. In practice, maintaining order seems to be about disciplining women, who are forced to cook food as a punishment for being lazy or ‘stubborn’. This category of **orim** is called **orim agan**, literally ‘masquerade that gives trouble’ and its speciality is to fine women. There is a special season, **agan** ‘time of trouble’, for meting out fines to offenders. The **orim** are also in contact with the dead and it is believed that the spirits of dead children require to be fed; hence they will request special meals from the mother of such children. **Orim** also have a marriage-broking function; for example, young women tell the **orim** the name of the young man they would like to marry, and they find ways of passing on the message.

A significant question is whether the men themselves actually believe in the ideology they propagate, or whether this is simply a quite explicit structure developed for social control by an essentially atheist elite. One reason for thinking it has real significance is the importance of **orim** in strengthening spiritual power in situations of external threat. A Tarok man can call upon the invisible army of the **orim** in moments of crisis. After young men are initiated, they are permitted to carry a special whistle, **nzur icam**, which they can use to call the **orim** to assist them. Post-menopausal women, who have some of the same status as initiated males, can enter the **orim** society on payment of sacrificial animals. Although they cannot own a whistle, they can call the **orim** to assist them by the use of a special cry. Such women may then display all the behavioural traits of men. The intervention of the **orim** to strengthen the courage of men in war is explicit, but they also play a role in encounters with other types of spirits. Witchcraft attacks, which can be frequent in Tarok society, are a common explanation for unusual behaviour, as is the failure to make sacrifices to spirits with which individuals may have specific relationships. The **orim** can be called upon by initiates to give them strength to fight off such attacks.

Photo 3. Playing the **nzur icam**



## 3. Tarok language

Tarok [=Yergam] was first described by Fitzpatrick (1910/11). The first scholarly publications on the Tarok language are by Leo Sibomana (1980, 1981a,b) who provides a useful summary of the phonology, noun-classes and verbal system. More recently, Longtau (1991, 1993, 1997) has analysed the implications of the classification of Tarok for the interpretation of oral tradition and elaborated a formal phonology.

---

<sup>4</sup> It should be emphasised that all information about the activities of **orim** is at second hand. Neither author has direct experience of **orim** activities, and of course would be bound by an oath of silence if we had such experience.

Tarok has twenty-nine consonant phonemes:

	Labial	Labio-dental	Alveolar	Palato-Alveolar	Palatal	Velar	Labio-velar	Glottal
<b>Plosives vls</b>	p		t			k	kp	ʔ
<b>vd</b>	b		d			g	gb	
<b>Implosives</b>	ɓ		ɗ					
<b>Fricatives vls</b>		f	s	ʃ				h
<b>vd</b>		v	z	ʒ		ɣ		
<b>Affricates vls</b>				tʃ				
<b>vd</b>				dʒ				
<b>Nasals</b>	m		n		ɲ	ŋ		
<b>Laterals</b>			l					
<b>Vibrants</b>			r					
<b>Semivowels</b>					y		w	

There are seven vowel phonemes:

	Front	Central	Back
<b>Close</b>	i	ɨ	u
<b>Mid</b>	e	ə	o
<b>Open</b>		a	

All seven vowels occur word initially except the central close vowel; and the front and central mid vowels. The close central vowel can occur word medially, but not finally. However, all the remaining six vowels can occur word medially and finally. All seven vowels can also occur as free morphemes except the close and mid central vowels.

Tarok has three level tones and a rising and falling tone. Tones are marked:

// for a high tone

mid tone is shown by an absence of a tone mark

/ for a low tone

/^ for a falling tone

/~ for the rising tone.

The paper follows the phonological analysis proposed in Longtau (1993) but not the standard Tarok orthography, which has a rather misleading use of IPA symbols. The examples here give IPA symbols their conventional values. The correspondence with Tarok orthography is as follows;

IPA	Tarok orthography
ɨ	ə
ə	ɔ
ŋ	ng



## 4. The language of the Orim

### 4.1 Main categories of substitution words

Table 1 gives a list of all the special lexical items in the speech of the **orim** recorded at present. This is a far from complete list, but it gives a sample of the main words in all categories of speech. All these are substitution forms, i.e. they are inserted in otherwise normal Tarok sentences. The main categories are;

- a) Food and drink items. These are used to indicate to women the food they should bring either for the dead, or to make good unacceptable behaviour
- b) Persons. These are coded ways of speaking about women when they are present at a masquerade
- c) Weapons. Used in discussing warfare and military matters.
- d) Household items. Used in discussions when women may be present
- e) Ritual items. Used to conceal meanings from men not fully initiated

Interestingly, **orim** speech, unlike normal Tarok, has no regional varieties; the ancestors apparently speak in the same language all across Tarok land. Table 1 shows the actual term used when the **orim** speak, its literal translation, its referent or meaning and the usual word in Tarok for this concept.

Table 1. Orim lexical items

Orim term	Literal translation	Meaning	Usual word
<b>m̀mon c̀t̀c̀t̀</b>	plucking <i>cutcut</i>	chicken	<b>ir̀gu</b>
<b>m̀pajilik̀and̀n̄</b>	grass that likes growing in water	rice	<b>ikaba</b>
<b>ipa ijili k̀à nd̀n̄</b>	one who puts his buttocks in the water	rice	<b>ikaba</b>
<b>ǹn̄ng fitfit</b>	something that smells <i>fitfit</i>	locust bean cake	<b>abai</b>
<b>aswal ipi</b>	tail of the rat	rizga <sup>5</sup>	<b>aǹanj̀ol</b>
<b>m̀bal dil̀it̀<sup>6</sup></b>	something that sticks [in your mouth] <i>dilit!</i>	arrowroot <sup>7</sup>	<b>amwám</b>
<b>nt̀acuk̀ut̀ b̀à dama<sup>8</sup></b>	something you put in the mouth, <i>cukut</i> [i.e. very well]	white beniseed <sup>9</sup>	<b>ilimpyár</b>
<b>̀ngẁangẁang ta á b̀ali</b>	shield that reaches Bali [town]'	local bread <sup>10</sup>	<b>ǹz̀n̄k̀n̄</b>
<b>m̀b̀aẁu</b>	something that makes your face swell	Bambara nut	<b>afi</b>
<b>ǹd̀apỳàng</b>	something that refuses to be pulled'	goat	<b>ib̀al</b>
<b>àzhaɓar</b>	famished one [insultative]	porridge	<b>ǹkp̀àng</b>
<b>nləfər</b>	something for libation	porridge	<b>ǹkp̀àng</b>
<b>àẁar</b>	something to be brought out of its husk	millet	<b>im̀ar</b>
<b>ǹgg̀og̀ok</b>	something that is sieved	beer	<b>ǹc̀e</b>
<b>ak̀osh̀ar</b>	necklace for women	young girl	<b>̀uyenb̀en</b>
<b>ik̀amb̀al pl. ik̀amb̀al</b>	roan antelope	woman	<b>̀uc̀ar</b>
<b>asha gidi+</b>	? Borrowed from unknown language	drum	<b>igangang</b>
<b>il̀ak̀an</b>	butterfly	blanket <sup>11</sup>	<b>ab̀ar̀ko</b>
<b>av̀ak̀ci</b>	sheath for a sword or knife	house	<b>ǹzh̀i</b>
<b>ab̀ok̀ci</b>	shrine of <b>orim</b>	house	<b>ǹzh̀i</b>
<b>akum<sup>+</sup>-ib̀ỳàn̄</b>	below the wild aroid	farm	<b>ir̀am</b>

<sup>5</sup> small tuber, *Plectranthus esculentus*

<sup>6</sup> The **orim** word for arrowroot (**amwam**) appears in the generally used expression: **m̀bam dil̀iti i lyat nggwangwang ni i ga ikum k̀à k̀a'wurmaya** (=sticker of-*dilit* we make shield (with) so-that we go with to-Wurmaya (a mythical town not known today))

<sup>7</sup> *Tacca leontopetaloides*

<sup>8</sup> **ba dama** is actually borrowed from Hausa! i.e. very much.

<sup>9</sup> *Sesamum indicum*

<sup>10</sup> cereal dough roasted or boiled in leaves made from millet etc.

<sup>11</sup> 'blanket' in this context is the cloth that covers the masquerade and so in turn stands for the masquerade itself

<b>Orim term</b>		<b>Literal translation</b>	<b>Meaning</b>	<b>Usual word</b>
<b>ndàp</b>	<b>zə̀kzək</b>	one that pulls <i>zəkzək</i> from under Panjang <sup>12</sup>	farm	<b>iràm</b>
<b>àkùmànjàng</b>				
<b>mbal-pər</b>		fire ant	fire	<b>apər</b>
<b>̀ngakci</b>		cornstalk sheath	knife	<b>ikpàl</b>
<b>agbèshì</b>		horn	stick	<b>idàri</b>
<b>̀cáng</b>		python	water	<b>̀ndə̀ng</b>
<b>atámtám</b>		the one of the mouth	tobacco	<b>atə̀ba</b>
<b>ashílishili</b>		gourd	salt	<b>m̀màn</b>
<b>̀nkánjwàl̀ak</b>		something with a wide jaw	dog	<b>ivá</b>

#### 4.2 Contexts of use

The table groups all the food terms together and these represent either fines on women or the food she must supply to feed the dead. The **orim** will speak using the special words and the ‘interpreter’ will repeat it in ordinary language. When the **orim** visit a ‘stubborn, badly behaved’ woman, she will be fined so many goats, chickens or bowls of rice. Rizga is the food of **orim** in the land of the dead and typically rizga, arrowroot, beniseed, Bambara groundnuts and porridge will be eaten by a child who has died. The **orim** will request these foods from a mother to carry to the child.

The references to the house, the farm and household implements are used in judging a lazy woman, i.e. one who does not work hard in the house and farm. These are conceived to be major character defects and as such are subject to judgment by the **orim**. When the **orim** visit the house of the offender, these words are used in condemnatory expressions. To refer to women and girls, the coded words **akóshár** and **ikàmbàl** are used by the **orim** to speak to one another. Similarly, the ‘blanket’ is a code-word for the masquerade cover that the **orim** put over themselves during the daytime so that women will not recognise them. Encounters with women are more common than they used to be, as Christianity and modern notions of behavioural norms spread.

The term for tobacco has a very specific context, as tobacco is used to signify a marriage proposal. The young girls are to tell the **orim** who they would like to marry and the **orim** in turn inform the young men. If the young man is in agreement, then he brings tobacco to the girl to give to her mother as part of the marriage payment.

The word for drum is used by the **orim** in conversations between one another. During the course of a certain ceremony, at one point the priest says ‘Beat the drum!’, using the substitute term. Similarly, the terms for weapons are used internally in discussions about preparations for warfare.

#### 4.3 Other aspects

One of the more puzzling aspects of **orim** terms are their sources. Many seem to be quite random, ‘gourd’ for salt’, ‘python’ for ‘water’, or ‘butterfly’ for ‘blanket’. Others clearly have some semantic connection with the real referent, for example ‘cornstalk sheath’ for ‘knife’, ‘**orim** shrine’ for ‘house’, and ‘women’s necklace’ for ‘young girl’. Substitutions such as ‘fire-ant’ for ‘fire’ make sense in Tarok, but not necessarily in English. However, the most common terms are verbal nouns, often with an ideophone added to clarify the sense. These are usually descriptive locutions, such as beer being ‘something that is sieved’ and rather recall the way parents speak in front of children in European societies. There does not seem to be any underlying logic to the choice of substitutions and perhaps this is the point, they cannot be guessed but must be learnt.

**Photo 4. Barrel-drum igangan**



<sup>12</sup> The Chief masquerade Panjang has a variant name Manjang

There is also some evidence for flow between **orim** speech and normal speech. Examples are: **ace ga'va**, 'dog's penis', was originally a name the tuber rizga, in **orim** speech, but was adopted into normal Tarok to refer to a poor quality cultivar. The **orim** were thus compelled to develop a new term for rizga. Similarly, **ñkpaŋaŋ**, 'stick', was originally an **orim** term, but has now spread into normal speech, so the language of the **orim** has a new coinage, **agbàshì**, 'horn' in normal speech. This also throws interesting light on lexical innovation; and in particular the genesis of new words 'from nowhere'. Secret languages can often have synchronically completely random associations between referent and lexeme; if these are borrowed into the normal language, they can represent innovations that will remain opaque to the put-upon etymologist.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper is a first look at a rich culture of spirit language in central Nigeria. At present this is a culture which is still very much alive, indeed it is adapting to the modern world in a quite remarkable way. Because of the difficulties of elicitation, little has been published about these spirit languages, but it is clear they can provide valuable insights into both the ordinary language and the conceptual structures that underlie it, as well as broader aspects of the anthropology of such societies. I hesitate to suggest this is yet another priority for research, since the languages of Central Nigeria are so poorly documented in every other way, but the existence of a rich repertoire of parallel speech is at least worth underlining.

## References

- Banfa, Stephen, 1982. Towards a Yergam History: Some Explorations. In: *Studies in the History of Plateau State*, Nigeria, ed. Elizabeth Isichei, pp. 90-98, Macmillan Press Ltd.
- Butt-Thompson, F.W. 1929. *West African Secret Societies: their organizations, officials and teaching*. London: H.F. & G. Witherby.
- Dangel, Richard, 1929. Grammatische Skizze der Yergum-Sprache. *Bibliotheca Africana* III, 2/3, pp. 135-145.
- Famwang, W. V., 1980. *The Tarok Culture*. Crossroads Publications, Jos. [A printing of a 1978 manuscript]
- Fitzpatrick, J.F.J., 1910/11. Some Notes on the Kwolla District and its Tribes. *Journal of the African Society*, X:16-52, 213-221.
- Griaule, Marcel 1938. *Masques Dogons*. Paris: Institut d'Ethnologie.
- Hale, K. 1973. 'Deep-surface Canonical Disparities in Relation to Analysis and Change: An Australian Example', in T. A. Sebeok (ed.) *Current Trends in Linguistics, 11 (Diachronic, Areal and Typological Linguistics)*. The Hague: Mouton. 401-458.
- Hale, Ken & Nash, David. 1997. Lardil and Damin Phonotactics. In: *Boundary Rider. Essays in honour of Geoffrey O'Grady*. ed. by Darrell Tryon & Michael Walsh. pp. 247-259. *Pacific Linguistics* C-136.
- International Bible Society and Nigeria Bible Translation Trust, 1988. *Nsar Nnap-nla Mpipye (Tarok New Testament)*. I.B.S. and N.B.T.T., New York.
- Kastenholz, Raimund 1998. Language shift and language death among Mande blacksmiths and leatherworkers in the diaspora. In: *Endangered languages in Africa*. Matthias Brenzinger, ed. 253-266. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe.
- Lar, I.B. & Ganta Godswill Dandam 2002. *Tarok proverbs in context*. Jos: Jos University Press.
- Longtau, Selbut R. 1991. Linguistic Evidence on the Origins of Peoples: The case of the Tarok people of Plateau State (Nigeria). *Afrika und Übersee*, 74:191-204.
- Longtau, Selbut R. 1993. A formal Tarok phonology. *Afrika und Übersee*, 76:15-40.
- Longtau, Selbut R., 1997. Tarok Children's Songs. *Afrika und Übersee*, 80, 233-253.
- Longtau Selbut R., 2000. Tarok Burial and Funeral Rites. In ed. Lannap, A. *Tarok Woman*. University of Jos, Press, Jos.
- Murphy, William P. 1980. Secret Knowledge as Property and Power in Kpelle Society: Elders versus Youth. *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 50 (2):193-207.
- Noss, Philip 1977. Compounding in To. The dynamics of a closed pidgin. *Studies in African Linguistics*, 57: 185-197.

Roger Blench: The secret language of the **orim**, Tarok ancestors. Circulation draft

---

- Pawley, A. 1993. A language which defies description by ordinary means. In: W. Foley (ed), *The role of theory in language description*. pp. 87-129. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Portmann, Marie-Louise & Alois Odermatt (eds.) 1986. *Wörterbuch der unbekanntten Sprache*. Basel: Verlag Basler Hildegard-Gesellschaft.
- Sibomana, Leo 1980. Grundzüge der Phonologie des Tarok (Yergam). *Afrika und Übersee*, 63:199-206.
- Sibomana, Leo 1981a. Tarok II: Das Nominalklassensystem. *Afrika und Übersee*, 64:25-34.
- Sibomana, Leo 1981b. Tarok III: Das Verbalsystem. *Afrika und Übersee*, 64:237-247.
- Smith, M.G. and M.F. Smith, Mary F., 1990. Kyanship and Kinship Among the Tarok. *Africa*, 60 (2):242-269.
- Stewart Macalister, R. A. 1937. *The Secret Languages of Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tessmann, Gunther 1931. Die drei Sprachen des Baja-stammes, To, Labi, Baja (Kamerun). *MSOS*, 34(3):70-115.
- TWA [Tarok Women Association, Jos Branch] 2000. *The Tarok woman*. Jos: Tarok Women Association.