

Mambila field trip

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R. M. Blench 1999. Field trip to record the status of some little-known Nigerian languages. *Ogmios*, 11:11:14.

Between 19th and 23rd January 1999, Bruce Connell and I made a field trip to the Mambila Plateau to try and complete the listing of lects in Bruce's Mambila database.

The first trip was to Zongo Ajiya in the extreme northwest of the Mambila Plateau, to visit the Mvanip people, first recorded by Meek as Magu in the 1920s. Far from being 'less than 10,000' as it says in *Index of Nigerian Languages* (1992), there are only 100 speakers (chief's estimate) living in one quarter of Zongo Ajiya. Despite this, the language seems to be alive –the Jauro assured us that all the children still speak it, which appears to be true. A long wordlist was taped and there is no doubt that this is the same as the language given in Meek. Oral traditions of migration were recorded from a monoglot speaker of Mvanip, Mr. Yi Neman, who is now over 100 years old. Despite the small number of speakers and the evidence of fluency in vehicular Fulfulde, Mvanip is still being transmitted to children.

When we asked for the language closest to Mvanip, we were given the name of the Ndunda people (which Meek noted as speaking the same language as Magu). Ndunda is a village some 5km. from Yerimaru, past Kakara on the tea estate road, northwest of Gembu. The Ndunda are a distinct people and language whose existence seems previously to have been unrecorded. Ndunda resembles Mvanip but the two are sufficiently distinct as to be regarded as separate languages. Apart from a wordlist, we also took a limited amount of historical data. There are probably 3-400 speakers of Ndunda. It appears the language is still being transmitted to children.

We wanted to reach Antere, beyond Ndunda on the Cameroun border, as the exact language(s) spoken there are unknown. However, the road has now collapsed and we were forced to give up that project. We were able to contact Antere people in Yerimaru, and were told, much to our surprise, there are numerous languages spoken in Antere, in different quarters. These are;

Fum		=Mfumte
Nshi	(home village Nkiri)	? = Wushi
Bùkwák people	from Kwak, speaking Kwak	? = Yamba
Bunta people	from Nca village speaking áncá	? = Manta
Biti people	speaking (?) Ndégbítè	
Viti people		

We were able to record a wordlist of Viti and it is definitely a Grassfields language of Camerounian Bantu type –but of what type and whether it is new cannot yet be known. As for the others we guess they may also be Grassfields although there is absolutely no evidence for this except proximity. The identifications in the table above are based on the entries in the *Linguistic Atlas of Cameroun*. But they all seem to be spoken in Nigeria and should thus be added to the list of Nigerian languages. The numbers of speakers must be very small.

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The most striking result of this survey was that in general, despite the small numbers of speakers of many languages, they continue to be spoken. This is not to say they should not be regarded as 'endangered' – any language with so few speakers can disappear rapidly through cultural or economic change. The main threat is that the rise of Hausa and English will tend to pidginise the languages, that younger people will no longer be able to master the complex system of plurals and tend to replace common lexical items with their Hausa equivalents.

Since the map accompanying the Index of Nigerian Languages was published in 1994 (but representing field data up to the end of 1990) a substantial new body of data has been collected on names, location and existence of languages. These have been drawn on a base map prepared by SIL, and are presently being digitised in Nairobi. This map should appear to accompany the millennium edition of the Ethnologue.

References

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