

Recent Fieldwork in Nigeria: Report on Horom and Tapshin

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In March 1998 I was able to visit two communities in Nigeria, the status of whose languages has been uncertain until now. In the case of Tapshin, no data seems ever to have been recorded, while in the case of Horom, some 50 words, often inaccurate, have been published.

Horom

The Horom language is spoken in Horom village in Bokkos district of Plateau State, Nigeria. The main village of the Horom is some 10 km. (40 minutes drive) east of Richa over an extremely bad road. Richa is at the edge of the Jos Plateau some 2 hours drive SE of Jos and is the principal market-town for the area. All the other villages in this area speak varieties of Kulere, a Chadic language, with the exception of Mabo and Barkul. The Horom also have a small hamlet, Kura 'down', i.e. on the plain below the escarpment, where they live among the Rindre.

The Rom people (sg. Rom pl. BaRom) have been called 'Horom' in almost all the literature (e.g. Hansford *et al.* 1976). Horom is the name of their language, but in view of the ubiquity of this root for 'person' or 'man', Horom is a good reference name. Some early sources have the name 'Kaleri', apparently a distortion of 'Kulere', which appears in earlier classifications, but this is highly inappropriate.

The only published data on Horom are the sporadic citations in the Benue-Congo comparative wordlist (Williamson and Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1973) although Daniel Nettle has a list of some 100 words which he has kindly forwarded to me. I collected a wordlist of some 600 words with the assistance of Selbut Longtau from Abiya Ishaku Musa and a group of villagers in Horom on the 30th of March 1998.

The Horom language is spoken by perhaps 1500 speakers at a maximum. Surprisingly, the language does not seem unduly threatened; during the language elicitation session it seemed that many of the children present were able to produce the required lexical items simultaneously with the adults. This situation may be explained partly by the remoteness of Horom, although remoteness has not prevented the Chadic languages in the Bauchi area from disappearing. The Horom people are extremely multilingual; they reported fluency in Kulere, Rindre (a Plateau language spoken at the bottom of the escarpment), Hausa and several speakers of English also live in the village. Horom culture is still very much alive and presumably this has acted to preserve the language as well. Nonetheless, this is only a first impression and the small number of speakers suggests the urgency of undertaking a more comprehensive survey.

The Horom are regarded by their neighbours as culturally part of the Ron-speaking group. The only source for information on Horom culture is CAPRO (in press).

The people of Horom are expert in traditional pottery. Other handicrafts are weaving of traditional sacks, smithing and carving. Almost every householder rears chickens, goats, sheep or cows. According to tradition, cows were kept for ceremonies and sacrifices.

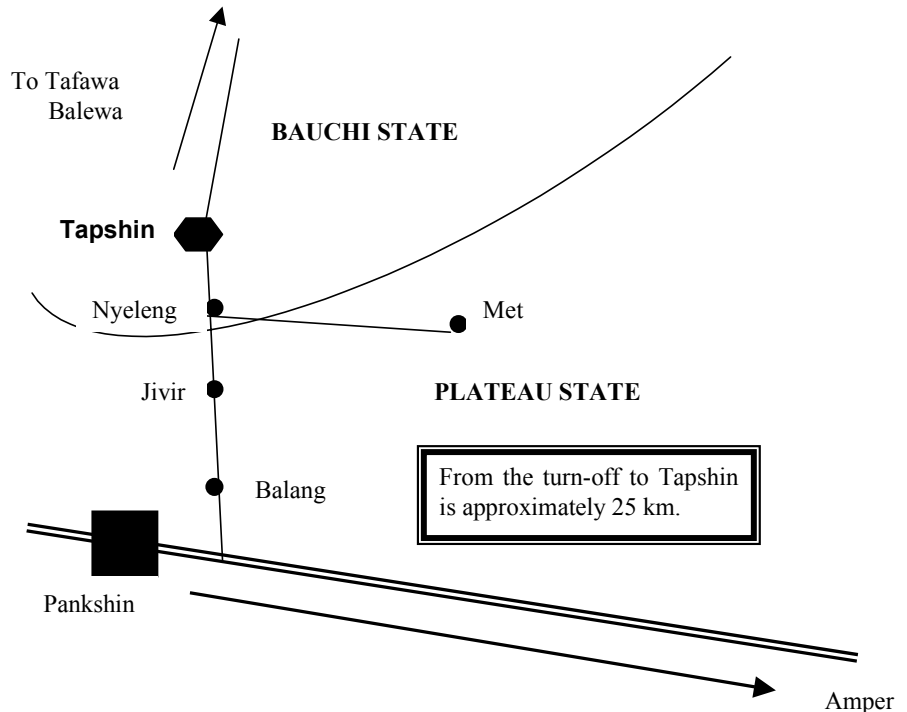
It can also be said that traditional religion remains very lively in this area. The Horom have lively musical traditions including, rather surprisingly, the use of the xylophone.

Horom is said to belong to a group of languages classified as Southeast Plateau (formerly Plateau 6) along with Fyem and Mabo. Analysis of the wordlist has tended to confirm this view although there are unexplained linkages with the Tarokoid languages spoken south-east of this region. Nettle (in press) appears to argue against the inclusion of Mabo in this group.

Tapshin

The Nsur language is spoken in Tapshin village in Plateau State, Nigeria. Tapshin is some 25 km. north of the Pankshin-Amper road and reached by a track leading off the main road some 5 km. east of Pankshin. The road can only be traversed by a four-wheel drive and may well be cut off completely in the rainy season. Despite this, the area is densely populated with elaborate terracing systems. **Error! Reference source not found.** shows the location of Tapshin;

The only published reference to this language is in Hansford et al. (1976) apparently based on some unpublished observations of Kiyoshi Shimizu, who apparently made the claim that Tapshin was related to Eloyi, a language spoken much further South. The name 'Tapshin' is locally considered to be Hausa, although it does not look like Hausa. At any rate, this is the name of the only village, a large dispersed settlement with numerous wards. The Tapshin call themselves **Nsúr** plural **àNsúr** and their language **kisúr** and the reference name could be either Nsur or Sur. The Ngas people call the Nsur 'Dishili'. The name 'Myet' found in some earlier references is one version of the name Met, a settlement some distance west of Tapshin. The people of Tapshin claim that the people of Met speak 'the same' language as them, but this has yet to be directly confirmed.



A wordlist of some 600 words was collected by Roger Blench with the assistance of Selbut Longtau from a group on elders in Tapshin on the 21st of March 1998. We would like to thank the chief, Sale Sambo, for calling the meeting and John Tula Rabu for help with translation as well as all those who attended for their good-natured participation.

On the face of it, Nsur should be a prime candidate for language loss. All adults appear to be fluent in Ngas and Hausa and Tapshin is an enclave within the Ngas, a numerous population speaking a Chadic language, by whom they are culturally dominated. The number of speakers cannot be more than 3-4000, depending on the status of Met. The figure of 18,000 given in CAPRO (1995) would appear to be a serious over-estimate. However, it was apparent during the interviews that even young children are learning the language and there is no evidence of a decline in competence. Even more surprisingly, but no doubt related, the language is by no means full of loanwords from Hausa and Ngas, as is sometimes the case. The only source for information on Nsur culture is CAPRO (1995:323-327).

A comparative analysis of Nsur vocabulary has been undertaken and, tentatively summarise the results;

- a) Nsur is a Plateau language, ultimately of the Benue-Congo family of Niger-Congo
- b) Nsur is part of the Tarokoid group and is probably most closely related to Yanjam.
- c) There has been substantial mutual influence with the Ngas language, and Ngas is in some cases clearly the receptor language, despite its present-day numerical importance
- d) Despite virtual bilingualism in Hausa there has been very limited influence except for recent items of material culture.

As with Horom, the small number of speakers suggests that Nsur is a prime candidate for further research. The rapid nature of the survey and the impressionistic sociolinguistic information may well be misleading.

Plateau languages in Nigeria are extremely diverse and for many of them no data whatsoever has been published and their classification is therefore highly speculative. No recent sociolinguistic work has been carried out to determine their status, but many of them have very few speakers. Research conditions in Nigeria are frankly difficult, but those who take the trouble to visit these isolated communities are usually given a warm welcome and enthusiastic assistance from the chief and elders.

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