

PROJECT REPORT

Research on Vanishing Languages and Practices in the Northern Guang Area in Ghana: a preliminary report

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We here present a very preliminary report on a field project entitled ‘Vanishing Voices from Ghana’s Middle Belt’, an Endangered Languages Documentation Project funded by the Endangered Languages Documentation Program based at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. It is being carried out by the author in association with a historian, Dr. Samuel Aniegye Ntewusu of the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana. This report deals primarily with the endangered languages and associated endangered practices aspects of the project. Although the historical aspect is not the main focus, it will be realized that it is intimately connected with the linguistic aspect. The project was initially inspired by a desire to trace and document languages that were either known to be disappearing, and there was uncertainty as to whether they were still spoken by anyone, or unknown to linguistics and so unidentified in the literature.

Part of the project was intended as a follow-up to a trip made by the same researchers to the area between Tamale and Salaga in 2007. At that time it was determined that a language called ‘Nterato’ by J. Goody (1963) and reported by him as having “virtually disappeared” in 1956 was still spoken by two elderly men in the rather remote village of Kpalangase, some 33 km. east of the main road between Tamale and Salaga, who however called it ‘Ntrapo’.¹ A short list of 77 words was collected, which when merged with Goody’s list of 42, plus some personal names, confirmed that this is a north Guang language, similar to but not identical with several other languages of the area. It was hoped to check whether there were still speakers of this or other closely related languages in several other settlements mentioned in Goody (1963).

It was also our intention to determine whether a language other than Gonja, possibly called Mpur, is still spoken or at least remembered in Tuluwe, a Gonja town on the east bank of the White Volta which is the seat of a major Gonja chiefdom.

¹ The element **-po** in nouns relating to persons in Guang languages is cognate with Akan **-fo**, and it is very likely that these gentlemen were using the term for the people for the language, on the model of “language of the Ntrapo”. They also said that **ntrapo** was a corruption of singular **bədrapo**, plural **ntrapona** – which seems to confirm that the term essentially means the speakers of the language.

Information gathered there in 2007 was inconclusive and no documentation was possible at that time. However, for several practical reasons it may not be possible to carry out these aspects of the project. The language of daily life in both Kpalangase and Tuluwe today is Gonja.

The major focus of the present project is on the Kpandai area, specifically the village of Balai (which is also Dr Ntewusu's home town). Kpandai, about 60 km. east of Salaga and about 118 km. south of Yendi on the north-south road that passes from Yendi down through the Volta Region, is traditionally Nawuri speaking, although today there are large communities in the district speaking other languages, particularly Konkomba. However Balai, about 5 km. to the north-west of Kpandai, is solidly Nawuri. Nevertheless, we had information that two unidentified languages were used there for ritual purposes. One was said to be spoken in connection with a women's cult popularly known as 'Okule', and the other in performing libations by the clan regarded by themselves and others as the true indigenes of Balai, which indeed is the name of the clan in question. In early February 2013 Dr. Ntewusu and the present author visited Balai to investigate the situation.

Before that, however, in August-September 2012, Dr. Ntewusu and Dr. Jonathan Brindle visited Balai on the occasion of the celebration of the 'Okule' cult, and filmed and recorded the two days of cult performance. It was very fortunate that they did so, because the cult performance is rare – this was the first in twenty years – and the material they collected in this initial documentation probably could not have been recorded at any other time. Dr. Brindle also collected a short word list of the cult language, on the basis of which he was able to determine that it is a variety of Yoruba. Thanks to Dr. Brindle's efforts, part of the puzzle was therefore already solved by the time we went in February 2013. I shall now describe what we were able to learn about the 'Okule' language and cult beyond the bald fact that the language is Yoruba, and then outline what we were able to learn about the cult language of the Balai clan.

The 'Okule' Cult of the Women of Balai

'Okule' is the informal name of the cult known in its own language as **Odzo Aliidzi**. **Aliidzi** means literally "member of the cult", derived from the Yoruba verb **ní ~ lí** "possess" and **edzí**, cult. 'Okule' is a nickname based on common Yoruba forms of greeting, for example **òkóò**, or **òkúálélé** "good evening". According to Abraham's dictionary **È kúúlé** is the response to a greeting meaning "welcome".² The cult members are not familiar with the ethnonym 'Yoruba', which is not generally used for the Yoruba people and language of Togo, but they are very aware of the connection. The members refer to themselves as **álíidzi**, plural **álíidziànà** and to the language as

² The principal resources used in identifying and analysing Yoruba forms so far include Abraham (1958), Oduyoye (1972), Ogunbòwale (1970) and www.yorubadictionary.com.

kiliidzi or **kiledzi**. The language is also called **kətábá** in Nawuri. The deity **Odzo Aliidzi** has two manifestations, known by the names ‘Tsamkpana’ **teṅkpàṅà** and ‘Oleche’ **ṣlētē**. ‘Ogun’ is one of his appellations. Tsamkpana is associated with disease, both as a bringer of disease and as a protector from it, and is to be identified with the Yoruba deity **Şampana**.³ **Ogū** of course is also a well-known Yoruba deity name. The cult performance recorded by Brindle and Ntewusu in August 2012 was occasioned by the appearance of Tsamkpana in a number of villages in the area, including Balai. Oleche is specifically associated with leprosy. It appears that this cult was originally acquired from the Achode at Shiari, another Guang-speaking group located some 75 km. east of Kpandai close to the Togo border. In the past, girls from Balai went to Shiari for their initiation.

The cult once claimed the allegiance of virtually all the women of Balai but it now appears to be gradually dying. Although the present members are active and enthusiastic they are all over forty, except for one individual in her thirties who was inducted as a child, and there have been no initiations for many years. The reasons for this seem to be a combination of the spread of Christianity, especially Pentecostalism, and formal education for girls, which tends to take them away from the community if they proceed beyond primary school. None of the present members in Balai have been to school. The cult is reportedly still initiating younger cohorts in other communities, for example in the Adele area to the south of the Achode.⁴ Figure 1 shows the dance circle on the first day of the performance on 31 August 2012. In the centre are important cult objects.

At least in Balai, the leader of the group is known as the **ṣlaàmi**.⁵ The present incumbent belongs to the **Amoanē** clan. Since she knows that her first child was born in 1951 we estimate that she is about 80 years old. It was she who gave us formal permission to carry out the study and publish the results. The practical organization is controlled by her second-in-command, the **ṣlaàmi àkpàdzà** ‘olami’s cane’, a somewhat younger and very vigorous woman of the **Kasta** clan. In addition, each age or initiation set has an **ónòngbó**, or most senior officer, **àjénē** ‘middle’ ie. second in seniority, and **bénimáàfò** the third in order of authority.

The language is not strictly secret. During periods when the cult is being celebrated the initiates speak only **Kiliiji**, including to their children, who perforce learn to understand it although they do not reply in it. At other times initiates may speak it among themselves, although we got the impression that this is no longer a common practice. We recorded a short exchange.

³ Orthographic ‘p’ in Yoruba is pronounced [kp].

⁴ Information from Mr. Adenyah of the Adele Project of the Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation.

⁵ This word is evidently a Yoruba compound but its etymology has not been determined.

Sixteen songs in the language, mainly in praise of the deity, were recorded in August 2012 and were transcribed and translated in February. Collecting the songs might have been problematic if the initial recordings had not been made during the 2012 celebration period, but because they were already recorded the singers had no objection to repeating and discussing them. Libation prayers however were recorded, transcribed and translated in February 2013, not a period of celebration, without difficulty. Every initiate receives a special name in the language, which is used among initiates and for cultic purposes. In a few cases the Kiliiji name has come to be used generally in place of the bearer's ordinary Nawuri name. Songs, prayers and names are thus the major discourse types for which the language is used.

Libation is poured sometimes with pito made from guinea corn, sometimes with water. A special stance is adopted: foot and head gear must be removed, and the worshipper kneels with her hands on the ground in front of her. (The present **ɔlaami** sits on a stool, as due to her age she has trouble kneeling.) It seems that the ban on footwear and head coverings when making libation is general in Balai (and elsewhere), but the kneeling posture is not.

Although the language clearly has Yoruba roots it also has special or at least non-Standard features. It is not known at present whether these are peculiar to Balai, to the cult language generally, or are common to Yoruba as spoken in Togo. For example, Kiliiji includes such typically Yoruba words as **màdè** 'child', **àgùgù** 'bone', **adza** 'dog', **odzu** 'eye', **òkò** 'man'. The verb 'drink' is **mɔ̃**, compare Yoruba **mun** [mũ], and 'sleep' is **sù**, compare Yoruba **sùn** [sũ]. However **ifù** 'belly' looks more Akan-like. In some cases the prefix vowels are different from at least Standard Yoruba, thus Kileji has **éna** for 'fire' rather than **ina**, and 'earth' is **nlɛ** rather than **ilɛ**. The only nominal plural marker seems to be a suffix **-ɲa** or sometimes **-na**; neither occurs in Yoruba, but **-na** was found in the moribund Guang language of Kpalangase mentioned above (see fn.1). Much more documentation in these areas is needed in order to elucidate the relationship between Kiliiji and L1 Yoruba. The Yoruba language generally is by no means endangered, but the version of it used in connection with Ojo Aliiji in Balai certainly is.

The Language of Balai Clan Prayers

Although we were not able to witness a celebration of the Okule cult in February 2013, quite fortuitously we arrived just at the time the annual guinea corn festival was about to begin, and this afforded a good context for studying the Balai clan's special prayers.

The festival is called (in Nawuri) **kadzodzí**. A single grain of guinea corn is called **kóyó**, plural and mass **áyó**. On Saturday February 2 the ritual pounding of the corn

began about 6 am, preceded by a lengthy libation in Nawuri.⁶ The festival is under the authority of the priest of **Kǎ̀ɲkpè**, the most important deity of the town, and it was he who gave us permission to carry out the study.⁷ The priest is a member of the Kabisu clan of Balai.

The main day of the festival was Monday, February 4. Preparation of the ceremonial guinea corn porridge (or *tz*, the popular abbreviation for Hausa **tuon zafi**, in Nawuri ritually called **kikari**) began at 6:30 am. at the Kankpe priest's house. This is not the usual food of the people, who prefer yam fufu (pounded yam) to anything else, but for this ceremony every family gets a small portion of the ritual food with a little soup made with dried okro. Guinea corn is mainly used for brewing pito (beer), but the new corn cannot be used for brewing before this ritual food is prepared and the associated ceremonies performed.

At about 9 am we went to the Kankpe shrine grove, about 20 minutes' walk into the bush. In its precincts footwear, headgear, wheeled vehicles and photography are not allowed, but we were permitted to make a sound recording. The shrine house is at one side of an open space within the grove, round and made of swish with a raffia door and thatched roof, with buttress poles. In front is a conical altar, on which was placed a sharpened knife. Men clapped and made a subdued vocalization while the Kankpe priest performed libation and pito was poured over the altar. The posture adopted by the men in this and subsequent libations was quite different from that adopted in Okule. They sat on low seats or squatted, leaning slightly forward and clapping slowly as the priest spoke (see Fig. 2).

Two people took some of the pito inside. After this ladies shared out the guinea corn to feed the shrine. By 9:15 some men went off to feed several smaller deities in the neighbourhood. Small bowls of cooked guinea corn and okro soup were served out. Many smaller shrines received libations, with the prayers said in Nawuri, and numerous people were there with offerings, however small. By 10:25 when we left there was a growing queue of people waiting to ask the deity for something or thank him for something given.

The libation text could not be readily understood by an ordinary speaker of Nawuri. The recording was transcribed and translated the next day with the help of John Mane Kinyikide (**Máàné Kènyèkédè**), a member of the Balai clan, who provided the following information:

⁶ We did not actually witness the ceremony, arriving too late. It was re-enacted two hours later for our benefit.

⁷ We later also got permission from the chief of the town, Nana Òbìmpé I, but this seemed to be less crucial.

The same text is repeated three times with a different offering each time. First, a very tiny kind of millet called **ál⁸** is put into water in the calabash and poured on the ground outside the shrine house. Then, cooked guinea corn is put in the calabash and poured on the altar outside the shrine house. Finally, pito [made as always from guinea corn] is poured inside the shrine room.

In the circumstances it was not possible to determine whether the three repetitions of the prayer were literally “the same”, since they could not be recorded or re-enacted on the spot. The ritual shows a neat Levi-Straussian progression from raw to cooked to “super-cooked”.

On Wednesday February 6 about 8:30 am, as a special favour to us, the head of the Balai clan performed another libation, in the courtyard of his house. (Wednesday is the no-farming day in Balai.) Since it was not in a major shrine we were allowed to photograph, but not within a circle that included a small shrine and the libation area. Libation was poured with water from small pots. A knife was laid out in front of the clan head, with a wooden haft, and a long blackened stick with an iron blade at one end and what appeared to be an iron binding at the other (see Figure 2). The stick is called **dendzi**.

The significance of the knife and iron-bound stick is that the Balai clan are traditionally blacksmiths, and they still practice the craft. In the discussion that followed the prayers it transpired that several of the older women present remembered that they used to collect lumps of ironstone from deposits in the surrounding bush and pound it to a powder. This was then mixed with water, heated and eventually pig iron was produced. Later that day we visited a nearby deposit. Today they have given up this very labour-intensive practice and buy scrap metal. At the forge, which is close by, we recorded some of the specialized iron-working vocabulary.

We were escorted to the ironstone deposit by a member of the clan called Nyandi Nkianeh (**ŋkīānɛ**). The next day he helped transcribe and translate the clan head’s prayer, which he did by speaking the words, on a new recording. It actually consists of two prayers: one to the earth god, the second to the aboriginal founder. He also said fairly strongly that this information is usually not imparted to strangers, and implied that it is the clan’s private way of preserving its identity or sense of itself.

The language of the prayers seems to be very much like Nawuri, but there are problems. The prayer at the Kankpe shrine began as follows:

Hóó Nàná Kǎŋkpè (or ŋkpé)

⁸ R. Blench in his ‘Central Togo Datasheets: Nouns and other parts of speech’ gives Ikposo Uwi **ól** “guinea corn”.

Balai: **éfòlò b̀**
Nawuri: *kə̀gbərə́ ébu*
English: deity's room

The word **b̀** might conceivably be identified with the modern Nawuri **-bu**, but **éfòlò** is not known. It continued:

Balai: **bé-ló m'ólè**
Nawuri: (as above, but hard to interpret)
English: they have entered [for assistance from the shrine] and come out [of the shrine]
Balai: **tèṅṅeteṅṅe mbà**
Nawuri: *ebó̀sò bà*
English: roaming come [back]

Dr. Ntewusu felt that although **bé-ló m'ólè** is Nawuri, the expression is so elliptical that it is hard to interpret and would not be understood on a first hearing. The verb **teṅṅe** in the next line is not normal Nawuri usage. The rest of these texts similarly included many words that could be interpreted as Nawuri, although often the syntax was obscure, and a few words that could not. The tentative hypothesis is that the Balai prayer language is an archaic form of Nawuri, possibly preserving words from another language that was superseded by Nawuri.

In Lieu of Conclusion

Many hours of conversation on these topics were recorded in Nawuri, and these are currently being transcribed and translated. When completed the account given above will be considerably expanded and enhanced. A second trip in 2013 will extend the documentation of both languages, and attempt to resolve some of the many problems they present. The audio, visual and paper documentation when completed will be deposited in the archive of the Institute of African Studies and with members of the community in Balai, as well as the ELDP.

Nawuri is not considered endangered, although its speaker community is not large – according to Ethnologue, in 2003 it had 14,000 speakers and was growing – and Yoruba certainly is not. Yet these special forms of each language are associated with cultural practices that are endangered, and it is likely that these linguistic forms are also endangered. Their investigation, we think, opens a window onto the social history of a particularly complex part of the country.

Figure 1:
Dance ring on the first day of Tsamkpana's celebration, 31 August 2012, showing ritual calabash containing leaves, and sticks to drive away the spirit.



Figure 2:
Balai Clan head pouring libation, 6 February 2013.



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