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Progress and problems in literacy programmes in Central Nigeria

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Abstract:

Central Nigeria is a region of great linguistic diversity where there were no pre-colonial orthographies in use. The expansion of population and modern education has created a strong demand for local literacy programmes for the Plateau languages of Central Nigeria. For people to be able to develop themselves intellectually, it is important that they have a system of writing that is truly their own. Initially, demand for literacy has been in relation to programmes for Bible translation, and this is largely where funding is sought. However, these programmes are frustratingly long-term and some have been quite ineffective due to poor (or no) initial planning and ill-designed orthographies. However, in the decade since 2010, demand is increasingly coming from non-denominational organisations whose concern is cultural maintenance, and thus the use of vernacular languages in education. This paper examines the progress achieved and problems faced by some of the Plateau languages in the area of literacy development with a more detailed case study of the Mada Literacy Programme, as well as offering some practical solutions to assist the spread of literacy.

Keywords: Mada, Nigeria, literacy, orthography, translation

1 Introduction

An effective mother-tongue literacy programme has a critical role to play in the linguistic enterprise. It promotes the survival of minority languages and at the same time motivates neighbouring ethnic groups to promote their own language and culture, as well as laying a solid foundation for literacy in national languages (Akinnsaso 1993). The argument for promoting mother-tongue literacy as a step to broader literacy is succinctly stated by M'Bow (1978: 1):

The rights of every individual could not be applied in practical terms other than by every individual first grasping the alphabet of his own language. Only through learning to read does a man assume his full responsibility as a citizen. If he cannot read, he is powerless to realize the whole of his civic and political potential; neither can he exercise power at any level whatever in modern society. The peoples most affected by illiteracy cannot fully control their future development unless they have a system of writing which is truly their own.

In this paper,¹ the author reports on the progress and problems of literacy among the Plateau languages in Central Nigeria including comparisons with similar programmes elsewhere. Central Nigeria, often referred to as the Middle Belt, includes Niger, Kogi and Kwara States in the west, stretching as far as Adamawa and Taraba in the east. There are at least 150 languages in the region as a whole, of which only a few have continuing literacy programmes and these are within the context of Bible translation. Elsewhere, literacy programmes have become moribund. Such programmes are now only remembered by the names of the expatriate workers who started them but who have since left the country, while others are only represented by outdated primers preserved in the archives. The paper provides an overview of the picture of mother-tongue literacy in the Plateau area and discusses in more detail some of experiences within the Mada Bible Translation and Language Project, the mother tongue of the author.

According to Nigerian Federal Government policy, the language of communication in the classroom (Primary 1–3) should be the mother tongue (Okedara & Okedara 1992). The main institution intended to promote this is the NERDC (National Education Research and Development Council), based in Abuja. This institution publishes ‘official’ orthographies for Nigerian languages. However, it has no resources to promote the use of these orthographies and state governments are largely left to their own devices when implementing this policy. Where a particular language is considered to be dominant in a state

1 Unfortunately, the first author of this paper died in 2014. He thanked the organizers of the Hamburg meeting for inviting him and for the audience, whose comments have been incorporated into the revised version of this paper. Roger Blench updated much of the information in September 2020, based on his own recent knowledge of the situation. He would like to thank Selbut Longtau and Matthew Harley for insights into particular programmes.

(such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) that state government will promote it.² These languages are taught in higher institutions of learning while other languages are neglected. However, in highly multilingual states, such as Plateau and Nasarawa, where there is no dominant language, the attention given to minority languages is highly contested, and state governments have instead often chosen to promote Hausa through the Adult Literacy programmes.

2 The growth of orthography development

In the earliest period (i.e. from the 1840s onwards), literacy and Bible translation were in the hands of individual missionaries. Few of these met with success, in part due to the fearsome difficulties of Plateau languages, which have both complex consonant systems and elaborate tonal schemes. The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) began work in Nigeria in 1970, and instituted a more rigorous approach to phonology and grammar. However, following a dispute with the Nigerian government in 1976, it left the country and its programmes were handed to the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) which carried on translation work. The slow speed of the operations of NBTT (often as much as twenty years between initial approaches and launch of the New Testament) led to frustration within the communities and a growth of new local bodies which promised to provide much more rapid results. SIL only returned to bible translation under its own logo in 2018

Two examples of such newly established local bodies are the NBTT Orthography Workshops, and the Seed Company's Luke Partnership Programmes. NBTT Orthography Workshops involve rapid visits of two to three weeks by specialists based in Jos to communities which express an interest in literacy. The phonology is sketched during this period and then an alphabet chart is printed. Some examples of communities where this approach has been taken are the Amo in Plateau State, Maya [= Bali] in Taraba State and the Kyanggawa in the south of Kebbi State. This has the advantage of responding to the community but the major disadvantage that the phonology is not subjected to any peer review (or even written down), and thus the alphabet

2 Although this is not inevitably the case. For example, Kanuri is the dominant language in Borno State, but the state government makes little or no effort to promote it.

charts can be highly unreliable. There is almost no follow-up; communities are left to their own devices in respect of further action. The Seed Company's Luke Partnership Programmes are on a larger scale. These involve bringing together around ten ethnolinguistic groups which have expressed interest in developing literacy and Bible translation. Expatriate linguistic consultants were brought in,³ many with no knowledge of African languages, and worked with teams of three to four speakers to develop a phonology and orthography of the language and begin a translation of the Gospel of Luke. Each team could attend two such workshops, after which the project had to be self-supporting. The principal zones where this has been undertaken are Bauchi, Gombe and Adamawa States, where there are many minorities whose languages are almost unknown to the scientific public. This has had better results than the NBT strategy, but a failure to consult any previous literature on the languages in the workshop, and a complete bypassing of tone has also sometimes allowed the development of highly inadequate orthographies. No sociolinguistic surveys are conducted prior to the workshops, so, for example, dialect choices are based on the statements of those attending. Experience in Nigeria has shown time and again that literacy can be a strategy manipulated by particular subgroups as a tool for political ascendancy. Moreover, the explicitly Christian orientation can be problematic; many of these populations have significant numbers of Muslims, who can be actively deterred from literacy programmes by the emphasis on Bible translation.⁴

However, beyond Bible translation, there have been striking new developments in the area of community development. An organisation known as CONAECDA has been established in Plateau State, with nascent branches in other states, to lobby government for the establishment of mother-tongue education in the schools. Following a series of meetings with Plateau State education officials, in 2019, eight languages were selected for further development. Teams are currently exploring either reviving former literacy materials or preparing more modern primers. Many questions remain about devel-

3 This has come to a halt due to insecurity in the regions east of Jos.

4 In northwestern Nigeria, where many West Kainji languages are developing literacy programmes, those with a specifically Christian orientation have been forced to switch to 'religion-neutral' practices, to avoid alienating influential Muslims who also want to participate in language development.

oping customised course materials and paying teachers, but this is a promising start.

3 Progress

3.1 Overview of mother-tongue literacy programmes in the Plateau area

There exist around 40 Plateau languages divided into Northern, Western, Central, Southeastern, Southern and Tarokoid (Gerhardt 1989; Blench 2000). Under these groupings, there are further sub-groups and clusters, many still largely undescribed. Literacy programmes exist for only a few of them, within the framework of Bible translation. Table 1 summarises the state of mother-tongue literacy in the Plateau area.

The following non-Plateau (i.e. Chadic and Adamawa) languages have literacy programmes: Goemai, Mwaghavul, Ngas, Ron, Waja, Tula, Dadiya and Laamang. The Ron Project has effectively halted due to internal disputes over dialect and orthography issues, although there have been recent moves to revive it. The literacy program of Laamang is no longer active, in part due to local opposition from the Muslim community leaders.

3.2 Case studies

3.2.1 *Migili*

The Migili people started translating the New Testament in 1972 and completed it in 1984. In 1985 it was launched, but after this, nothing was heard of it. The expatriate consultant Yvonne Stofberg, who did the initial phonological analysis, left the country, and no final agreement was reached on key orthographic issues such as the number of vowels. No effort was made regarding a literacy programme and only recently have plans been made to revive it. The main New Testament translator, Pastor Vincent Dogo, undertook a major revision of the orthography in 2017, but disputes within the committee have so far prevented its uptake in the community.

Table 1. Literacy work in Plateau languages

| Language | Literacy materials | Comment |
|--------------------|--|--|
| Berom | Folk stories – Orthography – <i>Susti</i> ⁵ – Primers 1 & 2 – New Testament – Old Testament in progress – <i>Bere Nehta</i> – newsletter – <i>Takada Lele</i> – Hymn book – <i>Lele</i> – Psalm – Radio magazine programme – Dictionary – Jesus Film – Gospels of Luke & Mark on tapes – Alphabet chart with pictures – Alphabet chart without pictures | Literacy classes moribund |
| Ce (Rukuba) | Gospels of Mark & John – Christmas stories – Radio magazine programme | Community-sponsored literacy programme and classes active |
| Eggon | Orthography – New Testament – two Primers – Dictionary – Jesus Film – Old Testament started (but on hold) – Radio magazine programme | Moribund. Existing orthography highly inadequate |
| Hyam | Bible books – Wordlist – Alphabet chart – Body parts chart – Reading and writing Hyam – Hyam proverbs (unpubl.) – Hymns – Story book (unpubl.) – Names of animals (unpubl.) – New Testament in progress | Community-sponsored literacy work very limited. Existing orthography highly inadequate |
| Dūya [= Idū] | Reading and writing book – Grammar book - Draft New Testament chapters | Many orthographic issues unresolved |
| Iten (Eten = Aten) | Song book (also on tape) – Transitional materials – Gospel of Mark – Dictionary (upcoming) – New Testament completed – Radio magazine programme | Literacy work in progress |

5 Titles in italics are the names of booklets published in vernacular languages.

| Rigwe | Hymn book – New Testament completed – Radio magazine programme | Community-sponsored literacy programme and classes active |
|---------------------|--|---|
| Izere | Orthography – Alphabet chart – <i>I fa yir Izere</i> (i.e. Let's read Izere)– Alphabet booklet – Jesus Film – Radio magazine programme – New Testament completed – Dictionary (draft) | Literacy work moribund |
| Icen | Reading and writing book – New Testament completed | Literacy work in progress |
| Migili ⁶ | Orthography – Reading and writing book – Folktales – New Testament completed – Radio magazine programme – Jesus Film | Moribund |
| Ninzo | Orthography – Alphabet chart – Primers 1 & 2 – Reading and writing Ninzo – Story book – New Testament completed | Literacy work moribund |
| Nyankpa | Reading and writing book – Draft New Testament chapters | Literacy work in progress |
| Tarok | Orthography – Teachers handbook – Primers and readers in three volumes – Catechism – Alphabet chart – Jesus Film – Radio magazine programmes – New Testament – Dictionary (forthcoming) – Old Testament in progress – Hymn book – Grammar book | Literacy classes very vigorous |

6 Recent contact with the main New Testament (NT) translator reveals that five churches, which were planted by him, are using the NT, and at the moment plans under way to get the literacy programmes started in many more churches and villages.

3.2.2 *Kice [= Rukuba]*

Kice (Rukuba) is an example where the community has been strongly motivated to develop literacy classes independently of the mission organisations. A basic orthography has been developed and work has begun somewhat sporadically in both literacy and Bible translation. However, it has so far not been possible to incorporate tonal marking into the orthography, despite the role it plays in the grammatical system.

3.2.3 *Goemai*

Goemai (a West Chadic language) is an example of how standards are slipping, driven by the need to provide translations of religious literature, irrespective of whether they are read. The first orthography of the Goemai language was developed by a Catholic priest, Father Sirlinger, in the 1930s, and with a few changes, this is still in use today, despite its problematic conventions. A New Testament has been launched by NBTT, despite the absence of a published phonology.⁷ If orthographies are not subject to public scrutiny there will inevitably be problems, after the initial enthusiasm for the New Testament publication.

4 The evolution of the Mada Literacy Programme

4.1 Background

Mada is a Plateau language spoken mainly in Nasarawa State, with pockets found in southern Kaduna State and parts of Niger State. The only existing materials on the language are short studies by Gerhardt (1972/73, 1983) and Price (1989). The idea to reduce the language to a written form through Bible translation was mooted in 1978 by Solomon Manzuch. It was not until 1982 that it became a reality, after consultations with the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT), who sent a SIL (Summer Institute of Linguistics) team, Norman and Barbara Price, to begin the translation work. Although the original plan was for them to be based in the field, it was rapidly decided to move the project to Jos.

⁷ This is not strictly true, since Hellwig (2011), an academic grammar of Goemai includes the phonology. However, the relationship between the phonology and the orthography has never been spelt out.

Before the work took off, a committee was set up to decide which dialect should be used. The committee was to oversee the work of translation with a separate committee for literacy work, but when it became obvious that the literacy committee was inactive, the translation committee combined both functions. The committee sat on several occasions to discuss which of the dialects to use. Price (1989) had surveyed Mada dialects and concluded there nine: Rija, Ancho, Anjagwa, Boher, Gbugyar, Gwanje, Ungwar Zaria (Rinze), Akwanga (Kegbe) and Ninghaan. These dialects are divided into three groups based on the forms of a particular pronoun. Table 2 shows the dialects and the distribution of the corresponding pronoun.

Table 2. Mada pronoun 'us' by dialect

| <i>tə</i> | <i>lə</i> | <i>kwa</i> |
|-----------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Rija | Ninghaan | Ungwar Zaria |
| Ancho | Akwanga (Kegbe) | |
| Boher | | |
| Gwanje | | |
| Anjagwa | | |
| Gbugyar | | |

It can be seen at once that these are quite different from one another, rather than simply phonological shifts. It was decided to select a representative of the lects using *tə*, as these were more numerous.

Rija was chosen since it is also the centre of a Mada chieftaincy and commonly understood by speakers of other lects. Rija has been called the 'Central' dialect although this is not really the case. From 1982 to 1997, when the New Testament was completed in draft, the Rija dialect was used. However, at this point there was a change of personnel in the translation team, and finally, the pure Rija dialect was not used in the printed version of the New Testament, but mixed with elements from the Gwanje dialect, because this was the dialect of the individual who undertook the final editing and typesetting. Although the New Testament was launched with the usual fanfare, it has subsequently been subject to much community dispute because of its mixed forms.

The evolution of literacy classes followed a similar arc. When the author joined the translation project in 1987, there were just two existing literacy classes, run by a language helper. As the work progressed, two more classes were formed, and by 1992, we had established ten classes in different villages. However, the only source of income for literacy workers was that raised by the local committee, which was both low and irregularly paid. Nonetheless, the number of literacy classes gradually expanded and we were able to establish 20 literacy classes between 1993 and 1997, which we visited once every month. After completing the New Testament in draft in 1997, the author also left the translation work, partly due to poor pay and secondly, to pursue further education.

After the author had left, the other language helper decided to take a different approach to literacy work. He recruited 10 trained voluntary literacy teachers, who were divided into 5 groups of 2. They travelled and traversed the length and breadth of Mada land and the Mada diaspora, organising and establishing literacy classes. This took them to more villages than before. Also, literacy lessons were organised through a radio programme tagged “Mada Magazine”. This was done mainly with the rural populace in mind, especially those who were and are not literate in any language at all.

In the year 2000, the New Testament was launched and the following year, the author was appointed Literacy Coordinator as a voluntary position to supervise literacy activities since the former language helper was re-assigned to other responsibilities by NBTT. In that year we compiled five primers and one pictorial booklet. We organised a workshop on “Train the Trainers”, and right now, those so trained have gone to set up classes in their villages and wherever they reside. So far, books and other reading materials published or prepared in Mada include the following (Table 3):

Table 3. Literacy materials in Mada

| Published or prepared | Audience |
|--|---------------------|
| <i>Nə tə bla Mada gıgər</i> – Let’s Read Mada Together | literates |
| <i>Mənyuren Mada</i> – Alphabet chart | beginning-literates |
| <i>Yəso Krisəti se bə nggon nggon yə gu kpə tə cunɡwon</i> – Jesus Christ has power to save | literates |
| <i>Mərən ətu ki yə la te</i> – Newsletters | literates |

| | |
|---|---------------------|
| <i>Gbrin ki</i> – Pictorial booklet | beginning-literates |
| <i>Bla Mada</i> – Primers 1–5. Not printed | beginning-literates |
| <i>Bla Mada</i> – Primer for beginners | beginning-literates |
| Orthography | beginning-literates |
| <i>Ren Kpan Nyu Suswe</i> – New Testament | literate |
| <i>Gbrin ya Yeso</i> – Jesus Film | non-literates |
| Dictionary. In preparation | |
| <i>Nggyeren Mada</i> – Mada Proverbs. In progress | literate |
| <i>Māsen ə nyu Mada</i> – Selected hymns. Not printed | literate |

The Mada team has also translated the Nigerian National Anthem and the Pledge.

Literacy activities include:

- a. reading centres in cities and local villages;
- b. media – magazine programmes on radio and recording of *Let's Read Mada Together* on tapes;
- c. train the trainers workshops (participants are encouraged to write stories);
- d. teaching of Mada language in 10 pilot primary schools (begun in September 2004);
- e. production of songs on tapes (singing competition);
- f. reading competition and scripture recitations.

Institutions and organisations collaborating with the Mada Bible Translation and Language Project in the area of literacy work include: Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT), State Ministry of Information, Local Government Education Authority (LGEA), Community Development Associations (CDA), Churches, Women Fellowship Groups and Bible Colleges. In relation to this, courses are being run by NBTT that have direct bearing on literacy promotion. These include: Introductory Course on Applied Linguistics (ICAL), Introductory Course on Translation Principles (ICTP), Literacy workshops, Writers workshops and Train the Trainers workshops.

4.2 Orthographic issues

Just as there were problems in the choice of a dialect, so it was in the orthography. One issue that has been the subject of much controversy is the representation of nasals. There are two types of word-

final *n* in Mada, a syllabic coda *n* and a *V + n* sequence representing nasalisation, i.e. IPA [Ṽ], (originally marked with a cedilla under the vowel). However, since there is no clear phonemic contrast between [Vn] and [Ṽ] in Rija, it was decided to drop the cedilla and write both sequences as Vn.

Mada orthography is unusual for a Nigerian language in that it marks tones. Mada has short words, no evident noun-classes and no morphological distinction between noun and verb. Hence, without tone-marking, there would be many homographs and it would be very difficult to read. The translation team together with the Project Committee sat down to consider the marking of tones on words. Mada has three basic tone heights, which it was decided to mark as follows: high (unmarked), mid (-) and low (˘). There are two contrastive contour tones – rising (ˆ) and falling (ˊ) occurring on individual syllables, which are less frequent, though essential for some grammatical distinctions. Take for example the following words:

Table 4. Mada minimal tonal quadruple

| Mada | Gloss | Tone pattern |
|-------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| <i>lá</i> | negative tense marker | high |
| <i>là</i> | continuous tense marker | low |
| <i>là</i> | to help | low |
| <i>lǎ</i> | madness | rising |

In orthographic representation, the high tone is omitted hence a contrastive CVCV set would appear as follows:

Table 5. Orthographic representation of a contrastive CVCV set

| Mada | Gloss | Tone pattern |
|-------------|------------------|---------------------|
| <i>mūmù</i> | winnowing basket | mid-low |
| <i>mūmū</i> | maggot | mid-mid |
| <i>mùmū</i> | corn powder | low-mid |
| <i>mumu</i> | there (distance) | high-high |

Nigerian languages often mark high (ˆ) and leave mid unmarked. For Mada, however, it is more economical to mark the mid tone because it is less frequent than the high tone. Needless to say, there was considerable controversy about this, as tone-marking is usually avoided

in typical orthographies. In popular signage, Mada is usually written without tones, but it is only possible to interpret these because the meanings of short phrases are already known. Logical as it is, it has proven extremely difficult to teach learners to mark tones accurately.

4.3 Problems with the Mada literacy project

4.3.1 *Inaccurate assessment of literacy and Bible translation needs*

It took the Mada people 18 years to complete the New Testament, due to a number of factors including the following:

- a. poor mobilisation and sensitisation of the people on the importance of the work and what was required of them;
- b. not accepting the leadership of the person who initiated the work;
- c. the attitude of the project advisor, who was not so eager to finish the work on time (“Jesus was not in a hurry” became his motto);
- d. no definite plan of action as regards the literacy programme;
- e. no continuing enthusiasm, since it took so much time to finish the work. This was seen in the way people supported the work financially; they became tired of the numerous appeals for money by the project committee which reduced the initial eagerness and enthusiasm that greeted the introduction of the translation work.

In the case of Mada, the translators were the same people engaged in literacy activities, which created too much of a burden on them, given the poor remuneration and problematic transport situation. For other languages with literacy coordinators, most of them may not be trained. Sometimes there are no personnel at all who can read and write their own languages. Even Yoruba and Hausa, which are taught at university level, have the same problem of lack of trained teachers (Aaron 1998: 5). Because there are no trained literacy personnel, there are few people to write books. Even where there are qualified writers, money is not available to publish such material. Without money, little or nothing can be achieved. Money is needed to print literacy materials and to pay the workers and for other contingencies. Two of us had to leave the translation work at one point because of poor salaries.

Not all Mada speakers see the need for mother-tongue literacy. Visits to communities to start or restart literacy classes were often met

with opposition from community leaders who claimed that reading and writing English and Hausa were sufficient and that reading Mada was a waste of time. Over time, this opposition has receded, as vernacular literacy has become more popular. The editor of this paper was invited to speak at the Nze Mada symposium in 2016 on the prospects for reviving Mada literacy.

4.3.2 *Local political rivalry*

In Mada, local political rivalries did and do still affect the work; people of different political leanings are not willing to work together. During the launching of the New Testament and the Jesus Film, many influential people did not attend because of political differences with the translation team. Beside this, there was also a personality clash between the first language helper (Solomon Manzuche) and others including the final language helper, regarding the initiator of the translation work.

5 Conclusions

For meaningful literacy and translation work to start in any language, it is essential to carry out a preliminary assessment to set priorities. Surveys should be conducted to find out the needs on the ground, and particularly whether translation is a community priority or not. Some languages may not necessarily be interested in Bible translation, but literacy programmes can still be embarked upon. Even where there is genuine interest in Bible translation, it is still better to begin with literacy before going into translation of any kind. At present, because funding for translation is prioritised over literacy, the result is often unread (and unreadable) Bible translations.

These points can be summarised as follows:

- a. An absence of sociolinguistic surveys has meant that literacy and Bible translation programmes are begun where there is a lack of popular demand and even social barriers to the use of a particular dialect. This can mean that considerable effort is wasted on projects that come to nothing.
- b. A consequence of this is that Bible translation programmes take an inordinately long time and sometimes project personnel leave in frustration. Related to this is pressure from funding bodies to translate scripture regardless of literacy.

- c. Ironically, now that the concept of developing literacy has been sparked among minority communities, there are no resources to work even with highly motivated groups, for example, the Hyam or the Kice [Rukuba].
- d. Funding is a problem, but probably not a major one. The problem is more of connecting producers of literacy materials with those who have resources.

To achieve any meaningful literacy work, agencies concerned with endangered languages should provide the funding available for the development and printing of materials.⁸ It is equally important to train people to do the work. We do not have trained personnel to run literacy programmes in various languages. Furthermore, if donor agencies collaborate with Community Development Associations (CDA) to develop literacy materials, this will go a long way to help the growth of mother-tongue literacy work. More so, much work needs to be done in the area of language survey. Many Plateau languages have no contact with literacy development; once their status is assessed they can be introduced to the concept of reading and writing their mother tongue.

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⁸ It is ironic in an era when there has never been more interest in endangered languages and when institutions such as the SOAS-based ELDP promote the projects they fund, that many minority languages are floundering for lack of a few hundred dollars.

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