

PROJECT REPORT

Siti/Kyitu; an Endangered Language of Côte d'Ivoire

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Résumé

Ce rapport présente le résumé du travail effectué, et de celui en cours, dans le cadre de la recherche linguistique mené en vue de décrire et de documenter la langue kyitu (ou siti). A l'origine intitulé «The Siti Pilot Project – Description and Documentation of an Endangered Language of Ivory Coast », ce projet financé par le Programme de Documentation des Langues en Danger (ELDP) a pour buts la prise de contact, le témoignage de la situation sociolinguistique, et le recueil de données sur cette langue parlée seulement à Vonkoro (Côte d'Ivoire), village situé près de la rive de la Volta Noire à la frontière du Ghana. Compte tenu du fait que le nombre des locuteurs kyitu était présumé faible et que la grande partie de l'information disponible sur cette langue était d'environ 90 ans, il nous a semblé nécessaire de découvrir son état actuel. Au début du projet, nous présumions qu'elle pouvait être déjà éteinte. Le rapport précise les différents aspects du projet : la rencontre d'information sur la nature et le but du projet aux Kyiras de Vonkoro, les recensements, la transcription et la prise des données, la compilation du lexique et du corpus, et l'impact du projet sur la communauté locale. En guise de conclusion, le rapport s'ouvre sur un sujet qui pose indubitablement problème ; notamment « dire que le kyitu est en voie de disparition serait difficile à justifier, mais dire que le kyitu n'est pas une langue qui risque de disparaître serait irresponsable ».

Introduction:

A language documentation project is summed up briefly in this work-in-progress report. Details on the background of the project, the fieldwork, the work completed, the projected end results, and actions intended in the future are the topics presented.

Background and Motivation:

The project was originally intended as a contribution to the documentation of the two remaining Southwestern Grusi languages spoken in Ivory Coast: Kyitu (also known in the literature as Siti, Sitigo, Sitige, Kira or Cira) and Deg. The objective was to start with the most urgent case, the Kyitu language, the number of whose native speakers Bécuwe (1981: 11) estimated at 31. In carrying out research in Vonkoro,¹ reportedly

¹ Vonkoro is a village situated about 2 km. from the Black Volta river on the Ivoirian side, equidistant from Bole (Ghana) and Bouna (Ivory Coast).

the only Kyitu speaking village left, the project's intention was to provide an account of the language's vitality and endangerment. Considering the alleged speaker population, it was assumed at the time that the language may be nearly extinct, and, as the bulk of the information available on the language was approximately 90 years old, a fresh look at Kyitu was deemed necessary.

The original linguistic material available consists of 90 words and a few short phrases in Delafosse (1904), and an 800-entry word list in Tauxier (1921). No new material has been presented since, with one exception: at the end of the nineteen nineties, a German researcher collected material on Kyitu in order to re-confirm that the language was “indeed a distinct member of the Western subgroup of Gurunsi” (Kleinewillinghöfer, 1999). Based on the expressions referring to approximately 40 concepts, he provided evidence that Kyitu was indeed distinct from Vagla and Phwie, two Southwestern Grusi languages, and Khi, a language of the Gan/Dogose subgroup. Even though Kleinewillinghöfer's work was an important and necessary update of the situation, he did the work off-site in Ghana, on the other side of the Black Volta river, with one consultant, and thus failed to notice important sociolinguistic features in the context of language endangerment.²

The Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP), through their small grant scheme, funded a project entitled ‘The Siti Pilot Project: Description and Documentation of an Endangered Language of Ivory Coast’, which was designed to provide a constellation of essential materials: annotated texts coming from a range of recordings of language usage, a concise sociolinguistic report, a grammatical outline of the language, and a digital lexicon consisting of ‘recycled’ and new data. The cooperation of two linguists, one involved in research on the Southwestern Grusi group and the other a native speaker of Kulango—and one of few specialists of the language—was believed to be well-suited to work on the linguistic description and documentation of Kyitu. The project was administered by the Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, with a starting date of 01/01/12 and an expected completion of 31/09/12, including 4 months to deliver the report and submit the material to the archive.

Preparation and Fieldwork

Sociolinguistic survey:

Overt participant observation and three questionnaire surveys dealt with the sociolinguistic aspect. A first short visit to Vonkoro was necessary in order to meet with the people and inform them of the nature of the research. This was crucial as there was a possibility that the language was no longer spoken, or that the people of Vonkoro would refuse our mission. At this community entry meeting we administered one questionnaire, which examined their identity, language, and history, to a focus

² He confessed the following in a footnote: “Unfortunately, I was not aware that the number of speakers reported in Bécuwe (1981) was so dramatically low, only 31. I therefore did not inquire about the number of people still speaking that language.” (Kleinewillinghöfer, 1999:42)

group of 11 individuals composed of the chief, the landlord, elderly men and women, and young men. We learned that they call themselves Kyira [kĩr̀rà], and their language Kyitu [kĩ̀tò], although the ethnonym may also be used to refer to the language. The Kulangos call the Kyira [sítígé] and their language [sítígó] or [sítígé], the Julas call them [võkorokã] ‘people of Vonkoro’, and the Safalibas, who live in Ghana across the Black Volta, call them [tʃíríbá]. They informed us that the languages Kyitu, Kulango, Safaliba, Jula, Kamara, Lobiri, Waali, Akan and Gonja, in approximately that order, are understood in Vonkoro, but that Kyitu, Kulango, Safaliba and Jula are those which they can mainly speak. It was emphasized that no Kyira is monolingual. They also confirmed that there are no villages outside of Vonkoro where Kyitu is spoken, apart from the people born in Vonkoro who today are members of the ‘Kyira diaspora’. An open question inquired after the origin of this multilingual situation. The responses indicated that, first, their economy brings them to meet several ethnic groups. When they work as labourers, manually (un)loading the vehicles crossing the Black Volta, Kyira young men exchange with people from culturally and linguistically diverse groups. Further, the major weekly markets attended are those of Bouna, Mããso, and Niandégué in Ivory Coast, where they communicate in Kulango, Jula or Lobiri. There is also the one in Bole, Ghana, where they communicate mostly in Safaliba, though a few Kyira can also speak Gonja. Each Monday, the market of Vonkoro brings together people who speak different languages, but Kulango, Jula and Lobiri are the ones mainly spoken. Secondly, outsiders settling in Vonkoro do not bother learning Kyitu, and when they do, they never master the language to a considerable level. That applies to wives of Kyira men as well. Kyira men marry mostly Kulango, Lorhon³ and Safaliba women, and vice-versa for the Kyira women.⁴

The children are said to learn their mother's language first, and then gradually learn to speak the language of the father, and finally the languages spoken at the community where they live. It was stressed that only rarely does a Kyira child *not* learn Kyitu, even when s/he lives outside the village. However, some in the focus group complained that Kyira children raised away, mostly those from town, come infrequently to Vonkoro and speak with difficulty. In public meetings, they use Kulango only if Kulangos are present. Otherwise, Kyitu is used exclusively in weddings, funerals, divinations and sacrifices in which individuals of all generations are involved.

The second questionnaire was intended as a follow-up. Individual interviews were to help us understand and appreciate the reflections gathered at the focus group session. The following observations are prototypical, and roughly summarize our

³ The Lorhon (or Loma according to the speakers) live in villages clustered around Doropo. Kulangos are found in Lorhon area. The Lorhon are believed to be the ancestors of today's Kulango. Although Kulango and Lorhon have a common origin, they were clearly distinguished by our consultants.

⁴ The Kyira use a bilateral descent (or double-descent) system with cross-cousin marriage allowed (i.e. a man can marry his mother's brother's daughter but *not* his mother's sister's daughter, and he can marry his father's sister's daughter but *not* his father's brother's daughter).

findings. A Kyira speaks Kyitu, Safaliba and Kulango frequently. French and Jula come after, but they are used in different contexts, the former with governmental bodies and the latter with market actors, and for a few, with their Muslim brothers. In language comprehension, a Kyira understands Kyitu, Safaliba and Kulango 'perfectly', and Jula, Lorhon, French and Lobiri 'moderately'. One fact that strikes us is that, like Kyitu, all other languages are mainly learned in Vonkoro, so it is not necessary to travel to be exposed to languages other than Kyitu. Safaliba, Kulango and Lorhon are learned with the wives of Kyira men and their children in Vonkoro. At home, half of them admit to speaking Safaliba with their children, and if a husband's wife is Safaliba, he will speak to her in her language. Children in Vonkoro are believed to speak Kyitu and Safaliba amongst each other. When asked which language they would like to see the children of Vonkoro learn to read and write, Kyitu, French and English were the most popular. In general, interviewees believed that Kyitu will be spoken by their grand-children, for reasons such as "since I speak it, they will", "normally you do not lose your language by attending school", "as long as I am alive people will speak it", and "if my children learn it, their children will too". Some of them do not think that Kyitu is being replaced by another language. Those who do fear this blame the outsiders.

The third survey was intended to gather information mainly on the population size, the origin of married women (i.e. where they were born and raised), and the ethnic group of the married women's parents. For obvious reasons, more often than not, children speak the same native language as their parents and grandparents, therefore we found it worthwhile to identify the origins of the language transmitters and quantify their presence in Vonkoro. The census shows that Vonkoro has a population of around 157 individuals, with 27 family houses, each averaging 1.4 households. The women and men over 18 YO account for 26% and 19% respectively of the total population, while the individuals with 18 YO and under account for the remaining 55%. Married women born and raised in Vonkoro represent 35%, those from Safaliba villages 26%, and 21% from Kulango villages. The remaining 18% is shared among women of Gonja, Waala and Dega origins.

Language Data:

The collection of raw language data was done in Vonkoro, whereas the transcription, translation and analyses were conducted in Vonkoro and Bouna. A final short field trip, this time off-site in Bole (Ghana), was necessary in order to look at general inconsistencies and questions raised in the post-fieldwork period, and to meet with and record an elderly Kyira woman who had lived the major part of her life in Mandari (Ghana).

The compilation of the lexical database was achieved in several phases; first we each separately elicited the first 400 words of the SIL Comparative African Word list (CAWL-1700 words/concepts)⁵ in order to tune our ears to the language and compare

⁵ <http://www.pnlanguages.org/silepubs/abstract.asp?id=47602> (Accessed 24/08/12)

our transcriptions. We then decided on some transcription conventions (but kept the discrepancies) and carried on with the elicitation of the remaining concepts on pen-and-paper forms. This phase occurred in Vonkoro with several speakers. The keyboarding of the CAWL-1700 was facilitated by WeSay⁶, a lexical tool which already implements the structure and order of the CAWL-1700 by providing a reference number and semantic domain of each concept. In addition, it allowed us to work on a different set of words and to merge the lexicon files at the end of each day. The result was then imported in FLEx,⁷ a language data organizational tool. The glossing and definitions are in French and English. Since the Kyira were known to speak and understand the regional lingua franca, i.e. Kulango (the variety of Bouna), and loan words could be easily assessed by having the two languages side by side in a database, we augmented the lexical database with Kulango lexical data by eliciting the same word list with one speaker of Buna Kulango. Finally, all Kyitu noun and verb entries of the CAWL list were linked to audio clips.

The ‘textual’ data (as opposed to lexical data) of the audio corpus consists of recordings of observed and staged communicative events (in the sense of Lüpke 2009). The former category is composed of folk tales, riddles, songs, monologues and dialogues, whereas the latter category includes descriptions of various scenes depicted on illustrations (i.e. static stimuli). The characteristic context of the performance was artificial, as it was requested by us the researchers, but nevertheless appeared sincere and authentic. As far as we can judge, the audience of folk tale telling participated and collaborated with the performer(s). In contrast to the opinion heard on language transmission and domain of usage at the community entry meeting, three elderly women narrated on one occasion that the telling of folk tales is an uncommon practice nowadays, and that children are no more ‘listening’. Can such events not be part of their traditional obligation anymore? Also they told us that “before, when a group of women started to sing, other women would usually join them; now, you see, we are singing and no one comes.” Was this due to the presence of microphones and we, the strangers? We believe they wanted to share with us an aspect of the linguistic reality in Vonkoro.

The consultants had been designated by the chief and elders as ‘the best speakers’, although the majority of the folk tales in the corpus come from a man who was not among those recommended to us. Beyond that we were able to identify the potential of other collaborators while working on the elicitation of the lexical data, as each of us separately would spend some time in different compounds/residences communicating with various individuals. Overall about sixteen individuals gave us language data in some way or another, about ten have been recorded, while three worked more intensively than others on the transcripts of recordings. Moreover, we systematically chose different individuals in the process; no one ever assisted in the

⁶ <http://wesay.palaso.org/> (Accessed 24/08/12)

⁷ <http://fieldworks.sil.org/flex/> (Accessed 28/08/12)

transcription or translation of his/her own audio record. This procedure allowed people to comment on someone else's speech style, choice of vocabulary, etc., but also avoided the possibility of the consultants modifying the interpretation of the recorded speech (i.e. they may try to correct themselves or otherwise alter what they actually said).

All the event recordings were provided with a resumé and linguistically-relevant meta-data (e.g. who, where, what, etc.), while a selection of them received deeper descriptions in the form of speech transcription, translation and comments. This work was carried out in four phases. The first phase consisted of sentence/paragraph transcription and translation in notebooks by playback technique. In this phase the original recording was played in (sentence/paragraph) blocks, which had been put into sections and time-aligned in Praat,⁸ for the consultant to carefully repeat, translate and comment on. The second phase concentrated on words/morphemes translations and contributed to the making of grammar hypotheses. The digitalisation of text data and word-level interlinearization was processed in FLEx, which allows for an interaction between the lexicon and the text, thus facilitating correction and improvement. The third phase merged the time-offsets data and the text information data into a single file.⁹ Since we, the project's researchers, and the country of research are francophone, the primary language of annotation was French.

Work completed and to be done:

At the time of writing this report, the material to be sent to the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)¹⁰ is being put together. Approximately fifty observed communicative event audio recordings, 450 staged communicative event audio recordings, one thousand recordings of single words spoken in isolation, ten short videos, one hundred digital images, one multi-layered map, a 2000-entry lexical database, twenty annotated and interlinearized texts, and various documents are brought together in the collection, which for the majority conform to the archive's encoding formats requirement (i.e. UTF-8 character encoding, XML data encoding, 16 bits/44.1 kHz linear PCM audio, JPEG digital images). In the declaration of consent contract signed at the beginning of the project, a statement specifies that any Kyira person can access the archive and contact ELAR or the project's principal investigator (J. A. Brindle) at any time. Many of the recordings, especially the folk tales and songs, were very popular amongst our consultants. They were converted into MP3 files so people could store them in their phones or memory cards.¹¹ Since we were told that Kyitu had never been heard on the radio, we arranged to have the local radio station in Bouna, 'La voix de la Savane', give airplay to songs we recorded in Vonkoro. A photo-book and a

⁸ <http://www.fon.hum.uva.nl/praat/> (Accessed 28/08/12)

⁹ We acknowledge Tom Myers and Alexander Nakhimovsky for making this last phase possible.

¹⁰ <http://elar-archive.org/> (Accessed 28/08/12)

¹¹ These days one can purchase relatively cheap battery-operated portable AM/FM/Shortwave receiver with built-in MP3 player, memory card slot and USB port.

booklet, the latter being a compilation of our lexical database exported in the form of a dictionary Kyitu-Kulango-French, are under construction and copies will be given to the chief and the project's main consultants.

In assessing the overall impact of the project on the local community, we believe that our approach triggered interest in their own language, but also raised important questions and some self-awareness. It gave the Kyira an opportunity to assert their own perspective on language endangerment. In fact, the sociolinguistic aspect in particular was an opportunity to discuss issues, such as patterns of language usage, which otherwise normally remain implicit. Residents of Vonkoro and speakers of Kyitu are now familiar with what constitutes some aspects of language description and documentation. Since many Kyira showed interest in continuing the work, it is perhaps an occasion to mobilize the community and investigate the reasons for their enthusiasm. Are they interested in establishing a standard orthography and designing literacy material? What are their expectations and views on the future benefit of documenting Kyitu? Outside the community, our presence as researchers and our motivation to visit the region of Bouna contributed to the reflection that Kyitu is unique and fragile. Moreover our visits to the regional governmental authorities tell us that field linguistic projects are valued. However, these claims are hard to evaluate.

Finally, another of our efforts was an attempt to promote Kyitu as a self-standing language in the *Ethnologue*.¹² In this widely-used catalogue of the world languages, Kyitu does not appear as a language spoken in Ivory Coast, but 'Sitigo' and 'Cira' are identified as alternative names for Vagla (ISO 639-3: vag) spoken in Ghana.¹³ The Southwestern Grusi languages show high percentages of lexical similarity with one another, as shown in Bendor-Samuel (1965); Manessy (1969a,b); Kleinewillinghöfer (1997); Brindle (2011), yet no studies have demonstrated the relationship between Vagla and Kyitu, and no evidence has shown that Kyitu is a dialect or a variant of Vagla. The present classification is unfortunate, since Manessy had already distinguished the two languages. A change request form was sent to the ISO 639-3 Registration Authority in August 2012 in order to create a code element and an entry for Kyitu in *Ethnologue*.

Conclusion:

The project's contribution consists first and foremost of an update of our current knowledge of Kyitu. Overall we consider that the project created the records necessary to investigate Kyitu in the future, and preserved the material for the future. The material provides the scientific and local communities with the beginning of modern documentation of a highly vulnerable language. However, the project did encounter several problems (e.g. administrative, logistical, technical and human resource related), which we will not consider here, but self-criticism would be useful down the line.

¹²<http://www.ethnologue.com/> (Accessed 24/08/12)

¹³See Kleinewillinghöfer (1999) for a genesis of Kyitu in language taxonomies.

By and large, the work to be completed as stated in the original plan was too ambitious, given the time allocated to it. Although notes on the grammar were taken all along as comments, and the lexical database gave us a good picture of some aspects of Kyitu phonology and morphology, so far we do not have a self-standing document which captures the system of the language. Even now there are many uncertainties in the glossing of grammatical words, and some constructions are still opaque. The interpretation of the data published by Delafosse and Tauxier in comparison with what we gathered could help identify some important changes that the language underwent. Having digitalised the original data available in the preparation period, the work of linking these entries to the entries of the lexical database is yet to be done. The project offers data with few analytical statements drawn from them, thus the description aspects of the project suffer from that weakness.

Furthermore, Kyitu was believed at the outset to be among the most endangered languages in West Africa, considering the speaker population. It turned out that at such a small scale it is delicate to advance a number of 'native speakers'. Hence, how do we deal with the number of native speakers (i.e. 31) Bécuwe (1981) estimated? For example, if only men over 18 YO are calculated, since they are those who systematically stay in the only Kyitu speaking village after getting married and are primarily responsible for traditional institutions, there are in fact 29 native speakers. When women living in Vonkoro of two Kyira parents were included, we add 9; then we add 3 when women living in Vonkoro with one Kyira parent were included; resulting in a total of 41. This number represents about a quarter of the total population. Then how do we treat the population under 18 YO? One of our main consultants admitted to speaking mainly Safaliba to his children. On a stimuli description task, the daughter of another consultant rarely built a sentence without using a Kulango or Safaliba word. People we talked to conceded that many young children speak more and more Safaliba when they play. As to the number of native speakers, are we to add up a Kyira diaspora, composed mostly of women who married outside the village? But then, how do we take into account the quality and quantity of the Kyitu spoken? In the field we were under the impression that the Kyitu production of many young adults is comprehensible, yet bumbling. After verification, we realised that some consultants gave a good number of Safaliba and Kulango words for non-specialized vocabulary where Kyitu expressions exist. On occasion, a consultant would go and ask someone from the elderly generation for words which we believed were customary. Based on that, and on the multilingualism observed in Vonkoro, we are simply unable to tell how many native speakers of Kyitu there are out there, although it must be higher than 50. The endangerment status of Kyitu needs arrays of intertwined evidence to be assessed. Questions such as: what are the threats to the language and where are they coming from, who/what is responsible for the language falling out of use, and, why is the language still in use, are those we will continue trying to answer.

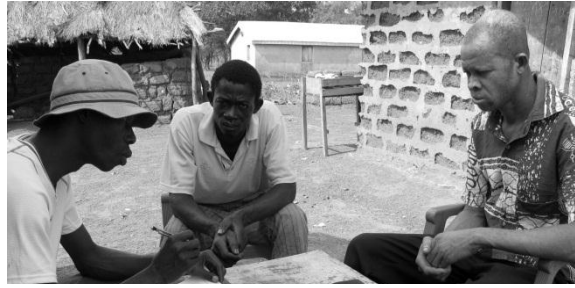


Figure 1 Enoc Kra, Zina Jabafi, Zina Bialaboĩ (from left to right) working on a word list



Figure 2 Zina Daare telling us a story



Figure 3 Zina Jibohini (top right) telling us a story



Figure 4 Jonathan Brindle and Zina Daare (Bébé) working on the translation of a text

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