THE GBAYA LANGUAGES

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The Gbaya languages are treated in the third part of the recently published volume of the series, Handbook of African Languages. In this work they are held to represent a dialect cluster (a single unit) within the larger unit, the Banda-Gbaya-Ngbandi languages. In thus uniting these linguistic groups, Tucker and Bryan agree at least in part with Greenberg, who includes them as well as some other languages within his Eastern Branch of the Niger–Congo Family. On the other hand, they do not go as far as Greenberg does on the ground that ‘the divergent features of these languages [i.e. those included by Greenberg in the Eastern Branch] would seem to be sufficient to exclude some of them from this “branch”, and possibly to allocate them to other branches ...’. They therefore ‘feel that Greenberg’s “Eastern Branch” grouping cannot be justified (still less the order of his items), except on the grounds of geographical expediency’ (Tucker and Bryan, p. 146).

The authors fail to mention the fact that Greenberg admitted that he was not altogether at ease about his classification of Gbaya. He says, ‘I assign Gbaya to the Eastern Branch with some hesitancy since it displays evidence of affiliation with the Adamawa branch’ (p. 12, n. 17). Later, after he had further studied the matter, he still had some doubts, although he thought that they were ‘probably unjustified’ (p. 115).

Although some of this disagreement may be due to differences in approach, it is certainly not to be denied that some of it is also due to insufficient and/or poorly recorded data. If there were more good grammars, there would be much less disagreement on such major groupings. Tucker and Bryan are to be commended for having given us a bibliography by which we can judge the extent of the information available to them. It was unfortunate that Greenberg failed to give such a bibliography. The number of works on Gbaya is actually slightly larger than is indicated by the bibliography in this volume. The following works should be added to the list. Some of them, although not strictly linguistic, provide linguistic data.


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TISSEUR (le Père Ch.), *Grammaire Gbaya (dialectes Bozoum, Mbay, Bokoto)*, Bozoum, 1938.

This is a typewritten manuscript (single-spaced) of 40 pages.


The authors of Part III have, I suppose, attempted to list *all* the names of the Gbaya-speaking people. If this is so, it is hard to understand how the so-called ‘Gbéyá and Súmá, who live for the most part north of the Ouahm [Wáam] River, were missed. In fact, one of the most startling features of the treatment of the Gbaya is the vacant space left on the map north of Bozoum and Bossangoa, represented primarily by the administrative region of the Ouahm. The bulk of the population is Gbaya-speaking, and a considered estimate of their number would be 70,000. The dialects of the Suma, Gbeya, and Gbaya of Bozoum are mutually intelligible.

To these one should add the Suma-Kaba, or Suma-Kapa as the name actually occurs in the speech of the Gbaya-speaking people, whom some Suma call ‘Súmá ndila bám’ because they are reported to curse people by calling on the *ndila* ‘lion’ to *ba* ‘to seize’ a person, therefore, ‘lion seize me’. These people, who most often refer to themselves simply as Suma, inhabit the area north of the new road between Bossangoa and Gore on both sides of the Nana Barya River. Many of them speak ‘Kaba’ as well as Suma, and there is a certain amount of intermarriage between the two ethnic groups. Many Suma say that the Suma-Kaba use many ‘Kaba’ words, but I have not yet been able to determine the extent of the borrowing. All that I have done is to record a list of words, using the 200-word list used by some in glotto-chronological studies (see, for example, *Word*, 12, pp. 1–210, 1956), most of which are illustrated by sentences. There I found only three words that seem to have been borrowed from ‘Kaba’, i.e. *fù* (instead of *sōn*) ‘all’, *kadé* (instead of *kpém*) ‘one’, and *ngé* (instead of *naa*) ‘(my) mother’. There is also a tendency to use *f* where other Gbaya dialects have *p*, e.g. *fe* ‘year’, *fèè* ‘rope’, *fèè* ‘cob antelope’. (In ‘Kaba’ there is a phonemic contrast between *b* and *p*, the latter of which seems to include the phones [p ] and [f].) The Suma-Kaba of Bhotango as well as the Suma of Bhogira use a syllabic *m* for the first person singular pronoun where Gbeya would use *am*. Thus: *nì nh ri* and *am nì ri* ‘I drink water’. Is this a result of the influence of ‘Kaba’, in which there are syllabic nasal consonants? I have written ‘Kaba’ in quotation marks because, whereas the people north of Paoua call themselves Kaba, those from around Markounda (not Marakounda) and east along the Barya identify themselves with the Mbay from across the river in the Chad and prefer to be called Mbay. Most people, African and European alike, ignorant of this state of affairs, continue to call them Kaba.

1 The term ‘so-called’ is henceforth omitted, but it is explained below why I consider all such names only arbitrary labels. I follow the practice of talking about the Gbeya (i.e. people) or Gbaya language (from one point of view only a dialect of Gbaya) as a concession to precedent and for the sake of convenience.
Into Gbeya has been translated some of the New Testament (published by the British and Foreign Bible Society) as well as lesson material for the (American) Mission Évangélique de l'Oubangui-Chari.

I have referred to the Suma, Gbeya, and Suma-Kaba without calling them tribes or sub-tribes, an error that the authors of Parts II and III of the *Handbook of African Languages* have made. Although they use the term 'tribe', nowhere do they define it. For example, on page 37 of Part III it is said that 'the dialects constituting this Cluster [i.e. Gbeya], and the tribes speaking them, are mostly known as MANJA ... or Gbaya ...'. Later, the authors say, 'tribes speaking dialects of this Cluster are: ...' after which they list many names, such as Gbanu, Ali, &c. These statements give one the impression that there are as many dialects as there are 'tribes'. The fact of the matter is, and this should have been made explicit, that there are communities for the most part only roughly defined by geography, dialect peculiarities, and certain cultural differences. As far as I have been able to tell, there were never any political units equivalent to the names now used. The only unit is a kinship one, the word for which in Gbeya is *nú-wey* 'mouth of fire' (?), although now the Sango word *màra* is used. Most of these units, which I, for lack of a better name, tentatively call clans, which they do in some respects resemble, have names with a *bho* (bo) prefix. Thus: Bhobo, Bhodigi, Bhodukpa, Bhobura. These clans are widespread, cutting across the so-called tribal boundaries. Thus, there are members of the Bhodukpa clan on the Yaloke–Carnot road and others, who call themselves not Gbanu but Gbaya, about 50 kilometres north of Yaloke on the road to Bozoum. Moreover, there are Bhodigi who call themselves Gbanu as well as those (30 kilometres west of Bossangoa on the road to Bozoum) who call themselves Gbeya.

It is my impression that it is the European who has, in his preoccupation to record the *race* (as used in the French language) of the populations, tended to exaggerate cultural differences and create large units to which some have become 'loyal'. It is only when the European points out such differences that the people claim a 'tribal' difference. The best-attested example of the making of distinctions where none existed is that of the Bhodikiri, who are found in the Bossangoa District, not far from the town of Bossangoa. The Gbanu insist that the Bhodikiri are really Gbanu who moved from around Yaloke some time in this century. The migration was complete, for apparently no remnants of the Bhodikiri remain around Yaloke. However, all administrative reports still list the *race* of these emigrated Gbanu as Bhodikiri.

It is not difficult to imagine how this error was made, for to this day many people, who do not yet understand what the European means by *race*, give the name of their village, which may consist of the members of a single clan or several clans, or even the name of the village chief. (I have not yet determined whether or not in the latter case the chief was also a clan elder.)

Moreover, the fact that the Gbaya often refer to their language simply as *nú ré* 'the language of the village', meaning the speaker's village, is evidence, it seems to me,

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1 A brief investigation revealed considerable differences between the clan-structure of the Gbanu and Gbeya. Moreover, although there was in the pre-European era a certain amount of interclan co-operation, it seems to have been on a local level. I have not been able to determine whether or not these *nú-wey* were really smaller family units, i.e. lineages, within certain specific but unnamed (?) clans.
that there is—or was—little idea of a larger unit, social or linguistic. It is true that
the Gbaya of Bossangoa is now often referred to as *ni Bhooro* 'the language of the
Bhooro', but this refers not to the many villages in which people of the Bhooro clan
may be living, but to the now most important Bhooro settlement, namely the one at
Bossangoa. (I have the impression that in this area the indigenous population still
considers Bhooro the most important of the clans living in that town, a government
post of about 14,000 Africans.) The appellation therefore remains a geographically
oriented one.

In view of all these factors, one should not talk about Gbaya tribes, but only of
certain masses of population, some of which are now known by certain names, the
most important of which are Gbaya, Gbanu, Suma, and Manza. Moreover, it must be
made clear that linguistic units, e.g. dialects, must not automatically be equated with
these communities. These dialects can only be determined by a careful comparison
of samples of speech from numerous areas. The list of Gbaya 'tribes' given by
Tucker and Bryan should therefore be understood to designate simply the Gbaya-
speaking inhabitants of certain geographically defined areas.

In view of the fact that there are some inaccuracies in the names and the informa-
tion given about them, I here give a somewhat corrected list in the same order.
One should not presume that I wholeheartedly endorse this list. It really sheds very
little light on the Gbaya dialects. Although, for example, some Gbaya-speaking
people call themselves Suma, their dialect—if one can talk of only one dialect—does
not apparently differ from Gbaya-Bhooro more widely than does the Gbaya of
Bozoum.

I have taken the liberty of making a few changes in the names. The explanatory use
of the word Gbaya is consistently omitted. Where it is understood that one is speak-
ing of Gbaya dialects, I see no reason to add it to the name when no other unrelated
language by the same name exists. If at any time one wants to be explicit, I should
suggest putting the word Gbaya in parentheses following the name of the dialect,
e.g. Gbanu (Gbaya). The hyphen is used in compound names of widespread usage.
For example, there are those people who, in order to distinguish themselves from the
Mgbaka, whose language Tucker and Bryan classify with the Sere-Munu languages,
seem consistently to refer to themselves by the compound name Mgbaka-Manza.
According to the information supplied by the authors, the Gbaya-speaking Mgbaka
of the Belgian Congo do not use the compound name Mgbaka-Gbaya, but to avoid
confusion with the Mgbaka and Mgbaka-Manza, the name Mgbaka-Gbaya should be
used. It is very possible, on the other hand, that a little study would reveal the fact
that Mgbaka-Manza and Mgbaka-Gbaya were actually only slightly differentiated
dialects, i.e. Mgbaka (Gbaya).

It is unfortunate that the authors do not write the names consistently. They use,
for example, both Mbaka and Ngbaka. Where it was justified, they should have
adopted one form of the name. I have chosen Mgbaka instead of Ngbaka to avoid
giving the impression that there is a consonant cluster of *ng* followed by *b*.1 I have
chosen the form Manza instead of Mandjia, &c. in order to write what I think is the
phonemic form of the name. The symbols *nz* represent an alveopalatal sibilant

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preceded by a homorganic nasal which do not seem to contrast with [nz]. This type of non-phonemic alternation occurs in Gbeya, where some speakers use [s] and [z] and others use [ʃ] and [ʒ].

I have represented the implosive stops [β] and [d] by bh and dh, whereas the authors either do not indicate the implosive nature of the consonant (e.g. Budigri for Bhodikiri) or indicate it with preposed apostrophe (e.g. 'Bangando).

Manza.

Mgbaka-Manza.

Kaka. My informant1 had never heard of these people. (Henceforth this observation is represented by a question-mark.)

Mombe. I have no idea who these people could be. The present inhabitants of Calloch'h’s Buruse (phonetically Bhōorō-sem) now speak Ari. I am not prepared to say whether or not there were in 1911 (when Calloch'h’s dictionary was published) at Bhooorosem people speaking a dialect different from Ari, but they certainly are not there now. Moreover, it must be made clear that his Gbēa are not the same as the Gbeya (sometimes written Gbē) of Bossangoa.

Manza Baba?

Mgbaka-Gbaya.2

Mgbaka-Manza. The informant did not distinguish these from those already mentioned.

Gbānu. The informant said that this was a name given by the European, but that they were once called Mgbēri.

Bhodikiri. These, as stated above, should not be listed separately. The informant said that they were originally called Bhodori, but that the European gave them the new name. I venture to say that more than one clan was involved in the migration. Many of these people speak Gbeya and a Banda dialect as well as Sango.

Bagba?

Ari [arā]. The letter / is often used by Europeans for the l-sounding lateral flap in the Gbaya languages. The informant said that the Gbanu once called the Ari Bhoor6-scm, apparently one of their clans, before the European began to use Ari, but he had never heard of the name Gbē given by Tucker and Bryan.

Bhofi.

Gbaya-Bhofi. One of their largest villages is Bhonagiro.

Kaka.

Bhiyanda.

Bhogoto.

Buli-Bukum?

Kaka. The informant called them Kaka instead of Gbaya-Kaka.

Bhangando.

Kaka. I see no justification for listing Kaka three times.

Yaangere [yaangére], so given by the informant.

1 I checked my own observations, based on four years of experience in western Oubangui-Chari, with an elderly and bright Gbanu man, Marc Vorongou, of Bossembele, who has travelled extensively in the Gbaya-speaking area of this territory.

2 It may be of interest to note that there is a village on the Bangui–Bossembele road, between the areas inhabited by the Ari and Gbanu, which is called Bhoturi. Since this is undoubtedly a clan name, and since in Gbaya the phonemes / and / alternate in many words, I wonder if the Belgian Botili is the same.
Bokari?
Somo. The informant said that the most important chief was called Zomo, and that his village was Gbandej. Since Europeans often hear Gbayà voiced stops b, d, g, and z as voiceless, could Somo and Zomo be the same name?

LAI.

Bodomo?
Kara.
Gbeya.
SUMA.
SUMA-KABA.

On the authority of Tessmann it is stated that To and Labi, two 'secret' or 'cult' languages, are spoken by the Gbayà. It would be more accurate to say that Labi [LaBi], for one, is spoken in the Carnot-Berbérai area, for it is certainly not known among the Gbanu, Gbayà of Bozoum, or Gbayà. Among these is found the secret society known as sombdi among the Gbayà, or somari among the Kärë (a Mbum-speaking people?). My informant, who claimed to know the language of Somari since he once was a member of the society, said that there were no Gbanu words in it. This statement would tend to confirm the claim made by the Kärë and Gbayà that Somari is a Banda importation.

There are a few statements that should be corrected.

It is stated (p. 38) that the Gbayà of Botili, in the Belgian Congo, 'speak an archaic dialect'. On what basis is this statement made? It seems to me that one could only describe a dialect as being archaic after having made an historical study of all the dialects of that particular language and having reconstructed, say, a primitive Gbayà.

The authors state (p. 39) that the Gbayà-Bhofi speak a 'mixed jargon' which we are led to suppose is a mixture of Bhofi and Gbayà. It is very doubtful that they speak a jargon, a term usually reserved for pidgin languages. If there is anything at all unusual here, it is simply the fact that the speakers of a certain speech community have borrowed from another, a process that is not at all unusual in the world.

On page 39 they say that the 'so-called Gbayà Kaka . . . are said to be unable to understand GBayà dialects, and to use Sango . . . as a lingua franca'. These two declarations are not of equal significance, for the first tells us something about the difference between Kaka and other Gbayà dialects, which are not identified, and the second gives the impression that all the other Gbayà people listed in this section do not use Sango as a lingua franca. As a matter of fact, Sango is used by a large part of the population throughout Oubangui-Chari, regardless of linguistic boundaries.¹

Here follows a map showing the Gbayà-speaking areas around the towns of Bozoum and Bossangoa. The names of the areas are those in common use by Europeans and many Africans. The limits of each area are schematic. As a matter of fact, except for the districts of Mbaiki and Bossembele, where thousands of Ari live in the 'bush', practically all other villages are located on automobile roads, only a few of which are shown. In this map small 'foreign' enclaves within a certain area are not shown. There are, for example, some Banda on the Bozoum-Bossangoa road. These are historically recent settlements.

Professor Tucker comments as follows:

While welcoming this article as a useful correction to the relevant section of the Handbook, I would draw attention to the following points:

p. 151. The spelling MBAKA is used only in quotation; otherwise the form NGBAKA is used throughout the text. The spelling MGBAKA is certainly preferable, but is not officially used in the area. It therefore seemed advisable at the time to adhere to customary practice.

p. 152. The implosive sounds [ɓ] and [ɗ] are consistently indicated when known to the authors to occur. Where the information is derived from other persons, the form in which it was supplied is adhered to. The method of representing these sounds in the text is that found in most vernacular literature in Africa, viz. 'B and 'D. There are
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grave disadvantages in the use of ‘BH’ and ‘DH’ for these sounds, since these combinations of letters are used elsewhere with a quite different significance. For example ‘dh’ frequently indicates the dental sound in African languages, as in DhaISO, Dho Luo.

p. 153. The phrases ‘archaic dialect’ and ‘mixed jargon’ occur in quotations from other authorities, who were interpreting (doubtless correctly) the statements of their own informants.

Résumé

LES LANGUES GBAYA

Dans la troisième partie du Manuel des Langues Africaines (Handbook of African Languages) récemment parue, les langues Gbaya sont considérées comme un groupe de dialectes (une seule unité) au sein d’une unité plus grande, les langues Banda-Gbaya-Ngbandi. A ce sujet les auteurs (Tucker et Bryan) sont en partie d’accord avec Greenberg, qui les classe avec quelques autres langues dans la ‘Branche Orientale’ de la famille ‘Niger-Congo’, mais ils pensent que la seule justification de la formation de cette ‘Branche Orientale’ est celle d’un commode groupement géographique. Ils oublient d’ajouter que Greenberg lui-même n’était pas entièrement satisfait de sa classification des langues Gbaya. Cette différence d’opinion serait due en partie à une conception différente du problème ainsi qu’à des données insuffisantes et mal consignées. On peut féliciter Tucker et Bryan de leur bibliographie, mais il manque encore certains articles sur le Gbaya. (Une liste est ajoutée.)

A la liste de ceux qui parlent le Gbaya citée par Tucker et Bryan peuvent s’ajouter les Gbeya et Súmá qui vivent au nord de la rivière Ouahm; les Suma-Kaba ou Suma-Kapa, sur les deux rives de la rivière Nana Barya; et la majorité de la population (environ 70.000 âmes) du nord de Bozoum et Bossangoa, représentée principalement par la région administrative d’Ouahm.

Le mot ‘tribu’ ne doit pas s’employer pour désigner les divers groupes Gbaya. Il faut souligner qu’il n’y a que des communautés pour la plupart très vaguement définies par des conditions géographiques, des particularités de dialectes et certaines différences culturelles. Il n’y a jamais eu, autant qu’on peut l’affirmer, d’unités politiques correspondant aux noms employés actuellement. La seule unité est celle de parenté, qu’on pourrait appeler, avec réserve, un clan. Ces clans sont très étendus, et dépassent les soi-disant limites tribales. L’idée qu’il existe des unités plus grandes provient, sans doute, d’une erreur de terminologie. Par conséquent, on ne devrait pas parler de tribus Gbaya, mais seulement de masses de populations, dont certaines ont reçu des noms; parmi les plus importantes figurent les Gbaya, Gbanu, Suma et Mansa. De plus, il faut souligner le fait que l’extension des unités linguistiques, les dialectes par exemple, ne correspond pas automatiquement à l’extension de ces communautés. On ne peut déterminer ces dialectes qu’à l’aide de comparaisons minutieuses entre des exemples tirés de nombreuses régions. Il faut, donc, entendre la liste des ‘tribus’ de langue Gbaya, donnée par Tucker et Bryan, comme une simple désignation de communautés de langue Gbaya vivant dans une région géographique définie. Il y a quelques erreurs de noms et de renseignements et une liste corrigée est ajoutée. Plusieurs autres rapports ont reçu aussi des corrections.

Le professeur Tucker ajoute un commentaire sur certains points à la fin de l’article.