

The Hot Zone



Of Local Interest

... And Do You Speak Chadian?

So there you are, back at home, talking to a few friends over a few beers. You have explained where Chad is; you have talked a bit about *La Belle N'Djamena* and its lack of asphalted roads; you have talked about the oppressive heat and the refreshing rains. Sooner or later, you will be asked the “Language Question” in any one of its many variations (my favorite to date is the one that I have picked for the title here!) I do not know about you, but I always end up wishing that I knew just a bit more on the subject. So here is a little primer to help us all on the topic. Two very quick disclaimers: 1- I am not a formally trained expert linguist! (For that, please contact our very own PAO, Art Bell!) 2- As we will see ahead, this is quite a complicated matter!

Text & Maps by J. Serpa

SIL International’s Ethnologue, probably one of the most authoritative sources on anything that has to do with languages in African countries today, has 134 languages listed for Chad. Accounting for two which are extinct, for French, standard Arabic, and Chadian sign language, that leaves us with 129 native spoken languages. On the other hand, Jean Chapelle, probably still today the world’s premier Chad-ologist, in his seminal work *Le Peuple Tchadien, Ses racines et sa vie quotidienne*, identifies 70 living languages. These figures tell me two things immediately: 1- for two such authoritative experts to disagree to this level, the subject matter can not be very straight forward; and 2- whether it is 70 or 130, we are still talking about an incredible large number of languages, especially if we take into consideration the fact that the population of Chad is estimated to be something around 10 million inhabitants!

The (Very) Big Picture

To start understanding what is happening, I found it quite useful to look first at the very big picture. Most specialists seem to almost agree that there could potentially be 4 major language families present today in continental Africa. (Yes! In here too, consensus seem difficult to come by!!!) These are:

1- The Afro-Asiatic languages, generally believed to have originated in northeast Africa and present today in north, east and Sahe-

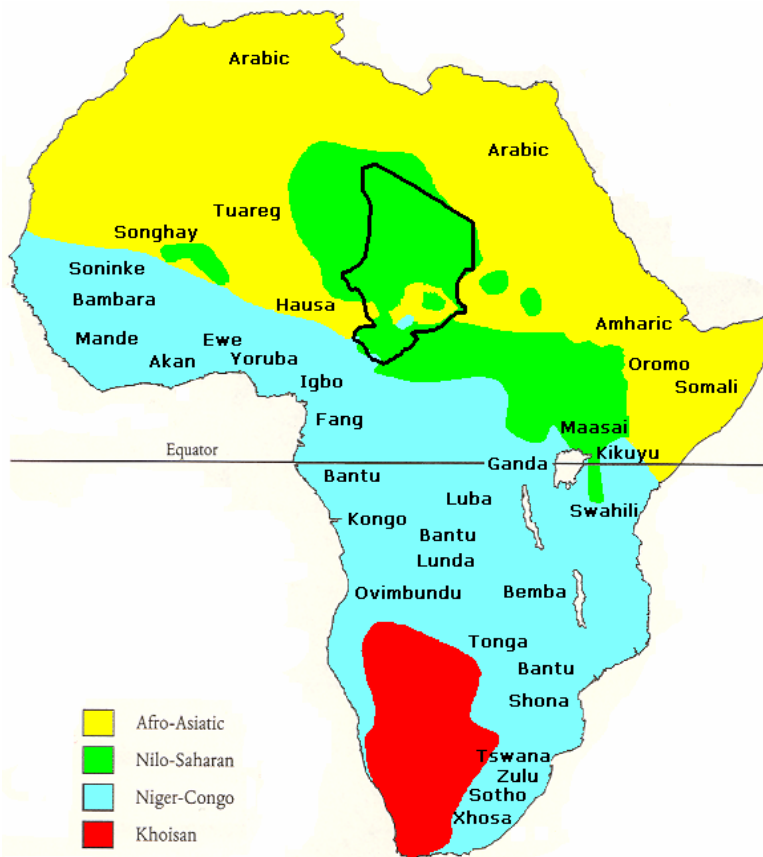
lian Africa, and southwest Asia;

2- The Nilo-Saharan languages, internally extremely diverse (and probably the most controversial grouping), present today in the upper part of the Nile river and in Lake Chad’s basin;

3- The Niger-Congo languages, believed to be the world’s largest language family in terms of distinct languages, generally believed to have originated in the Niger and Congo basins, and present today in most sub-Saharan Africa; and

4- The Khoisan languages, famous for its use of click consonants, historically mainly spoken by the Khoi and the Bushmen, today only spoken in the Kalahari Desert in southwestern Africa

The situation in Chad – a vast country right smack in the middle of Africa – had to be quite complicated! In fact, 3 of these 4 major language families are represented in Chad (the exception being the Khoisan family.)



The Nilo-Saharan Languages

I will start by looking at the second family of languages, the Nilo-Saharan ones, because this is the most complicated group. I will leave the other two families for the next issue of The Hot Zone.

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The Saharan Sub-Group

This sub-group of languages is composed of the two main Tubu languages, namely the Teda and the Daza (or perhaps more correctly,



Tedaga and Dazaga), by the Zaghawa, the Kanembu and the Kanouri.

In general terms, the Teda is the language of the Tubu in the mountains of the Tibesti and the Daza of the ones in the plains. The

languages are somewhat close: the Teda is 67% lexically similar to the Daza.

The Zaghawa is spoken by the Zaghawa and the Bideyat of Biltine and southern Ennedi (extending into Sudan.) Its main dialects are the Tuer-Gala (Bideyat, Baele, and Anna), the Kobe-Kapka, and the Dirong-Guruf.

The Kanembu and the Kanouri are closely related languages: as a matter of fact, the Kanembu is considered to be the immediate origin of the Kanouri. The Kanembu is the predominant language north of Lake Chad, in southern Kanem and Lac, all the way east to Massakori. The Kanouri is mostly spoken in the northern Nigerian, surviving in Chad in isolated pockets along the Chari and in Batha and Guera.

[Before moving onwards, this may be the proper place to talk a bit on the terminology used to designate some of these peoples. The term Tubu, which originally meant "those who sleep or live in the Tibesti" in Kanembu, has been generally used by western scholars to designate those who speak Teda or Daza. A few scholars classify the Zaghawa and the Bideyat as Tubu but this is far from consensual. The term Gorane is used by Chadians (except Kanembus and Zaghawas) sometimes to refer to the inhabitants of BET, sometimes to refer specifically to the Daza. The term Kreda is generally used to designate a sub-group of the Daza, normally more compact and more homogenous than what is normal among Tubu and who live in the Bahr El Ghazal region of Kanem. But in some cases (and especially by western scholars) it is used just as a geographical indexer, i.e., to designate anyone from that region regardless of ethnical origin.]

The Nilo-Saharan Languages of Eastern Chad

This is not a homogenous linguistic classification, as it includes languages from different sub-groups. The grouping was done on a geographical basis (for convenience) to include the following languages:

From the Eastern Sudanic Sub-Group: Daju, Dar Daju, Tama

From the Fur Sub-Group: Amdang, Fur, Mimi

From the Maban Sub-Group: Maba, Masalit, Runga

Very briefly, of all these languages, the one with most speakers is the Maba, spoken in the region around Abéché, from Biltine in the

north down to Am Dam in the south. It is somewhat close to Masalit (42% lexically similar.) And of all these languages, the ones that are exclusively Chadian are the Maba and, possibly, the Mimi, as the Runga language



extends into the C.A.R., and all the others into western Sudan.

The Central Sudanic Sub-Group

This sub-group is composed by the Nilo-Saharan languages of central and southern Chad, namely: Bagirmi, Gor, Kenga, Laka, Lutos, Mango, Mbay, Naba, Ngam, Ngambay and Sar.

Of all of them, the most spoken is the Ngambay with around 750,000 speakers, followed by the Naba, with nearly 232,000 speakers and the Sar with nearly 180,000 speakers. The first one is spoken in most of the Logone Oriental (around Moundou), in parts of Mayo-Kébbi and the Logone Oriental, and into Cameroon and Nigeria. The second one, the Naba, is spoken by the Bilala, the Kuka and the Medogo of Batha and Chari-Baguirmi. The third one, the Sar, is spoken in the Moyen-Chari, around Sarh, Koumra, and Moissala. Also of relevance in this group is the Bagirmi, the predominant spoken language in the Chari-Baguirmi, southwest of the capital, N'Djamena.



More on all this in the next issue!