The Hot Zone

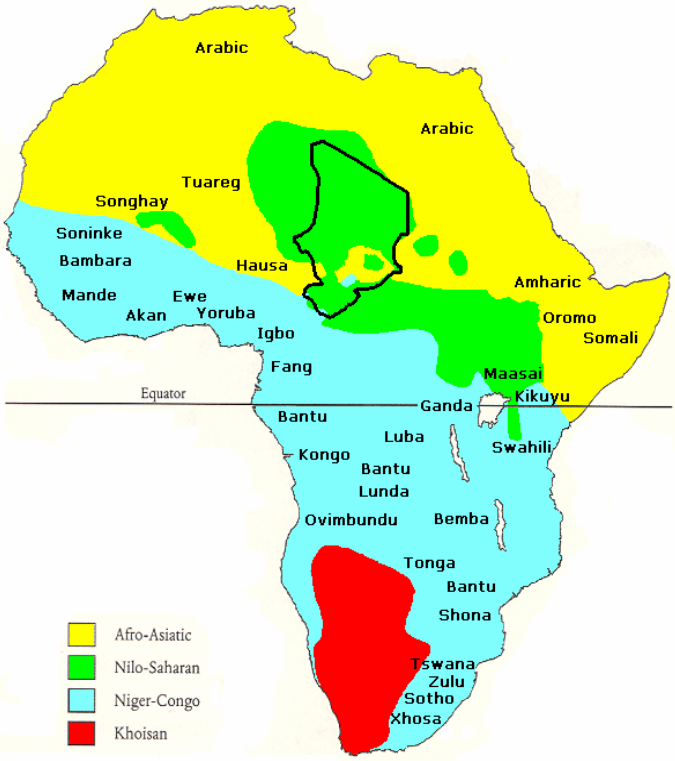
Of Local Interest

… And Do You Speak Chadian?

Text & Maps by J. Serpa

Here we go for the second part of the article on languages in Chad. Before I continue, I would like to make a couple of remarks on the first part. 1.- I was astonished by the feedback that I got on the article. Apparently, those lines filled a niche! To all of you who came to me with their reviews (and ideas for other articles), my heartfelt thanks. 2.- The lists of languages in the text (and on the maps) for each sub-group were illustrative, not exhaustive. For example, on the Central Sudanic Sub-Group, I list (and map) Bagirmi, Gor, Kenga, Laka, Lutos, Mango, Mbay, Naba, Ngam, Ngambay and Sar. These are meant to be examples for this sub-group (and hopefully the most representative ones), but they are not the whole deal. In addition to them, there is Bedjond, Berakou, Bernde, Dagba, Disa, and still 8 more! (After all, there are over 100 languages in Chad!) This point is not clearly made on my article.

Onwards! In the last issue we looked at the Nilo-Saharan Languages. In this one, we will look at the other two families present in Chad, namely, the Afro-Asiatic and the Niger-Congo Languages. And for reference, I include the general map yet again.



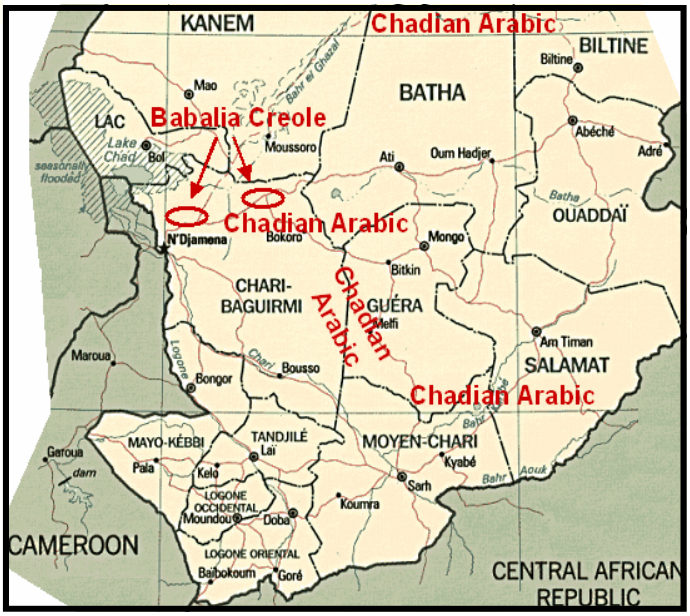
The Afro-Asiatic Languages

The Semitic Sub-Group

There is only one Afro-Asiatic language of the Semitic Sub-Group in Chad, but it is an important one: Chadian Arabic. This is the language of wider communication in Chad. Also called Shuwa Arabic, Chadian Arabic is spoken by nearly one million people in the Salamat, Ouaddai, and Biltine; in the center of the Batha Region; and in parts of the Chari-Baguirmi. It is also becoming more widely used in the Mayo-Kébbi, in northern Tandjilé, and in the Guéra. (A pidginized variety of Chadian Arabic, commonly called 'Bongor Arabic' is spoken as a second language by many people in Mayo-Kébbi and other parts of Southern Chad.) North of N'Djamena, between Djermaya, Karal, and Tourba, and also around Ngoura, there is a *créole* developed from Chadian Arabic (90%) and the Nilo-Saharan Berakou (10%) called Babalia. This *créole* shares structural similarities with Juba Arabic.

[Chadian Arabic, in spite of its name, is also spoken in Northern Cameroon, Eastern Niger, in the Borno and Yobe States in Nigeria, and in the CAR. On terminology, outside Chad, the designation 'Shuwa Arabic' is sometimes used to refer to the variety of Chadian Arabic spoken in the Lake Chad region. Also note that the term 'Shuwa' is considered pejorative by some people in Nigeria.]

According to SIL's Ethnologue, there is no diglossia of Chadian Arabic with Modern Standard Arabic. (Ok, ok! Obviously I had to go to a dictionary to sort out this diglossia thing, but I will save you the trip! In linguistics, it is a situation where, in a society, there are two closely-related languages, one of high prestige, normally



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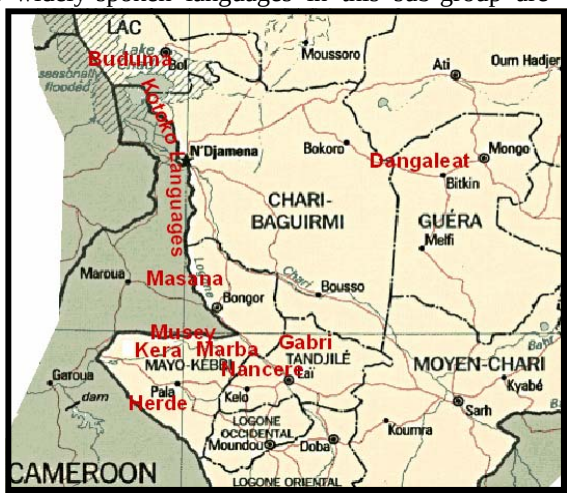
used by the government and in formal texts, and the other of low prestige, which is usually the spoken vernacular.)

The Chadic Sub-Group

The most widely-spoken languages in this sub-group are Musey, Marba, Masana, Nancere, Buduma, Dangaléat, Kera, Herdé, and Gabri.



Musey is spoken by nearly 200,000 people around Fianga and Gounou (and in Cameroon); Marba is spoken by nearly 125,000 speakers in the region north of Kélo; while Masana has around 110,000 speakers in Chad, in the region around Bongor and along the Logone River (and it also extends into Cameroon.)

Also part of the Chadic Sub-Group and of relevance both historical and geographical to us in N'Djamena are the Kotoko languages, namely Lagwan, Malgbe, Maslam, Mpade, and Mser. (The other two – Afade and Jilbe – have no speakers in Chad.) Altogether, there are an estimated 100,000 speakers of Kotoko languages in Chad. They are concentrated along the Logone River, from north of Gelengdeng to N'Djamena, and then along the Chari, from here up to Lake Chad. (And btw, the historical relevance is due to the fact that the Kotoko are generally considered to be the descendents of the Sao, the first known inhabitants of this region.)

The Niger-Congo Languages

The Atlantic-Congo Sub-Group

All Niger-Congo languages present in Chad are a part of this sub-group. The most widely spoken are Mundang, Tupuri, Day, Nzakambay, Kim, Kuo, Bua, Niellim, and Zan Gula (all from the Volta-Congo Sub-sub-group), and Adamawa Fulfulde (from the Atlantic Sub-sub-group.)

Mundang is spoken by close to 160,000 people around Léré (entering into Northern Cameroon); Tupuri is spoken by close to 100,000 people around Fianga (also entering into Cameroon); and Day is spoken by nearly 50,000 people southwest of Sarh.

Concerning Adamawa Fulfulde (aka Peul, Fula Fulbe or Eastern Fulani), this language has an estimated 130,000 speakers in Chad. One part of this population is settled around Léré, and the rest is spread out around the south. Two other Fulfulde languages are present in Chad, namely Bagirmi Fulfulde and Bororo Fulfulde. Together, they have an estimated 25,000 speakers, mostly nomads spread out around Southern and Western Chad below latitude 15° N.

And then there is Sango. Technically speaking, Sango, a Ngbandi-based *créole*, may not really be "Chadian" – according to SIL's Ethnologue, there are probably no first-language speakers of it in the country. In spite of this, Sango thrives as a "trade language" in Southern Chad, close to the border with the CAR (where it is a national language.)

Concluding Thoughts

To me, this article fully attest to the multi-linguistic nature of Chadians. Looking at the number of languages spoken here, their geographical distribution, and the number of speakers for each language, it is absolutely safe to say that all Chadians speak at the very least 2 or 3 different languages!

As I said in the opening lines, this is a complex subject. But let me conclude by thanking the fact that Lucy is not posted to Abuja. As complicated as it is here in Chad, the language scene in Nigeria is even more so. How much more complicated? SIL's Ethnologue lists 510 languages for Nigeria!!!

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