

Documenting Nalu: An Atlantic Language on the Coast of Guinea, West Africa

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In the coming two years I will document the language and the culture to retain a record of Nalu, an extremely under-documented Atlantic language of Guinea. Nalu is spoken on the littorals of Guinea and Guinea-Bissau. In Guinea, Nalu speakers primarily live north of the river Nuñez on the Tristão islands, which are part of the prefecture of Boké. Across the border in Guinea-Bissau speakers of Nalu are located around the Cacine estuary in the Tombali region. It is claimed that ancestors to the contemporary language community entered the current living area around the 14th and 15th centuries. I plan to produce a detailed dictionary, annotated audio and audiovisual data of texts from different genres, cultural activities etc., an orthography, and a grammatical sketch.

In both countries Nalu speakers live in a heterogeneous ethnic and linguistic environment. Not much is known about the exact situation in Guinea Bissau, except

maybe that one can reasonably assume that Nalu is spoken in the vicinity of Balanta, Biafada, and Landuma speakers. In Guinea Conakry, Nalu is spoken as one of many languages in the prefecture of Boké, and Nalu speakers there live together with speakers of Landuma, Balanta, Baga and other languages. Even in the one area that is dominated by Nalu speakers, i.e. the sub-prefecture of Kanfarandé, they are in contact with Balanta, Landuma and Fulfulde. Encompassing this situation is Soso, the dominant lingua franca of the region, with speakers both also in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone.

Nowadays, Nalu speakers are shifting towards Soso. To be more precise the shifting process to the target language Soso is asserted for the Nalu speakers of Guinea and can reasonably be assumed for the speakers living in Guinea Bissau. At least, most sources that mention the topic claim that Nalu in Guinea Bissau is fast disappearing. A point that severely

aggravates the language shift situation mentioned above is the inexistent administrative support. Neither in Guinea Bissau nor in Guinea Conakry is Nalu considered to be a national language and thus it is, to my knowledge, neither part of any government or NGO initiative for alphabetization, nor is it part of any school curricula, nor is it used in the media.

Because of the language shift situation it is hard to gauge exactly how many people actually speak the language still. Numbers vary between 6000-25000. Be that as it may, any numbers given are hard to interpret speakerwise, because the criteria for entering someone as Nalu into the count are generally not given. Thus, if one takes into account that, except on the Tristão islands, most of the younger generation of 'ethnic' Nalu are first language speakers of Soso and have, at best, passive competence in Nalu, the actual number of speakers is most likely a lot lower than estimated. Nevertheless, on the Tristão archipelago which still is an infrastructurally and economically somewhat marginalized area, the language is still used as an intraethnic means of communication and also transmitted to some extent to the younger generation. Thus, although the number of speakers may be quite small and dwindling, a meaningful study of this language is at present still possible.

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