

# Documenting Nalu - an Atlantic Language on the Coast of Guinea, West Africa

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My postdoctoral research involves a documentary linguistics project on Nalu, a poorly documented and endangered Atlantic language of Guinea, West Africa. Different from 'classic' language documentation aimed at language description, the goal in documentary linguistics is to create a record of natural language in the form of an extensively annotated audio-visual corpus. While a project in documentary linguistics still produces items known from 'traditional' language documentation such as a dictionary, a grammatical sketch, and an orthography, the heart of such a project is a digital corpus of transcribed, translated, annotated and contextualized audio and audio-visual data. The documentation contains recordings of various language events, e.g. descriptive monologues or free ranging conversations, as well as recordings of cultural activities. The different parts of the documentation are connected through an extensive web of cross-references between the transcribed recordings, the dictionary, the grammatical sketch, and the supporting commentary. This apparatus is targeted at making the corpus accessible to and usable for a variety of users, e.g. cultural anthropologists, linguists, historians, community members, interested laymen, and policy makers. The material will be archived with the Endangered Languages Archives (ELAR) at SOAS.

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.

In both countries where Nalu is spoken, 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. All encompassing this situation is Soso, the dominant lingua franca of the region, with speakers 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. 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 alphabetisation, 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 still speak the language. The numbers given vary between 6,000-25,000. Nevertheless, on the Tristão archipelago which is an infrastructurally and economically somewhat marginalized area, the language is still used as an intra-ethnic means of communication and also transmitted to some extent to the younger generation.



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