

# Documenting the Language of Fishing among the Dwang

JAMES ESSEGBEY

In 2013 I spent nearly six months studying the influence of the disappearance of a cultural practice on the language of the Dwang community in the middle belt of Ghana. This group call themselves Akenyenyi and their language Kenyen. The total population of the Dwang people is 3300 and they live in a total of 21 villages. My research consisted mainly of finding out which fishing-related practices the Dwang engaged in and which of these are expressed with Dwang words and which ones are expressed with borrowed words. Although mostly farmers, the Dwang people also fish in the rivers on their territory, the most notable one being the Sene river. Until the late 1960s, the main fishing method was communal. It involved using some herbs known as *kəsə*. At different times in the year, the community would harvest the *kəsə* and take it to the rocky banks of the Sene river. There they beat it into pulp. They would then spread it over the waters and wait ashore. Not long afterwards the fish in the area become incapacitated and then the community moves into the water in an orderly manner to collect them. The communal importance of this practice is such that everyone was required to cultivate some *kəsə* on their farms and make it available during *kəsə* expeditions. The fishing event itself was a festive occasion and competing groups were formed to see which one beat their *kəsə* into pulp fastest. The integral nature of this to the Dwang can be seen from the fact that the traditional way of saying 'to fish' is *ye kəsə* which literally means 'go kесе.'

Sometime in the 1960s, the Akosombo dam was constructed which led to the creation of the then largest man-made lake in the world, part of which is in the Dwang area. This led to the influx of fishing communities from southern Ghana with their fishing practices. Unfortunately, the new guests also brought along more lethal methods of incapacitating their fishes



than *kəsə*: they introduced DDT and a powder which the people simply called 'poison.' Within a short time, this lethal and extremely effective method replaced *kəsə*. It also removed the need for communal engagement since anyone could go and sprinkle some poison over an area and then start collecting the dead fish. The new method didn't last long however. This is because it was illegal and the Dwang people themselves discovered that the fish they caught through the process did not taste good, and rotted in short time. Surprisingly by the time they stopped this process, they had also stopped the cultivation of *kəsə*. They explained that it was too time consuming to cultivate and took precious land. As such, they could not revert to their collective fishing practice. During the time I spent there nobody could produce a sample to show to me.

The immediate consequence of the stoppage of the *kəsə* practice is that the expression for catching fish among most Dwang has changed from *ye kəsə* to *kyire mkpətra*, literally 'catch fish'. In fact, it wasn't until more than a month into my stay when a medicine man talked about medicinal uses of fish among the Dwang

that he used the term to my hearing for the first time. A second consequence is that since the fishing practice is no longer communal, fewer people get involved in fishing activities. As a result, fewer people know of Dwang names for fishes and their uses. Thus within one generation, a development project wrought changes which have far-reaching consequences on the community, including their language.

*James Essegbey is associate professor in the Department of Languages, Literatures, and Cultures and a CAS affiliate faculty member.*