

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

A SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY OF BUWAL (GADALA)
(RAPID APPRAISAL)

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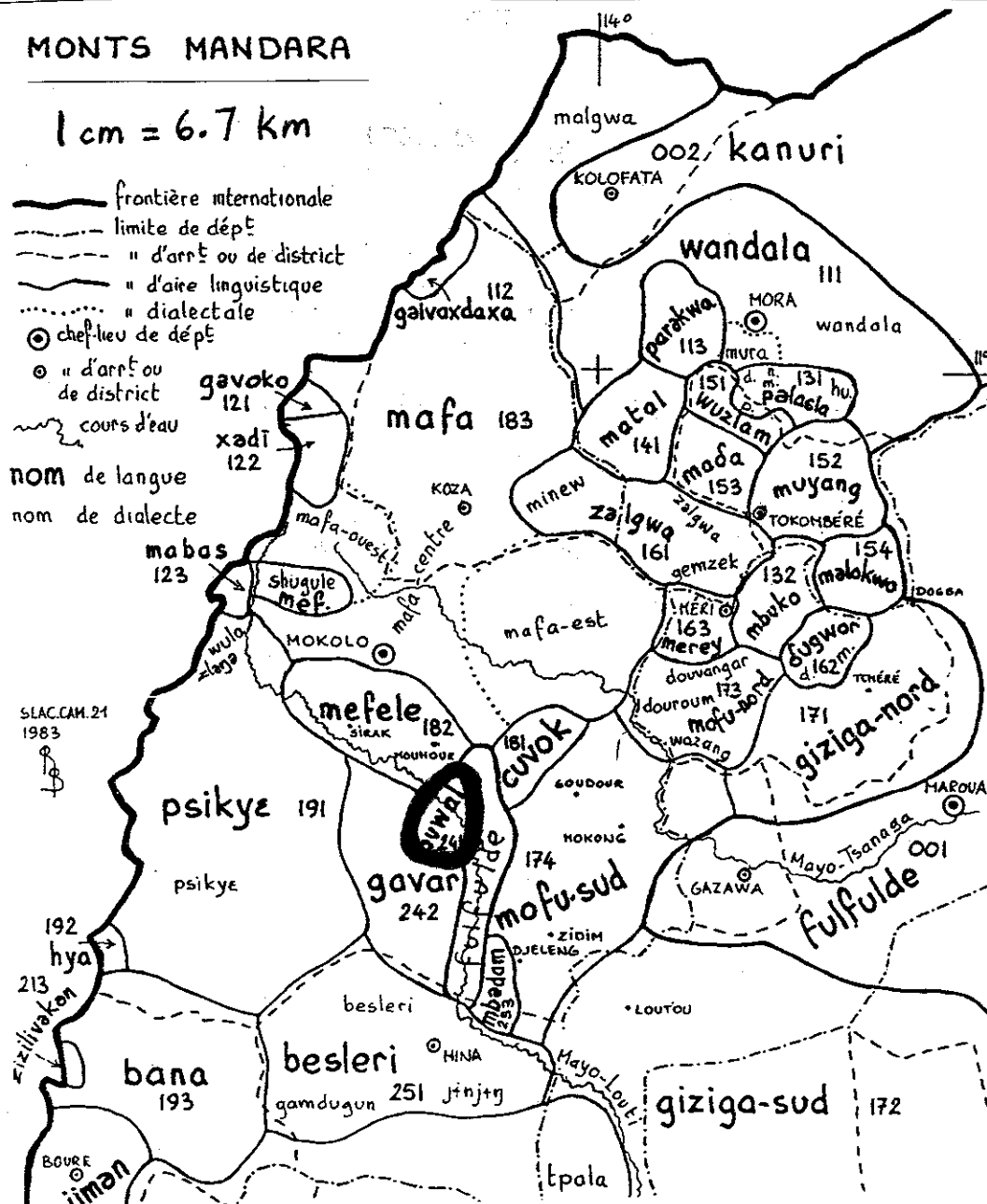
1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Buwal ([búwàll]), also known as Gadala, is a Chadic language spoken in the Extreme North Province of Cameroon, in and around Gadala, near Zamay in Mokolo Subdivision, Mayo-Tsanaga Division (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Location of Buwal-speaking Area (From Dieu and Renaud 1983:389)



The Atlas linguistique du Cameroun (Dieu and Renaud 1983), hereinafter referred to as "ALCAM," classifies Buwal (code number 241) as Afro-Asiatic, Chadic, Centre-West, Daba, North (Dieu and Renaud 1983:35). It is alternatively called "Gadala," which is also the name of the main village where the language is spoken. Its closest linguistic neighbours are Gavar (242), Hina ("Besleri" 251), Daba (252) and Mbëdam (253). Geographically the Buwal-speaking area is surrounded by Mefele (182) to the north and northwest, Gavar to the west and south, and Fulfulde along the eastern side from north to south.

Buwal is also listed in Ethnologue (Grimes 1988b:171); its linguistic classification is Afro-Asiatic, Chadic, Biu-Mandara, A, Daba. As in ALCAM, "Gadala" is given as an alternate name for Buwal. On the other hand, Gadala is also described as a dialect of Gavar. This may lead one to think that Ethnologue would describe Buwal as a dialect of Gavar, but such is not the case; rather, it states that "(Buwal) may be intelligible with Gavar" (Grimes 1988b:171).

Very little information is available on Buwal apart from what can be found in ALCAM and Ethnologue. The Bible Translation Needs Bulletin (Grimes 1988a:52) classifies the language as a "possible translation need," an expression which implies that further research is required. At the time ALCAM was compiled, there was a total lack of linguistic studies on Buwal, and we are not aware of any that may have been done since then. A word list does exist, however, and is available at the offices of the Société Internationale de Linguistique (SIL), Centre de Formation, Route de Mbalmayo.

There are apparently fewer than 5,000 Buwal speakers (Dieu and Renaud 1983:60). No attempts have been made to standardize this language (i.e. develop a standard written form), and to our knowledge no plans to do so are under consideration. Two song books have been informally produced by local Christians, and these are the only two pieces of written material known to exist in Buwal.

1.2 The Survey

The Buwal rapid appraisal survey was conducted on May 22, 1992 by Lawrence Seguin of SIL and Bradley and Tammie Harvey of Pioneer Bible Translators, seconded to SIL. This report is based on two formal group interviews, one held at the Protestant chapel in Gadala-Centre, and the other held at the Catholic chapel in the Mangari neighbourhood of Gadala village. Further information came from an informal conversation with the catechist from the Catholic chapel in Hodango. This was a Mofu man who had spent most of his life in the Buwal area and claimed to speak Buwal better than Mofu. Because of his Mofu origins, we consider his statements less reliable than what the two Buwal groups told us, but they are nevertheless useful for comparison purposes.

About 20 men took part in the interview at the Protestant chapel. Because the catechist was present and he himself did not speak much Buwal (he was a Guider speaker), the men spoke among themselves in Fulfulde. The team's questions were translated from French into Fulfulde, and the group's responses interpreted back in French.

At the Catholic chapel in Mangari we interviewed both the Catholic catechist, Jérémie KATADAY, and the "secrétaire de communauté," Ezékiel BOUBA. The team did not conduct a full rapid-appraisal interview but instead focused on intercomprehension with Gavar-Hosséré and language use within the church. This interview took place entirely in French.

The survey team had planned to interview traditional leaders but none was available during their visit.

1.3 Purpose of the Survey

Given the possible translation need status of Buwal, the purpose of the survey was to revise this status at least to either "probable translation need" or "unlikely translation need" by means of a rapid appraisal survey (cf. Section 2.0, "Procedures"). More broadly, the purpose was to evaluate the need for the codification or standardization of Buwal (i.e. the development of a standard written form of the language).

2.0 PROCEDURES

A rapid appraisal survey attempts to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation of a particular language in view of the possible need for codification. The advantage of the procedures used is that they are designed to gather useful information in a short time (usually anywhere from one day to one week) using specific non-technical means (informal conversations and formal interviews with groups and individuals).

Three major areas were kept under consideration:

- (a) dialect situation: the distribution and comprehension of related speech forms, as well as the corresponding attitudes;
- (b) bilingualism: the extent of proficiency in languages of wider communication (LWCs) such as French, Fulfulde, and/or any other languages widely used in the area, as well as the corresponding attitudes; and
- (c) viability: the prospects for a successful language development project in the local language, as shown by attitudes toward the mother tongue and by reported patterns of language use.

In this report the definitions of "dialect" and "language" are those given for the French words "dialecte" and "langue" in ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:19). "Speech form" or, alternatively,

"speech variety," are broader in meaning, corresponding to that of "variété" in ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:19).

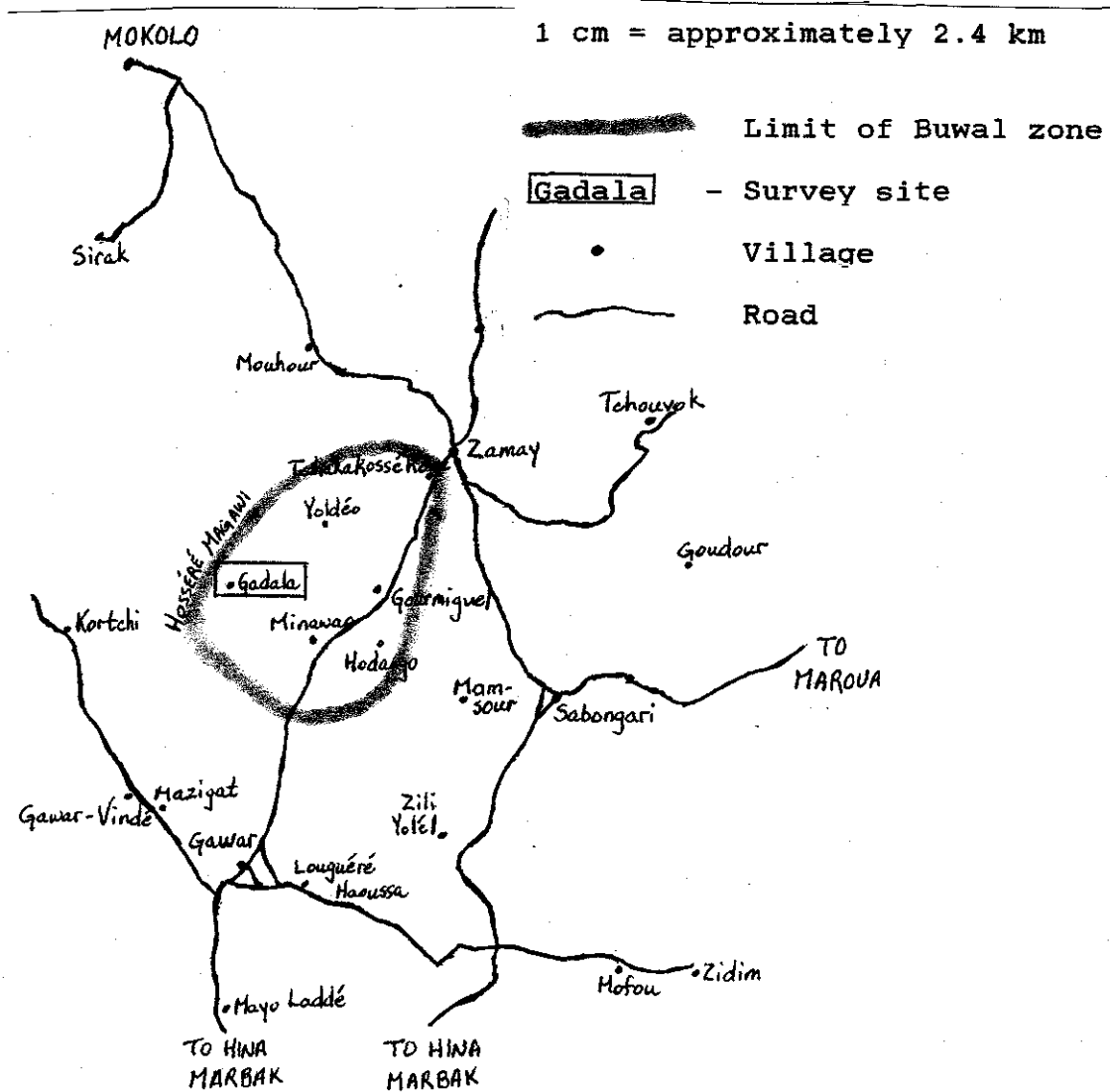
3.0 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1 Dialect Situation

The interviews revealed that Buwal is perceived to be a single, homogenous language-unit with no dialects to speak of. There are slight pronunciation differences from village to village that do not hinder intercomprehension. Those interviewed did not divide Buwal speakers according to how they speak; they said everyone speaks only "Buwal." Figure 2 shows the extension of the Buwal area:

FIGURE 2

Extension of the Buwal Area



Given this reported homogeneity, work was stopped after the two group interviews were completed. Individual questionnaires would have been administered had the group interviews revealed the existence of several dialects. In the rapid appraisal approach, individual questionnaires are used to discover attitudes toward the various dialects, with a view towards selecting a reference dialect for standardization.

3.2 Multilingualism

3.2.1 Acquisition of Other Languages

a) Linguistically Related Languages: Gavar, Mefele, Cuvok, Mofu, Mbèdam

The Protestant group stated that speakers of Buwal are not able to understand Mefele, Cuvok, and Mofu unless they travel in the areas where these languages are spoken. Although we did not ask whether there was generalized acquisition of these other languages through contact with those who speak them, we were informed that people living near the border with the Mofu area (e.g. in Hodango village) tended to learn Mofu, whereas those living further west tended not to learn it. This may hold true for other languages but requires more study.

The Protestant group also said that Buwal speakers can understand Mbèdam, but not as easily as they can Gavar. The Mbèdam are considered a separate people speaking a different language.

The greatest degree of comprehension seems to exist with Gavar, or what the two groups interviewed called "Gavar-Hosséré." According to both groups, a Buwal speaker and a Gavar speaker can each speak his own language and be understood by the other; few learn how to speak the other language, however. This is typical of speech varieties with a high level of inherent intelligibility. On the other hand, three statements were made that appear to argue that this intelligibility is acquired:

- 1) the Protestant group said that Gavar is not learned by those who remain in the village and do not travel to the Gavar area;
- 2) the two Catholic men interviewed said that old people cannot understand Gavar;
- 3) the Catholic catechist in Hodango said that Buwal speakers in his village do not understand Gavar.

Statements gathered during the Gavar rapid appraisal survey further confuse the situation (cf. Seguin 1992:5-6). There the team was told by one group that Gavar and Buwal are the same language, but by another group that they are completely different languages. This precludes our making any solid conclusions on inherent intelligibility. From the information we have, we can venture to

say that in Gadala-Centre and Mangari there may be a high level of acquired intelligibility due to geographical proximity; moreover, this has become generalized.

This relationship merits further study. A suggested approach is to carry out intelligibility testing between Gavar and Buwal in three different points within each area: 1) in a village that is as far as possible from where the other language is spoken; 2) in a village that is about half-way to the other area; and 3) in a village that borders the other area. This would show whether geographical proximity is really a factor in intelligibility.

b) Languages of Wider Communication: Fulfulde and French

The Protestant group claimed that old people do not understand Fulfulde well, but that all the young people and children are able to understand it, having acquired it by age 10. As far as French is concerned, apparently only those who go to school learn it, beginning around the age of 8. Few Buwal children go to school, however.

3.2.2 Attitudes

a) Gavar

Given the close relationship between Gavar and Buwal, this was the focus of the team's questions. What emerged was that attitudes are positive towards the Gavar people and their language, but not towards the use of Gavar in place of Buwal as a means of instruction in the primary schools or, more generally, as a means of written communication. Both groups agreed to having the Bible in Gavar, but the two men interviewed in Mangari said that people would not go to the trouble of learning to read Gavar so that they could read Scriptures in that language. They would only be willing to listen to a Gavar speaker reading it.

b) Fulfulde

Attitudes towards Fulfulde appear to be more positive than those towards Gavar. If given a choice of having the Bible in Fulfulde or Gavar, the Protestant group voiced a preference for Fulfulde, because it would be more useful to all the language groups in the area (not just their own). They would also accept seeing Fulfulde used in the local primary schools because "everyone speaks it."

3.3 Viability of Buwal

3.3.1 Language Use

Normally in a group interview, questions should be asked about language use in the following domains: with one's spouse, children, and peers; in the market; in the fields; and at the dispensary (or another location where outsiders are present). During this survey,

however, the team concentrated initially on language use in the local churches. By the time this subject was exhausted, the interviewees showed signs of exhaustion also, and the interview was brought to an end.

Nevertheless, if patterns of language use within the church are an indication, then Buwal is a vital language and Fulfulde does not meet all communication needs. In both the Protestant and Catholic chapels, everything said in Fulfulde is reportedly translated into Buwal. In the Protestant church, occasionally some parts of the service are conducted only in Buwal. If a visitor who does not speak Buwal is present, a translation is given in Fulfulde. At times only Fulfulde may be used in such cases.

At the Catholic chapel in Mangari, Fulfulde is used during the Mass, but a Buwal translation is provided "for the women's benefit." (It was not determined if this was done during the liturgy.) The same occurs at the Hodango chapel because, according to the catechist, many women and children do not understand Fulfulde.

This being so, we can suggest that local Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, feel a need to use their own language during church services, as Fulfulde apparently does not communicate sufficiently to everyone.

3.3.2 Attitudes towards the Mother Tongue

Both groups were very positive towards the idea of seeing their mother tongue developed. They would be delighted to have a Bible translation in Buwal, feeling that Buwal is easier to understand than Fulfulde. In fact, song books have been produced in Buwal by both Protestants and Catholics, and such local initiatives are a strong indicator of positive attitudes towards the mother tongue.

The two groups interviewed also expressed an interest in learning how to read and write in Buwal as well as in seeing it used in local primary schools, such as is being done in some areas of Cameroon under PROPELCA (Project of Operational Research for the Teaching of Languages in Cameroon).

Expressions of interest should not be taken to mean that people would attend literacy classes in significant numbers, or that the use of Buwal would be easily integrated into the school curriculum. Many other factors determine the success of these types of projects. The responses given, however, at least show the presence of positive attitudes.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the above analysis we can make the following preliminary observations:

- 1) Buwal is a single, homogenous language with no significant differences in how people talk from village to village. The speech of the main village, Gadala, could probably serve as the basis for codifying the language.
- 2) There is insufficient evidence at this time to say that the Buwal-speaking population as a whole speaks or understands any already written language, either a related language or an LWC, to a degree that would preclude developing Buwal into written form.
- 3) There is considerable interest in seeing Buwal developed into a written form, including Bible translation. Current use of Buwal in local churches reveals a perception that Fulfulde does not adequately communicate to everybody.

In view of the above, the implementation of a project to eventually codify Buwal and translate the Bible into this language appears justified. The translation need status of Buwal should therefore be changed from "possible" to "probable."

It would nevertheless be useful to study the relationship between Buwal and Gavar, so as to determine whether inherent intelligibility would be high enough to allow a single project to be developed for the two speech varieties. Even if inherent intelligibility is not high, it may be possible to set up a project for transferring written materials from one language to the other by means of computer-assisted dialect adaptation (CADA).

As far as a broader, government-sponsored standardization effort is concerned, Buwal's small population may place it low on a list of priorities, although any private efforts, initiated by local people, a church, or a development agency, should not be discouraged.

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