

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

SOCIOLINGUISTIC SURVEY OF MEFELE
(RAPID APPRAISAL)

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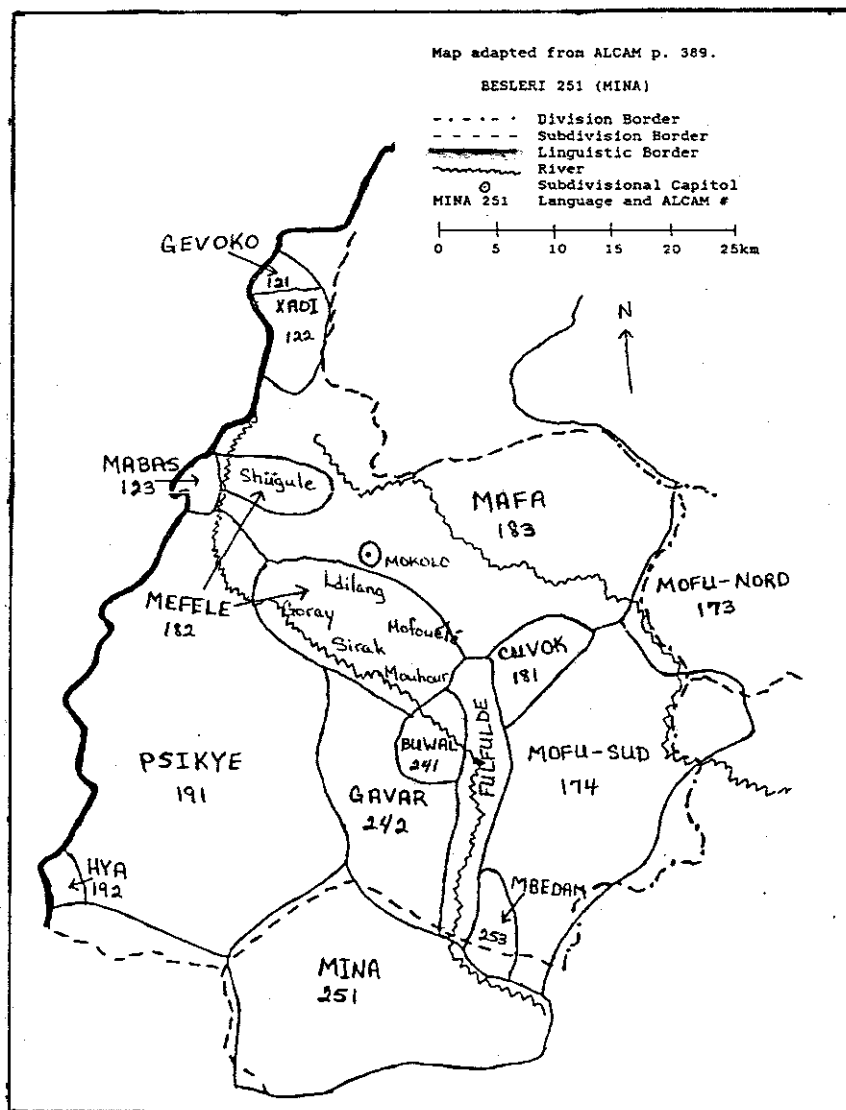
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1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

Mefele is a speech variety found in the Extreme North Province of Cameroon, Mayo-Tsanaga Division, Mokolo Subdivision. It is spoken by more than 10,000 people according to Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun (Dieu and Renaud 1983:160), hereinafter referred to as ALCAM. Mefele speakers live in two separate areas: the larger one is south and southeast of the city of Mokolo, the other is about ten kilometers northwest of Mokolo (cf. Figure I). ALCAM places Mefele in the Chadic language family, Mafa group, and classifies it as number 182 (Dieu and Renaud 1983:357). The Ethnologue classification is as follows: Afro-Asiatic, Chadic, Biu-Mandara, A, Bura-Mandara, Mandara-Matakam, Matakam (Mafa) (Grimes 1988a:181).

Figure I
Map of Mefele Area



The name Mefele is not the name used by the speakers themselves to refer to their language, but is reportedly a distortion of "Mofouélé," the name of the centrally located village. Other villages where Mefele is spoken include Sirak, Mouhour, Ldilang, Doray and Shougoulé. The people refer to their language simply as "our language" or call it by their village name (e.g. "Sirak", "Mouhour"), though they say people in all these villages speak the same language. As there seems to be no clear choice of a language name, we will continue to refer to this language as Mefele for the purposes of this report. This choice conforms to ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:35) and Ethnologue (Grimes 1988a:181), which also list the following dialects:

ALCAM

1. Mefele, Serak (Sirak), Muhura (Mouhour)
2. Shügule (Chougoulé)

Ethnologue

1. Mefele
2. Serak (Sirak)
3. Muhura (Mouhour)
4. Shugule (Chougoule)

In this report the meaning of "dialect" is as it is defined in ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:19).

As our research concurred with the dialect situation recorded in ALCAM above, we will also use the term "Mefele" for the dialect of the larger area south and southeast of Mokolo, including the villages of Mouhour, Sirak and Mofouélé. "Shügule" will refer to the dialect spoken in and around the village of Shougoulé, located northwest of Mokolo. Spellings of the village names are taken from the Map of Cameroon (published in Yaoundé by the National Geographic Centre). The spellings of the language and dialect names are taken from ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:35).

1.2 The Survey

The Mefele rapid appraisal survey was conducted in May, 1992. The survey team consisted of Lawrence Seguin of the Société Internationale de Linguistique (SIL) and Bradley and Tammie Harvey of Pioneer Bible Translators, seconded to SIL.

1.3 Objectives

The primary objective of this rapid appraisal survey was to assess the need for standardization of the Mefele language. To attain this objective it was necessary to gain a better understanding of the dialect situation in light of the fact that ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:35) and Ethnologue (Grimes 1988a:181) disagree concerning the number of dialects present. One of the factors considered in this evaluation was the attitude of the Mefele toward their own language as well as other languages that they may utilize. In addition, consideration had to be given to the possibility of the Mefele being

able to adequately utilize materials from another already standardized language, such as Mafa, due to generalised bilingualism.

2.0 PROCEDURES

The procedures of the rapid appraisal survey method are designed to obtain specific, non-technical information in a short amount of time (anywhere from one day to one week). This method also allows for evaluation of data while still in the field, which reduces the likelihood of leaving the area and later discovering unanswered questions. The rapid appraisal method can provide a general overview and preliminary insight into the sociolinguistic situation of an area, though its scope is limited due to the type of data and methods of collection. The data is collected through the use of informal interviews with political and traditional authorities as well as church and mission leaders, combined with formal group and individual questionnaires administered strategically within the language group in question. The survey questions target the level of comprehension and attitudes toward any dialects or related speech forms; possible bilingualism and corresponding attitudes with neighbouring languages and languages of wider communication, especially Fulfulde and French in this case; and the viability of the language as well as the feasibility of a language development project.

On this particular survey, formal group interviews were conducted with the village chief and leaders of Sirak and with the leaders of the Shougoulé Catholic church. Informal interviews were conducted with Kodjé K. Abdias, president of Mokolo parish for the U.E.E.N.C. (Union des Eglises Evangéliques au Nord-Cameroun), originally from Sirak; Brother Gilbert Allard, a Catholic lay brother who has worked primarily in Shougoulé for 17 years; and Jérémie Hodékwem, catechist in the Shougoulé Catholic church. Twelve individual questionnaires were also completed in the village of Sirak (cf. Appendix and Table I). (Four women were interviewed together, but their individual responses were recorded.) Though an attempt was made to vary the sample according to age and sex, our sample should not necessarily be considered representative of the population.

TABLE I
Questionnaire III Sample

	Men	Women	TOTAL
Young (Under 35)	2	3	5
Middle Aged (35-50)	1	1	2
Old (Over 50)	1	4	5
TOTAL	4	8	12

3.0 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

3.1 Dialect Situation

3.1.1 Intercomprehension

Complete intercomprehension was reported between each of the Mefele-speaking villages, even among young children; this points toward adequate inherent intelligibility among the varieties of Mefele. Nevertheless, speakers reported some differences among the villages' speech patterns, with the most notable difference being between Shougoulé and the other villages. These differences, however, are very few and very small. In fact, according to one interview, a speaker from Mouhour and a speaker from Sirak may find one word different in two or three hours of conversation. A Sirak person, on the other hand, would know immediately by speech that someone is from the Shougoulé village. Most everyone interviewed agreed, however, that they could determine a speaker's home village by his manner of speech.

3.1.2 Attitudes

All those interviewed agreed that the four main villages mentioned previously speak the same language. The villages all have mostly the same traditions; Shougoulé has one festival different from the others. The Shügule are reported to have originated from the same area as the other Mefele, but came at a different time and settled in a separate location. They consider themselves to be one people regardless of their geographical separation by the city of Mokolo and the Mafa people.

3.2 Multilingualism

3.2.1 Intercomprehension

Mafa is the most familiar second language. The group interviewed at Shougoulé said that all the Shügule people speak Mafa, even the old women. However, Brother Allard believes that women and children do not understand Mafa this extensively. According to him, one must travel to learn it, and mostly men travel. Hodékwem the catechist said almost all Shügule people speak Mafa because Shougoulé is encircled by Mafa people. Mafa is not as widely understood by the people in Sirak, Mofouélé and Mouhour, however, because it is a larger group with Mafa speakers adjacent on only one side of their area, which decreases contact with the Mafa overall. The group interviewed in Sirak debated amongst themselves whether the majority or a minority of Sirak people understand Mafa. This conflicting data makes it difficult to determine the exact extent of Mafa bilingualism.

Children are exposed to Mafa at school and market. In those cases where the school is within a Mefele village, Mafa children travel in for school. These Mafa and Mefele children learn one another's language. Youth who do not meet Mafa speakers at school apparently do not learn it as well as the other children do. Therefore,

comprehension in Mafa must be acquired, and this is reported to occur at about eight or nine years of age. The interviewees said Mafa is easily learned, which is not surprising in light of its classification according to ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:35). Mefele (182) is closely related to Mafa (183).

Fulfulde is spoken only by the young people (ages fifteen to thirty), who travel a lot ("énormément"). Older people do not speak Fulfulde, and women may learn a few Fulfulde words at the market. Some Fulfulde is also spoken in the Mefele villages among the few Muslims there. Parents do not speak Fulfulde with children, and in cases of exogamy, the couple may speak some Fulfulde until the wife learns the husband's language, if both speak Fulfulde. Boys and girls both learn Fulfulde at about ten to fifteen years of age: for example, at the market or from friends at school. According to Jérémie Hodékwem, however, children do not learn Fulfulde if they stay in the Mefele villages.

French is known only by those who go to school. Children begin French studies in the first year of school, at about age seven. More and more children are learning French; however, few children on the whole go to school, and many of these leave school due to the expense involved and various other reasons. Many young people also go to Yaoundé (and possibly other large French-speaking cities) where they learn French.

3.2.2 Attitudes

Mafa is apparently a valuable language to learn since the Mefele are surrounded predominantly by Mafa speakers. If marriage patterns are any indication of attitudes, the practice of intermarriage between the Mefele and Mafa may reveal a favourable attitude between these two groups.

In other situations however, the attitudes may be interpreted as being somewhat negative. For example, Kodjé Abdias reported hearing of instances where Sirak non-Christians have considered Christianity to be "a Mafa thing" because Mafa is spoken in the church.

Concerning Mafa attitudes towards Mefele, Brother Allard has experienced opposition to Shügule materials being used in chapels in Sirak, Mouhour and Mofouélé. However, these are mixed parishes, and the opposition is coming from Mafa priests who prefer to read Mafa materials, rather than from the Mefele themselves.

Fulfulde and French were seen as good languages to learn in order to communicate with other parts of Cameroon. One elderly gentleman in Shougoulé said that he wishes he could speak French. Someone has to translate the radio news or the newspaper for him. The group interviewed in Shougoulé prefer French over Mafa for learning to read and write, and see both French and Shügule as necessary for the children to learn in school.

3.3 Viability

3.3.1 Language Use

The Mefele language is used in the major domains of family and village life. Parents speak Mefele with children, though Mafa, Fulfulde and French words do sometimes appear in conversations. As some interviewees explained, there is a mixture "in the head," and one speaks whatever word comes to mind first regardless of the language. The people did not associate this phenomena with the dying of their language, however. Mefele is spoken among friends, in the fields and for traditional activities and songs. In exogamy, the wife normally moves to the husband's village, and she and their children learn his language. No language shift appears to be occurring, though there is possibly increasing bilingualism among the children in Mafa, Fulfulde and French.

The Mefele apparently have plenty of opportunities to speak Mafa at markets, both local and large ones. Mafa is also used in the Protestant church in Sirak. Christians there generally learn Mafa in the church if they do not already know it, though they may have some difficulties in understanding Mafa the first couple of years. Because all of the Protestant evangelists are Mafa, the message and Bible readings are presented in Mafa, and there is no translation into Mefele.

The Catholic service in Shougoulé used to be in Mafa with translation into Shügule until two years ago, when they started using Shügule exclusively. Brother Allard and Jérémie Hodékwem have translated two catechism books into Shügule, as well as portions of Genesis, Exodus and the New Testament. Mr. Hodékwem said he uses these Shügule portions when he travels to the Catholic chapels in Sirak and Mofouélé. He also assists the catechists who understand Shügule in these other churches to prepare Shügule scripture readings for use in their services. These chapels are beginning to use Shügule more and more. According to Brother Allard, the Mefele speakers in these chapels are willing to sing and pray in the Shügule dialect. If Mafa speakers are present at the Shougoulé church, some prayers, liturgy and songs will be done in Mafa for the visitors' benefit. Also, during large celebrations when people travel into Shougoulé from surrounding villages and language groups, the sermon is translated into Mafa. In the Protestant chapel in Sirak, the different parts of the service are conducted in the speakers' mother tongues. So if a Mefele speaker is giving the meditation or announcements he speaks in Mefele; if a Mafa speaker is in charge of a part of the service (all the catechists are reported to be Mafa), he speaks Mafa, but there is no translation into Mefele, though the church membership is primarily Mefele.

3.3.2 Attitudes

The overall attitude gleaned from the interviews is that Mefele is strong and will not be replaced. However, some of the young people in Sirak expressed fear that they may lose or forget the language because

they have already forgotten some words, such as names of trees. On the other hand, the rest of the Sirak group felt that as long as some young people remain in the village, the language spoken in Sirak will last "eternally."

All those interviewed expressed interest in seeing their language written. When asked why they were interested in this, it was suggested as a method of helping to preserve the language. Contrary to their previous statement (that their language would not die out), this seems to indicate some fear of possible loss or reduced status of their language. On the other hand, it also shows that they have a high regard for their language. To learn to read and write Mefele and use it in school was seen as a good thing, but the groups interviewed stressed that it would still be necessary to learn French as well.

This attitude toward preserving the language was also expressed by Brother Allard and Jérémie Hodékwem in their reasoning for having a Bible translation in the Shügule dialect. Brother Allard reasons that the Shügule (and by extension, the Mefele) need their own translation because they are a distinct people and he wants them to feel proud that they are Shügule; he also wants to "mettre en valeur leur langue," which means to give value to the language by developing or writing it. According to Mr. Hodékwem, Shügule Catholics could use the Mafa scriptures, but the Shügule do not want to lose their language. He did point out that everyone, especially small children, understands better in Shügule than in Mafa.

Kodjé Abdias expressed that there is a possible need in Sirak for the Protestant service to be in Mefele. He said it may be difficult to reach certain people when using Mafa. As already mentioned, some people have suggested that the church does not concern them because it uses Mafa. In the past, a Mefele language committee was attempted but failed. Currently there are Mefele speakers on the Mafa language committee.

4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This survey confirmed that the speech varieties spoken in the villages of Sirak, Mouhour, Mofouélé and Shougoulé are all one language. The speakers themselves seemed to make the distinction that Shügule is slightly different from the other three. This seems to confirm ALCAM's division of Mefele into two geographically separated dialects.

Bilingualism in Fulfulde and French is increasing, but primarily among the young who go to school. At this time bilingualism in French and Fulfulde do not appear to be widespread, and it is not foreseen that either of these two languages will be a threat to Mefele.

Though the Mefele expressed the desire to see their language written and have it taught in schools, the primary reason given for this desire was the preservation of their language. An increase in understanding was given as a secondary reason, but there seems to be no initiative on their part to develop their language. Though the

Shougoulé Catholic church is exclusively using Shügule in their services, there is some opposition against the use of these materials from the Mafa catechists in the MefeLe dialect area. Mafa is used almost exclusively in the Protestant churches, though there are some new members who have difficulty understanding well at first. The attitude toward learning Mafa seems to be good, however, and there also seem to be plenty of opportunities to learn it on a daily basis. In addition, Mafa appears to be widely known and increasing in use.

Considering these factors, it seems that the need of a MefeLe Bible translation is questionable. Therefore, we recommend that the Bible translation need be considered "unlikely" at this time. We also recommend, however, that this status be re-evaluated at a later time due to the conflicting data concerning the current extent and level of bilingualism in Mafa (cf. Section 3.2.1). In-depth bilingualism testing would be required to determine if Mafa bilingualism has progressed as predicted. If at that time a sufficient level of Mafa bilingualism is found to exist, MefeLe may be further classified as having "no need" in regard to Bible translation. If an insufficient level of bilingualism is found, then consideration will have to be given to upgrading the classification to "probable" translation need.

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ADDENDUM TO THE MEFELE SURVEY REPORT

Lawrence M. Seguin

At the Cameroon Language Assessment Committee (CAMLAC) meeting held in Yaoundé on October 15, 1992, it was decided to keep Mefele's translation need status unchanged as "possible" until more information has been collected on Mafa bilingualism.