

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC
AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

**A STUDY OF READER INTEREST
AMONG THE MAKAA PEOPLE OF EASTERN CAMEROON**

Mr. Matthew Heeley

2000

SIL
P.O. Box 1299, Yaoundé
Republic of Cameroon

1.0 Introduction

2.0 Method

3.0 Results

4.0 Interpretation of results

5.0 Conclusion

6.0 Appendices

1.0 Introduction

This paper outlines the results obtained, and conclusions reached, following the efforts of an SIL research team working amongst the Makaa people of the Eastern province to understand better what literature was most in demand. The Makaa language is spoken in the districts of Abong Mbang, Doumé and Nguélémendouka, in the Haut Nyong division of the Eastern Province. The study was conducted from May 1999 – July 1999, during the first few months of the team's arrival.

The research team was concerned particularly with the promotion of literacy in the Makaa language. It was felt that, if the team was going to successfully encourage the Makaa people to read their own language, and consequently to write it further, there needed to be a good base of interesting literature available. The research team was, of course, not in a position to decide what did and what did not interest the Makaa people. Thus, the team developed a strategy through which to find out what the Makaa themselves were interested in reading. The team then planned to tailor the materials that they published to the felt needs and interests of the population at large.

2.0 Method

A questionnaire was devised that would enable the research team to determine what genres of literature were in demand¹. Additional questions related to aspects such as the importance of colour, expense, and length of the literature. The survey was carried out during a series of initial team visits to nine Makaa villages.

The research team encouraged as many people as possible to participate, and looked for a good mix of age groups and of women and men. Rather than each individual answering the questionnaire alone, the village was encouraged to discuss the issues together, and then to make their conclusions as a village unit.

The research team also noted down other points of interest that fell outside the statistics presented below, but which were still considered to be of interest. Some of these points of interest will be presented later in this report.

To encourage ease in the survey process, the wide range of possibilities for literature production were divided into the following genres/categories: religious², cultural, pedagogical, health and hygiene, sport, agriculture and development, church materials³, novels, easy-reading⁴.

¹ See appendix 6.1

² The Makaa area is predominantly Christian – the term “religious” here, then, is understood to be Christian religious material. The religious category contains religious materials that are not specific to one denomination. The category thus includes Bible stories, Bible portions, and complete books of the Bible translated into Makaa.

³ The category “Church materials” includes literature that is directly linked to use in specific churches. This category includes, then, materials such as liturgical portions, and songbooks for various churches.

3.0 Results

The results here are presented in tabular form. Table 3.1 presents the percentage of villages that showed an interest in the proposed categories as a basis for future publications:

Category/Genre	% of villages that showed an interest
<i>Health and Hygiene</i>	55%
Religious	55%
Sport	44%
Agriculture and Development	33%
Cultural	33%
Pedagogical	22%
Easy-Reading	22%
Church materials	22%
Novels	11%

Table 3.1

The attitudes to the use of colour in future materials, and its effectiveness in making materials more attractive, are presented in table 3.2:

Responses of villages to use of colour	Percentage
Colour does not make materials more interesting	45%
Colour does make materials more interesting	55%
Prices of materials should not be raised to compensate for the inclusion of colour	77%

Table 3.2

Table 3.3 places the percentages of actual materials sold in the period May 1999 – May 2000, according to category, alongside the preferences shown by the villages questioned in table 3.1:

Category/Genre	% of villages that showed an interest	% of total materials sold from May 1999 – May 2000
<i>Health and Hygiene</i>	55%	2%
Religious	55%	12%
Sport	44%	7%
Agriculture and Development	33%	2%
Cultural	33%	10%
Pedagogical	22%	24%
Easy-Reading	22%	38%
Church materials	22%	5%
Novels	11%	N/A

Table 3.3

Table 3.4 takes the preferences shown by the villages questioned in table 3.1, and compares those preferences with the percentage distribution of materials sold in the years May 1998-1999 and May 1999-2000.

⁴ "Easy-reading" is a blanket term for inexpensive, short, and attractive materials that concentrate on popular themes. They were encouraged by the research team as a strategy to attract people to begin to read Makaa. The category includes posters, calendars, and comic form materials.

Category/Genre	% of villages that showed an interest	% of total materials sold from May 1998 – May 1999	% of total materials sold from May 1999 – May 2000
Health and Hygiene	55%	0.4%	2%
Religious	55%	17%	12%
Sport	44%	N/A	7%
Agriculture and Development	33%	0.6%	2%
Cultural	33%	5%	10%
Pedagogical	22%	41%	24%
Easy-Reading	22%	24%	38%
Church materials	22%	12%	5%
Novels	11%	N/A	N/A

Table 3.4

Table 3.5 takes the preferences shown in table 3.1, and compares them with the percentages of the total value of materials sold, by category, in the past two research years.

Category/Genre	% of villages that showed an interest	% of total value of materials sold from May 1998-May 1999	% of total value of materials sold from May 1999 – May 2000.
Health and Hygiene	55%	0.6%	1%
Religious	55%	13%	12%
Sport	44%	N/A	2%
Agriculture and Development	33%	0.4%	4%
Cultural	33%	3%	8%
Pedagogical	22%	38%	42%
Easy-Reading	22%	10%	22%
Church materials	22%	35%	9%
Novels	11%	N/A	N/A

Table 3.5

Table 3.6 places the quantity of materials sold during the year prior to the arrival of the research team (May 1998 – May 1999), alongside that of materials sold during the year of research from May 1999 – May 2000:

Category/Genre	Quantity of materials sold from May 1998 – May 1999	Quantity of materials sold from May 1999 –May 2000	% Increase in quantity sold
Health and Hygiene	2	75	3750%
Religious	77	286	371%
Sport	N/A	206	N/A
Agriculture and Development	3	45	1500%
Cultural	27	306	1133%
Pedagogical	209	746	357%
Easy-Reading	178	1152	647%
Church materials	76	168	221%
Novels	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 3.6

Table 3.7 places the value of materials sold in the year prior to the arrival of the research team alongside the value of the materials sold in during the year of research May 1999 – May 2000.

Category/Genre	Value of materials (cfa) sold from May 1998 – May 1999	Value of materials sold (cfa) from May 1999 – May 2000	% Increase in value of materials sold
Health and Hygiene	900	22,500	2500%
Religious	28,400	74,550	127%
Sport	N/A	10,300	N/A
Agriculture and Development	800	6,750	844%
Cultural	5200	50,000	962%
Pedagogical	83,200	261,300	314%
Easy-Reading	20,925	135,825	649%
Church materials	76,000	55,875	-27%
Novels	N/A	N/A	N/A

Table 3.7

3.6 Further observations

The following list covers observations, comments and suggestions that were made in response to the original questionnaire, and that could not be indicated in the statistics offered above:

1. That few Makaa people have literature, either in French or Makaa, in their homes.
2. That the question of colour in materials was very much subject to price. If the use of colour resulted in an increase in price of the material, then it was not worthwhile to use colour.
3. Books and other sorts of literature and materials were often considered too expensive.
4. Young people, in particular, were interested in materials that were linked to sport – notably football.
5. Many villages specifically cited the Bible as important literature to be made available in Makaa.
6. In villages where there was no electricity, reading was difficult because of the lack of good lighting in the evenings.
7. Books were often considered preferable to smaller, cheaper, and easier-to-read materials. Books were considered to be more valuable and more mature.

4.0 Interpretation of results

4.1 Analyses of the questionnaire results (Table 3.1)

The results of the questionnaire point to a marked interest in religious materials and health and hygiene materials in particular. These statistics reflect well, we believe, the content and discussions in most of the village meetings. Religious materials were often the first category to be mentioned. Health and hygiene issues were clearly prominent in the village setting – malaria and diarrhoea were often mentioned as good subjects for future materials.

There was eagerness among the younger people, men in particular, for materials that covered sport, at the national, international and local levels. Football was by the far the most popular sport – the suggestion of football magazines and journals was often greeted with warm agreement.

Less interest was shown towards cultural, agricultural and developmental materials than the research team would have expected. The team was especially looking for possible ideas for future development materials, and none were very forthcoming. There were more ideas for possible cultural titles, but these often came later on in the discussion after the more popular categories had been raised.

The lack of interest in easy-reading materials is, perhaps, the most striking of the results. The research team had easy-reading materials very much in mind when conducting the questionnaires. The team was hoping to use easy-reading materials as a way to encourage more people to start reading. The fact that many villages preferred real books to comics, or to short pamphlets, was a surprise.

That pedagogical materials came lower down the list was to be expected. While the need for teaching materials to learn to read and write was widely acknowledged, their inherent interest level was low. They are seen more as a simple necessity.

The responses to the suggestion of future church materials depended very much on the setting of the village meeting. If there were church members present, the interest was accordingly higher. In addition, many of the villages tended to be either predominantly Catholic, while others were predominantly Protestant. As a result, the suggestions for future materials often depended on the denomination of the participants. There has already been significant progress made in the translation of important church materials (Songbooks, the Confession of Faith, and The Lord's Prayer), thus diminishing the number of future possibilities.

The possibility of novels in Makaa was not widely suggested. This, on one hand, reflected the fact that many of the Makaa consider the extent of written Makaa to still be very limited. On the other hand, it reflected the participant's knowledge that there simply are not enough Makaa writers capable of producing the likes of novels. That novels came lowest on the list, is probably also a good indication of the reading habits of the Makaa – many of them are simply not interested in reading a long novel in Makaa.

4.2 Comparing the questionnaire results with the quantity and value of material sales in the past two years (Table 3.4 and 3.5)

One of the most striking observations that comes out of this comparison is the dominance of easy-reading material in the quantity of materials sold – especially in this year of research. Why is it that the response to the questionnaire was very negative, but the actual demand was very high? There are probably several aspects that contribute to this contradiction in the results. Firstly the easy-reading materials were always priced much lower than the larger books – often a Makaa person could afford 50cfa for a poster, but not 500cfa for a whole book. This fact is reflected in table 3.5 where easy-reading materials do not figure as highly as some other categories, due to their low sale value. Secondly, there is a certain prestige attached to literature – and a book carries much more prestige than a small pamphlet. In other words, if someone was trying to impress his fellows, he would want a book, not a pamphlet or poster. Perhaps this prestige problem was prevalent in the village meetings – a book would be ideal, but in reality the easy-reading material was more affordable, and often more attractive. Realistically, the fact that the easy-reading material is so much cheaper than the other categories, and thus so much more popular than the other categories, probably distorts our results slightly. The following table, table 4.3, covers the same topic as table 3.4, but with the figures adjusted to exclude easy-reading materials:

Category/Genre	% of villages that showed an interest	% of total materials sold from May 1998 – May 1999	% of total materials sold from May 1999 – May 2000
Health and Hygiene	55%	0.5%	4%
Religious	55%	22%	20%
Sport	44%	N/A	11%
Agriculture and Development	33%	0.5%	2%
Cultural	33%	7%	16%
Pedagogical	22%	53%	38%
Church materials	22%	16%	9%
Novels	11%	N/A	N/A

Table 4.3

Even when excluding easy-reading materials, it remains striking how low health and hygiene sales have been in both the years studied. According to the results of the questionnaire (Table 3.1), health and

hygiene was joint most- interesting category for future materials. Certainly, health issues dominated much of the discussions. Why is it that although there is, without doubt, a felt need for health material, material sales on the subject, both in terms of quantity and value, have been so low? It is perhaps, once again, a reflection of the Makaa attitudes to money, and how to spend it. Whilst it is widely recognised that health information is needed, it is not given sufficiently high priority for people to spend money on it. The poor sales of health and hygiene materials, given the high interest the population has indicated in it, is a remarkable example of how the Makaa know what they *need*, but they will only spend money on what they really *want*. In this light, planning for future literature production becomes much more complicated than simply trying to satisfy felt needs. Just because someone says they are interested in something, does not necessarily mean they will spend money on it.

Religious materials, for which the villages showed equal interest as for health and hygiene, proved to sell in a good number. There appears to be real motivation present to buy religious materials. This motivation is, of course, encouraged and provided to a great extent by the *large church* presence among the Makaa. Why are the Makaa people willing to spend money on this and not on other categories? Firstly, in a few parishes of the Catholic and Protestant churches, the church leadership has encouraged its members to read the Bible, to sing songs, and to say prayers in Makaa. The Makaa culture appears to be quite hierarchical in this respect – if the church leader authorises, or encourages something, it is quite possible that the church members will agree, or at least acquiesce. Secondly, and more obviously, there is the inherent interest that the Bible has for the Christian – this interest is greatly magnified when the Bible can be read in the person's first language. It appears that many of the people buying religious materials are genuinely interested, or at least curious to find out what the Bible looks like in their own language. The continued success of religious materials also gives the researcher a good clue as to how to plan his future literature production – to look for the structures that are present, and how he can work with them to advance literacy. In many Makaa villages, schools and churches are the two principle structures present.

The relative success of the cultural materials has been an encouragement to the research team. As noted in the introduction, for literacy to really take hold among the Makaa people, it was important to begin to start writing the oral culture down. In the responses to the questionnaire, equal interest was shown in cultural and agricultural materials. In terms of sales, the cultural materials have done significantly better. The prices of the books of the two categories are, in fact, very similar. So it cannot be the question of money that has brought about the success of one, and poor interest in the other. In particular, the Makaa have shown a great interest in proverbs, and traditional stories. Perhaps the low interest shown in the questionnaire responses was due in part to the belief that proverbs, traditional stories and the like, were really something to be told (i.e. part of the oral culture) rather than written down. When, however, people see their predominantly oral culture written down, in their own language - that creates an interest that was not previously present. The same cannot be said for agricultural and development materials – both years show a very low interest in terms of quantity and value of materials sold, and the questionnaire responses also revealed a relatively low level of interest. Where does that leave the researcher? Often the researcher will have clear development goals in mind; if the people show little interest however, there is little he can do. A prime example amongst the Makaa is a book on pesticides, and how to use them. It has sold very poorly. Why? Perhaps because the Makaa live by agriculture, and they are very good at it. The Makaa man might justifiably demand,

"Tell me something I don't know."

The dominance of pedagogical materials both in table 3.5 and table 3.6 should not come as a surprise to the reader. Literacy work among the Makaa is still relatively new, and people need to learn to read before they can do anything with all the categories of literature we have looked at. Before beginning a literacy class, the Makaa student is obliged to purchase the reading and writing manual. The past research year has witnessed a growth in literacy classes, and thus a growth in number of pedagogical materials sold. The pedagogical materials also tend to be among the more expensive materials available in Makaa. As the questionnaire responses indicate, there may not be a great interest in pedagogical material, but in a culture where the majority of people still cannot read and write Makaa, there will continue to be a growing need for it. This is a simple fact that the researcher cannot ignore, whilst working towards more "interesting" materials for readers.

4.4 Comparing the sales of materials of the two research years (Tables 3.6 and 3.7)

Tables 3.6 and 3.7 graphically illustrates a large increase in sales of materials in the year May 1999 – May 2000, compared with May 1998 – May 1999⁵. This is both a qualitative and quantitative increase. Why then, have sales of materials jumped so high in the space of one year? Firstly, the low sales of the first year should be highlighted – when figures are so low to begin with, even a relatively small rise in sales will bring about a large percentage increase in the quantity and value of materials sold. Secondly, the arrival of five new people to the research team that had previously been only two, certainly gave a boost to the literacy work. With their arrival new Makaa areas were introduced to literacy, more people learned to read and write, and thus more books were sold. The Makaa language committee has also proved to be more effective in the second year than it had been in the first.

Accepting the importance of these factors then, how much impact did the questionnaire research have? Did the research team learn a good deal from it, and did they manage to successively tailor material production as a result? The most striking answer is that the demand for materials did, in fact, seem to contradict the findings of the initial research in the villages. Easy-reading materials received a luke-warm reception during the questionnaire period, yet the research team decided to go ahead nonetheless. The results have been encouraging, with easy-reading materials involving many Makaa people in literacy whom would surely not otherwise have bought anything to read. Easy-reading materials dominate most of the results presented in this paper.

On the other hand, as a result of the initial research, we did make efforts to produce more religious materials. These materials have sold well – in particular when we have combined the religious with aspects of the easy-reading materials. Religious comics and posters form a good number of the materials sold in the past year. Sport has also been a successful element in the past year – once again, however, it was combined with the easy-reading element. The football magazines that have been produced have proved popular – although they are much smaller and much cheaper than the more orthodox books.

It is also true, perhaps, that the experience of the village visits with the questionnaire, and the totality of what we learned, cannot be fully expressed in a set of statistics. The question and answer sessions were set in the context of conversations and relationship building. The experience of meeting with people in the villages, and involving them in the future of Makaa literature did, in the opinion of the researchers, contribute greatly to what was decided, and to the eventual increase in material sales. If the statistics are sometimes contradictory, the participation, involvement and co-operation of the Makaa was concrete. It is this partnership that has made the research year May 1999 – May 2000 such a fruitful time.

5.0 Conclusion

The first, and perhaps the most significant, conclusion of this paper is the importance of the involvement of the Makaa people in this process. It seems somewhat obvious, but to really gain a good understanding of reader interest among the Makaa, the Makaa themselves had firstly to be consulted, and secondly, involved in the decision making. The question however begs itself,

"How you do involve 80,000 people in the decision making process?" In this light, our approach of using a questionnaire seems to be both sensible and practical. It could be argued that by organising our results according to village response, and by not concentrating on specific elements of the society, we were painting a picture with a brush that was slightly too thick. Why not do one questionnaire for women, one for men, one for young one for old? Simply because Makaa culture does not easily slip into these neat divisions – the culture is not fragmented, rather it is tightly knit. Having open debate, across a cross-section of the village, led to worthwhile results, and certainly a good understanding of how the village works. In short, this approach gave us cultural pointers we might not otherwise have had.

Secondly, this paper warns quite impressively that, what people answer to a questionnaire is not necessarily what they will do after the questioners are gone. The interest reflected in the initial responses

⁵ The only exception to this trend is the category of Church materials in table 3.7, where impressive Presbyterian songbook sales in the first year compared with the lower sales of the following year, explain the negative growth percentage. The songbooks are priced at 1000 cfa, by far the most expensive of all the materials available in Makaa.

is, we feel, still valid. It is important to remember, however, that *we* went to *them*, they did not come to us. The responses offered were given in good faith and were a good reflection of what the villages really wanted. Yet this discussion took place in an ideal world. The responses did not so much tell us that if we published a certain book the villagers would go out and buy it; rather they told us that if the villagers were to buy a book, or were the villagers to have enough money to buy a book, this is the book they would choose. It did not necessarily follow that if we published a set of materials on their advice, they would immediately go out and buy them.

Thirdly, even though we have seen an encouraging increase in materials sold, the Makaa appear to still be far from being literate in their own language. The researcher should be reminded that we can devise the most interesting materials in the world, but if the people concerned do not feel any urge to read regularly, if reading is still not a natural activity, if other things still take priority, then the materials you produce may well not be read.

We are then left with a difficult question – do we publish more and more to try and create reader interest, or do we wait until the reader interest is there before we publish? As far as our research with the Makaa has developed, there does seem to be an underlying interest in the villages. Yet is it not enough to bring about the wide-scale purchasing of Makaa literature that we would like to see. What we really need to try and do is raise reading Makaa up a few notches in their list of priorities. To this end, producing easy-reading materials seem to be a good strategy. When the readers are not ready to spend significant money on literature, when they are not yet in the position to read lengthy, complicated materials, it is useless trying to force these things upon them. By applying the principles of involvement and co-operation, the researcher is in a better position to understand and provide for reader interest – even, and especially, when the reader does not immediately say what the researcher wants to hear.

6.0 Appendices

6.1 Questionnaire

VILLAGE VISIT SHEET

Name of village -

Date of visit -

SALT members -

Attendance -

Suggested intro: " Nous sommes une equipe de cinq personnes et nous sommes ici pour aider dans l'oeuvre d'alphabetisation en langue Mekaa. Nous travaillons avec M. Dan Heath et M. Nelis Van Den Berg. Nous aimerons vraiment vous aider at vous encourager dans votre travail en langue Mekaa.

Les Recherches au sujet des livres - est-ce que beaucoup de lecteurs de Mekaa en un ou plusieurs livres en Mekaa dans la maison? Lesquels par exemple?

- quelles sortes de lectures est-ce qui interresseraient les gens? Par exemple: contes populaires, proverbes, les romans, histoires bibbliques, l'information sur l'hygiene, sur l'agriculture, les nouvelles sur le sport, du village etc.
- est-ce que les gens plus attirés par les illustrations en couleur?
- est-ce que les livres sont trop chers?

Discutez la compétition d'écrivains:

Les remarques générales:

Est – il nécessaire de rendre une autre visite? Dans combien de temps?