

Language Documentation of Nalu in Guinea, West Africa

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For the past two years, from October 2010 to September 2012, I have worked as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the Center for African Studies. The goal of this fellowship was to document Nalu, an endangered Atlantic language of Guinea, West Africa and create a multipurpose digital archive of natural language events combined with cultural audio-visual material.

During the fellowship I travelled to Guinea two times for field research of five and four months respectively and approached the linguistic documentation of Nalu in 'documentary linguistics' fashion. This was combined with an immersive approach in which I lived as a guest with families in the principal research area during data collection. Different from language description, which aims at documenting the grammatical structure of a language, the goal in documentary linguistics (sometimes also called language documentation) is to create a record of natural language in the form of an extensively annotated audio-visual corpus of transcribed, translated, annotated and contextualized audio and audio-visual data that contains recordings of various language events from descriptive monologues over free ranging conversations to cultural activities. Since Nalu is a little known and under-described language, the resulting digital language archive also contains items known from 'traditional' language documentation, such as a dictionary, a grammatical sketch, and an orthography.

The archive will be accompanied by an extensive web of cross-references between transcribed recordings, supportive linguistic analysis, and commentary all of which is targeted at making the corpus accessible and usable for a variety of users, be it academics -- such as cultural anthropologist, linguists, historians -- or non-academics such as community members, interested laypeople, or policy makers. The material will be submitted to the Endangered Languages Archives (ELAR) at SOAS by the end of January 2014.

I invite anybody who is interested to register as a user with ELAR and access the archive once it is uploaded. It contains a set of interesting data that I believe to be useful for a variety of disciplines. Amongst other things it features interviews in which the 'Jihad' by Asekou Sayon in 1956 aimed at



destroying animistic shrines and ritual objects is remembered and commented upon, clan histories recorded by the local research team, a dictionary with over 2000 entries, picture series on economic activities (e.g. palm oil production, fishing) as well as cultural topics (e.g. architecture) etc. In addition, it contains four short ethnographic documentaries on different economic activities and cultural contact narrated by Nalu speakers as well as one full length film on the death ritual of the 'Mnyaando' secret society which were produced in collaboration with visual anthropologist Martin Gruber from the University of Bremen, Germany.

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