

## The Nyagbo Documentation Project

### JAMES ESSEGBEY

For the past three years I have been working on a multimedia ethnographic documentation of Nyagbo, one of fourteen languages classified as Togo Remnant, Central Togo, or Ghana-Togo Mountain (GTM) languages. Nyagbo has been without a detailed description, which is unfortunate because its lexicon and structure are being eroded by Ewe, the dominant regional language. My documentation project, which is funded by the NSF, involves collecting audio-visual recordings of different communicative events, most importantly the ones that depict the culture of the Nyagbo.

The recordings include funeral practices, durbar of chiefs, child-naming ceremonies and story telling. As evidence of cultural erosion, child-naming ceremonies among the Nyagbo has become a completely Christian affair where, instead of family and friends gathering at dawn to perform traditional rites on the seventh day after the birth of a child, they are rather led in prayers and worship by a catechist in Ewe.

I also recorded Nyagbo economic activities such as rice and maize cultivation, palm wine tapping, preparation of palm oil and gari (a type of flour). The recordings have been transcribed and annotated and sent for archiving to the DOBES program for the documentation of endangered languages at the Max-Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics, where they can be accessed from all over the world. Part of the texts was used to create a primer for the speakers to learn to read and write the language. This primer was presented to the chiefs and people at a durbar organized at Odumasi, one of the townships. Copies of the cultural events have been put on VCDs for presentation to the community.

Another aspect of the documentation project involves writing a reference grammar of the language as well as producing a tri-lingual dictionary. Nyagbo has an intricate tonal system and resolving that in the field hasn't been easy. Fortunately for me I was able this summer, with the help of a Humanities Scholars Enhancement grant, to invite Madam Judith Glover, my principal language assistant to Gainesville.



With the help of Dr. Ratee Wayland (Linguistics), we have worked to resolve this problem using PRATT, a program for phonetic analysis. Also assisting in the work was Dr. Felix Ameka, an expert on GTM languages from Leiden University, the Netherlands, who also joined me over the summer, with the support of the NSF grant, to work on the typological profile of the GTM languages. Lee Ballard, a graduate student from Linguistics who is interested in the investigation of tones took part in some of the sessions. The synergism produced by us meeting together at this place has been tremendous.

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