

DOCUMENTING AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE: ANIMERE

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During summer 2017, I traveled with four undergraduate students to Nkwanta in the northern part of the Volta Region of Ghana to do document Animere. The trip was funded by a Research Tutorial Abroad (RTA) grant from the Center for African Studies. Animere is one of 15 languages located in the hills of the Ghana-Togo border, from which they got the name Ghana-Togo Mountain (GTM) languages. It is the most endangered of the GTM languages with less than 30 speakers all of whom are over 50 years old, and is no longer being transmitted to children. All Animere speakers also speak Adele, another GTM language, and Akan, the regional dominant language. Many speak several other languages in the region. The Animere situation is particularly interesting in that rather than shift to the dominant regional language, as happens in most language endangerment situations in Africa, they are shifting to Adele. During our time in Nkwanta, the students worked with 2 native speakers of Animere (Papa Peter and Mathias) and a language consultant (Ernest Nniakyire) to segment, transcribe and translate parts of conversations and storytelling sessions which were recorded in 2013 by Bryan Gelles, a UF graduate student.

Following that, we traveled to Kecheibe, the hometown of the Animere people to record them performing their traditional songs and dances. This was very important because the language situation became known to us when the elders of the community approached Andrew Ring, who was then working on bible translation in the area, and told him that their language was disappearing; their children did not speak it and they, the old people who could speak it, were dying. They wanted help to revitalize the language. According to Andrew Ring, the elders lamented that “they did not have anyone to sing their songs.” The trip provided an opportunity for the students to conduct research and experience the daily living conditions and social life in a contemporary African society. They are currently working on an Animere reader, which contains illustrated folk tales and transcripts of the songs which we recorded in Kecheibe. The reader will be presented to the community with copies of their songs and dances.

The trip with the students was followed by a Summer School in Language Documentation and Data Management in Winneba, which is in the southwestern part of Ghana, between Accra and Cape Coast. I organized the school with my

colleague Fiona McLaughlin, and Felix Ameka at Leiden University, with funding from the NSF Documenting Endangered Languages program. With support of faculty from the United States, Europe, and Africa, we brought together graduate students and junior faculty in West Africa and their counterparts in the United States to share the knowledge and skills associated with current methods and practices of language documentation. Participants worked with 5 native speakers of Animere to produce a basic documentation of the language. My eventual plan is to undertake a major effort to document Animere before it disappears.

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