

# DOCUMENTATION OF BAGA MANDORI: AN ENDANGERED LANGUAGE OF GUINEA

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As a visiting research fellow at the Center for African Studies I am working on the documentation of Baga Mandori, an under-documented Atlantic language spoken in the coastal region of Guinea, West Africa. With this work I continue my efforts to document and preserve languages of the Guinean littoral that I have started with the documentation of Nalu, whose speakers live in the immediate vicinity of Baga Mandori speakers. The purpose of the project is to create a digital archive on Baga Mandori containing annotated audio-visual material, a grammatical sketch, and a trilingual, Baga-English-French dictionary. The project is funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Baga Mandori belongs to the Atlantic (Niger-Congo phylum) group of languages, or the langues *sénégalo-guinéennes* as they are sometimes referred to in French sources. It represents the northernmost variant of a cluster of languages (or dialects) generally called Baga which are (from north to south: Baga Mandori, Baga Sitemu, Baga Sobané, Baga Kakissa (also Baga Marara), Baga Koba, and Baga Kaloum, all of which are or were spoken (some of these varieties are already extinct) in the Republic of Guinea. This group of languages is, together with Landuma, related to the Temne language of Sierra Leone and are part of the Mel cluster of languages.

Speakers of Baga Mandori live in a

heterogeneous ethnic and linguistic environment. The language is predominately spoken in the area around the mouth of the river Kogon, namely the districts of Dobaly and Kalagba located within the prefecture of Boké. Neighbouring languages include, among others, Landuma, Balanta, Nalu, Peul (Fula) and other Baga varieties. Overshadowing this situation is Soso, the dominant lingua franca of the Guinea littoral, with speakers also in Guinea-Bissau and Sierra Leone and to which Baga Mandori speakers are starting to shift. The community speaking Baga Mandori is said to number approximately 4000 speakers although I suspect the number to be much lower.

Baga culture, religion, and languages have been under considerable pressure from the outside for a long time and exist in an environment where being Baga is/was often viewed as pagan and backward by outsiders. This includes the political and religious dominance emanating from the Fouta Djallon, the expansion of Mande languages (notably Soso) and cultures, and the “paranationalist” politics after independence. In response to this every Baga society has already undergone critical changes to their culture. One illustrative example of this is the iconoclastic ‘Jihad’ by Asekou Sayon (Yaasekou Sayong) which happened shortly prior to independence and succeeded in destroying a considerable amount of Baga (and other coastal groups’) ritual objects and sacred sites. The adverse attitude towards being Baga,

combined with the rise of Soso since independence as a language of the political center Conakry, has led to a general situation where Soso presents a prestigious alternative means of communication for Baga speakers. This contributes considerably to the language shift from Baga to Soso. A point that severely aggravates this situation is the inexistent administrative support for Baga Mandori. Baga Mandori (or any Baga language) is not considered a national language and thus it is, to my knowledge, neither part of any government or NGO initiative for alphabetisation, nor is it part of any school curricula, nor is it used in the media. This state of affairs has already led to the disappearance of Baga languages, such as Baga Kaloum, and to the endangerment of any Baga varieties still spoken, some of which are reported to only feature a few remaining speakers (Baga Koba, Baga Sobané).

In a 1996 New York Times article, Holland Cotter remarked that despite the international prominence the Baga cultures had gained due to the popularity of the Nimba (D’mba) mask that still iconically represents African art, the people, language, and culture behind the art still remain little known. Seventeen years later Cotter’s comments are still valid and this project hopes to make a dent into the lack of Baga linguistic documentation.

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