

AN OVERVIEW OF THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION OF KUPSAPINY, A SOUTHERN NILOTIC LANGUAGE OF UGANDA

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ABSTRACT This study reports on the sociolinguistic situation of Kupsapiny, the Southern Nilotic language spoken by the Sebei people in the Sebei region of Uganda. Even though the Sebei are highly conservative in various respects, Kupsapiny has been losing its vitality. Primarily because the history of the people has been adverse to the maintenance of their language, it has undergone considerable change under the influence of English, Swahili, and Lugisu (Bantu). In order to revitalize Kupsapiny, its use in schools, which is currently limited to grade one through grade four in public schools, should be extended through primary education at least. Prior to this, however, the language needs to develop a written system.

Key Words: Kupsapiny (Sebei, Sapiny); Southern Nilotic; Uganda; Language revitalization; Community profile.

INTRODUCTION

The objectives of this study are (i) to write a community profile of the Sebei region of Uganda, where Kupsapiny (Southern Nilotic) is spoken, (ii) to report on the diminishing vitality of this language, and (iii) to point out possible ways to revitalize this language.⁽¹⁾ This study is based primarily on interviews I conducted with native speakers of the language during my fieldwork in Kapchorwa from July 11 through August 1, 2009 and from July 30 through August 27, 2010.

PREVIOUS STUDIES

Kupsapiny belongs to the Elgon group in the Kalenjin branch of the Southern Nilotic language family. Only a few studies have been conducted on this language (Montgomery, 1966; O'Brien & Cuyers, 1975; Kawachi, 2010).⁽²⁾ Although there are some studies on other Kalenjin languages (e.g. Creider, 1982; Creider & Creider, 1990), southern Nilotic languages generally have been little studied in the past.

Wölck (1976) provides a framework for the description of socio-cultural information on a speech community. He proposes information on the aspects of a speech community shown in (1) as possible social structural factors that might be relevant to language use and important to a sociolinguistic study of it.

(1) a. Demographic information: number of people, households, nuclear families,

distribution by sex and age, number of migrants, patterns of migration—temporary, permanent, or circular.

- b. Occupational distribution: a list of shops, businesses, institutions, and services, the names of the individuals or families who own or administer them.
- c. Political structures: types of parties and their policies, local government, councils, unions, representatives and officials names, meeting frequencies, debated issues, and decision effects.
- d. Education: the number and types of schools, who goes to which school, who the teachers, principals, supervisors and board members are, where they live, where they are from, and what the degree of literacy is.
- e. Religion: who holds what office, what church activities exist, what the fraternal organizations are, and who their members are.
- f. Voluntary associations: community organizations, voluntary associations, status groups, elites, and gangs.
- g. Residential composition of the community: division into and the relative prestige of residential zones or neighborhoods, urban or rural, suburban, ghetto and slum areas, and patterns of land use and ownership in rural districts.
- h. Communication means and media: radio and television stations, their programming and reception, newspapers, their affiliation, and content and circulation.

The present study presents as much information on these aspects of the Kupsapiny-speaking community as it can, though it lacks data on some of the individual items in (1a)–(1h).

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE SEBEI PEOPLE AND KUPSAPINY

This section provides information on the geography and climate in the Sebei region and on languages in and around this region, and gives a short profile of the Kupsapiny-speaking community in (1a)–(1h), following Wölck (1976).

I. Geography and Climate

The Sebei region, which is about 300 kilometers east of Kampala (about 360 kilometers by car), covers an area of approximately 1,750 square kilometers on the northern slopes of Mt. Elgon, an extinct volcano. The Uganda-Kenya border crosses Mt. Elgon northeast to southwest, separating its northwestern side in Uganda and its southeastern side in Kenya. Mt. Elgon National Park lies in the southern part of the Sebei region, covering almost 40% of the total area of the region, and is uninhabitable (though a few hunting tribes illegally live there).

The Sebei region is an unofficial label for the Kupsapiny-speaking region. It was one administrative unit called the Kapchorwa District before 2005, when it divided into the two administrative districts of Bukwa and Kapchorwa. The former district occupies the eastern portion of the Sebei region, and the latter district covers the rest of the region. The Kapchorwa District consists of two administrative

counties, Kween County on the eastern side of Kapchorwa District (the central part of the Sebei region), and Tingey County on the western side of Kapchorwa District, which includes the capital town of the Sebei region, Kapchorwa. The Bukwa District consists only of the administrative county of Kongasis. Most people live in places 1,800–2,200 meters above sea level. As is common throughout Uganda, there are two seasons in the Sebei region, a rainy season (March–September) and a dry season (October–April). The temperature fluctuates between the low teens and mid-twenties Celsius, and the annual rainfall is 1,000–1,500 millimeters.

II. Languages in and around the Sebei Region

The Sebei region is the only community where Kupsapiny is spoken. Almost all the people in this region speak this language. Many Sebei consider Sabaot, which is spoken by about 280,000 people on the Kenyan side of Mt. Elgon, to be another intelligible dialect of their language.

Thirty percent of the Sebei people are monolingual in Kupsapiny. Most of the remaining population speaks English as their second language. Many of them also speak Lugisu (also called Lumasaaba), a Bantu language spoken by the Bagisu people (also called Bamasaaba) in the Sironko and Mbale Districts to the southwest of the Kapchorwa District, as well as Swahili. Additionally, some of them speak Luganda (the language of the Baganda people), the most widely spoken Bantu language in Uganda. Many Sebei begin to learn these languages before primary education. They continue developing their English skills through formal education. They pick up Lugisu, Swahili, and Luganda, not through education, but through contact with speakers of these languages, especially those who come into the Sebei region on business. Churches also teach Luganda and English.

There are three dialects of Kupsapiny: Kween, Mbai, and Kongasis. Considered the standard variety, the Kween dialect is spoken widely in the north central Sebei region. The Mbai dialect, which is spoken in the western-most Sebei region (the west edge of the Kapchorwa District), has been strongly influenced by Lugisu (Bantu), which is spoken to the southwest of the Kapchorwa District. The Kongasis dialect, spoken in the eastern Sebei region (Bukwa District), has been greatly influenced by Swahili, which is widely spoken across the border on the Kenyan side.

The Sebei region is surrounded by communities of other languages. To the north of the Sebei region lies the Nakapiripirit District, where Karamojong (Ngakaramojong), an Eastern Nilotic language, is spoken. To the west of the Sebei region, farther beyond the Sironko District (one of the Lugisu-speaking regions that is adjacent to the Sebei region), is the Kumi District, where another Eastern Nilotic language, Teso (Ateso), is spoken. On the other side of the south-eastern border of Uganda and Kenya lies a district where Sabaot, mentioned above, is spoken. On the other side of the northeastern border, there is a district where another Kalenjin language, Pökoot, is spoken.

III. Community Profile of the Sebei Region

This subsection is a brief profile of the Sebei-speaking community that shows the conservativeness of the Sebei.

1. Demographic information

According to the national census in 2002 (Uganda Bureau of Statistics), the population of the Sebei people rose from 120,000 in 1994 to 181,000 (a little over 130,000 in Kapchorwa District and a little below 50,000 in Bukwa District). The number of immigrants to the Sebei region is fewer than 2% of the population. The Sebei, especially Sebei men, rarely marry people in other ethnic groups, but in recent years, educated women, who go out of the region for their university education, have started to marry men in other ethnic groups.

Some families are polygamous. The average number of children per family is about eight, and that per married woman is about six.

2. Occupational distribution

Over 90% of the Sebei people are farmers, who produce crops such as bananas, beans, peas, maize, Irish potatoes, wheat, and Arabica coffee. The rest engage in public service or business. Those who carry on small businesses may also farm on the side. Previously pastoralists, they shifted to agriculture in the nineteenth century (Goldschmidt, 1976).

3. Political structures

There are four major national political parties in Uganda: the National Resistance Movement (NRM), the Forum for Democratic Change (FDC), the Democratic Party (DP), and the Uganda People's Congress (UPC). The dominant party is the NRM, and over 95% of the Sebei voted for it in the general election in 2006.

In Uganda, the local politics have layers with different levels. There is a local council (LC) per the organization of each level: LC1 (village level), LC2 (parish level), LC3 (sub-county level), LC4 (county level), and LC5 (district level). From each county (LC4), one (female or male) member of the parliament is elected, and from each district (LC5), one female member of the parliament is elected. When a lower council cannot decide on an issue, they pass it on to the next higher level. The government generally respects the decisions made by LC1 and LC2 (for example, every case has to go through LC1), and LC1 and LC2's decisions are highly effective.

4. Education

The schools in the Sebei region are kindergartens, primary schools (from 6 or 7 years-old to 12 or 13 years-old students in grades 1–7), secondary schools (grades 1–6, with grades 1–4 being lower levels and grades 5–6 being upper levels), a teachers' training school, a technical school, and a technical institution. Primary education is compulsory.

There are nearly 100 kindergartens in the Sebei region (about 80 in Kapchorwa District and about 20 in Bukwa District). They are all private schools, many of

which are attached to private, primary schools. There are about 230 primary schools in the Sebei region (about 200 in Kapchorwa District and about 30 in Bukwa District), with approximately two-thirds of them public and the rest private. There are 27 secondary schools with only lower levels (twenty in Kapchorwa District and seven in Bukwa District), and nine of them (7 in Kapchorwa District and two in Bukwa District) offer upper-level in addition to lower level secondary education.

The language of instruction had long been strictly English at all levels of education until the government changed its policy in 2007, so that now the use of the local language is encouraged at the lower grades (grades 1–3) in public primary schools. Since this change, the public primary schools in the Sebei region have started to use Kupsapiny as the language of instruction for classes from grade 1 to 4, with English starting in grade 4. Nevertheless, the private schools use (and teach in) only English and not Kupsapiny. In addition, even though public primary schools use Kupsapiny at the lower grades, the teaching materials used are all written in English because no writing system has been developed for Kupsapiny.

Owing to education in English, nearly 60% of the Sebei adults are literate in English, and some are also literate in Luganda. However, no one writes Kupsapiny as it is an unwritten language. (None of them writes Lugisu or Swahili, either.)

5. Religion

About 90% percent of the Sebei people are Christians (50–60% Protestants, 40–50% Catholics, a small number of believers in other sects), and less than 10% of them are Moslems. The Sebei are generally devout religious believers, but there are those who think that since the 1990s, their religions have become materialistic, and have taken too much interest in fund-raising.

Before new religions came into the region, the people traditionally believed the spirits of people reincarnated, as articulated and propagated by prophets. They believed the Sebei originated in Israel and moved through Ethiopia to their current area. They also practiced medicine and dealt with urgent matters in the community. At the end of the nineteenth century, they protested against Christianity, leading to their arrest by colonialists, who considered them demoniac.

The Sebei did not resist but welcomed the new religion. The Sebei benefited from the schools (especially, primary schools), hospitals, and churches built for them by missionaries. The Sebei accepted these institutions, even though the language used was Luganda, a Bantu language widely spoken in Uganda, and the Sebei region came under the administration of the Bugisu people. This situation continued until the independence of the Sebei region from the Bugisu administration in 1962.

6. Voluntary associations

There are civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations, and the latter are usually under the former. These organizations deal with issues such as peace, cattle ownership, health, education, hunger, and the rights of the people in minority communities (especially, those living in Mt. Elgon National Park).

7. Residential composition of the community

The Sebei society is based on a patrilineal clan structure. When a couple gets married, the woman leaves her family and clan to become a member of her husband's family and clan. Traditionally, a man refers to his brother's wife as *our* wife, and when a man dies, his wife chooses one of his brothers as her husband so that her sons will be able to inherit the property. Lately, however, this custom is gradually diminishing.

A recent increase in population in the town of Kapchorwa has made it difficult for inheritors in some families to acquire enough land because their father's land is already too small to divide.

8. Communication means and media

Cell phones are widespread, but it is relatively expensive to make a call. It is much less expensive to send a text message with a cell phone. Unlike phone conversations, in which two Kupsapiny speakers converse in Kupsapiny, this mode of communication is normally carried out in English even between Kupsapiny speakers because of the lack of a writing system for Kupsapiny. The Christian funded radio stations 94.1 FM (Kapchorwa Trinity Radio) and 101.0 FM (Imani) in the Sebei region, which play Christian music, use mainly Kupsapiny and English, and some Swahili. Another FM station in the Sebei region, 95.4 FM (Elgon FM), started by a private company in August 2010, which plays various kinds of music, also uses the three languages similarly to the other two FM stations. There are also Kupsapiny programs in the FM station in the Soroti region, Voice of Teso, and the nationwide AM station, Radio Uganda. The Sebei have neither local TV programs nor local newspapers, though a private publishing company publishes a biweekly local newsletter in English.

CURRENT SITUATION OF KUPSAPINY

The last section has shown that although the Sebei have adjusted themselves to new environments, they are conservative in various respects. Despite this, Kupsapiny is currently in the danger of losing its vitality.

There are Kupsapiny speakers in older generations who regretfully complain that Kupsapiny has been corrupted to the extent that no young people can speak it properly. I myself noticed that in the process of selecting consultants, there are Sebei in their twenties and thirties who have been influenced by English to the extent that I thought they were not appropriate as consultants of Kupsapiny. They show characteristics such as the following. First, some people do not have sufficient basic vocabulary, and cannot readily provide Kupsapiny words expressing fundamental concepts. Some speakers produce certain foreign words in their daily conversation in Kupsapiny, but fail to recognize the fact that they are not Kupsapiny words. Though Kupsapiny has a system of numerals by which one can count up to at least 999, many Sebei do not use the Kupsapiny numerals for six and above, but instead use Bantu words. Second, some speakers cannot provide the correct inflectional paradigm for the different past tenses of verbs. Third, in Kupsapiny,

which uses VSO word order, the non-verbal predicate precedes the subject, as in (2a)–(4a), and this order is considered to be authentic, but some speakers prefer to use the construction where the subject is followed by the copula, and then by the predicative adjective phrase or noun phrase, as in (2b)–(4b). This construction is considered to have been newly adopted under the influence of English. According to some of my consultants, Kupsapiny speakers who also speak English may use the copula construction in addition to the predicate-subject construction, but non-English speakers usually use only the predicate-subject construction, and not the copula construction.

- (2) a. wóó kō-ín.
big house-that
- b. kō-ín le wóó.
house-that COP big
'That house is big.'
- (3) a. ɲeɲí mēēsāā-ní.
3SG.GEN table-this
- b. mēēsāā-ní le ɲeɲí.
table-this COP 3SG.GEN
'This table is hers/his.'
- (4) a. pāpā-mwāāní kípróp.
father-1SG.POSS Kiprop
- b. kípróp le pāpā-mwāāní.
Kiprop COP father-1SG.POSS
'Kiprop is my father.'

Similarly, for transitive clauses, those Kupsapiny speakers who also speak English seem to use the SVO word order, which is normally limited to some discourse contexts, more often in other contexts as well compared to non-English speakers.

In the speech of most Kupsapiny speakers, words and phrases in English, Lugisu, and Swahili, especially those in English, appear here and there. A clause in English can even occur in the middle of a Kupsapiny talk. Whenever there is difficulty expressing an event in Kupsapiny, speakers often switch the language to English. How often this happens appears to depend largely on the type of topic in the conversation.

There are different factors that have caused Kupsapiny to reduce its vitality. First, the Sebei generally might not have much sense of urgency to maintain and preserve their language and culture, and no organization seeks to protect them. Second, the Sebei people's history has been adverse to Kupsapiny, instead providing the Sebei many opportunities to use other languages. The second point is more thoroughly discussed in the next section.

SEBEI PEOPLE'S HISTORY RELATED TO THEIR USE OF KUPSAPINY

Before the early nineteenth century, the Sebei controlled the entire area of Mt. Elgon as their own. However, since the early nineteenth century, they have had many conflicts with ethnic groups around them such as the Bugisu, Masai, Karamojong, Nandi, and Pökoot peoples, who all raided them a number of times (Goldschmidt, 1976). During some of the conflicts, they were pushed into the current Sebei region. The Sebei also suffered from cattle rustling from other ethnic groups like the Karamojong and the Pökoot in the mid-twentieth century. None of these incidents seems to have directly affected their language use. However, there are two important events in the history of the Sebei that have significantly influenced their language uses: the spread of Christianity in the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century, and the Ugandan government's implementation of language policies.

In 1877, the first missionaries to Uganda arrived in the Baganda region, that is, the Luganda-speaking region, which includes Kampala. They propagated Christianity through Luganda, the Bantu language spoken not only by the people there but also by the largest population in the country. They built churches, schools, and hospitals for the Baganda people. They also came to the Sebei region to do the same. However, they did not stay long, but had the Baganda manage the institutions. As a result, the language used in those places was Luganda, not Kupsapiny. Later, the Sebei region (currently, the Kapchorwa and Bukwa Districts) came under the administration of the Bugisu in Bugisu District (the present Mbale and Sironko Districts), and became part of their district. The language used at school continued to be Luganda even during the British colonization (1898–1962). This situation continued until 1962, when the Sebei region became an independent district as the Kapchorwa District.

Immediately, after Uganda's independence in 1962, the Ugandan government launched a language policy wherein English became the established language of instruction, and using the local language was rigidly prohibited in school throughout the country. In the Sebei region as well, students had to use English at school; they were punished if they used Kupsapiny. This continued until 2007, when the government changed its policy, and as mentioned earlier, started to encourage the use of a local language at lower primary levels.

Although Kupsapiny is used as part of primary education, according to some of my consultants, the Sebei have developed a long-lasting inferiority complex about their language. The perception persists that their language is inferior to other languages, especially Lugisu, and this motivates them to use foreign languages.

In fact, according to some of my consultants, the Sebei also seem to have a sense of isolation not only from neighboring ethnic groups but also from the whole country. In Uganda, where closely related languages are clustered in groups, most ethnic groups, whether they may be Nilotic or Bantu, understand the language or languages of the same family spoken around them. The Sebei, on the other hand, do not have an ethnic group around them whose language is genealogically related to Kupsapiny and is intelligible to Kupsapiny speakers, and consider themselves to belong to a separate ethnicity from the others, though they share

the same ethnicity with Sabaot speakers in Kenya. This sense has been promoted by recurrent conflicts with and harassment from neighboring ethnic groups. Their use of English may be helping them acquire a sense of belonging to English-speaking people.

According to Brenzinger et al. (1991) and Brenzinger (2001), endangered languages in Africa have characteristically diminished their vitality due to the preference of their speakers to use the dominant African language of the country instead of a European language. This is unlike speakers in other places throughout the world, where either the dominant language of the country or a European language has prevailed over an endangered language. Although Kupsapiny is only moderately and not seriously endangered, it does not follow this African pattern. Even though some Sebei speak one or more of the Bantu languages, Lugisu, Luganda, and Swahili, it is the Sebei people's use of English rather than that of any other language that has most lowered the vitality of Kupsapiny. Most young Sebei cannot speak Kupsapiny properly to the extent that they cannot do without English even while speaking Kupsapiny.

TOWARD THE REVITALIZATION OF KUPSAPINY

Actions should be taken to revitalize Kupsapiny well before it completely loses its vitality. The use of Kupsapiny should be extended through primary education. The highest priority before doing this must be to develop a writing system for this language. Teaching materials have to be produced in Kupsapiny so that teaching can be done purely in Kupsapiny. Moreover, with an established writing system, their traditional stories could be recorded and handed down to posterity. Furthermore, the development of a writing system would motivate the Sebei to use their language in a wider range of contexts than they do now. The local government could also develop the people's awareness of the maintenance and preservation of their language and culture.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS I would like to express my deepest thanks to my Kupsapiny native speaker consultants, Twoyem Kenneth Chemonges, Chemitay Joyce, Cheebet Francis, Chebet Joel Michael, Kapcerono Satya David, Kitikoy Chemonges, and Chebrot Amos Chemonges. I also wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for providing insightful comments on an earlier manuscript. I am also very grateful to Patricia Yarrow for her editorial comments. No one but me should be faulted for any errors or inaccuracies in this paper. The present study was made possible by Grant-in-Aid for Scientific-Research Program (B), sponsored by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (principal investigator: Professor Osamu Hieda, Kaken Research Project No. 21320074). I presented earlier versions of the present paper at the 139th meeting of the Linguistic Society of Japan at Kobe University on November 29, 2009 and at the Faculty of Economics Workshop at Shiga University on December 4, 2009.

NOTES

- (1) The Sebei people are also called the Sepei, Sabiny, or Sapiny people. Because [b] is an allophone of /p/ in Kupsapiny, and the Sebei people usually spell the name of their language in English as ‘Kupsapiny’ rather than ‘Kupsabiny’, the present study also uses this spelling with ‘p’. Although the Sebei people also prefer to use ‘p’ to ‘b’ to spell the name of their region and their own name as a people, ‘Sebei’ and ‘Sabiny’ are much more widely used as English spellings than ‘Sepei’ and ‘Sapiny’; hence, the present study uses the spellings with ‘b’.
- (2) There are a number of anthropological studies on the Sebei people that have been conducted by Goldschmidt (e.g. 1967; 1969; 1976; 1986) and Shiraishi (e.g. 2006; 2009). Goldschmidt (1976) is a comprehensive study of the Sebei people, but does not discuss their language very much.

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————— Accepted *August 10, 2010*

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