

Pots, plants and people: a documentation of Bainouk knowledge systems

The Baïnouk languages

The Baïnouk languages are a cluster of endangered languages spoken in the Casamance area of Senegal (West Africa). They belong to the Atlantic language grouping. Today, three main varieties of Baïnouk are spoken in Senegal and the neighbouring country Guinea Bissau.

The label Baïnouk reunites people speaking these languages, people who feel that part of their cultural identity is Baïnouk, and a group of people (speaking Kobiana/Kasanga) who have privileged relationships with Baïnouk-speaking groups.

The languages are closely related, but they have many differences in basic vocabulary and grammatical structure, and speakers of the different languages cannot understand each other's Baïnouk variety. Baïnouk languages are spoken in a very multilingual environment, with children growing up learning up to 8 languages.



Rice harvest in Gonoum



Botanist Mathieu Gueye (left) collecting a plant specimen in Agnack

A documentation of the Baïnouk languages in their cultural context will not be possible much longer. Therefore, our project focuses on three endangered and connected knowledge systems - the documentation of past and present pottery practices, of plant knowledge and use, and of the nominal classification of the languages.

Pottery making and use

The project collects data on contemporary pottery-making practices and pottery use. Pottery is an important part of Baïnouk material culture, and is itself endangered as plastic containers imported from China replace locally made vessels. There is now only one Baïnouk potter, Aramata Diandy in Agnack Grand, but pottery is still used in most villages.



Aramata Diandy, the last Baïnouk potter, Agnack

Plant terminology, knowledge and use

The second focus of the project consists of a documentation of plant terminology, knowledge and use. In the entire Casamance, the knowledge of plants is decreasing, and climate change and rural exodus are exacerbating the loss of this important area of traditional ecological knowledge. The Baïnouk have a reputation for being excellent plant healers, and therefore an important aspect of our documentation activities has a focus on medicinal plants, but we also document agricultural practices.

The nominal classification system

Cultural knowledge on pottery and botany is reflected in the complex nominal classification system of the language, which constitutes the linguistic focus of the project. Every noun of the language belongs to one of ca. 25 noun classes. The usage and role of their referents in everyday life and ceremonies is often reflected in the choice of noun class marker. Since medicinal plants were traditionally stored in clay pots, there is a strong link between pots and plants, manifest in the grammatical system.



Community member and activist Moussa Mané collecting metadata for a recording in Agnack



Project members Amadou Kane Beye (ethnorachaeology, 2nd from left), Moustapha Sall (ethnorachaeology, 3rd from left) and activist Ansou Diendame (4th from left) with other community members

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