



LINGUISTIC ASSIMILATION: THE INFLUENCE OF HAUSA LANGUAGE ON TSURESHA (GUNGAGAWA LANGUAGE) OF YAURI EMIRATE, NORTHERN NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: *The word Gungawa is used by the Hausa people in Yauri to refer to people who lived on the islands of the River Niger, Northern Nigeria. The islands in the River Niger in Yauri Emirate were the traditional homelands of the Gungawa. They are a distinct ethnic group in Yauri Emirate who called themselves Baresha and called their language Tsuresha. At present, the Baresha (Gungawa) are found in Yauri, Ngaski and Shanga Local Government Areas (Yauri Emirate) in Kebbi State. Few are also found in Agwara and Borgu Local Government Areas of Niger State, largely due to migrations. These people have been in Yauri for over 500 years now. However, since 1968 when they were resettled by the Nigerian government to give space for the construction and operation of the Kainji Dam, the Tsuresha (Gunganci) language has been facing serious existential challenges especially due to the overbearing influence of Hausa, the most dominant language in Northern Nigeria. As the Baresha came into much more in contact with other people, particularly the Hausa speaking people, their ancestral language continue to diminish. The end result is that, Tsuresha is becoming endangered. Most Gungagawa people now speak the Hausa language fluently, dress like the Hausa people and most often identify themselves as Hausa not as Baresha (Gungawa). This paper aims explores the influence of Hausa language on the language of this distinct ethnic group of Yauri origin.*

KEYWORDS: Gungawa, Tsuresha, Hausa, Language, Yauri Emirate.



INTRODUCTION

Hausa ranks as one of the major languages in both Nigeria and Africa. It is the most widely spoken language in Nigeria and second most widely spoken in Africa, surpassed only by Kiswahili. Linguists classify it within the Western branch of the Chadic language superfamily, which belongs to the Afro-Asiatic language phylum. The Hausa people inhabit territories straddling the border between Niger, where about half the population speaks Hausa as a first language, and Nigeria, where about one-fifth does. Most Hausa people practice Islam. Their tradition of long-distance commerce and pilgrimages to Islamic holy cities has spread their language to almost all major cities in West, North, Central, and Northeast Africa.¹ Mahdi Adamu describes Hausa as an easy language to learn, with robust yet simple grammar. He further argues that the linguistic expansion of Hausa threatens many Nigerian languages, even in their home regions.²

The *Tsuresha* (Gunganaci) language faces serious threat from Hausa. The Gungawa call themselves *Baresha* or *Uresha* (singular) and their language *Tsuresha*. Hausa people living with them in the Yauri of Northern Nigeria named them Gungawa and their language Gunganaci. The *Baresha* originate from Yauri Emirate, one of four emirates in Kebbi State. Located at 2⁰ latitudes along the Niger River, the emirate comprises three Local Government Areas: Yauri, Ngaski, and Shanga. Historically, Yauri belongs to the seven “bastard” Hausa states, also known as the “Banza Bakwai”. Its inhabitants include the Kambari, Gungawa, Dukkawa, Lopawa, and Shangawa.³

Linguists classify *Tsuresha* as a member of the Benue-Congo language family in the Western Kainji sub-language group.⁴ Blench describes it as one of five languages in the western Kainji of North-western Nigeria.⁵ Other Western Kainji languages include Kambari, Dukawa, Lopawa, and Laru.⁶ Almost all *Baresha* now speak both *Tsuresha* and Hausa, though few still speak their language fluently at home and occasionally in markets and other places. This bilingualism explains why *Tsuresha* faces extinction, unable to withstand the imperial nature of Hausa. This paper focuses on discussing Hausa’s influence on the *Tsuresha* language,

1. Encyclopaedia Britannica, available online at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/257101/Hausa-language>, retrieved on Monday 3rd November, 2014.

2. M. Adamu, “The Major Landmarks in the History of Hausaland”, The 11th Inaugural Lecture, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, Delivered on Thursday, 1st April, 2010, pp. 21-22

3. I. Mukhtar, “Some Reflections on Hausa Language and Culture Among the Yauris”, *Kano Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 2, 2003, p. 106.

4. R.G. Gardon, Jr. “Languages of Nigeria”, in *Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, Fifteen edition, Dallas, SIL International, 2005, p. 69. Online version of this book is available at <http://www.ethnologue.com/>. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, Benue-Congo Languages are the largest branch of the Niger-Congo Language Family in terms of Speakers, number of Languages and Wide Geographical Spread; Stretching from the Benin-Nigeria border across Nigeria and Cameroon, through Central Africa to Eastern Africa. This Information is available at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/61232/Benue-Congo-languages>. It is also available in the printed book.

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. See R. “The West Kainji Languages of North-western Nigeria”, p.3, available at http://homepage.ntlworld.com/roger_blench/RBOP.htm http://homepage.ntlworld.com/roger_blench/RBOP.htm

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. *Ibid.*



exploring the extent of this influence. Before examining this influence, let us first consider the origin of the Baresha people.

Origin of the *Baresha* People

The origin of the *Baresha* has been subjected to different interpretations by scholars. Mahdi Adamu⁷ is of the opinion that the *Baresha* were people of mixed ancestry who traced their origins to several ethnic groups who for various reasons, and at different times, settled on the islands, and consequent to their isolation, they developed a language and a way of life quite different from those of any of the ethnic groups from which the immigrants came. Amongst the ethnic groups that formed the *Baresha*, according to him, were the Hausa people, the Borgu people, Barebari (Kanuri), Djerma, Songhai, Kambari, Dukkawa and Nupe.⁸

According to Harris, the *Baresha* are the descendants of a Songhai army who were defeated by a Borgu force at a place called Gwangwarake (a bush in Borgu).⁹ The remnants of this army, as he further explains, instead of returning home, settled among the local peaceful inhabitants in Yauri area, and later intermixed with the local communities and became what is today known as *Baresha* (Gungawa) and Lopawa.¹⁰ Mahdi Adamu has however, argued that if this was true, the war must have taken place long before the fourteenth century, and that there is nothing in the histories of both the Songhai and Borgu to indicate that the two kingdoms had fought during the said period. He added that the earliest documented clash between the Songhai and Borgu was in the middle of the sixteenth century when a section of the Songhai army was defeated by Borgu.¹¹ In line with Mahdi Adamu, Fabunmi is also with the view that if the position of Harris was correct, there is need to know the identity of the original local people whom the defeated army were supposed to have met and socially and culturally intermixed with to produce the group called the *Baresha*.¹²

In another version Harris has it that, the word “Gungu” did not originally mean island at all, but the name ‘Gungawa’ was applied to the people because their ancestors, the Kebbawa, came from Gungu, the greatest of all the towns in the empire of Kanta Sarkin Kebbi.¹³ Again, if this

7. M. Adamu, “A Hausa Government in Decline: Yawuri in the 19th Century”, *M.A (History) Dissertation*, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, 1968, p. 32.

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. *Ibid.* See also, “Some Aspects of Ethnic and Cultural Transformation in some Parts of the Middle Belt of Nigeria to the End of the Eighteenth Century”, *Department of History Senior Staff Seminars*, Ahmadu Bello University, 26th February, 1976, pp. 6-7 by the same author. This is actually the popular opinion among the Gungawa themselves.

9. P.G. Harris, *Sokoto Provincial Gazetteer*, London, 1939, p. 276. Harris has not however given any date, when the war was fought between Songhai and Borgu.

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. *Ibid.* The identity of the local communities who intermixed with the descendants of Songhai army and later became what is known as *Baresha* (Gungawa) and Lopawa as explained by Harris in this document, is not disclosed by the author.

11. M. Adamu, “Some Aspects...” *op.cit*, p. 6.

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. M.O. Fabunmi, “Inter-Group Relations among the Riverine Communities of the Upper Middle Niger and the Kabi Valley, 1500-1806 A.D”, *P.hD (History) Thesis*, Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto, 1989, p. 47.

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was true, it means that the origin of the *Baresha* was not older than the Kanta era whose reign was between 1516 and 1561. But one needs to be careful in accepting the position of Harris regarding the origin of the *Baresha*. Both of the two versions he propounded can hardly be accepted since there is no any strong historical evidence to support his analysis especially because not all the *Baresha* have Kabbawa as their ancestors. Quite a number of Gungawa, as earlier said, claimed descent from other ethnic groups such as Kambari, Dukkawa, Bussawa, Nupe, Barebari (Kanuri) and Hausa.

There are also some archaeological evidences which show that the Niger Basin (including areas occupied by the *Baresha*) was inhabited as far back as the Stone Age period. For instance, the stone artefacts that were recovered from Baha, Yelwa and Ulaira (settlements predominantly occupied by the *Baresha*), showed evidence of considerable antiquity.¹⁴ Fabunmi has rightly observed that the existence of the pebble tool industry, Middle Stone Age implements, discovery of Sangoan type tools as well as presence of Late Stone Age tools in these sites are all indications of a highly developed Stone Age industry. He added that at Yelwa, Kasabu and Barishi, some large flat stones were discovered by the archaeologists, and they suggested that they were used as foundations for huts and granaries.¹⁵

At this point, it should be noted that based on the oral traditions collected from the *Baresha* themselves, the opinion propounded by Mahdi Adamu that the *Baresha* were descendents of immigrants of different ethnic origins who for various reasons, and at different times, settled on the islands and that consequent to their isolation, developed a language and a way of life quite different from those of any of the ethnic groups from which the immigrants came, seem to be more convincing because during our field research for this paper all the *Baresha* interviewed on their origins, pointed to different ethnic groups.

Wherever the *Baresha* originated from, by the 15th century when the Hausa people of Katsina origin established their political dominance over the indigenous people of Yauri, the *Baresha* have already inhabited numerous islands and some few mainland settlements along the River Niger in the Yauri area. Thus, they were part of the indigenous people of Yauri who the Katsinawa established their dominance over them in Yauri during the second decade of the 14th century.¹⁶

The Influence of Hausa Language on the *Gunganci* Language

The influence of Hausa language on the *tsuresha* (*guganci language*) was consequent upon two major developments in their history. The developments were Islamization of the *Baresha* and their resettlement from numerous islands of the River Niger in Yauri Emirate, following the construction of Kainji Dam in 1968. The way and manner these two developments were responsible for the influence of Hausa language over that of the *Baresha* will be discuss below.

. P.G. Harris, "Notes on Yauri (Sokoto Province), Nigeria", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (J.R.A.I), vol. XL, 1930, p. 291.

¹⁴. R.C. Soper, "The Stone Age in Northern Nigeria", *Journal of Historical Society of Nigeria*, vol.2 no. 2, December 1965, pp. 174-195 as cited by M.O. Fabunmi, "Inter-Group Relations..." *op.cit.*, p. 65.

¹⁵. See M.O. Fabunmi, "Inter-Group Relations..." *op.cit.*, pp. 65-66. See also, N. Nzewunwa, "Archaeological Research in the Middle Niger Valley of Nigeria", *Kiabara*, IV: 2, 1980.

¹⁶. For more on this, see M. Adamu, "A Hausa Government in Decline...", *op.cit.*, pp. 46-48.



It should, however be noted that the location of Yauri as a long-distance trade route between Hausaland and Gwanja (in modern Ghana), was an earlier factor responsible for the influence of Hausa language over not only the *Baresha* language, but also that of other indigenous people of the area namely, the Kambari, the Dukkawa, the Lopawa and the Shangawa. The position of Yauri as a trade route made it favourable for some Hausa traders to settle there, spread the Hausa language and culture, and subsequently subjected the people of the area to Hausa leadership.¹⁷ Added to this, was the use of Hausa language as a common language as well as language of communication among the diverse people of Yauri Emirate.

Islamization of the *Baresha*

It is extremely difficult to date precisely the beginning of the spread of Islam amongst the *Baresha*. However, from the data collected, it is clear that the spread of Islam amongst the *Baresha* was consequent upon three major developments in the area, viz the activities of Hausa Muslim clerics (*Malamai*), Sardauna's Conversion Campaign, and the role played by the *Baresha* Muslim youths.

As a total way of life, Islam changed the totality of the lives of the *Baresha* community, particularly their social life. The religion of Islam has impacted seriously on the culture and social life of the *Baresha*. The social and cultural life of the *Baresha* before they embraced Islam which was basically traditional, gave way to the Islamic way of life. For instance, the Holy Qur'an and the Hadiths of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (SAW), as the key sources of Islamic Law, are now guiding the *Baresha* way of life, including the way they eat and drink, their marriage system, laws of inheritance, naming ceremony, burial rites, etc. Islam, which received great positive response from the *Baresha*, has also changed their mode of dressing. The Gungawa mode of dressing is now in line with the Islamic tradition whereby men began to wear long dresses that covered the body, and the women adopted the use of veil to cover the whole body as ordained by Islam. Muslim names have also taken over the traditional names of the *Baresha*. It is therefore now common to hear such Islamic names as Muhammadu, Abdullahi, Musa, Isah, Sani, Maryam, Hadiza, Amina, A'isha, Hauwa'u, etc among the Gungawa, instead of such Gungawa traditional names like Shagiya, Citumu, Goge, Weta, Akipwa, Asuba, Aladi, Ateni, etc.¹⁸

Another link between Islamization of the *Baresha* and influence of Hausa language over them was how Islam brought them closer to the dominant Muslim communities in towns like Yelwa. The stigmatization previously showed to the *Baresha* by the Muslims has disappeared. Consequently, Muslims now marry from the *Baresha* women, and the *Baresha* men also marry freely from Muslim families without any restrictions. As a result of this closeness and interactions, majority of the *Baresha* are now of the opinion that the new trend has contributed immensely in posing threat to their language. The *Tsuresha*, they argued, cannot withstand the linguistic pressure of the Hausa language which is the common language in markets, in worship places, at schools and at other places where people gather and interact. The younger generation among the *Baresha* now find it difficult to speak their language

¹⁷. I. Mukhtar, "Some Reflections on Hausa Language...", *op.cit.*, p. 113. See also, M. Adamu, *The Hausa Factor in West African History*, Zaria, Ahmadu Bello University Press, 1978, pp.50-51.

¹⁸. Malam Isyaka Muhammad (Limamin Suteku) interviewed in front of his residence in Stteku, on Wednesday 4th August, 2010.



fluently due partly to the fact that some of them have one of their parents as non- *Baresha* speaking people or because of intermingling with other Muslim communities, particularly the Hausa speaking people.¹⁹

It has been observed that some of the *Baresha*, especially the young ones, now feel inferior if they are called *Baresha*. When asked the reason for the inferiority, the majority of them associated *Baresha* with non-Islamic practices, stressing that they were no longer *Baresha*, they were Muslims and that the *Baresha* (their ancestors) have already died on the islands. Some of the *Baresha* now even claim Hausa as their both language and ethnicity especially in the official documents and records such as in school certificates, certificates of birth, declaration of age, identity cards, electoral and population exercises, and the like. Thus, there has been a gradual assimilation of the *Baresha* language and culture by the Hausa language and culture respectively. The *Tsuresha* is therefore, no doubt in danger of disappearing, and if the current pace of Islamisation and Hausanisation among the *Baresha* continued, the *Tsuresha* language might one day disappear.

CONCLUSION

This paper strongly contends that the Baresha ethnic group emerged from a union of people with diverse ethnic backgrounds. These people, for various reasons and at different times, settled on numerous islands of the River Niger in the Yauri area. The immigrants abandoned their original ethnic identities and developed a new ethnicity, which they named Tsuresha. Hausa people called them Gungawa, meaning “island dwellers.”

The paper also argues that 20th-century developments, namely the acceptance of Islam and the Kainji Dam resettlement exercise in 1968, along with earlier factors discussed in the paper, have largely influenced the Baresha with Hausa culture in the 21st century. The Baresha now speak Hausa fluently, dress like Hausa people, and often identify themselves as Hausa rather than Baresha. Crampton’s observation supports this claim: “The Gungawa of Yauri Emirate...nowadays not only practise Islam, but also wear Hausa dress and speak only Hausa language in public and call themselves Hausa.”²⁰

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¹⁹. Oral interview with Malam Usman (Bagaruwan Dangaladima), aged 73 years, interviewed in front of his residence in Ikun, on Thursday 8th July and Saturday 20th November, 2010.

²⁰. Quoted in I. Mukhtar, “Some Reflections on Hausa Language...”, *op.cit*, p. 114.



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