

Nimbari as a language name

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(May 2012)

In the *Ethnologue* (cf. Lewis 2009), a language "Nimbari" is listed for Cameroon, albeit with the remark 'no known speakers'. That language name is also used to form a classificatory tag for one of the main branches of the Adamawa Group Languages in that same volume: Leko-Nimbari, with Nimbari itself as a single unit forming one of four co-ordinate sub-branches. What is the significance of this language name, and what does it actually refer to, both in a diachronic and in a synchronic perspective? Westermann/Westermann (2001: 7, 8) state that

"The people who are identified as the Nimbari said that they spoke Kangou, not Nimbari. [...] [They] identified themselves as Nimbari, after the name of their village, Gorimbari [...]. We questioned them and others if there were any other people or a language called Nimbari [...], but no one did (*sic.!*)."

Note that Kangou (or Kaangu, Kaang) is a variety of Fali (an alleged Adamawa language very different from those of the Leko-Nimbari branch). As a classificatory term, "Nimbari" can be traced back to Greenberg's (1963: 9) naming of his single unit Adamawa group 12. In terms of sub-classification, it is thus not directly linked to any other group of his Adamawa Branch Languages. In a footnote (1963: 40), he remarks that "it is the language referred to as Niamniam by Strümpell", without further specifying the source. From the lexical data included (six entries for "Nimbari" all in all, Greenberg 1963: 11, 14, 23),¹ it becomes clear that this information is taken from Strümpell 1910. The data in question are listed under the name of "Niam-Niam" in that source, renamed "Nimbari" by Strümpell himself in a later publication (Strümpell 1922/23: 68-69):

"[...] 'Bari' oder 'Nimbari' soll der einheitliche Name dieses von den Fulbe Niam-Niam genannten Völkchens gewesen sein [...]. [...] Wie die Niam-Niam untergegangen sind, so ist auch ihre Sprache verklungen. Nur noch wenige alte Männer findet man, die sich erinnern."

Thus, nearly 100 years ago, the author explicitly states that, apart from some aged persons, rememberes, there were no speakers of the language formerly proper to this group of people left. No names of Nimbari settlements are found in Strümpell's publications, but

"Strümpell bemerkt, sein (*sic.!*) „Niam-Niam“ wären früher in Bajuna und Be, zum Teil im Bibene - Land ansässig gewesen (also zu beiden Seiten des untersten Majō -Kebbi)." (Struck in Strümpell 1910: 450).

The lexical data listed by Strümpell (1910) for Nimbari, for the remembered language spoken by that group of people before they shifted to Fali-Kangu, shows clear links within the wider Adamawa context, for some individual cases in particular with the Duru language cluster (Dii, Duupa, Dugun), and (to an even lesser degree) with Samba Leko and Kolbila. But the majority of lexical entries do not seem to be comparable to data from any other language of that region. It is rather this lack of decisive evidence than positive classificatory criteria that obviously

¹ In an earlier version (Greenberg 1949), he includes seven more cases of lexical evidence from Nimbari. In agreement with the method applied and the goal pursued, these are all selected for being suitable as evidence for a membership in the Adamawa group, or even beyond, in Niger-Congo.

brought about a re-interpretation of "Nimbari" as an internally isolated part of what could very well be called "Central Adamawa Languages" (i.e. the "Leko-Duru" or "Sama-Duru" Group, to avoid the term Nimbari here). To conclude, the following can be stated:

- a) Strümpell (1910) published a short vocabulary of a language ("Niam-Niam") that shows a limited number of similarities with languages from the Duru and Leko clusters.
- b) The language was not in use any more at the time of data collection, shift to Fali-Kangu was more or less completed; the data were collected from some rememberers.
- c) The validity of these data, given the circumstances, is rather low.
- d) Strümpell stated in a later publication (1922/23), the autonym of his "Niam-Niam" was "Nimbari".
- e) The name "Nimbari" itself is a Fali term meaning "people [of] Mbari", the latter being the name of a prominent mountain, Gori Mbari (this also being the name of the village dominated by this mountain).²

The term "Nimbari" should thus not be used as a classificatory term, nor should the scarce and surely in large parts erroneous data be given central significance in any comparative approach to Adamawa languages.

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² In 2008, the elders at Gorimbari (or Gorimbaara [gó:rím bá:rà], represented by the Wakili Adamu Mangi Kacalla, the elder Cɛmba Bidibe, and Isa Adamu who translated, informed us (i.e. U. Kleinewillinghöfer, R. Kastenholz and R. Kramer) that (*M*)baari (most likely the same term as "Bari" mentioned by Strümpell, see above) refers to the inselberg central to their village area. Thus the term "Nimbari" appears to be Fali *ní mbáári* "people/person (*niru*) of (M)Baari", situated near a mountain (*góri*) precisely called "(M)Baari".