Language Documentation in the Nuba Mountains of Sudan: The Uncu (Ghulfan) Documentation Project

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UDP General Information

• The Uncu Documentation Project is an internationally-based endangered language documentation team, with members in Germany, Egypt, The Netherlands, and Sudan.

• We work to document, describe, and conserve Uncu (Ghulfan), an underdocumented and endangered language. Uncu is classified as a Nilo-Saharan, East Sudanic language that is a member of the Kordofan Nubian dialect group.

• We are situated at the American University in Cairo and at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology (MPI-EVA) in Leipzig, Germany.

• Our major funding comes from the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Project at the School for Oriental and African Studies (SAOS), University of London.

• We have also received generous financial contributions from the Endangered Language Fund, the American University in Cairo, The Alice Cozzi Heritage Language Foundation, and MPI-EVA.

• Our project began in 2004 working with Uncu speakers among the refugee population in Cairo, Egypt.

• Our first fieldwork in the Nuba Mountains was carried out in January, 2009.
Project Dimensions

Description

Documentation

Conservation
Some of the end products of our project will be:

• an Uncu grammar (Jade)
• and Uncu orthography (entire team)
• an Uncu/Arabic/English dictionary (Bob and others)
• and account of the Uncu tone system
• a monograph on relationships among Ajang and other East Sudan languages
We are working to document Uncu by recording various kinds of language from as many domains as possible. So far, these include:

- semantic domains – food, farming, building, plants, animals, ceremonies
- songs
- stories
- dances

sorghum-based bread & sauces

various gourd and clay containers
Documentation

Kirane
‘type of dance’

Narratives

Kwe ‘horn’

Kunfa
‘ceremonial bracelet’

Dji minto
‘grinding stones for sesame and sorgham’
Conservation

The Uncu realize that their language and culture are endangered and are interested in stopping the obsolescence process.

Some Uncu intellectuals had already begun conservation projects when we arrived. These include an effort to develop an orthography and a word list.

We are now helping with these projects and assisting the Uncu in developing other conservation projects.
Part of our contribution to the Uncu conservation effort involves offering training in descriptive linguistics.

We also plan to offer a dictionary-making workshop in Khartoum next winter, and hope to offer training and help in Uncu language learning materials development.

We may also work with Uncu women to develop a public relations campaign aimed at reversing the process of raising Uncu children as unilingual Arabic speakers.
During our January trip to the Nuba Mountains, most days consisted of visits to Uncu villages. This would usually entail:

- artifact shows
- dances, songs, and stories
- historical enactments
- visits to schools

We would then race back to our house in Dilling to take advantage of the five hours of electricity, where we would:

- recharge batteries
- work with speakers to analyze data
- log data
We got much more data recorded than we had hoped, mostly due to the amazing welcome and cooperation we got from the Uncu people in Khartoum and the Nuba Mountains.

One major triumph for us is that we are now fairly certain of the Uncu phonemic inventory, with only one major issue left to solve.

We were also able to collect GPS lat/long readings for Uncu villages.

While the data we gathered answered many questions we had, it also posed new ones and in many cases called into question what were for us fairly certain assumptions. We still have much work to do on:

- tone
- possible vowel harmony
- grammatical analysis
- etc.
The Future

We have funding for two more trips to the Nuba Mountains. However, we work in a politically fragile area and may not be able to return in the near future.

We will continue our work with Uncu speakers in Cairo but are also now in the process of making contact with Uncu speech communities in the United States and in Europe.

Debri Village, Nuba Mountains

Flag of the Sudanese Peoples Liberation Movement
Project Members

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The one, the only
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A Message from the Uncu People