



Julut (Sudan) – Language Snapshot

ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Julut was originally spoken in the Nuba Mountains, in the south of Sudan, South Kordofan. Together with Tima and Katla, it forms the Katlaic subgroup, which belongs to the Niger-Congo phylum. Greenberg (1963) proposed that Katlaic be subsumed under Niger-Congo's Kordofanian branch. The existence of Kordofanian as such is questioned by different linguists today (Dimmendaal 2009, Güldemann 2018). Speaker populations are difficult to estimate due to limited information from the government as well as country-internal displacements as a result of economic pressure and civil war (Human Rights Watch 2012). Julut language documentation and description was the focus of the author's PhD project from 2014 to 2020. The language data was collected during five field trips of roughly ten months' work altogether. This paper gives a brief overview of the location of the Julut villages, the social situation of the communities, prior research, and the current investigation on Julut.

مستخلص

تُستخدم لغة جُلْد في الأصل في جبال النوبة بجنوب كردفان في جنوب السودان. وتشكل مع لغتي تيما وكاتلا فرع الكاتلايك، الذي ينتمي إلى عائلة النيجر كونغو. وقد صنف قرين بيرج (1963) فرع الكاتلايك تحت فرع اللغات الكردفانية في داخل عائلة النيجر كونغو، غير أن وجود فرع اللغات الكرفانية أصبح موضع تساؤل بين مختلف اللغويين (ديمنداال 2009، جولدامان 2018). ومن الصعب تحديد عدد المتحدثين باللغة وذلك لشح المعلومات الرسمية، بالإضافة إلى النزوح الداخلي في البلاد بسبب الوضع الاقتصادي والحرب الأهلية (هيومان رايتس وتش 2012). كان التوصيف والتوثيق للغة جُلْد محور مشروع الدكتوراه الذي قامت به الباحثة في الفترة من (2014-2020). تقدم هذه الورقة لمحة موجزة عن موقع قرى جُلْد، والوضع الاجتماعي للمجتمعات وعن الدراسات السابقة والحالية في لغة جُلْد.

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<i>Language name:</i>	Julut
<i>Language family:</i>	Niger-Congo, Kordofanian?, Katlaic
<i>ISO 639-3 Code:</i>	kcr
<i>Glottolog Code:</i>	julu1237
<i>Population:</i>	14,200 for both Julut & Katla according to <i>Ethnologue</i> (Lewis 2014)
<i>Location:</i>	about 11.747665, 29.307058
<i>Vitality rating:</i>	threatened–shifting

1. INTRODUCTION

Julut is a minority language of Sudan. Originally spoken only in the Nuba Mountains in South Kordofan, Julut is now also found in major cities across the country in addition to being spoken by about 6,000 people in a rather isolated area of the northwestern Nuba Mountains. The same number is mentioned for the Julut community in Khartoum by the Julut people themselves. Since *Ethnologue* (Lewis 2014) does not recognise Julut as a separate language of its own group, it only states that Katla and Julut together comprise 14,200 people.

Julut, Katla, and Tima together form the Katlaic language group. Hellwig (2013) argues that Julut and Katla should be considered a dialect continuum, as Julut and the neighbouring East Katla are mutually intelligible, whereas Julut and West Katla are not. Furthermore, the comparison of the number systems (Nüsslein in preparation) illustrates the divergence between these languages as they are spoken today. The creation myths of the three groups, however, speak of a time when three brothers came into the Nuba Mountains, settled there, and founded the three tribes.

The ban on indigenous languages in Sudan until 2005 as well as political conflicts, the dominance of Arabic, and the changing economic conditions have threatened minority languages like Julut for generations. In the cities, as in the Nuba Mountains, the Julut language is hardly passed on to children, and adults speak predominantly Arabic amongst themselves. Thus, Julut is a highly threatened language.

2. GEOGRAPHY

Julut /ʒulut/ was formerly spoken exclusively in the Nuba Mountains in the district South Kordofan, which is in the south of present-day Sudan. The Julut region¹ is located about 40 km south of the town Dilling (or Al-Dalang), about 80 km north of the town Kadugli, and about 60 km northeast of the town Lagawa (see the map in Figure 1).

The Nuba Mountains are said to have been a retreat area for different groups that lived in the regions surrounding it (Thelwall & Schadeberg 1993). Therefore, the language diversity is remarkably high in the Nuba Mountains. Many languages from different language families and even language phyla can be found there.

The villages in the Nuba Mountains are located along winding paths; thus, the twelve Julut villages are arranged in a semi-circle around a mountain massif (see Figure 2). These villages are divided into three dialect zones: Kujulu /kuʒulu/ to the far east, Julut Baca /ʒulut baʒa/ to the south, and Kolonggo /koloŋgo/ to the far west. A few western villages of the Kolonggo area are actually recognised as belonging to the Katla language group as well (Figure 2, parallel light-green and light-blue lines). This supports the hypothesis that Katla and Julut represent a dialect continuum with an overlap of these language groups in the region in between. Thus, the Kolonggo area appears to have witnessed the most social mixing.

¹ While the language's name is pronounced with /u/ vowels, the Julut region is pronounced /ʒulut/.

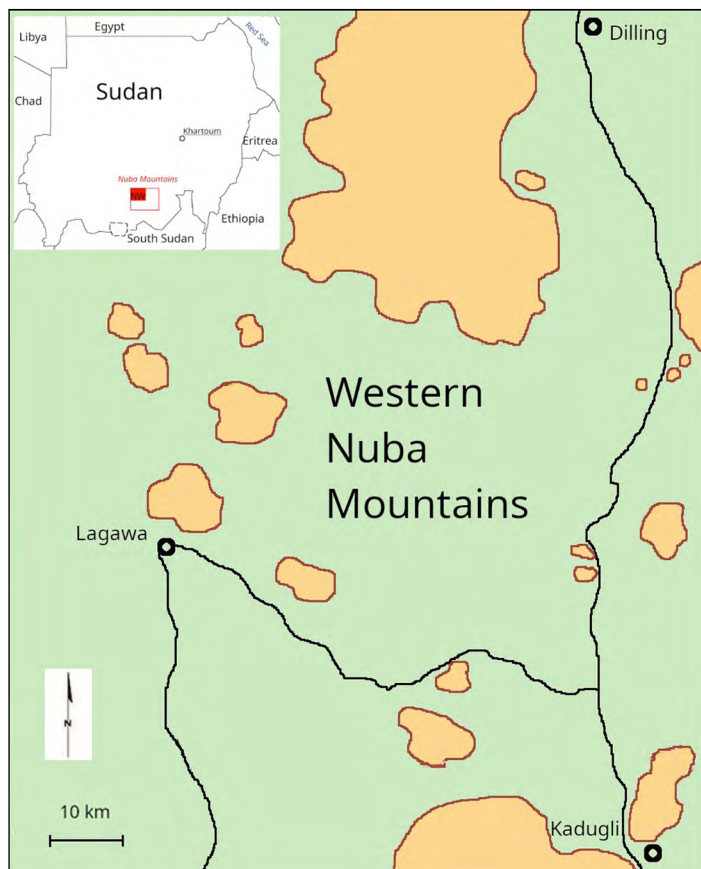


Figure 1 Western Nuba Mountains.²

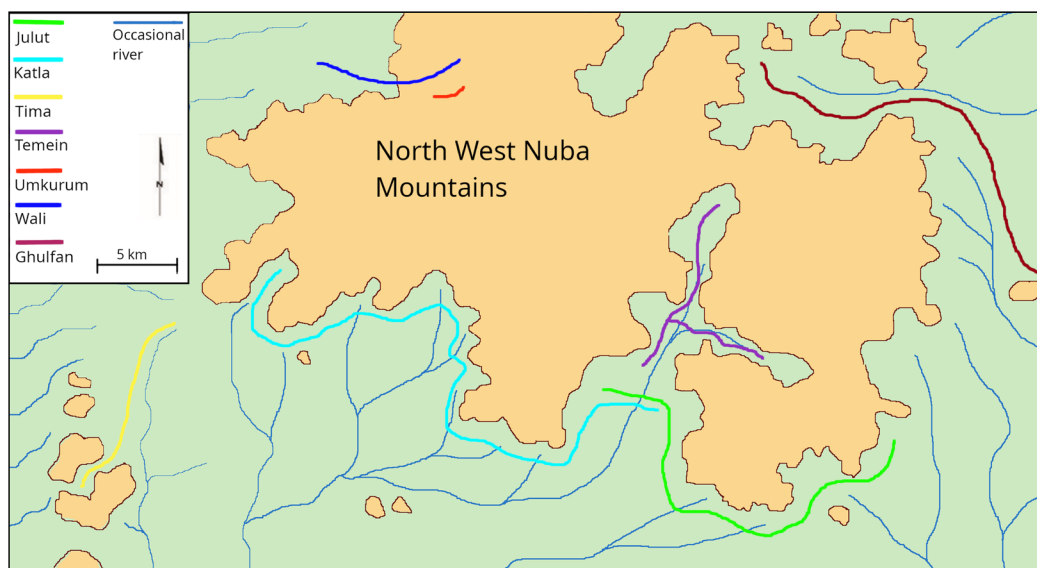


Figure 2 Northwest part of the Nuba Mountains.

Tima and Katla are located west of Julut, as the map in Figure 2 indicates. Temein, a Nilo-Saharan language, is spoken directly to the north of Julut. The Umkurum language also belongs to the Temeinic group. Further north and east are Hill-Nubian or Kordofan-Nubian languages like Ghulfan and Wali.

² Maps of the Nuba Mountain areas were created by Ulrike Nüsslein on the basis of the Topographic Field Map from the Joint Military Commission printed by the Centre for Development and Environment, University of Berne, Switzerland.

3. SOCIAL SITUATION

The Nuba Mountains are situated between the predominantly Christian South Sudan and the almost exclusively Islamic Sudan (Chiari & Kollmer 2008). The cross-border region has suffered from recurrent conflicts since 1956. Even after the Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2005 and the independence of South Sudan in 2011, the Sudanese government ruled by former president Omar Al-Bashir continued to wage war against the remaining Southern People's Liberation Army (Human Rights Watch 2012) and has even bombed this area (Rühl 2012). The neglect of healthcare and education in this region, which began in colonial times, continues to be a major problem. Such poor living conditions have caused mass displacements of inhabitants from the Nuba Mountains to various cities in Sudan (Reeves 2013).

Arabicisation and Islamicisation by the government, 20 years of civil war, and economic pressure have also led to the heavy exodus of people from within the Nuba Mountains to larger towns outside the mountains. This displacement led to the fragmentation of an evolved, interconnected social network between the villages that was greatly diversified in many ways. Even if the population data of the Julut in the Nuba Mountains and the city communities were collected, the question remains: how many Julut people can still speak their language? Contributors to the author's Julut description and documentation project report that the Julut language is no longer passed on from the parents' generation to their children and that the situation in the Nuba Mountains is equally as bad as in the cities. Therefore, the Julut language must be considered as highly or severely endangered today.

After months of continuous demonstrations on the streets of Khartoum and other major cities, the long-time president Omar Al-Bashir was overthrown in August 2019. A transitional government, in which the army agreed to share power with civilian groups, took over the leadership for three years until country-wide elections were held. Even during this time, the atmosphere in the Nuba Mountains remained tense because it was not known whether the new government could be trusted. Still, the old government clique is too strongly intertwined with the administrative structures. A military coup led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan brought an end to the transition to democracy in late October 2021. Since then, people have returned to the streets to protest against the coup, and Sudan has been in a deep political and economic crisis that has affected all regions of the country.

In 2014, Al-Bashir's government had expelled all people from Christian organisations, and around the same time, it forbade foreigners from travelling to South Kordofan and other districts. For this reason, all field research after that time could only be arranged in Khartoum. The Julut community of Khartoum was said to number around 6,000 at the time of fieldwork between 2014 and 2018. Most Julut live in Haj Yusif, an eastern part of the capital city. They are organised with a leader who is elected biannually. They have a language committee which developed an orthography in 2005 with the help of T. Stirtz, a linguist with SIL International, and which created two editions of an alphabet book. The most recent one was released in 2015. The present author worked with this material and adopted the orthography to raise awareness of the language in the community.

Finally, the Julut community in Khartoum was able to register with the relevant government authorities in 2015 as an autonomous ethnic group, allowing them to meet without fear of being punished as they had been in times before.

4. PRIOR RESEARCH

Julut is a hitherto little-described language. One of the first linguists to undertake fundamental language studies in Sudan was Stevenson (1956/57). He classified Katla with Temein and Nyimang as “[t]hree groups of apparently unrelated languages with no noun-classes” (Stevenson 1962: 128). Stevenson considered only Tima and Katla as languages, whereas Julud (the former spelling) was simply deemed to be a dialect of the latter. Since the compilation of non-Bantu languages by Tucker & Bryan (1966) was based on Stevenson's data, Julut finds no mention therein. The same holds for the description of the Kordofanian language family in *Die Sprachen Afrikas* (Heine et al. 1981).

Greenberg (1963) was the first to propose that the language groups Heiban, Talodi, Rashad, and Katla are branches of a Kordofanian language family, with Schadeberg (1981) also following this approach in his work. But the plausibility of a Kordofanian group of languages is called into question by contemporary linguists. Dimmendaal (2018) provides evidence that the Katla/Rashad group (both Kordofanian) is linked to the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo phylum. Güldemann, by contrast, favours an areal rather than a genealogical approach in order to establish a “kind of link between heretofore unrelated linguistic lineages” (2008: 181). His proposed Macro-Sudan Belt (MSB) includes languages from both the Niger-Kordofanian and the Nilo-Saharan phylum, even though it does not contain all languages within these phyla. Notably, the Nuba Mountains are not in the MSB proper, but in the “East Africa-Gregory Rift transition sphere” (Güldemann 2018: 473, 487).

The available information on Katla is restricted to a few pages in some of the sources mentioned above or in Heinitz (1917: 57–58, 98) and Meinhof (1916/1917: 212–235). Those surveys focus on phonetics, phonology, and nominal morphology and capture only a small number of words, and verbal grammar remains severely understudied.

5. CURRENT RESEARCH

The research solely on Julut was started with the PhD project by the author in the summer of 2013. The project was completed in December 2020 with the publication of the author’s dissertation, *A grammar of Kordofanian Julut, with particular consideration of the verbal morphology*, but the documentation of a language has no end as such (Nüsslein 2020). It should be mentioned that the work on Katla by Hellwig between 2006 and 2007 (in preparation) yielded additional data from Julut; Hellwig was also the one who suggested doing the author’s PhD project on Julut.

Roughly ten months of fieldwork was carried out between 2014 and 2018, comprised of five trips to Khartoum. The consultants who participated in the project included 22 men and 6 women. Two of the Julut contributors came initially from the Nuba Mountains to Khartoum for medical treatment. Another person came from Dindir, Sennar state, to visit his family. They were all between about 30 and 80 years old. Those participants living in the Nuba Mountains are farmers, and the people living in the city are construction workers, minibus drivers, shopkeepers, teachers, or have some other job to earn a living. None of them are particularly rich.

The project facilitator, Awad Baba El-Husan, has been an important language consultant, having assisted with the translation of texts as well as interactions with other contributors. He also helped to get in contact with as many Julut people as possible who can still speak their language. Thanks to social media platforms like Whatsapp, we can communicate with each other whenever we want. Our communication and work language is English, while the language of Sudan at a national level is Arabic.

The Julut language shows a number of typologically interesting properties, including advanced tongue root (ATR) vowel harmony that determines verbal allomorphy; diverse prepositions for directional concepts; numerous derivational extensions; multi-verb constructions to refer to some tense/aspect/mode (TAM) contents; and solely singular number marking. Probably the most outstanding phenomenon is the number marking system, in which only the singular is marked, but not the plural (Nüsslein 2018). Comparative research on Julut, Katla, and Tima shows an even more exceptional picture. Not only is it just the singular that is marked, but it is marked with a non-productive prefix. This peculiarity can also be traced in Katla and even in Tima (Nüsslein in preparation).

The project prioritised rich metadata, including thorough documentation of the situation, the contributors, current events, and the language documentation work. The corpus includes approximately ten hours of audio recordings, of which 48 are stories, 27 are songs, about 100 are elicited sentences, some are word lists, and one is a questionnaire. The author used Toolbox software to compile a lexicon of 780 nouns and 200 verbs, 600 elicited sentences, the questionnaire, and 18 transcribed and analysed stories that correspond to about 560 analysed sentences. The project also resulted in copious fieldnotes and written questionnaires which remain to be digitised.

Having achieved the descriptive goals of the PhD with the publication of the dissertation (Nüsslein 2020), the author's focus now turns to the creation of a digital archive of Julut language material (Nüsslein 2022). The goal is to put as much data as possible in the Endangered Languages Archive to ensure that a digital record of the language is conserved and accessible to others.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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