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Kulaale (Chad) – Language Snapshot

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Language Name:	Kulaale (exonyms: Fania, Fanya, Fanian, Mana, Kobe)
Language Family:	Niger-Congo, Adamawa, Bua
ISO 639-3 Code:	fni
Glottolog Code:	fani1244
Population:	1,100 (SIL, 1997)
Location:	10.176552°, 18.566710°
Vitality rating:	Severely endangered

Summary

Kulaale (also known as Fania), is a Bua (Adamawa, Niger-Congo) language spoken by approximately 1,000 people, who call themselves *Kulaawe* [kòlááwé] or *Eywe* [ʔèywè]. They live in a dozen villages in the southernmost part of the Guéra region in Chad. The Kulaawe are traditionally agriculturalists: they grow mainly sorghum and millet, as well as maize, groundnut, and beans. The inhabitants of the village of Tilé Nougar are additionally historically blacksmiths, and used to extract, melt, smelt, and forge iron. The Kulaawe are all Muslims today, although their conversion is relatively recent, and aspects of their pre-Islamic practices still survive. Many Kulaawe also live in towns, mostly Sarh and N'Djamena, where the language is usually not passed on to the younger generations. In general, the language and the traditions it carries are under threat due to rapid economic and demographic change in the country.

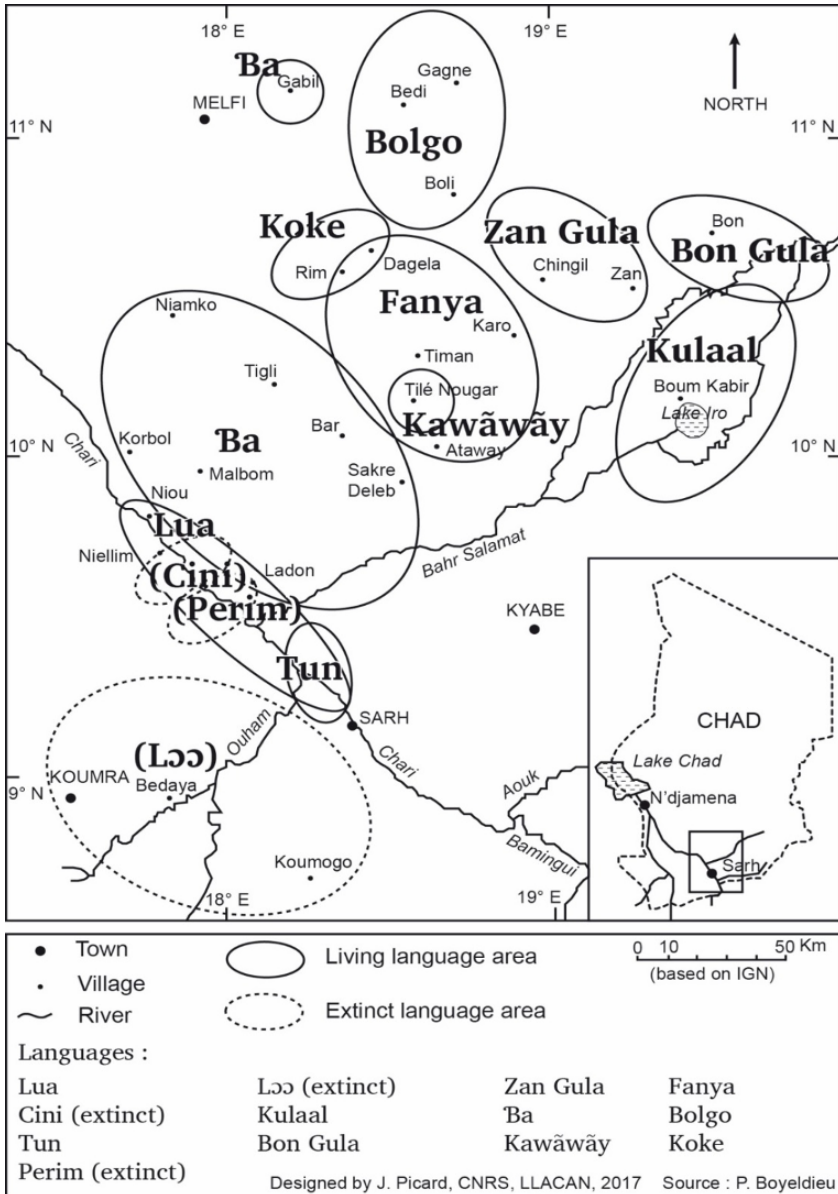


Figure 1. Distribution of the Bua languages in southern Chad (from Boyeldieu et al. 2018)

1. Overview

Kulaale is known in the literature as ‘Fania(n)/Fanya’, ‘Mana’, or ‘Kobe’. ‘Fanian’ is the name used by the Chadian administration to refer to the language and its speakers, who call themselves *Kulaawe* [kòlááwé] (sg. [kòláánó]) or *Eywe* [ʔèjwè] (sg. [ʔèjnù]), and their language *Kulaale* [kòláálé], or *Eyle* [ʔèjlè]. Kulaale belongs to the Bua group of languages, subsumed under the tentative Adamawa subgroup of Niger-Congo. While Adamawa is not a well-established genealogical unit, the Bua group shows enough cohesion and regular sound and morphological correspondences to be considered a bona fide language family (Boyeldieu 1986; Boyeldieu et al. 2018). Preliminary data suggests that Bua consists of two subgroupings: Riverine Bua (Ba, Lua, Tun, Loo) versus Inland Bua, the latter being further split between Bolgo/Koke and Gula (Kulaale, Gula Iro, Bon Gula, Zan Gula) (Kastenholz 2017; Boyeldieu et al. 2018). Kulaale appears to belong to the Gula subgroup. The Bua languages are spoken in southeastern Chad, straddling the border between the Moyen-Chari and Guéra administrative regions. Kulaale is spoken in the center of this zone, in a dozen villages including Manakundju, Ataway, Tilé Nougar, Timan, Sisi, Rim, Kani, Komi, Karo (cf. Map 1).

Kulaale is severely endangered. Eberhard et al. (2019) estimate that the number of speakers was 1,100 in 1997, and consider it to be a ‘vigorous’ language (EGIDS level 6a), however Moseley (2010) lists it as ‘severely endangered’; my experience in the field confirms this latter assessment. The speech community is scattered in small and far-apart villages in a severely underdeveloped and economically unattractive region of Chad, characterized by roads in bad condition, no electricity, rudimentary health services, no access to clean drinking water (and water shortages during the dry season), extremely limited access to education, and no mobile phone reception. Consequently, the younger generations tend to leave the villages to find better living conditions in town, where they tend to shift to local majority languages, such as Sar or Chadian Arabic.

The violent history of the region in the last 150 years has also contributed to depopulation. Tilé Nougar, for instance, currently has about 100 inhabitants. This is one fifth of its 1911 population, and perhaps up to 50 times less than its mid-19th century population, according to de Rendinger (1936: 198), who attributes this trend to the passage of the late 19th century warlord and slave trader Rabih (cf. Horowitz 1970; Zeltner 1988). Violence continued with colonial rule and measures such as forced labor, known to have drawn many people to migrate to newly created colonial towns. Finally, the chronic political instability and violence that characterized the country from the mid 1960s to the early 1990s exacted a heavy toll on local populations, and is still vividly remembered. Two events were particularly violent and disruptive. The first was the violent crushing

of the Mubi rebellion in 1965 (known as the Mangalmé *événements*, cf. Abbo 1996), which did not target only the Mubi, but all the populations of the Guéra region, including the Kulaawe. It was followed by the 1979 civil war, and the chronic instability and frequent opposition suppression campaigns that ensued in the 1980s. Many people in the region were tortured and killed at that time. A detailed account of the consequences of those years of violence on the village of Boum Kebir, about 70 km south-east of the Kulaale-speaking area, can be found in Pairault (1995). The trend in the last 150 years has thus been towards massive emigration to urban centers, accompanied by generalized language shift, leaving only a fraction of the population in the villages speaking their language on a daily basis. Taking the nine UNESCO factors of language vitality (Brenzinger et al. 2003) into account, one can see how dire the situation is:

(1) UNESCO language vitality and endangerment factors: values for Kulaale¹

Factor	Value	
	(villages)	(town)
1. Intergenerational Language Transmission	4	2
2. Absolute Number of Speakers	4	1
3. Proportion of Speakers Within the Total Population	4	1
4. Trend in Existing Language Domains	3	1
5. Response to New Domains and Media		0
6. Materials for Language Education and Literacy		0
7. Community Members' Attitudes Toward the Language		2
8. Governmental and Institutional Policies		2
9. Amount and Quality of Documentation		1

In relation to each factor, Intergenerational transmission (Factor 1) is still the norm in the villages, but it has ceased in urban contexts. The language is spoken by a very small number of people (approximately 1,000) (Factor 2), all multilingual, including in the villages, where people are in contact with Arabs and Fula herders with whom they communicate in Chadian Arabic, the lingua franca of the region (Factor 3). The language is not used on a daily basis by most remaining speakers in town (Factor 4). It is not used in new domains and media: television and radio are mostly in French, Chadian Arabic, or local majority languages. Kulaale has no internet presence, and very few members of the community have regular

¹ Scale: 0 extinct, 1 critically endangered, 2 severely endangered, 3 definitely endangered, 4 vulnerable, 5 safe.

internet access (Factor 5). Most Kulaale speakers in the villages are illiterate, and the literate urbanites are educated exclusively in French. There is no orthography or educational materials for the language (Factor 6). The Kulaawe in Tilé Nougar do not have a negative attitude toward their language, but they tend to favour cultural assimilation to modern Chadian society. I have not yet visited the other Kulaale-speaking villages, but the information I collected in Tilé Nougar seems to indicate that the situation there is very similar. The picture in town is bleaker, with few children speaking the language, having switched to local majority languages (Factor 7). Government policies in place do not protect or promote minority languages. Education (when it is offered) is entirely in French or in standard Arabic (Factor 8). The only documentation of sufficient quality is the data that I collected in 2014, 2017, and 2020, as detailed in Section 2 (Factor 9). The Kulaale language and traditional culture can thus be deemed to be severely endangered, confirming the estimate of Moseley (2010), and should be documented urgently, while they are still practiced on a daily basis in the villages.

Data collection on Bua languages started in the 19th and early 20th centuries by linguistically untrained travelers and missionaries, who collected short wordlists in unreliable transcriptions (cf. Boyeldieu et al. 2018 for an exhaustive list). Since the 1960s, three Bua languages have been the object of serious linguistic work: Kulaal/Gula Iro (Pairault 1966, 1969), Tun (Palayer 1975, n.d.), and Lua (Boyeldieu 1985). However, all of these descriptions are limited to the phonology, morphology, and lexicon, and do not include any description of syntax, semantics, or pragmatics. Kastenholz (2017) published a preliminary sketch of Bolgo (Bolgo Kubar dialect) based on a three-week field trip. Most recently, Tikka (2019) wrote an M.A. thesis on the phonological description of Bolgo (Bolgo Dugag dialect). Other linguists have done preliminary (unpublished) work on other Bua languages: Ba (Boyeldieu field notes), Zan Gula (Sauer & Sauer, personal documentation), Bon Gula (Roberts 2004, 2010). See Boyeldieu et al. (2018) for an up-to-date presentation of the family and of the available data.

Kulaale is virtually undocumented. Before my visits to Tilé Nougar in 2014 (24 hours), 2017 (one week) and 2020 (one week), only four wordlists had been collected: Gaudefroy-Demombynes (1906:107) of 200 words, Joly (1935) of 200 words, Faris & Meundeung (1993) of 160 words, and 50 words collected by Chadian linguist Khalil Alio in 2005. All except the last use unreliable transcriptions (e.g. advanced tongue root (ATR) contrasts for vowels are not identified, tone is not transcribed).

Only two Bua groups have been the object of anthropological documentation, one limited (Niellim/Lua, cf. Boyeldieu & Seignobos 1975; Testut 1978), and one extensive (Gula Iro, cf. Pairault 1966, 1969, 1995). Anthropological documentation on the Fania/Kulaawe, on the other

hand, is virtually non-existent, limited to a few mentions in de Rendinger’s (1936) report on a visit to Tilé Nougar in 1911, Moulinard’s (1947) general description of habitation in Chad, and Vincent’s (1962, 1975) account of religious practices in the Guéra massif.

2. Current research

I carried out preliminary fieldwork in Tilé Nougar in 2014 (one day), 2017 (one week), and 2020 (one week). The preliminary data shows that:

- Kulaale vowels have an advanced tongue root (ATR) contrast and harmony;
- the tone system is characterized by two contrastive heights, with frequent use of polar tone and complex non-concatenative tonal morphology;
- verbs have complex morphology with three moods (indicative, subjunctive, infinitive), and a derived instrumental form (‘do X with’), in all three moods;
- a focus suffix is used on all verbal forms (simple and associative forms, all moods) when an element in the utterance is focused.

I was recently awarded a *Documenting Endangered Languages* grant from the US National Science Foundation and National Endowment for the Humanities to document Kulaale in the coming three years (2020-2023). The research team also includes an anthropologist (Rémadji Hoïnathy) and a botanist (Ngomde Djasnabaye) to conduct both linguistic and cultural documentation. This project will produce the first full account of the Kulaale language in the form of a collection of interlinearized and annotated audio/video recordings of various language use types and genres, and a reference grammar with Kulaale-French-English lexicon. All the collected data will be deposited at *The Language Archive* hosted by the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (Nijmegen, The Netherlands), which has a strong commitment to long-term preservation and accessibility. The cultural documentation will encompass socio-economic organization, oral history, religious practices, material culture, and environmental knowledge. Much of this work will consist in the collection of texts in the Kulaale language. The cultural side of the project will result in an ethno-historical monograph describing the Kulaale culture and its history in the words of the speakers themselves, together with the enrichment of a pre-existing ethnobotanical database, and a detailed report on the Kulaawe’s knowledge and use of plants.

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