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Notes on Gàlì (Miltu), a moribund Chadic language (Republic of Chad)

Abstract

A short description of Gali, an East Chadic language, based on field notes taken in 1972.

Keywords

Chadic, Gali, Miltu.

1. Introduction

Some thirty miles southeast of Bousso on the southern banks of the river Chari lies the village of a people called *Gàlìn*,¹ where their language, called *Gàlì*, is spoken by some 3–400 people.² Gali borders on some other small East Chadic languages such as Sarwa to the West and Ndam to the South,³ while the present lingua franca of the wider region is Chadian Arabic. The name Miltu (on German maps) or Miltou has been given to this people by the Bagirmi (Barma) overlords who used to exercise their rule over the whole area along the Chari river for centuries. According to some weak historical memory, the Miltu people travelled to their present location from a place called Sede in Bagirmi land and on their way they passed through a village named Jena, a village in the Melfi region, before coming down to the Chari riverside, their present home

* Herrmann Jungraithmayr collected the Gali data in the field and carried out the linguistic analysis. Carsten Peust took over the final editing of this paper and appended the last section on the genetic classification of Gali.

¹ A plural form. The corresponding singular is *Gàlìni* for a male and *Gàlìnil* for a female individual.

² In 1972, the number of speakers was given to me by the village head as 363.

³ See the map in Jungraithmayr (1977: 134).

location. All this has of course to be checked and verified since my information is quite scanty having been collected at a short visit to the village. For instance, the Melfi reference sounds suspicious, this region lying at a distance of several hundred miles to the northeast; migrating from there would also imply that they had to cross the river from the northern to the southern banks.

It is worth noting that Miltu land is situated at the very eastern end of what the French called “bec de canard” and the Germans “Entenschnabel”, i.e. “duckbill”.⁴ Some remnants of the German colonial administration are still visible (in 1972), e.g. the office building of the colonial administrator and the avenue of trees leading straight up to it. Of course, after some sixty to seventy years during which nobody had ever taken care of it any more, the real estate has run wild: Plants and bush have grown exuberantly all over. As to the history of the place, it was already before the first world war, in 1911, that France and Germany had agreed on a deal whereby this north-eastern section of the German colony was left to France in compensation for territories to the east and south of the German area (Morocco-Congo treaty of 4 November 1911).

The present village of Miltu comprises of the following three wards (quarters): Tongor, Gumul and Galiny, the residence of the chief being situated in Gumul.⁵

The following data was recorded on 24 March 1972 in collaboration with the Gali speakers Sale René, Brahim Mumi and Ousmane Alifa. I wish to express my sincere thanks to them for their friendly assistance. There are four more Gali persons whom I owe thanks for their information: Corporal Gurmut in Bouso, Brahim Kunvur in Abou Deia, Ramadan Lamana and Mumin Alkali in Fort Lamy (now N'Djaména).

At the occasion of my short visit to Miltu village I took photos of some elderly male persons whom I met on the spot. Some of them are included in the annex of this article. I was deeply impressed by the beauty and spirit reflected by their heads and faces.

⁴ Cf. Kund (1931). It had been part of German Cameroon since 1894 (Border treaty of 15 March 1894).

⁵ It has been noted that there is another village higher up the river, southeast of Baranga-South, the language of which is called Dəmraw, possibly a dialect of Gali (Miltu).

2. Linguistic notes

2.1. Phonology

2.1.1. Consonants

The number of consonants amounts to 29:

<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>ʔ</i>
<i>b</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>j</i>	<i>g</i>	
<i>ɓ</i>	<i>dʼ</i>			
<i>mb</i>	<i>nd</i>	<i>nj</i>	<i>ŋg</i>	
<i>f</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>š</i>		<i>h</i>
<i>v</i>	<i>z</i>			
<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>ɲ</i>		
<i>w</i>	<i>r, ɾ⁶, l</i>	<i>y</i>		

The following palatalized and labialized consonants may have to be added to the above list of basic consonants: *py*, *rw*, *fw*. In final position, *p* and *t* are unreleased; e.g. *fwóót* ‘four’, *sáp* ‘three’.

2.1.2. Vowels

The vowel inventory comprises the following nine qualities:

<i>i</i>		<i>ə</i>		<i>u</i>
	<i>e</i>			<i>o</i>
		<i>ɛ</i>	<i>ʌ</i>	<i>ɔ</i>
			<i>a</i>	

The vowels *ɛ* and *ɔ* occur only sporadically and may not be phonemic. Note that the central vowel region is doubly occupied, a feature shared by other languages spoken in this region such as Bagirmi and Sumray. Gali makes much use of these centralized vowels, as e.g. in *ná* ‘I’, *nə* ‘we’, *ŋgə* ‘you (f.sg.)’, *sír* ~ *sár* ‘two’, *pádām* ‘one’, *màn* ‘porridge’, etc. Long vowels have also been noted and will be symbolized here by doubling of the vowel letter.

⁶ A flap. It has not been determined whether *ɾ* and *r* are distinct phonemes.

2.1.3. Tone

The language has been recorded with three tone levels: *à* low, *ā* mid, *á* high. In addition, two contour tones have been observed: *ǎ* low-high, *â* high-low. While the number of contrastive tones cannot be considered as definitive, there is no doubt that Gali is a tone language, as is a priori expected for any Chadic language. Illustrative minimal pairs are: *nà* “we” ≠ *ná* “I”; *pààr* “blood” ≠ *páár* “sun”; *tàr* “man” ≠ *tár* “moon”.

2.2. Morphology

2.2.1. Noun

Nouns and verbs display very similar structural shapes. Out of the some forty recorded nouns, 28 possess two radicals: CVC, CVVC, and 10 three: CVCVC(V). The only one with just a single radical is *fù* “meat” (CVV). The noun *bùrɣən* (CVCCVC) may be a composite form.

Affixes do not seem to exist. Unfortunately, no observations have been made regarding grammatical gender (but cf. note 2 above). As to the category of number, only the following plural forms have been recorded:

	singular	plural	
(1)	<i>fúdí</i>	<i>fwōt</i>	fish
(2)	<i>gəlám</i>	<i>kə̀rù</i>	compound (“concession”)
(3)	<i>kām</i>	<i>wūūs</i>	person
(4)	<i>mààr</i>	<i>mǎn</i>	woman
(5)	<i>máyíní</i>	<i>mímín</i>	star
(6)	<i>tàr</i>	<i>tārú</i>	man (male)

Obviously, plural formation is rather irregular in this language. Apart from two cases with internal ablaut (1, 5), there are two cases of suppletive plurals (2, 3) and one apparently with an *u*-suffix (6).

In addition to these, the following nouns have been recorded:

belly	<i>gə̀dən</i>
blood	<i>pààr</i>
body	<i>šín</i>
bone	<i>gə̀ssín</i>
breast (female)	<i>bàn</i>

brother	<i>sán- ~ sín-</i>
chest	<i>bùrɣân</i>
dream	<i>sáǎn</i>
ear, my	<i>šīmānī</i>
eye, my	<i>ǎddìnī</i>
fire	<i>kúúr</i>
fireplace	<i>gùɲ ~ gūwún</i>
granary	<i>càrū</i>
groundnut	<i>kúnì</i>
head, my	<i>kīrí</i>
hut	<i>gábáɾ</i>
meat	<i>fì</i>
moon	<i>táɾ</i>
mouth, my	<i>pyēērí</i>
nape of neck	<i>tóɲúl</i>
navel	<i>tìmsì</i>
neck, my	<i>kòòlī</i>
nose, my	<i>fūnānī</i>
oil	<i>sówáán</i>
porridge (“boule”)	<i>màn</i>
pot	<i>tàrí</i>
river	<i>rwáát</i>
salt	<i>áánī</i>
sauce	<i>bǎl</i>
sheep	<i>kàràṁ</i>
soup	<i>ḃàlǎ</i>
sun	<i>páár</i>
tongue	<i>lís-</i>
tooth	<i>sǎn</i>
vein	<i>sùggūr</i>
water	<i>wúm</i>

2.2.2. Pronoun

The pronominal paradigm comprises nine positions, five in the singular and four in the plural. Sex/gender is distinguished in the 2nd and 3rd persons of the singular. The following table presents the three basic categories: subject pronoun, absolute pronoun and possessive pronominal suffixes. As in some other East Chadic languages (e.g. Bidiya, Dangla), there are specific lengthened forms for subject pronouns in the future tense. The possessive suffixes have been recorded only for two nouns, “brother” and “tongue”, so that their shapes have to remain somewhat preliminary.

	subject pronoun (past/ present)	subject pronoun (future)	absolute pronoun	possessive suffixes with “brother”	possessive suffixes with “tongue”
sg. 1c	<i>nó</i>	<i>náà</i>	<i>ní</i>	<i>sónn-ání</i>	<i>lís-édí</i>
2m	<i>njò</i>	<i>njòó</i>	<i>káɲ</i>	<i>sóɲɲ-əm</i>	<i>lís-əm</i>
2f	<i>ɲgò</i>	<i>ɲgòó</i>	<i>káyè</i>	<i>sóɲɲ-ē</i>	<i>lís-è</i>
3m	<i>cí ~ cá</i>	<i>cíì</i>	<i>cí</i>	<i>sín-í</i>	<i>lís-ōw</i>
3f	<i>ndà</i>	<i>ndàó</i>	<i>káàn ~ kání</i>	<i>síɲ-ít</i>	<i>lís-āt</i>
pl. 1incl	<i>kà</i>	<i>kàá</i>	<i>kááyí</i>	?	?
1excl	<i>nə</i>	<i>nəó</i>	<i>káání</i>	<i>síɲɲ-ì</i>	?
2c	<i>há ~ h́á</i>	<i>háò</i>	<i>hónān</i>	<i>síɲɲ-ìn</i>	?
3c	<i>ɲgá ~ ɲgú</i>	<i>ɲgál</i>	<i>ɲgíyà</i>	<i>síɲɲ-ā</i>	?

Taking a look at the other nouns that have been recorded only together with the 1st sg. suffix, we observe that the common element of all of them is the final vowel *-i*, whereas the preceding consonant can be either *-n-*: *àdd-ìní* “my eye”, *fūn-āní* “my nose”, *šīm-āní* “my ear” (as also in “my brother”), or a liquid: *kī-rí* “my head”, *kòò-lī* “my neck”, *pyēē-rí* “my mouth”. To be sure, the morpheme separations proposed here are preliminary as we cannot be certain of the precise shape of the stem. But it may be tentatively suggested that the *-di-*suffix of *lís-édí* “my tongue” represents the most basic shape of this termination,⁷ whereas the liquid is merely a phonetic alternant of *-d-* in intervocalic position, and the same might hold for *-n-* (preferred when the stem contains a nasal?).

⁷ To be compared with *-du* which serves as the 1st sg. possessive suffix in a number of East Chadic languages (e.g. Sokoro, Saba, Dangla).

2.2.3. Numeral

Gali employs the following basic cardinal numerals:

<i>pádām</i> “1”	<i>jīpdām</i> “6”	<i>gwòm pěy pádām</i> “11”
<i>sír</i> ~ <i>sár</i> “2”	<i>jìksár</i> “7”	<i>gùmē sír</i> “20”
<i>sáp</i> “3”	<i>fórwót</i> “8”	<i>gùmē sír pěy pádām</i> “21”
<i>fwóót</i> “4”	<i>bàànīpdām</i> “9”	<i>àrū pádām</i> “100”
<i>pìjì?</i> ~ <i>pìi</i> “5”	<i>gwòm</i> “10”	<i>dùbú</i> “1000”

The numerals “6” and “7” are evidently combined in a quinary manner from the last syllable of “5” plus, respectively, “1” and “2”, whereas “8” is a reduplicated “4”.⁸ The numeral “9” includes “1” at the end and might therefore have originated from something like “10 minus (?) 1”.⁹ The higher numbers are widespread areal terms, cf. Hausa *gómà* “10”, *dārí* “100”, *dùbú* “1000” or, even closer, Bagirmi¹⁰ *àrú* “100”, *dūbú* “1000”.

2.2.4. Verb

The following verbs have been recorded:

	perfective stem	imperfective stem
“to bite”	<i>úr é</i>	(present:) <i>úr</i> , (future:) <i>úúr</i>
“to buy”	<i>ús é</i>	<i>òòs</i>
“to drink”	<i>sìy ē</i>	<i>s è</i>
“to eat (soft things)”	<i>tíy é</i>	<i>t é é</i>
“to eat (hard things)”	<i>šīm ē</i>	<i>š ē m</i>
“to fill”	<i>wún é</i>	(present:) <i>wūnn ē</i> , (future:) <i>wúnn é</i>
“to kill”	<i>kūj ē</i>	<i>kòc</i>
“to see”	<i>kàl ē</i>	<i>k à l</i>
“to swallow”	<i>jìr ē</i>	<i>j ò r</i>

⁸ Similarly in some other East Chadic languages, e.g. Dangla, Mawa, Mubi.

⁹ Similarly in some other East Chadic languages, e.g. Mubi, Sokoro, Sumray.

¹⁰ Quoted from Keegan & Djibrine (2016).

2.2.4.1. Verbal aspect system

There is a clear-cut binary aspect system at work, with a perfective (PFV) opposing an imperfective stem (IPFV). The term “Langstamm”, often applicable in East Chadic languages, e.g. Mubi and Migama, does not make sense for Gali, since in most cases IPFV is segmentally shorter than PFV. Within IPFV, a slight difference seems to exist between an IPFV present and an IPFV future stem (see “to bite”, “to fill”). The primary marker that distinguishes the two basic aspect stems is the perfective suffix *-e*. Internal vowel change (ablaut), however, also plays a certain role, where we observe an alternation of a close vowel (PFV) with a more open vowel (IPFV) in some of the verbs. The same kind of alternation is well-known from a number of other Chadic languages including Gadang, Mokilko and Sokoro. Finally, also slight tonal changes have to be considered, for whose elaboration the material is not abundant enough.

2.2.4.2. Verbal conjugation

Three tenses are attested: Past/perfect, present and future. They are formed with the subject pronouns enumerated in section 2.2.2 above, so that only 1st sg. forms need to be quoted here. Past/perfect: *ná tíyé m̀l̀n* “I ate / have eaten food”. The present tense includes an element (an auxiliary?) *gālā*, e.g.: *ná gālā téé m̀l̀n* “I am eating food”. The future tense was recorded as *náà tē* (~ *tā*) *m̀l̀n* “I shall eat food”. In place of the present tense marker *gālā*, we here find a lengthened form of the subject pronoun. Given the analogy with the present tense, the subject pronouns of the future tense might be amalgamations of the ordinary subject pronouns plus some erstwhile future marker, whose last trace survives in the lengthening of the pronominal morpheme.

3. Genetic classification

Given the still limited amount of available information on Gali, even a classic lexicostatistic study would hardly be feasible. Nevertheless, it is possible to forward a reasonable hypothesis concerning the genetic position of Gali. Gali is clearly a Chadic, more specifically an East Chadic language. While the root **p-d* representing the numeral “4” (in Gali: *fwóót*) is a strikingly reliable indicator of Chadic languages, being shared by all Chadic languages hitherto documented,¹¹ the root **s-b* “3” (in Gali: *sáp*) is an equally good indicator of East Chadic, being represented in (almost) all East Chadic languages to the exclusion of all other branches of Chadic.¹²

¹¹ Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow (1994, I: 73).

¹² Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow (1994, I: 168).

In terms of geography, we would expect Gali to be one of the languages of the so-called branch A of East Chadic, all of which are located near the rivers Chari or Logone.¹³ For example, the Sarwa language, spoken in the immediate neighbourhood of Gali, belongs to the Sumray subgroup of East Chadic A. However, the evidence does not seem to show any particular closeness of Gali to the East Chadic A languages. An important common innovation of the languages that have traditionally been classified as East Chadic A is the replacement of the Proto-Chadic root **p-t* “sun” by the neologism **t-w*, which originally stood for “fire” but in these languages extended its meaning, sometimes along with additional specifiers such as “fire from above (= sun)”.¹⁴ In Gali, however, the original root has been preserved (*páár* “sun”), which favours a connection with East Chadic B rather than East Chadic A.

If taken seriously, this would make Gali the westernmost known outlier of the East Chadic B branch. Looking for those East Chadic B languages that are geographically closest to Gali, even though at some distance, we come upon a group of idioms that can be dubbed “Sokoro group”, including Sokoro, Saba, Mawa, Ubi and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Barain.¹⁵ In fact, it turns out that Gali shares conspicuous similarities with the Sokoro group of languages. One characteristic isogloss of this subgroup is the root **b-k* for “meat”: Sokoro *bikò*¹⁶ = Saba *biiki*¹⁷ = Ubi *būgi*¹⁸ = Mawa *bük*¹⁹, to which Gali *fii* can probably be related, whereas most other Chadic languages show reflexes of a different root **l-w*.²⁰ A few more diagnostic isoglosses that connect Gali with languages of the Sokoro group are the following:

- “breast” *bàŋ* = Ubi *pāynà* = Barain *pēyé*²¹
- “compound (sg.)” *gèlām* = Sokoro *kalay* “compound”²² = Saba *gòlmò* “case, maison” = Barain *gòlmó* “house”²³
- “groundnut” *kúni* = Barain *kúnni*

¹³ Mokilko will be left out of consideration here, since its assignment to East Chadic A or B is controversial, see Peust (2018: 250f.).

¹⁴ Jungrathmayr & Ibrizimow (1994, I: 161).

¹⁵ On this subgroup see Roberts (2009: 129), Blažek (2011: 53), Peust (2018: 245).

¹⁶ Jungrathmayr & Ibrizimow (1994, II: 233).

¹⁷ All Saba data are from Jungrathmayr (in press).

¹⁸ All Ubi data are from Alio (2004).

¹⁹ Jungrathmayr (1981: 58).

²⁰ Jungrathmayr & Ibrizimow (1994, I: 116).

²¹ All Barain data are from Lovstrand (2015).

²² Rineke van Rijn (SIL), personal communication.

²³ This term may be cognate with a root **g-r* attested elsewhere in East Chadic, e.g. Bidiya *gèèrà* “maison”, and even beyond (cf. **g-d* in Jungrathmayr & Ibrizimow 1994, I: 99), but the nasal extension appears to be a peculiarity of the Sokoro subgroup. Cf. also Gali *kèrù* “compound (pl.)” = Barain *kálò* “compound”.

- “sheep” *kàrəm* (-*m* suffix?) = Sokoro *gàgìr*²⁴
- “to swallow” *nìrē* = Sokoro *nédīyé*²⁵
- “water” *wūm* = Sokoro *ùmbó*²⁶ = Saba *úmbò*

Finally, the present tense marker *gālā* mentioned in section 2.2.4.2 above is likely to be related, despite some possible difference in function, to a future auxiliary that has been reported as *gàrà* for Sokoro (Jungraithmayr 2005: 176) and as *kār* for Mawa (Roberts 2013: 119); all of these stand in the same syntactic position between the subject pronoun and the imperfective verb stem.

The Gali verbal system, in which the perfective stem is characterized by a suffix *-e* whereas the imperfective stem shows no suffix but rather, at least in some instances, an ablaut of the root vowel towards a more open quality (*u > o*, *i > e*), also looks quite similar to what has been documented for verbs in Sokoro (Jungraithmayr 2005).

This attempt at a classification is hampered, of course, by the defective attestation of all languages concerned, and still needs further substantiation in the future. But it happens to agree well with the extra-linguistic evidence: The Sokoro group of languages is located, broadly spoken, in the region of Melfi or to the north of it, which is approximately the region from which the Gali believe to have originated according to their oral history memories cited above in section 1.

This is not the place to write a historical phonology of Gali, but we can observe that an original word-internal dental stop tends to be weakened to a rhotic *r ~ ʀ* in this language:²⁷ *páár* “sun” = Mubi *fāt*, *úré* “to bite” = Mubi *àwàdé*, *nìrē* “to swallow” = Sokoro *nédīyé*, *fórwót* “eight” < **fót-fót* (reduplication of *fwóót* “four”), and cf. the observations made in section 2.2.2 concerning the 1st person sg. possessive suffix. Second, there seems to be a tendency for word-initial stops that are voiced in related languages to be voiceless in Gali, such as *kām* “person” = Migama *gimú*, *kòòlī* “my neck” = Mokilko *góllá* “neck”, *pààr* “blood” = Migama *báára*, *pìjì?* “five” = Mubi *bífä*, *pyēē-* “mouth” = Migama *bii*; sometimes with *f-* as the Gali representative of *b-* elsewhere: *fúdí* “fish” = Mawa *bùs*²⁸ and the noun for “meat” discussed above.

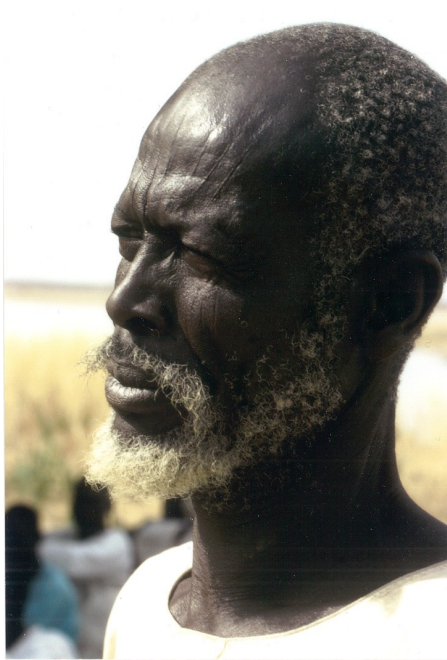
²⁴ Jungraithmayr & Ibriszimow (1994, II: 291).

²⁵ Jungraithmayr (2005: 180).

²⁶ Jungraithmayr (2005: 176).

²⁷ Migama data from Jungraithmayr & Adams (1992), Mokilko data from Jungraithmayr (1990), Mubi data from Jungraithmayr (2013).

²⁸ Jungraithmayr (1981: 67).



Photographs by H. Jungraithmayr 1972: Chief of the Miltu (Gali) community (top left); elders of the Miltu (Gali)

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²⁹ Thanks to Joseph Lovestrand (SIL) for having shared this manuscript.

³⁰ Thanks to Doris Weiss (SIL) for having shared this manuscript.