

1 Introduction

1.1 Dogon languages

Dogon is a family of languages spoken principally in eastern Mali, though some Dogon groups have spread across the border into Burkina Faso. As a whole, the family belongs to the vast Niger-Congo phylum, but its precise position relative to other Niger-Congo families (e.g. Mande, Gur) is very unclear at this point. The internal structure of the Dogon family is also very unclear, as is the number of mutually unintelligible languages it contains. The French colonial administration, having little interest in small native languages, favored (macro-)ethnic over (precise) linguistic classification, hence “Dogon” rather than e.g. “Jamsay,” and labeled linguistic varieties within each such macro-ethnicity as “dialects,” a tradition maintained even in current Francophone scholarship. For somewhat similar reasons, (macro-)ethnic classification suits African governments fine. The official language policy in Mali, for example, is to equate “language” with (macro-)ethnicity, select the linguistic variety spoken in a particular focal community as standard, develop pedagogical materials in this variety, and teach it as “mother tongue” to schoolchildren and interested adults everywhere who belong to this ethnicity. In the case of Dogon, the Toro-So variety of the Sanga area was chosen as standard Dogon and is the basis of government-approved literacy efforts in the region.

Using the test of mutual unintelligibility as diagnostic, on the other hand, there are clearly many distinct Dogon languages in Mali. We do not yet have Dogon-wide data in a form that would permit accurate identification of language boundaries and of genetic subgrouping. However, having surveyed the varieties spoken in the northern and northeastern parts of Dogon country, I can report the following as distinct languages, using the towns of Dountza and Boni (primarily Fulfulde-speaking) and Koro (Dogon and Mossi) as geographical reference points:

1. Jamsay (Diamsay), see below;
2. Beni-Walo, spoken in two geographically separated villages, Walo at the western end of the long Gandamiya cliffs (on the far side of which is Kikara, where the Songhay language Tondi Songway Kiini is spoken), and Beni east of Dianwely Maoude;
3. Nanga (naŋa), spoken in the clustered villages of Anda, Soroni, Namakoro, Wakara, and Kono between Beni and the Tommo-So (Tombo-So) speaking zone that begins at Kasa and extends to Bandiagara;
4. Tabi-Sarinyere, spoken by the Tandam people east of Boni in several villages ringing the widely separated inselbergs of Tabi and Sariniéré, plus a few small villages and one substantial one (Koyo) on the two inselbergs framing Boni itself;
5. Najamba (= Bondu), spoken in a cluster of villages southwest of Douentza including Koubewel, Adia, and Tintam.

Assuming that the better-known Dogon languages of the plateau and the southern plains (Tommo-So, Donno-So, Toro-So, Teɲou-Kan, etc.) are indeed distinct languages rather than just dialects of each other, it seems likely that the total number of distinct languages in the family is not less than ten and may be around fifteen.

After the predictable failure of government-supported instruction in Toro-So in this zone, local groups have launched literacy programs in Jamsay and Bondu and these are now being taught in primary schools. Aside from its own mother-tongue villages, Jamsay is being taught in the Tabi area (whose people have long known Jamsay as a second language, since Mondoro is not far away), and the children of Beni attend school in Jamsay-speaking Dianwely Maoudé, where Jamsay is of course used. Therefore Jamsay is slowly acquiring the status of a locally dominant “standard” Dogon in the Douentza-Boni region.

1.2 Jamsay language

In terms of population, Jamsay is the largest of all Dogon languages, with over 30,000 speakers. It is spoken three zones: 1) several villages northeast and southeast of Douentza (e.g. Dianwely, Boumbam); 2) a cluster of villages including Mondoro near the Burkina border east of Tabi mountain; and 3) a cluster of villages near Koro (also near the border, but farther south). Dialectal variation between zones 1 and 2 is slight, so the main dialectal split is between Jamsay proper in zones (1-2) and the Guru dialect in zone (3).

The Jamsay recognize that they are newcomers, in comparison to the older Dogon in the zone, who include not only speakers of the four other languages mentioned above but also some others who have now been linguistically Jamsay-ized while remaining conscious of their status as “owners” of the country. Prior to the Jamsay migration of perhaps a few hundred years ago, Dogon villages were almost entirely confined to the inselbergs (tectonic mountains, often rising abruptly from the plains in the form of sheer cliffs, either cone-shaped or extending as ridges. The villages were either on the shoulders of the cliffs, or on the summits of the inselbergs—locations blessed by water sources (mountain springs) but also favored by military considerations (defences against marauding Tuaregs, Fulbe, and slave-traders). These Dogon would farm some fields in the plains, generally not far from the inselbergs, as well as some fields on the summits and some vegetable gardening near water sources. The Jamsay were the first Dogon in the area to build villages in the essentially unprotected flat plains between the often widely separated inselbergs, and the first to fully develop fields in the plains. To defend themselves, they developed a culture of male bravado that is still in evidence today under much more benign external conditions. They do not fit the stereotype of the helpless peasant, ever ready to pay tribute to foreign warlords to secure a modicum of peace.

1.3 Environment

As noted above, much of the region is defined physically by flat plains punctuated by inselbergs. The Jamsay proper are the prototypical people of the plains, and are quite conscious of a broad cultural gap between them and the local “mountaineers” (tórò-m), though some of the latter now speak Jamsay. The plains/mountain division is reinforced by periodic disputes over ownership of fields. The mountain people claim ancient ownership of the fields in the plains now farmed by the Jamsay proper,

while the Jamsay point out that they were the first to clear these fields and have now farmed them for many generations. These disputes have taken on a sharper edge in recent decades, as climatic changes and desertification have cut the annual rainfall in half, making control of the most productive fields all the more critical.

Most of the Dogon (and Songhay) of the inselberg region are farmers. The principal crop is millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*). Other wet-season crops include sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), cow-pea (*Vigna vexillata*), sesame (*Sesamum indicum*), roselle (*Hibiscus sabdariffa* in red and green varieties), cassava (*Manihot utilissima*), peanut (*Arachis hypogaea*), and groundnut (*Vigna subterranea*). Rice is only grown in a few small pockets. The millet harvest is around October or early November and is critical to local subsistence, since the staple food is millet cake (tô) with baobab-leaf sauce. Since 1975, millet harvests have become unreliable due to varying combinations of poor rainfall, too much late rainfall that causes rot, ordinary crop pests (flock birds such as the dioc *Quelea quelea* and the golden sparrow *Passer luteus*, grasshoppers and millet bugs, the parasitic herb *Striga aspera*). During my Jamsay fieldwork in 2004, the millet crop (already questionable do to below-average rainfall) was decimated by a locust invasion.

Most Jamsay villages have little opportunity to farm in the dry season (the “contresaison”) since they lack access to year-round mountain springs and do not have an irrigation system fed by wells. There is accordingly an annual exodus of young men and some young women to the big cities of the south after the harvest, in search of usually menial labor (farm work, watchmen, maids). The mountain people, and some other Dogon farther south with better water resources, do a moderate amount of dry-season vegetable gardening (especially onion, okra, potato, chili pepper, and African eggplant *Solanum aethiopicum*, but also carrots, lettuce, and some other vegetables). These people also harvest fruits throughout the year, from fields (watermelons) or from planted orchards (mangoes, papayas, guavas, bananas, tamarinds, oranges, lemons). These are supplemented by fruits from native trees such as *Lannea microcarpa* (wild grape), *Vitellaria paradoxa* (karité), *Vitex doniana*, *Ziziphus mucronata* (jujube), and *Detarium microcarpum*.

The wet season (“hivernage”) is from June to September. There is usually no rainfall from October to May. This dry season can be divided into a cold season that peaks in January (with daily high temperatures around 20 Celsius), and an extremely hot season that peaks in April and May (with daily high temperatures around 45 Celsius).

Herding was traditionally handled by other ethnic groups who mingle with the Jamsay, chiefly Fulfulde (especially cattle) and to a lesser extent Bella (sheep and goats). However, Jamsay villages often own some livestock in addition to their fields. Cattle are typically entrusted to Fulbe, who consume or sell the milk. An increasing number of Jamsay are directly involved in sheep and goat herding.

The plains harbor a rather modest number of wild flora and fauna species. Typical grasses of the drier plains are *Schoenefeldia* and *Aristida*. In the fields, common wet-season weeds in the fields are grasses (*Digitaria*, *Panicum*, *Brachiaria*, *Dactyloctenium*), herbs (*Commelina forskaliae*, various legumes), and vines (*Ipomoea* spp., wild melon spp.). The dominant tree of the plains is *Acacia tortilis*. There are few “forests” (depressions with dense tree and liana growth) in these plains, which therefore no longer support large mammals, though old people remember when lions and leopards roamed the wild, feeding on gazelles, antelopes, and buffalo. In addition

to birds, many of them migratory (i.e. present during the wet season and shortly thereafter), the common animals nowadays are rodents and other small mammals (squirrel, several mice, hedgehog). Hyenas, jackals, and one gazelle are occasionally found in a few wooded areas. Elephants still periodically traverse the wet-season swamps of the Mondoro-Tabi area on their way toward Gosi.

The flora and fauna of the mountains are much richer. Typical shrubs of the lower slopes, among boulders, are *Combretum micranthum* and *Guiera senegalensis*; Higher up one finds typical inselberg trees such as *Ficus abutilifolia* (one of several figs in the area) and the wild grape (*Lannea microcarpa*). Montane fauna include baboons and two smaller primates, a mongoose, a wild cat, and a hyrax (dassie). Many bird spp. are found in the mountains (stone partridge, rock pigeon, stone-chat, etc.).

1.4 Previous and contemporary study of Jamsay

The single previous academic work on this language is a 1988 Laval University dissertation University (Quebec) by Oumar Ongoïba: “Étude phonologique du dogon, variante ġamsay (Mali).” I happened to meet the author in July 2004 in Douentza as he made a rare visit there following a death in the family. He is now teaching French in the Toronto area.

As noted above, there has been recent interest in Jamsay in connection with local literacy programs. Mr. Souleïman Ongoïba, a Douentza-based employee of the NGO Near East Foundation (NEF), has been the driving force behind this. Because government policy favors Toro-So as the standard Dogon, there has been no support in the capital Bamako for theoretical or pedagogical research on Jamsay.

1.4.1 Fieldwork

I have been involved in fieldwork on languages of northern Mali since 1989. Grammars, dictionaries, and text collections on three Songhay languages (Koyra Chiini of Timbuktu, Koyraboro Senni of Gao, and Tondi Songway Kiini of Kikara near Douentza) have now been published. A dictionary and a text collection on Hassaniya Arabic have also appeared, and a grammar and a dictionary of Tamashek (Tuareg) are expected to appear shortly. I intend to complete a grammar and a dictionary of another Songhay language, Humburi Senni, in the near future. I have some textual and lexicographic material on Tadaksahak, a Tuareg-ized Songhay of the Menaka area, but I have no immediate plans for publication.

Since Dogon as a whole is little-known linguistically, since the Dogon are known to be ethnographically interesting, and since I had already worked in on two Songhay languages in the same general eco-zone (Tondi Songway Kiini and Humburi Senni), I decided to shift to Dogon as my next fieldwork target.

A large team project would be ideal, given the number of languages and the corresponding need for many bodies, but as of 2004 I had secured funding only for a solo project. I chose to focus on Jamsay, while beginning parallel work on other, as yet completely undescribed, Dogon languages of the Douentza and Boni regions.

In preparation, I spent about 9 days in summer 2003 doing rapid-fire lexicographic work on Jamsay. This permitted me to put together a quick and dirty

working lexicon back in the U.S. With funding for a sabbatical year secured, I began serious fieldwork in July 2004. Though based in Douentza, during August and September 2004 I spent a 4-8 days each in Dianwely Kessel (a nearby Jamsay-speaking village), Tupere (Tabi-Sariniéré language), Beni (Beni-Walo language), Anda (Naŋa language), and Koubewel (Bondu language). This allowed me to survey the languages of the region, make contacts with potential future research assistants, do the flora and fauna terminology (with extensive flora collecting by my assistants), and in some cases to make tape recordings.

In October and November, back in Douentza, I focused on transcribing Jamsay texts, extending the lexicon, and on drafting this grammar.

With the Dogon project I am shifting in part toward electronic “publication” of lexical and textual data, while continuing to publish at least the larger grammars in print form. My intention is to put up, by myself or with others, a comparative Dogon website beginning with lexical data, and to gradually integrate textual data into it.

1.4.2 Acknowledgements

The funding for the 2004-5 fieldwork came from the University of Michigan (full-year sabbatical on half pay) and from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Research Tools program. NEH has played a vital role in my overall Malian research, having previously contributed to my Songhay research and having co-funded (with the National Science Foundation) my Tamashek project. The University of Michigan has also helped keep me going between external grants with various forms of bridging support and publication subvention funds.

