

## Recent Fieldwork in Ghana: Report on Dompō and a note on Mpre

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In April 1998 I was able to visit a community in Ghana, whose language has been uncertain until now. Indeed I was informed that Dompō was either dead or was simply a subgroup of the Gonja not speaking a distinct language. This turned out to be entirely false, and reports of the death of Dompō exaggerated. I have added a note on Mpre, a language more likely to be extinct, but which no-one has comprehensively searched for since its first appearance in the literature.

### Dompō

The existence of the Dompō language has been known previously only through the 100 words given in Painter (1967) and the animal names transcribed by Cansdale (1971)<sup>1</sup>. It has several times been reported not to exist, or to be just an ethnonym or a submerged clan. As the present document shows, this is false.

The Dompō live in a settlement adjacent to the main town of the Nafaanra people, Banda, Brong-Ahafo Region, Ghana. Painter (1967) gives a map reference as 8° 09'N 2° 22'W. Banda is reached from Wenchi by going northwards from the main road to Bondoukou in Côte d'Ivoire and is still south of the Black Volta. A new road is being built that will eventually join Banda to Kintampo via Mo, but this is presently only passable with a four-wheel drive. The quarter of Banda where the Dompō live is called Dompofie. One or two women who married out are said to reside in nearby villages, but this is the only settlement of the Dompō.

As far could be ascertained, Dompō is the name of both the people and the language. The name 'Ndmpo' given in some documents seems to be a garbled version of this. The map accompanying Painter (1967) shows two very small areas near Banda marked 'Ndmpo' and a much larger area south of Larabanga marked NDMPO (Kwa Akan) inside the Gonja area. To judge by a slight mismatch between the list of surveyed villages (p. 31) and the data tables (p. 46 ff.) Painter probably found that only one of his sites actually spoke Dompō but subsequently failed to correct the map. This may also be the source of the idea that Dompō is only a Gonja subgroup, as this probably *is* the status of the larger group.

A wordlist of the Dompō language was collected by Roger Blench from Mr. Kosi Mila (ca. 55 years old) and a group of villagers on the 2nd of April 1998. The oral traditions of Dompō were narrated by the Chief, Mr. Nanas Sianɔ, assisted by the elders. I am grateful to all who took part for their enthusiastic co-operation.

Dompō is spoken by ten households, all of whom are also fluent in Nafaanra. All members of these households seem to have some command of the language, but whether it will be transmitted to the next generation in more than an attenuated form is open to doubt. Nonetheless, there is no evidence that it has ever been spoken by many people and bilingualism in Nafaanra must long have been a feature of the community. There are presently some 60-70 people with some command of the language and perhaps 10 who can recall obscure lexical items. As such, intensive further study is certainly a priority.

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<sup>1</sup> The present exercise confirmed, as far as possible, all Cansdale's identifications, and that his transcriptions were also reasonably accurate.

## Classification

The most recent influence on the Dompō language is clearly Nafaanra, but Dompō is clearly not related to Nafaanra. Painter (1967) assumes that Dompō belongs to North Guang, which it does on the basis of the lexicostatistic counts used in his paper. The numerous correspondences with Gonja suggest either that;

- a) it is a dialect of Gonja that has come under heavy influence from other languages
- b) it is a Guan language related to Gonja that has been relexified from Gonja and other languages
- c) it is a language of unknown provenance that has been heavily relexified from Gonja and other languages

One argument in favour of the latter is that no names for wild animals or trees in Dompō resemble those of Gonja in any way. Some of them resemble Mo and the Senufoid languages in the area (not only Nafaanra but Gyɔɔɔ and Banda Ashanti) but others seem to have no external parallels. Given the lack of detailed lexical material on many neighbouring languages this cannot be the basis for any firm conclusions. Nonetheless, it does suggest that Dompō might be a relic of the pre-Niger-Congo languages of West Africa.

## A note on Mpre

Our only information about this language is in an article by Cardinall (1931) published in the *Gold Coast Review*. He calls it 'A survival' and it consists of some ethnographic notes and a wordlist of a language called Mpre, spoken in a village named Butie. Cardinall says;

'Butie... stands more or less on the watershed of the Black and white Voltas not far from their confluence on the Southern path from Mpehe to Kabilipe.'

This is not remarkable for its precision, but it seems that area must have gone under the floodwaters when the Akosombo Dam was created. Where the populations were moved remains to be discovered.

Cardinall gives some 70 words of Mpre. Of these, the first five numerals resemble the Gonja numerals but most of the other seem to have no parallel anywhere. The list has been typed up and I am presently doing comparative work with it, but it might be a survival of a pre Niger-Congo language, or else the population was severely displaced and the language remains to be recognised from elsewhere in West Africa. No-one has yet gone in search of any remaining speakers of Mpre, but the experience of Dompō suggests that it would be worth trying.

Draft annotated wordlists of Dompō and Mpre are available from the author at [r.blench@odi.org.uk](mailto:r.blench@odi.org.uk) by email attachment in Word 97 format.

## References

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