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CHAPTER 4

***Kparo*: A Study of the Emergence and Death of a Minority Language Newspaper in Nigeria**

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Introduction

This paper is concerned with exploring the history, evolution, content, language and death of the *Kparo* newspaper, an indigenous, state-run minority language newspaper that was published between the mid and late 1980s in Baatonum (more popularly known as Bariba) language for the people of the former Borgu Local Government who occupy the westernmost fringes of Kwara State on Nigeria's border with Benin Republic. (A part of Borgu Local Government was ceded to Niger State by the General Ibrahim Babangida regime in 1991, and the part that remained in Kwara State was further subdivided into two local governments). The newspaper was a publicity organ of the Directorate for Social Mobilisation (DSM), better known as the Mass Mobilisation for Self-Reliance, Social Justice and Economic Recovery (MAMSER), a government agency which Professor Sam Oyovbaire, the then Minister of Information under the General Ibrahim Babangida transition regime, described as representing "the first time in Nigeria... a transition regime has deliberately undertaken a programme to generate desirable social conduct to complement its structural and institutional reforms" (1987, p. 3). To a great extent, this is true. MAMSER, which has now metamorphosed into the National Orientation Agency (NOA), was formed by the General Ibrahim Babangida regime in 1985 "to inculcate new values, politically educate the adult, socialise the young, and mobilise the masses" for the purpose of the government's failed attempt to restore democratic rule in the country (cited in Agbaje, 1997, p. 147).

The government reasoned that one of the most effective ways to create, sustain and deepen civic consciousness among the broad masses of the people was to deploy a medium that is indigenous to the people to reach them. It is, however, a moot point whether, indeed, the print medium is an effective means to reach a rural populace that is largely illiterate and steeped in an oral culture. But this paper does not intend to grapple with the problematic of determining the functional relevance of using a print medium to reach a largely illiterate audience. The point must be made, however, that given the capacity of the print medium to be a robust vault of information and to be a more permanent and more easily accessible record of events than the broadcast media, the experiment of introducing a newspaper culture among a largely oral people is not entirely unreasonable. What is more, deploying a minority language to publish a newspaper has the additional merit of preserving it, immunising it against the risk endangerment or extinction, conferring prestige on it, and elevating its social status.

The Baatonum language

In order to fully appreciate the dynamics that underpinned the emergence and death of the *Kparo* newspaper, it will be useful to briefly discuss the nature and origin of the language in which the paper was produced. The people's name for themselves is Baatonu (singular) or Baatombu (plural). Their name for their language is Baatonum. But the Yoruba people who are the closest cultural and geographic neighbours to the Baatombu variously call them Bariba, Ibariba or Baruba, and it is these names by which historians and other scholars who write about the people call them. Up to 30% of the people are literate in their language in Benin Republic. There is no record of the literacy rate among the speakers of the language in Nigeria, but it seems obvious, for reasons that will be shown later in this paper, that it can not be impressive.

There is very scanty research on the both the Baatonu people and their language. The language therefore comes across as one inconsequential “minor minority” language. But

this is not correct. The Final Report of the Proceedings Of the Meeting of Experts on the Use of the Regional or Subregional African Languages as Media of Culture and Communication with the Continent held at Bamako (Mali) between 18 and 22 June 1979 under the auspices of UNESCO listed the Baatonum (referred to in the report as Bariba) language as one of the 49 “languages of regional intercommunication” in Africa on account of the spread and relatively strong numerical strength of its speakership (UNESCO, 1981). The Baatonum language is spoken in fairly large numbers Benin Republic, Nigeria, parts of Burkina Faso, parts of Niger and parts of Ivory Coast. There are minimal dialectal variations between the Baatonum spoken in Benin Republic and the one spoken in Nigeria, but the variations are not sufficient to impair mutual intelligibility.

Bible portions have been published in the language since 1953 (<http://www.christusrex.org/www1/pater/ethno/Beni.html>). And a weekly Baatonum newspaper also called *Kparo* (which translates as “messenger” or “town crier”) is published in Benin Republic (http://ecole-ouverte.ens-lsh.fr/breve.php3?id_breve=22). Several radio and television stations in Benin Republic also broadcast programmes in Baatonum, which are very popular among the Baatonum-speaking people of Nigeria because of the contiguity of the two communities. In fact, the government of Benin Republic recently set up an exclusive Baatonum language, 24-hour FM station called *Deema* (meaning “Heritage”), which plays Baatonu music, discusses Baatonu traditions, literature, orature, mores, history, heritage and concerns. Instructively, this station enjoys an incredibly passionate patronage, both in terms of consumption and advertising, from Baatonu listeners in Nigeria.

This is scarcely surprising. In Kwara State where the Baatombu are found in Nigeria, the state-owned Radio Kwara devotes only a miserably marginal amount of airtime to

broadcast Baatonum language programmes, while both Kwara TV (also a state-owned television station) and the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA) in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, do not beam signals to as far as Baruten Local Government where the bulk of the people live. However, they translate news into the language for residents of Ilorin. Because of the low level of literacy in Baatonum language among the Nigerian speakers, the Benin Republic *Kparo* newspaper is not read in Nigeria.

A common misconception among early linguists who studied the Baatonum language was to regard Boko or Bokobaru (a language spoken in the Kaiama and New Bussa side of the former Borgu Local Government Area) as a dialect of Baatonum. As will be shown later in this paper, this misconception was one of the factors that stifled the growth of the *Kparo* newspaper experiment. Even though the Baatombu and Boko people share vastly common socio-historical and geographic experiences (for instance, they both belonged to the little studied but nonetheless powerful pre-colonial Borgu Empire, which stretched from the Borgu Province in present-day Benin Republic to Baruten and Kaiama local government areas of Kwara State, to Borgu and Agwara local government areas of Niger State and to parts of Kebbi State in Nigeria), their languages are mutually unintelligible and belong to different language phyla. While Baatonum language belongs to the Gur or Voltaic branch of the Niger Congo family, Boko belongs to the Mande branch of the same family (Bernd and Derek, 200; Greenberg, 1966).

The Baatonum language, in common with several other minority languages in northern Nigeria, has been a victim of systematic and deliberate state neglect. And this has origins in the attempt by British colonial conquerors to weld together the linguistically diverse, culturally disparate, and spatially separated ethnic groups that populate the vast Northern Region through the instrumentality of the Hausa language for administrative convenience. This goal was achieved at the expense of other languages and to the advantage of the

Hausa language. Today, Northern Nigeria has an unfair share of Nigeria's endangered and extinct languages (Kperogi, 1999).

Governance requires, according to Fasold, "communication both within the governing institutions and between government and the people" (1984: 3). It was obviously this latter requirement of governance that necessitated the purposive privileging of the Hausa language as the North's lingua franca, what Fishman (1972:665) defined as the "the language of consensus". The auxiliary consequence of this is the predictable subordination of all other languages and their consequent inability to acquire sufficient confidence, social prestige and native-language literacy to produce their own indigenous language press. The validity of this proposition is admittedly open to question. Minority languages in Southern Nigeria whose growth was not stymied by deliberate state policy do not have a vibrant indigenous language press tradition. Nor do they evince a tendency to have one soon. And even the Igbos whose language has benefited from several policies of purposive interventions from the colonial period to this day do not have as much impressive tradition of indigenous language newspaper publishing as the Hausa and the Yoruba. But these observations do not discount the fact that the historical neglect of minority languages in Northern Nigeria is responsible for the noticeable lack of language loyalty and language pride among the North's linguistic minorities. And this has a connection, however remote, with the near absence of indigenous newspapers among them.

In the first few years of primary school education, the colonial administrators not only made the teaching of Hausa compulsory for all students in the North; they also made it the language of instruction for all subjects for the first four years of primary education. This policy continued up to a few years after independence until the regional structure of Nigeria was dissolved and replaced by states by the emergent military regime. The result was that the first crop of educated people from minority linguistic groups in the North had

high literacy in the Hausa language but was illiterate in their own indigenous languages.

This was a huge seminal disincentive for the emergence and growth of indigenous language newspapers in mediums other than the Hausa language. The only set of minority groups who were insulated from this linguistic imperialism were the people who were educated in Christian missionary schools. Religious denominations developed writing systems for a whole host of minority languages and translated the Bible into those languages. This elevated the status of the languages to a certain extent. But these languages were few when one takes into account the immense linguistic diversity of the North.

Overview of *Kparo* newspaper

Even though media scholars have not yet reached a definitive consensus on what kind of publications unquestioningly qualify as newspaper, Otto Groth's five time-honoured criteria for determining a true newspaper are generally used. According to the German scholar, the five criteria for adjudging whether a publication meets the requirement to be called a newspaper are: the paper must be published periodically, "at intervals not less than once a week"; everyone who has the means to buy the paper should have access to it; it must have appeal for large, diverse segments of the society by having variety in its content; and lastly it must be "timely with some continuity of organisation" (cited in Bittner, 1989,p.22). The *Kparo* newspaper conformed to most of these criteria, except that the frequency of its publication was less than once a week. It was published only once in a month while it existed. This deficiency, however, is not sufficient to detract from the fact that it was a newspaper.

The publication of the paper was ambitious and revolutionary in more ways than one. Before MAMSER published *Kparo*, there had never been any record of a Baatonum language newspaper in Nigeria. (In Benin Republic, where Baatonum is one of the major languages of the country, the weekly newspaper, *Kparo*, predated the Nigerian experiment, and is still being published in Parakou, the capital of Borgu Province—one of the 12 provinces in Benin Republic). As a

consequence, there was a dearth of Nigerian professional manpower to produce the paper. This was compounded by the fact that there was an abysmally low literacy in the Baatonum language among its indigenous speakers in Nigeria. Predictably, the bulk of the manpower for the production of the paper was drawn from the editorial staff of *Kparo* in Benin Republic. The indigenous Baatonum-speaking Christians, most of whom are literate in the language, complemented these “foreign” staff. As a matter of fact, the *Kparo* in Nigeria largely mimicked the style, planning and presentation of the *Kparo* in Benin Republic. The only difference was in the pagination. The *Kparo* in Benin Republic has more pages than the one that was published in Nigeria.

However, it is not clear who the publisher of *Kparo* in Benin Republic is, and what has made it endure all these years. It would be interesting if further research can be done on this. The constraints of time and resources did not permit an exploration of this.

The content and operation of *Kparo*

Unlike most indigenous language newspapers in Nigeria, *Kparo* was a state-run newspaper, as was pointed out earlier. Expectedly, its content preponderantly reflected the policy pronouncements, thinking and propaganda of the government of the day. One of the crucial deficiencies in the content of the paper was that it hardly reported the activities of the local community where its contents were expected to be consumed. The paper’s primary occupation was to transmit the activities of government, particularly events surrounding the aborted transition to civil rule in 1992, to the local community. It therefore became only the print equivalent of the radio broadcasts that the people were already used to. In common with most state-run media, the paper scarcely had advertisements, except occasional government-sponsored public service announcements. But it was a fairly well-produced paper, except that its design and aesthetics could have benefited from some improvements. All the issues had a four-page, four-column format.

The paper was produced in Ilorin, the Kwara State capital, and edited by the late Mr J.B. Kperogi, a missionary-educated Baatonu man who was also the MAMSER coordinator of the then Borgu Local Government, which included the present Baruten and Kaiama local governments in Kwara State, and Agwara and Borgu local governments in Niger State. The late Mr Kperogi was a graduate of English and French and a distinguished educationist who had the distinction of being the first Baatonu to translate the Nigerian National Anthem into Baatonum language. His early missionary education, which included learning the orthography of the Batonu language, stood him in good stead for the job. But experts from the Republic of Benin supported him.

While the people were enthusiastic about the emergence of the paper, patronage was not as inspiring. Three reasons could be responsible for this. The first, obviously, is that most of the people for whom the paper was intended were not literate in the medium of the paper. Even the few who were literate in the language did not find much use for it since it merely rehashed government news stories that they had heard on radio or read in English-language newspapers. The paper did not connect with the people because it did not report the local concerns, anxieties and fears of the people. The second possible reason for the low patronage of the paper was that it was not free. For a rural community that has a large army of socially excluded and economically disaffiliated citizens, charging a fee to read a newspaper was probably not the best way to encourage a reading culture. The third factor might be that, because the idea of a newspaper in the local language was still novel, if not new-fangled, the culture of buying a paper, even for those who could afford it, had not yet caught on. Unfortunately, the paper did not last long enough to allow the people to come to grips with this new cultural reality.

Why the paper folded up

The first apparent reason why the paper ceased publication was that MAMSER, which produced the paper, ceased to exist. The paper, however, stopped appearing in the newsstands even before MAMSER wound up. The most important reason why the paper was rested was the stiff

opposition it got from the Boko-speaking people of the local government. After a few years of appearing in the newsstands in communities in the then Borgu Local Government Area, there was a protest from the Boko-speaking areas to the effect that the paper should not be circulated in their communities because they did not understand the language in which it was written. They instead demanded that a separate newspaper in their own language be published for them. The publishers of *Kparo* were shocked. They had been misled to suppose that everybody in the local government was Baatonu or at least understood Baatonum. Those who knew enough to know that there was a separate language called Boko in the local government thought that Baatonum and Boko were mutually intelligible, close linguistic cousins. They were wrong.

Well-placed Boko politicians who had access to those that mattered in MAMSER and the Federal Ministry of Information conspired to frustrate the continued publication of the paper. And their efforts were helped by the fact that the paper did not have an impressive patronage among the Baatonum-speaking people to start with. So the experiment became a mere flash in the pan. No attempt has been made since then, either by private individuals or government(s), to revive *Kparo* or start another newspaper in Baatonum.

Conclusion

In spite of all that has been said about the reasons for the collapse of the *Kparo* newspaper, it seems reasonable to make assumptions that the most fundamental draw-back of the paper was the absence of literacy among the Baatonum-speaking people in their native language. As long as native language literacy is lacking among the people, so long will the prospects of indigenous language print journalism elude them. Interestingly, one of the resolutions of the Pan African Seminar on the “Problems and prospects of the use of African national languages in education” held in Accra Ghana from August 26 to 30 in 1996 was that there must be “mass literacy of every language group in its own language, and of every community in its prevailing language,” and that there must be “full media use of the languages in newspapers and journals, radio and television, and the development of rural language journalism towards this end” (Appendix to the Final

Report, 2002).

As if guided by this resolution, the Kwara State Government in the early 1990s signified interest in introducing the learning and teaching of Baatonum language at the Kwara State College of Education, Ilorin. The idea of the government was to train a crop of teachers who would subsequently popularise literacy in Baatonum language at the lower levels of education. For this purpose, the government recruited teachers from Benin Republic, where Baatonum is taught and studied from primary schools to the university. But this effort was frustrated by the lack of interest on the part of the Baatonu people in Nigeria to enroll for the course. The prospective students said apart from the low prestige that would be attached to being students of a language that is not spoken beyond Kwara State in Nigeria, their career choices upon graduation would be severely limited. They would be condemned to the drudgery of teaching a language to a people who would think they did not need to learn it.

This reality poses a bleak future for the prospects of the emergence of another Baatonum language newspaper in Nigeria. It seems that the most crucial reform needed to reverse this state of affairs is an attitudinal one. Like most linguistic minorities in Nigeria, the Baatonu in Nigeria have a deep-seated contempt for their own language, inspired in part by years of defective teaching in schools that not only prohibit but also punish the speaking of “vernacular” languages in schools. From an impressionable age, people are brought up to uncritically accept the pejorative labelling of their native languages as “vernacular”, which implies that they are inferior to the official language. This instigates a mentality of low self-worth and frustrates any attempt to salvage languages from the peril of extinction. Any native-language literacy programme that excludes a systematic process of restoring pride and loyalty in the language of a people will not endure. That is what the experience of the emergence and death of *Kparo* teaches us.

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