

PECULIARITIES OF THE WORDS 'DEATH' AND 'TO DIE' IN SOME BOLE-TANGALE LANGUAGES ¹

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ABSTRACT

The verb "to die", reconstructed as *mə t ə or *mw t for the whole Chadic family, as well as the noun "death" show regular reflexes in the Bole-Tang(a)le languages Kwami, Kupto, Widala and Piya. The glosses for "to die" are mù d à n , mú t ó , mù r á n ì and mù r á n n ì , respectively. In each of these languages this verb behaves in a peculiar way. In Kwami it is the only verb, which has a plural in perfect participle. In Kupto an irregular (verbal-)noun exists, from which a plural and an abstract noun can be derived. In Widala and Piya two verbal sets in one and the same paradigm can be found; one of them with and one without an 'intransitive copy pronoun'. Interestingly, in Piya oral tradition a female monster called Nùnù Múr ò appears, who can change into a leaf of calebash.

Keywords : Chadic languages, Bole-Tang(a)le group, Northeast Nigeria, Kwami, Kupto, Widala, Piya, to die, death.

RÉSUMÉ

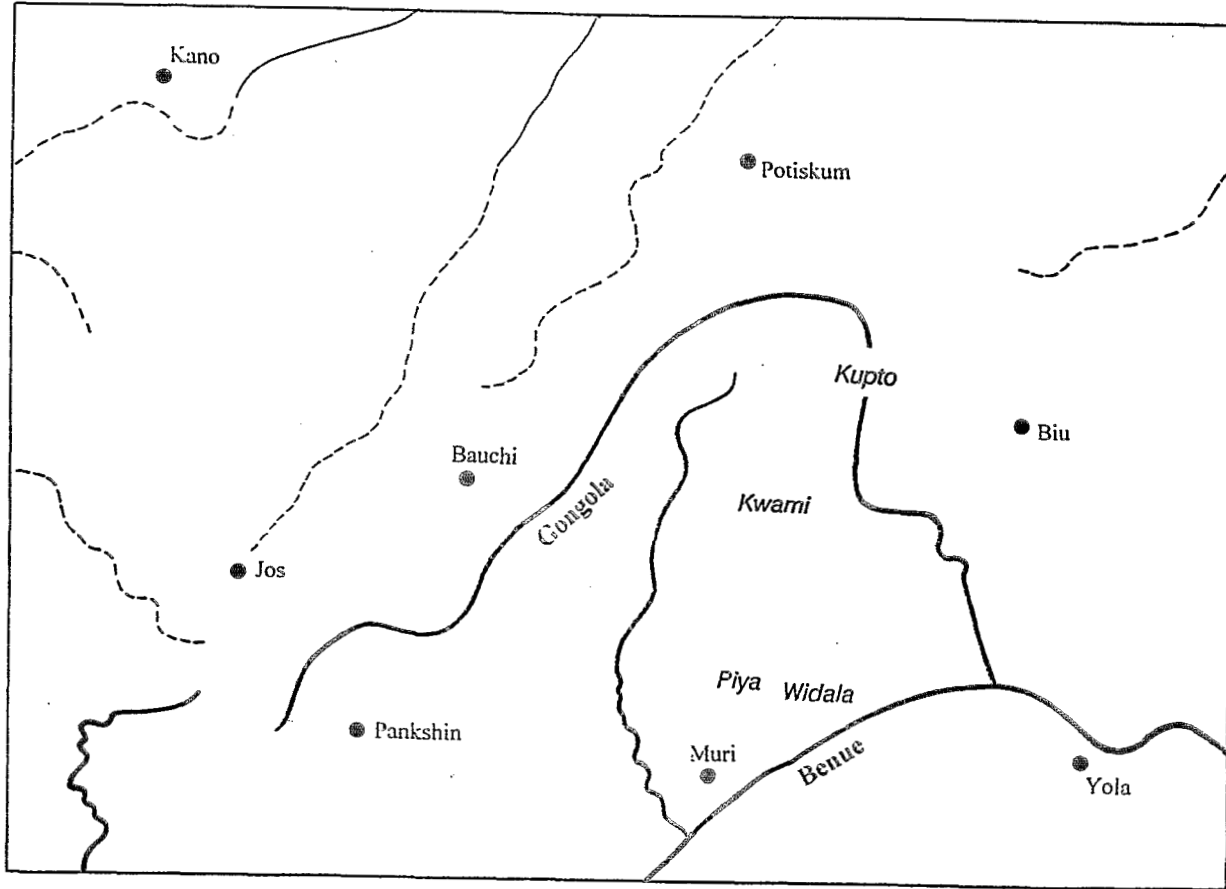
LES PARTICULARITÉS DES MOTS POUR "MORT" ET "MOURIR" DANS QUELQUES LANGUES BOLE-TANGALE

Le verbe "mourir", reconstruit comme *mə t ə ou *mw t pour l'ensemble de la famille tchadique, ainsi que le nom "la mort" présentent des réflexes réguliers dans les langues kwami, kupto, widala et piya, du groupe bole-tang(a)le. Les formes pour "mourir" sont, respectivement, mù d à n , mú t ó , mù r á n ì et mù r á n n ì . Dans chacune de ces langues, ce verbe se comporte d'une manière particulière. En kwami, c'est le seul verbe qui a un pluriel au participe passé. En kupto un nom (verbal) irrégulier est attesté, à partir duquel peuvent être dérivés un pluriel et un nom abstrait. En widala et en piya, deux séries verbales sont attestées dans le même paradigme : l'une avec et l'autre sans "pronom-copie intransitif". Dans la tradition orale piya, il est intéressant de noter l'existence d'un monstre féminin dénommé Nùnù Múr ò , qui peut se transformer en une feuille de calebassier.

Mots-clés : langues tchadiques, groupe bole-tang(a)le, Nord-Est du Nigeria, kwami, kupto, widala, piya, mourir, mort.

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¹ This article, which was not presented during the workshop, is a complementary contribution to the article entitled "Mourir en tchadique".



Carte 1 : Northeastern Nigeria.

There are only a handful of words within the whole Chadic language family, which have one and the same root in their reconstructed forms. One of these words is the verb "to die" with its noun "death". "To die" appears in its reconstructed form as *mætə¹ or more convincible as *mwt² for East-, Central- and West-Chadic. To the latter belong the Kwami, Kupto, Widala and Piya languages - members of the southern Bole-Tang(a)le group³ - whose gloss for "to die" perfectly fits with the proposed proto Chadic forms. Compare the following examples from these languages, which are given in the verbo-nominal form:

Kwami	Kupto	Widala	Piya
mūd-ān	mūt-ō	mūr-ānì	mūr-ānnì

But as one already can see from the different verbo-nominal suffixes, these languages have developed each in its own way particular forms of the verb, respectively its noun.

In Kwami the base of the verb is mūd-. The morpheme -ān shows its intransitivity. It belongs to that verbal class, which contains intransitive verbs (here 'non motion verbs') and middle verbs⁴. The nominal derivation is made up with the suffix -ō, i.e. mūt-ō means "death" and a "dead person" is called ?ān mūtō, lit.: "person death". The most striking fact however is that mūdān has -as the only exception in the whole paradigm of perfect participle- a plural form, which is built by gemination of the second consonant, e.g. sg. mūd-í jì , pl. mūt t-í jì⁵ (< *mūdd-í jì), as in: tārā mūd-í jì "a dead goat", but: tērnì mūt t-í jì "dead goats".

In Kupto the citation form mūt-ō is at the same time the noun, which is feminine in its gender. It is in so far irregular, that nominal derivations of verbs in -o do not have a high tone on their bases as well as on their suffixes, e.g. fāt t-ō "to rest", kàdd-ō "to lie down", etc. Furthermore a nominal plural of mūtō can be made by suffixing the morpheme -láy, i.e. mūtō-láy. A highly interesting fact however is, that a suffix -kúr, which usually forms "abstracta", can be added to this noun. From this point of view it can be argued, that mūtō is considered the "concrete event of death", whereas mūtō-kúr is more the "abstract concept". A proverb may express this: mūtōkúr kùdō tòmín fídí mà rúuní "Death is the ear in front of a shadowy place". The explanation which was given is not all that clear but, according to the interpretation of my collaborator, it means "before one's soul can rest in peace it has to arrange itself with the death". A further peculiarity of the noun mūtō is that it cannot stand in combination with búu "person of, that of", like búu wūtōw "person of work, farmer"; búu kúfá "person of smithery, blacksmith", etc. But it appears in the following nominal combinations: kùshì mūtō pl. kùshì mūtóláy "funeral ceremony",

¹ Newman, 1977 : 24.

² Jungraithmayr/Shimizu, 1981 : 84.

³ Hoffmann, 1971 : 3; Hansford *et al.*, 1976 : 186; the Widala (Kode) is a newly discovered language, which also belongs to the southern Bole-Tangale language group.

⁴ Leger, 1989 : 68 ff.

⁵ Leger, 1988 : 300.

lit.: "cry of death" and mbãalò mútò "funeral", lit.: "covering with sand death". With regard to the verbal aspect of mútò, one can see two different sets in the perfect tense. There, it can go with and without the so called "intransitive copy pronoun"¹. Compare the following examples:

yì mún-nì	or	yì mùt-kò/mùk-kò	"he died"
tè mút-tã		tè mùt-kò/mùk-kò	"she died"
wùn mùt-ã-wù		wùn mùt-kò/mùk-kò	"they died"

This classifies the verb in one of the two Kupto verbal classes, which are distinguished mainly by having two different sets in the perfect paradigm. Other verbs grouped into this class are -like in Kwami- middle verbs.

In Widala, the verb for "to die" in its citation form is mūr-ánì and the noun "death", derived by suffixing a morpheme -ò to its base, is mūr-ò, possessing feminine gender. There is however a second citation form yù mūrò "to die", which literally means "to make death". It seems that the first form is employed in preference when referring to human beings, and the second form for animals. Compound nouns with the word mūrò are found in the following examples: wè mūrò "ghost", lit.: "thing of death"; fò mìnà mūrò "funeral", lit.: "mouth of house of death"; mìnà mūrò "place of funeral", lit.: "house of death" and mìn mūrò "funeral ceremony", lit.: "alcohol/beer of death". An "unnatural death" is called mūrò òãñ, which means "a strong death" and a coward dies a mūrò shòyò, i.e. "a death of fear", lit.: "a death of bush". An interesting paradigm is taken in the present continuous form, where tì pírí means literally "at the place (of)". The examples are:

yì tì pírí mūr-ánì	"he is dying" (verbal noun)
yì tì pírí mūr-ò	"he is dying" (noun)
yì tì pírí mūr-ì	"he is dying" (verbal substantiv ?)

A further form is:

yì tì pírí mūr-ày mỳyã-réy, which means "he is at the place of that man's death".

As Widala has a plural for each verb, the citation form would be mùtùr-ánì. As in Kupto, mūránì, but also mùtùránì, is in the perfect paradigm facultatively constructed with an "intransitive copy pronoun", e.g.:

cákú mūr-ów	or	cákú mūr-àn-nì	"he died"
tè mūr-ów		tè mūr-àn-tò	"she died"
cún mūr-ów		cún mūr-àn-yùn	"they died"

or with the same meaning in the plural form:

cún mùtùr-ów	cún mùtùr-àn-yùn	"they died".
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In Widala, the verb is grouped in one of four verbal classes, which can be called the "most common" one, as there appear, transitive as well as intransitive verbs with or without an "intransitive copy pronoun".

¹ Newman, 1974 : 23.

In the Piya language, the citation form of the verb "to die" is similar to that of Widala, i.e. *mūr-ánnì*. The noun derived from it is *mūr-ó* and has a feminine gender. When adding the possessive pronoun, the nominal suffix changes its tone and is lengthened. For example: *khù cìrā mūr-òo-ní yìi yò* "the time of his death has come", lit.: "head/upon hand of his death has made". Compound nouns, made up in connection with *mūr-ó*, are: *wè mūr-ó* "monster, goblin" (Ha. *dòodòo*), lit.: "thing death" and *kùjì mūr-ó* "funeral ceremony", lit.: "crying of death", whereas "funeral" itself is called *nāné*. A "dead person" is *ʔān mūr-ó* and the "house" or "room where the dead person is put on the bier" is named *mīnā mūr-ó*. A very striking similarity (esp. in plural) exists to the verb *mùt t-ánnì*, pl. *mùt tūr-ánnì* "to be still, to cool down", whereas *mùt t-ó cík* means "keep quiet!", lit.: "cool down body!" and *mūr-ó cík* "(physical) death". As in Widala, Piya also has a verbal plural, which is *mùt tūr-ánnì*. In the perfect, the verb has two possible constructions, one with an "intransitive copy pronoun" and one without it, e.g.:

<i>cākhí mūr-ì-géé-nì</i>	and	<i>cākhí mūr-ù-γó</i>	"he died"
<i>tè mūr-ì-géé-rò</i>		<i>tè mūr-ù-γó</i>	"she died"
<i>cùnù mūr-ì-géé-jù</i>		<i>cùnù mūr-ù-γó</i>	"they died"

or for the plural as well:

<i>cùnù mùt tūr-ì-géé-jù</i>	<i>cùnù mùt tūr-ù-γó</i>	"they died"
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In Piya oral tradition there is a figure appearing in many stories called *Nùnù Mūr-ò*, meaning "the Female Death". She is considered to be a fat, giant woman, whose motion is described with its own ideophone *gìgrì -gìgrì-gìgrì*. She has many female children, who usually try to seduce their suitors so that they can more easily be eaten up by *Nùnù Mūr-ò*. She can change into a plant named *ʔālā kwàalì* "leaf of calabash" and devour animals and human beings. Another name for her is *Pàanò Pàttù*, which means "Daughter of Pattu". The question, however, of the meaning of *Pàttù* remains unsolved.

The words "to die" and "death" are as old as mankind and they must have been in constant use by man since his existence. They belong -after one's definition- to the "Kernvokabular"¹, or to the "basic vocabulary"² and thus undoubtedly serve as fundamental keywords in comparative linguistic research.

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¹ Rössler, 1979 : 26-27; Jungraithmayr, 1990 : 46 (1).

² Samarin, 1967 : 218, 220; Bartholomew/Schoenhals, 1983 : 293, 322.

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