Stolen Life, Preserved Language: 
Life and Death and Endangered Languages


Barbara G. Hoffman, Ph.D. 
Dept. of Anthropology 
Cleveland State University 
Email: b.hoffman@csuohio.edu

1. Background
For over two decades, the dearth of case studies of language shift, language death, and language revitalization has been deplored by Africanist linguists (cf Dimmendaal 1989; Brenzinger, et al 1998) In addition to linguistic documentation of the many indigenous African languages heretofore minimally described, the study of the sociocultural contexts of language shift that are causing minority African languages to be “abandoned in favor of other, more prestigious, African languages” is urgently needed. (Brenzinger, et al 1998:19)

Among the numerous West African language groups that have received minimal attention from linguists and anthropologists is the cluster of fourteen related languages commonly known as the Togo Remnant (TR) group, all but one of which are spoken within a relatively compact geographical area in SW Togo and SE Ghana. The need for documentation of the structural, sociolinguistic, and ethnographic dimensions of language use within these communities is particularly acute for Anyimere (Ghana) and Igo (Togo). These two TR languages have been officially recognized as endangered, both by the UNESCO *Red Book on Endangered Languages* and by the “Survey of Language Endangerment in Africa” (results of which were published as Sommer 1992). A comparison of the cases of these two related endangered Togo-Remnant languages, Anyimere and Igo, both spoken in an area of Togo and Ghana now divided by a national border, demonstrates the power of determined and long-term individual leadership to slow the process of language death. The Igo language is spoken by some 3,000 of the Ogo people concentrated in five Togolese villages, less than 20% of the entire Ogo population. For the last 50 years, the people of these villages have been ruled by one Paramount Chief. The two remaining Anyimere communities of Ghana, on the other hand, do not have long-term chiefs, and have made no concerted effort to retain, much less revitalize, their language or their culture. This paper gives an overview of the current state of linguistic documentation of both languages, then examines the life history of the current Ogo ruler and how his unlikely appointment to the chieftaincy has worked to keep the Igo language alive. As is common among endangered languages of Africa (cf. Brenzinger, et al 1998; Blench 2000), use of the ancestral languages in these two speech communities has long been dwindling due to widespread patterns of language shift, whereby the locally dominant African languages (Ewe in the Igo-speaking region and Twi among the Anyimere) are preferred within the majority of the linguistic contexts of daily life.
Nonetheless, Igo has been undergoing revitalization efforts in recent years and has retained a significantly higher percentage of speakers than has Anyimere. My hypothesis is that this is due to a significant extent to one of the structural features of political organization in Bogo society, that of the traditional chieftaincy. The structure of the institution of Ogo chieftaincy, in combination with the social history and character of the person who has exercised that office for half a century as Paramount Chief, has enabled the preservation of the Igo language in ways not available to communities with short-term leadership institutions (on the impact a determined leader can have on reversing language shift, see also Meyer, this volume). Through the agency he has exercised as traditional political head of the group, the efforts to retain and revive Igo language have been supported by the group as a whole (on the role of group agency, see also Sicoli, this volume).

This situation is markedly different from the Anyimere case. The striking attitudinal contrasts between the Anyimere community, which seems resigned to the obsolescence of its language, and the Igo-speaking community, which is actively organizing resistance to such an outcome, can be traced in no small part to these political and personality differences.

2. Linguistic Overview

Though most of the fourteen TR languages have been known to Western linguists for just over 100 years, the linguistic scholarly literature on these speech communities is in general extremely sparse; ethnographic studies are non-existent. Moreover, the majority of what is available dates from the early part of the 20th century, and its value is accordingly diminished both by age and by the fact that linguists of that era lacked a proper understanding of several fundamental structural aspects of these languages, particularly in regard to phonological phenomena such as tone and vowel harmony. There is a paucity of adequate descriptive material for the TR language communities with very small numbers of speakers, in particular those that have been officially recognized as endangered, i.e. Igo and Anyimere.

2.1. Genetic classification

In what remains the only published general study of the entire TR cluster, Heine (1968) surveyed the phoneme inventories and arrays of noun-class affixes for each of the TR languages, based on core vocabulary items elicited via a standard word-list. Since his primary objective was genetic classification and historical reconstruction, other aspects of the grammars of the languages, such as the structure of complete sentences, remained entirely outside the scope of the study. Among Heine’s general conclusions are that, although the TR languages are not mutually intelligible, they do constitute a coherent genetic unit, which can be divided into two subgroups of seven languages labelled NA and KA based on the form for “flesh”. Heine assigns both Igo and Anyimere to the KA group, which can be further partitioned on both genetic and geographic grounds into three subsections: North, Central and South (Lewis 2001; Kropp-Dakubu & Ford 1989).
Anyimere belongs to the Northern KA group, along with Akebu. Igo, meanwhile, belongs to the Central KA group, together with Bowili and Ikposso.

Both before and since Heine’s study, however, the classification of the TR group, both internally and externally, has been a matter of controversy. Among the various positions adopted, the one that appears to have the widest following at present denies the genetic unity of the TR cluster—instead, it aligns Heine’s KA subgroup genetically with Ewe, while grouping Heine’s NA languages together with Twi and the other Akan languages (Blench 2001). However, the arguments that have been made in support of this reorganization can be reinterpreted as deriving from the language-contact situation. Ewe is dominant in nearly all of the KA zone, whereas in the NA zone the Akan language Twi exerts an analogous influence. Given the dearth of reliable linguistic data between 1968 and 2000, it seems just as plausible that the alignment of KA with Ewe and NA with Twi might be explained as easily by language contact as by genetic characteristics (Lewis 2002).

In any case, however, all parties do seem to agree that Heine’s KA subgroup is genetically unified (as is the NA subgroup); thus the genetic relationship between Igo and Anyimere remains uncontroversial. At the same time, further research into the languages, and into the oral traditions concerning the origins and migrations of the respective ethnic groups, holds out considerable promise for furthering our understanding of relationships within the TR cluster. This is especially true for the Anyimere, none of whose oral traditions concerning history and wider affiliations have ever been reported in the literature, for reasons that will be clarified below.

2.1.1 Anyimere

The literature on Anyimere is so sparse as to be almost non-existent. Apart from a few relevant pages in Heine (1968), the only source is the seven-page article published as Westermann (1933), wherein the author presented his edited version of the raw field notes of the missionary linguist Adam Mischlich. These consisted of a five-page word list and a two-page sketch of the inventory of noun-class prefixes, all with unreliable tone-marking. In these two works combined there are only four Anyimere sentences of four words each all told. This language remains, therefore, almost totally undescribed.

In addition, Anyimere is unique among the TR communities researched by Heine in that he was unable to elicit any oral traditions concerning their history. In visits in 2000 and 2001 to the two remaining sites with significant Anyimere populations (the villages of Kecheibi and Kunda in Ghana), Marshall Lewis and I found no one that had any recollection of their ancient social history or how they came to be where they are today except that some seemed certain they had fled there to avoid the slave raids of the Ashanti (another Akan-speaking group). How the language community got split between two geographical locations that no longer have any practical contact was either a mystery to them or something they did not wish to discuss with two outsiders on their first visit to the community.
2.1.2. Igo

Although there is more published on Igo than on Anyimere, the literature on Igo is of mixed quality. All sources on the language consist of at least a word list, but the transcription in most of them is so unreliable as to lack any utility, e.g. Bertho (1952). While the transcription in some other sources is more trustworthy, the total number of vocabulary items published in the early works is less than 500. Until the last decade, the only genuinely valuable work devoted specifically to Igo was Westermann (1922), which combined a sizeable vocabulary list (ten pages) with a 16-page sketch of the grammatical system. Even that work has severe limitations, though; apart from its age and brevity, Westermann openly acknowledged that his tone-marking was incomplete and provisional, and cautioned that it could not be relied on.

On the other hand, the recent PhD dissertation by a trained linguist who is also a native speaker of Igo, Honorine Poidi-Gblem (1995), represents a milestone in Igo studies. This descriptive work covers a vast range of aspects of Igo grammar, and thus provides an outstanding point of departure for pursuing specific research questions in greater depth. The extremely broad scope of Poidi-Gblem’s thesis has the inevitable result that most of the individual topics receive only superficial coverage. The vital groundwork established therein, however, should enable future studies to go far beyond the levels of detail that typically limit the descriptive depth of research on endangered languages, for which virtually no prior documentation is often available, as in the case of Anyimere.

2.2. Sociolinguistic situations

2.2.1. Anyimere

As noted in Heine (1968), most Anyimere live in two villages in the northern portion of the Volta Region in SE Central Ghana, between Lake Volta and the Togo border. Heine’s survey included speakers from Kecheibi, but he was unable to consult any from the far more remote village of Kunda. Kropp-Dakubu and Ford (1989) do mention Kunda, where they say that the Anyimere language was thriving in 1974. This assessment is very different from the situation we found there. In 2001, Lewis and I visited Kunda and were able to verify that there are fewer than 200 Anyimere people there, only a tiny fraction of whom claim to be speakers of the language.

As reported by Heine, the principal ethnic group in Kecheibi is the Adele, who speak a TR language of the NA subgroup. The Anyimere comprise only a tiny fraction of the Kecheibi population. Heine reported that of the 250-odd Anyimere in the village (circa 1965), only a few dozen people spoke the language at all, none of them under 40 years old. The majority of the Anyimere in Kecheibi now speak Adele as their first language, with little or no ability in the ancestral language; moreover, by far the most common second language is Twi, with Anyimere ranking well down the list. The functional range of Anyimere in Kecheibi is extremely restricted--while it can sometimes be heard in the market, it is primarily used in domestic environments, and almost
exclusively among the elderly. The language remains unwritten, and is not used in any official context, whether civil or traditional.

The situation in Kunda is similar in a number of ways to that in Kecheibi, in regard to the size of the Anyimere population and the presence of the Anyimere language within the community. There are about 160 Anyimere people there, only a few of whom claim to have genuine competence in the language. There are also, however, some noteworthy differences from Kecheibi. First, the dominant language in Kunda is Twi, with Adele having a negligible presence. Secondly, over three quarters of the population of Kunda are ethnically Anyimere, whereas in Kecheibi they constitute perhaps 8% of the village. Finally, there are two Anyimere speakers in Kunda who are relatively young adults (they appeared to be under 40). These two were identified by the villagers as the most competent speakers of and best sources of information about the language; the fact that they were both schooled and spoke some English was the only discernible rationale for this evaluation.

Based on the information he gathered in Kecheibi in the mid-1960s, Heine made the prediction that the language would probably die out within a generation. That has not yet happened, but the trend toward abandonment of Anyimere continues unabated, and the community itself generally regards the language as moribund. While the discovery of the continuing Anyimere enclave in Kunda, including at least two non-elderly speakers, may be seen as a positive development vis-a-vis the situation that presented itself to Heine, it is questionable whether it will affect the prospects for survival of the language.

2.2.2 Igo

Igo is spoken by the Bogo people, in five small villages of the Bogo canton in SW Togo: Bogo-Ahlon (the Canton seat and home of the Paramount Chief), Sassanou, Tinipe, Denou, and Aoundjassi. The Canton lies at the base of the Danyi plateau along the Ghanaian border. The Ogo population in the canton is about 8,000 and roughly an equal number live outside the Canton, in various Ogo enclaves elsewhere in Togo and in Ghana. Virtually none of the Bogo in Ghana speak Igo, and even within the Canton only about 3,000 have any practical ability in the language at all. Moreover, there is a wide range of levels of ability in Igo among these 3,000 individuals, such that the number of genuinely competent Igo speakers is quite small. Virtually all Bogo, meanwhile, speak Ewe, the dominant language of the surrounding area, including all of southern Togo and the abutting portion of the Volta Region in SE Ghana. The great majority of the Bogo, including even those with good command of Igo, claim a greater degree of fluency in Ewe than in their ancestral language. The Bogo have in fact been in a state of peaceful coexistence with the far more numerous and politically dominant Ewe for centuries, so there is a long history of bilingualism among the Bogo.

In the last hundred years or so, however, patterns of bilingualism and language shift have become increasingly polarized due to a host of factors, ranging from a decimating smallpox epidemic at the end of the 19th century to the designation of Ewe as a national language in both Togo and Ghana. Ewe has accordingly developed as a written
language, a language of education and other sociopolitical institutions, the language of prevalent religious practice (most Bogo reportedly professing Christianity, at least nominally), and a language of journalistic and broadcast mass media, with a considerable body of creative literature as well. In addition, even though Igo is genetically much more closely related to the neighboring TR language Ikposso than to Ewe, it is Ewe which typically serves as the medium of communication between members of these two TR populations (unless both speak French). Moreover, since the European colonial legacy has resulted in Ghana being anglophone while Togo is francophone, the only language that most Bogo can use for communication with people from across the border is Ewe. This is true even intraethnically, as exemplified by the fact that on the periodic occasions of pan-Bogo celebrations, which bring together the Bogo in the canton with those from the diaspora, Ewe is the language that must be used. These different historical and sociolinguistic factors have thus consolidated the position of Ewe as the most empowering language for Bogo across the widest range of contexts.

The dangers facing the Igo language and the attendant issues of ethnic identity are most tellingly evidenced in the personal narrative of the Paramount Chief Gassou IV, who was raised with Ewe as his first language to the near-complete exclusion of Igo until the chieftancy was suddenly thrust upon him, whereupon he felt a responsibility to begin learning the ancestral tongue. His personal transformation has been a vitally influential factor in increasing community awareness of the dire threat of extinction, both linguistic and cultural, posed by the growing tendency among the Bogo to abandon Igo in favor of Ewe. His efforts to combat the longstanding and rapidly accelerating trend towards language attrition, supported and supplemented by those of scholars and the community at large, are heroic. Whether they will ultimately be triumphant or tragic remains to be seen. The forces of linguistic change against which they battle are strong. As is typical in language endangerment contexts, social factors are having the greatest impact on the linguistic lifespans of both Igo and Anyimere: of particular import are the differences in their traditional governance institutions. 3. The structure of the chieftaincies

Both the Bogo and the Anyimere are led by chiefs, but the structural differences in the chieftaincies are several and appear to significantly influence the attitudes of the two language communities toward their ancestral tongues. The Bogo have one Paramount Chief and a lesser chief for each village. The Anyimere have clan chiefs and village chiefs. In 2000, one of Heine’s principal Anyimere informants from 1965 had recently become the Chief of the largest Anyimere-speaking clan in Kecheibi, and yet, despite having participated in one of the very few linguistic studies of his ancestral language some 35 years prior, he showed very little interest in preserving the tongue. 6

He had, however, since collaborated with a researcher from SIL whose efforts were directed toward translating the Bible into Adele. The village of Kunda had no chief in 2001, their previous one having died a couple of years earlier, but they had a regent, an elder named Amankrado Nana Kodjo Bakro, filling in until a new chief could be installed. The Anyimere follow the gerontocratic practice common in many African cultures of selecting a respected elder from an appropriate lineage to serve as chief for
the relatively brief duration of his remaining lifespan.

The Bogo, on the other hand, select a young man to become Paramount Chief, then they symbolically “kill,” bury, and resurrect him as chief for life. The Paramount Chief then takes on the status of the symbolic incarnation of the Bogo people; formerly, he was their head priest, judge, and guardian of custom. Although since 1961 the political, judicial, and religious powers of Togo’s traditional chiefs have been substantially reduced on a national level, the Paramount Chief of Bogo Canton is still a respected leader, highly involved with his people, and central to the life of the community. Assuming a normal life-span, the Bogo chieftaincy affords many more opportunities for focused leadership in the efforts to effect, or to resist, cultural and linguistic change.

This structural difference between the Anyimere and Bogo is, of course, merely that: a social structure that has attendant possibilities for strategic manipulation or for neglect, as the case may be. The uses made of the structure of the chieftaincy by the Bogo chief are, interestingly, derived from his personal history and character rather than from a lifelong immersion in the culture that might have led to his internalizing structural patterns. The fact is that he was born elsewhere, stopped visiting the ancestral home in Bogo Canton at the age of 6, grew up in a completely different language community, and spent his formative years in Francophone colonial schools. Yet, despite being raised outside the canton, despite learning Ewe as his first language, and despite his adamant opposition to being appointed as traditional Paramount Chief, Chief Gassou IV has for decades played a central role in Igo language preservation efforts.

3. A history of life and death

The following account of how he “lost” his life but subsequently preserved his language, in his own words as I have translated them from French, is excerpted from approximately 14 hours of tape-recorded life-history interviews I conducted with Chief Gassou IV in Kpalimé, Togo, in July of 2001.

[photo of Chief Gassou IV here]

My Beginnings

My real name is Amégan Yao David. I was born in Badou the 24th of June, 1943 at 10:05 a.m. Because we were in the middle of the war when she bore me, [my mother] was careful to make note of the day and time. I was baptized into the church on the 7th of July 1943, eleven days after my birth.
First Experience with School

In 1951, my family had moved to Kpalimé. On the 15th of October, we were at the house when an administrative guard arrived leading a crowd of children, maybe ten or so, and they arrived at our house where the guard said he had come to take the children to school. We followed and he led us to the girls’ school. We were the first boys to go to a girls’ school! When we arrived there, I didn’t know it was a girls’ school – I didn’t know anything. The first time I heard French was when the Head Mistress of the School spoke to the guard and he reacted by saying “Commandant a dit amener ici!” That was the first sentence of French I ever heard and it has stayed in my head. Commandant a dit amener ici!

The guard didn’t know it was a school only for girls until the Headmistress informed him to take the boys to the regional school while she kept the girls there. Commandant a dit amener ici! And that’s how I began school in 1951 [at age 8].

Primary & Secondary School

I stayed in Kpalimé until the end of 1953 and completed the first two and a half years of primary school. On December 23rd, my mother came to take me to our farm near Badou. On Sunday the 3rd of January 1954, my brother took me to Badou where on the 4th I was enrolled in the public primary school of Badou so I could finish the last two trimesters for the certificate of studies. In February, I fell ill. I suffered from a strong migraine which forced me to return to the farm where I stayed until May. I learned later that the migraine was a result of a serious fall I had taken in 1948. It was around the 15th of May that I returned to Badou where I sat for the end-of-year exam. Despite my mentally and physically weakened state, I wrote the exam and was admitted in 4th place to the next level of study. Thereafter, I was always first in my class.

I completed my primary studies and on the 11th of June 1957, I passed the exam for the certificate of primary studies at the administrative Circle headquarters 200 km away. It was a large administrative territory and there were only 217 of us candidates for secondary school, but the grading was strict. If you made 5 mistakes on a dictation, you were flunked. Each mistake was worth 2 points, so 5 mistakes would give you 10 points off and that was a flunking grade. I took 5th place on the exam, then spent the ‘57-’58 school year preparing for the secondary entrance exam. I only went to the school to help the teachers in first and second grade when the director would request I come to help the younger ones.

So in May of 1958, I passed that exam and I was admitted to the technical secondary school in Sokodé, the Practical School of Commerce and Industry. At that time there were only five secondary schools in Togo.
I had never been to Sokodé, I didn’t know it, but I went there with my colleagues in the train from Lomé to Blitta. From Blitta we rode on a big shipping truck to Sokodé where we arrived at 9 pm. Now where to sleep? We didn’t know anyone. We were supposed to go to the school, but we were afraid of the hazing by the senior students. So we went to a house and used sign language to ask for a place to sleep. The people didn’t speak French or Ewe and we didn’t speak Kotokoli [Tem], so we relied on sign language.

In that school, after two years you receive the Certificate of Professional Apprenticeship. The level wasn’t difficult, but it was much more advanced than the schools today. We were studying algebra, physics, and chemistry two years before they do.

Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to finish my schooling.

My brother Simon wrote to me in May. I still have his letter. He asked me to join him in Bogo-Ahlon, our ancestral village, instead of going home to the farm. I wondered why he asked me to go there because he had always forbidden me to do so since our father had become gravely ill there and no one had helped us. Ever since that time, he had asked us all to go to the farm near Badou rather than returning to the village. Since 1949, I hadn’t been to Bogo.8

So now that he was asking me to come back to the village, I couldn’t understand. Then, after the first letter, he sent me another saying that he had a daughter named Sénat Rose. At the time, she was 3 days old. He said, I give you the child, you are henceforth her father. I asked him to come to the village first, and then give me his daughter, and I couldn’t understand why. I had two older brothers. Why not give the girl to one of them, they are much older than I! I said ok, I’ll go to the village and I’ll ask him why he gave me the child.

Our break began on the 15th of July; the 18th I arrived in the village. I arrived in the village to find the terrible news that my brother Simon was gravely ill and had gone to the dispensary in Sassanou [another Ogo village]. I went there immediately. On the 8th of August, the doctor said that his state was so bad that we should take him back to the village. We left Sassanou on August 8th and on the 10th at 10:00 am he was dead.

In October 1959 I returned to my school, but I was traumatized by the death of my brother who had lodged me from 1950-1953, had educated me, had guaranteed all my life and when I was admitted to secondary school he was so happy he took me to Kejebi, a big village in Ghana today, where there was already a bank in 1950, already a big market, already a big village full of activity.
Back then, we went shopping and he bought me everything: my trunk, my clothes... I had never worn slacks, but he had some made for me. Everything that I would need in Sokodé, he bought. Then he told me, we’re not finished, there are two more things. He took me into a shop called Jimmy Hall where he bought me a watch and a notebook. It wasn’t the kind we use in schools in Togo, so I didn’t understand why he bought it. When we returned home, he told me to carry it with me always.

I was afraid to wear the watch because I’d never worn one before. He said, no, no wear it. I put it on and we went back to the farm. The next day he called me and said, ok now you’re going to Sokodé. You can buy anything you want there with no problem. As soon as you need more money, send me a letter and I’ll send you the money. He brought out 6 addressed and stamped envelopes. Here you go, he said. You won’t need to spend money to buy stamps. All you have to do is write the letter and put it in an envelope and send it to me. Every two weeks, I’ll leave the farm to go to Badou to see if you’ve sent me a letter from Sokodé. That is the guarantee.

But the only condition is that you take this notebook. From the farm where I am, I will control you in Sokodé.

I said, How can you control me in Sokodé, you’ve never been anywhere close to there, so how can you be on the farm and control me in Sokodé? He said to me, don’t laugh, what I say is true. From here, I’m going to control you, I’ll monitor you. Everything you do that’s good or that’s bad, I’ll know it here in the farm. I thought, no one knows me in Sokodé so who’s going to write to my brother to report on the kind of life I lead? But I didn’t ask any questions, I just said ok, I accept. He said, take the notebook. I took the notebook he had purchased at Kejebi. From the first page to the last, he had signed and numbered each page. And he said, here, David, here is your notebook. I didn’t buy the watch so you’d arrive in school on time, I bought the watch to control you.

Go with the notebook and watch, you have the necessary money. You can spend it in one day with no problem, but all the purchases you make, down to the last dime, you write I bought an eraser, a pastry, a pencil, an outfit or food or anything, you put the name of what you purchase in the notebook.

So, it was a list I was to send him. You write “number 1, pastry, and the price of the pastry.” But that’s not all. You also write down the hour of the purchase and the minute of the purchase.

Ah! I said, that is more difficult! I had to learn the hours of the clock. He said, there it is, that’s my control. You go now, and you can buy what you want, but don’t waste your time writing me a letter. You don’t have time, you need to learn, study. You don’t have time. Once your
money is lacking, tear out the sheets of the notebook with the numbers, dates, purchases, and times, and put them in the stamped envelope and mail it and in two weeks I’ll have your letter in Badou and I’ll send you a telegraphic money order.

You know, he had never been to school?
I didn’t know what a telegraphic money order was! It’s only later that I learned you could send money through the telephone. It was just like today’s Western Union.

Once I arrived in Sokodé, I couldn’t spend money or go out. I thought, if I spend money, how am I going to justify it? Thus, all the way in Sokodé I was monitored and controlled by my brother. So, I had to apply myself in school and that’s what I did.

I regretted the day of his death so much! I knew that his dying was the reason he asked me to join him in the village. But in October of ’59, I went back to Sokodé. My brother who had supported me was dead and my other brothers were out of the country. My father couldn’t send me money, so when I left he gave me what was necessary to get through the next three months. After that, during the Christmas holiday, I was to return to the village for the Christmas and New Year’s holidays when he would give me money for the following three months until the Easter holidays when I would return and take funds for the last trimester. That’s what we agreed upon and that’s why I came back to Bogo in December of ’59.

A Life Lost
Unfortunately for me, my cousin who had been the Canton Chief, Gassouata, had had difficulties with the people of the entire canton. Unfortunately, on the 28th of December, he was dethroned. He was dethroned by the people, all the people: the traditional chiefs, the notables, the warriors, the council of elders, everyone. All the Ogo people descended on Bogo to pronounce him dethroned. It was the first time a Canton Chief had been dethroned, the first time this had been done. So my brothers within the family started to flee.

I’m not a chief [I thought]. If someone has to be chief, it’s not me. They can’t appoint me chief. So I was there, I stayed in the village. My brothers and cousins who were there started to leave the next morning. They started the dethroning that Sunday and Monday between 4-8 a.m. my cousins fled. I was just there. If they had to use someone, it wouldn’t be me, I was sure. If my older brother had been there, I would have told him to leave to avoid being caught to be made chief. Me, I’m just a kid. They can’t take me because they have to take people who are 20-30 years old.

So during the night of Monday to Tuesday, around 11 pm, I was in our house. My cousin Adjima was with us and was gravely ill. I went to
give him an aspirin and then went back to my room. I told him that if he got worse, he should call me and I’d give him another pill.

So, I’d gone back to my room and 10 minutes later, I heard someone knocking at my door and I thought it was Adjima calling me, so I answered. As soon as I answered, [the person] said, “From today and from the moment you hear our voice and until the end of your days on this earth you are our chief.”

I said, “Imbecile! Who’s saying that?!” (in French). “Imbecile! Who’s saying that?!” in French, and I closed my door and locked it since it wasn’t Adjima calling me and I had seen that it wasn’t just one person but a whole arsenal of people, a mass of them, a whole crowd who surrounded the whole house. He said, “Open!” I said, “I’m not going to open! My door is my door and I’ll never open it!” The same hour, they brought what I think is a battering ram and broke down the door and took me.

There is how and in what state I was taken. I said, “Why are you arresting me? Me, I can’t be chief!”

When we went out into the black night, I saw it was an immense crowd. And it wasn’t only the folks of my village, it was the folks of Sassanou, of Tinipe, of Aounadjassi, of Denou. It wasn’t the folks of my village but they took me. Aren’t they going to kill me, I wondered, and I was afraid. I saw that they had taken me and led me to my uncle’s house. They seized my body so I couldn’t move until we reached my uncle’s house. From the time they pronounced me chief, the drums were played. Later, I learned that that drum is held by the owners of the earth, the Sassoume family. The drum was played to confirm what they had done, but I learned that later. At the beginning, to start with, I didn’t know anything about the history of our people. Besides, I didn’t even know the people. I barely knew my village and even my language, I barely spoke it!

I spoke it but not enough since I had always been outside the community. So, they led me to my uncle’s house and they started to play, to dance, and to celebrate that they had caught me and I was the chief. I couldn’t understand anything, but I stayed there and the next day the others came, all the village chiefs, all the elders, all the population of the Canton came and filled Bogo.

According to our tradition, when one arrests a chief to enthrone him, one doesn’t proceed immediately to his enthronement. First thing you do is hold his funeral (something else I didn’t know but learned later). You hold his funeral, so that’s what they did. Those who want to cry or those who want to make a gesture of mourning, do so accordingly. So, you arrest a chief and hold his funeral over a period of three days. Afterward, they told me I’d be enthroned now following the rites but based on our
calendar, because we neither respect nor apply the calendar of the Ewes and even less that of the Europeans. We have our own days. We have 5 days per week and we have 13 months per year, and our year begins in October. According to this calendar, the enthronement had to take place on the 7th day.

During all that time, I was held prisoner. You can’t go out, especially not during the day. If you have to go out, you go at night, and never alone. If they had left me alone, I would have fled. Even to go to the toilet, they accompany you for all 7 days. After 10 or 12 days, when it was done, I was to return to my father’s home. I went back there and immediately wrote a note to the Director of our school.

I wrote him a telegram that my sister sent from Hohoe in Ghana which was then Gold Coast – he was French – and I said, Monsieur I’ve been captured by a community that wants to kill me; save me or else I won’t be able to return to school ever. So when the Director received the telegram, he immediately sent one to the Commandant du Cercle, Kami Dornano, and within 3 days Kami Dornano was there. The population had already informed him, but I didn’t know that.

He was the last French Commandant du Cercle. He had to leave his car on the mountain because back then, cars couldn’t reach the village.

When he arrived at our house, I didn’t kow him. He said he was the Commandant du Cercle and that I had sent a telegram to my director. I said yes I had done so. He asked how. I told him I sent it via one of my cousins in Ghana. He revealed he had heard I’d said I’d been taken by a community that wanted to kill me. He said he had come to reassure me that no harm would be done and that the whole community would protect me as well as he himself in his role as Administrator of Overseas France. No harm would come to me. Not only would he protect me, he was to aide me so that I could assume my functions as chief and that in two weeks the people would take me to him so that the administrative formalities could be done so that the government could recognize my designation.

I said, but Monsieur Le Commandant du Cercle, what you say is fine but terrible for the person to whom you are speaking because my life should not end here. I know little about this village. I wasn’t even born here, I was born near Badou and it’s only because my brother was dying that I came to this village and I don’t know anyone. How can I govern a community, a population of villages that I don’t know? I can’t! I said he has to help me; he has to do the impossible to take me back to Sokodé so that I can finish my studies.

He said, you know how to read and write, you’re speaking to me in French and I’ve understood everything you say. That’s sufficient for you
to lead this population, and that’s the only thing you have to do now is to guide this population. What you need to do henceforth is to battle so that schools will be created in your village and in your canton so that others can go further than you. That’s what the Commandant du Cercle said to me.

I said no, Monsieur Le Commandant du Cercle, if you take one step, I’ll take two. I’ll hold onto your coat and go with you to Kpalimé. Tomorrow I’ll take the train to Lome and the next day I’ll be in Sokodé. He said, Ah! Non, non, non. He even refused that I accompany him to the big baobab outside the gate of my house. He said no, that I had to stay there. So that was the end of my life.

In bidding him farewell, I said Commandant, you know this is the end of my life. My life stops here. I can’t continue my studies, and what I have to do is to go to the fields and I’ll become miserable. He said no, that he would help me, and then he left.

So, the 13th or 14th day, I can’t remember which, the entire population, the traditional chiefs and the others took me to Kpalimé to see the Commandant, the same Commandant who had come to see me. They gave him the record of the procedure through which I had been designated Paramount Chief. He received the record, I think it was the 10th or 11th of January, but I don’t remember. He told me that he held me in complete confidence and that I would be protected, that I shouldn’t worry, that the people would submit to my desires and wishes, and that if there were any problems, at the slightest difficulty I should inform him.

At that, we were dismissed and returned to the village. That was the end of my school year. In the meantime, I had received a scholarship. The first year, I didn’t have a scholarship but the second year the pupils who worked hard were rewarded with a scholarship. I had worked well and received a full scholarship. I learned of it in November, returned to the village in December, and had thought that with my full scholarship I’d be back in Sokodé in January, never to return to the village.

Both my scholarship and my studies ended there. There you have my entire life. That is how I was torn from my studies to be turned into a stone that would never leave this village. Ever since the 29th of December 1959, until this day, I am a stone in this village.

A permanent fixture of the Bogo village and Canton, to be sure, but Chief Gassou has proven to be anything but a dumb stone. Two years after his capture and the ending of his life as a young scholar, his older brother, who had by that time completed his university studies and been hired by the U.N., visited the village and brought the Paramount Chief a gift: a university textbook on history. He urged his younger brother to study it. Chief Gassou protested that, although he could read the words, since his studies
had stopped at such an early age, he would not be able to understand it. His brother told him to read it anyway, to read everything he could, and that understanding would slowly come.

It did come, and so Chief Gassou decided to start reading other things as well. He began to read the Bible, novels, anything he could get his hands on. In 1965, at the age of 22, he went to a newly-established monastery nearby which had a library where he could come and read at his leisure. The following year, he made contact with a fellow administrator, the mayor of Kpalimé, who had been trained as a teacher in the Ecole Normale of Dakar. From him, Chief Gassou received weekly instruction in pedagogy for two years. Then, he met a monk who agreed to teach him philosophy over the course of a year. After that, a French geography teacher, followed in 1970 by a Belgian professor of African history who came to Chief Gassou to collaborate with him on a study of the Bogo people and the Igo language. Two years later, a French professor and special counsel to the Minister of Education came to study the roots of the Ogo society and the Igo language, and the Chief collaborated with him. While all these efforts were coming to fruition, a young Ogo woman from the village of Sassanou was studying linguistics at the Université Stendhal in Grenoble. Like Chief Gassou, she had spent many years away from the canton, but once she returned she devoted her energies to documenting, analyzing, and preserving the Igo language. Honorine Poidi-Gblem made Igo the focus of her doctoral studies and in the late 1980s began publishing the first pedagogical materials for teaching Bogo people how to read and write their own language. Together with her husband, Napo Poidi, she worked with Chief Gassou, his sub-chiefs, and his councils of elders to establish literacy centers in each of the five villages of the Bogo canton. By the year 2000, a manual of orthography, a syllabary, three short literary works (a booklet of riddles, another of folk tales, and a third of stories written in Igo by contemporary Bogo authors), along with a calendar, and a translation into Igo of the Gospel of Luke had been printed with a modest level of support from SIL International. In well-attended meetings with the language committees in each village in 2000, a palpable enthusiasm for the language and the efforts of the Poidis and Chief Gassou was evident.

Would any of this have transpired if the sixteen year old Amégan Yao David Adoboli had not been seized by his people in December of 1959, symbolically buried, then resurrected as Chief Gassou IV? If the Bogo, like the Anyimere, selected only old men as chiefs, or if Chief Gassou had been less long-lived, what would be the state of the Igo language today under those circumstances? Of course, these are questions without answers, but not without probable outcomes. It is a fact that the structure of the Bogo Paramount Chieftaincy requires a young man to give up his ordinary identity and any other ambitions he might have to take on a life of service to the community. It is also a fact that the young man who lost his life to the chieftaincy in 1959 was of a particularly curious, intelligent, and determined character. The combination of these two facts made it probable that, if the Igo language could be revived, Chief Gassou’s thirst for lifelong learning and his ever-growing admiration for his native tongue would give Igo every chance to persist.
This is not to say that there is still not a tremendous amount of work to be done. Excellent groundwork has been laid, but there is still much to be documented and renewed uses of the language to be popularized. For example, during our first stay in Bogo-Ahlon, Lewis discovered that Igo has five different verbs for “be” – a lexical-semantic phenomenon of great typological interest not mentioned in any of the current literature on the language. In addition to further linguistic documentation, the cultural practices of the Bogo people have yet to be recorded. My own brief investigations revealed that some have been substantially altered within living memory and some have perished forever. The trend toward Christianization has, for example, nearly destroyed the indigenous Ogo religion, which used to value a pantheon of gods in a rich calendar of communal observances throughout the year. Now, there is only one Ogo god officially celebrated by the community every few years, in a festival that seems destined to become increasingly secularized as tensions between the Christians and the few remaining practitioners of the indigenous religion influence communal practices.

In addition to the need for more documentation, there is a need for a long-term campaign of cultural revival/renewal/re-creation among the Bogo. The same kinds of socioeconomic forces are at work in Bogo Canton that are causing minority languages to go the way of Anyimere the world over. For Anyimere-speaking people to successfully trade or get jobs with others, they must speak either Adele or Twi. For the Bogo, the language that opens doors to the outside world is Ewe, and to a lesser degree, French in Togo and English in Ghana. Add to these linguistic pressures the unavoidable influences of cultural globalization, westernization in particular, and you have what Joshua Fishman has non-hyperbolically called the potential for “total cultural meltdown.” (Fishman 2002: 147) Even though the Bogo have the potential advantage of living in a nonindustrialized society with agrarian schedules, contrary to the Miami as described by Rinehart (this volume), so that they can make the effort to attend the language schools and apply themselves to learning to read and write their language, the pull of the outside world is an increasingly strong one. No one person, even one as dynamic and dedicated as Chief Gassou, can hold back these tides. What he, and the others whose work he has nurtured, supported, and helped to sustain, can do is to stimulate pride in Igo-speaking among the Bogo population. It will be up to them to take the culture and the language into the future, as he himself acknowledges:

All of the educated Bogo people have not taught their children to speak Igo, so the next generations will not either, unless we do something about it. There are many factors that lead us toward this danger. We must fight to save our language and culture from this fate! It will be necessary for us to fiercely combat to save, preserve, and continue our way of life. It must become the case that Ewe is a complement to our language rather than our language being a complement to Ewe. Ours is a national language too!
Bibleography


Notes

1 A previous version of this paper was presented at the 104th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Washington, D.C in December, 2005. My fieldwork for the life-history portion of this paper was sponsored by a Research Enhancement Award from Cleveland State University in 2001. Linguistic and ethnographic fieldwork in Togo and Ghana was conducted in 2000 in collaboration with Marshall C. Lewis PhD, and much of the first part of the paper is derived from jointly-developed grant proposals and our ACAL presentation of 2002. Dr. Lewis’ comments on previous drafts of this paper are gratefully acknowledged, but any errors within are my own.

2 These languages are also referred to by recent scholarship as the Central Togo (CT) languages, but to date the case for a change in terminology has not, in my opinion, been thoroughly made, so I will retain the older terminology in this paper for consistency with the bulk of the published literature.

3 An alternative spelling for Anyimere is Animere. Igo is the language of the Ogo people (Bogo, pl.)

4 By our estimation, only about 10% of the Anyimere people have retained any ability in the language, while about 40% of the Bogo living in the Canton currently have some Igo competence.

5 cf Lewis 2001.

6 Peter Nkom, 70-78 years old according to his own estimate when we met him in 2000.

7 This process holds true for village chiefs as well. The lifelong status of chief has only been withdrawn once, under very extreme circumstances.

8 On official maps of Togo, the village’s name is Bogo-Ahlon. Ahlon is an Ewe word, meaning “those who kill.” Chief Gassou usually refers to the village by its Igo name, Bogo.

9 The “brothers” Chief Gassou is referring to are categorical rather than consanguinal brothers; the term “brother” is used for a variety of persons, including a variety of cousins.