WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE? (CONTINUED)

Since colonization by the French and the subsequent independence of the Central African Republic in 1960, the Sango people have been acculturated through contact with other language groups. As the Sango language became more and more ‘creolized’ through urbanization, the people also tended to adopt a more or less hybridized cultural outlook. The urban centres such as Bangui are sites of an agglomeration of cultural habits with a westernized orientation. However, basic cultural patterns still reflect Sango traditions. Women are expected to look after the production and preparation of food while men occupy the public space as providers. Traditionally a young man was obliged to work for the girl’s family for up to four years after which his family pays lobola (or brideprice). The offspring resulting from such marriage become members of the man’s lineage. The basic family unit is not limited to the biological father, mother and their children but extends to members of the parental lineage who also take part in the rearing of children. Respect for seniority is enshrined in the Sango language itself. For instance speech registers vary according to the age and role of the respective speakers. The second person plural pronoun is used to show one’s deference to elders. Traditional religious practices such as rites of initiation and all-night funeral dances persist but have often been replaced by Christian adherence. Orality remains strong as levels of literacy in both French and Sango are quite low.

WHY STUDY SANGO?

The rise of Sango from a language spoken by a minority of people to the status of an official language makes it an interesting case study for sociologists, sociolinguists and lexicographers. By 1991, Sango had acquired the status of a joint official language with French yet it had only managed to have a standard orthography in 1984. The level at which Sango obtained such linguistic and terminological enrichment poses a major challenge for the study of other minority languages. More often than not, most minority languages are left to sink into oblivion. The secret, as Marcel Diki-Kidiri (2001) argues, should be to make any language a working language in order for it to stay alive. To this end, a website, http://sango.free.fr, has been created to promote instructional courses in the Sango language. Hence the development of Sango provides a model for study of other minority languages.
WHO ARE THE SANGO PEOPLE?

Only 400,000 of the almost 5 million second language speakers in the Central African Republic are native Sango speakers. The Sango people were originally river traders who are believed to belong to the Ngbandi language cluster. More than a century ago, Ngbandi was comprised of a handful of dialects one of which was the Sango spoken variety. As the Sango tribe spread out from the Ubangi river and came into contact with other language varieties, their language rose to become the lingua franca or official language of the Central African Republic.

Sango (sometimes also called “Sangho”) is the national language of the Central African Republic. A creole based on the Ngbandi language of the northern Democratic Republic of the Congo, Sango is spoken not only in the Central African Republic, but also by some people in Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The most recent count of native speakers of Sango was 404,000 speakers total — 350,000 of these speakers in the Central African Republic. However, Sango is widely used as a trade language between people who speak other minority languages; thus, it has somewhere around 1,600,000 speakers who speak it as a second language. The Sango people are very friendly and very appreciative of the fact that foreigners are learning and speaking their language. Sango language sounds are very sonorous like birds. Sango uses phrasal verbs and nouns to describe many concepts that use only one word in English. Words in Sango are often used over and over again to mean different things. The most amazing resources the Sango have are their language and themselves. They love it when you communicate with them in their language and not French for example.

WHAT’S THE NATURE OF THEIR LANGUAGE AND CULTURE?

The rise of a relatively little known Sango language into a lingua franca of the Central African Republic has been compared to the history of the English language. While the basic vocabulary of the English language remains Germanic, most of the loan words are derived from Romance languages such as Latin, Greek and French. Likewise, with the arrival of Europeans in the Central African Republic during the 19th century, the Sango language began to borrow and expand through language contact. Although there was considerable loss to the indigenous Ngbandi vocabulary, Sango underwent a significant transformation of its syntax through the adoption and adaptation of loan words. This resulted in its being classified as Ngbandi based pidgin or creole by the American linguist William Samarin (1967). However, other linguists such as Marcel Diki-Kidiri (1982), Christina Thornell (1997) and Charles Morrill (1997) have contested Samarin’s creolization of Sango arguing that Sango has developed as a functional language variety.

Today, the growth of Sango as an official language of communication and instruction has had significant implications for its second language speakers. Whereas most rural migrants to the city of Bangui spoke different languages, they have taken up Sango as their lingua franca. This has not only led to the rapid expansion of Sango lexicon but has also elevated its status to the position of a national language. In some instances, Sango has gained more prominence in situations whereas French used to be the norm.