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Do you speak Kordofanian ?

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Do you speak Kordofanian ?

In the very center of the Republic of the Sudan, the province of South-Kordofan is home to several tens of diverse indigenous communities, each of which speaks (alongside with Arabic, the main vehicular of that region) a tongue of their own. The aim of this communication is twofold :

- **1.** to give a short introduction to the Kordofanian phylum, which regroups more than one half of the languages spoken today in the Nuba mountains.

- **2.** to illustrate the most sailent features of Kordofanian languages through a selection of data taken from a case-study, namely Koalib, a Kordofanian language spoken in and around the cities of Delami, Umm Berembeita and Abri, in the Eastern Jebels of South Kordofan.

I. Kordofanian languages and Kordofanian linguistics

1.1. A quick glance at the linguistic panorama of South-Kordofan

As has been said above, South-Kordofan is characterised by a rather extraordinary linguistic diversity : in a tiny region of 80.000 km², at least two scores of different tongues are still daily spoken by approximatively 1.000.000 to 2.000.000 people, usually collectively designated by the umbrella name *Nuba* (Nadel 1978 [1947] : 2-4). The multifariousness of the languages spoken by the Nuba is exceptional, even in local standards : they represent between one third and one half of the total number of languages spoken in the whole Sudan in an area which represents fewer than 5 % of the country.

This high ratio of languages per square mile is partly due at least to the topography of South Kordofan, a montainous area capable of providing many natural shelters to people fleeing from more powerful competitors. For ages, diverse ethnic groups came to settle in the various rocky massives and hills of the Nuba Mountains (the other name of South Kordofan), thus managing to preserve their political autonomy and cultural identity and therefore giving birth to the present-day enormous linguistic variety of this area.

Although little is known of most of these languages, the information we presently dispose of is enough to propose an overall classification :

- **1. the Kordofanian phylum** is the most important language group in terms of number of languages and speakers. The Kordofanian phylum is generally believed to be one of the main branches of the Niger-Congo super-phylum, which embraces most of the languages spoken in the Southern half of Africa (from Senegal to Kenya : cf. Williamson, Kay & Blench, Roger 2000). The more than 20 Kordofanian languages are all endemic to the province of South Kordofan. They are mostly spoken in the Eastern half of the Nuba Mountains and can be grouped in at least 4 branches (or families), that is (from North to South) :

- the Rashad languages, spoken in and around the cities of Rashad and Abbasia. This branche consists of two clusters, the Tagoy languages (with noun classes¹) and the Tegali languages (without noun classes).

- the Heiban languages, spoken from Delami to the North until Kau, Nyaro and Fungor to the Southeastern limit of the Nuba Mountains. This branch regroupes at least 10 languages, all of them have noun classes and display high lexical similarities (Schadeberg 1981a).

- the Talodi languages, spoken in and around the city of Talodi, also have noun-classes.

- Lafofa is an isolated language, which seems to constitute a separate branch of Kordofanian (MacDiarmid 154-155 ; Stevenson 1956 : 102). However, Schadeberg (1981b) disputes this status and considers it as a member of the Talodi branch.

The Kordofanian phylum may comprise a fifth branch, namely the Katla-Tima cluster, spoken in the North-Western part of South Kordofan. But the available evidence in favor of the inclusion of these languages in Kordofanian is scarce (cf. Stevenson 1957 : 51) and a 500 Tima word list which I was kindly provided with by Gerrit Dimmendaal in 2005 has not given me any clue as to some possible genetic relationship between Koalib and Tima lexical items.

- **2. the Kadu (or Kadugli) languages** (spoken in and around the city of Kadugli) represent the second most important grouping strictly endemic to the Nuba Mountains. Its ten or so members also have a noun-class system, but with an organisation quite different from the one that can be observed in Kordofanian languages (Stevenson 1957 : 55-56). The most recent studies dedicated to the Kadu languages advocate in favor of an inclusion of this grouping into the larger Nilo-Saharan super-phylum (Bender 2000 : 46).

- **3. the other Nuba languages** have less mysterious origins : all of them are clearly of Nilo-Saharan stock and therefore it has been possible to show that they are related to other linguistic groupings, well attested outside South Kordofan :

¹ For the notion of noun class, cf. **II.2.**

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- the **Nubian** dialect continuum (Dilling, Dair, Kadaro, Karko...), spoken in the Northern fringe of the Nuba Mountains, is closely related to other Nubian languages such as Nile Nubian (two languages spoken in the Nile Valley, in Northern Sudan and Southern Egypt) or Midob (spoken in Dar Fur).

- the Nuba languages known as Shatt, Liguri and Lagawa, also belong to a larger group, namely the **Daju** languages, spread across Eastern Tchad, Dar Fur, South Kordofan and Bahr-el-Ghazal (Thelwall 1981).

- **Nyimang-Afitti**, spoken in the North-Western part of the Nuba Mountains, as well as **Temein** (spoken in a nearby area), are two other subdivisions of the Nilo-Saharan super-phylum (Bender 2000 : 45-46)².

Each of the above groupings would deserve a particular, detailed presentation. Yet, for obvious reasons of competence and available space, I will henceforwards focus this presentation on the Kordofanian phylum, of which I am presently describing one member (the Koalib language).

1.2. Kordofanian linguistics : what has been done to date ?

To date, the Kordofanian phylum remains one of the most poorly known language group in Africa. To put it in Schadeberg's words (one of the few scholars to have specialised in the field), «*descriptive and comparative work on Kordofanian languages is still in its infancy*» (1989 : 79). However, despite its juvenile present state, the beginning of Kordofanian studies already dates back to relatively remote times : it was in 1829 that Rüppell published the first wordlist of two Kordofanian languages (*Schabun*, belonging to the Heiban branch of the phylum, and *Takele* (= Tegali), from the Rashad branch). Kordofanian linguistics can therefore be claimed to have developed for almost two centuries, which is not that new, in comparison with African linguistics as a whole. Nonetheless, the main problem concerning Kordofanian has remained the same since Rüppell's times : the lack of abundant, reliable data. This carence can be ascribed to several factors :

- due to their demographic insignificance and isolated location, the Nuba Mountains have often been held in almost total neglect by the rest of the world in general and by the scientific community in particular. As a consequence, in the course of the past two centuries,

² For more details about the classification of Nubian, Nyimang-Afitti and other Nilo-Saharan groupings, see Rilly (forthcoming).

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relatively few scholars have decided to invest time (and money) to check what Nuba languages really look like and fewer still have found the necessary institutional and financial support to conduct their research in good (or at least acceptable) conditions.

- the enormous linguistics diversity of the Nuba mountain was also a terrible challenge for the few people who finally came to dedicate some of their life to the study of these languages. Even if you limit yourself to the Kordofanian phylum, the internal diversity of this group is comparable to what can be observed among all indo-european languages spoken in Europe (Romance + Germanic + Slavic + Baltic + Greek + Albanian). How can just a handful (in the true meaning of the word) of linguists manage to give a full account of such a multiplicity of languages and dialects³ ?

- in addition to that, since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Nuba Mountains were the theatre of two major devastations (during the Mahdia (Stevenson 1984 : 31, 56-61 ; Elles 1935 : 23-27) and the last civil war), during which it was almost impossible for any outsider to go there for scientific purposes. Furthermore, the main vernacular in South Kordofan is a local form of Sudanese Colloquial Arabic and until relatively recent times (say the first half of the XXth century), there was almost no Nuba able to speak a European language. As most of the linguists who ever came to publish about Kordofanian languages were Westerners, who generally had poor knowledge of Arabic, there came on top of the above-mentioned difficulties the problem of communication between linguists and Kordofanian speakers.

Taking into account all the limitations and constraints we have just seen, what has been produced on Nuba languages can be considered as a quite respectable amount of information. Basically, the available sources can be divided into three categories :

- **1. the surveys**, aimed at giving a general account of the linguistic diversity of the Nuba Mountains area. Given the high number of Kordofanian languages, such enterprises were forcibly limited to the publication of relatively short comparative word lists (or basic morphological features) for each language. The most relevant surveys of this kind are those of :

- P.A. and D.N. Mac Diarmid, who, «*during the dry season of 1930-1931*» (1931 : 149), had native speakers of 45 different Nuba languages translate the same word list, «*with a view to ascertaining the number of languages spoken in the region and their relations to one*

³ As a matter of fact, nobody is still able to say exactly how many languages are spoken in the Nuba Mountains, for the information is often too scanty to decide whether we are faced with two dialects of the same language or to two closely related languages. That is the reason for which, throughout this article, I have refrained from giving too precise figures about the number of languages which each phylum or branch actually comprises.

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another.» The results of this survey, published in 1931 under the title «The Languages of the Nuba Mountains», allowed his authors to propose the first systematic groupings of the languages that had been investigated. Most of these groupings, based on a rigorous analysis of the data, have never been seriously challenged since then.

- Roland C. Stevenson, a protestant priest who was in charge of the evangelisation of the Nuba Mountains around the middle of the XXth century. In addition to his religious duties, Stevenson soon got interested in the indigenous Nuba languages, and began to collect data from all the languages he came in contact with, adding to his own inquiries the material obtained by diverse missionaries working at that time among several ethnic communities. His PhD, entitled «A Survey of the Phonetics and Grammatical Structure of the Nuba Mountain Languages», published in 1956-1957, is no doubt the most significant piece of linguistic work ever produced about the whole of Nuba languages. All the languages grouping are documented and the data Stevenson provides still are today the only ones available for some speech communities.

- Thilo Schadeberg, a trained linguist who, in 1974-1975, took up a research trip across the Nuba Mountains and investigated a standardised word list of 100 items (plus some morphological indications, such as the form of personal pronouns and possessives...) among more than 20 linguistic communities, speaking Kordofanian and Kadu languages⁴. He later published his data on Heiban (1981a) and Talodi (1981b), and proposed for the first time some reconstructions of the protolanguages (respectively proto-Heiban and proto-Talodi) which presumably gave rise to the present-day Heiban and Talodi languages.

To this day, Schadeberg's and Stevenson's work remain the most reliable and complete sources for an overall and comprehensive approach of the Kordofanian languages.

- **2. full descriptions of individual languages.** As regards Kordofanian, most of such descriptions were produced by protestant missionaries, who generally spent a long time in full linguistic immersion among the people whose language they described. The most comprehensive descriptions I am aware of for Kordofanian languages are grammars of Moro (Black 1971), Otoro (Stevenson 1942) and Tira (Stevenson 1943). The fact that these work

⁴ At the time when Schadeberg made his research, there was still some doubt among the possibility of Kadugli languages belonging or not to the Kordofanian phylum : Greenberg, in his seminal book *The languages of Africa* (1970 [1963] : 149-160) had considered them as a branch of Kordofanian, while Stevenson (1957 : 55-56, cf. I.I.) had insisted on the fact that the Kadugli class-system was too different from the rest of the class-languages to allow for their inclusion in the same grouping. Later on, Schadeberg (1981c, 1989 : 74), turned to be one of the supporters of the non-Kordofanian status of the Kadugli family. His view has never been seriously challenged since.

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were intimately linked to the activities of christian missionaries had at least two important consequences from a linguistic point of view :

- the descriptive works of this kind ceased to be produced when the missionaries were expelled from the Sudan in 1964 (Fluehr-Lobban & al. 1992 : 145)⁵. That is why there are no recent reference of that kind.

- the religious objectives of the missionaries introduced a bias in the choice of the languages to be described : effectively, it was easier to convert animists than muslims. That is why, for instance, the Rashad languages, spoken almost exclusively by muslim people, were less studied⁶ than the Heiban languages, whose speakers were still largely animist by the time the first missionaries (after the Mahdia) came to settle in South Kordofan (during the second quarter of the XXth century).

Another characteristic of material produced by the missionaries, probably linked to the state of the linguistic knowledge about African languages at that time, is that almost all of available documents bear no mention of tone, an element which seems to play a key role in the morphosyntax of most (if not all) of Kordofanian languages (cf. **II.4**).

- **3. texts in particular languages** : as a rule, they were also produced by the missionaries, who quite often set to translate the Bible (or part of it) in the language of the people among whom they had settled and sometimes came to produce didactic material (to teach children how to read their language) and collected traditional folkstories. More recently, some Nuba groups have resumed by themselves a litterary activity in their mother tongue : such is the case of the Koalibs, who (since 1993) have issued at least 6 publications in their vernacular, including various folkstories and a new version of the New Testament (translated by a Koalib speaker)⁷.

II. A brief account of one particular Kordofanian language : Koalib

In this section, I have chosen to illustrate five sailent features of Koalib (kb.), the Kordofanian language I am presently in the process of describing. Koalib belongs to the Heiban branch and is spoken by 100.000 people coming from or living in the North-Eastern

⁵ According to Stevenson (1984 : 75), as soon as 1962, there were no missionaries left in South-Kordofan.

⁶ About the Rashad branch, one can mention at least one exception, namely Fr. Carlo Muratori's notes on Orig, who were reorganised and published by Schadeberg & Elias (1979).

⁷ For more details about the publications in Koalib, see Quint 2006 (in press).

part of the Nuba Mountains. All the data provided hereafter are taken from the central variety of Koalib, named *Rere* in English (Schadeberg 1981a) and **ɲèréɛɾè** in Koalib.

II.1. Vowel harmony

Like many of the world's languages and many African languages in particular (Clements 2000 : 134-138 ; Creissels 1994 : 89-103), Koalib has a mechanism of vowel harmony. The eight Koalib vowels are divided into two sets (high and low), based on vowel height, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Koalib vowels grouped by position and sets

Vowels	Front	Central	Back
High	i	ɛ	u
Low	e	a	o
	ɛ		ɔ

All Koalib words may contain either high vowels or low vowels, but one and the same lexical unit cannot contain vowels belonging to both sets.

The harmonic rules strictly apply to almost all of the 3.800 items I presently dispose of, as shown by the following examples :

- words with low vowels : **ɛɛtùm**, **kúukí**, **kwèɛlúŋ** [ɛɛðùm, kúugí, kwèɛlúŋ] *termitarium, flea / louse, liar*.

- words with high vowels : **káɗɗény**, **kwòɔɾàm**, **lɔɾé**, **póorè** [káɗɗɛŋ, kwòɔɾàm, lɔɾé, fóorè] *one-eyed person, thief, drying shed / rack (for sorghum), light*.

As a consequence of vowel harmony, most Koalib prefixes and suffixes have two forms, depending on whether they are affixed to a word with high or low vowels.

Example :

- **kwèɛlúŋkì** [kwèɛlúŋgì] *with the liar*. The instrumental particle **-kì**, *with*, has a high vowel /i/, because **kwèɛlúŋ**, *liar*, belongs to the high set.

- **káɗɗénykè** [káɗɗɛŋgè] *with the one-eyed person*. The instrumental particle **-kè**, *with*, has a low vowel /e/, because **káɗɗény**, *one-eyed person*, belongs to the low set.

Vowel harmony can also be used as a morphological device, for example in verbal derivation, to produce factitive forms (in high vowels, H) from intransitive verbs (in low vowels, L).

Example : **enteré** [enderé] (L) *to sleep* > **intirí** [indirí] (H) *to lull / put (someone) to sleep*.

II.2. Class system

Like many Niger-Congo languages and most of Kordofanian languages (cf. I.1.), Koalib has a noun-class system : any Koalib substantive belongs to a class or gender, characterised by a prefixal class-concord, generally borne by the substantive itself and commanding a series of morphological agreements on elements referring to that substantive.

Examples :

- 1. **kwór**, *man, husband* (**kw-** class)

> **kwór** **kwínyí** **kwè-cào**

[kwór] [kwínyí] [kwèzào]

husband + POSS.1SG + be.good.PFV.3SG

= *my husband is (a) nice (man)*.

The **kw-** concord, found on the substantive **kwór**, is repeated on the possessive and the verb.

- 2. **lèpéntî**, *teacher* (**l-** class)

> **lèpéntî** **línyí** **lè-cào**

[lèvéndî] [línyí] [lèzào]

homme + POSS.1SG + be.good.PFV.3SG

= *my teacher is (a) nice (man)*.

The **l-** concord, found on the substantive **lèpéntî**, is repeated on the possessive and the verb.

In Koalib, there are 11 such class-concords. At first sight, this system can seem quite complicated when compared with the 2 or 3 gender systems found in most European languages. However, in many cases, those concords are not combined arbitrarily with the substantival lexemes, as will be shown below :

- **1.** the alternation of class-concords is commonly used to express number (through singular / plural pairing).

Examples :

- **kwór**⁸, *man* (**kw-** class) > **lór**, *men* (**l-** class).

- **kàpòppór** [kàvòppór] *butterfly* (**k-** class) > **yàpòppór** [jàvòppór] *butterflies* (**y-** class).

- **2.** most of class concords (or of singular / plural pairings of the type seen in **1.**) are clearly linked to a broad semantic notion which gives an intrinsic coherence to each noun class.

Examples :

- the **ŋ-** class tends to group most of the liquids in Koalib : **ŋán, ŋâo, ŋùmé, ŋîn**, *milk, water, sweat, blood*.

- associated with the **t-** (singular) / **r-** (plural) pairing, one finds many objects characterised by their length, such as : **táalà, táe, tóolòlò, tóo, túudùnè**, *hair, road, rainbow, thin stick, sewing thread*.

- **3.** in addition, several class-concords are synchronically used in overt derivation with specific semantic values (probably derived from the broad notions exemplified in **2.**).

Examples :

- the **ŋ-** concord is used to produce abstract nouns : **kwòoràm**, *thief* > **ŋòoràm**, *theft*.

- the **kw-** (singular) / **l-** (plural) is used to derive the name of the inhabitants of a determined place : **Káلكè** [kálgè] *Delami* (name of a Koalib city) > **kwèkáلكè** [kwègálgè] *inhabitant of Delami, "Delamese"* (plural : **lèkáلكè** [lègálgè]).

This type of class-system displays many similarities with what can be found in other subdivisions (such as Bantu) of the Niger-Congo super-phylum : it was essentially on the ground of these similarities that Greenberg (1970 [1963] : 149-160, cf. also discussion in Schadeberg 1989 : 71-73) claimed that a genetic relationship did exist between Kordofanian and Niger-Congo.

II.3. Declension

⁸ Phonetic transcriptions of Koalib words are provided only when actual pronunciation is significantly different from what can be inferred from the (phonologically-based) orthographic transcriptions.

More surprising from a typological point of view (Creissels 2000 : 233-234, 247-248 ; Watters 2000 : 202 ; Creissels 1991 : 71, 348, 353-354), Koalib has a synthetic declension, comprising two cases :

- the subject (S) case, usually lacking any overt marker.
- the object (O) case, marked by a suffix and / or a change in tone pattern.

Example :

- **kwór kwè-cào** [kwór kwèzào] "man.S + be.good.PFV.3SG", *the man is nice*.
- **kwêécé kwòoró** [kwêézé kwòoró] "see.IPFV.3SG + man.O", *he will see the man*.

The morphology of the object case is by no means transparent for the outsider, as can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. A sample of the morphological devices uses to mark the object case

Meaning	Subject	Object	Object marking
<i>gourd</i>	kòttó [kòttó]	kòttóyé [kòttóyé]	suffix
<i>jackal</i>	kwòtlòm [kwòðlòm]	kwòtlómá [kwòðlómá]	suffix + tone change
<i>person</i>	kwìcì [kwìzì]	kwíçì [kwíçì]	tone change

Besides its accusative function, the object case can mark assume other roles, such as :

- **1.** dative :

Example : **Kwókkò** [kwókkò] *Kwókkò, name of the first-borne male child* > **kwìntàccé Kwókkòŋwó ñèçàaŋálè** [kwānɗàccé kwókkòŋwó ñèçàaŋálè] "show.to.IPFV.3SG + Kwókkò.O + thing.O", *he will show Kwókkò something*.

- **2.** attributive :

Example : **ñémàt** [ñémàt] *friendship* > **nyíŋé lòrò ñémàtè** [nyíŋé lòrò ñémàtè] "we + be.1PL + friendship.O", *we are friends*.

- **3.** locative (when followed by positional words).

Example : **èètùm** [èèðùm] *termitarium* > **èètúmè-kùttú**⁹ [èèðúmè kùttú] "termitarium.O + under", *under the termitarium*.

⁹ Postpositions exist in Koalib but they do not command an object agreement on substantive. That is why I use the (provisional) label "*position word*" when dealing with items behaving like **kùttú**, *under*. For further development, see Quint (forthcoming).

To date, the existence of a synthetic declension in Kordofanian has been mentioned only for the Heiban branch (Stevenson 1957 : 28, 37, 44, 49, 193) to which Koalib belongs. However, data for the other branches are so scanty that we cannot exclude the possibility that a similar object case (or other cases) be found there too.

II.4. Tone and morphology

Like most of Niger-Congo languages (Clements 2000 : 152 ; Creissels 1994 : 177), Koalib is a tone language, i.e. the tonal melody associated to each syllable of a word has a distinctive value. Koalib has two tone levels :

- high, signaled by an acute accent (◌́) : **ḡwóny** [ḡwón] *saliva*.
- low, signaled by a grave accent (◌̀) : **ḡwòny** [ḡwò] *eggs*.

These two levels can combine to form several types of modulations, the most common of which is the falling tone (begins high and ends low), signaled by a circumflex accent : **ḡâo** [ḡâo] *water*.

Although it is possible to provide several tens of lexical pairs of the **ḡwóny** / **ḡwòny** type, the highest functional load of tone obtains in morphology :

- it has already been shown above (cf. Table 2) that tone alone can be used to distinguish between object and subject function for substantives ;
- in addition to that, tone plays a key-role in verb-morphology, being frequently the sole mean to distinguish the different actors and undergoers involved in a given situation, as the following triplet shows :

- **kwèny-èécé** [kwènyèé] *I will see him*.
- vs. **kwény-èécé** [kwényèé] *we will see him*.
- vs. **kwény-éécé** [kwényéé] *he will see me*.

II.5. Verb extensions

Koalib possesses a rich verbal derivation, which offers many possibilities to modify the basic meaning of a verbal root. In **I.1.**, it has been shown that vowel change (from low set to high set) can be used as a derivational device to produce factitives. However (at least as

respects overt derivation), most of Koalib verbal extensions consist of suffixes (generally associated with specific tonal melodies), as can be seen below :

- **1. -Vccé / -Vcci**¹⁰ [Vccé, Vccí] is a *benefactive* (BEN) extension, usually associated with the idea of *making something to someone's advantage* :

- **kwé-pùutí ḡán** [kwévùuđí ḡán] "warm.up.IPFV.3SG + milk.O", *he will warm the milk up*

> **kwé-pùutíccí Kwókkòḡwó ḡán** [kwévùuđíccí kwókkòḡwó ḡán] "warm.up.BEN.IPFV.3SG + Kwókkò.O + milk.O", *he will warm the milk up for Kwókkò.*

- **2. -Vtà / -Vtè** [Vđà, Vđè] is a *detrimental* (DETR) extension, usually associated with the idea of *making something to someone's prejudice* :

- **kwé-nyìimí ḡèđà** [kwéjìimí ḡèđà] "steal.IPFV.3SG + cow.O", *he will steal a cow*

> **kwé-nyìimètè Kwókkòḡwó ḡèđà** [kwéjìimètè kwókkòḡwó ḡèđà] "steal.DETR.IPFV.3SG + Kwókkò.O + cow.O", *he will steal a cow from Kwókkò.*

- **3. -Vnné / -Vnní** [Vnné, Vnní] is a *reflexive* (REFL) extension, usually associated with the idea of *making something to oneself* :

- **kwêécé Kwókkòḡwó** [kwêézé kwókkòḡwó] "see.IPFV.3SG + Kwókkò.O", *he will see Kwókkò*

> **kwêécànné k-álmántàr-ná** [kwêézànné k-álmándàr-ná] "see.REFL.IPFV.3SG + Kwókkò.O + in-mirror-within", *he will look at himself in the mirror.*

- **4. -Vtècé / -Vtìcí** [Vđèzé, Vđìzì] is a *reciprocal* (RECP) extension, usually associated with the idea of *making something to each other* :

- **lé-tòoké Kwókkòḡwó** [léđòogé kwókkòḡwó] "stab.IPFV.3PL + Kwókkò.O", *they will stab Kwókkò*

> **lé-tòokàtècé-ná** [léđòogàđèzé ná] "stab.RECP.IPFV.3PL + within", *they will stab each other.*

Several other extensions of this kind are attested in modern Rere Koalib (for more details, see Quint, forthcoming).

Concluding remarks

¹⁰ There are two forms for each verbal extension, because of the existence of vowel harmony : cf. **I.1.**

Through this brief overview, I have tried to show how diverse and fascinating Nuba (and especially Kordofanian) languages are. As a conclusion, I would like to point out the following ideas, which seem to me crucial for the future of Kordofanian linguistics and languages :

- **1.** we know too little about Kordofanian and (for obvious scientific reasons) more research is need about the numerous languages spoken in South-Kordofan, some of which are clearly endangered and might well fall into oblivion without having ever been thoroughly investigated. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the structure of Kordofanian languages and of their exact degree of relationship with the rest of Niger-Congo could prove particularly valuable in order to reconstruct the history of African tongues and populations.

- **2.** the present-day political and demographic weight of the Nubas as a whole has perhaps never been so high in Sudanese history. Today, they make up more than 8 % (i.e. over 2 million people¹¹) of the whole population of the Sudan (*Encyclopædia Universalis* (1997 : 413)¹² and, for the last 40 years, there has been a growing feeling of Nuba identity among the indigenous people of South Kordofan (Stevenson 1984 : 75-76 ; Omaar & De Waal 1995 : 55-59, 338-340). This increasing consciousness is nurtured, inter alia, by claims about linguistic particularisms, strengthened by the fact that various Kordofanian languages are still widely spoken by several ethnic communities. Thus, besides its cultural aspect, the language issue in South Kordofan may well acquire also a sizeable socio-political dimension. The future will show how and if Kordofanian speakers can (and want to) keep their linguistic heritage in today's ever-changing Sudan.

List of abbreviations

¹¹ This figure includes all people who view themselves (or are viewed) as Nubas (i.e. belonging to one of the non-Arab ethnic communities of South-Kordofan) : the number of actual speakers of Nuba languages is certainly much lower although it is very difficult to assess, due to the lack of up-to-date data (hence the rough estimate of 1.000.000 to 2.000.000 people I have given in **I.1.**). For further discussion of the number of Nuba people and speakers, see Quint 2006 (in press).

¹² Fifty years ago, this proportion was 6 %, according to the 1955-1956 census (Stevenson 1984 : 24).

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BEN = benefactive

PFV = perfective

DETR = detrimental

PL = plural

H = high (vowel)

POSS = possessive

IPFV = imperfective

RECP = reciprocal

kb. = koalib

REFL = reflexive

L = low (vowel)

S = subject

O = object

SG = singular

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