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Korandje as a Songhay language island

Lameen Souag

1. Introduction

With some five million speakers, the core Songhay varieties – forming a dialect continuum along the Niger river – are not a good fit for the notion of language island, despite being unrelated to any of the neighbouring languages. However, a broader look at Songhay reveals a rather extensive Songhay language archipelago outside of this core area, consisting of towns on old trade routes and small groups of farming villages founded by migrants:

	Country	Type	Date	References
Djenne	Mali	Town	?1500	(Heath 1999a)
Hombori	Mali	Town	?1500	(Heath 2007)
Djougou	Benin	Town	?1500	(Zima 1994)
Kandi	Benin	Town	>1500	(Heath 2001)
In-Gall	Niger	Town	?1400	(Bernus 1972)
*Agades	Niger	Town	ca. 1400	(Barth 1851)
Tabelbala	Algeria	Town	?1200	(Souag 2015a)
Kikara	Mali	Villages	?1500	(Heath 2005)
Maranse	Burkina Faso	Villages	?1600	(Nicolaï 1979)
Zarma of Argungu	Nigeria	Villages	ca. 1850	(Sani 2017)
Zabarma	Sudan	Villages	ca. 1900	(Abu-Manga 1995)
Malle	Sudan (Blue Nile)	Villages	ca. 1900	(Abu-Manga 1995)

To this may be added several nomadic groups along the peripheries who shifted from another language to Songhay – at a period that for now can only be guessed at very approximately – while retaining a distinctive group identity:

	Country	Type	Date	Former ethnicity	References
Idaksahak	Mali, Niger	Nomads	?1700	Berber	(Christiansen-Bolli 2011; Souag 2015b)
Igdalan	Niger	Nomads	?1600	Berber	(Benítez-Torres 2009)
Iberogan	Niger	Nomads	?1600	(unclear)	(Rueck & Christiansen 1999)
Kel Alkaseybaten	Mali, Burkina Faso	Nomads	?1750	Tuareg	(Grémont 2010)
Gabero	Mali	Nomads	?1750	Fulani	(Heath 1999b)

The emergence of some of these language islands is probably to be connected with the expansion of the Songhay Empire (1464-1591), which extended as far west as the Atlantic Ocean before falling victim to an invasion by Morocco. However, the language's spread began before that and has continued long after it, as illustrated by the southward expansion of Zarma in Niger (Alpha Gado 1980).

Among all these Songhay language islands, the most linguistically divergent is undoubtedly the oasis of Tabelbala in southwestern Algeria, where the pressures of nearly a millennium of contact with Berber and subsequently Arabic has turned Songhay into a clearly distinct language: Korandje. The remainder of this paper is dedicated to describing its situation as a language island whose separation from its source is nearly complete. For studies of the language, see Cancel (1908), Tilmatine (1991; 1999), Souag (2010a; 2010b; 2015a; 2015c); for studies of the culture, see especially Champault (1969). A different perspective on local history is provided by Idrīsī (2013).

2. Linguistics

The name “Korandjé” (Cancel 1908) is a rather inexact attempt to transcribe in French the language’s autonym *kʷara n dzyəy*, “village’s language”. Other spellings found in the literature include Kwarandzyey, Kwara-n-dzi. In Arabic, speakers usually refer to their language as *ʃalḥa* شلحة, a term used indifferently in the region to describe any non-Arabic local language. (Confusingly, versions of this term (English *Shilha*, French *Chleuh*, etc) have become well-established outside the regional context to refer specifically to the main Berber variety of southern Morocco.) When they need to distinguish their language from other local “Shilhas”, they call it *lbəlbaliyya* البلبالية; the speakers themselves are Belbalis. The resident

Ait Atta Berbers similarly call Korandje *tacelhiyt n tbelbalt*, “Shilha of Tabelbala”. As a result of this usage, many Arabic speakers mistakenly assume Korandje is a Berber dialect.

2.1 Structural innovation, regularity, and complexity

Within Songhay, the Northern branch to which Korandje belongs (Souag 2012) stands out as strikingly innovative in its grammar. This branch distinguishes itself by the loss of almost all inherited derivational morphology; by the extensive borrowing of Berber plural morphology (mainly for Berber loans); by the development of a new genitive particle *n*; by the absence of grammaticalised definite marking; by prenominal positioning of larger numerals; by replacement of the old relative marker with a demonstrative; and by a strong propensity to agglutinate subject pronouns and mood/aspect/negation (MAN) markers onto the verb. Even within Northern Songhay, Korandje is quite innovative (Souag 2010a): former subject pronouns have gone further down the road to subject agreement than in any other variety (appearing even on the comitative preposition, cf. Souag (2015c)), negation has been factored out of the MAN marker to occupy a distinct slot, the mood/aspect system has been considerably expanded, numerals come between nouns and adjectives, and the primary postpositions have been reduced to a minimal inventory of basic case functions (locative, dative, genitive).

With the great exception of noun plurals – whose irregularity results unambiguously from contact influences – Korandje morphology is fairly regular, probably about as regular as other Songhay languages if not more so. This is particularly true of the verbal system. The verbal system of Korandje, like that of Songhay in general, is strikingly regular, except to some extent where it interacts with property marking. Nevertheless, Korandje has developed some innovative irregularities even in this domain: two auxiliary-like verbs, existential *ba* ‘be, exist’ and desiderative *bax* ‘want’, cannot take regular mood/aspect marking. The formation of attributive adjectives from stative verbs is also generally regular, but several irregularities exist there as well. Most adjectives are formed either by reusing the verbal stem (eg *k^warəy* ‘be white’ or ‘white’) or by adding a suffix *-əw* (eg *d^ʕəd* ‘be broad’ vs. *d^ʕədəw* ‘broad’), but irregular forms such as *ku* ‘be long’ vs. *kuku* ‘long’ have been retained from proto-Songhay. The irregularities of deverbal noun formation in mainstream Songhay have been entirely lost in Korandje; however, some borrowed verbs pair with corresponding borrowed deverbal nouns.

The nominal system, on the other hand, is rife with irregularity in regard to number marking: Arabic nouns typically retain Arabic plural marking (eg *lkas* ‘cup’ > *lkisan* ‘cups’), while Berber ones variably show restructured Berber-style plurals (eg *ak^wasi* ‘hedgehog’ > *ik^wasənən* ‘hedgehogs’). This fits perfectly into the North African context – most Berber varieties retain Arabic plurals for Arabic loans, while a few Arabic ones retain Berber plurals for Berber loans, and both families have a wide variety of different plural patterns within their lexicon even before loanwords are taken into account. Within a Songhay context, however, this is quite unusual; apart from Northern Songhay, most Songhay varieties limit plural marking to a non-lexeme-specific NP-final suffix or clitic, making this kind of irregularity unthinkable. Indeed, the latter strategy is still alive and well in Korandje, which uses the

inherited NP-final plural clitic =*yu* in all cases unless the last word of the NP is already internally marked for number.

Morphosyntactic complexity is primarily a matter of regularity, already discussed, but paradigm size can also be taken to be relevant. In this respect, the changes in Korandje inflectional morphology do not tend in any one direction. The preverbal aspect/mood marking slot takes a wider range of material as a result of the innovation of a new prospective (in *-baŋam-*), an optative (in *adm-*), ‘any more’ *-k-*, and ‘yet’ *-kum-*. Yet, whereas negation is fused with aspect/mood in mainstream Songhay, Korandje has factored it out into a prefix *s-*, leading to the disappearance of the original negative aspect/mood forms (Kossmann 2004). Phonologically, the changes in Korandje are again not unidirectional: the consonant inventory has been considerably expanded by the introduction of pharyngeals, uvulars, and pharyngealised consonants (despite the loss of *ŋ*), while the vowel inventory has shrunk considerably due to the loss of contrastive vowel length and of mid vowels (but subsequently gained a new contrast between front *a* and back *ɑ*), and contrastive tone has simply been lost. See 2.2 for more details.

In terms of morphological type, mainstream Songhay is close to isolating; its suffixes are relatively low in textual frequency, apart from the definite article. Korandje has turned number of formerly independent words into affixes, including subject and object pronouns and mood/aspect/negation markers, as well as acquiring a number of lexical plurals. This has raised its synthesis index (morpheme/word ratio), as defined in Greenberg (1960), from barely over 1 to more than 2.

2.2 Contact and lexical innovation

Largely as a result of long-term contact, Korandje seems to have changed rather more extensively than its stay-at-home relatives. Korandje phonology has been profoundly reshaped by contact effects, contrasting with the relative stability of Songhay phonology within the family’s heartland. As examined in detail by Nicolaï (1981), caveats about the nature of reconstruction aside, Proto-Songhay – and, in most respects, proto-Northern Songhay – can be reconstructed with a phonology barely distinguishable from that of modern Niger Songhay (Kaado): five vowels *a e i o u* each distinguishing short vs. long, two level tones (and contour tones probably resulting from combinations thereof), no complex onsets, no *p*, labiovelarized consonants *k^w, g^w, ŋ^w*... The divergences of mainstream Songhay languages from this system are relatively minor; notably, some lose tone and/or lose labiovelarization, while Zarma loses mid vowels in closed syllables. In Korandje, however, the phonology has been much more extensively reworked. Features absent from North Africa have been lost: tone contrasts have been abandoned, and *ŋ* has been unpacked to *ny* [NG]. Features typical of North Africa have been gained: word-initial CC has become routine, schwa has been added to the vowel inventory and alternates with zero, pharyngealization has become contrastive for coronal consonants, uvulars have been added to the consonant inventory... The vowel system has been massively reworked. Initially, the loss of length contrasts and raising of mid vowels brought Korandje very close to the usual Northwest

African pattern. However, the subsequent loss of postvocalic *r* in certain contexts created a new opposition considerably more unusual for the region between *a* and *ɑ*.

Korandje morphosyntax and syntax, if not quite as profoundly reshaped as its phonology, still falls well outside the mainstream Songhay norm. Many of the relevant changes precede Korandje's arrival in the oasis, dating back to Northern or even Northwestern Songhay (Souag 2012) – the procliticisation of subject pronouns and mood/aspect/negation markers, the shift from SOV to rather strict SVO order (probably under Berber influence), the simplification of inherited diathesis suffixes and deverbal noun morphology, the development of a centrifugal marker on the verb (under Berber influence), the loss of (or failure to innovate?) definite marking on nouns... However, the progressive shift of subject pronouns to agreement markers (under Arabic and Berber influence), the separation of negation from mood/aspect marking (under Berber influence), and the reduction of primary postpositions to a small set of clitic case markers (an internally motivated simplification) are more recent. Contact with Berber and Arabic has massively complicated Korandje plural marking (see 2.1) and the syntactic behaviour of numerals within the noun phrase, while creating a marginally productive root-and-pattern templatic causative alternation and a new subclass of nominal adjectives (both borrowed from Arabic); none of this has any known parallels in mainstream Songhay.

As for the lexicon, less than 500 Songhay words survive in Korandje. Their importance should not be underestimated; they include most of the high-frequency vocabulary (e.g. *ayəy* “I”, *ti* “say”, *dza* “do”, *a-ffu* “one”), and account for the large majority of any normal transcript. Nevertheless, the long tail of less frequent vocabulary consists almost entirely of Arabic and Berber loanwords. Even inherited Songhay words have often changed under Arabic and Berber influence to cover a different set of senses than in Songhay: for instance, whereas in Songhay “close” is expressed by the same word as “cover” (*dáabù*), in Korandje it is expressed by the same (inherited) word as “tie” (*haw*), just as in regional Berber (Tashelhiyt *qqn*). Newer lexical gaps are rather consistently filled by borrowing from Maghrebi Arabic (which in turn has often filled them from French): *lawqid* “matches”, *luṭu* “car”, *nnəkʷət* “identity card”, *ṣəwwər* “take photos”... In the rare cases where neologisms are created from inherited resources, they are usually relegated to a cryptic argot register intended to baffle Arabic-monolingual or unfamiliar listeners, rather than being used in everyday conversation (e.g. *ir yyarə* “yellow water” for what would normally be *atəy* “tea”, *uy kʷarəy* “white one” for normal *idṛamən* “money”). While Arabic is the only active source of loanwords at present (including French ones passing through Arabic), etymological investigation reveals a remarkable variety of major loan sources.

Within Berber, sound correspondences make it necessary to distinguish at least four strata (Souag 2015a): a few early loans from Tuareg which probably precede arrival in Tabelbala, e.g. *hɣa* “flee”, *ayarər* “women's wrap”, *tasiyya* “drinn-grass”; a major set of loans from a close relative of Zenaga (Mauritania), probably dating to the medieval heyday of Tabelbala's role in trans-Saharan trade, e.g. *yarə* “yellow”, *talla* “look for”, *taməməṣ* “bride”; a number of more recent ones from a southern Moroccan Berber variety, perhaps especially after the decline of trans-Saharan trade and the rise of the Ait Atta tribe, e.g. *imga* “sickle”, *abərḍən*

“sparrow”; and a few sporadic loans from the Zenati Berber varieties of southwestern Algeria, e.g. *awəzza* “serving dish”.

Within Arabic, the situation is less clear-cut, but some loans probably reflect contact with Hassaniya to the west, while more recent ones tend to come from the emergent Maghrebi koine of the provincial capital Bechar; the influence of spoken Arabic massively outweighs that of Standard Arabic, which, in this diglossic context, is used much more for passive understanding than for active production. While borrowing from Arabic has undoubtedly accelerated since independence, it was well under way much earlier. Cancel (1908) already documents profound Arabic influence in the language, extending to basic vocabulary like *laktəf* “shoulder”, *dha* “back”, *rəbʕa* “four”; out of eight Korandje fairy tales recorded by Champault (1950), seven have Arabic refrains.

Most French loanwords have evidently passed through Maghrebi Arabic (as often shown by their forms), e.g. *ttili* “television”. It is possible, however, that a few (perhaps *laližu* “the French Foreign Legion”, for instance) may have entered the language directly through contact with soldiers during the colonial period.

A couple of possible direct loans from sub-Saharan languages need further investigation; the best candidate is the verb *bə* “be crazy”, which has no plausible Songhay, Arabic, or Berber etymology of which I am aware, but would formally be a regular reflex of Hausa *bori* “spirit possession”.

3. Geography & population

Korandje is spoken at the oasis of Tabelbala, in southwestern Algeria between Bechar and Tindouf. Within this oasis, the villages of *Zaouia/Kʷara* and *Cheraia/Ifrənyu*, as well as the hamlet of *Makhlouf/Yami* and the small post-independence settlement called *Bina Eddati*, are primarily Korandje-speaking, while the central settlement established by the French, *Hai El Wasat/Lkərti*, is primarily Arabic-speaking, and inhabited in large part by 20th or 21st century immigrants to the town. These settlements are fairly close together, with no more than six kilometres from one end to the other. However, the ruins of other former settlements are scattered across the oasis, including areas currently uninhabited. The total population of the oasis is over 5000, but of these, probably no more than 3500 or so speak Korandje.

The oasis as a whole is profoundly isolated; the nearest permanent settlement of any kind is the tiny Hassaniya Arabic-speaking village of *Bou-Tbiga*, 100 km to the northeast, and the nearest town, *Abadla* (Maghrebi Arabic-speaking), is 180 km away as the crow flies, and considerably further by road. Within living memory, it used to take days to get to any other settlement. This isolation was no doubt an important factor in the oasis' ability to maintain a separate language for such a long period.

4. History

Tabelbala is to be classed as a progressive language island. The area around Tabelbala has been inhabited since well before the Neolithic, judging by the stone tools that still regularly

turn up in the desert. The presence of Songhay there, however, dates back probably no more than 800 years or so, according to Souag's (2015a) attempt to reconstruct the linguistic history of the oasis. In the 13th century, trade routes between Morocco and the Sahel that had formerly led to western Mauritania shifted their southern terminus eastwards. In this new configuration, Tabelbala was well-positioned to serve as a convenient stop on the long and barren road between Sijilmasa (SW Morocco) and Timbuktu or Walata. To fulfill this new role, however, it needed to be developed: agricultural workers needed to be persuaded or (more probably) compelled to move there by the highly mobile guides and traders that stood to benefit from it, likely belonging to the Berber-speaking nomads called Masūfa in contemporary sources. The clearcut innovations shared by Korandje with the rest of Northern Songhay (causative *-ndza*, relative *-yu*, centrifugal *-nna*, imperfective *b*, 2pl *ndzyu...* see Souag (2012)) are best explained by presuming that these workers came from oases in what is now northern Niger. On arrival, these Northern Songhay-speakers borrowed a good part of their vocabulary, including almost all of their hunting-gathering vocabulary (e.g. *ibbi* "gather", *azənkʷəd* "gazelle"), much of their pastoral terminology (*ayyər* "male donkey", *təksi* "goat/sheep", *adəs* "colostrum") and many religious and cultural terms (e.g. *təzbərrən* "Dhuhr prayer", *tagərḍəṣ* "paper"), from the Berber speakers they found already dominating the region. They retained Songhay forms for core agricultural terms, however, such as *lambu* "garden", *gungʷa* "chicken", *həyni* "grain", *kngu* "date palm". Tombstones from this relatively early period feature Berber names resembling forms found among the Zenaga and Tuareg of the southern Sahara, suggesting that the oasis' elites at this period had particularly close ties to the south.

Starting around 1500, as European-controlled oceanic trade began to supplant trans-Saharan trade, Tabelbala's position seems to have become more precarious, and it came under the rule of Arabic-speaking nomads from the north. Its elite at this period seems to have sought to cultivate ties to both sides of the Sahara, as exemplified by the locally born jurist and holy man Makhlūf ibn ʿAlī, who taught at both Timbuktu and Marrakech before 1533. Morocco's conquest of the Songhay Empire in 1591, and the subsequent economic difficulties of the Sahel, would presumably have further weakened any remaining ties to the south. By about 1600, the oasis was unambiguously in the political orbit of new forces from the north; at this period, the village of Sidi Ali Othman in Tabelbala was sacked for refusing to pay its customary tribute to Arab nomads, and some survivors fled to other regions. Despite these disruptive events, the development of this language island seems to have remained essentially static. The potential for expansion by emigration was not realized; Belbali emigrants to Touat (Champault 1969: 31) or Tafilalt (Ensel 1999) ultimately shifted to Arabic. Conversely, while the population of the oasis undoubtedly diminished during this period, the language's status as the default language of daily life in Tabelbala evidently remained constant.

Over subsequent centuries, a new set of local elites grew up to reflect this situation, emphasising North African patrilineal ancestry and inscribing it on the landscape of the central graveyard, *iməmaḍən* (the marabouts), in the form of prominent mausoleums. Among the latter, Sidi Larbi, the Arab ancestor of one dominant family of Kwara today, arrived at a date roughly estimated around 1750. The Berber Ait Sful began arriving from the northwest

at a similar period, as Ait Atta political hegemony in the region took off, and initially stayed in what had been the ksar of an earlier saint from Morocco, Sidi Zekri. For some time, the two groups lived together in Kwara. Around 1882 (possibly earlier), disputes between the two groups over irrigation rights led the latter to leave Kwara and found Ifrenyu as a separate village of their own. Nevertheless, all these groups ended up speaking Korandje rather than Arabic or Berber, suggesting that locally born women and haratin played a larger role in determining the oasis' culture than this patriarchal discourse would suggest.

The twentieth century, however, would bring more profound changes. In 1910, the French completed their conquest of the oasis by building a small fort there, around which grew up a new village (*alkartī* < “quartier”) inhabited by largely Arabic-speaking soldiers and former nomads. After independence, this settlement remained the administrative centre of Tabelbala, further spurring its growth and reinforcing the status of Maghrebi Arabic as a spoken language of the oasis. As universal education took off and travel became easier, the apparent advantages of a more prestigious language finally became enough to induce language shift, as discussed in 7 below. If current trends continue into the future, Korandje is likely to be extinct before the end of the century.

5. Sociocultural and economic context

The speakers of Korandje are divided between two villages and one hamlet. Each village has its own leadership, a council of respectable older male heads of families, with no official status. The only religion practiced is Sunni Islam (following the Maliki madhab), as throughout the region; within that context, however, tensions exist between traditionalist approaches, valuing the tombs and descendants of holy men and following the lead of Sufi orders' heads, and reformist approaches condemning all these as illegitimate innovations. Well into the 20th century, many speakers still lived in a ksar (*k^wara zzinuw*) – a compact walled village built of mud brick, with different extended families in different quarters – now abandoned. Newer dwellings are built with bricks and concrete, and are fragmented across a larger set of locations. When space permits, families may follow a patrilineal joint family model, with several married sons remaining under the same roof with their parents. The main traditional occupation is farming, centered on date palms watered from canals (foggaras), and supplemented by occasional hunting and gathering. The foggaras have now largely dried out, and new crops such as potatoes and peanuts watered through drip irrigation are becoming economically important. Hunting is hardly viable any more, but the gathering of desert truffles still provides welcome supplementary income. For a more reliable source of income, government jobs play a strikingly important role (teacher, imam, official, security guard, soldier, contractor...), and the search for jobs often motivates emigration. Ties with organisations outside Tabelbala are thus economically vital at every level.

The concept of “ethnicity” should be deployed with caution in the context of southwestern Algeria. Several mutually inconsistent, cross-cutting categorization schemas are simultaneously present in popular consciousness, and may be deployed or rejected strategically. At the oasis level, Belbalis could plausibly be considered as an ethnic group, united by a common language and a shared cultural heritage in contrast with more recent

Arabic-speaking immigrants and ex-nomads. Yet the family-level divisions among Belbalis could themselves equally be considered ethnic in character. The dominant families of Ifrenyu are conscious of their Ait Atta ancestry, linking them with Berber speakers in Morocco, while those of Kwara insist on their maraboutic Arab ancestry in many cases, seeking genealogical ties with Saida or Mauritania and ultimately with Mecca or Medina. The traditional classification of other families as *haratin* (*aḥarṭən*) and ex-slaves groups them with other disadvantaged groups all across the Sahara. The very idea of “Belbali” identity has ambiguous boundaries, potentially extending to families resident in Tabelbala for several generations who have never spoken Korandje.

At the regional level, we find the folk ethnic dichotomy of Arab vs. (usually “Shilha” Berber-speaking) Shluh, with Belbalis classed as Shluh for not speaking Arabic and for traditionally having a sedentary farming lifestyle more similar to that of Zenati Berber oases than to that of Arab pastoralist nomads. (According to Belbalis, the Hassaniya-speaking Reguibat draw the boundary of this dichotomy differently, classifying all sedentary people to their north as Shluh, even the ones who speak Arabic and call themselves Arabs.) Relative to the north, a broader regional identity as southerners/Saharans is perceptible, though irrelevant except when encountering northerners. At the national level, the ideological claims that Algerians are all Arab and/or all Amazigh are universally familiar, and may be accepted or rejected depending on personal attitudes or convenience.

Intuitively, there seem to be some cultural differences between Belbalis and their Arabic-speaking neighbours, involving slightly different styles of self-presentation and senses of humour. Formalizing this tentative observation, however, would require comparative anthropological research that has not been done; the oasis' traditional culture before independence was described in remarkable detail by Champault (1969), but the focus there is not on comparison. The most visible manifestations of cultural distinctiveness have been substantially eroded by the influence of broader Algerian norms; material items such as clothing and tools are now almost entirely imported, while local practices such as the carnivalesque *gurgʷayšša* festivities of Ashura have come to be deprecated for religious reasons.

6. Sociolinguistics

The official languages of Algeria are Arabic and (since 2016) Tamazight (Berber). The distinction commonly made in Africa between official and national languages has no legal status at present. In practice, however, the status of Tamazight is closer to that of national languages in sub-Saharan African countries than to that of Arabic, the primary official language. Government documents are usually made available in Standard Arabic but almost never in Tamazight. Standard Arabic is both taught and used as the primary medium of instruction up to the end of high school throughout, and for many subjects in university as well; Tamazight is taught only as a subject, and only in a small minority of schools and universities, none of which are particularly close to Tabelbala.

French has no official status on paper, but remains the working language of much of the government, and the language of instruction for STEM subjects at university; in larger cities in the north, a few upper/middle-class families even speak it at home. French competence, however, is very much region-specific, and is rather lower in Tabelbala and the south more generally than in cities such as Algiers or Oran. In principle, French is taught at all schools throughout the country from an early age; in practice, most school graduates in Tabelbala can hardly be said to speak French. This combination of circumstances acts as an important barrier to economic advancement. English is also taught in all schools, often by teachers who hardly speak it themselves; the results are even more limited.

The *lingua franca* within Tabelbala, in most surrounding communities, and throughout most of Algeria is Maghrebi Arabic, which is not inherently mutually comprehensible with Standard Arabic. The Maghrebi Arabic dialect continuum extends across both Algeria and Morocco, including much of the Sahara; the target variety for speakers from Tabelbala largely reflects the emerging koine of the provincial capital Bechar, a variety close to southeastern Moroccan Arabic, with some influence from Oran and, more recently, even Algiers. In Tindouf, to the west of Tabelbala, the role of *lingua franca* is contested by Hassaniya Arabic, a sharply distinct Arabic variety mainly spoken in Mauritania; Hassaniya was traditionally dominant in Tindouf before independence, and has since been reinforced by the Polisario's position there and by the nearby Sahrawi refugee camps.

For its size, Tabelbala is fairly linguistically heterogeneous. Most adult Belbalis still speak Korandje as an in-group language, while most of the large Arab minority (mainly Chaamba) speak Maghrebi Arabic. Several Reguibat families speak Hassaniya Arabic, and Belbalis who have spent time further west are often familiar with it. In the traditionally Korandje-speaking village of Ifrenyu/Cheraia, old genealogical ties with the Ait Atta of southern Morocco have brought in a number of elderly speakers of Southern Atlas Tamazight, including Ait Khebbach ex-nomads and originally Moroccan women married into Ifrenyu families; their language, however, has not been passed on to their children, and most have learned Korandje. Many school teachers and other government personnel come from other oases of the region; several speak Zenati Berber varieties, notably that of Igli. A few Tamasheq-speaking Tuareg families are present, ultimately tracing their roots back to modern-day northern Mali. Even Kabyle Berber speakers occasionally pass through. Most of these languages, however, have no public presence; the only languages regularly heard in public are Maghrebi Arabic and, to a lesser extent, Korandje and Hassaniya Arabic.

Most communities in the province, such as Abadla or Kerzaz, are more homogeneously Arabic-speaking, with similar migrant minorities but no comparable large group of indigenous non-Arabic speakers. However, several oases – such as Igli, Ouakda, Lahmar, and Boukais – traditionally speak Zenati Berber varieties, and as such show a more comparable degree of linguistic heterogeneity. In the provincial capital Bechar, recent sub-Saharan African immigrants are present in addition to all the other groups mentioned, speaking a variety of languages.

Multilingualism in Tabelbala and the wider area today generally follows language status lines: speakers of Berber and Korandje learn Maghrebi Arabic, but no one learns Berber or Korandje. Community membership, however, used to override this principle in some cases; up to perhaps 1970 or so, learning Korandje seems to have been part of becoming integrated into the Belbali community. Both Berber speakers from the Ait Atta and some older Arabic speakers with closer ties to the villages (often through marriage) learned Korandje at this period, unlike their children and more recent immigrants. All speakers of Korandje, except reportedly a few of the oldest women, are at least bilingual, speaking fluent Maghrebi Arabic and sometimes understanding Hassaniya as well; some older speakers show prominent substrate features in their Arabic, such as merger of *s/š* and *z/ž* and inconsistent gender agreement. Other types of multilingualism are essentially tied to schooling, as discussed above.

7. Language use and language attitudes

The first state school in Tabelbala opened in 1957 (Champault 1969: 441), and its first high school opened only decades later; average educational levels remain relatively low by Algerian standards. In this respect, Tabelbala is similar to its nearest neighbours; Western-style education reached this corner of the Sahara only in the 20th century, and the closest centres for traditional religious education beyond the primary level were hundreds of kilometres away in the Saoura valley or Touat. The disadvantages of this lack have been felt acutely as salaried jobs have become more of a necessity, and parents are keen for their children to succeed in school. The language of both state education and extramural religious education is Arabic – officially Standard Arabic, in practice a variable mix of Standard and Algerian dialect; before and for a brief period after independence, state education was in French. Since 1995 Algerian schools have had the possibility of providing classes in Berber, but Korandje does not benefit from this concession. Children are required to study French and English as foreign languages, but few anywhere in Algeria end up able to speak English, and in Tabelbala not many learn to speak French either; daily life in the region provides hardly any opportunities to use it.

Terrestrial television and radio are mainly in Arabic, with some French and Berber; those with satellite television usually watch Arabic channels. Books available locally are almost exclusively in Arabic or French; no book has yet been printed in Korandje, nor is there any established orthography for the language. Music is the one medium in which Korandje has made some inroads. People mainly listen to music in Arabic, especially from the wider region around Tabelbala (rai from Oran, Gnaoua music from southern Morocco or Bechar, Reguibi music from Tindouf, instrumentals from Ouargla...) However, a few tapes – and now YouTube videos – of original songs in Korandje circulate, enjoying some popularity among Belbalis while remaining largely unknown outside the community. Apart from the latter, there are no immediately obvious major differences between the media popular in Tabelbala and the media popular in the area more broadly.

Korandje is absent from the domains of education, administration, and collective worship, and in informal transactions is present only between Belbalis. It remains in vigorous use among

peers and within families, but has largely disappeared from a crucial domain: parent-child interaction. This is the result of decisions taken by Belbali village councils and family leaders in the 1970s and 1980s after teachers told them their children were being held back at school by coming in without knowing Arabic. The result of their deliberations was to instruct parents to stop speaking Korandje to children, and this seems to have been largely successful. Despite this, Korandje is still being transmitted to children in some neighbourhoods as they reach adolescence, partly by playing with older peers; in this context, starting to speak it becomes a sort of rite of passage indicating a more adult status. Younger speakers are, however, notably less fluent than their elders even in such cases, and in other neighbourhoods younger adults speak little or no Korandje. There are no serious efforts to revive or maintain Korandje, much less to promote it, although I heard occasional semi-serious speculation about the idea of teaching it at school in the wake of the expansion of Tamazight language teaching elsewhere in the country.

The most widely expressed attitude towards Korandje may be summed up by a line of doggerel familiar throughout the region which is repeated by Belbalis practically every time the subject comes up: “Shilha is no more speech than vegetable oil is animal fat.” “Shilha” (any indigenous language of the region, normally Berber but in this context Korandje) was a language of sedentary farmers, while the pastoralist nomads spoke Arabic. Meat dishes – more readily accessible to herders than to farmers – were highly prized, and are still seen as essential for offering proper hospitality to guests. The simile thus implicitly identifies Arabic not just with propriety but with prosperity. Many older speakers straightforwardly call Korandje useless, and see no need to pass it on. It does, however, enjoy some covert prestige. Speakers often point to the advantages of being able to speak to each other without outsiders understanding them, in bargaining contexts for instance, and sometimes claim that growing up with it made it easier for them to learn foreign languages such as French. They are less likely to mention solidarity-enhancing functions, but from an outsider’s perspective it seems clear that Korandje helps to establish membership of a community, despite the often deeply felt rivalries between different groups of speakers. Even in the early twentieth century, non-Belbalis who settled down in Tabelbala used to learn Korandje as a necessary part of their slow integration into the oasis (see 6 above), although later immigrants have generally felt no need to do so. The need for Maghrebi Arabic, on the other hand, is taken for granted.

8. Networks

The typical Belbali knows a vast number of relatives; the villages (though not so much the modern town centre) are organized by patrilineal kinship group, and people often live next door to their closest relatives. Except for the younger generation, the language of such relationships is Korandje. A Belbali would also normally know a very large number of other residents of Tabelbala irrespective of ethnicity or family; the language of such relationships is Belbali between Belbalis (excluding the youngest), Arabic with non-Belbalis. The number of acquaintances outside Tabelbala, in contrast, is much more variable, depending on one’s mobility, and such acquaintances are valued not least for making it easier to travel beyond Tabelbala. Outside acquaintances are almost always created and maintained in Arabic.

In the early twentieth century, isolation and the decline of trans-Saharan trade forced Tabelbala to be relatively self-sufficient in many respects, relying largely on its own limited natural resources for food, craftwork, and building materials. Even then, however, exchanges with regional Arabic- and Berber-speaking groups were necessary, not only for luxuries such as books and paper, but even for nearly indispensable items such as tea or guns. The language of such commercial networks, by then, was Maghrebi Arabic. Since the late twentieth century, the oasis has increasingly been integrated into the modern Algerian economy: most of the necessities of life come not from gardens and hunting but from shops and utility companies, and getting them requires money earned by selling local produce in larger towns or working for government enterprises. This makes integration into networks extending beyond the oasis essential; the primary spoken language of these networks is again Maghrebi Arabic, though French makes itself felt in more upmarket ones, and a select few Belbalis are even exposed to English through the national oil company, Sonatrach.

The ties between Korandje speakers and speakers of other Songhay languages are minimal. Many speakers of Korandje assume their language is similar to nothing else – a “language of genies (*ig^wadən*)”. Many others, however, are vaguely aware that a similar language is spoken in what they usually call “the Sudan”; some have run into Songhay speakers (immigrants from Mali) in other Algerian towns, and one older man even spent a few years working in Timbuktu. Such passing contacts have inspired some curiosity – which social media now makes easier to gratify – but rarely any strong feelings of connection. The attitudes of Songhay speakers towards Tabelbala are less clear to me; some specialists are aware of its existence, via Western linguistic literature, but it certainly does not loom large in popular consciousness. Some efforts have been made, however, to popularize its existence in Songhay social media pages.

Insofar as the speakers of Korandje have a common homeland, it is Tabelbala; going further back, each family claims a different ancestry depending on where their patrilineal ancestors originally came from. In traditional local society, Arab and Berber ancestry is far more prestigious than sub-Saharan ancestry (often associated with slavery). Families of non-Songhay patrilineal descent often attempt to maintain some ties with their distant patrilineal kin elsewhere in North Africa. No such ties have been maintained or created with the Sahel, excluding Mauritania. It seems likely *a priori* that such ties would have existed when the trans-Saharan trade was still significant (well into the 19th century), but if so, they have vanished from popular memory.

Traditionally, Tabelbala has been largely endogamous, like most other communities throughout the region. This was partly a matter of practicality: before the road was built, it took considerable effort to marry someone from outside the oasis. It was also, however, a matter of ideology: proverbially, a spouse should ideally be from the same patrilineage, and if not should at least be a relative of some sort (Champault 1969: 284). This, however, was never an absolute. Outsider men who settled down in Tabelbala would often marry Belbali women, while prosperous Belbalis would sometimes seek wives from purported distant relatives living hundreds of kilometres away; in both cases, the children would grow up speaking Korandje if they were living in Tabelbala. In the modern context, successful Belbali

men sometimes marry northerners, solidifying contacts already made through education or administration. This makes less difference to language transmission than might be supposed, since Korandje is normally no longer passed down even in endogamous marriages.

Emigration from Tabelbala is mainly motivated by the search for jobs or education, or more broadly speaking for opportunity. Most emigrants end up in other Saharan towns within Algeria, in particular Tindouf or Bechar, the two nearest regional capitals; some have moved to northern Algeria, usually Oran, and a few have even reached France. In earlier centuries, the bulk of emigration similarly seems to have targeted larger oases along trade routes passing through Tabelbala, in particular Touat to the east and Tafilalt to the west. In almost all cases, emigration – whether temporary or permanent – reinforces speakers' contact with Arabic. Encounters with Songhay speakers are fairly rare within Algeria, while Mali and Niger are not seen as attractive destinations for emigration.

Immigration to Tabelbala, over the twentieth century, has resulted mainly from two mutually connected factors: the decline of nomadism, and the increasing presence of government. Most of the region's Arabic- and Berber-speaking historically nomadic groups abandoned nomadism over this period and settled down in towns including Tabelbala. The government played a significant role in this process: the emergence of universal education, health care, and subsidised housing made settled life much more attractive, while the closing of the Moroccan border reduced nomads' mobility. At the same time, government jobs were often filled by people from further afield, who (usually reluctantly) moved to Tabelbala at least for the duration of their employment, and sometimes ended up staying on.

9. Conclusions

Among the numerous Songhay language islands dotting West Africa and the Sahara, Korandje stands out for its prolonged near-total isolation from the rest of Songhay and for its location far to the north of the rest, reflecting the globalising effects of medieval trans-Saharan trade. Its speakers have managed to maintain a profoundly different language from the surrounding region for almost a millennium, despite sharing a common religion, patrilineal blood ties, and many elements of their culture with other oases of the area, and borrowing extensively from their languages. This feat was undoubtedly facilitated by the difficulty of travel, allowing a relatively small community to impose its own speech norms even on prestigious immigrants. At present, this long history seems likely to be coming to an end, with an ongoing shift to Arabic provoked by a combination of government educational policy and speakers' efforts to raise their socio-economic status in the context of an oasis increasingly connected to the rest of the country. In effect, as Belbalis have been integrated into a wider national community, they have relinquished to it the role of determining speech norms. However, speakers remain sufficiently numerous that a revival is possible in principle, and national attitudes towards minority languages have become more open in recent decades. The last word has yet to be spoken.

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