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PRESENTATION OF LINGALA, COMMON LANGUAGE OF ZAIRE AND THE  
PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CONGO.

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PRESENTATION OF LINGALA, COMMON LANGUAGE OF ZAIRE AND THE  
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There are a certain number of writings in which one can find information about the origin, the geographical extension of Lingala, the factors which have helped its expansion and the evolution of its structures.

Most of the authors of these writings have conducted researches on the field, that is to say in the present territories of Zaire and of the People's Republic of Congo.

Among these authors, one can mention the following whose works are well known:

- Monsignor L.B. DEBCECK ("Manuel de ligala tenant compte de la langue parlée et de la langue littéraire", Edition De Scheuts Brussels)
- Father Everboeck ("Grammaire et exercice de lingala")  
2nd edition 1955
- Mr. Guthrie ("Grammaire et exercices de lingala").

All these linguists agree that Lingala has always been a common (mixed) language.

Originally, they claim, it was spoken by a cluster of "Tribes" called Bangala, each of which had its own language. They add that the Bangala come from localities situated around Mbandaka, Lisala. Lingala could have evolved from the mixing of the peoples who frequented these places for economic activities, chiefly for fishing.

As a matter of fact, Mbandaka region and its environs form a cross-road where the riverine peoples living around the River Congo and its tributaries came to fish. They used to come from River Likouala, River Sangha, River Oubangui in the People's Republic of Congo and from other tributaries of River Congo flowing within the boundaries of Zaire.

They all learnt this language easily in view of its obvious affinity as a Bantu language with their mother-tongues. As can be seen, Lingala has never been the mother-tongue of a single tribe.



We can now examine the various factors that favoured its expansion.

1. The economic factor. It is the factor that had the greatest impact on the spreading of this language from its origins. Later on, one notices that trade also played a great role. Indeed, along River Congo, that is from the North to the South, and on both shores of the river, heavy commercial activities took place and still take place.

During the colonial era, the construction of the railway line played a decisive role in the spread of this language in the south of present-day Zaire (because of the construction of the Kinshasa -Matadi railway line) and in the South of the People's Republic of Congo (because of the construction of the Congo Ocean line).

Nowadays, interaction between the populations in the South of these two countries also contributes to the spreading of the language in those regions; thanks to all these phenomena, it is now common to hear Lingala spoken at Loubomo, Kayi and Pointe-Noire, places that some consider to be exclusive strongholds of Munukutuba. In the process of this expansion, Lingala borrows words from the language spoken in those areas, and thus appears as a language in which everyone feels he is represented. It is indeed a non-tribal language, that is to say, a common language.

2. The administrative and political factor. In the present-day Zaire, Lingala has always been a language of instruction in the army. Since soldiers are deployed all over the country for security reasons, one can easily say that there are speakers of this language all over Zaire, even in areas which are generally believed to be exclusive strongholds of Swahili, Tchiluba and Kikongo.

President MOBUTU's policy of using Lingala as the language of communication in his contacts with the masses of any region whatsoever, reinforces this spreading of Lingala all over the Zairean territory. Lingala was also

used as an administrative language, especially in the Equatorial Region and in Kinshasa. At any rate, Lingala seems to be the language spoken in the capital even though it is located in the South of the country.

In the People's Republic of Congo, despite the French colonization policy which was to suppress the local cultures and languages, efforts have been made for some time now to enhance the use of local languages. In this connection, political leaders particularly strive to address the masses in common language.

For reasons that can easily be pointed out, and especially because of the more and more obvious expansion of this language all over the national territory, most people speak Lingala. Although no official decision has yet raised it to the level of national language, Lingala has already, through many symposia organised in this country on teaching, gathered a lot of support that would tend to make it a language of instruction and communication at the national level.

3. Teaching. In Zaire, Lingala has been the language of instruction in government and missionary schools, in the capital and in the Equatorial Region during the colonial period. Work is currently in progress to resume this practice. Nowadays, this language is taught up to first degree level at the university of Zaire, in Paris, Brussels, London, Moscow, Washington.

4. Evangelization. In this area all the congregations that settled in the People's Republic of Congo and in Zaire achieved a remarkable work towards the study and propagation of Lingala. Besides, the best known and richest documents on this language are produced from their works.

5. Music. Music stands out at the moment as the most dynamic and most important element for the expansion of the language. As a matter of fact, 80 to 90% of Zaire-Congolese modern music is in this language. It



should be noted that most musicians composing in Lingala come from the South; which really shows the national status of the language, even if the leaders do not yet concede this status to it through official texts.

In the People's Republic of Congo, bands are formed in the big Southern urban centres and all these bands are known to sing in Lingala. One may recall the success of the Makabana orchestra (Comirails) whose record, Suka-Tima, was a hit. In the north, on the other hand, the Lingala language does not enjoy as much success and expansion in the musical field. More and more, the masses are using it for their songs, be they from the south or from the north.

During the crucial periods of the history of our country (national conference, electoral campaigns, Party Congress), folklore associations use Lingala to express their views on these events and thus take part in the political life of the nation: Lingala therefore has a political role among the masses and thus happens to be used as a national language in spite of the hesitation on the part of the powers that be.

It should be stressed that this music is greatly appreciated and played all over Africa and even in other continents.

In Africa, this music, sung in Lingala, has an obvious political function, in so far as it conveys ideas related to the liberation and building of the countries of this continent.

This is a language whose propagation the authorities and researchers should ensure by setting up publishing houses and newspapers which must make it accessible to all those who wish to know the ideas expressed by this music.

6. Mass Media. Lingala plays an obvious role in this field in Zaire and Congo.

In Zaire, it is the only language used on television. In this country, Lingala is also used as a common language on radio, along with Swahili, Tchiluba and Kikongo.

In Zaire, a good number of newspapers are published in Lingala. The most popular one at present is "Zaire ya Sika", the presentation and richness of which constitute a strong case against those who keep on thinking that African languages cannot describe the activities of modern life in our countries.

In the People's Republic of Congo, articles are published in "ETUMBA" from time to time. This newspaper will soon have a regular column reserved for publications in Lingala. Lingala is also the common language in broadcasting.

7. Research. We have already mentioned the studies carried out by priests and members of religious bodies. Important researches are going on in all the places where this language is being taught, especially in the centres mentioned above. There are at present doctoral theses on this language: the one on lexical structures was presented and defended publicly at the Sorbonne in Paris, by Mr. ANTOINE NDINGA at present a Lecturer in linguistics at the University of Brazzaville. The second thesis dealing with the functions and morphology of the noun was also publicly defended at the Sorbonne by Mr. PAUL NZETE.

8. Present situation of Lingala. The large number and the diversity of places of origin of its speakers make the current Lingala undergo all sorts of pressure: the pressure brought about by all its African speakers, old and new, and pressures from European languages which tend to make it a language actually created by speakers from all quarters. This can be easily verified in the urban centres and especially in Kinshasa and Brazzaville, and that proves once more that Lingala as spoken at present in Kinshasa and Brazzaville is no longer just the common language of the inhabitants of the areas around MBANDAKA, as some people might still be tempted to continue to believe, but indeed a language invented by the urban populations of the North and South of the Popular Republic of Congo and Zaire.



This situation is clearly seen in the modifications that have taken place on the phonetic, syntactic and lexical levels, modifications which separate more and more Lingala, the common language spoken at the national level, from the Lingala of Mbandaka. And Lingala is at present national, representative of the Zaireo-Congolese masses. It is consequently one of the great languages of Africa, along with Swahili, Hausa, Fula and Arabic.

9. Lingala and other Languages of Central Africa. Being a Bantu language, Lingala contains a large number of words and syntactic forms of speech that can be found in languages spoken in Congo and Zaire. This explains, apart from economic and cultural reasons, the fact that it can be embraced without much difficulty. To enrich it, one should take its situation into account, and borrow from neighbouring languages the words and phrases which it lacks when it comes to expressing modern national life.

10. The future of Lingala. All the countries using this language, especially Zaire and Congo, should arrive at an international policy meant to develop research on this language with a view to making grammar books and dictionaries accessible to all. One should praise the initiative of Professor Mateene Kahombo, of the Linguistic Bureau of the OAU in Kampala (Uganda) who has just produced a very remarkable book on Lingala and Swahili, for, whether we like it or not, Lingala stands out as the second common language of the Bantu Zone after Swahili, thanks to its wide diffusion brought about by all the factors mentioned above. Africans who are honest and willing to work earnestly for the building of a united and independent Africa must take this into account.