

# **The Batwa Language: Studies in Cultural Survival, Language Preservation and Ethnic Identity.**

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## 1. Description:

The purpose of this project is two-fold: to write an entire grammar of the Batwa language of Rwanda and to record their oral literature for further study after the completion of the description of their language. The Batwa are one of the three social groups which make up the Rwandan society. The other two are Batutsi and Bahutu. The Batwa belong to the lowest stratum of the society. They are recognizable by anybody who speaks Kinyarwanda because they have a distinct accent as far as tones and intonation are concerned. This study will describe all aspects of their speech: the sound system (phonology), word creation and structure (morphology), the sentence patterns and processes (syntax) and meanings (semantics). This analysis will be contrasted with Standard Kinyarwanda to see how the Batwa dialect differs from it. In phonology, the task will be to find out if both dialects have the same phonemic inventory, whether the Batwa dialect has less or more sounds than the standard dialect or if it uses phonetic variations. At the suprasegmental level, it will be examined if the Batwa dialect has the same tone rules like the Standard dialect namely Tone Rhythm Rules: Beat Movement, Beat Addition, Beat Deletion, Beat Alternation, etc (Kimenyi, 1993), tone anticipation, tone variation, etc. In morphology, we will see if the Batwa dialect has the same number of noun classes and if these class prefixes have the same function in both dialects. The standard dialect uses these class prefixes also to create new lexical items whose meanings are metonymically associated with the ones of the primary plane of expression. We will thus be able to find out if the Batwa dialect is as productive as far as prefix or zero-derivation is concerned. The language of poetry (Kimenyi, 1988) uses this device a lot. As far as verb morphology is concerned we will look at the tense-spect-modality system and grammatical suffixes. Are these morphemes which indicate tenses, the perfective and the imperfective aspects and moods, used the same way? Does the Batwa dialect also use grammatical suffixes such as benefactives, causatives, reciprocals, etc. If it does, do they have a similar function? Is the same word order respected in case of multiple grammatical suffixes?

In semantics, are there any faux amis (false cognates), similar words but with different meanings? Are there any words which are only found in the Batwa dialect? Are there any words which exist in the standard language but are not found in this dialect?

Kinyarwanda has different types of specialized "languages": the language of poetry (panegyric, dynastic and pastoral), the hunting language, the language of initiation, the language of blacksmiths, etc. Most of these specialized languages differ from the standard language only in vocabulary. This vocabulary is either archaic, borrowed from neighboring languages or found in the standard language but with different meanings. The cult language uses the same strategies but it also uses prefix derivation and sound

substitution, syllable addition or truncation. How does the Batwa language differ from all these types of languages?

In the standard dialect, women use a taboo language (Kimenyi 1989&1993). Not only are they not allowed to utter their parents-in-law's names but they also have to find or create new lexical items for all words which sound like their names. Do the Batwa women use this taboo language as well? How about the polite language used by wives to refer to their husbands and the intimate language used by women among themselves? There are certain expressions which are used by women only which refer to the addressee. Do Batwa women use them as well? Do they use different ones? These are some of the issues that this study will investigate.

## 2. Methodology:

There will be two types of data: Taped natural conversation from as many people as possible and data from oral literature: folktales, riddles, proverbs, panegyric poetry and children literature: jumping rope rimes, nursery rimes and tongue twisters. Ethnic jokes, if there are any, about the other two groups namely the Bahutu and the Batutsi or jokes about Batwa by themselves will also be collected. Kinyarwanda has a lot of jokes about Batwa which ridicule them as being naive and stupid. Oral literature will be used because all these genres use some formulaic expressions in the beginning or in the end or in the introduction of certain motifs and characters. These formulaic expressions are rigid, don't allow changes in vocabulary and in the structure and sometimes use archaic language. It should then be expected to find typical Batwa words in these genres of oral literature.

I am mostly interested in myth folktales, the ones which explain natural phenomena such as the world creation, the genesis of natural phenomena, the explanation of social inequalities, the origin of death. It is expected that they might have their own version of why Batwa are who they are. We don't even know if they like their condition or if they envy people who belong to the other groups. Since this is an oral tradition society without historical written records, these myth folktales are the only ones which have answers and explanations to the questions that are being raised and which can help us to understand the Batwa philosophy, their concepts, how they see the world, their values and their customs.

## 3. Importance of the project

Like the Brakumin of Japan, the Untouchables of India and the Gypsies of Europe, the Batwa of central Africa (Zaire, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda) are also the pariahs in these countries. They are considered as subhumans without human and civil rights. Like in other stratified societies, the Batwa are the entertainers: clowns, singers, dancers. They are despised and eat the food which is considered dirty and inedible by the society such as lamb, dead animals. They are the only ones who smoke marijuana, they are beggars and they were the executioners. There are a lot of Batwa jokes which make fun of them as being dumb and naive. To justify their mistreatment and their lower social status, the society has a lot of folktales which offer an explanation. Their second citizen or sub-human status is seen as punishment from either Imana (God) or from the mythical father of the Rwandan nation, Gihanga. Batwa from whom all Batwa descended, these

stories state, acted more irresponsibly than his two brothers Gahutu and Gatutsi and was always unable to accomplish the duties assigned to him by his father. Gihanga cursed him, refused him inheritance and told him that in order to survive he had to beg food from his two siblings.

The Batwa population is under 1%. The number has decreased first because they were warriors and had high casualties on the battlefields and also because their women were taken from them by the Bahutu and the Batutsi who could not come up with bridewealth. The offsprings became automatically either Bahutu or Batutsi because in this patriarchal system the child takes the social group of the father. The male Batwa could not find spouses since they are not allowed to marry in the other groups. The Batwa who also distinguished themselves in the war or other skills were made Batutsi by the King of Rwanda. All these factors reduced the number of Batwa not only in Rwanda but in neighboring countries as well.

Despite the fact that these people who in Rwanda are less than 1% of the population and have no homeland of their own, they have a distinct culture which is noticeable mostly in the way they dance and the way they sing. They also have a very noticeable accent. While their contribution to the music has been reported and recorded, nothing has been written about their language.

The Batwa are related to the pygmies but there are many Bahutu and Batutsi who made themselves Batwa also for socio-economical reasons because the Batwa are the only people who are allowed to beg without feeling shame and humiliation in this society. The project is important not only for linguists but also for anthropologists, historians, sociologists and all scholars who are interested in language maintenance, cultural survival and ethnogenesis, the attempt by minority groups to have a distinct cultural and linguistic identity.

The only minority dialect that has received linguistic attention is Black English. There is no other serious study of "ethnic" dialect that is available. Only regional dialects studies are found. This study will hopefully stimulate interest among linguists in studying minority dialects and offer a methodology as how to go about it.

This study will shed light also as to whether we are dealing with language maintenance or ethnogenesis or both. The research will probably show that both phenomena are taking place at the same time. First, most of the Batwa are bidialectal because they can switch very easily to the standard dialect, which indicates that there is a serious effort by this group to be different and have a distinct ethnic identity. Although Batwa are second class citizens there is a certain advantage of speaking the Batwa way. Eventhough they don't own anything, the Batwa are the only group which has freedom of speech. They can use dirty language, they can insult anybody even important personalities and criticize the government without any fear of repercution. Secondly they can beg for anything they want without shame or humiliation. Third, since in the traditional Rwandan society people are supposed to share food, the Batwa are always sure to have the "lion's share" because they are not allowed to sit on the same table as everybody else, eat on the same plate or drink from the same jar or bottle. If there are not enough food and drinks only Batwa and children are served.

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