

Notes and News

Notes on the Bangala Language

What is generally called 'Bangala' by the whites of the Ituri is usually called by the natives themselves either 'Mangala' or 'Mongala'. There are so many divergent views regarding this commercial language that one hesitates to make any statements for fear of adding confusion to what has always been confused. This arises chiefly because there has not been any unity of action. The official has his own form of speaking and writing it. The trader expresses it as he pleases without any standard to follow. The Catholic missions do the same and Protestants sometimes within a hundred miles or so of each other adopt quite different spelling to suit their own tastes when the speech of the native is vitally the same.

But all the while, in spite of differences of opinion, and in spite of difficulties arising, 'Bangala' (which perhaps ought to be called always Lingala or just Ngala, which name will be used here) has gone steadily forward leaving its impress on a vast territory stretching from Uganda on the east and the Nile on the north-east over the Nile-Congo watershed down through and along the Congo River. Most missions that pretend to do some work in the local vernacular also have to resort to using Ngala again and again, and some have taught and preached entirely in it for years. Hundreds of children are born every year with no other mother tongue.

Some say that one cannot express oneself in it, but the writer does not believe that any native ever thinks of being restricted when confined to its use. No one after listening to conversation in it day after day can doubt its use as a medium of speech. Usually the trouble is with the white person who makes the complaint, and he has not taken time to acquaint himself with it. The fault is not with Ngala, but with the man who is trying to speak it.

A few quotations will give an idea of the difference of opinion. Says one, 'It is not an indigenous language, it is a hotch-potch of ignoramuses. As a means of conveying thought, it is of less value than the lowest savage dialect.' If it is not indigenous, what is it? It certainly is not European, Sudanic, or Arabic. It bears all the true marks of Bantu linguistics. And if it did not originate with its main roots from the languages of the Bobangi, the Balolo and the Bangala with a great many additions from others such as Ngombe, Poto and Swahili, then I am very much mistaken. And if it is of less value than the lowest savage dialect, why do hundreds of whites and thousands of natives, and many of them educated too, resort to using it constantly and find it very valuable as a means for conveying thought?

Back in the formative years on the thousand miles between Stanley Pool and Stanley Falls there were at least five distinct languages, to say nothing of many smaller unclassified dialects. No official, trader, or native could be expected to learn them all or even a large number of them. Every time a boat stopped the captains and under-officials could not be expected to speak a different language. So what is called a jargon has grown up—it is not entirely grown yet—from absolute necessity, which is the mother and author of invention always. If it is not an indigenous language, then it certainly is an indigenous invention—a happy medium between the several groups where the necessity arose. And from this beginning it has spread over this large area of the Upper Congo. Missionaries leaving the very north-eastern border report being able to understand and be understood in this medium clear through to the west coast.

Courboin said in 1908, 'Ainsi toute la génération future parlera le Bangala. Il y a donc là un fait existant, un courant irrésistible, contre lequel il n'y a d'ailleurs pas à lutter; nous assistons au phénomène de nombreuses peuplades perdant leurs dialectes propres, pour parler un langage nouveau.'

Stapleton said in 1903, 'I am convinced that "Bangala" has come to stay.' Rev. J. H. Marker of the same Mission as Dr. Stapleton remarks in the July number of the *Congo Mission News* (1929), 'The man is blind indeed who does not see clearly that in factory and on farm, by road and rail, on steamers big and small, *one thing that is certain* in this changing land is that Lingala is the popular expression of a practical age. It shears away much that an early Victorian purist would retain, of concords and rules that would hamper its progress. It prefers shorts and shirt sleeves to cuffs and a top-hat.' Marker says further in regard to it: 'Lingala has become the common currency and the small change of life's daily speech. Bitten often and banged upon the counter, it stands the test, and the biting and the banging harden it to rough usage and send it out bearing honourable scars.'

If Dr. Stapleton was sure it had come to stay at the opening of the century, Mr. Marker is just as sure of it continuing a quarter of a century later. He further asserts: 'Along one thousand miles of the main river from Congo Dan to Beer-sheba this thing *is serving and has come to stay*.'

Most of those who heap the greatest number of curses upon it are those who know the least about it, and have spent little or no time in trying to learn it. I have never known any one that really set out to know it well that did not succeed sooner or later and become its ardent champion. A large number—perhaps a half-hundred missionaries scattered over quite a large territory, belonging to different societies—could be listed as using it partly or exclusively in the Ituri and Uele as a teaching and a preaching medium. There are none that do not realize its limitations, but very few of these, if any, would listen for a moment to the statement that it is not an indigenous language.

The Bantu seems to flourish on lack of what we call necessities—number, gender, prepositions, and adverbs to some extent, articles definite and indefinite, all go by the board. He has a way of his own for denoting plurality when necessity arises. ‘Many animal’, ‘some child’, or ‘few hen’ suits his linguistic taste just as well as ‘many animals’, ‘some children’, or ‘a few hens’ suit ours. When it comes to verbs Ngala is no exception for richness. It resorts to its tenses, to its causative, relational, interactionary, reactionary, and stative forms, with a host of prefixes, suffixes, and prepositional or adverbial infixes as profuse as the tropical jungle itself.

Whether we like to know it or not there are thousands and thousands that are losing hold on their very expressive mother speech. Ask many of the younger generation the words for ‘sorrow’, ‘law’, or ‘obedience’ in the vernacular. He will answer, ‘I do not know. My father knows, but I always use the *lingua franca* word even in my village tongue.’

Languages are not manufactured, they grow, and that pretty much independently. But they find their level sooner or later. And the very fact that the entire New Testament has been published and is finding ready use in the Uele and Ituri is proof that this medium of speech is developing slowly. In order to do this piece of translation work one must realize that there are tenses sufficient for such a task and other means for expressing gender and person and number. The Bolobo Press produced a Harmony of the Gospels in Lingala in 1929. The Mariste Brothers of Buta have also issued a number of good text-books in Lingala for reading, arithmetic, and French. One mission has issued a set of ninety reading lessons in a graded form, another is publishing stories and fables.

Many Government officials are very friendly and would do anything in their power to improve or help improve and stabilize the entire movement. And one would be led to believe that they accept the position of M. Franck, in his speech at Le Zoute: ‘I have been in schools in the heart of primitive Africa where missionaries were trying to teach the poor black children French. I told them it was quite useless.’ He seemed to believe that a poor *lingua franca* was preferable to a pidgin or worse than pidgin French.

One of the difficulties has been a lack of co-ordinated effort on the part of the several parties concerned—missionaries, commercial agents, and officials—to get together and work together with a definite object in view, to improve and build for a better *lingua franca*. Every one seems too busy to take the time that is necessary for such work. Then there has been no effort between the different sections to harmonize or unify. Congo River Lingala and Ituri Ngala present some differences that will probably be dissolved or adjusted in time. The differences probably seem greater to the whites than they do to the blacks owing to the fact that we think from the standpoint of orthography while they think from the standpoint of sound.¹

¹ A conference representative of Protestant Missions in various parts of the

The question probably arises: is there not a tribal speech of large and predominant people that could be selected as a medium for teaching and literature? I could speak only for this locality. While such a move could be highly desired it would probably meet with stubborn resistance from those large sections that are filled with small dialects and over which the predominant tribes have little or no influence. The Azande or the Mangbeto vernaculars would probably find a footing if they were taught faithfully in all the schools, but this would not settle the difficulties of Lingala on the thousand miles of the big river, and I rather doubt, whether even with long use it would be able to supplant Ituri Ngala. Many of the peoples of the Ituri and Uele are of Sudanic origin rather than Bantu, so we are often informed. This would eliminate this section from amalgamating with the Bangombe, Bangala, Balolo, or the Babangi, and yet Lingala in its various forms holds sway over both regions.

(Communicated by the REV. J. A. BARNEY).

The Bantu Dramatic Society at Johannesburg.

DURING the past year, an interesting new development has been started in Johannesburg among the members of the Bantu Men's Social Centre, a club for educated Bantu men who, as teachers, mine-clerks, and in other professional occupations, have become more or less detribalized town-dwellers. This is the *Bantu Dramatic Society* which some of the members have founded on their own initiative, with the help of educated Bantu women. In its first programme the Society formulated its aspirations and confessed its faith in the following words: 'Although the Society will present European plays from time to time, the aim of the Bantu Dramatic Society is to encourage Bantu playwrights and to develop African dramatic and operatic art. Bantu life is full of great and glorious incidents and figures that would form the basis for first-class drama.'

Actually, the Society elected to make its bow to the Johannesburg public with a European play, viz. Oliver Goldsmith's *She Stoops to Conquer*. Two performances of this play at Johannesburg were followed by one at Pretoria; and, later in the year, not only was *She Stoops to Conquer* repeated, but *Nongqause*, a play in Xosa by Miss M. W. Waters, was added to the Society's repertoire. The author of this play is a white South African lady. The Bantu playwright is still to seek; nor is it at all obvious in what language he will choose to express himself. For, such is still the hold of inter-tribal rivalries and memories of old feuds that a play in any one of the several Bantu languages

area where Ngala is spoken decided to produce one of the Gospels in a unified Ngala, and the book is being printed by the Bible Society. It is hoped that this will help towards the standardization of the language.—EDITOR.