

Robert Nicolai: *La force des choses ou l'épreuve 'nilo-saharienne'. Question sur les reconstructions archéologiques et l'évolution des langues*. SUGIA Beiheft 13, Cologne: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag. 2003. 577 + xv p. EUR 64.

In spite of its title, this is a book on Songhay. Its author, professor at Nice university, is among the world's greatest specialists of this language family, and has written an impressive series of articles and books – impressive both in quantity and quality – on questions of Songhay linguistics, Songhay linguistic history, and the theory and methods of linguistic comparison. The present book is a sophisticated sequel to Nicolai (1990), where he explained, among others, his view of the linguistic origin of Songhay. The basic tenets of Nicolai's theory can be summarized as follows:

The language from which the modern Songhay languages derive was a mixed language consisting of two components: a grammatical system taken from Mande, which includes phonology, morphology, syntax, as well as some free grammatical morphemes, and a component of different origin, which consists of the lexicon. This implies that the origin of Songhay is not mono-genetic.

The development of this theory was contemporary with, and independent from, similar approaches, such as those by Thomason and Kaufman and Claire Lefebvre. Nicolai's proposals and theoretical justifications did not provoke much discussion, and have, undeservedly, been almost totally neglected in the literature on language contact and language mixing.

Since the formulation of his theory, Nicolai has followed two different lines of research: in the first place the philosophical and theoretical foundation of the concept of language mixing and the refusal to accept mono-genetic origin as the standard representation of language history. In the second place the elaboration of his view of Songhay, especially in the quest for the lexifier language. The present book mainly concerns the second question (although in Nicolai's works the first question is never far away): it is an empirical discussion and investigation of Songhay language origins. The book consists of two different parts. The first part provides a critical review of two recent works on Nilo-Saharan reconstructions, Ehret (2001) and Bender (1997), which both include

Songhay in the Nilo-Saharan family. The second part consists of a refined statement of his 1990 theory of the double origin of Songhay and an encouragement to look for the lexifier language in the Afroasiatic domain.

In the first part of the book, the author analyzes and criticizes the arguments given by Ehret and Bender for their inclusion of Songhay in Nilo-Saharan. As any reader of Ehret's massive comparative dictionaries will be aware of, this is not an easy task, as one is confronted with enormous amounts of material, from an incredible number of languages and language sources. Even a critical review of the data of one language group given by Ehret would demand large amounts of work and space. Nicolai uses an intricate way of both dissecting Ehret's method and the validity of his proposals. Concentrating on only two elements (a lexeme, 'sun', and a proto-consonant, ***ḡ**), he endeavors to discern (and dismantle) all arguments which lie behind Ehret's decision to consider the Songhay forms reflexes of Nilo-Saharan. In a second chapter, Nicolai gives a critical overview of Bender's arguments for the inclusion of Songhay in Nilo-Saharan. Both sections come to the same conclusion: the evidence for a Nilo-Saharan background of Songhay is extremely weak, not only in terms of Nicolai's own methodological approach, but also, and especially so, in terms of the methods the two authors claim to adhere to. While reading this, one is both convinced by the argument, and a little bit uneasy about it, too. There is no doubt, and Nicolai convincingly points to this, that Ehret's and Bender's ways of looking at things are often problematic, and that especially in the case of Ehret, a scrutiny of the "proofs" he uses does not leave much of value. Moreover, Nicolai does not assess the validity of the Nilo-Saharan forms used as a comparison, and one suspects that they suffer from the same shortcomings as the Songhay materials. On the other hand, one sometimes gets the feeling that Nicolai is too rigorous in his dismissal of some of Ehret's and Bender's proposals. I will cite one example. In his analysis of the 'sun' etymon, Nicolai mentions the fact that in some Songhay languages there seem to be two sets of correspondences (**ḡw/h** and **w**) for what is simple **w** in Zarma. The reason for this correspondence is unknown (p. 42), and this makes Nicolai sceptical about any out-of-Songhay correspondence based on such words. However, as long as the existence of these two sets of correspondences has not been explained (two proto-phonemes are but one option, assimilation – see note 64 on p. 43 – could be another, and one could also think of the dialectal variation between the presence and absence of prenasalization found with many other Songhay nouns), one cannot simply dismiss the Nilo-Saharan correspondences.

The second part of the book is concerned with the construction of an alternative (non-mono-genetic) history of Songhay. First, the author gives an overview and some elaboration on his position on the North-West Mande origin of Songhay grammar. The outsider may remark that, although there are evident similarities between the Songhay and the North-West Mande grammatical systems,

most of these seem to be of a general typological nature, and not concern similarities in detail. In fact, Nicolai gives a long and well-accounted for exposé of the problem of S-Aux-O-V-*other* word order in Songhay and points to the importance of S-Aux-V-O-*other* constructions. By doing so, however, he undermines his own position, as this type of construction is absent from Mande.

More innovating is his treatment of the lexical elements. In Nicolai (1990), he opted for a Tuareg origin, and on the basis of one Southern Tuareg dialect he picked out over 400 *comparanda*. In his present work, Nicolai takes a larger point of view, encompassing the entire field of Afroasiatic. Aided by vast lexical databases compiled by the Nice team in the course of time, he singles out over 400 Songhay items, which are compared to forms of similar shape and meaning in Afroasiatic languages. The most important languages which figure in his comparisons are Arabic (both classical and dialectal), Berber, Ge'ez and Afar. Other languages, including nearby Hausa, are only cited sporadically. The comparison is meant as a preliminary step towards analysis, and the compared items are not to be regarded as established cognates. This is reflected in the fact that one Songhay item is often compared to a number of items in other languages, which have no established lexematic relationship between themselves; thus Songhay **díbbà** “naissance de la queue” is compared to Arabic **danab** “queue” and **tabi'a** “to follow”, and Songhay **fèjì** “mouton à poils” is compared to Tuareg **abägog** “mouton” and **ayfəd** “mouton”, terms which have no etymological relationship to each other and even hardly have any phonetic similarity. Moreover, Nicolai makes no effort to distinguish borrowings from non-borrowed lexicon in the languages he compares with Songhay. This is highly problematic in the case of languages such as Berber. With a few exceptions, Arabic and Hausa loanwords in Berber languages can be recognized by more or less objective means (presence of certain phonemes and use of specific morphological patterns), and their identification is normally unproblematic. Most sources on Berber identify Arabic loanwords, so it would have been easy to leave out these items, or at least to mark them as probable borrowings.

Nicolai does not conclude that these 400 comparisons constitute a proof of an old Afroasiatic background of the Songhay lexicon; however, by presenting them in the way he does, he certainly suggests that where there is smoke there is fire. Only a careful scrutiny of the compared items could make out whether this fire is really present.

The greatest problem with these comparisons, however, lies on another level. Songhay is a close-knit language group, and it does not seem to represent an enormous time depth. Differences between the Songhay languages may be comparable to those found inside Slavonic or Romance. When Nicolai is right, and Songhay is a mixture of two different languages, the identification of the lexifier language with “something Afroasiatic” is much too vague. At the time of the emergence of Songhay (which I guess lies sometime between 750 BC

and 1250 AD) the desintegration of Afroasiatic must have lied back for at least 3500 years (probably much more), and a branch such as Semitic had already split up in many different languages. This gives us two possibilities: (a) the lexifier language is an identifiable language with a relatively shallow time depth (such as “Hebrew” or “Proto-Berber”); (b) the lexifier language constitutes a now extinguished branch (or sub-branch) of Afroasiatic. If (a) is the case, the quest should be to find the lexifier language, and the general Afroasiatic background of the compared items is irrelevant. If (b) is the case, it is very much to be doubted that Nicolai’s presentation helps us much to pin it down. Afroasiatic is so heterogenous, and contains so many very divergent lexical items, that it is improbable that there is any Songhay item (or item in any other language in the world) which would not show some form-meaning correspondence with an item in some Afroasiatic language. Claiming that the existence of the Songhay item shows that the unknown Afroasiatic lexifier language contained exactly the compared item would be circular. Moreover, one wonders why no reference at all is made to the large amount of (highly debateable) Afroasiatic lexical reconstructions undertaken by scholars such as Orel and Stolbova, Takács, Blažek, and Ehret. This would at least give a more sophisticated list of items that might have been reflected in this unknown language.

The way things are now, I would say that Nicolai has laid the stakes too low. One has the impression that by means of comparisons such as given in *La force des choses*, it would be possible to find 400 items comparable to Songhay in almost any language phylum of the world, and it is by no means evident that Afroasiatic would work better than, for instance, Trans-New-Guinea, Niger-Congo, or even Nilo-Saharan. This, of course, does not necessarily mean that the lead is false, and the materials provided are certainly an incitement to a closer look at the question.

But what if the lexifier language of Songhay cannot be identified, not because our methods are insufficient, but because the language was a real language isolate, the last member of an otherwise extinguished phylum not connected genetically to any other language family in the traceable linguistic past? In that case all endeavor to identify the lexifier language would be in vain ...! And why could this isolated language not have had a Mande-like syntax and morphological structure? Would one still need the mixed language hypothesis?

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