

Notes and News

The Linguistic Situation in the Western Parts of the Niger Delta.

THE following notes aim at giving a summary of the linguistic situation among the Ijò, Ishekiri, Sobo, and Isoko tribes which inhabit the western part of the Niger Delta, along the banks of and inland from the Nun and Forcados rivers. The large majority of the members of these four tribes are in the Warri province.

There are many similarities among the Sobo, Ishekiri, and Isoko tribes, both in customs and language: the Ijòs, however, are quite distinct. One quite feasible theory put forward is that the Ijòs were the inhabitants of Benin City before the present Benis, who came from the Yoruba country and drove the Ijòs out; this, however, has not been proved. On this theory, the Sobos, the Ishekiris, and the Isokos are emigrants from the Benis, being either related or else ex-vassals of the Oba of Benin in time past—the beginning of the eighteenth century is a general date given to the exodus. Certainly there are similarities in the Beni, the Sobo, the Ishekiri and the Isoko languages: A student of the Yoruba language says, moreover, that the Ishekiri and Sobo languages bear similarities to the Yoruba language.

There is evidence, and a good deal of considered opinion, to suggest that the Sobos are increasing in numbers and influence: on the other hand the Ishekiri and Ijò tribes are declining. In the Ishekiri tribe, the women have been increasingly moving to Lagos, where many of them become prostitutes; the result of this is that Ishekiri women are becoming less useful workers of the tribe, and large numbers of Ishekiri men are marrying Sobo women. In the Ijò tribe the system of the large and small dowry (roughly £60 and £30 respectively), whereby under the small dowry the body of a deceased Ijò woman and her children return to her family and clan at death, is resulting more and more in Ijò men taking Sobo or Isoko women, whereby for a dowry of about £20 a man may take and keep a wife and her children. A common thing is for an Ijò man to take one Ijò woman under the large dowry, and the rest of his wives from the Sobo or Isoko tribes. The Isoko tribe is possibly stationary, or may even be slightly increasing as regards population, but it is more closely allied to the Sobo tribe in customs and language than any other. Many Isokos can speak Sobo fluently, and almost all Isokos can understand Sobo: the Isokos are often classed as the Isoko-Sobo tribe, and are, it is understood, to be placed in the Sobo division for administration by Government.

The above considerations suggest that a long view would choose the Sobo language as the lingua franca of the western part of the Delta. The

Ijòs are probably decreasing in numbers every year, and intermarrying more and more with the Sobos and Isokos; the Ishekiris are doing the same; the Isokos adjoin the Sobos and are not very different from them in language. On the other hand, the Sobo people and the Sobo language are virile, spreading, and gaining in influence. Many travelling traders say that their knowledge of the Sobo language carries them through many parts of Nigeria outside the strict Sobo area.

The Ijòs would probably never consent to learn Sobo. In any scheme for a lingua franca the Ijòs would definitely have to be left outside. Their unwillingness to adopt any language but their own is complicated by the fact that the Ijòs live in small and scattered villages, fishing being their chief occupation. The Ishekiris already know a little Sobo, and might with education adopt Sobo as a lingua franca. The Isokos could do so easily with a little effort, if they could be persuaded to make that effort. In this way Sobo might in time be made the lingua franca of the three tribes, and the literary medium for vernacular work.

The alternative to this is the persistence of the three languages, and the absence of any lingua franca save that of pidgin English. Any vernacular literature, as e.g. school text-books, would have to be printed in the three vernaculars, and this is costly for a small number of readers. The lingua franca would not, of course, interfere with these vernaculars; it would, however, provide a medium for language for all the tribes in the western part of the Delta save for the scattered Ijòs, and it would greatly facilitate translation and printing work. Its adoption would be very slow. Yet, on the long view, if there is to be a lingua franca at all, Sobo is the most obvious language to be chosen.

So far as the writer's knowledge goes, the only Europeans who can speak Sobo at all fluently are Father Cadogan and Father Kelly of the Catholic Mission at Warri. It is probably true to say that no European can speak Ishekiri, Ijò, or Isoko fluently enough, that is, to carry on a long conversation or to preach. In addition there are several Government officials who have passed a language examination in Sobo, and one who is going on to take a further examination in Sobo says that it is not much more difficult to learn than Yoruba, apart from the fact that there exists no grammar book, and only a few church primers and hymns in translation. The Rev. O. N. Garrard spent five years in the Ijò country and can read it fluently and carry on some conversations. He can also speak some Isoko: and the Rev. J. W. Hubbard is making good progress with the Isoko language.

The real need is for a Union Sobo, on the analogy of Dennis's Union Ibo. So far the translation work in the Ishekiri and Isoko tribes has been sporadic and done by natives; there does not exist even now, I believe, a full translation of the Bible in any of the vernaculars of the western part of the Delta.

In support of the above ideas, I may quote from a letter from Father

Cadogan, to whom these ideas were communicated and whose opinion as a Sobo scholar was asked. He writes: 'Your views of the Sobo language interested me very much. As the Sobos are a sturdy, industrious tribe, it seems they will survive the Ishekiris and Ijøs. If this supposition came to pass there can be no doubt about it but that their language will become the lingua franca of the Delta. At the moment the Ijøs would resent very much being asked to learn Sobo, so that a written Sobo on the analogy of the Union Ibo would not be of much use outside the Sobo country. It would be hard to say what good purpose it might serve in twenty or thirty years' time. There are at present whole Ijo villages becoming absorbed by the Sobo element in their midst, and, if this continues, it will surely add to the influence of the Sobos and to the importance of their language.'

If the need and value of a lingua franca are admitted for the western part of the Niger Delta, Sobo appears to be the obvious medium, and if it were adopted, the immediate need would be a Union Sobo chosen from all the Sobo dialects, which would be acceptable by the Ishekiri and Isoko tribes, as well as by the Sobo clans. (*Communicated by the Rev. J. W. WELCH.*)

Mission du Directeur en Afrique Occidentale.

M. Henri Labouret, Professeur à l'École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes et à l'École Coloniale de Paris, a accompli de juillet à décembre 1932 une mission de linguistique et d'ethnologie en Afrique Occidentale.

Cette mission, subventionnée par l'Institut et le Ministère de l'Éducation Nationale, patronnée par le Ministre des Colonies et le Gouverneur Général de l'A.O.F., avait pour but de recueillir des informations nouvelles sur les sociétés, le travail et les droits fonciers au Sénégal, au Soudan et en Guinée. Ce programme a été entièrement rempli.

En outre, M. Labouret a pu rapporter une abondante documentation linguistique se rapportant à des parlers peu connus, des textes notés de la bouche d'informateurs choisis et des phonogrammes pris dans les meilleures conditions et destinés au Musée de la Parole.

Enfin il a rapporté 158 mensurations d'indigènes pour le Laboratoire d'Anthropologie du Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle.

Soucieux de former un groupe d'ethnographes parmi les jeunes administrateurs coloniaux, il avait obtenu de la Fondation Rockefeller une généreuse subvention pour lui permettre d'emmener avec lui un élève de l'École Coloniale désireux de s'initier aux recherches sur le terrain. M. N. Leca, diplômé de cette École, de l'École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes et de l'Institut d'Ethnologie, avait été désigné pour l'accompagner. M. Leca a efficacement collaboré aux travaux de la mission, il rapporte les éléments d'un important travail sur la pêche maritime et fluviale dans les régions qu'il a parcourues.