

Mabire: A Dying Language of Chad

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Abstract

The last few speakers of Mabire, a Chadic language of central Chad, provide information on the decline of the Mabire community, the origins of their people and language, and word list data. Based on the analysis of the word list, as well as the origin myths retold, it is suggested that the Mabire language be classified in the Dangla group of Eastern Chadic, along with Dangaleat (Dangla), and Migaama (Migama).

Information on Mabire

The existence of Mabire was first mentioned to Dr. James Roberts (SIL) during an interview he had in 1993 with some Kofa men in the town of Mongo in central Chad. Additional information collected in January 2001 by SIL's language survey team (consisting of Eric Johnson, Noelle Hutchinson, Susanne Malander, and Calvin Mberjodji) confirms its existence as a distinct and endangered language. Mabire is now only spoken by a few older people, in the Guera province of Chad (Bidiyo canton, Mongo-Rural subprefecture). Word list comparison results show a relatively close lexical similarity to the Jegu dialect of Mogum, though not close enough to suspect intercomprehension. The Mabire-speaking community appears to have disbanded following a devastating epidemic, and the survivors have been assimilated into neighboring speech communities.

Our information about Mabire comes principally from interviews with three individuals: Terab and Balha, an elderly brother and sister living at Oulek who still speak the Mabire language and Moussa Duwane, a Mabire man interviewed in Mongo in 1993, who does not speak the language. Terab and Balha know of no others who can still speak Mabire, though Balha's four daughters know a little and can understand it. A man named Souleymane Dabanga is the current chief of the Mabire and lives at Katch, to the south of Mount Mabire. However, as he is the only Mabire speaker there, those in Oubi-Oulek were doubtful as to whether he can still speak the language. They had not communicated with him for several years. They do know that he has three daughters who do not speak Mabire. The Mabire suffered an epidemic (*mât hana Allah* 'the death of God'), which caused them stomach aches and most died, as they had no medications. Those who survived were dispersed into other villages or N'Djaména and began speaking primarily Chadian Arabic. According to some Kofa men interviewed in 1993, there are thirty Mabire *chefs de famille* living at Katch, even though they are physically mixed in with the other Kofa residents of Katch. Now all these people speak Kofa or Chadian Arabic, and they are considered Kofa by the Kofa people.

Probably within the last fifty years, the Mabire were all together in four large villages near Mount Mabire. Their villages were named Amdjaména, Arga, Mambire (which later divided into Antérééné and Berouet), and Milaal. (See the map in appendix C; we were not able to locate Milaal.) Moussa Duwane, the Mabire interviewed in Mongo, claims that Arga and Milaal did not speak the Mabire language, rather they spoke Bidiyo-Tounkoul and Chadian Arabic but were united to the other Mabire villages by the canton chief. According to Terab and Balha, the ancestors of the Mabire came from a village named Mabir, which they said was "7 km west of Baro" (Dadjo II canton, Mangalmé subprefecture). The map prepared by Chad's Bureau Central de Recensement shows a village around seven km northwest of Baro, named Mabar, which the Migaama people consider to be the original Migaama village and is currently entirely peopled by Migaama speakers (William Chesley, personal communication).

A word list was elicited from our two informants (see appendix A) which was compared with other lists taken in nearby Chadic languages. A total of 145 words contained in all the lists were compared (though the entire Mabire list collected contains 227 items). These lists were compared to each other to discover the percentage of apparent cognates shared between them. The comparison was based on "apparent cognates", i.e., words that look phonetically similar. Words known to be borrowings and compounds were excluded from the calculation, but no further research was done to ascertain whether the apparent cognates are truly historically cognate. The judgment as to whether two words are phonetically similar is also subjective, but we followed the general guidelines suggested in Blair 1990:30–33. The following table displays the percentages of similarity between the word lists, followed by the margin of error in parenthesis. (Thus the similarity between Mabire and the Jegu dialect of Mogum should be read as between 37.6% and 52.4%.)

Mabire						
45 (± 7.4)	Mogum (Jegu dialect)					
39 (± 7.3)	44 (± 6.8)	Migaama (Baro dialect)				
34 (± 7.1)	43 (± 6.7)	53 (± 6.8)	Bidio (Toukoul dialect)			
34 (± 7.1)	49 (± 6.8)	52 (± 6.8)	53 (± 6.8)	Dangaleat (Eastern dialect)		
26 (± 8.2)	23 (± 7.2)	20 (± 6.9)	21 (± 6.9)	19 (± 6.7)	Ubi	
18 (± 5.7)	26 (± 6.0)	17 (± 5.1)	17 (± 5.1)	18 (± 5.2)	37 (± 8.2)	Mawa

From these results, Mabire appears to be the most lexically similar to the Jegu dialect of Mogum, though there is not a significant difference between this figure (forty-five percent) and that of the similarity between Mabire and Migaama due to the high margins of error (calculated by WordSurv lexical similarity analysis software, see Wimbish 1989:58ff). Mabire appears to be equally similar to the Toukoul dialect of Bidio as to the Eastern dialect of Dangaleat, with a lesser similarity to Ubi and Mawa.

Barreteau (1978), in his classification of Chadic languages, groups Dangaleat, Migaama, Mawa, Mogum (including Jegu), and Bidiyo all together in a subgroup of the Dangla group, called “Dangla, Migaama.” Therefore, based on Mabire’s lexical similarity with these six languages, we suggest that Mabire also be grouped in his Dangla/Migama subgroup: Afro-Asiatic, Chadic, East, B, Group B.1 (Dangla Group), Subgroup A (Dangla, Migaama Subgroup). As it appears that Mabire shares less than half its vocabulary with any of these other languages, it seems appropriate that Mabire be considered a separate language, rather than a dialect of one of these, a language which in a few years will likely be extinct.

Appendix A: Mabire Word List (transcribed in IPA)

	<i>English</i>	<i>Chadian Arabic</i>	<i>French</i>	<i>Mabire</i>
1	head	râs	tête	kajat
2	hair	sûff	cheveu(x)	kibas
3	eye	ên	oeil	ida?
4	nose	monkhar	nez	dəməl
5	ear	adan	oreille	uduje
6	mouth	khachum	bouche	beto
7	teeth	sunnûn	dent	sin
8	tongue	lisân	langue	pel
9	neck	ragâbah	cou	werəd
10	throat	halgûm	gorge	džerea
11	arm	îd	bras	pota
12	hand	îd	main	poiĵot
13	finger	usbaʾ	doigt	kaito
14	(finger) nail	khanfûr	ongle	gokoni
15	breast	déd	sein	paj
16	belly	batun	ventre	at
17	navel	surra	nombril	domile
18	back	dihir	dos	taro
19	buttock	ja'ab	fesse	kurai
20	leg	rijîl	jambe	isin
21	knee	rukuba	genou	sariṇil
22	foot	rijîl	ped	tar
23	skin	farwa	peau	zam
24	bone	adum	os	aso
25	blood	dâm	sang	bar
26	urine	bôl	urine	tfora
27	heart	galib	coeur	galib
28	man	râjil	homme	mit
29	woman	mâra	femme	dat
30	child	wiléd	enfant	tapil
31	father	abu	père	tetĵa
32	mother	amm	mère	jati
33	brother	akhu	frère	sin
34	sister	akhut	soeur	suti
35	maternal uncle	khâl	oncle maternel	magre
36	name	usum	nom	kilek
37	chief	chêkh/bilâma	chef	damətio
38	dog	kalib	chien	kaṇ
39	goat	khanamay	chèvre	in
40	chicken	jidâde	poulet	kukuri
41	cow / bull	bagaray	vache / boeuf	gama
42	horn	garin	corne	gepo
43	tail	danab	queue	besa

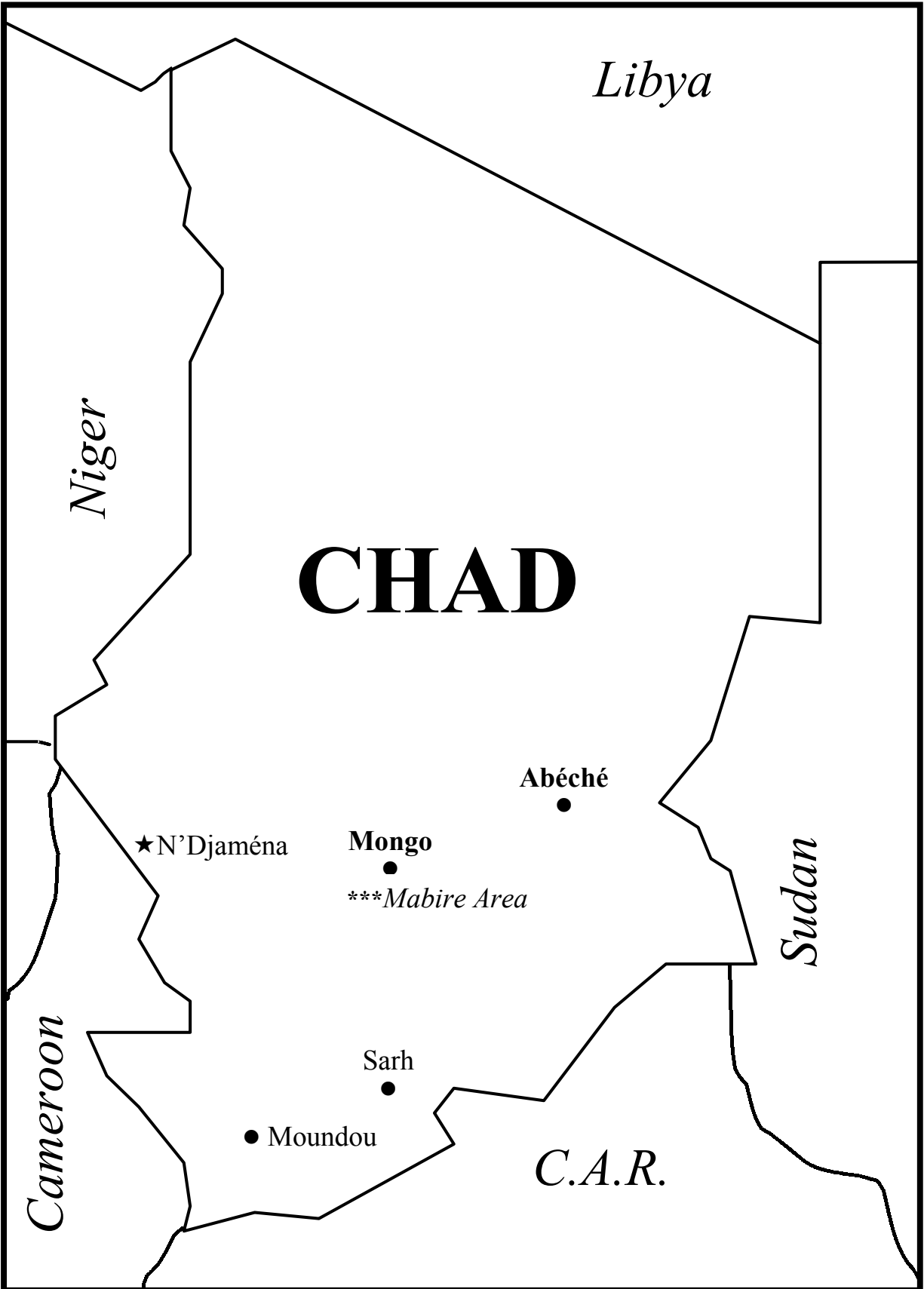
44	camel	jamal	chameau	lakum
45	elephant	fil	éléphant	gari
46	snake	dâbi	serpent	ali
47	fish	hût	poisson	bis
48	bird	têr	oiseau	ide
49	ant	nimle	fourmi	maḡ
50	spider	abunchabach	araignée	ziruwi
51	scorpion	agrab	scorpion	zirindia
52	head louse	gâmul	pou de tête	intat
53	tree	chadaray	arbre	gawi
54	branch	matârîg	branche	aro
55	leaf	warchâl	feuille	tapi?
56	bark	gichir	écorce	deḡ
57	root	irig	racine	lut
58	flower	nuwar	fleur	tuḡ
59	seed	têrab	(graine de) semence	korie
60	grass	gechch	herbe	ḡal
61	sky	sama	ciel	boḡ
62	cloud	sa'ab	nuage	aripepi
63	sun	haray	soleil	pat
64	moon	gamar	lune	tere
65	night	lêl	nuit	andunkel
66	star	nujumay	étoile	kal
67	wind	rîh	vent	gulwaj
68	earth	tûrab	terre	kit
69	hill	hadaba / hajar	colline	dam
70	stone	hajar	Pierre	(word unknown)
71	sand	sinâka	sable	sin
72	dust	ajâj	poussière	tunum
73	pebble	hajar	caillou	(word unknown)
74	water	âlmî	eau	amba
75	dew	nâda	rosée	mep
76	river	wâdi	rivière	riak
77	fire	nâr	feu	oko
78	smoke	dukhân/bôkh	fumée	sio
79	ember	jamur	braise	guziḡ
80	year	sana	an	ilagit
81	rainy season	kharîf	saison pluvieuse	rigbigbit
82	dry season	sêf	saison sèche	pida
83	village	hillê	village	gamte
84	field	zere	champ	malti
85	road	derib	chemin	or
86	house	bêt	maison	ben
87	bed	serir	lit	daḡal
88	hole	hufra	trou	ulə
89	dirt	wasakh	ordure	(word unknown)
90	clothes	khalâḡ	habit	zilmaḡ

91	calabash	kâs	calebasse	karitfo
92	cauldron	burma	marmite	tun
93	meat	laham	viande	sut
94	salt	mileh	sel	zil
95	oil	dihin	huile	seweq
96	egg	bêd	oeuf	desaq
97	milk	laban	lait	bo
98	hunger	ju	faim	maj
99	thirst	atach	soif	ipin
100	rope	habil	corde	bure
101	iron	hadîd	fer	tepo
102	knife	sakkîn	couteau	nejer
103	war	harba	guerre	zan
104	one	wâhid	un	ke
105	two	tinên	deux	ser
106	three	talâta	trois	sup
107	four	arba'a	quatre	pot
108	five	khamisa	cinq	betdaq
109	six	sitte	six	mik
110	seven	sab'a	sept	païse
111	eight	tamâne	huit	porpæde
112	nine	tis'a	neuf	barket
113	ten	achara	dix	ora
114	eleven	ihdâchar	onze	orake
115	twenty	ichirîn	vingt	ærakse
116	hundred	mîya	cent	(word unknown)
117	many, much	katîr	beaucoup	mani
118	few, little	chwiya	peu	pali
119	all	kullu	tout	godok
120	good	adîl	bon	turut
121	bad	hawân	mauvais	bajeta
122	old	châyib	vieux	zoban
123	new	jadîd	nouveau	torat
124	hot	hâmî	chaud	isa
125	cold	bârrid	froid	olan
126	tall (height)	tâwîl	haute taille	bolget
127	short (height)	sakhâyar	petite taille	roæn
128	long	tâwîl	long	olan
129	short	gisêyar	court	roæn
130	heavy	tagîl	lourd	per
131	light (weight)	khaffif	léger	tjawaj
132	full	malân	plein	minan
133	empty	fâdi	vide	aje
134	clean	nadîf	propre	turun
135	dirty	waskhân	sale	(word unknown)
136	dry	yâbis	sec	ajøn
137	red	ahmar	rouge	bar

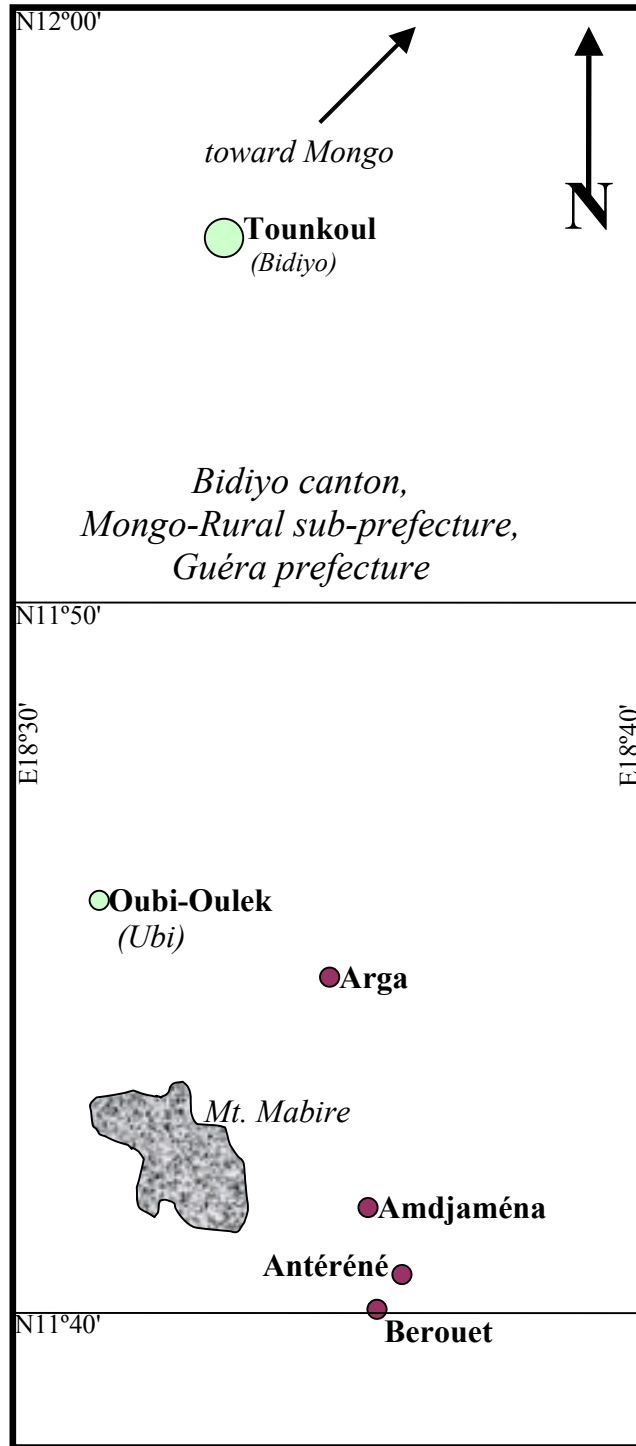
138	black	azarâg	noir	tʃilim
139	white	abyad	blanc	pororan
140	leave	fât yufût	partir	ire
141	come	ja yaji	venir	are
142	arrive	ja yaji	arriver	(word unknown)
143	rise, get up	gamma yugumm	se lever	watʃe
144	sit, sit down	ga'ad yag'ôd tihit	s'asseoir	untu
145	lie down	ragad yargud	se coucher	oje
146	fall	waga yaga	tomber	gale
147	walk	râkh yurûkh	marcher	katka
148	run	jara yajri	courir	gadfu
149	swim	bagbag yibagbig	nager	om
150	fly	târ yitîr	voler (oiseau)	watʃewa
151	see	châf yichîf	voir	taru
152	hear	simi yasma	entendre	nagje
153	smell	chamma yuchumm	sentir (odorat)	sowt
154	give birth	walad yawlid	donner naissance	waje
155	die	mât yumût	mourir	mate
156	sleep	nâm yunûm	dormir	oje
157	blow	nafas yinafis	souffler	napisa
158	whistle	saffar yisiffîr	siffler	sojtʃ
159	swell	dardam yidardim	enfler	wasi
160	suck	massa yumuss	sucer	magir
161	spit	bazzakh yibazzikh	cracher	patʃawa
162	cough	gahha yuguhh	tousser	idza
163	vomit	gaddaf yigaddif	vomir	gagagi
164	bark	bamba yamba	aboyer	ol
165	bite	adda yi'addi	mordre	omiə
166	eat	akal yâkul	manger	taka
167	drink	charab yachrab	boire	al
168	want	dawwar yidôr	vouloir	nipala
169	have fear	khâf yakhâf	avoir peur	kula
170	know	irif ya'arif	savoir	ibina
171	think, reflect	fakkar yifakkir	penser/réfléchir	pakuru
172	count	hâsab yihâsib	compter	mani
173	suffer, ache	(bili yabla) waja' bôj'a	souffrir/avoir mal	parajə
174	laugh	dihik yadhak	rire	gilewa
175	cry	baka yabki	pleurer	artʃe
176	say	gâl yugûl	dire	odzama
177	ask	sa'al yas'al	demander	napala
178	sing	khanna yikhanni	chanter	rie
179	dance	li'ib yal'ab	danser	war
180	play	li'ib yal'ab	jouer	war
181	give	anta yanti	donner	birka
182	show	wassaf yiwassif	montrer	taru
183	send	rassal yirassil	envoyer	name

184	buy	bâ' yibî'	acheter	ɖawaje
185	marry	akhad yakhud	se marier	tɕawe
186	fight	harab yahrib	lutter	zama
187	kill	katal yaktul	tuer	nade
188	steal	sarag yasrag	voler (dérober)	masa
189	take	châl yichîl	prendre	ike
190	lead	wadda yiwaddi	amener	itria
191	search	fattach yifattich	chercher	maga
192	find	ligi yalga	trouver	ameʔ
193	push	lazza yilizz	pousser	sajan
194	pull	salla yisill	tirer	kajati
195	tie, attach	rabat yarbut	lier/attacher	ɖupie
196	hit	dagga yudugg	frapper	lopia
197	split	chagga yuchugg	fendre	pertɕek
198	scratch	hakka yuhukk	gratter	kudû
199	squeeze, press	assar yi'assir	presser	mia
200	wash	khassal yikhassil	laver (quelque chose)	apali
201	burn	tachcha yutuchch	brûler	iga
202	throw	zarag yazrug	lancer	rame
203	pour	sabba yusubb	verser	kaje
204	bury	daffan yiduffun	enterrer	məriɲa
205	hide	damdam yidamdim	caler	damdim
206	work	khadam yakhdim	travailler	narawe
207	sweep	gachgach yigachgich	balayer	gusie
208	braid, weave	machat yimachit	tresser	dale
209	cultivate, farm	harat yahrit	cultiver	guan
210	prepare food, cook	tabakh yatbukh	préparer (la nourriture)	bande
211	here	hini	ici	au
212	close, near	garîb	près	ej
213	there	hinâk	là-bas	kadiɲ
214	far	ba'îd	loin	are
215	to the right	be zên	a droite	pat
216	to the left	be isra	a gauche	gaigbe
217	now	hassa	maintenant	zaʔin
218	yesterday	amis	hier	saxan
219	tomorrow	ambâkir	demain	makandu
220	or	wên	ou	au
221	when	mata	quand	zəniɲ
222	how	kéf	comment	ma
223	who	yâtu	qui	gimua
224	what	chhunû	quoi	jama
225	I / me	anâ	je / moi	na
226	you	inta Γ / inti E	tu / toi	gimuke
227	he / him	hû Γ / hî E	il / lui	gidaɲ

Appendix B: Map of Mabire Area in Chad



Appendix C: Map of Mabire Village Sites in the Region



References

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