

**Sociolinguistic Survey Report
on Tirma, Chai, Baale, and Mursi**

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During our trip to southwestern Ethiopia, more specifically to Tum, Maji, Adekas, and Jeba [late Dec. to early Jan.], we made the following observations regarding languages and their genetic classification. There is no separate language called Suri (or Surma). The name Suri is an ethnonym referring to the following communities:

1. Tirma
2. Chai (or T'id)
3. Baale

The neighbouring Dizi and Amhara communities refer to these three groups collectively as Surma (possibly derived from a Dizi word meaning "(kind of) lowland ant"). These days the Suri groups also tend to refer to themselves as "Surma", thereby distinguishing themselves from the neighboring Bume (Nyangatom), Dizi, Mursi, or other groups.

The Tirma and Chai speak dialects of the same language, whereas the Baale speak a different, although genetically related, language. But all three groups feel a kindred spirit to exist between themselves. There is a strong sense of cultural affinity (or common ethnicity), also manifested by the fact that they have similar age-set systems, or common ceremonies, whereas their material culture is also similar (e.g., women wearing lip disks).

Tirma and Chai form a dialect cluster with Mursi, but there is no common name for this dialect cluster. The Mursi are never referred to as Surma (or Suri); they are either called Mursi or Mun (which is their self-name). Although we did not do the proper sociolinguistic tests, our claims on mutual intelligibility between Tirma, Chai, and Mursi are based on the following observations:

1. The three varieties are extremely close phonologically, lexically, and grammatically.
2. Speakers of, for example, Tirma, claim to have no problems in understanding Chai or Mursi, and vice versa.
3. We observed speakers of Chai using their own speech in contact with Tirma without any apparent difficulties in communication.

Although ethnically the Baale people form a close bond with Tirma and Chai people, their language is quite distinct from the latter. The Baale call their language Baalesi. They are also referred to as Zilmamo, which is the name of their country, situated west and south of Jeba town, towards the border with Sudan. The Gimira call the Baale people and their language Baaye, whereas the Anywak refer to them as Dok. The Baale people call the neighboring Dizi people Saara, and the Amhara are referred to as Goola. Baale is also spoken across the border in Sudan, in an area known as Kachepo, which is the name used by the neighboring Toposa, Juje, and Murle for the Baale people and their country.

Whereas Tirma and Chai groups on the one hand, and Baale on the other, form an ethnic unit called Suri (or Surma), their languages are only distantly related (probably like English and, say, Norwegian). Many Baale people apparently speak Tirma and/or Chai. Only few Baale people speak Dizi or Amharic. In, for example, Jeba town there are several Dizi people speaking Baale as a second language. These people intermediate between the local and regional traders and the Baale people, when the latter come to town in order to buy salt and razor blades.

Baale is closely related to the Didinga-Murle cluster, which consists of Didinga, Tenet, and Larim in Sudan, and Murle in Sudan and Ethiopia. This claim is based on the close phonological, lexical, and grammatical affinity between Didinga-Murle and Baale. Extensive evidence for our hypothesis will be given in a separate report in the near future. Some initial evidence is given following. In terms of basic vocabulary, for example, Didinga-Murle and Baale share many cognates, whereas in Tirma-Chai-Mursi a different root is found; for example:

'head'	Baale	- ðwá
	Tirma	- saba
	Murle	- ɔɔ
	Didinga	- o
	Larim	- owa
'bone'	Baale	- éémē
	Tirma	- giga
	Murle	- amen
	Didinga	- emen
	Larim	- amen

Also, in these cognate forms there are regular sound correspondences between Didinga-Murle and “ð” alternating with “z”) in Didinga-Murle and “s” in Baale:

Murle - Baale ð - sðð
 ‘bone’ εεð - éés
 ‘goats and sheep’ iðo-k - ísð
 ‘how many’ ðaar - sára
 ‘name’ ðaar - sára

The personal pronouns of Baale can be related easily to the Didinga-Murle system. More specifically, the absolute case pronouns of, for example, Murle correspond neatly to the absolute case pronouns of Baale; they are quite distant from the Tirma pronouns:

Murle - Baale - Tirma
 1 sg aneeta - àndá - àɲè
 2 sg meet - ìndá - ìɲè
 3 sg nɔnɔ - nðɲ
 1 pl aget - àggá - àgè
 2 pl ɪget - ùggá - ɪge
 3 pl nɔnɔ - nóg - yòg

In fact, the Baale forms seem to be shortened (VCCV) forms of the Didinga-Murle forms in the case of first and second person. For example,

*aneeta: *anta > anda

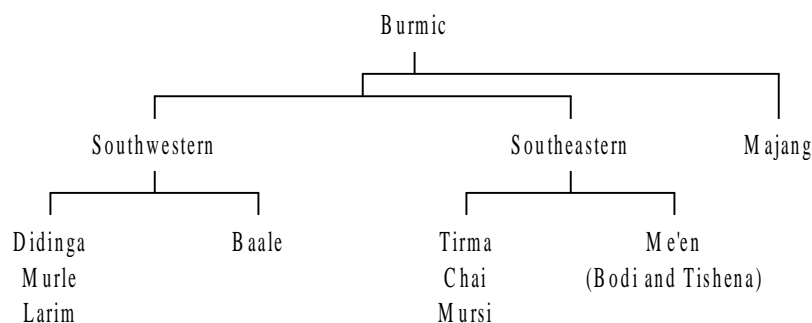
(because sequences of nasal and voiceless stops are not allowed in these languages), and

*uneeta: *unda > unda

(whereas in Murle u > i in this environment). Also, the nominative case pronouns of Didinga-Murle and Baale are close, e.g. naana ‘I’ in Murle corresponds to nààná ‘I’ in Baale. More extensive evidence of the genetic classification of Baale will be given in the near future.

The Tirma-Chai-Mursi dialect cluster is more closely related to Me’en (ik) than to Baale, but Tirma-Chai-Mursi and Me’en are nevertheless distinct languages. There is also a considerable degree of animosity between the Me’en (more specifically the Tishena people within the Me’en community) and the neighboring Tirma and Chai, frequently resulting in fights over territorial rights and manslaughter. Because of the nature of their contacts, few Tirma or Chai speak Me’en and vice versa.

The following picture seems to emerge from our investigation regarding the genetic classification of the Surmic languages:



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 (original document format modified for consistency with later reports)

Full evidence for this classification and, more specifically for the genetic position of Baale(si), will be given separately in the near future.