

**How do you get information about Sango Godobé and the Godobé of Bangui:**

**A conversational interview between Helma Pasch and Germain Landi**

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Sango Godobé is known as the language of the street children (*Godobé*) in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic (CAR). It is a variant of Sango, the national official language of the country (Pasch 1994). It differs from the latter among other things by manipulations which we have described in 2015, manipulations which are characteristic for many so-called youth or secret languages. The description is based primarily on observations carried out by Germain Landi in 2011-2012 before he came to Cologne for his PhD studies in 2014. Our motive for this research was to produce a presentation on Sango Godobé for the international Workshop *Youth Languages and Urban Languages in Africa* (Cologne, 30.05-01.06.2012) which took place just after Landi's first arrival in Europe.

At that time, written information on the Godobé was very scarce and that on their language quasi non-existent. Therefore field-work appeared to be necessary in order to find out what this language looks like. For lack of funds "normal" fieldwork with paid language-assistants was not possible and we had to develop ways of getting hold of information without investing money. Give the advice to unobtrusively observe communicative situations where Sango Godobé is used is, however, far easier when sitting in Germany than to put into practice in Bangui. The main reason for this difficulty is that it is not easy to eavesdrop conversations in conditions where speakers try to hide their language from outsiders. Such a way of clandestinely collecting linguistic data will furthermore not be appreciated by a group whose members struggle hard every single day to survive, hence the observing linguist must be careful not to be trapped.<sup>2</sup>

In the following conversational interview the whereabouts of the production of that paper on Sango Godobé are discussed with focus on how Germain Landi carried out fieldwork and how he managed to obtain the valuable data.

### The conversational interview

**HP:** In 2011 and 2012 you did fieldwork on Sango Godobé trying to find out what the language variant looks like and what makes it different from common Sango<sup>3</sup> and even more from standard Sango, which has been highly influenced by the writings of Diki-Kikiri (1986) and by radio programs. The results of this research were published in a volume on urban youth languages (Landi & Pasch 2015). Please let us know how you carried out your research and which other sources helped you in the description of that language. To begin with, when you ask people in the street about Sango Godobé, what answers can you expect?

**GL:** In the street, people might answer briefly that Sango Godobé is "the language of the thieves of KM 5", probably the most vibrant suburb of the capital Bangui, or that it is "the language of hustlers and of drugs addicts".<sup>4</sup> This attitude of normal people has been documented in the media, online as

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<sup>1</sup> We want to express our deeply felt gratitude for the chance to contribute to this issue. We also thank Asangba Reginald Taluah for revising our English and to Nico Nassenstein and André Motingea Mangulu for their assistance in discovering etymologies in languages from DR Congo.

<sup>2</sup> This difficulty holds true somehow for all kind of linguistic and anthropological research. After so many years of political unrest the situation in the country is such that "nobody trusts anybody anymore" as Séraphin-Personne Feikere of the Institut de Linguistique Appliquée de Bangui said on the international workshop *Perception et catégorisation-dénomination, Couleur* 9-10 novembre 2017 at the Université de Lorraine in Nancy.

<sup>3</sup> The term 'common Sango' corresponds to Wald's (1986: 56) 'Sango commun' and refers to the variant of Sango actually spoken in Bangui and the rest of the country, while standard Sango is practised only by a relatively small group of people and used for written purposes.

<sup>4</sup> This attitude towards the Godobé is, however, not only expressed by the better-off population in Bangui, but found its way also into scholarly literature. Titley (1997: 47) in describing the situation of

well as print, on several occasions, e.g. in a speech given May, 31, 1970 on a "Mother's Day"-venue (*fête ti amaman*) shows Bokassa presenting a speech on the value of an industrious life. At one point, he asks his audience repeatedly *godobé ayeke zowa?* "what type of persons are the Godobé?" and every time the listeners answer shouting unisono *zo ti nzi!* '(they are) thieves'. My brother registered this speech on an audio-cassette and had me listen to it several times).

On May, 5, 2013, the weekly *Jeune Afrique* reports that Michel Djotodia, Bozize's successor as president of CAR, stopped the looting of the town by young Godobés describing them in a similar attitude as scapegraces coming from the miserable suburbs of Bangui (*désœuvrés venus des quartiers miséreux de Bangui*), hustlers (*voyous*), former prison inmates (*libérés de prison*), jobless people (*chômeurs*) with empty stomachs.

Bouquiaux et al. (1978: 117) state explicitly that the term *Godobé* refers above all to young 'thugs' (*voyous*) or scapegraces who loiter around public places seeking occasions for petty theft, but it is also used with reference to adults of up to 35 years of age.

**HP:** What is the earliest scholarly documentation of the term *Godobé*?

**GL:** That lexicon entry *Godobé* by Bouquiaux et al. is - to the best of my knowledge - the first documentation<sup>5</sup> of the term. Eight years later, Diki-Kidiri (1986: 92) in an analysis of the role of Sango in the formation of the nation the as the oldest source mentions the *Godobé* and presents them as a highly disadvantaged group.

According to him the young *Godobé* of Bangui are gangs who love music and boisterous the night-life of the black town (*les bandes des jeunes « godobé » de Bangui adorent la musique et la grouillante vie nocturne de la ville noire*). In doing so they behave very much like young people all over the world who prefer to enjoy a vibrant life to hard work.

Street children were, however living in Bangui long before they were mentioned in the literature. According to Tringle (01.2012) the first gangs of boys were observed the sixties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, soon followed by groups of girls<sup>6</sup>. Their number keeps on growing.

**HP:** What is the meaning of *Godobé* and what is the origin of this term?

**GL:** In written sources and in the internet *Godobé* is used mostly with reference to street children who for lack of other income are often forced to live on theft. We can see this, e.g., in the title of a report by an NGO on street-children in Bangui (CCFD-Terre Solidaire 2013, Landi & Pasch 2015). Kalck (2005: 41) in the historical dictionary of the Central African Republic makes a distinction between children just living in the streets and those who become delinquents, i.e. *Godobé*. So does Woodfork (2006: 146) who defines *Godobé* as children who live on their wits on the streets of Bangui and who make their living by carrying out small jobs for other people. Since these jobs don't bring enough money, they also turn to thievery, begging or prostitution, and many of them consume drugs. Note that Woodfork explicitly states that not all street children commit crimes nor do they all use drugs.

In Bangui, however, people refer quite usually to both street children and delinquents by the term *Godobé*. When questioning intensively people about their personal experiences with *Godobé* they may forget their negative attitude for some time and tell that it is not unusual to hire *Godobé* for jobs which nobody else wants to do, in particular jobs which other people refuse to do. One of such

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constant instability and intimidations refers to the *Godobé* as "a criminal element" that in the popular residential districts surrounding the centre of Bangui "preyed on the better off and the unwary".

<sup>5</sup> In the preface to our paper on Sango *Godobé* we erroneously quoted Diki-Kidiri (1986: 92) as the oldest source.

<sup>6</sup> Today the girls among the *Godobé* are often called *Godobettes* by children and youths.

jobs is digging tombs, which entails the permission for them to attend the funeral celebration. In the end, they may admit that the Godobé are striving for paid jobs most of the time, but that they are obliged to steal when they do not manage to earn enough money, but when not urged to think about the economic difficulties of the Godobé they get quick back to their old attitudes.

As for the etymology of this name there are two explanations. According to the NGO CCFD-Terre Solidaire (2013), there was once a merchant called Mr. Godobé who helped some homeless children by giving them little jobs. Before long other children joined them expecting to get the same support, and they continued to stay around Mr. Godobé's place. In the end, all these children they were called *Godobé*. This story may well reflect historical reality, since in Bangui *Godobé* is a normal name for persons (more men than women have this name), but at the same time it sounds like a piece of folk etymology and we cannot be really sure whether it reflects historical reality.

Bouquiaux et al. (1978: 117, 557) state that *godobé* is a word of Gbaya<sup>7</sup> origin and that in Gbaya it has the meaning 'prostitute', i.e. it refers to persons of the lowest social rank, but this etymology is not really convincing.

**HP:** Are the Godobé really as dangerous and bad people as is often said?

**GL:** The title of Sylvestre Seme's (2000) thesis *Les godobé de Bangui (RCA) ou la construction sociale de la délinquance juvénile dans la ville africaine*<sup>8</sup> indicates quite clearly that the reputation of the Godobé as gangsters is above all a social construction. But because of their misery and their eternal undernourishment they tend to be involved in petit crime and they have the reputation of criminals. This is also the case for institutions who care for the street children and it cannot be denied that in Bangui street children are quite generally considered a problem of crime. Since several years different societal groups engaged make great efforts to solve these problems for several reasons. On the one side, Christian churches and a number of NGOs (cf. e.g. Lazareva 2016) want to support at least the children among the Godobé and protect them against attacks by the population and the police. They also give them food, shelter and education in order to empower them so that they can be successful in their lives. On the other side, government, police and municipal administration want to protect the population from being robbed by Godobés, whom they consider criminals, and beat them and chase them away.

The fact that the youngest Godobé are only about six years old but that occasionally there are also babies among them (Triangle 2012) is the main reason why NGOs feel the need to support them. Many of these children are orphans and for some reason obliged to care for themselves.

The constant fear of persecution by the police and that part of the population who live in houses may instigate the Godobé to continually create new words and syntactic constructions which prevent outsiders from understanding them (Woodfork 2006: 146f). But we know that such urge for linguistic innovations is a feature which is characteristic for the so-called youth languages of Africa (cf. Nassenstein & Hollington 2015).

**HP:** Since when is the term *Sango Godobé* used to denote a variant of Sango?

**GL:** Diki-Kidiri's above-mentioned article is most probably the oldest scientific source about Sango Godobé, which he considers a slang (argot) of standard Sango or *sango courant*. He observes that specific words from Sango Godobé enter standard Sango which reflects similar bottom up development as (Nassenstein 2015) has documented with regard to the Langila-variant of Lingala. This observation is quite important from a sociolinguistic point of view since it documents the shaping

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<sup>7</sup> There is no Gbaya-dictionary available which would confirm that in Gbaya *godobé* is the equivalent for 'prostitute.'

<sup>8</sup> This thesis was not accessible to Germain Landi.

of Sango by all layers of the society of Central African Republic and accepting even low-prestige variants the source of innovations. Diki-Kidiri also mentions the influential role of Sango Godobé in popular music which can be observed in quite a number videos on YouTube.

A nice example is the video *Centrafrique musique* of the group *Zokela - Hity Maïty*. where quite a number of words from Sango-Godobé are heard which are not used in standard Sango. In the refrain there is the following expression:

- (1) *Supu ti lo la a-kinda mbi*  
sauce POSS 3s PRES SM-turn.over 1s  
It is her mass (lit.: sauce) that knocked me down.

In this clause *supu* refers to the stoutness of a woman who was knocked down by a very lean one. *Lo yeke na supu mingi* ('s/he has much soup') is said about a well build or strong person. In standard Sango - and in more polite terms - one would describe such as person as *kono-ngo zo* (big-NOM person) 'a big, stout or fat person'.

Another Sango-Godobé expressions is the term "chambre à air" (< French) for the slip leaking out of the trousers.

- (2) *Tongana e hõ na lege, chambre.à.air na gigi.*  
when 1p pass way inner.tube PREP outside  
When we go along the street, our inner tube (lit.: 'leaking slip') appears outside.

**HP:** Are there other denotations for Sango Godobé?

**GL:** Sango Godobé is occasionally called *double Sango*. But while in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century *double Sango* was characterized as a language of gangsters and criminals, as is the case with Sango Godobé today, it is now used to denote ludlings where words are manipulated by inversion of syllables or by insertion of syllables according to specific phonological rules, i.e. the same type of manipulation that is practised in Sango Godobé. It is practiced primarily by children, but also by adults some who may even organize events where participants compete with their capacity to produce and understand even long texts in Double Sango (Voeltz 1992). The main difference is that the ludling double Sango is practiced in symmetrical communication<sup>9</sup> to enable all participants to use and to "decipher" it while the same manipulations in Sango Godobé aim at making speech unintelligible in asymmetric communicative situations.

**HP:** Where did you learn about the structures of Sango Godobé? How did you get the specific examples published in our article?

**GL:** Well, it may be striking, but at the University of Bangui research on Godobé has until now not been a topic of research. Note that the first scholars who worked on the Godobé and their language did so when they studied abroad. The first is a description of the language by Sélézilo (1999) produced in Côte d'Ivoire and the second is a sociological study of the Godobé by Seme (2000) written in France.

Since the speakers of Sango-Godobé are in constant contact with other inhabitants of Bangui, basically everybody has at least some knowledge of it. People may refuse to speak it, but they can

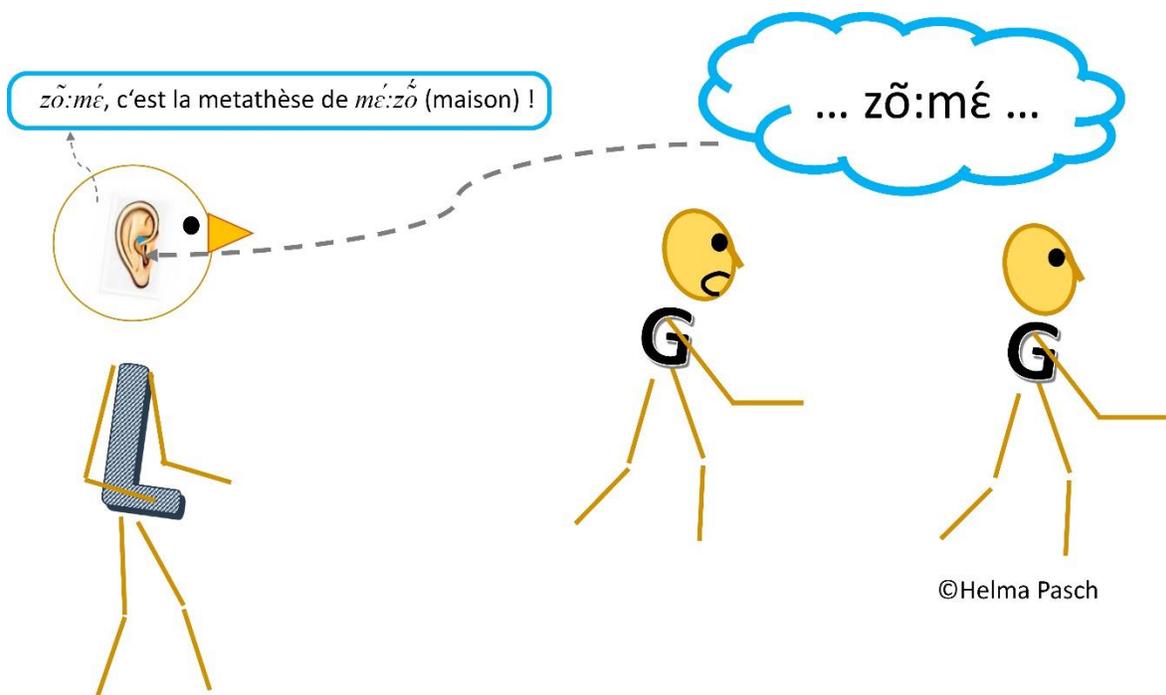
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<sup>9</sup> At given moments, where one speakers utters a piece of manipulated speech which the interlodutor has to "decipher" these situations are asymmetric. But since roles keep changes the communication as a whole is symmetric.

understand it to some degree. My own competence of this variant allowed me to observe several spontaneous situations which are described in the following text.

There were several occasions, where I could observe unobtrusively speakers using Sango Godobé. Sango Godobé is definitely not a secret language, and besides its reputation as a medium of gangsters, though it still has the reputation as such. The prestige of the language is, however, improving and it is considered more and more a *cool* means of communication which journalists and politicians use when this is convenient for their aims.

The first was given when I was walking walking in the street and had the chance to overhear a conversation of two young Godobé in which the word [zõ:mé] (a metathesis of "maison") was uttered. I realized immediately that this was a typical Sango Godobé item and I tried to follow the speaker and his interlocutor unnoticed trying to get the rest of the conversation, but unfortunately without any chance to get more data.



Picture 1: Overhearing a Sango Godobé word in a conversation of two young men in the street

The second occasion was given when I was going to town on a motorbike taxi, a fairly big woman sitting behind me as a second passenger.<sup>10</sup> The driver who observed that there was heavy pressure on the rear wheel and that driving the motorbike was difficult because of her weight made the following remark to her alluding at her obesity by *lezba* which is derived from *balèze* 'stout, strong, fat' (< French) by metathesis: "*Soeur, mo ke lezba !*" The woman did not understand and the driver repeated his critical remark, now with the adjective in its basic form *balèze* which she did understand. This szenario shows that the taxi-driver, uses a Godobé form although he does not consider himself a Godobé. It might indicate further that the woman does not know Sango-Godobé at all, or that she is not well enough acquainted with it to grasp an unexpected utterance.

<sup>10</sup> It is not unusual in Bangui that motorbike taxis take two passengers.



Picture 2: La grosse femme - the big lady

Fairly good chance to observe the speech of Godobé was given in repair workshops for motorcycles. Where the Godobé who have a friendly relation with the owner they are allowed to stay around. They talk with the owner – in common Sango - and when there is a need they give him a hand. Among themselves they also speak common Sango most of the time. Only when they want to make sure that clients of the shop do not understand them they use manipulated forms of Double Sango. It goes without saying that the shop-owners understand Sango Godobé fairly well. When I took my motobike for repair one of the Godobé sneaked into the shop looking here and there which looked suspicious to the mechanic who said to me in a warning voice: *ala sara ange na petit so* (3p make attention PREP young.man DEM) 'be careful with that guy'.

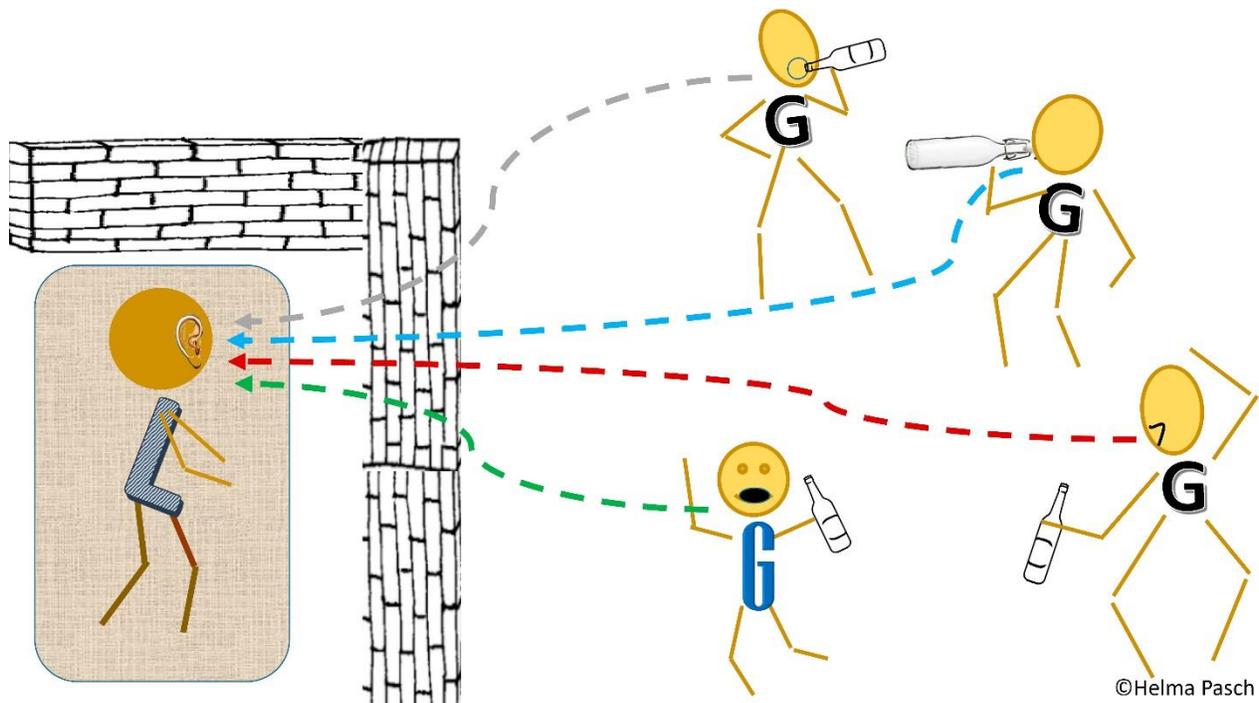
Picture 3: Some Godobe around the motorbike repair shop

One day I could make a fourth spontaneous observation while waiting for a taxi in a very busy street. On the opposite side there was a woman of about 30 years of age who was also waiting for a taxi. A man who was slightly older stopped and said to the woman:

(3) *le ti mo a-mu réseau awe...*  
 eye POSS 2s SM-take already  
 Your face has already been connected to the power source.

4. A wonderful chance to observe Sango Godobé was given when on my neighbour's premises a funeral ceremony was celebrated. Lying in bed at night in my house, I could listen to the songs of the Godobé and their communication among themselves and with other people. During this ceremony they playfully manipulated Sango more intensively than they do on other occasions.

Although I was a bit acquainted with Sango Godobé I was not able to follow the conversations because the speakers were too far away from the house, they spoke in the opposite direction or very unclearly. All I could make out in the end were a number of typical words such as *Jack Bauer* for drink with a high percentage of 'alcoholic ' which in common Sango is called *ngbako* or short statements like *ake deuxportant* 'it is very important, it is even more important'. 'Jack Bauer' is the lead protagonist of an American television series and is often portrayed as their most capable agent. In Bangui people connect him with huge consumption of alcohol, which explains the metaphorical shift of the name. *Deux-portant* is a playful derivation of *un-portant* (/ɛ̃pɔrt'ã/) a deliberate misunderstanding of the homophonous *important*, making the number word *deux* 'two' as opposed to *un* 'one' the marker of comparison (Landi & Pasch 2015: 216)



Picture 4: Listening to Godobé on a funeral celebration while in bed

**HP:** What were special experiences when investigation usages and forms of godobé? And what are your expectations with regard to the results.

**GL:** Well, it was a new experience that it is possible to do fieldwork just by observing spontaneous speech. It takes of course more time than elicitation sessions with a language consultant and you never know whether you will have specific data you are after, but the data that you get are reliable, hence more valuable In the end you may happen to get data which you had not expected before and for which you did not even look.

Let me make the following concluding remarks. I think that anybody who has a good command of common Sango and who is acquainted with the word-formation patterns of Sango-Godobé can do such kind of research.

Is important to know that certain aspects of Sango Godobé can also be investigated on the basis of music-videos in the internet. As I mentioned already, many singers sing texts in common Sango with Sango Godobe expressions interspersed as shown above (ex. 1) and in the following song

which I transcribe and translate here. Note that here the expressions from Sango Godobe consist of words of unknown origin which do not exist in common and standard Sango, like *sepele* 'slender, lean', of loanwords from English, e.g. *fair play* or French in a specific new reading, e.g. *chambre à air* 'the part of the pants which peeps out at the back from under the trousers'

- (4) *Matinda, sepele<sup>11</sup> ti mbi*  
 slender POSS 1s  
 Matinda, my slender [wife]

*sac à main ti mbi*  
 bag at hand POSS 1s  
 My handbag i.e. my darling who is unseparable from me like a woman's handbag from her hand, who walks hand in hand with me

- (5) *E a-sepele e ke na beauté naturelle.*  
 1p PL-slender 1p COP PREP beauty natural  
 we slender women have the natural beauty

- (6) *Tongana e hō na lege,*  
 when 1p pass PREP way  
 When we pass by

*a-yeke iri e oo a-mannequin ti premier choix*  
 SM-COP call 1p EXCL PL-model POSS first choice  
 they are calling us "top models"

- (7) *Tongana e hō na lege, chambre.à.air na gigi:*  
 when 1p pass PREP way inner.tube PREP outside  
 when we pass our pants peep out from beneath the trousers  
 [lit. a part of the inner tube is outside and visible]

- (8) *Ndembo<sup>12</sup> ti samba ni a-hunda ti<sup>13</sup> lo gi fair play*  
 rivalry POSS co-épouse DEF SM-ask 3s only  
 Rivalry with other women needs fair play, i.e. no violence.

*Ye ti kua: sepele ti mbi oo chambre à air ti mbi*  
 thing POSS work/ leanness POSS 1s inner.tube POSS 1s

<sup>11</sup> *Sepele*, which may be used as an adjective or as a noun, is not known in common and standard Sango, and is not documented in any of the important Ubangian languages, nor in Lingala, Kituba or Swahili all of which have played a role in the formation of Sango. It might be the lexicalization of an ideophone with a formerly reduplicated form, just as in several Ubangian languages ideophones referring to leanness of the whole body or of body-parts have been nominalized and become denotations of the respective feature. Motingela Mangulu (p.c. comm.) suggested that *sepele* is, however, possibly a loan from Ngbaka. Here *pèle* is the equivalent for 'cord, thread, liana' and *sè* a prefix of names of certain animal clans (Maes 1959: 153, 159).

<sup>12</sup> The equivalent of *ndembo* in standard Sango is *tembe* (Bouquiaux et al. 1978: 569).

<sup>13</sup> The preposition *ti* not only marks possessive constructions, but it is also used to subordinate non-finite verbs.

my working tools: my slenderness and my peeping pants

- (9) *ye ti kua ti mbi oo, bata ni na mbi femme*  
thing POSS work POSS 1s protect ANAPH PREP 1s woman  
: my working tools: don't destroy it on my behalf [lit.: protect it for me, woman]

What fascinates me is its gain in prestige which has made the former so-called "gangster language" a "cool" means of communication which journalists and politicians use when this is convenient for their aims, and I would not be astonished if our two publications on this language will increase the prestige of Sango-Godobé even more

I hope that students of linguistics in Bangui will follow appreciate the two new ways of getting linguistic data: observing and evaluating spontaneous communications, and evaluate texts from the internet and particular YouTube videos. The advantage is not only that they get different type of data, but also that it makes research far more easily affordable.

**HP:** What language did you use to talk to speakers of Sango Godobé?

**GL:** I did not communicate directly with the Godobé but observed them, and whenever I had specific questions I asked some non-Godobé who is competent in the variant, e.g. the motorbike-mechanics, for explanations.

**HP:** What attracted your interest in Sango Godobé.

**GL:** I know the language since I have been living in Bangui for a long time, but during my studies at the university it was never a topic of linguistic studies. My interest in the structures was roused by the invitation to participate in the workshop on urban youth languages in Cologne in 2012 and present a paper on Sango Godobé. That was a wonderful chance for which I am very grateful.

### Abbreviations

ANAPH	anaphoric pronoun	POSS	possessive
COP	copula	1s	1 <sup>st</sup> person singular pronoun
DEF	definite marker	2s	2 <sup>nd</sup> person singular pronoun
EXCL	exclamation	3s	3 <sup>rd</sup> person singular pronoun
PL	plural marker	1p	1 <sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun

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