

# THE PLURAL IN LELE

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This article describes nominal and verbal plurals in Lele, an East Chadic language, and attempts to explore the sources for these forms by comparing the Lele pluralizers with those of other Chadic languages.

Cet article décrit les pluriels nominaux et verbaux en lele, une langue tchadique de l'est et essaie de découvrir l'origine de ces formes en comparant les affixes qui marquent le pluriel avec ceux dans d'autres langues tchadiques.

## 0. INTRODUCTION

One of the characteristic features in a number of Chadic languages is the similarity of nominal and verbal plural formations. Both Frajzyngier (1977) and Wolff (1977) have written emphasizing this similarity and attempting to describe the relationship between them. The verbal plural formations have been called frequentative, intensive or pluractional by some, and they can indicate in some Chadic languages either plurality of subject, object or both.

Lele is an East Chadic A language in the Nancere subgroup (Newman 1977). Very little has been published on any of the languages in this subgroup. Because this data has never been published before, the following sections will present a full analysis.

The first part of this paper will describe nominal and verbal plural formations in Lele and the relationship between them. The second part of the paper will explore the similarity between these formations in Lele and those in other Chadic languages and hypothesize about the source of these forms.

## 1. LELE PLURAL VERBS

The plural verbs in Lele show repetition of an action. If the object is plural (for a transitive verb) or the subject is plural (for an intransitive verb), the plural form can be used, (in both cases, the action occurs more than once) as well as if the action is simply repeated as shown in (1).

- (1) n    **dìgrì tu**            'I kill (a) goat.'  
I    kill goat  
n    **tìgrì ore**            'I kill goats.'  
I    kill<sup>^</sup>PL goats  
n    **bàá<sup>1</sup>**                'I fall.'  
I    fall  
ge   **padi-wí**            'They fall.'  
they fall-PL  
n    **hìndì Pierre**        'I insult Pierre.'  
I    insult  
n    **hìndì-wì Pierre**    'I insult (repeatedly) Pierre.'  
I    insult-PL

It should be noted that not all verbs have a plural form; I only know of approximately thirty.

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<sup>1</sup>The data from other Chadic languages is taken from Frajzyngier 1977, unless otherwise noted.

Despite the fact that in Chadic languages “the most common devices for formation of the verbal plural are reduplication of a syllable or gemination of a consonant” (Frajzyngier 1977:51), Lele does not form verbal plurals in either of these ways.

The two most common devices for forming the verbal plural are a suffix *-wi* and devoicing of the initial consonant. Only verbs with initial voiced obstruents may be devoiced while the rest of the verbs take the *-wi* suffix. Both devices are shown in (2) and (3).

(2) SINGULAR PLURAL

<b>al</b>	<b>al-wi</b>	‘sing’(a certain type of victory song)
<b>hìndì</b>	<b>hìndì-wì</b>	‘insult’
<b>naỹ</b>	<b>naỹ-wi</b>	‘knock, clap’
<b>keél</b>	<b>kel-wí</b>	‘pick up one by one’
<b>wàl</b>	<b>wàl-wì</b>	‘cut’

(3)

<b>dìgrì</b>	<b>tìgrì</b>	‘kill’
<b>bòr</b>	<b>pòr</b>	‘break’
<b>jègnì</b>	<b>cègnì</b>	‘join, sew’

Only verbs with initial voiced obstruents may be devoiced while the rest of the verbs can take the *-wi* suffix (cf. (4) and (5)).

Some verbs, all of which begin with /g/, form the plural by using a combination of the two strategies:

(4)

<b>gàr</b>	<b>kàr-wì</b>	‘build’
<b>gày</b>	<b>kàỹ-wì</b>	‘split’

A small group of verbs use one or both of the devices, but also either change or add a consonant.

(5)

<b>bàá</b>	<b>padi-wí</b>	‘fall’
<b>ma</b>	<b>mar-wi</b>	‘die’
<b>gìr</b>	<b>kì-wì</b>	‘run’

I only know of one verb that does not fit into any of the above patterns and it is shown in (6).

(6)

<b>ày</b>	<b>ágè</b>	‘take’
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## 2. NOMINAL PLURALS

The most productive device in Lele for the formation of nominal plurals is the clitic *-kíyè*.

(7)

<b>hìdà</b>	<b>hìdà-kíyè</b>	‘tree(s)’
<b>kumno</b>	<b>kumno-kíyè</b>	‘god(s)’
<b>kura</b>	<b>kura-kíyè</b>	‘hare(s)’

However, many of the plurals involving people or animals are formed by internal vowel changes. These plurals are far from regular, though some regularities can be observed. Many of the vowels can change to several different vowels and consonants can be changed or added. For example, /a/ becomes /e/, /i/, or stays the same (in each case the most frequent vowel change is listed first).

(8)

<b>kùlbá</b>	<b>kòlbé</b>	‘cow, cattle’
<b>tùmàrà</b>	<b>tòmèrè</b>	‘duck(s)’
<b>bùgàníng</b>	<b>bògèníng</b>	‘my friend(s)’
<b>gìjàngá</b>	<b>gàjìngé</b>	‘sorcerer(s)’
<b>kurmbàning</b>	<b>karmbàning</b>	‘my half brother(s)’

/i/ regularly becomes /a/.

- |      |   |  |   |
|------|---|--|---|
| (9)  | <b>gùjé</b><br><b>kìrgá</b>   | <b>gàjé</b><br><b>kàrgé</b>  | 'throwing knife/knives'<br>'wild animal(s)'                             |
| (10) | <b>dònglònìng</b><br><b>tóngó (f)</b><br><b>kóngó (m)</b><br><b>mùdùrù</b><br><b>tòrù</b> | <b>dònglènìng</b><br><b>kángé</b><br><br><b>kòndìrè</b><br><b>kòrà</b> | 'my thigh(s)'<br>'which one(s)?'<br><br>'young man/men'<br>'chicken(s)' |

/u/ becomes /o/, /a/, or /i/.

- |      |  |   |   |
|------|--|---|---|
| (11) | <b>kùsá</b><br><b>lùngmà</b><br><b>kùyrò</b><br><b>kùrmbaning</b><br><b>mùduro</b> | <b>kùsé</b><br><b>lùngmè</b><br><b>kàyré</b><br><b>kàrmbaning</b><br><b>kòndìrè</b> | 'fish'<br>'horse(s)'<br>'guest(s)'<br>'my half brother(s)'<br>'young man/men' |
|------|--|---|---|

It is very difficult to find a singular form with an /e/ that forms the plural with internal vowel changes. There is one possible example, but there are consonant additions and changes as well as shown in (9).

- |      |               |                   |                 |
|------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| (12) | <b>ḡéníng</b> | <b>ḡángyáníng</b> | 'my brother(s)' |
|------|---------------|-------------------|-----------------|

/o/ becomes /e/, /a/, or remains the same (often with consonant changes as well).

Frajzyngier (1977:50) and Newman (1990:38ff) note that /a/ is a frequent device used to mark plural and all of the vowels in Lele can become /a/ in some of the forms.

Frajzyngier (1977:55) also notes that "It is very likely that in a number of Chadic languages the feminine marker was also used in the formation of the plural". However, Newman (1990:7-10) clearly links the masculine with nominal plurals, and this seems to be the case in Lele, even for nouns without a singular masculine form. Note the masculine marker k- and the feminine marker t- in (13) which all have plurals beginning with k.

- |      |   |  |  |
|------|---|--|--|
| (13) | <b>tóngó (f)</b><br><b>kóngó (m)</b><br><b>tormo (f)</b><br><b>kormo (m)</b><br><b>tóng (f)</b><br><b>kóng (m)</b><br><b>tamá</b><br><b>hàlà</b><br><b>tòrò</b> | <b>kángé</b><br><br><b>karma</b><br><br><b>kángyé</b><br><br><b>kamdá</b><br><b>kàmlà</b><br><b>kòrà</b> | 'which one(s)?'<br><br>'child/children'<br><br>'indefinite, other'<br><br>'woman/women'<br>'maiden(s)'<br>'chicken(s)' |
|------|---|--|--|

There are a few forms that are marked with a -we.

- |      |   |  |                                  |
|------|---|--|----------------------------------|
| (14) | <b>gìrà</b><br><b>ba</b><br><b>máyò</b> | <b>gàr-wè</b><br><b>bang-we</b><br><b>máỹ-wè</b> | 'dog(s)'<br>'man/men'<br>'small' |
|------|---|--|----------------------------------|

This last example is one of the very few adjectives in Lele that can be marked for plural. The nasalization is present because of the combination of the two glides /y/ and /w/.

There are also a few forms that seem to be totally irregular.

- |      |   |  |  |
|------|---|--|--|
| (15) | <b>bayndí</b><br><b>tu</b><br><b>ḡéníng</b> | <b>kara</b><br><b>ore</b><br><b>ḡángyáníng</b> | 'person, people'<br>'goat(s)'<br>'my brother(s)' |
|------|---|--|--|

### 3. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN NOMINAL AND VERBAL PLURALS

The only apparent relationship between the nominal and verbal plurals is the *-wi* marking on the verbs and the *-we* marking on the nouns. The other devices for forming the verbal plural, consonant devoicing, seems to have no relation to the internal vowel changes or to the *-kíyé* plural marker. The *k-* masculine marker which occurs at the beginning of nouns seems in some cases to have been reinterpreted as a plural marker. It is unvoiced, and perhaps this was originally used as a prefix on verbs and has only left the voiceless feature behind to mark its presence. I can find no data to support this hypothesis however and there does not seem to be a similar process taking place anywhere else in Chadic languages. Newman (1990:63) has a different explanation of the initial consonant devoicing (see §4. In addition, Newman (1990:86) finds the link between nominal and verbal plurals to be a weak one, a conclusion that the Lele data supports.

### 4. THE PLURALS IN LELE AND THOSE OF OTHER CHADIC LANGUAGES<sup>2</sup>

I will now explore the relationship of the plural formations in Lele with those of other Chadic languages. The *-wi* verbal plural marker seems unrelated to other Chadic verbal plural formations, with the possible exception of the *-i-* infix found in Fyer, a Ron language of the West branch (Frajzyngier 1977:48). Newman (1990:78ff) lists several Chadic languages that have *-ay/-aw* suffixes on plural verbs, but does not link them conclusively with the Lele *-wi* (which he also cites) nor does he believe that the reconstruction of a proto-Chadic suffix from them is possible.

The initial consonant devoicing is also found in other East Chadic languages all of which are in the same sub-branch as Lele, but seemingly nowhere else. Newman (1990:63) believes that this devoicing stems from a CV- reduplication, a common pluractional formative in Chadic.

The nominal plural marker *-kíyé* is clearly related to the *-(V)n* plural suffix described by Frajzyngier (1977:52) and Newman (1990:21ff) and found, for example, in East Chadic (Kera, Dangaleat, Tumak), in Biu-Mandara (Kotoko, Logone, Gude) and West Chadic (Bade, Hausa). (For the relationship between nasal consonants and nasalized glides in Lele, see Simons and Burquest 1986.) It is interesting to note that Frajzyngier (1977:55) states that "all the Chadic languages which have the *-Vn* marker ... have a form of the masculine marker containing an *n*." This is not the case for Lele, as there is no form of masculine marker which contains an */n/*. This however does not explain the presence of the */k/* in the Lele suffix. It is possible that the pluralizing suffix *-(V)n* is also marked with the masculine *k-* suffix, which is sometimes used for plurals as seen in §2. Another possible explanation is posited by Newman (1990:17). For Karekare, Kankuru, Bade and Ngizim, Newman links their *CVn-* suffix to a combination of the *-(V)n* suffix and the Chadic *aki* suffix found in Hausa and elsewhere. Originally, the combination could have marked a double plural or else a plural and a indefinite marker. This explanation would certainly fit the Lele data although Lele seems to be the only language outside the West Chadic branch to show this combination.

As noted above, the */a/* marking plural is a frequent device for marking nominal plurals and can be linked to the frequent Lele vowel change to */a/*. Other East Chadic languages such as Dangaleat, Bidiya, and Mubi also exhibit internal vowel change to */a/* (Newman 1990:40ff). Internal vowel replacement for pluralization of nouns is also a widespread phenomena for Afro-Asiatic languages in general and */a/* has been shown to be both a pluralizing suffix and an infix (Welmers 1973:221ff and Greenberg 1963:47). It

<sup>2</sup>In Lele orthography, the double vowels indicate a tone glide. Although the practical orthography does not always indicate tone, I have marked high tone in this paper with a *´* and low tone with a *`* while mid tone is unmarked. The *˜* indicates nasalization.

is interesting to note that in other Chadic languages such as Angas, Ron, and Miya, there is a change to /a/ in the plural verb forms of some verbs (Newman 1990:72ff).

As for the *-we*, there are languages that have an *-e* suffix marking nominal plurals in all three major groups: Jegu (East Chadic), Logone and Buduma (Biu-Mandara) and Daffo, Sha, and Fyer (West Chadic). Perhaps the most similar suffix for nominal plurals occurs in Warji, a West Chadic language, which has a general plural suffix of *-wi*. There is also a *-mwa* (or *-mua*) nominal plural marker in Angas.

As the *-we* nominal marker seems to be more closely related to other Chadic languages' nominal plurals, it seems likely that the *-wi* verbal plural marker was borrowed from the *-we* and not the opposite. This goes against the tendency of Chadic languages as a whole (according to Frajzyngier 1977) to form nominal plurals from verbals.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In Lele then, the only device used to mark plural that can clearly be related to proto-Chadic (according to Frajzyngier 1977) is the /a/ marking nominal plural (which has become an internal vowel change rather than an /a/ marker properly speaking). There is no reduplication used to mark either nominal or verbal plurals.

Lele has a nominal plural suffix *-kíyě* which is possibly a combination of a masculine marker and a *-(V)n*, a widespread Chadic pluralizing device. It also has a *-we* nominal plural marker and a *-wi* and devoicing of initial voiced obstruents as verbal plural markers. The devoicing is possibly historically related to a CV- reduplication according to Newman (1990:63). The *-wi* appears to be borrowed from the *-we*, and all of the above seem to be innovations that occurred after proto-Chadic split.

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