

MIDALA'S PRAYER AT ZOKU
11 September 1996

Revised and with Michael Thomas's comments 090412

Zoku is an annual feast and ceremony of purification and renewal and is held in September-October. The following prayer is offered immediately following a ritualized campaign to drive the spirits of the dead out of Sukur towards the Kapsiki.

Midala, the ritual war leader, standing with a calabash of watery beer outside the enclosing wall of the chief's house, starts by speaking to the chief on the other side of the wall. Midala has removed a stone from the wall, and the chief may have done the same on his side. (Any resemblance to Pyramus and Thisbe is coincidental.) Midala starts by speaking to the chief.

This is Markus Ezra's interpretation of the words (Tape 96-2A: 001-017) and my transliteration and construal. Sakun checked against tape 031215. Modifications following advice of M. Thomas (see below)

Goeyva nda is (baya)

Look-at person eye (first).

First look me in the eye.

Fə riy tam

Put hands now

Now put your hands (in the hole in the wall).

Da jukw tə, da fa tə

Thing patriline his, thing father his

This rite descends in the chief's patriline, that he has from his father.

Ma nday haram tə a ca dza tlama da tə pə vuwax.

If person evil his then he go catch thing his on leaves.

If anyone that harbors evil thoughts towards the chief, let him catch his (evil) thing on leaves

This refers to the practice when sacrificing a bull of letting the first blood run onto leaves or straws. These absorb any evil and are discarded. The implication is that any evil will return to harm the evildoer. I think *ma ...a* has the sense 'if (or when) ... then,' but *a* was described as a *future* marker by Markus. But can *a* at the start of a sentence indicate the past, as it definitely does, and *a* in the middle the future?

At about this stage Midala throws the contents of the calabash into the hole in the wall to wet and wash the hands of the chief.

Ma da-i pə ghur-i ya xidi a ka ngəba ma ngwa.*

If things on farm come? chief, should+be+like replant up+on mountain.

MT: If (it is) the things on the farm (which are experiencing the evil mentioned in the previous line; thus the -i) oh Chief, let it be put up the mountain

Let all that grows on Sukur farms be replanted with double abundance.

ya xidi apparently refers in the manner of a synecdoche to the whole of Sukur. *Akka* is singular and I think composed of *a* like and *ka* hers (and its?) [Seems v. unlikely!]. *Atta*, the plural version, appears in the last line. The preposition 'ma' is used because the observer is below the mountain.

Ma hay a mbaharavə (mbaharava) mid akka fu ma ngwa.

If any crops were broken by storms, let them recover.

If something ptm break (break) storm should+be+like put-back up+on mountain.

Markus' reading included the second (*mbaharava*)

Vərishin sakun ha mədləpərpər atta

May the children of Sukur be as healthy and as prudent as butterflies.

Children Sukur as butterflies should-be-like

Butterflies are always healthy and fly away at the least sign of trouble.

ND7:12 960911

A freely translated version (draft for film subtitles)

Chief! First look me in the eye.

Now hold out your hands (to the hole in the wall).

This rite is the chief's, inherited in his father's line

If anyone harbors evil thoughts, let him discard them.

O Chief, may all that grows on our farms be doubly abundant.

If crops were broken by storms, let them recover.

May the children of Sukur be as healthy and as prudent as butterflies.

Michael Thomas's comments 090412

First - the first two lines:

Goeyva nda is (bayi)

Fə riy tam

You have *bayi* glossed as 'now' and *tam* glossed as 'then'.

I have *tam* as 'now' and *bayi* functions as a clause final connective indicating 'before'; i.e. the clause ending with *bayi* should occur before another action. For example, in a story about a baboon, the baboon is asking for a piece of meat. The Hyena pelt says 'pick me up *bayi*' or 'pick me up first, before I give you the piece of meat'

The many functions of *a*...

I also have many examples of *a* starting sentences with a past reading. But *a* can also start clauses with an exhortative reading (*Let X happen*)

For example, when someone is starting off on a journey, say up the hill, you can say: *a zhiḡəla tla kwa* 'may God carry you'

In the exhortative usage, you always get the SVO pattern, whereas with past readings, it tends to be VOS.

Given the context of the prayer, I think each of the phrases like *a ca dza tlama...*, *akka* and *atta* could be these exhortative phrases (*akka* = *a ka*).

a also can function as a GOAL marker when the goal is animate (*da* when inanimate as in a location) or as a vocative.

The line *ma day pə ḡhur ya xidi akka ngəba ma ngwa* is very interesting. I think here the *ya* may not be *ya* 'come'. Instead it might be:

ma da-i pə ḡhur-i a xidi, a ka ngəbama ngwa
IF thing-PL LOC farm-i VOC chief, EXHORT 3SG.F put-UP mountain

Maybe the *a* is being used in the vocative as in 'If (it is) the things on the farm (which are experiencing the evil mentioned in the previous line; thus the -i) oh Chief, let it be put up the mountain'

The 'ka' is confusing here as you noted. I was told that *ka* can refer to women, animals, God and all 'things men don't understand'. Could it be the case that the spirit involved in relocating/replenishing the crops is being referenced?

It may also be the case that the final *a ta* is not the exhortative but an instance of a type of possessive construction.

For example you can have phrases like: *nə iyuk a ta* 'They have a goat' The *a* in this construction seems related to the use of *a* as a goal marker.