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The Miship: People, language, and dialects

Abstract. The article discusses the Miship people of Plateau State, Nigeria. The paper is divided into sections for clear presentations and analysis. The sections include the geographical location of the language, History of the people, population, socio-economic life of the Miship, their concept of traditional medicine, and finally the two dialects of the language Longmaar and Jiɓaam. Identifying; two types of linguistics variations namely: lexical and phonological differences.

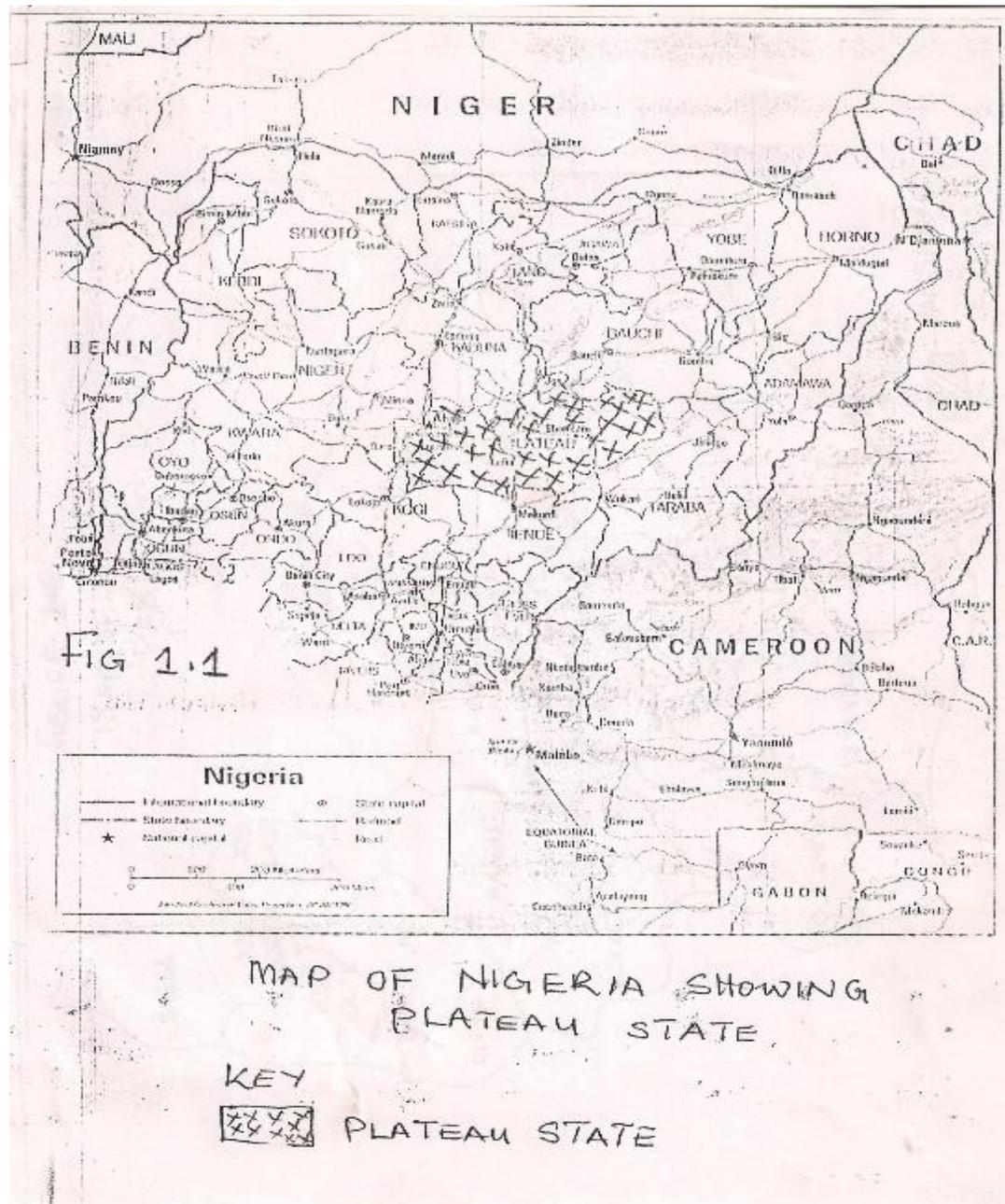
1.0 Introduction

Miship takes its name from the approximately 17,000 people who speak it. The home state of the Miship people, whose language is being studied here, is Plateau state, the twelfth largest state in Nigeria, and is roughly located in the center of the country. Its capital is Jos. Plateau state is celebrated as the “home of peace and tourism, an image that has been fractured in recent years by Muslim-Christian clashes in the state. It has a population of around 3.5 million people. The state has been rightly described as a miniature Nigeria because it contains almost all, if not all, the various ethnic groups of Nigeria. It includes an area of 26,899 square kilometers. The state is named after the picturesque Jos Plateau, a mountain area in the north of the state with captivating rock formations. Bare rocks are scattered across the grassland, which covers the plateau. The altitude ranges from 1,200 meters (4000 feet) to a peak of 1,829 meters above sea level in the Shere Hills range near Jos. Years of mining have almost left the area strewn with deep gorges and lakes.

In 1976, the state had fourteen local government areas (LGAs). New LGAs were carved out of the large ones in 1989, 1991 and 1996, so that today the new Plateau is subdivided into the followings seventeen LGAs namely: Barikin Ladi, Bassa, Bokkos, Jos East, Jos North, Jos South, Kanam, Kanke, Langtan North, Langtan South, Mangu, Mikang, Qua'an Pan, Riyon, Shendam, Wase and Pankshin. See Fig. 1.1.

Figure 1.1

Map of Nigeria showing states including Plateau where Miship Language is spoken

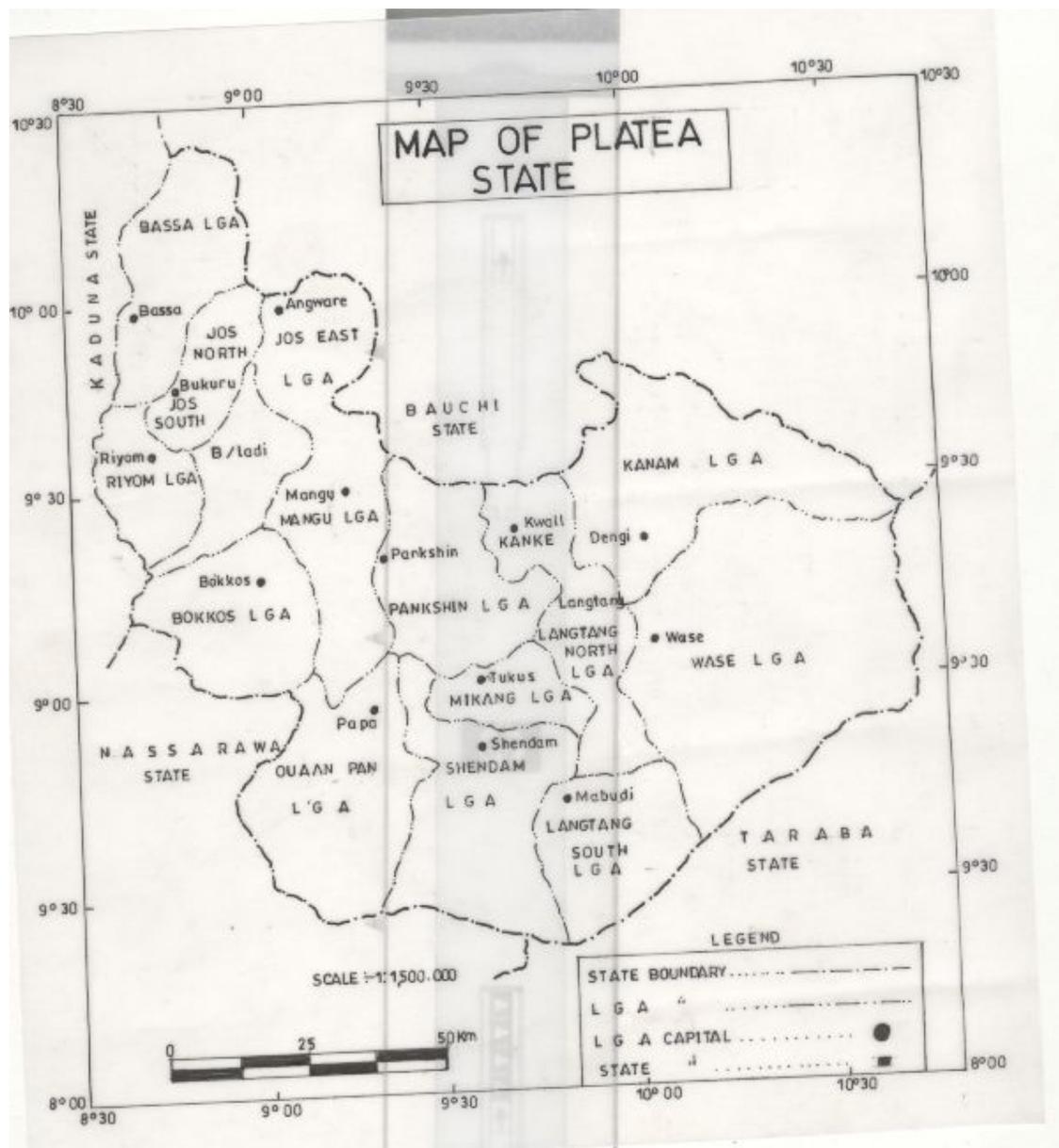


Similarly, the state has over 30 ethnic groups, each with a proud cultural heritage, with no single group large enough to claim majority position. People from other parts of the country coexist peacefully with the indigenes. Some of the groups in the state include the Berom, Ngas, Taroh, Goemai, Youm; Montol, Rukuba, Kwagalak, Piapung, Buji, Irigwe, Mushere; Jarawa, Anaguta, Gashish, Pyem, Amo, Chip, Meryang, Fier, Bogghom, Mwaghavul, Ronkulere, Aten and Miship, just to mention but a few. The Miship language, which is the focus of our study, is predominantly spoken in the southern part of Pankshin Local Government Area-Plateau State. Pankshin is located at latitude 9.33333 in decimal degrees, longitude 9.45 in decimal degrees, at an average altitude of 1371 meters.

2 The history of the Miship People

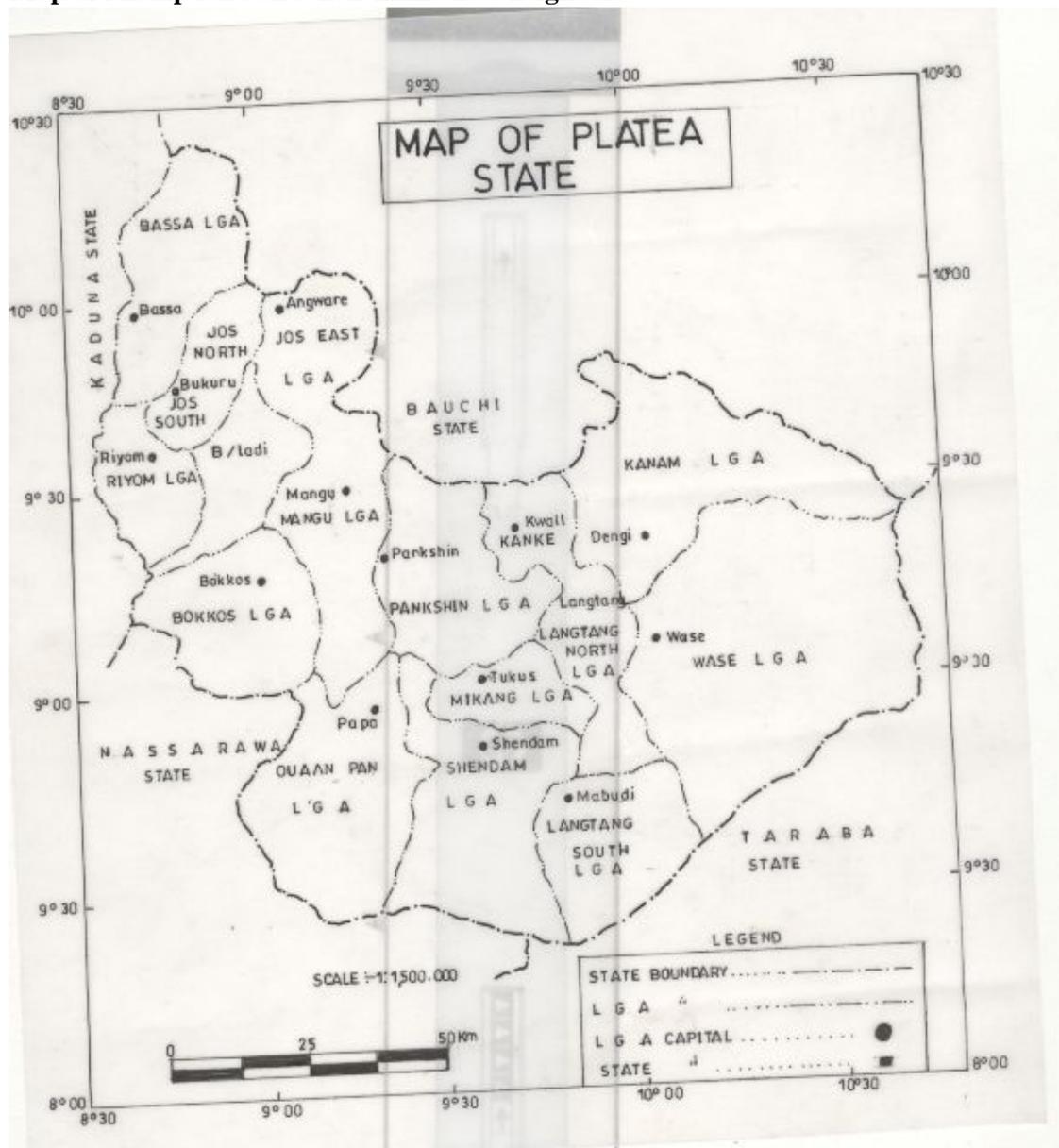
The historical origin of Miship people is no different from that of many other African language groups. Their origin as an ethnic group remains a topic of speculation, largely because there are no historians that ascertain where and how they originated. There are several oral traditions about the early migration of the Miship people to their present homeland in North-Eastern part of modern day Nigeria. For example, one oral tradition states that the Miship are believed to have migrated from the Chad Basin to their present homeland between 1110-1150 AD. They left the Chad Basin area along with other ethnic groups, the Ngas, Mupun, Tal, Tarok, Goemai, Sura and Pyem, went to Kaneem Borno and later migrated to their present areas in Plateau state of Nigeria. Another oral tradition documented in Banwar (1997) states that the Miship migrated between the fifteenth to eighteenth century from Kaneem Borno to their present homeland in Pankshin –Plateau State, Nigeria. (See Fig., 2, Fig. 3, Fig. 4.) In another similar oral tradition the two clans Longmaar and Jiɓaam, which are also referred to as dialects, have different views about their origin. According to the *Longmaar*, their origin seems to be obscure, in the sense that they claim not to have migrated from anywhere; instead they originated from where they are, in other words, the *Logmaar*

Figure 1.2
Map of Plateau state showing Local Government Areas including Pankshin where Miship is predominantly spoken.



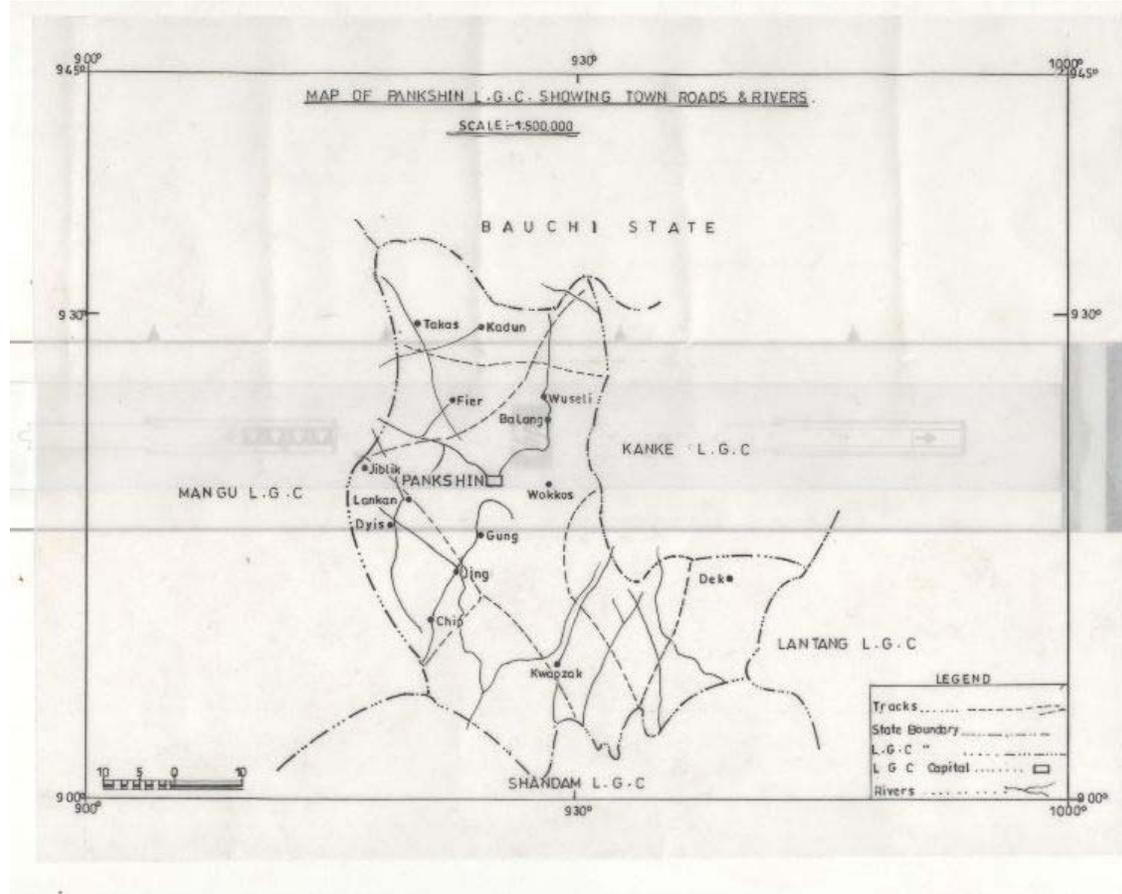
claim to be the aborigines of their present homeland. While the Jiɓaam; are believed to have migrated from Chad Basin into their present home land in Nigeria between the fifteenth and sixteenth century. A further oral tradition claims that speakers of the two dialects of Miship called Longmaar and Jiɓaam, are believed to have migrated from different places at a point in time to their present homeland. Under this tradition, the Longmaar claim to have migrated

Figure 1.3
Map of Miship land and their immediate neighbors.



from Jipari Kisa (Asa) to their present area, while the Jiḃaam are said to have relocated from Mwachvul to their present place of abode. All these oral traditions are subject to authentic scholarly historical analysis. We hope that our study will stimulate historians to investigate the origin of these people vis-à-vis the aboriginal settlement of the people and document them for the future generations.

Figure 1.4
Map of Pankshin L.G.C.



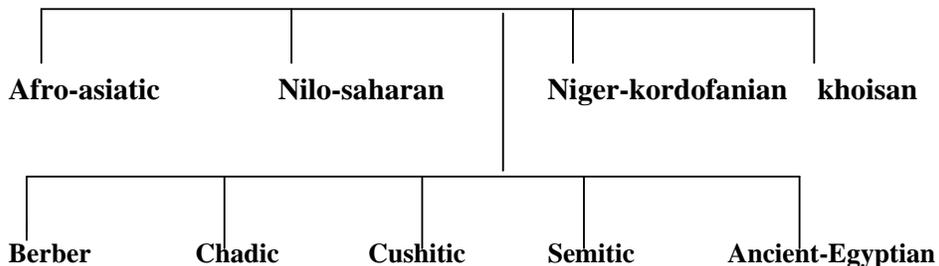
3 The Miship people and their language

The word “Miship” refers both to the kingdom and the language. Miship is an Afro-Asiatic language spoken in Plateau State, Nigeria. The Afro-asiatic constitute a language family with about 375 living languages and more than 350 million speakers spread throughout North Africa, Southwest Asia, part of the Sahel, West Africa and East Africa. Arabic is the most widespread Afro-asiatic language with over 280 million native speakers. The Afro-asiatic group also includes several ancient languages, such as Ancient Egyptian, Biblical Hebrew, and Akkadian. Maurice Delafosse (1914). The term did not come into general use until it was adopted by Joseph Greenberg (1950) to replace the earlier term “Hamito-Semitic” following his demonstration that hermitic is not a valid language family. The term “Hamito-Semitic” remains in use in the academic tradition of some European countries. Although some have

now replaced it with “Afrasian,” or, reflecting an opinion that it is more African than Asian, “Afrasan.” Individual scholars have called the family “Erythraen” (Tucker 1966) and “Lisramic” (Hoadge 1972).

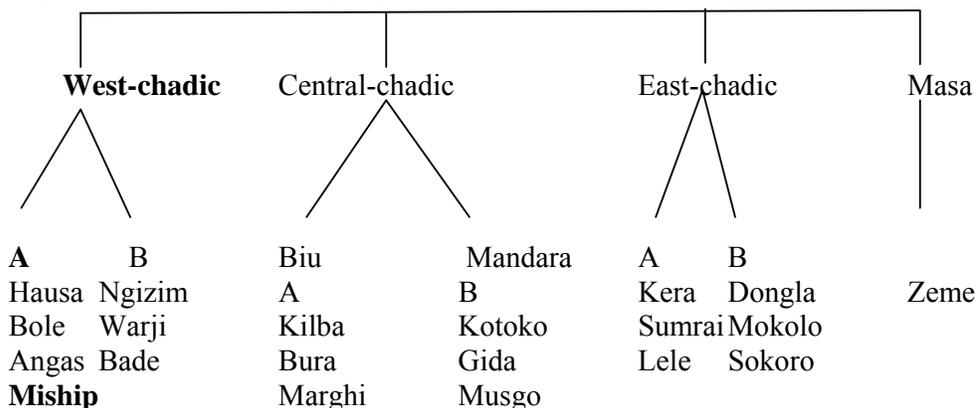
The Afro-Asiatic language family is usually considered to include the following branches: Berber, Chadic, Cushitic, Ancient-Egyptian, and Semitic. Miship belongs to the Chadic family which is divided into four thus: West Chadic, Central Chadic (Biu-mandara) East Chadic and Masa. Miship belongs to the family of West Chadic, which is further divided into “A” and “B.” Miship language falls under the “A” group of the West chadic. Other languages that fall under the “A” group of the west Chadic include Kare-Kare, Ngas, Kanakuru, Mupun, Bolanci, Hausa, etc. See fig 4.1

Figure 4.1 African Language Classification



In the Chadic family, four sub-families have been identified. Some of the sub-families may consist of sub-groups A and B as shown below. Miship belongs to the west Chadic A sub-group, with languages like Hausa, Bole, and Angas, just to mention but a few. See Fig 5.1.

Figure. 5.1 Chadic language classification



4 The population of Miship people

The population of Miship people, according to the 1991/92 census, was 17,000, excluding the Hausa Fulani and other groups that live in the area. Since the last population census figures above, there has been tremendous growth in population of the Miship because of improved medical facilities and institutions of learning such as post primary schools and the availability of college of education. These all reduced the migration of the people to urban cities in search of better living conditions.

5 The socio-economic activities of the Miship people

Several socio-cultural institutions existed in the region before the emergence of the two major religions of Islam and Christianity. These include marriage ceremony, birth rite, naming ceremony, circumcision, death rite, to mention but a few. Economically, Miships are predominantly farmers; agriculture has been the primary occupation of the people. Among the crops they produce are beans, yam, rice, guinea-corn, and cowpeas. Other activities like blacksmithing, weaving, hunting, and mining can be regarded as the secondary occupations of the people.

6 Traditional Medicines in Mishipland

The concept of medicine among the Miship people varies from the modern concept of medicine both in theory and practice. This is because Miship traditional medicine is different from the western medicine both in terms of the conception of the workings of human body, how illnesses occur, and how they are to be treated. This type of medicine has been in existence in Miship land for ages. It has also been discovered that there are various types of traditional medicine practitioners in the land, diviners (*gukum*), midwives (*matlabla*) herbalists (*go'ən*) and Orthopedics (*gopwat*). The above mentioned Miship traditional practitioners functions and the types of materials they use vary. There is a general belief

among the practitioners that *jinn* have super-natural power, can talk and offer cure for ailment from plants, animal parts, solution, and smoke.

In the same vein, two of Miship traditional practitioners i.e., the diviners (*gukum*) and the herbalist (*go'en*), in addition to the medicine, give instructions as to how their medicine should be administered. If this is violated, the patient can become insane. The diviners (*gukum*) are responsible for determining the cause of illness, which in some cases are believed to come from spirits. The major function of the midwives (*matlabla*) among the Miship is child delivery. They are mostly female and they use different indigenous plants, trees and oilmen to aid child birth. The herbalists (*go'en*) are also popular in Miship land. They are involved in the day to day treatment of common diseases in the community and can treat various infections and chronic diseases. They use plants, leaves, roots, and animal skins, to mention but a few, while the Orthopedics (*gopwat*) primary role is to fix fractures and broken bones. Their ability to diagnose the fracture is considered a gift from their ancestors, even though nowadays others believe that the power comes from God.

7 The dialects of Miship

The term dialect, derived from a Greek word *dialektos*, is used in two distinct ways, even by scholars of languages. One usage refers to a variety of a language that is characteristic of a particular group of the language speakers. The term is applied most often to regional speech patterns, but a dialect may also be defined by other factors, such as social class. A dialect that is associated with a particular social class can be termed a sociolect; a regional dialect may be termed a regiolect or topolect. The other usage refers to a language socially subordinate to a regional or national standard language, often historically cognate to the standard, but not a variety of it or in any other sense derived from it. This more precise usage enables distinguishing between varieties of a language, such as the French spoken in Nice, France and local languages distinct from the superordinate language, e.g. Nissart, the traditional native

Romance language of Nice, known in French as *Nicard*.

A dialect is distinguished by its vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation (phonology, including prosody). Where a distinction can be made only in terms of pronunciation, the term accent is appropriate, not *dialect*. Other speech varieties include standard languages, which are standardized for public performance (for example, a written standard), which are characterized by differences in lexicon (vocabulary), slangs, patois, or pidgin.

Keeping in mind the above concept and meaning of dialect, it is also important to point out that all languages have dialects. Languages spoken by millions of people, like English, Arabic, French, Hausa, and Kilba have many different forms according to the areas from which the speakers originated. Americans speak a variety of English that is different from that of England. People from Kano speak Hausa in slightly different ways from those from Sokoto. Hong and Gaya speakers of Kilba speak slightly different dialects. We call these ways of speech forms dialects. Miship Language is no exception from the above phenomenon.

Two dialects are identified in Miship: Longmaar and Jiɓaam. The Longmaar dialect is regarded as the prestige dialect. It is spoken in the area where the chief resides. The Jiɓaam dialect is regarded as less prestigious, although this is our view based on socio-political usage of the two dialects. Jiɓaam dialect speakers of Miship consider their dialect more prestigious because of its richness in vocabulary. It is also believed to be closer to the proto type form of the language. We wish to draw the attention of our dialectologists to the facts with regards to that aspect. At this point it is important to point out that we have observed two major differences between the two dialects namely: lexical and phonological differences.

7.1 Lexical differences between Longmaar and Jiɓaam dialects of Miship

The Longmaar and Jiɓaam dialects differ at the lexical level. At this level, we discovered two things: (i) some words differ in one or more sounds and (ii) some differ in words used to

express the same thing. Based on the Grund wordlist the following differences are discovered, as illustrated in Example 1 below:

7.2 Lexical differences in two or more words

(1) Longmaar dialect	Jibaam dialect	Gloss
karem	karam	mat
erem	aram	guinea-corn
shuar	hwar	laugh
tughur kagham	tughur dawn	courage
tang góng	tang báp	shoulder
deng	dèng	thin
apenáng	penáng	when?
bifiipo	biaappo	to be astonished
shwar	shuar	laugh
mi'ar	miyar	to become fat
tughún	kaabi kaa	cap
mato mánglé	ngum mangle	lorry

A close examination of the above examples reveals that there are differences in one or more sounds in Miship words which will be discussed under the section on phonology.

7.3 Lexical differences in words expressing the same meaning

Based on the data collected (Grund- word-list), it has been observed that there are instances in the language where different words in the two dialects are used to express the same thing /meaning, as shown below in Example 2:

(2) Longmaar dialect	Jibaam dialect	Gloss
mùn	gwom/guom	food
el	lee	clothes/load
ok	bwan	to dig
miskagham	long	chief/king
pekaa	gang	age mate
pəbit	pəməngbit	dawn
putaá	kon	to drop
re	d'el	enter
takaa	shandel	to cross
táp	kang	herd (animals)
yon	mbagani	big, large, great
kát	wule	small
dənpəzung	təptughur	reckon
kó	gabkinaar	divide
ngukəlom	yawus	blacksmith
da'am	jang mos	calabash

mato	ngum	car
təl	shak	to gather
tenyanyil	yashinsam	to press

The examples above reveal that for words in the two dialects no apparent correlation appears between related words. There is no link between the two words. In other words, the morphological or grammatical links between the two forms in the dialects are no longer apparent in forms that refer to the same thing. It is important to note that these lexical differences between the two varieties are numerous.

7.4. Phonological differences between Longmaar and Jiḃaam dialects

The phonological differences between the two dialects are minor; the only difference in the two dialects is the vowel /a/. In Longmaar dialect this vowel /a/ is realized as /e/ when it occurs in the same environment in Jiḃaam. The difference is usually at the beginning of a word, and in the medial position of a word. We wish to point out that it is in only few lexical items in the two dialects of the language that these phenomena occur. As shown below in Example 3:

Longmaar dialect	Jiḃaam dialect	Gloss
karem	karam	mat
erem	aram	guinea-corn
deng	dang	thin

Based on the examples above, the following rule can be formulated as shown below:

$$/a/ \longrightarrow /e/ \quad \#-, C-C.$$

This can be interpreted as the vowel /a/ becomes /e/ when it occurs at the beginning of a word and in-between two consonants.

In the same vein, it has been observed that in question words, the vowel /a/ is usually deleted/drop in Jiḃaam. As illustrated below in 4:

Longmaar dialect	Jiḃaam dialect	Gloss
apènàn?	pènàn?	when?
amé?	mé?	what?

awé?	wé?	who?
adənè?	dəne?	which?
ané?	né?	where?
adáng?	dáng?	how many/how much?

Based on the example, the following rule can be formulated as shown below:

$/a/ \longrightarrow \emptyset \quad \#-,$

This can be interpreted as the vowel /a/ is deleted when it occurs at the beginning of a word.

In a nutshell, two types of linguistic variations between Longmaar and Jiḃaam dialects of Miship are identified. These are lexical and phonological variations/differences. At the lexical level it was discovered that there exist differences in one or more sounds and also differences in words used to express the same thing/ meaning. At the phonological level it has been found that the vowel /a/ in Jiḃaam is realized as /e/ in Lognmaar when it occurs at the beginning and in between two consonants in some few words of the language. Similarly the same vowel /a/ in question words is deleted in Jiḃaam as shown above. Finally, from what has been analyzed, it was concluded that the differences between the two dialects of Miship i.e., Longmaar and Jiḃaam are relatively few. As such a high degree of mutual intelligibility is enjoyed between the different dialect speakers of Miship.

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