

## Red Gelao, the most endangered form of the Gelao language

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1, Introduction. Although a considerable amount of information about Gelao is now in print, there is still much to be learned about this very diverse language.<sup>1</sup> In fact, Ostapirat 2000 has proposed three divisions within Gelao: Southwestern—which includes the Gelao of Laozhai, Malipo, Yunnan and Moji, Longlin, Guangxi as well as the White Gelao of Đông Văn, Hoàng Su Phì, Quán Ba, and Mèo Vạc Districts of Hà Giang Province Vietnam and others generally calling themselves in various forms *tɛ*<sup>35</sup> *ɲlu*<sup>33</sup>, Central—which includes that spoken at Wanzi near Anshun, Guizhou, autonym *klau*<sup>55</sup> and as well as Sanchong Longlin<sup>2</sup>, Guangxi, the Green Gelao of Hoàng Su Phì, Vietnam and those calling themselves *ha*<sup>31</sup> *kei*<sup>31</sup>, and Western—Qiaoshang of Zhijing Guizhou with autonym *ye*<sup>45</sup>. The most studied variety is that found at Wanzi in Guizhou Province, China.

During a visit to Hà Giang Province, Vietnam May 25, 1997 Edmondson was able to gather data on a type unreported in China. There are only two villages in Vietnam (Na Khê and Bích Dịch of Yên Minh District) where this language is still spoken by perhaps 50 people. Often brides are sent back and forth between these two non-contiguous places in order to ensure continuation of the language and culture. These people call themselves *va*<sup>35</sup> *ntu*<sup>31</sup>. The Red Gelao people of Na Khê use Hmong as their main language of wider communication, but they also know some Guanhua Chinese and Kim Mun Yao. Our informant was 37 years old at the time our data gathering. He reported that his wife was a Red Gelao from Bích Dịch and that they regularly use Red Gelao in their family. It was gratifying to learn that children in Na Khê are still acquiring Red Gelao as their first language.

A transborder connection to the Gelao languages in China was discovered in the summer of 2003 when Li Jinfang was able to locate a speaker of Red Gelao, Mr. Yang Yucai, 62 years of age of Fanpo Village, Malipo County. This village is settled by Flowery or Hua Gelao people, who have shifted from Gelao to SW Mandarin (Guanhua). Mr. Yang learned the Red Gelao language as a child from his mother, who was from another place called Tianba, where, he says, both Red and White Gelao people still live. He reported that in Tianba and Xinzhai there reside a few Red Gelao families dressing in red clothing and that a few persons of the older generations are perhaps still capable of

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<sup>2</sup> Shen Yumei in her MA thesis has shown that Sanchong Gelao belongs to the Central and not the Southwestern Type.

speaking the language.<sup>3</sup> As for Mr. Yang himself, he might be classified as a semi-speaker, as his mother died many years ago and he has not had conversational partners since. According to Mr. Yang the autonym of the Red Gelao from his area is *u<sup>33</sup> wei<sup>55</sup>*.

In our state of knowledge about Red Gelao we are uncertain of the current numbers of Red Gelao speakers, but it is undoubtedly not very many. Vietnamese linguists were, in fact, of the opinion that the language was extinct and until this past summer it had not been reported in China at all. It appears from Li's fieldwork that there is one speaker of Red Gelao in Fanpo, Malipo and perhaps a few more in Tianba and Xinzhai, Malipo. Though not dead and not forgotten, the Red Gelao language is also not very healthy. There are a number of features suggesting *language obsolescence* or the processes of "aging" over generations as language death approaches in both the Chinese and Vietnamese forms of Red Gelao. Loss of vocabulary was clearly in evidence in the data. Our informant from Na Khê, had a very good command of lexical items in the domains: natural phenomena, body parts, plants, domestic animals and large wild animals. But he was poor on the names of insects—spider, fly, bee, cricket, etc. and in the names of cultural and household objects and tools. Chinese Red Gelao evidences a similar pattern: natural phenomena, body parts, large animals, domestic plants and crops, a few items of apparel and other cultural artifacts, and a fairly strong selection of verbs, adjectives, phrases, and simple sentences. A shrinking lexicon was perhaps a bit more in evidence Malipo than in Vietnam, as our Na Khê consultant was able to recall a greater percentage of our basic wordlist, but perhaps a visit to Tianba and Xinzhai would be informative in regard to the state of decay among those that use the language regularly still.

In the following paper we will not be presenting a full statement of the sound inventory in Red Gelao, as there has not, as yet, been time to investigate it thoroughly. Our remarks are thus confined to some preliminary comments on its features.

2. Tones. There are four tones in Red Gelao.

Table 1

<u>A1 Tone</u>	Viet	Chinese	<u>A2 Tone</u>	Viet	Chinese
Fire	pi <sup>44</sup>	a <sup>i55</sup> pi <sup>i55</sup>	Salt	naŋ <sup>44</sup>	u <sup>i55</sup> nian <sup>i55</sup>
Pig	foŋ <sup>44</sup>	m <sup>u</sup> ŋ <sup>i55</sup>	Tiger	?a <sup>44</sup> ntə <sup>44</sup>	
Dog	xaŋ <sup>44</sup>	xaŋ <sup>i55</sup> xaŋ <sup>i55</sup>	Ear	ku <sup>44</sup> lu <sup>44</sup>	qei <sup>i55</sup> le <sup>31</sup>
Alcohol	pau <sup>44</sup>	yaŋ <sup>35</sup> pu <sup>i55</sup>	Snake	ŋwi <sup>44</sup>	
Cogongrass	qu <sup>44</sup>		Duck	mpe <sup>44</sup>	
<u>B1 Tone</u>			<u>B2 Tone</u>		

<sup>3</sup> The Red Gelao people of Tianba are reported to have the family names, Yang and Luo.

Head	n <sup>te</sup> <sup>35</sup> x <sup>w</sup> <sup>31</sup>	te <sup>i</sup> <sup>35</sup> x <sup>w</sup> <sup>322</sup>	Clothing	wa <sup>31</sup>	wa <sup>31</sup>
Dry	ku <sup>w</sup> <sup>31</sup>	ku <sup>w</sup> <sup>31</sup>	Wash	ja <sup>31</sup>	ja <sup>31</sup>
Shoe	ʔu <sup>44</sup> ɕi <sup>31</sup>	u <sup>55</sup> tɕi <sup>31</sup>	Spicy	va <sup>31</sup>	gua <sup>31</sup>
Old	kau <sup>31</sup>		Sleep, to	ŋoŋ <sup>31</sup>	ŋuŋ <sup>31</sup>

C1 Tone

Meat	ʔo <sup>13</sup>	u <sup>35</sup>
Intestine	ɕi <sup>13</sup>	
Water	ʔaŋ <sup>13</sup>	aŋ <sup>35</sup>
Lightweight	ku <sup>w</sup> <sup>13</sup>	
Sour	plau <sup>13</sup>	

C2 Tone

Eagle	lwa <sup>35</sup>	
Female	ma <sup>35</sup>	
Feces	qa <sup>35</sup>	qa <sup>35</sup>
Breast	li <sup>44</sup> tsu <sup>35</sup>	li <sup>55</sup> tsu <sup>35</sup>
Urine	sa <sup>35</sup>	sa <sup>35</sup>

D1 Tone

Flea	m̥a <sup>31?</sup>	
Blood	pai <sup>31?</sup>	pai <sup>31</sup>
Nose	qa <sup>35</sup> n̥ua <sup>31?</sup>	qa <sup>35</sup> n̥ua <sup>31</sup>
Ten	kwe <sup>31?</sup>	

D2 Tone

Bone	ma <sup>35</sup> ntua <sup>31?</sup>	ma <sup>35</sup> dua <sup>31</sup>
Needle	li <sup>31?</sup>	
Raw	n <sup>te</sup> <sup>31?</sup>	

The tonal system of Red Gelao shows no split in vocabulary descended from the proto A, B, and D tones and has such a split between the high and low set only in the proto-tone category C, but there is quite a lot of tone change in context especially when lexical items in the C category occur in a compound when they often change from 13 to 35 tone values. Red Gelao retains the Gelao development that original B tone vocabulary has a pitch shape identical to that found in D tone vocabulary, cf. Ostapirat (2000:80).

In another characteristic of family resemblance to Kam-Tai, Red Gelao also demonstrates residues of the glottal constriction found in C tones. This feature is found widely in Central and SW Tai Stocks such as Tày of Cao Bằng Province, Vietnam and many forms of Southern Zhuang. In Table 1 we have underlined the second element in the tonal representation of C tone vocabulary to call attention to this glottal constriction, but we dispense with this detail in transcription other places in the text. One effect of this constriction is to give the auditory impression that a second syllable in a compound might begin with a glottal stop. There also no preservation in Red Gelao today of vowel length in the D tone category as there is in Kam-Sui and Tai, except as the original CVVC develops along differing lines than the CVC syllables. There is often a glottal stop or glottal catch in many words of the original D tone category, which once possessed CVC or CVVC syllable shapes. We have found a very few words of the D2 category that showed 13 tone values, e.g. *qai13?* ‘taro’ from \*p-ɣak<sup>D</sup> as well as *plau13?* ‘sour’ from \*bwlat<sup>D</sup>. Perhaps these have moved into the C tone category under influence of the final glottal constriction, which might have been equated with the glottal stop that is assumed to have been present in original D tone vocabulary before they weakened or disappeared.

3. Initials. Red Gelao initials show many of the same tendencies of other kinds of Gelao. Notable among these is the development of *prenasalization* in original voiceless and voiced stop initials. The usual result is a nasal plus voiceless stop sequence, especially if the word form has two syllables, as the nasal tends to sequence onto a preceding syllable as in the word for ‘bone’ *ma13 ntua31?*, cf. Figure 1 below.

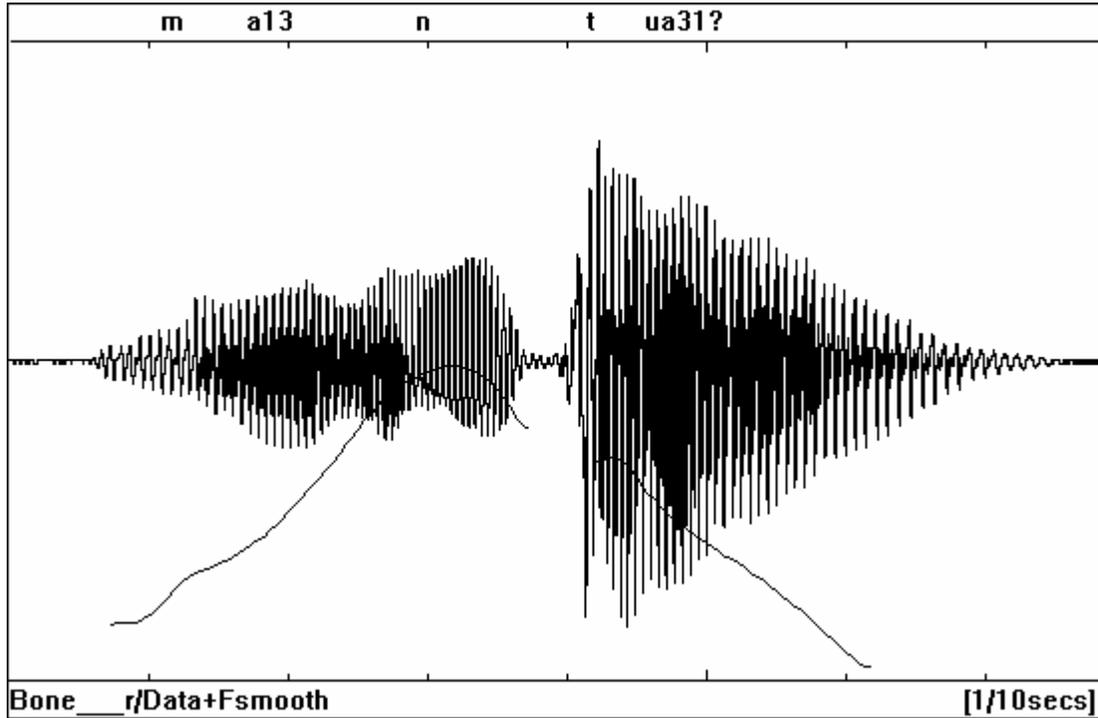


Figure 1: Waveform and pitch plot of *ma13 ntua31?* ‘bone’ showing the prenasalization of a voiceless t. Note the interrupted pitch track

Prenasalization is a feature of stops and affricates in the Gelao languages generally; the glottal stop does not have this feature. Original voiced stops often become prenasal plus voiced stop. Many original voiceless stops demonstrate a parallel development becoming nasal plus voiceless stop, as is seen in Figure 1. We also found examples of vocabulary with original voiced stop that have become prenasal plus voiceless stop. For example, the second syllable of *ma13 ntua31?* ‘bone’ is derived from the reconstructed Proto-Kra form *\*dək<sup>D</sup>*, cf. Ostapirat (2000:220) and also seen in the most archaic language of the group, Laha, *dak<sup>D</sup>* (in Noong Lay)/*thak<sup>D</sup>* (in Ta Mit). The devoicing of original voiced stops or affricates has not led as yet to the splitting of tones except in the C category, though this split is also a bit dubious.

Initial consonants are:

p ph b m m̥ f w\ʋ t th d n ŋ ɲ ɳ l ʔl ʔ s ʃ ɕ

Red Gelao is relatively faithful in preserving original *voiceless nasals and laterals*. Thus there are the examples: *ma13 ma31* ‘flea’, *qa35 ŋua31* ‘nose’, *ɽu31 tən35* ‘heart’. The development of voiceless nasals from the parent language into Red Gelao has taken some distinctive turns when velars are involved. Specifically, Red Gelao has innovatively evolved a rule of *velar nasal transportation*, a change that moves a velar nasal in an initial consonant cluster with h- or x- to word final or coda position or perhaps a more precise statement would be that the opening of the velic has been delayed to the word final position. Consider the examples below (Reconstructions from Ostapirat 2000):

- \*x-muA ‘pig’ -> foŋ44 or moŋ55
- \*hmokD ‘belly’ -> fou31ʔ
- \*x-maA ‘dog’ -> xaŋ44
- \*kraiB ‘head’ -> xu31
- \*kronA ‘road’ -> xi44
- \*hŋwuB ‘ripe’ -> xoŋ31
- \* hŋa(w)A ‘wait’ -> xiŋ44

It is notable that the \*kr- cluster appears to engender the same kind of velar or glottal friction found in \*x- or \*h-, suggesting another instance of family resemblance, as Li Fang Kuei 1977 pointed out the tendency of proto-Tai \*r to cause aspiration. The voiceless nasals in Sui can be variably jiggered out across the vowel and leave an h-initial in their place, e.g. *maA1* or *hã A1* ‘dog’.

4. Rhymes. There are several innovations in Red Gelao. The rhyme in Red Gelao is often broken into –ua when preceded by /t d n l/ in many cases. Examples are:

- tua44 ‘three’
- tua31 tua31 ‘liver’
- ntua13 ‘neck/throat’
- ntua44 ‘waist’
- lua35 ‘eagle, hawk’
- tɕhu31 ma13 tua44 ‘sunlight’
- ŋua31 ‘nose’

In regard to the development of rhymes \*-a generally become /-u/ as in *te44* ‘eye’, *lu44* ‘ear’, *ma44* ‘hand’, *ŋui44* ‘snake’, *qu44* ‘cogon’, *ku31* ‘dry’ *ku35* ‘light weight’.

5. Lexicon. There are a number of lexical items that appear to be found only in Red Gelao. These include: *ma13 sa35 kue55* ‘rat’ and *ma13 la31 yai31* ‘bird’,

There are also several loan words from Chinese: *hwaŋ44 kua44* ‘melon, cucumber’, *ha44 tɕau44* ‘chili pepper’, and *tʂə31 pei35* ‘wing’.

6. Affiliation. In this preliminary paper we have pointed out the precarious situation of the Red Gelao language, noting that its numbers are quite small. It is indeed a piece of good fortune that we have been able to gather data on this smallest member of the Gelao complex while there are still some fluent speakers, though admittedly we possess at present only a couple of limited word lists. This finding is all the more significant we feel as the Red Gelao language departs from the others in important ways. It shares the feature of prenasalization of voiceless/voiced stop initials but, at the same time. It is more conservative than SW Gelao in preserving final nasals (there are examples of both *-ŋ* and *-n*), while eliminating most initial clusters, e.g. *pl-* in favor of *p-*, cf. *pu35* ‘boil, ulcer’. Moreover, we noted that it has innovated a rule of nasal transportation and of vowel breaking from original *\*-a* not found in SW Gelao types. It does not follow Central Gelao types in having reflexes of the original *\*-ak* become *-aŋ* in some other non-D tone category, as has happened in Sanchong and Wanzi types. Thus, Red Gelao has: *ma13 ntua31?* ‘bone’ from *\*dəkD* and *qai13?* ‘taro’ from *\*p-ɣəkD* (cf. Ostapirat 2000).

Clearly Red Gelao is close to SW Gelao but seems to differ from it at the same time. Thus we will have leave open the question whether Red Gelao constitutes a separate branch of the parent proto-Gelao language. It seems to us that likely instead that it is a distant sister to SW types such as White Gelao.

We know very little about the Red Gelao language other than it is in jeopardy of becoming extinct. In other places there are also reports of Red Gelao in Guizhou Zunyi, Bigong and Maocaozhai Village, Zhenning County, and some places in Puding County, all in Guizhou Province, China. One needs to investigate Gelao language spoken at these places.

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