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A Note on the Language Name “Kewa”

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Introduction

Many (perhaps, most) of the names that linguists use to label a particular Highland language were not the common names by which the native people called their language, or themselves. Rather, clan names or, in some cases, village or dance grounds were the shared names that people used. In this note I examine the historical origin and current usage of the language name *Kewa*, as well as associated lexemes that help to further identify it as an individual “language.”¹

Kewa in Engan (and other) Languages

Kewa or *Kewapi*² is the name that a group of people in the Southern Highlands of Papua New Guinea now use to refer to themselves. It is part of a larger family of languages known as the Engan (called the West-Central Family by Wurm, 1975). As one of the largest groups in Papua New Guinea (PNG), it is comprised of the following modern day languages: *Enga*, *Huli*, *Ipili*, *Kyaka*, *Bisorio*, *Lembena*, *Mendi*, *Kewa*, *Sau* and perhaps others as well (Franklin 1975, 1997). Foley (1986:238) lists eight languages in the Family with 329,200 speakers, so today that number would probably be closer to 500,000.³

Several of these languages use *kewa* or some derivation of the lexeme to mean “stranger” or “foreigner.” For example, in *Kyaka*, the Drapers (2002:170) list several glosses: “foreign, alien, introduced, unfamiliar, unknown,” but also “white, whitish,” perhaps referring to the first

¹ The matter of defining a language involves multiple considerations. For commentary on the procedures used by SIL International to catalogue languages of the world see: www.sil.org and their comments on language vitality, dialects, sociolinguistics and other factors.

² Apoi Yaraepa (2013:1) calls the area that I refer to as *East kewa* by the name *Kewapi*. He includes my dialect study map of 1968 to define the dialects (2013:xiv).

³ Language population numbers are difficult to determine with accuracy, especially when it comes to dialects. In 2002, Wopa Eka and I examined the government 2000 census figures for the villages that we presumed to include all Kewa dialects. However, often the population names were collected at sites that combined villages and clans that were not always the same dialect. We concluded that there were about 45,000 in the East and West dialects and 10,000 in the South Kewa. Yaraepa (2013:1) gives much higher figures, and claims that there are 200,000 speakers, which does not seem to include figures from the area south of Mendi.

prospectors or government men that entered the area. In Enga proper (Lang 1973:40), *kewa* is glossed as “white, foreigner,” or even “native,” although Lang questions the latter meaning.

To the west of the Engan Family, but still partly within the Enga province is the *hewa* language. According to *Ethnologue* (<https://www.ethnologue.com/>), it is found in the “Lagaip district; Sandaun province: Telefomin district; Hela province: Koroba district; Lagaip river area, mountains north of Duna [duc] and Ipili [ipi] language areas⁴; south of Lagaip river northward to Central range high peaks (boundary between Sepik region and the highlands).” It seems likely that the lexemes *hewa* and *kewa* are cognates and depict some semantic characteristic of “stranger.”

Wiru is an isolated member within the Engan Family, but has features that show it is related to *Kewa*, although it also has features that are also in common with *Huli* and *Ipili*. However, there seems to be no lexeme in *Wiru* similar to the *kewa* for ‘stranger’ or ‘foreigner.’ On the other hand, when we skip over the *Wiru* language and go much further east, the word reappears in *Dadibi*.

Dadibi is in the Simbu Province and has been studied in depth by an SIL team, George and Georgetta MacDonald, and an anthropologist, Leroy Wagner. I quote MacDonald (1973:116), who notes that “The name *Kewah* (Franklin 1968:25) or *Kewá* (Wagner 1967:6) is used by the *Daribi* people to refer to the people living to their south...and to the west and northwest.” MacDonald investigated the use of the word elsewhere and also found that the people of Lake Tebera (in the *Daribi* language area) referred to themselves by the same name (MacDonald 1973: 117).

When I first visited the general area in 1958, the official name given for the language around the Ialibu government station was *Kewabi* or *Kewabe*. The name was used by Wurm in his earlier publications on the Highland languages, although later he refers to the language ten times in his book (Wurm 1982), as simply “*Kewa*.”

⁴ [duc] and [ipi] are examples of the three letter code system used in the *Ethnologue* to uniquely identify languages. See <https://www.ethnologue.com/codes> for an explanation of the system.

Kewa Dialects

The phrase for ‘east’ in West Kewa is ‘where the sun arises’ and ‘west’ is ‘where the sun goes inside’. ‘North’ and ‘south’ were in reference to clan areas that were either, for example, lalibu ‘up there’ (north) or Erave ‘down there’ (south). Although lalibu and Erave now refer to ‘towns’ consisting of government, mission and business establishments, historically (in the pre-colonial era), they were simply general valley areas. Everything is ‘named’ in Kewa areas by the clans that live there or once lived there: garden and ‘bush’ areas, rivers and streams, mountains and hills, ponds and lakes.

When I did an extensive dialect survey of the Kewa and adjacent areas (Franklin 1968), people would often describe three different dialect areas by contrasting the phrases that mean “what is it?”: *ali-ya* (EK), *ae-ya* (generally WK), *ake-ya* (some areas of SK). In other words, Kewa speakers were aware of certain dialect differences and could mimic their neighbors—to some extent.

In my dialect study, isoglosses that demonstrated phonological, grammatical, lexical and cultural features determined the areas East, West, South, Northwest, and Southeast, which I used as appropriate designations for the dialects and sub-dialects. These have largely been accepted and recognized, except for the name *Pole*, which people use to refer to the Erave area, particularly the town. *Pole yaina* is a common name for ‘malaria’ among the West Kewa (for example, see *Pole-yanya* in kewa.webonary.com).

As I have mentioned, Apoi Yaraepa (2004, 2013), who is a native speaker of the language, refers to the general language name as *Kewa* and the East dialect of it as *Kewapi*. The suffix *-pi* therefore bears additional comment.

Pi(i) in Engan

The word *pi* in *East Kewa* and other Engan areas means “talk.” For example, for *Kyaka*, the Drapers (2002:320-323) gloss *pii* with a number of meanings, including “speech, language, harangue, information, message, sound,” and “voice.” Phrases listed by Drapers include those

referring to “a compliment, swearing, protesting, debating, mocking,” and so on, all as categories of speech.

Lang (1983:85) also glosses *pií* as “talk/speech, language, word” in *Enga* proper, with its use in phrases to mean “swear, secret, abuse, truth, appeal, pledge,” and so on.

The *pií* form for language is found mainly in the languages adjacent to Enga proper, such as in *Ipili*, *Lembena* and *Huli*. This contrasts with the form *agale*, found elsewhere in the language family.

Aga(le) in Engan (and Wiru)

In *Kewa* the generic word for ‘talk’ also may refer to a language, as in *adaa agale* “the big talk,” that is, the “real” language that is used by the people. This is generally how *Kewa* people refer to their own “language”; in *West Kewa*, the form is *agaa*, where the final vowel is lengthened due to the loss of *-le*. This is a regular and common feature between the three dialects (WK = *agaa*; EK = *agale*; SK = *angale*).

The *agale* form does not occur in *Kyaka*, where the equivalent is *píi* (*lenge*) “to say talk,” nor in *Enga* proper, where it is simply *pií*. It turns out that *píi* is found mainly in the languages adjacent to Enga proper, such as *Lembena*, *Ipili* and *Huli*, but *agale* is used in *Kewa*, *Mendi*, and *Wiru*, although not to the extreme south where *Sau* uses *pi*.⁵

Wiru also uses the form *agale* to mean “language/talk”: Kerr, in his website *Witumo Wituda*, p.3, *Wiru* to English database provides 21 examples of its use.

Summary

We have shown that the word *kewa* (or *Kewapi*) is widely used in the Enga, Southern Highlands and other Provinces to refer to some sort of stranger. For example, historically, when the

⁵ This helps to confirm my analysis (1968:68) of an early movement from the Engan homeland to the Samberigi area. The titles given to some New Testaments often show the **agale** vs **pi(i)** difference: *Gotena epe agaa* (West Kewa); *Gotena epele agale* (East Kewa); *Gotena epe angale* (South Kewa); *Ngaoron Angal Bib Hobao Sao* (West Mendi). **Pi (i)** is often written as **bi** as well: Compare *Panake Pi La: Ula: Buka* (Samberigi/Sau); Habo Nanolene **Bi** Gahenege Lo winigi ogo (Huli); and *Gote Bi* (Bisorio).

government officers at the station at lalibu (the station to the north of the Kewa area) asked people for the name of the language to the south, the respondents gave the names *kewa* and *kewapi* to refer to those who were “strangers” and lived further south of themselves. The word occurs consistently with that range of meaning.

The word for “talk” or “language” in *kewa* is *agale* (with dialect variants) and occurs as a designation for the “talk” or “language” that the Kewa language group uses. On the other hand, in Enga proper, as well as in other areas, such as Sanberigi, well to the south in the Gulf Province, *kewa* occurs with *pi(i)* as the title for the language name.

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