

Do you, like Every Child Ministries, believe in ministering in the heart languages of the African people?

# Tell Me About an African Language

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## Africa--land of many languages

There are many thousands of languages in Africa, and they belong to several "families" or language groups. I once saw a map of [DR Congo \(formerly Zaire\)](#), where we used to live and minister. It showed 365 languages--one for every day of the year!

## The Kituba Language

The language we learned when we lived in [DR Congo](#) was called Kituba or Kikongo ya Leta (State Kikongo). Although it was commonly known as Kikongo in most of the middle and southern part of the Bandundu Province, it is to be distinguished from Kikongo ya Fioti (Little Kikongo) which is spoken in the Bas-Congo Province. Kituba is an interesting language because it started out as an adaptation of Kikongo for trade purposes--something known as a trade language--and it grew to become the first language of many people.

## Forming Plurals

Kituba is different from English in many ways. While we often form plurals in English by adding s or es to the end of a word, in Kituba "ba" is often added to the beginning of a word. "Nzo", for instance, means one house, while "banzo" means more than one house. Words that begin with "mu" in the singular change to "mi" in the plura. "Mundele," for instance, is a white person, while "mindele" is white people.

## Every sentence has a verb? Not necessarily in Kituba!

Kituba has verbs, but it is not always strictly necessary for a sentence to have a verb, especially in informal talk. "Yo yai," (literally, "It this") in informal Kituba means "Here it s." "Mono yandi yai" (literally, "I him this") means "Here I am."



## Some verb forms

Kituba forms the simple past of verbs by adding "aka" as a suffix. So "kwenda" ("go") becomes kwendaka, ("went"). It uses simple auxiliary verbs too--"me" (short for "imene"--"completed") for present perfect, "ke" (short for "kele"--"is") for present continuous, and "ta" (short for "ata"--"will") for future. In addition, you can show action toward or on behalf of someone by dropping the final a of a verb and adding "ila" to the end of the verb and reciprocal or mutual action by adding "isa." So if you read TO someone, you "tangila" and you love someone and they love you back, the two of you "zolana." You can recognize most verbs because they end in a.

## **Common letters**

Don't try to play scrabble in Kituba unless you add a whole lot extra u's, k's, and a's. Some Kituba words have a lot of them--lubutuku is birth, lusakumunu is blessing.

## **How do those sounds go together?**

Kituba seems hard for English speakers to read at first because it often uses combinations of consonants that are unfamiliar to us--mb, ng, ns, etc., especially at the beginnings of words. You will come pretty close if you begin with your lips in position to say the first syllable, but instead, say the second. "Mbote" is one of the most common words because it's used as an all-purpose greeting, in addition to meaning "good" or "well." In reality the m is hummed lightly in the throat before saying the b, but to many English speakers it sound more like "**Bo**-tay."

## **Kituba is easier than English--Here's why!**

In reality Kituba is easy to read because its sound system is absolutely consistent and while words are long, syllables are short. Take lubutuku, for instance. It's lu-bu-tu-ku (loo-boo-too-koo). Pretty simple. It just looks long.

## **The more challenging part of Kituba**

The harder part is the sentence structure. It's not at all like English, and you just have to listen to how Kituba-speaking people say things and follow the structure they use.

I remember that as the biggest turning point I had in learning the Kituba language. I had learned many words and many points of grammar as described above. Then at a certain point I was able to begin putting it together like my African friends did. At that point I was able to be understood much more readily and found speaking and writing much less tedious because I no longer had to translate from English in my mind. I even began thinking and dreaming in Kituba.

## **Bloopers we did**

Some funny "bloopers" happened to us along the way. When we wanted window screen, we had to order it by radio and have it sent in rolls up the river. I knew everyone in the area called window screen "muyungulu." So I ordered muyungulu. Were we surprised when the muyungulu arrived--three big rolls of link fencing! On investigation we learned that muyungulu means a mesh with little spaces between the holes. If you want window screen, you have to specify that you want muyungulu to keep out the mosquitoes.

## **Advantages of speaking the local language**

Speaking the language of the people was great. I remember that after we adopted our African daughter Kristi, we were travelling in an area away from our home, and there were some women waiting with us to go across a river on a ferry. They were arguing about whether or not white people could have a black baby, and they obviously were not aware that we could understand every word they said!

Another time I was getting arrested because I forgot to carry my passport with me, which is expected in Congo. The police were very angry and I was in big trouble. I heard one of them speaking Kituba (it was a Lingala-speaking area), so I spoke to him in Kituba. Instantly they got so engaged in conversation that they forgot they were arresting me. I went from being a criminal to being their sister. They even began calling other people over to "come see this white lady who speaks our language." We enjoyed a good chat and parted as friends, the passport issue forgotten.

## **Let me finish by giving you an important message in the Kituba language:**

Sambu Nzambi me lutaka kuzola bantu yonso, yo yina Yandi pesaka bo Mwana mosi yina kele na Yandi, sambu konso muntu yina kwikila na Yandi, yandi kufwa ve, kansi yandi kuvanda na moyo ya mvula na mvula.

**For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish but have everlasting life.**

**(Words spoken by Jesus Christ and recorded in the Holy Bible in John chapter 3 verse 16).**