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The phonological systems of the Mbam languages of Cameroon with a focus on vowels and vowel harmony

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Introduction

The languages of Mbam have a unique position in Bantu linguistics. Bastin and Piron (1999: 155), for example, consider these languages as the joint between “narrow” Bantu and “wide” Bantu, sometimes patterning with the one and sometimes with the other, while Grollemund (2012: 404) goes so far as to claim that it is “... le centre de diffusion proto-bantu, à partir duquel auraient débuté les migrations bantu...” As such, they are a rich motherlode for linguistic research to better understand both the Bantu A and Southern Bantoid languages and their relationship to each other.

The Mbam languages have another point of interest as well. They have been considered as standard 7-vowel languages (/i, e, ε, a, ɔ, o, u/) with Advanced Tongue Root (ATR) harmony. Several of the languages in this study, Nen (Stewart & van Leynseele 1979, Mous 1986, 2003), Maande (Taylor 1990), Gunu (Robinson 1984, Hyman 2001) and Yangben (Hyman 2003a), have been previously analysed as having ATR harmony and 7-vowel vowel inventories. Vowel harmony² has been described as “a requirement that vowels in some domain, typically the word, must share the same value of some vowel feature, termed the “harmonic feature” (Casali 2008: 497), in the case of the Mbam languages, an important “harmonic feature” is ATR.

Vowel harmony in African languages is a topic that has received a lot of notice and study, and the vowel harmony of not a few of the Mbam languages has also been studied. Most of these previous studies, however, have been on languages in isolation. This study seeks to compare and analyse the Mbam languages as a group;³ by comparing their vowel inventories and their vowel-harmony systems, and to discuss how they fit into the wider picture of vowel harmony in African languages and what they may reveal about language typology.

Many African languages which have some sort of ATR harmony have either 7-vowel, 7/9-vowel or 9-vowel systems. The Mbam languages discussed in this study do not fully follow these models. While three of the Mbam languages do have 9-vowel systems, the others do not. One has ten surface vowels of which nine are contrastive. Another has nine surface vowels of which eight are contrastive and four

² Vowel harmony is a term used in Bantu linguistics to refer to a specific vowel assimilation process which is limited to verbal derivational suffixes. This is discussed in detail below. The kind of vowel harmony as is found in the Mbam languages is not so common in Bantu.

³ Five of the varieties in this study (Gunu, Elip, Mmala, Yangben and Baca) have in various previous works been considered as dialects due to a relatively high lexicostatistic similarity.

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others have 8-vowel systems. The tenth language has eight surface vowels of which seven are contrastive.

1.1 The Mbam languages in this study

The Mbam languages in this study are spoken in the District of the Mbam-et-Inoubou, in Cameroon's Centre region. They are located between the more straightforward Bantu A languages to the south and the Grassfields Bantu languages to the north and west.

The languages in the District of the Mbam-et-Inoubou divide into two distinct groups: The Bafia group (Guthrie code A50) and the Nen-Yambassa group (Guthrie code A40-A60). While both groups of Mbam languages are related, the main distinction is that the latter group has robust vowel harmony which the former does not have. For this reason, the Bafia group A50 languages are not included in this study. Furthermore, the Basaa⁴ group A40 languages, generally found south of the Mbam are also not included. These languages are generally considered distinct from the Nen-Yambassa A40-A60 group.

While the A40-A60 languages have different Guthrie codes, they form a genetic unit both lexicostatistically and structurally. All but four of the Mbam languages found in this group are discussed in this study, although generally only the reference dialect is included. In some cases, where there are relevant known dialectal differences, that information has also been included. The four languages not included in this study are *Tuɔtɔmb* (A46) of the village of Bonek) and *Nyokon* A45, both closely related to Nen, *Hijuk* and *Bati* (A65) located in the Ndom subdivision of the Sanaga-Maritime Division of the Littoral Region of Cameroon.

Nyokon was classified by Guthrie as A45 (Guthrie 1971: 32) and by ALCAM as [514] and in the on-line Ethnologue as (nvo). While previous editions of the Ethnologue placed Nyokon as a dialect of Nen, all of the research done in the language from Guthrie and Tucker (1956: 29) to Mous (2003) show rather that they are distinct languages. The differences between Nen and Nyokon are important. The lexicostatistic similarity is very low, around 36% (Lovestrand 2011: 4 and Mous & Breedveld 1986) and Nyokon shows little evidence of ATR vowel harmony, unlike Nen (Lovestrand 2011: 34). It is, however, a Mbam language and one classified in the same group as the languages in this study.

Tuɔtɔmb (A46), ALCAM [513] is spoken in only one village, Bonek, located on the highway between the Yambeta and Nen language groups. It has an estimated 800 speakers. Phillips (1979) and Mous and Breedveld (1986: 177-241) include Swadesh-based wordlists and indicate that lexicostatistically, it is closest to Nen, but that it has -VC noun-class suffixes in addition to the CV- noun-class prefixes,

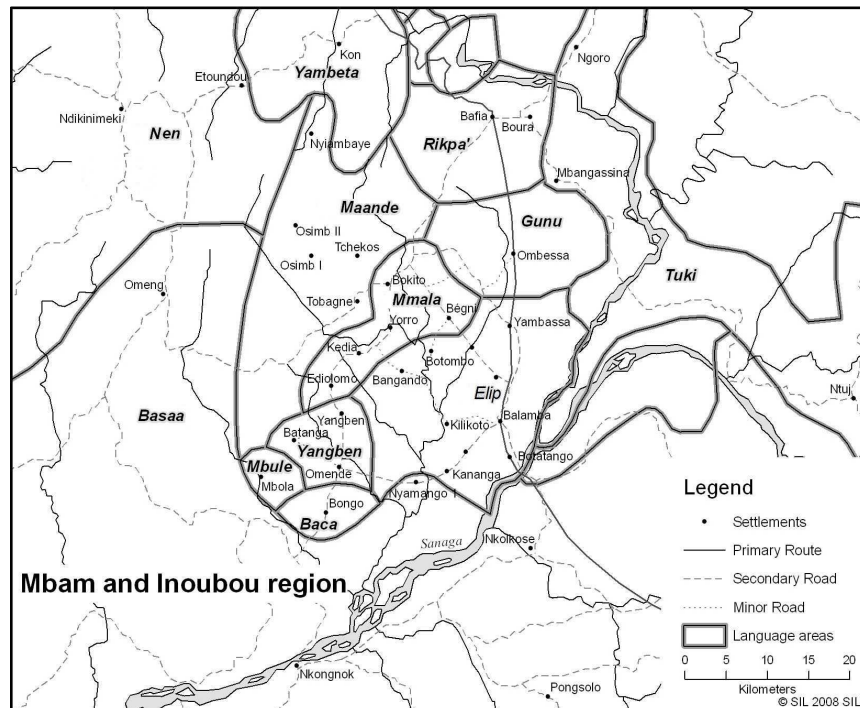
⁴ Basaa is briefly discussed in Chapter 5.

although the data from the Phillips (1979) and Mous and Breedveld (1986) wordlists indicate that there is variation in the Tuotomb noun-class prefixes and suffixes. It is not included due to a lack of opportunity to collect data for it.

Hijuk ALCAM [560] is spoken only in Nike and Meke the southernmost quarters of Batanga, a Yangben village, just north of Mbola village where Mbure is spoken. While ALCAM considers it more closely related to Bafia than the A40-A60 languages surrounding it, Boone (1992c: 2, 4) considers it to be closer lexicostatistically to Basaa with an 87% similarity. Due to this similarity to Basaa, Hijuk was not included in this study.

Bati (A65), ALCAM [530] is located just south of the Mbam. It is considered to be closely related to the other A60 languages, Baca, Mbure, Yangben, Mmala, Elip and Gunu. While vowel harmony has been reported, little study⁵ has been done to verify it. Bati, like Tuotomb, was not included due to lack of time and inaccessibility. The ten languages discussed in this study are located on Map 1, below.

Map 1: The location of the Mbam languages in this study



⁵ Emmanuel Ngue Um has data on Bati.

1.2 The sociolinguistics of the Mbam

The District of the Mbam-et-Inoubou is linguistically very complex. The multiplicity of languages as well as their relatively small size and close proximity leads to a high degree of multilingualism among the populations. Generally speaking, there is a very high level of bilingualism not only in French, but also in the neighbouring languages. Most people, men and women alike, can speak or at least understand one other Mbam language, and more commonly several. Due to the high level of multilingualism, most people can speak to someone from a neighbouring language in their own language and understand the other's language in return.

The Mbam peoples recognise an ethnic interrelationship and history. Although they are quick to identify their own tribe, there is a close interrelation between the tribes. This is perceived in the oral stories of their origins or migrations to the region.

1.3 Oral histories of the origins of the Mbam peoples

While oral histories are too varied to form any solid conclusions, in combination with other information, they can shed light on the history and the interrelatedness of the peoples of the Mbam.

The name “Yambassa” comes from a phrase “bunya Ambassa” *the descendents of Ambassa*. It is said that the Yangben, Baca, Mmala, Elip and Gunu peoples are all the descendents of a certain Ambassa who was, according to some, the wife of Ombono and according to others, a son of Ombono. Although the stories vary according to the people group, there are some definite points of similarity. Many of the Mbam people groups self-identify as children of Ombono and name one of his sons as their ancestor.

In most of the origin stories, Ombono or one of his descendents sets out on a hunt and gets lost. He then establishes himself in a new place (sometimes where there is a lot of game) and founds a village. For this reason, most of the villages in the area are so named after the ancestor who established the village.

Maande: The unpublished Maande text, “La Création de la Famille de Ombónó” (Ebaya Silas et al. 1981), tells the story of Ombono, a hunter who sets out with his dog. He finds himself in the Osimbe savannah. Being tired (and it seems unsuccessful in his hunt), he sits under a prune tree (*buhétú*) and rests. When he awakes, he collects the fallen fruits and takes them home to his wife, Ekiíki. She soaks the fruits and prepares them for their supper. The next time, Ombono's wife comes with him on his hunt. When they arrive at the prune tree, they decide to build their house there. Ekiíki is from the Banen people and since Ombono had not paid a bride price for her, their first son, whom they named Benenyi, was sent to his maternal uncles among the Banen in lieu of the bride price. The rest of the text lists the children of Ombono and their descendents.

Figure 1: The descendents of Ɔmbónɔ

1-	Ɔmbónɔ				
+	Ekiiki ⁶				
2-	Benenyi ⁷				
2-	Omaŋa				
3-	Enóka				
4-	Makanà				
5-	Nduku-Búéke				
5-	Nduku-Likúŋé				
5-	Nduku-Hókó				
5-	Nduku-Bisuje				
4-	Aláama				
3-	Iŋúlúku				
4-	Nyɛnɔ́kɔ				
4-	Mayabó				
2-	Kóono (Yambeta)				
3-	Ɔtɔbɔ				
3-	Kóono-Kindúné				
3-	Bɔnyana-Ɔaŋa				
2-	Ɔmaándé (Maande)				
3-	Osimbe ⁸				
3-	Nyambya				
3-	Anyangema				
3-	Tɔbaánye				
3-	Béyéke				
3-	Nyɛkáma				
3-	Icekú				
3-	Ɔmeŋa				
2-	Ekiiki (Bafia)				
3-	Bɛtaŋɔ ⁹				
3-	Mukɔ				
2-	Omendé (Yangben)				
3-	Balamba (Elip)				
3-	Kefíke (Gunú)				
3-	Bákóá (Gunú)				
2-	Kalɔŋa (Yangben)				
3-	Ketéa (Mmala)				
3-	Yɔ́órɔ́ (Mmala)				
3-	Bényi (Mmala)				

⁶ A daughter of the Banen.⁷ The first son is returned to the Banen since no bride price had been given for the mother.⁸ This and the following are the names of the Maande villages.⁹ Two villages on the Bafia-Bokito road towards the village of Kiiki.

Elip: There are three dialects of Elip. According to Abiadina (1988: 7), Ombona was a son of Belibe. His sons were Omenda, Yegele, Kiki, Bunya, Gianabina, Nimandia and Ntsiɛ.

Yegele had seven sons: Ambassa, Giligodua, Gananya, Bualunda, Bodomba, Osula and Bunyandua.

According to Esseba Ombessa Lambert, Mbónó, the son of Dugalagala, had three sons, Elibie, Nimaandia and Nsiɛ. Elibie's son Ambassa's son, Olamba is the ancestor of the Elip and Gunu people Nimaandia's son Ɔɲulug is the ancestor of the Maande and Nsiɛ's son Bekɔlɔ is the ancestor of the Sanaga (Tuki).

The villages of the *Mana-Kanya* dialect of Elip consider themselves the descendents of Olouo. Olouo had two natural sons, Botombo, Kananga and an adopted son, Killikoto, who was found by the others when out on a hunt. Olouo also had an albino daughter whose son Bongando gave his name to the fourth Mana-Kanya village (Belinga 2013: 2).

The people of Balamba according to (Abiadina 1988: 9) are unrelated to the other Belip, being the children of Bayaga of unknown origins.

Yangben: Ombono's children were Koon, (ancestor of the Gunu), Kiiki (ancestor of the Maande), Muko, Bitang, Bongo, Omende, Kiyangaben (Kalɔŋ).¹⁰

The descendents of Kalɔŋ give their names to the major clans found today. They are divided into two larger groups the “Pɛmuɛnɛ” which include the clans of Pondalɔ, Pɔyɔŋ, Kapɔlɛ, Ponomanɛ, Epukie and Apɔyɛ and their descendents. The “Pɔnyɔkiɔti” include the clans of Kanyɛ, Pɔkɛlɛk, Mfuno, Ipayɛ, Ipeye and Kuakɛ and their descendents.

Baca: Bongo, the son of Ambono (Ombono) and brother of Balamba. The other sons of Ambono are Yangben, Omende and Kiiki. According to his Excellency Ntsomo Npong Pierre, the chief of the village of Bongo, after an unsuccessful hunt, Bongo found himself lost in the savannah of *Buyok*. He finally settles in the area at the place called *Nday mpile* (the big oil palm)¹¹ and founded the village of Bongo.

The Baca also acknowledge a relationship with the Bati in the Sanaga-Maritime, who, according to his Excellency Ntsomo Npong Pierre, acted as a buffer between the Baca and the Basaa further south.

¹⁰ p.c. Kibassa Otoke (2013)

¹¹ cf. Sebineni, Alphonsine Flore (2008) also.

Gunu: Ombono was the only daughter of Kamba, the son of Nnyole. Kamba and his wife Molela are considered by the Gunu as the ancestor of five tribes which “crossed the river”, the Gunu, Maande, Elip, Bafia (Rikpa) and the Sanaga. According to Boyomo Mouko Michel (narrative elicited by Sintsimé Crépin, p.c. Nov. 2013), Kamba was a slave of a great warrior who was chief of the tribe. He got into trouble when he fell in love with the beautiful wife of this warrior. Condemned to death, Kamba and his wife fled to the land of the Banen on the other side of the Sanaga, which was at that time sparsely populated.

Figure 2: Descendents of Kamba (Boyomo Mouko Michel. 2013, p.c.)

- 1- Kamba and his wife,
- + Molela
- 2- Ombono (their only daughter) who gave birth to
 - 3- Gunu
 - 3- Lemande (ancestor of the Maande)
 - 3- Iguigui (ancestor of the Bafia)
 - 3- Saasa (ancestor of the Sanaga (Tuki))
 - 3- Zong (ancestor of the Elip)

Mmala: The Mmala, like many of the other Mbam people groups, consider themselves as the children of Ombono. While information concerning the origins of the tribe was not found, the stories of the foundation of certain of the principal towns were. According to Oyolo Jonas of Bokito, the first inhabitant of Bokito was a certain Ibondo, who came from the Maande mountains. A certain Amaboda, who was a native of the village of Baliama and a nephew of Bakoa (Gunu) and who was a criminal chased from his village, found refuge at Bokito. Amaboda and Ibondo became allies, along with Guilo of the village of Yorro, to defeat the Bakoa. Thus the village of Bokito is home to three peoples, the Maande, Mmala and Gunu.

There are two similar stories about the village of Begni (principal village of the canton Mmala), both explaining the name (which means “four” in Mmala). In one story, by Mbendé Alain, a hunter and his dog, while hunting in the bush, came across a termite mound where there were four people. In the other story, by Bébiyéme Nkono Raymond, when the colonialists were exploring the area, they came upon four people on a rock. When they asked the name of the area where they were, the people answered “four”, thus the area was named “Begni” ([bénì]). In both accounts, the village of Yorro is considered related to Begni. The first account that says Yorro was the brother of Begni, and thus it was originally a quarter of Begni, the other, that since the village was vast with few people, to protect their territory, some of the inhabitants were sent to “giolo” that’s to say to the empty land or desert. The name later corrupted to “Yorro”.

Mbure: The Mbure people consider themselves to be originally from the District of Sanaga-Maritime, south of the Sanaga. Due to war with the Basaa and Bati, they fled

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north across the river. Massamatila is one of the ancestors of Mbola, the founder of the village. The Mbure acknowledge that they are related to the Bogando (Elip) and Batanga (Yangben) and Bongo (Baca).

Tuki: According to Dugast (1949: 65-7), the *Tsinga* or Betsinga were originally from the northern bank of the Sanaga river and were pushed south of the river by the Babute (Vute) in the late 1800's (Dugast 1949: 148). With the arrival of the Germans, some of the *Tsinga* returned to the northern bank of the Sanaga.

The *Bundju* (Bonjo)¹² and *Kombe* (Bakombe) are listed as separate ethno-linguistic groups (like *Tsinga*) in Dugast (1949: 61-2). The *Bundju*, who consider themselves related to the *Mengisa*, were pushed south of the Sanaga by the *Vute* and later returned to their original lands, when the Germans rebuffed the *Vute*. The *Kombe* were subjugated by the *Vute* and dispersed.

The *Ngoro* (Angoro) also claim to be related to the *Mengisa* as well as the *Bundju*, *Kombe* and *Tsinga* (Dugast 1949: 62-3). Like the *Kombe*, they were subjugated by the *Vute* and dispersed. Dugast relates that among the *Ngoro* slaves dispersed, a boy named *Ndenge* caught the attention of the Germans and eventually worked and reunited the *Ngoro* in their native land.

Interestingly, the *Mengisa* people speak two languages. One of these, *Njowi*, is most closely related to the *Beti-Fang* languages of *Ewondo* and *Eton*. The other, *Leti*, is most closely related to the *Tuki* variants. *Njowi* is spoken south of the Sanaga River and *Leti* to the north, in the Mbam.¹³

Yambeta: According to Phillips (1979: 8-9), the *Yambeta* believe they have always lived on the right bank of the Nun River (also Dugast 1954: 136). While many outside researchers group *Yambeta* with the *Banen* (*Nen*) group, both culturally and linguistically, the *Yambeta* consider themselves more closely connected with the *Gunu*.

¹² The name in parenthesis is the name of the dialect identified in this study.

¹³ Some time ago, I did a lexicostatistical study of these variants based on a Swadesh 100-word wordlist. The results show that there is a close linguistic distance between *Njowi*, *Ewondo* and *Eton*.

Mengisa-Njowi					
77%	Ewondo				
94%	77%	Eton			
23%	23%	23%	Mengisa-Leti		
24%	24%	24%	82%	Tuki-Tocenga	
27%	27%	27%	84%	83%	Tuki-Tutsingo

The distances between *Njowi*, *Leti* and the *Tuki* variants are much larger.

However, according to Bolioki Léonard-Albert, a Yambeta speaker, the origin of the Yambeta people is not so simple. The two main dialects of Yambeta, *Nigii* and *Nɛdek*, have different origin stories.

Nigii is spoken in the villages of Kon, Kon-Kidoun and Edop. The people consider themselves descendents of the same ancestor as the Gunu, a certain Mbono (Ombono). The *Nigii* separated from the Gunu over a dispute concerning the entrails of an antelope.¹⁴

Nɛdek is spoken in the villages of Babetta, Bamoko, Bayomen and Bebis. The people of *Nɛdek*, unlike the *Nigii*, trace their origins to the Bamoun. During a time of war, a certain Timin, who was fleeing the war, arrived on the right bank of the Nun and settled there. He had three sons, Pɛda, Onkon and Yomɛn, who founded the *Nɛdek* villages of Babetta, Bamoko and Bayomen. They do not consider themselves descendents from Mbono (Ombono) but believe they are the true natives of Yambeta.¹⁵

Like the Nen, the *Nɛdek* trace their origins to the region of the Bamoun near Fouban, while the *Nigii* trace their origins to Ombono and the other Yambassa groups.

Nen: Unlike many of the other groups, the Banen, like the *Nɛdek* of Yambeta, do not identify themselves as the descendents of Ombono. Rather, according to Baléhen Jacques René, two of the four sons of a certain Biwoung are implicated in the origins of the Nen people. The four sons, Ganté,¹⁶ Onga, Munen and Bofia,¹⁷ leave the area around Fouban (Bamoun). Ganté settles in the area of Baganté. Onga settles near Tonga, and Munen and Bofia cross the Ndé River. The two brothers stayed together until a dispute between their sons caused Bofia to move south towards the present-day city of Bafia. Munen and his two sons, Ndiki and Niméki settled in the area, which is now named after them, Ndikiniméki.

Many of the peoples speaking Mbam languages share similar oral histories, many of which recount a story of migrations. These people relate to each other by referring to related historical people and the similarities of their traditions indicate a sense of cultural relatedness which is felt by these people and is due either to a common origin or convergence.

¹⁴ p.c. from Mboussi Ntafor (Kon) collected by Bolioki Léonard-Albert.

¹⁵ p.c. from Kibilé Victor (Babetta) collected by Bolioki Léonard-Albert.

¹⁶ Who founded the Baganté (Məɖumba, ALCAM [902].

¹⁷ Who founded Bafia (Rikpa, ALCAM [584])

1.4 Previous work done in the Mbam languages

This study looks at ten of the Mbam languages, comparing their vowel inventories and vowel-harmony systems. The languages compared are:

Table 1: Identification of the Mbam languages in this study

Lang.	ISO	ALCA M	class.	other sources consulted
Nen	BAZ	511	A44 ¹⁸	Dugast 1949, Stewart et al. 1979, De Blois 1981, Van der Hulst et al. 1986, Janssens 1988, Mous 1986, 2003, Bancel 1999, Stewart 2000.
Maande	LEM	512	A46	Scruggs 1982, 1983a, 1983b, Taylor 1982, Wilkendorf 2001 <i>Nomaande-French lexicon</i> , http://www.silcam.org/documents/lexicons/nomaande/index.html
Yambeta	YAT	520	A46 ¹⁹	Phillips 1979, Yambetta Provisional Lexicon, http://www.silcam.org/download.php?ssid=030100&file=YambettaProvisionalLexicon.pdf
Tuki	BAG	551	A61	Bilola 1997, Essono 1974, 1980, Hyman 1980, Kongne 2004 <i>Lexique Tuki-Français</i> , http://www.silcam.org/download.php?ssid=030100&folder=documents&file=TukiFrenchLexicon2006.pdf .
Gunu	YAS	541	A62 ²⁰	Gerhardt 1984, 1989, Orwig 1989, Patman 1991, Quilis et al. 1990, Robinson 1979, 1984, 1999, Hyman 2002a. <i>Nugunu Provisional Lexicon</i> , http://www.silcam.org/download.php?ssid=030401&file=NugunuProvisionalLexicon.pdf
Elip	EKM	542	(A62)	Paulian 1986b, Ekambi 1990, Onana Nkoa 2007
Mmala	MMU	542	(A62)	Paulian 1986b, Kaba 1988, Idiata 2000
Yangben	YAV	542	(A62)	Paulian 1986a, Paulian 1986b, Hyman 2003a

¹⁸ Erroneously labelled as A60 in the 16th edition of Ethnologue.

¹⁹ *Nigi* (Yambeta) is identified by ALCAM [520] as belonging to Guthrie's A46, along with Nomaande. Phillips (1979: 6, 45), for lexicostatistic reasons, places it with the A60 group.

²⁰ Guthrie identifies A62 as Yambassa. It is considered to include all the linguistic varieties identified by ALCAM as [541] to [543].

Lang.	ISO	ALCA M	class.	other sources consulted
Baca	BAF	543	(A62)	Abessolo Eto 1990, Sebineni 2008,
Mbule	MLB	544	---	---

1.5 Types of data collected

The data collected for this study consists of several types, as follows:

- 1) **Wordlists**, for each of the ten languages, consisting of approximately 700 to 4,000 words, depending on the language.

In five languages, Nen, Maande, Yambeta, Tuki and Gunu, these wordlists were started by others (several of which are on-line, see references). Having access to these language groups, I checked this data and elicited additional data as needed from the language areas. These same five languages have also had the most prior research done, works which I have perused in-depth. The principal of these sources are mentioned in Table 1 above for each language.

The wordlists from three of the remaining languages, Yangben, Mmala, Elip, are fully my own personal research, based on five years living among the populations (2003-2008) and an additional five years (2009-2013) working with the languages from Yaoundé. The data of the last two languages, Baca and Mbure are also personal research, based on data collected during short trips taken to the locations, and checked with individuals brought into Yaoundé for work sessions (2009-2013).

- 2) **Example sentences** and verb conjugations based on the wordlists, as well as recorded and transcribed narrative texts for seven of the ten languages.²¹

- 3) **Acoustic recordings**: Selected words and phrases from the wordlists have been recorded for acoustic analysis for each of the ten languages. The principal informants who provided me with acoustic data are the following:

Nen:	Mongele Daniel, Maniben Jean Paul, Leumou Benoit, Balehen Jacques René, Sebineni Alphonsine Flore
Maande:	Balan Marc, Bondiokin Jean-Jules
Yambeta:	Bolioki Léonard Albert, Ondaffe Nfon Emmanuel, Nkoum Ngon Andre
Tuki:	Ilomo Ntosbe, Ayissi Ndjebe Jean Pierre, Ebaka Marius, Koroko Emile, Nkengue Marie, Toue Jacqueline, Biteya Marguerite Hortense
Gunu:	Sintsimé Crépin
Elip:	Esseba Ombessa Lambert, Ologa Tite, Baboga Achille
Mmala:	Kiolé Frédéric, Bébiyéme Nkomo Raymond

²¹ Languages lacking narrative texts are Baca, Mbure and Tuki.

- Yangben:** Kibassa Otoke, Okono Tchopito
Baca: H.E. Ntsomo Mpong Pierre, chief of Bongo, Mpong Ntsomo Pierre G  r  mie, Ntsomo Ntsomo Mpong Pierre Marie
Mbure: Kibind   Babouet, Inengu   Gilbert, H.E. Noueye Noueye Joachim, chief of Mbola

1.6 The language corpus

This section introduces the ten Mbam languages discussed in this study and presents some background information of their location, dialect situation, and a summary and discussion of previous studies.

1.6.1 Nen

Nen (also known as Tunen, or Banen) is spoken in the subdivision of Ndikinimeki (District of the Mbam-et-Inoubou) by an estimated 35,300 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013), and spills over in the south into the subdivision of Yingui (District of the Nkam). Nen has four dialects; the two biggest, *T  b   ny  * (the reference dialect) and *Tuf  mb  *, have several subdialects. The list of Nen dialects and the villages where they are spoken is listed below in Table 2. This information was collected through personal communication with Loumou Beno  t (of the village of Ndekal  nd), the 20/Oct/2009 at Ndikinimeki. The reference dialect is underlined.

Table 2: Dialects and villages of the Nen-speaking region

Dialects:	Ethnologue ²²	Villages:
<u>T��b���ny��</u>		Ndikinimeki Ndiki village Ndekal��nd Maf�� Ndikmeluk Nebolen Ndikoti Nd��kbanya Nd��ma
	Itundu	Buturu Nefand ��tundu I, II, III Nomal��
		Ndokwanen

²² Ethnologue names eight dialects of Nen, six of which are listed here. Also included are *Logananga* and *Nyo'o*. The former, I have not been able to place in reference to the dialect names given to me in Ndikinimeki, and the latter is considered by ALCAM as a separate language. It is discussed briefly in section 1.6.3 below.

Dialects:	Ethnologue ²²	Villages:
Ninguessen (Mɛsɛ)	Mese (Paningesen, Ninguessen, Sese)	Ninguessen
Tufɔmbó	Ndogbang (Ndokbanɔl)	Ndokbassiomi Ndokbassaben Ndokbandalemak
	Ndokbiakat	Yingui Iboti Ndokanyak Ndoknanga
Alinga	Eling (Tuling)	Nituku Nɛbassɛl Neboya
Ndoktúna	Ndoktuna	Ndoktúna

Nen is one of the better-known and documented of the smaller languages of Cameroon, due to a large degree to the work of Dugast. Other studies on Nen vowel harmony include: Wilkinson 1975; Stewart and van Leynseele 1979; Bancel 1999; De Blois 1981; Van der Hulst, Mous & Smith, 1986; Janssens, 1988; 1993-4; and Mous 1986; 2003. While Dugast mentions vowel harmony (1971: 44-47), she merely lists the vowel combinations found within the word without elaborating on how the harmony functions.

1.6.2 Maande

Maande (also known as Nomaande, Lemande etc.) is spoken in seven villages of the Lemande canton in the highlands of the Bokito subdivision (District of the Mbam) by an estimated 6,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013). Maande has two main dialects: *Nonyambaye*, spoken in Nyambaye and Njoko, and *Nuceku* (the reference dialect), spoken in the village of Tchekos. There are two subdialects, which fall between the two major dialects: *Nobanye*, spoken in the villages of Tobanye and Bougnougoulouk, which is closer to *Nonyambaye*, and the dialect spoken in the villages of Omeng and Ossemb, which is alternatively called *Nomeng* or *Nossemb*, depending on the speaker.

Maande is also one of the better-known and documented of the smaller languages of Cameroon. Much work has been done by various SIL linguists notably Scruggs, Taylor and Wilkendorf.

1.6.3 Yambeta

Yambeta is spoken in the subdivision of Bafia, in the grasslands between Bafia and NdiKinimeki. Yambeta has four dialects; two main dialects *Nigii* and *Nedek*, and two lesser dialects *Begi* (subdialect of *Nigii*) and *Nibum* (subdialect of *Nedek*). *Nedek* is spoken in the villages of Babetta, Bamoko, Bayomen and Bebis and is according to the people the “original Yambeta”. *Nigii* is spoken in the villages of Kon,

Konkidoun and Edop. Begi is spoken in Bégui and *Nibum* is spoken in the villages of Kiboum I and Kiboum II. This study is based on *Nigii*, which is the largest and most centrally-located dialect, which has been chosen by the community as the reference dialect. The only in-depth study of Yambeta found is Phillips 1979 *The initial standardization of the Yambeta language*.

1.6.4 Tuki

Tuki (also known as Sanaga) is spoken along the border of Mbam-et-Kim Division with a few villages also in the Mbam-et-Inoubou Division, from Ntui to Mbangassina to Ngoro. There are approximately 26,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013). Tuki consists of seven dialects, although there are some discrepancies between authors concerning both the number (6 or 7) and the names of the Tuki dialects. For the purpose of this study, I am following the lists in Huey and Mbongué (1995). The reference dialect is underlined in Table 3 below:

Table 3: dialects of Tuki (Huey & Mbongué 1995)²³

Dialect	People	Location	Villages
Tangoro	Angoro	Subdivision of Ngoro	Angadjimberete, Ngoro, Ngamba, Moungo, Egona II, Bakouma, Massassa, Mbengué, Ngoro-Nguima, Nyamongo (N. of the Mbam river) and Djara-Kanga
Tuchangu ²⁴	Acango	Subdivision of Bafia	Egona I, Ngomo, Nyatsota and Nyamongo (S. of the Mbam river)
Tukombe	Bakombe	Subdivision of Mbangassina	Bialanguena, Boura I and Boura II
<u>Tutsingo</u>	Tsinga		Mbangassina, Enangana, Bilomo, Biapongo, Assola, Badissa, Nyamanga II, Nyambala, Biatombo, Yanga, Yébékolo, Etoa and Esséré
Tondjo	Bonjo		Biakoa, Bindamongo, Endingué, Tchamongo, Talba, Biatenguéna, Goura and Nyambala

²³ Kongne Welaze Jacques' (2004) study of the verb morphology of Tuki adds *Tungijo* (what the Tuki (or Baki) call it) or *Letí* listed as one of two languages (the other being *Njowi*) spoken by the Mengisa peoples (Kongne Welaze 2004: 8-9). Neither Lewis et al. (2013) or Dieu and Renaud (1983) consider *Letí* a dialect of Tuki, although it is known to be closer to the Mbam A60 languages than the A70 languages to which *Njowi* is considered to belong (Dieu and Renaud 1983: 108-109). Many Tuki speakers do consider it a dialect.

²⁴ Tucangu speakers perceived that their variety is spoken in Angadjimberete, Egona II, and Ngoro as well as the villages listed. See Huey and Mbongué (1995) for more information concerning the dialect situation of Tuki.

Dialect	People	Location	Villages
Tocenga	Bacenga	Subdivision of Ntui	Nachtigal, Ehondo, Njame, Essougli, Nguété, Odon, Bétanbam Koussé, Kéla, Edjindigouli, Koro and Mbanga
Tumbele	Mvele		Bindandjengué, Biatsota I, Biatsota II, Ntui, Bindalima I, Bindalima II, Koundoung, Bilanga, Ossombé

Tuki has had a moderate amount of previous study. The most extensive work has been done by Jean-Jacques Marie Essono, notably his *Description phonologique du tuki (ati)* (1974) and his *Morphologie nominale du tuki (langue sanaga)* (1980). Other works on Tuki include Hyman's (1980) article on the Tuki noun-class system, a preliminary survey carried out in Tuki in 1994 (Huey and Mbongué 1995), Biloa's (1997) *Functional categories and the syntax of focus in tuki* and Kongne Welaze's (2004) *Morphologie verbale du tuki*.

1.6.5 The Yambassa languages

Five linguistic varieties are identified as *Yambassa* in the literature. These are: Gunu, Yangben, Mmala, Elip and Baca. The best known and most studied of these varieties is Gunu. Following Gunu, the most comprehensive study has been done on Yangben (Hyman 2003a). The other three languages, Mmala, Elip and Baca are referred to in only a few comparative or lexicostatistical articles. ALCAM further divides *Yambassa* by making a distinction between Gunu (*Yambassa nord* [541]), Baca (*Yambassa sud* [543]) and *Yambassa central* [542], consisting of the remaining three: Yangben, Mmala and Elip. A sixth language, *Bati* [530], located just beyond the Liwa river in the Sanaga Maritime Division of the Littoral Region is also considered closely related to the *Yambassa* varieties. While these languages are synchronically similar, they do not seem to form a genetic unit, as will be shown in this study.

1.6.5.1 Gunu

Gunu (also referred to as Nugunu) is spoken in sixteen villages in two cantons by an estimated 35,000 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013). It has two dialects: *Gunu sud*, spoken in the canton of the same name (Bokito subdivision) in the villages of Assala I and II, Guéfigé, Guebaba, Bokaga and Bakoa, and *Gunu nord*, spoken in the canton of the same name (Ombessa subdivision) in the villages of Ombessa, Boyaba, Essende, Baningoang, Bouaka, Guienising I and II, Boyabissoumbi, Baliaama and Bogondo.

At least a dozen articles have been written on Gunu, although most concern grammatical or discourse-level study. Of most interest for this study are Robinson's (1984) *Phonology of gunu*, Paulian's (1986) lexicostatistical comparison with the other *Yambassa* varieties and Hyman's (2002) article on vowel harmony in Gunu. Other works consulted include: Gerhardt 1984; 1989; GULICO (Gunu Linguistic Committee) 2003; Orwig 1989; Patman 1991; and Robinson 1979; 1999.

1.6.5.2 Elip

Elip (also referred to as Nulibie or Libie) is spoken in ten villages in the Elip Canton by an estimated 6,400 (Lewis et al. 2013). Three dialects are attested. These are *Nuyambassa*, spoken in the village of Yambassa, principal village of the canton Elip, *Nulamba*, spoken in the villages of Balamba, Basolo, Botatango, Boalondo and Boatanye, and *Nukanya*, spoken in the villages of Botombo, Kananga, Bongando and Kilikoto.

Elip is referred to in only a few works, predominantly in lexicostatistical studies, and in one article (Paulian 1980: 63-66) on the noun-class system. It is referred to in *La méthode dialectométrique appliquée aux langues africaines*, 1986, edited by Guarisma and Möhlig, where it is compared with the other Yambassa languages, Mmala and Yangben (Paulian 1986b: 243-279). Other lexicostatistical studies include survey reports: Scruggs 1982; Taylor 1982; Boone et al. 1992. In addition, there are two MA theses from Yaoundé I: a phonology by Ekambi (1990), and a verb morphology by Onana Nkoa (2007).

1.6.5.3 Mmala

Mmala (referred to as Mmaala, Numala, or Numaala) is spoken in the Mmala Canton by an estimated 5,300 speakers (Lewis et al. 2013). It has two dialects: *Nuenyi*, spoken in the villages of Begni, Yorro and the Mmala quarter of Bokito, and *Nukitia*, spoken in the villages of Kedia and Ediolomo.

Mmala is referred to in only a few works, predominantly in lexicostatistical studies, and in one article (Idiata 2000: 23-32) on the noun-class system as well as in Paulian (1986: 243-279). Other lexicostatistical studies include survey reports: Scruggs 1982; Taylor 1982; Boone et al. 1992. In addition, there is a MA thesis from Yaoundé I: a phonology by Kaba (1988).

1.6.5.4 Yangben

Yangben (also referred to in some literature as Kalɔŋ or Nukalɔŋɛ) is spoken in three villages of the Yangben Canton by an estimated 5,296 speakers according to the 1977 census (Boone et al. 1992).²⁵

Yangben is spoken in the villages of Yangben, Omende and Batanga. The language is known by various names. The local populations refer to their language as the speech of ____ village; or in other words, as *Nukalɔŋɛ*: speech of Kalɔŋ (Yangben) village; *Numende*: speech of Omende village; and *Nutaja*: speech of Batanga village. The differences between these varieties are minor. The local population has recently

²⁵ Lewis et al. (2013) has the figure at 2,300 based on 1982 figures. This number seems low, based on my personal knowledge of the area and locally reported population estimates.

given a more inclusive name to the speech varieties of these three villages: they call it *Nuasue*: “our language”.

Yangben is referred to in a few works, predominantly in lexicostatistical studies with the notable exception of Hyman’s 2003 article on the vowel-harmony system of Yangben. Hyman’s article is also mentioned in *Vowel harmony and correspondence theory* (Krämer 2003: 13-14). Maho 1999 also refers to it in his *A comparative Study of Bantu Noun Classes*. In addition there are two separate articles on Yangben in *La méthode dialectométrique appliquée aux langues africaines*, 1986, edited by Gladys Guarisma and Wilhelm J.G. Möhlig. In one article (Guarisma and Paulian 1986: 93-176), Yangben is compared to several other Bantu A languages. In the second article (Paulian 1986b: 243-279), it is compared with the other Yambassa languages. Other lexicostatistical studies include survey reports: Scruggs 1982; Taylor 1982; Boone et al. 1992.

1.6.5.5 Baca

Baca²⁶ (also known as Nubaca or Bongo) is spoken only in the village of Bongo by an estimated 800 people (Boone 1992a: 1; Lewis 2009). The chief of Bongo village, his excellence Ntsomo Npong Pierre, however, says that the population of Bongo is closer to 4,500, most of whom are Baca speakers (p.c. February 2009).

The language is identified as having three dialects, *Baca*, spoken in the quarters of Ganok, Nkos, Buyatolo, Buyabikel, Buyabatug and Buyambo; *Kélendé*, spoken in the quarters of Kélendé Mbat and Kélendé Moma; and *Nibieg*, spoken in the quarter of the same name. This study is based on personal research of the main dialect spoken in Ganok quarter.

Baca is referred to in only a few works, notably Scruggs’ 1982 linguistic survey of the Bokito region (including approximately 180 terms), Paulian’s (1986: 243-279) article on the Yambassa languages (with a bit more than 100 terms), Boone’s (1992a) survey of Baca (including approximately 100 terms). In addition to these surveys, two Université de Yaoundé I MA in linguistics theses have been produced: Abessolo Eto 1990 and Sebineni 2008; the latter includes 250 terms in the annex.

1.6.6 Mbure

Mbure (also referred to as Dumbule, Mbule or Mbola) is spoken only in the village of Mbola by an estimated 100 persons (Boone 1992b; Lewis et al. 2013). In personal communication with residents, the population figures were given as 112 persons in 34 households for the four quarters of Mbola (Nikoyo Charles Dieudonné, catechist p.c. 13 Feb. 2009). The quarters of Mbola are Bougnabog, Cade, Kidjo and Tané-Mos. There appears to be no variation in the language between the various quarters.

²⁶ Pronounced as [batʃa].

Mbure is referred to in only a couple of works, notably Scruggs' 1982 linguistic survey of the Bokito region (including approximately 180 terms), and Boone's (1992b) survey of Mbure (including approximately 100 terms). Only seven vowels are identified in these works.

1.7 Divergent features of the Mbam languages

The Mbam languages in this study diverge from the general Bantu pattern in several ways and to a greater or lesser extent. The four main areas of divergence involve (1) separate preverbal elements, including differing word order (SOV) and full words interposing between the verb stem and the subject/tense complex; (2) a reflexive/middle derivational prefix replacing the proto-Bantu passive suffix; (3) differences in noun-class prefixes and (4) additional non-Bantu verbal extensions.

Separate preverbal elements:

Bantu languages are generally agglutinative, and while some of the southern Mbam languages (i.e. Yangben, Mmala and Elip) retain a highly agglutinative structure, most of the Mbam languages have phonologically separate preverbal elements. In some of these latter languages, other grammatical words such as indirect object nouns (Nen) and pronouns (Nen and Maande) or adverbs (Maande and Gunu) may occur between the verb root and the subject/tense complex. Nen in particular is exceptional for having an SOV word order with full nouns occurring between the subject/tense complex and the verb root. Maande, while retaining a SVO word order for full object nouns, does have independent indirect-object pronouns²⁷ which occur before the verb root.

Reflexive/middle derivational prefix:

The majority of the Mbam languages have a reflexive/middle derivational prefix, **bá-** or **bí-**. While there is also a suffix, **-Vb**, which is a reflex of the proto-Bantu ***-ibu**, found in some of the Mbam languages (Elip, Mmala Yangben and Maande), it is not generally productive except in two of the languages. Baca has both a **bí-** prefix and a **-Vb** suffix, both with a reflexive/middle sense. Mbure exclusively²⁸ has the **-Vb** suffix, in Example 1.

²⁷ Object pronouns, usually referred to in this study as indirect object pronouns, sometimes have additional meanings, including direct object. For simplicity, I refer to them as indirect object pronouns, the more common usage.

²⁸ Only one exception found: *#bí-sóg-ìr-ìn-ì to pray, respectfully request*

Example 1: Reflexive/middle derivational affixes in Baca and Mbure

Baca	kù- bí -tós-in	hurt oneself
	kù- bí -sím-in	lie oneself down
	kù≠kù ^{tf} - ib -it	stoop, bend oneself over
	kù≠tép- ib -it	stand oneself up
	kò≠fàk- ib -it	choke oneself
Mbure	mà≠bá ^d - ib -è	meet e.o., assemble w/e.o.
	kì≠bík- p -èn-è	besmear oneself
	kì≠kó ^m b-à kì≠kó ^m b- àb -è	scratch/scratch oneself

Gunu has both the **bí**- reflexive/middle prefix as well as a passive suffix **-lú** (*-u) which attaches to the verb after all other suffixes and extensions, including the final vowel (Orwig 1989: 293).

Noun-class distinctions:

All of these Mbam languages have fairly traditional Bantu noun-class systems. With a few exceptions, the noun-class prefixes are reflexes of the reconstructed proto-Bantu noun-class prefixes. There are three particularities: First, noun class 13 pairing as a plural class with either singular classes 11 or 19. All of the Mbam languages have a plural class 13.²⁹ Second, in many of these Mbam languages, there are two “morphologically distinct class 6 prefixes” (Maho 1999: 251). These are 6 **mà**- and 6a **àN**-. The third particularity is the plural of a class 19. In the Mbam A60 languages, the plural of class 19 is **mo**-, which is considered in Guthrie (1971: 32) as extraneous and was not assigned a class number. In some literature, it is identified as class 18 or in Scruggs (1982) as class 6.

Extra extensions:

There are a handful of extensions found in various of the Mbam languages which are not readily identified with Guthrie's common Bantu extensions. As these are not productive extensions, it is difficult to determine their role. Some examples found in the various Mbam languages are in Example 2.

Example 2: Extra (non-Bantu) extensions found in the Mbam languages

-om	gò≠lág- óm -in	<i>be light (Elip)</i>
	à≠bí-lók- óm -à	<i>listen, pay attention (Maande)</i>
	gò≠yób- òm -à	<i>stagger (Gunu)</i>
	ù≠hól- úm -à	<i>rest, breathe (Nen)</i>

²⁹ In the Bafia group A50 languages, 13 is a plural class generally pairing with 19.

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-ij (-i)	ò≠sàl- i -à	<i>divorce (v) (Nen)</i>
	ò≠tán-ál- i -án-à	<i>block (Maande)</i>
	≠pób- ij -à	<i>babble (baby) (Mbure)</i>
	gò≠bál- i -à	<i>swear (Gunu)</i>
	ò≠sìr- ij -à	<i>slip (Tuki)</i>
-al ³⁰	ù≠kìt- àl -à	<i>slap (Nen)</i>
	gò≠bà ^m b- àl -à	<i>palpitate (Gunu)</i>
	gò≠gág- ál -à	<i>wrap up (Mmala)</i>
	kò≠sík- il -à	<i>carve smth small & round (Yangben)</i>
	kò≠kòk- àl -à	<i>gnaw (Baca)</i>
-il/-id/-it ³¹	ò≠m'òt- il -à	<i>press (v)(Nen)</i>
	ò≠fóg- it	<i>shake(Yambeta)</i>
	ù≠tʃ'g- ít -à	<i>abandon (Tuki)</i>

1.8 Purpose of the thesis

The purpose of this study is to understand the complexities of the vowel systems and vowel harmony of these ten related languages, located in a relatively small area. The microvariation within these comparable but different vowel systems provides a greater understanding of the phonologies of each of the individual languages. Furthermore, by finding the relevant parameters of variation in a bottom-up manner, this study contributes to the understanding of phonology and specifically that of vowel harmony.

³⁰ Orwig (1989: 301) considers this extension to be a diminutive. One of my informants for Yangben suggested that it adds a meaning of "roundness" or "circular".

³¹ In several Mbam languages, this extension does seem to be a diminutive., but in the examples given here, a diminutive meaning is not evident.