

Linking Bantu to Benue-Congo: A view from the northern fringe of the Grassfields*

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1 Introduction

[1] As more and more descriptive data become available on more and more African languages, there is increasing need for some objective inter-linguistic framework within which these data may be classified and compared. . . Unfortunately, no such ideal classification has been available for the languages of Africa as a whole, and in recent years descriptive linguists have tended to use Greenberg’s “genetic” classification as a frame of reference within which to locate the languages they are describing. Although most of these linguists have not concerned themselves with testing the validity or otherwise of Greenberg’s classification, their unqualified acceptance of it in print has lent a certain “respectability” to his classificational units. This acceptance is potentially misleading to non-linguists, especially historians, and has helped obscure the fact many of these classificational units have never been scientifically established. (Dalby 1971:17)

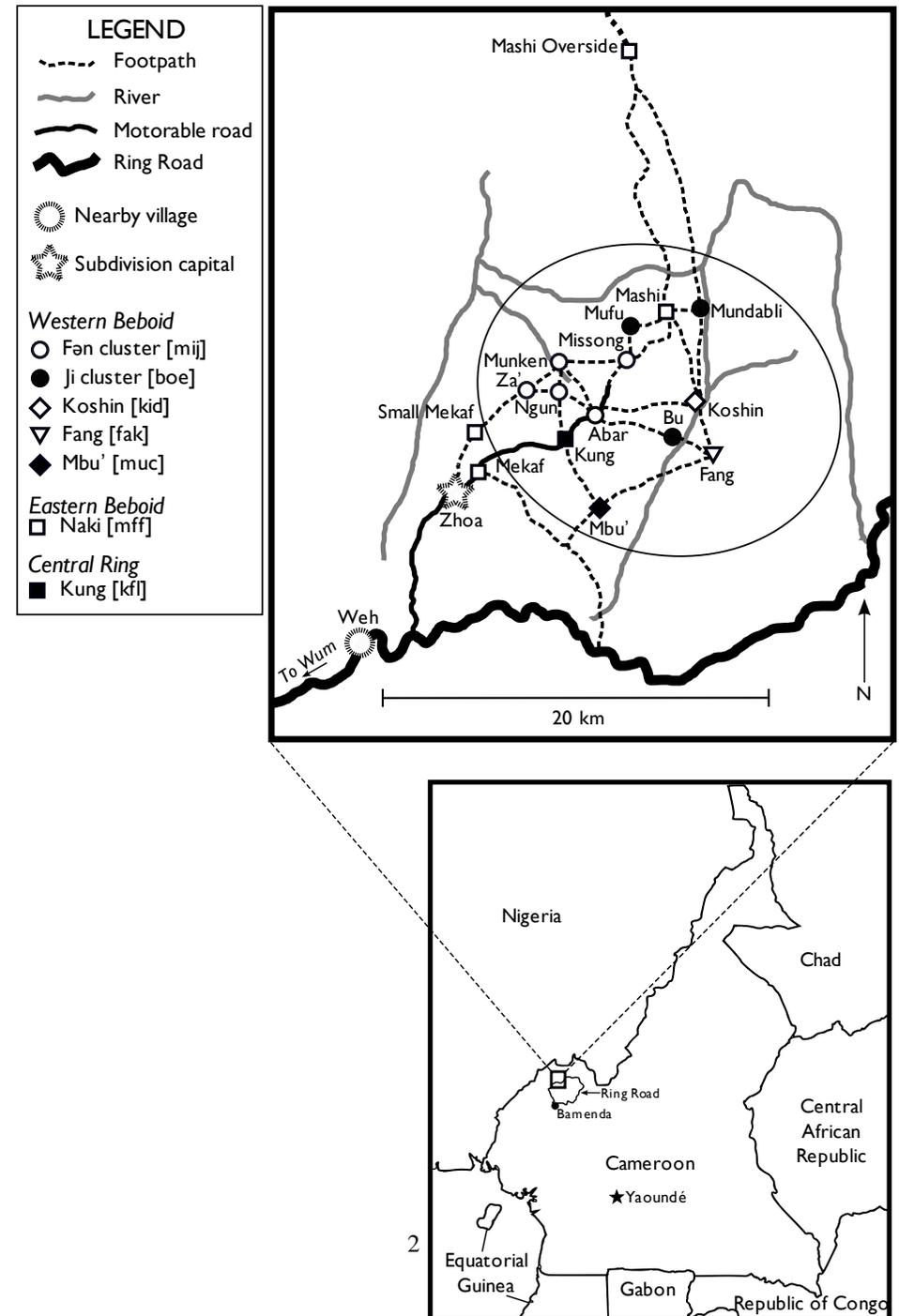
[2] . . . Today, after the outstanding works of scholars like Carl Meinhof, A.E. Meeussen, Malcolm Guthrie, and many others, we are still largely ignorant of the relationship patterns existing between the various Bantu languages.

One of the major reasons for this deplorable state of affairs must be sought in the approach used by the various authors. In many cases, the classifications proposed were based on both linguistic and non-linguistic criteria, the resulting mixture being neither fully acceptable to the linguist nor to the anthropologist or historian. In other cases, classifications were devised that were intended to serve several largely irreconcilable goals at the same time, e.g., to furnish the librarian with a convenient order of an amorphously looking lot of languages on the one hand and to provide the historian with a hypothesis on the linguistic evolution of the Bantu-speaking people on the other. (Heine 1980:295)

[3] . . . scholarly inertia reinforces mistakes, which are thereby perpetuated indefinitely, effectively forestalling any re-examination of the facts. (Childs 2003:47)

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Figure 1: Lower Fungom (based on Hombert (1980:84), with updates)



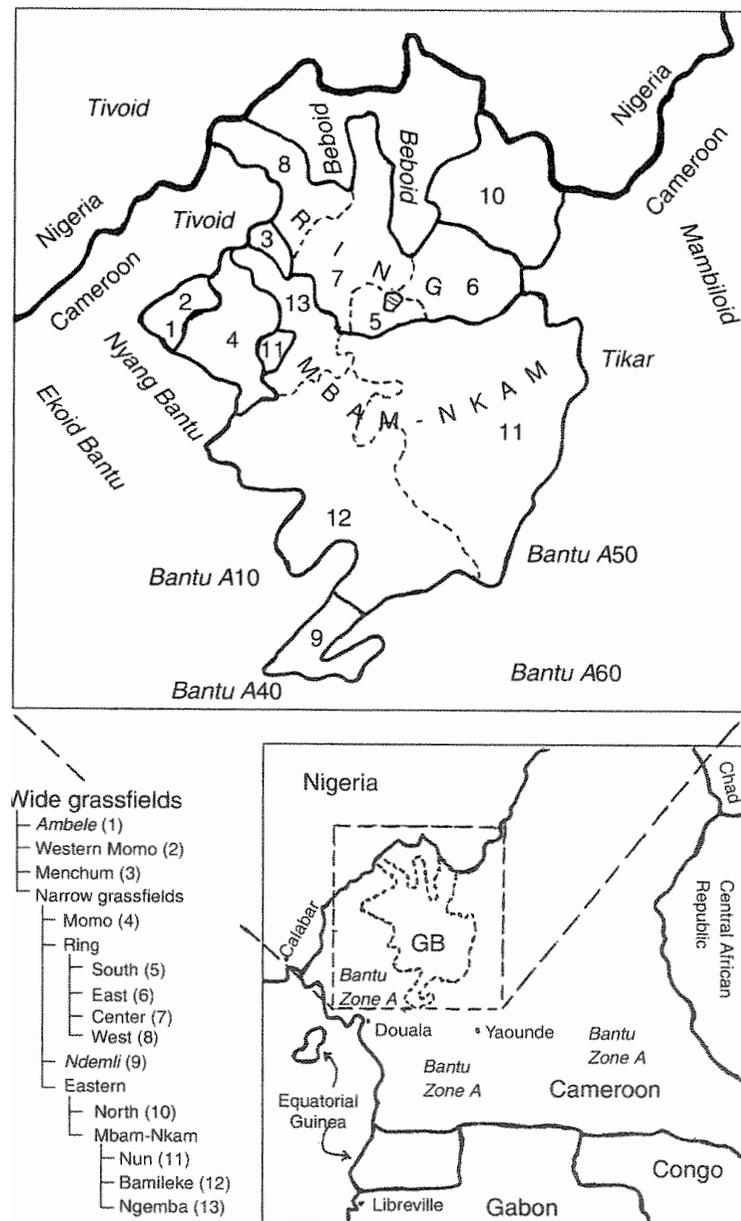


Figure 2: The Grassfields area (Watters 2003:226)

- [4] Some goals of language classifications, adapting Heine (1980:295–296)
 - [a] Hypothesize an origin and genealogical development
 - [b] Index structural similarities and dissimilarities
 - [c] Map the directions of areal influence
 - [d] Construct a referential taxonomy
- [5] The history of Bantu linguistics, however, teaches us that an unawareness of the differing functions of these classifications may lead to scientifically untenable conclusions. (Heine 1980:296)
- [6] Rest of talk
 - [a] Background on Western Beboid
 - [b] Some Western Beboid comparative data
 - [c] Interpreting Western Beboid history
 - [d] Implications
- [7] The classification of the languages discussed here has not been particularly controversial because
 - [a] No one really cares about them
 - [b] They are clearly “Bantoid”—so, their high-level grouping is less of a concern than for other cases
- [8] But, these languages are in the putative Bantu cradleland (Greenberg 1949b, Greenberg 1972, Vansina 1995) and are potentially important for understanding Bantu prehistory and Benue-Congo.
- [9] An important accomplishment of Greenberg was to more accurately situate Bantu within Benue-Congo, but the work should not have ended there.
- [10] The process
 - [a] Greenberg established a framework
 - [b] Genealogical tree model taken as default method of language categorization
 - [c] Groups of varying provenance became treated as hypotheses of relationship
 - [d] “Scholarly inertia” reinforced the conflation

2 History of (the name) Beboid

- [11] The Beboid languages are spoken at the northern fringe of the Grassfields—and have been comparably marginalized in linguistic studies of the Grassfields area.
- [12] Beboid (according to the Ethnologue)
 - [a] Eastern: Bebe [bzv], Cung [cug], Kemezung [dmo], Naki [mff], Ncane [ncr], Noone [nhu], Nsari [asj] (see Brye and Brye (2002))
 - [b] Western: Abar [mij], Fang [fak], Koshin [kid], Mbu' [muc], Mundabli [boe] (see Hamm et al. (2002))
- [13] The name *Beboid* initially appears in Hombert (1980), the first published survey of the entire group of languages.
- [14] The earliest published data on Beboid appears to be Chilver and Kaberry (1974) which contains data collected in the 1960's on several Eastern Beboid languages as well as Koshin, though no genealogical groups are proposed.
- [15] The term *Misaje* (the name of a town) was earlier used for some of the Eastern Beboid languages (see, for example, Williamson (1971:280–281), Voorhoeve (1980) and Hyman (1980b)), and the term *Fungom* (the name of a subdivision) was used for the Western Beboid languages (among others) (Hombert 1980:86).
- [16] The names *Eastern Beboid* and *Western Beboid* formerly transparently reflected geographic distribution. However, Naki—spoken in the west—has been reclassified as Eastern Beboid, rendering the names somewhat opaque.
- [17] Despite its widespread adoption as a classificatory label, no publication has ever presented evidence for the group in terms of shared innovations.
- [18] It is possible to reconstruct features of a “Proto-Beboid”—as Hombert (1980) does—but this is not good proof that it is a valid genetic unit.
- [19] An Eastern Beboid grouping is not implausible given speakers’ intuitions regarding language similarity and lexicostatistical analysis (Brye and Brye 2002).
- [20] Western Beboid is much more tenuous
 - [a] Speakers do not report any sense of linguistic unity.
 - [b] Preliminary linguistic investigation verifies that the language divisions of the Ethnologue seem to correspond to true genealogical units, but do not point to the existence of a Western Beboid group as a whole.

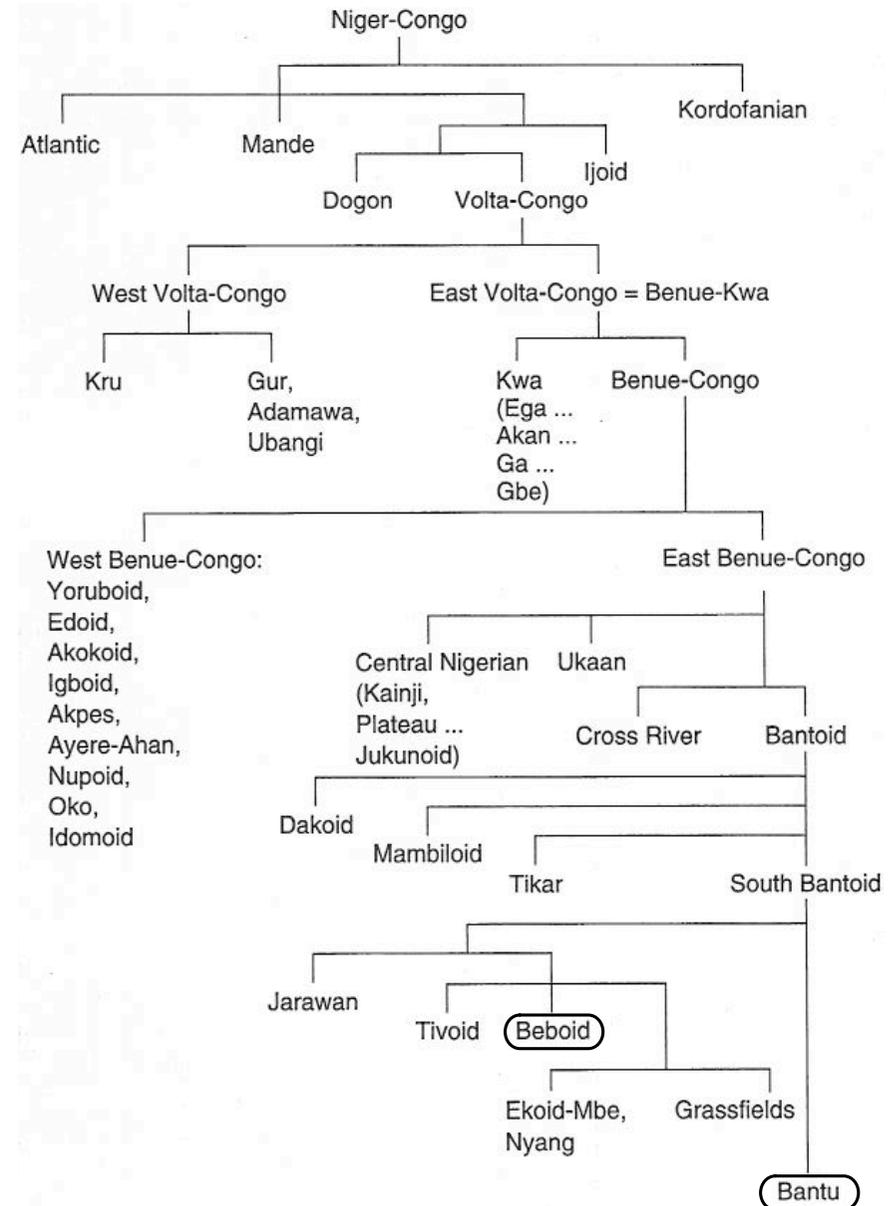


Figure 3: Niger-Congo classification (adapted from Schadeberg (2003:155))

[21] Beboïd as a whole is also tenuous—in particular because of Fə̀n.

[22] . . . a determination of genetic relatedness is a prerequisite of comparative work, which can be done only if languages are presumed to be related. That is, relatedness is presupposed or assumed, not established, by comparative linguistics. (Nichols 1996:45)

[23] In the Western Beboïd context, relatedness at some level is not at stake, but the existence of a specific subgroup is.

[24] The only case where grammatical evidence appears to have been used to establish relations in Beboïd is Voorhoeve’s (1980) suggestion that the Eastern Beboïd language Noni should be grouped with non-contiguous A40 and A60 languages because of the absence nasals in its class prefixes.

3 Western Beboïd noun class systems

[25] See Hombert (1980) for earlier data on Bù, Koshin, and Missong.

[26] Data here on Fang and Mbu’ should be considered more tentative. Some segmentally homophonous concords may be tonally distinct.

[27] Fə̀n languages

[a] MUNKEN (FƏ̀N)					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	u-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	u-	w-			
5	i-	y-			
9	ì-	y-	10	í-	y-
12	a-	k-			
19	shi-	sh-	26	mu-	mw-
			4	i-	y-
			6	a-	n-
			7(a)	ki-(...-lə)	ky-
			8	bi-	by-
6a	N-	m-			

[b] Fə̀n is conservative in retention of vowels, with considerable dialect variation.

[c] Class fluctuation

[i] Singular: *āyḡhḡ kénkḡ* ‘12.jaw 12.this’

[ii] Plural: *kīyḡhḡ kyénkì* ‘7.jaw 7.this’, *bīyḡhḡ byénbì* ‘8.jaw 8.this’

[28] Ji languages

[a] MUNDABLI (JI)					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	7	Ø-	k-
7	Ø-	k-	8	Ø-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	´-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-			

[b] Mundabli (Ji) examples

[i] Class 3/4: *gbḡ wén* ‘3.house 3.this’ / *dzḡ yén* ‘4.house 4.this’ (< PB *-jù?)
kpán wén ‘3.wood 3.this’ / *tswán yén* ‘4.wood 4.this’ (< PB *-kúni?)
 (see Kießling (2010+))

[ii] Class 7/8: *nəm kén* ‘7.belt 7.this’ / *nəm bén* ‘8.belt 8.this’

[iii] Class 9/10: *nyàm yén* ‘9.animal 9.this’ / *nyám yén* ‘10.animal 10.this’

[c] Bù also shows a plural circumfixal class comparable to other classes referred to here as 7a with form *kə...-tə* not (yet?) found in Mundabli or Mufu. (This is the class 27 of Hombert (1980:93).)

[29] KOSHIN					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
5	Ø-	w-	13	tə-	t-
7	kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	´-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	N-	m-
6a	N-	m-			

[a] Koshin Examples

[i] Class 5/13: *tā* ‘5.leg’ / *tētā* ‘13.leg’

[ii] Class 3/4: *kpḡ* ‘3.firewood’ / *tsḡ* ‘4.firewood’
wī ‘3.eyē’ / *jí* ‘4.eyē’
bī wé ‘3.foot 3.this’ / *bī yé* ‘4.foot 4.this’

[iii] Class 9/10: *nyā yḡ* ‘9.animal’ / *nyā yḡ* ‘10.animal’
shēm yī ‘9.heart 9.3sPOSS’ / *shēm yí* ‘10.heart 10.3sPOSS’

[30]

FANG					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	N-	w-	2	bə-	b-
3	w-	w-	4	y-	y-
3	w-	w-	13	tə-	t-
5	Ø-	w-	13	tə-	t-
7	Ø/kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	´-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	mə-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

[31]

MBU'					
SINGULAR			PLURAL		
1	Ø-	w-	2	a-	b-
5	Ø-	y-	6	a-	y-
5	Ø-	y-	7a	kə...-lə	k-
7	kə-	k-	8	bə-	b-
9	`-	y-	10	´-	y-
19	fə-	f-	26	N-	m-
6a	N-	m-	—		

- [a] Mbu' seems to show comparable prefix fluctuation to Munken (with class 7a, acting as a kind of “default”), though the pattern is less striking.
- [b] Anecdotal evidence suggests Mbu' is outside of the core of Lower Fungom.

[32] **Some observations**

- [a] Fən varieties all share the noteworthy feature that they retain the vowels in the prefixes for classes 3/4 and 9/10.
- [b] Circumfixal class 7a crosscuts apparent “language” boundaries.
- [c] The presence of class 13 in both Fang and Koshin is noteworthy since it is not found elsewhere in Western Beboid, and they otherwise show similar systems.
- [d] Prefix loss could be a used as a shared innovation—but it is not clearly “individual identifying” (Nichols 1996:48) in the relevant context given that prefix absence is common in the area (see, for example, Kießling (2010+)) (and even within Ji there is variation—Bù does show class 7, for example).
- [e] Consonant mutations as class markers seem to be part of an areal pattern (Kießling 2010+).
- [f] The noun class systems do not obviously point to the existence of a Western Beboid genealogical unit—in particular because of Fən.

[33] **The Proto-Eastern Grassfields and Proto-Western Grassfields noun class and concord systems as reconstructed by Hyman (1980b:182)**

CLASS	PROTO-EASTERN GRASSFIELDS		PROTO-WESTERN GRASSFIELDS	
	PREFIX	CONCORD	PREFIX	CONCORD
1	Ñ-	ù-	ù(n)-	ù
1a	Ø-	(=1)	—	—
2	bə-	bó-	bó-	bó-
3	Ñ-	ú-	ú-	ú-
3a	ì-	(=3)	—	—
4	—	—	í-	í-
5	li-	lí-	í-	í-
6	(=6a)	(=6a)	á-	gá-
6a	mə-	mó-	mə-	mə-
7	à-	í-	kí-	kí-
8	bì-	bí-	bí-	bí-
9	Ñ-	ì-	ì(n)-	ì
10	Ñ-	í-	í(n)-	Cí-
13	—	—	tí-	tí-
19	fə-	fó-	fí-	fí-

[34] **Some links between Western Beboid languages and Grassfields languages**

- [a] They generally pattern with Proto–Western Grassfields for classes 3/4.
- [b] Fang and Koshin share with Proto–Western Grassfields class 13.
- [c] At least some Fən varieties, along with Mbu', show distinct class 6/6a forms similar to what is found in Proto–Western Grassfields.
- [d] Consonant mutations of the sort seen in the Ji group, Fang, and Koshin are attested in some contemporary Ring (Grassfields) languages—for example, Mmen, Kom, and, apparently incipiently, in Aghem. (See Kießling (2010+).)
- [e] Overall, Western Beboid seems to pattern more with geographically adjacent Western Grassfields than more distant Eastern Grassfields.

[35] **Western Beboid possible genealogical groupings (lumping)**

- [a] Fən
- [b] Koshin-Fang-Ji-Mbu' (based on class 9/10 tonal plurals)—but then, you'd want to group these with Eastern Beboid against the “isolate” Fən

[36] **Maybe there is a northern Grassfields area comprising some parts of Ring and “Beboid”?**

[37] **Ultimately, too, one needs to look at what happens further to the north towards Nigeria, where Jukun seems to predominate.**

4 Interpreting “Western Beoid”

- [38] Beoid generally, and Western Beoid more specifically, seem to have been grouped together because of their opposition to Grassfields Bantu.
- [39] The Western Beoid region is at the northern economic fringe of the Grassfields, in an area associated with the production of oil palms (Warnier 1985:18) and which could be considered a kind of “backwater”.
- [40] The Grassfields cultural area appears to have been (see Warnier (1979))
 - [a] Densely populated (perhaps around 500,000 people in an area around the size of Belgium at the beginning of the twentieth century (Warnier 1980:831))
 - [b] Old (perhaps as old as the Iron Age for the area, which dates back perhaps to two or more millennia ago (Rowlands and Warnier 1993:514))
 - [c] Insular

In the nineteenth century, the peoples inhabiting the Grassfields and their fringes depended heavily upon each other’s production and formed a self-contained symbiotic community. (Warnier 1979:410)
 - [d] Specialized

The topography had two important consequences: first, it created much ecological diversity over a rather restricted surface, resulting in different regional factor endowments. The oil palm grows best on the southern and western fringes of the plateau. The plateau is well suited for the raising of small livestock (pigs, goats, sheep, dwarf cows, fowls), and for an agricultural production based on both forest and savannah crops. The central part of the plateau specialized in the production of iron that was traded towards the oil-producing areas. Local specialization in the production of tobacco, hides, raffia bags, wooden carvings, earthen wares, etc., depended on locally available resources but seems to have gone far beyond what could be predicted on such a basis. (Warnier 1979:410)
 - [e] Internally fluid

The population of the Bamenda area was constantly in the process of being re-distributed among chiefdoms. Conflicts within a chiefdom were often solved by the departure of one party. Such exiles were an expected feature of any succession to the position of chief. The unsuccessful contender would vacate the chiefdom with his wives, children, and followers, and seek adoption in another one. Each chiefdom was dominated by a number of lineages that provided its backbone and integrated all the newcomers by means expressed in the idiom of kinship. (Warnier 1979:412–413)
 - [f] Multilingual (Warnier (1980:832) estimates at least 50% of inhabitants spoke two or more languages “perfectly” at the beginning of the twentieth century)

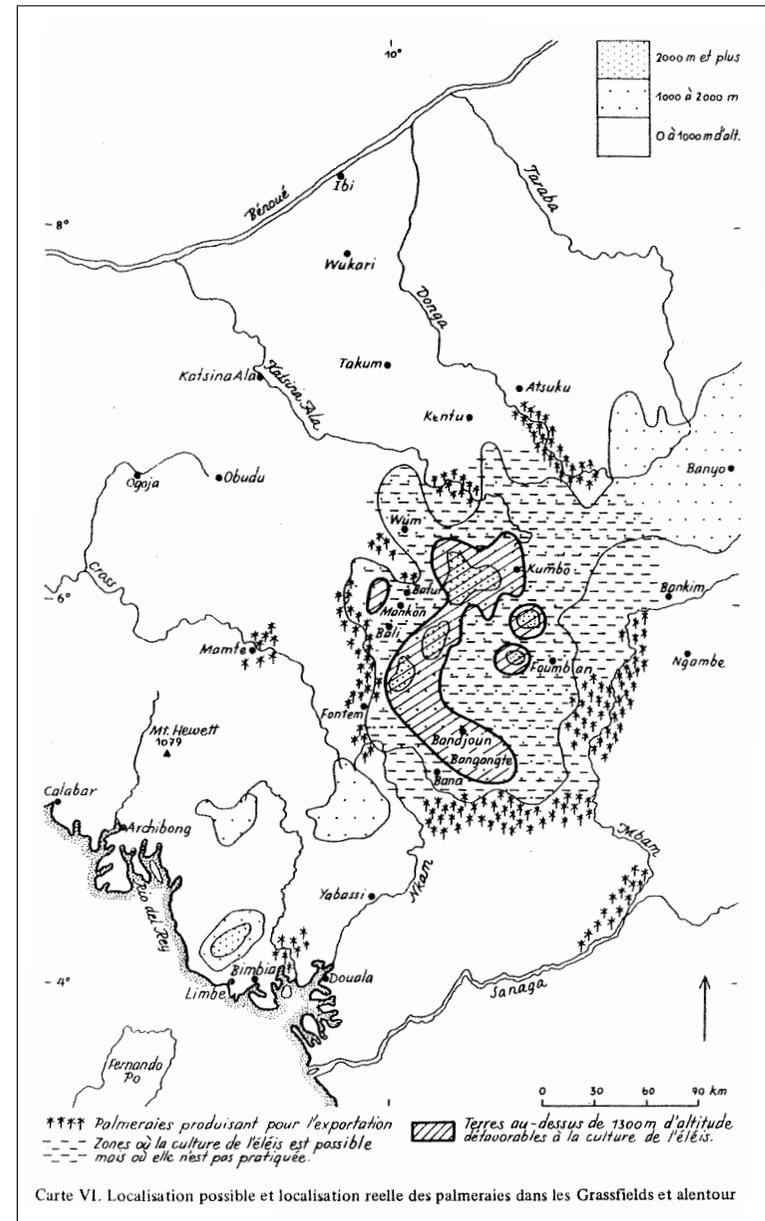


Figure 4: Oil palm production in the Grassfields (Warnier 1985:18)

- [41] The Grassfields area, in fact, has the hallmarks of a sprachbund—albeit one of closely related languages.
- [42] Grassfields languages share a number of lexical innovations, and this seems to have been the main basis for proposing the group (see Stallcup (1980:54) and Elias et al. (1984:32)—and the more recent work of Piron (1997:577–583)).
- [43] But, given the apparent sprachbund context of the Grassfields, non-genetic interpretations are readily available for this (see, for example, Voorhoeve (1980:66) and Warnier (1979)).
- [44] In fact, a non-genetic interpretation of Grassfields Bantu (as a whole) makes it easier to deal with the inconsistent presence of nasal noun classes in the Grassfields (see Hyman (1980b)).
- [45] Western Beboïd participates in the periphery of the Grassfields cultural area
- [a] They are oil producers like other peripheral areas (and historically, they were adjacent to a local metallurgical tradition, the “Glazed Sherds Industry” (Rowlands and Warnier 1993:514)).
 - [b] Linguistically, they are divergent enough from languages of the Grassfields to have never been seriously considered Grassfields languages.
- [46] How to interpret Western Beboïd?
- [a] A long-diversifying small language family that’s been at the fringe of the Grassfields for centuries?
 - [b] A geographically compact cluster of languages whose most noteworthy shared characteristic is having been drawn into the Grassfields cultural sphere without being “Grassfields” languages?
- [47] Problems with genetic interpretation
- [a] No grammatical—or even lexical evidence, with the possible exception of the word for ‘chicken’ (Williamson 2000:382)—for the subgroup at present
 - [b] Requires us to assume Lower Fungom is uniquely linguistically stable in the area, even though what we know of recent history alone contradicts this
 - [c] Requires us to assume Lower Fungom participated in the Grassfields economy without showing Grassfields population dynamics
 - [d] The area is marginal, it is not especially isolated
- [48] Additional factors for “areal” interpretation
- [a] Oral histories of many of the groups in the area explicitly treat them as being intrusive in recent times (though we must treat such claims with caution (Nkwi and Warnier (1982:24–29), Fowler and Zeitlyn (1996)).
 - [b] No sense of political unity in the whole area except for Mashi links to other Naki villages; no evidence of centralized language-unifying force.
 - [c] Hilltop villages, apparently a relatively recent development triggered by raids from the north in the nineteenth century (Nkwi and Warnier 1982:85–86,190), could have facilitated differentiation but probably not at the observed level.
 - [d] Two languages of the region appear to have moved in quite recently, Kung and Naki, though not quite historically.
 - [e] More recently, Troyer et al. (1995:3) report that region has become home to refugees relocated after the 1986 disaster at Lake Nyos.
 - [f] In sum, this area appears to be a general refugium (perhaps connected to its relatively low population density (Nkwi and Warnier 1982:193)).
- [49] “There is nothing recondite about the methods I have employed. It is the common-sense recognition that certain resemblances between languages can *only* be explained on the hypothesis of genetic relationship” (Greenberg 1955). [JG: emphasis added by PN] If one replaces the word “only” by “best” so that the phrase reads “. . . that certain resemblances between languages can *best* be explained on the hypothesis of genetic relationship” it becomes clear that what is at issue is not proof but rather the evaluation of competing hypotheses. (Newman 1995:10)
- [50] In terms of “competing hypotheses”, I think, at present, the areal one is stronger.
- [51] Should we abandon “Western Beboïd”
- [a] As a genealogical label, not reliable
 - [b] As a referential label, helpful
 - [c] Perhaps a better name would be: *Northwestern Grassfields Restprache?*
- [52] Campbell and Poser (2008:144–145) suggest that areal linguistics has not played a major role in African historical linguistics—it’s not clear to me that Africa is all that imbalanced from a worldwide perspective.
- [53] Rather, a lack of attention (or interest?) has meant that classifications of ambiguous areal-genealogical status have by default been treated as genealogical (as a result of an uncritical imposition of a standard “European” model on Africa?)—see also Blench (2009) and Irvine and Gal (2000:47–59).

5 Broader consequences

- [54] The evidence on which it is based is far too slight to make the classification of any value for historians looking for help from linguistic material... In fact it would be possible to place much more confidence in this whole work if the author had shown an awareness of the inconclusive nature of a great part of the evidence. (Guthrie 1964:135)
- [55] If you don't know what Western Beoid—or even Grassfields Bantu—is
- You assume a clearer version of Bantoid branching than there is evidence for
 - You assume a clearer version of the Bantu expansion than there is evidence for
- [56] I maintain that Bantu is merely a group within the vast Niger-Congo family and can in fact be placed within that family in the Benue-Congo branch and can be further pinpointed as a member of the Bantoid sub-branch of Benue-Congo. (Greenberg 1972:196)
- [57] This attitude of “precision” came to dominate the presentation of African families.
- [58] But, there is no “Bantu” (Nurse and Philippson 2003b:6–7)—Greenberg may have fixed one problem (that of “Semi-Bantu”) but only by introducing another.
- [59] The classification set forth here is a conservative one. I feel that far greater harm is done by a premature acceptance of a possibility than by a provisional rejection coupled with an allusion to its existence. This is particularly true in African languages where the primary evidence is not likely to be checked for long periods and where anyone who sets forth a general scheme assumes a greater burden of scientific responsibility than in areas where there is a more active scholarly interest. (Greenberg 1949a:83)

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