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The position of Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka group among the Niger-Congo languages

Abstract: Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka (GMN) was classified by Greenberg as an Eastern member of the Adamawa-Eastern Branch (Eastern was renamed Ubangian by Thomas and Samarin). Nowadays the unity of Eastern branch has been called into question (see Boyd and Moñino), and the group is reduced to its central languages, that is Banda-Yakoma-Sere-Mba; Zande and GMN diverge too greatly from the others to be considered as Ubangian any longer. This contribution focuses on the status of Proto-GMN inside Niger-Congo: for instance Proto-GMN shows more affinities with the Proto-Gur proposed by Manessy than with any of the Central Ubangian or Adamawa languages. Is this due to an actual closer genealogic connection between these two groups, or the fact that we compared two proto-languages reconstructed with the same "classical" methods? The answer will be possible only when we have reliable proto-languages for each little group of Niger-Congo languages that we are able to compare with each other. In the meantime, lexical affinities between Proto-GMN, Proto-Bantu, Proto-Sara-Bongo-Bagirmian languages (which are not Niger-Congo!) will be pointed out, and the status of these affinities (genetically related or borrowed in the distant past) will be discussed.

Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka was defined by Samarin (1971) as a “Dialectal Continuum”. I prefer to say “linguistic continuum” because, in this area, an isoglossal characterization does not put dialects into relief and because this group includes many languages without mutual intelligibility: there are at least four different languages, two of them being divided into many varieties or dialects. In Greenberg’s classification (1963), the position of GMN is as following:

I. Congo-Kordofanian
  A. Niger-Congo
    6. Adamawa-Eastern
      A. Adamawa (14 subgroups)
      B. Eastern (8 subgroups) :
        1. **gbaya, manza, ngbaka**
        2. banda
        3. ngbandi, sango, yakoma
        4. zande, nzakara, barambu, pambia
        5. ngbaka ma’bo, monzombo, gbanzili, mundu, mayogo, bangba
        6. ndogo, sere, tagbu, bai, bviri, feroge, indri, togoyo, mangaya
        7. amadi (madyo, ma)
        8. mondunga, mba (bamanga)

Joseph Greenberg’s “mass comparisons” method was based more on visible similarities than on phonic correspondences between terms; this method made possible the construction of a very global view on the four big language families of Africa, but it was insufficient to specify with accuracy the subfamilies and their branches. In Bennett’s lexicostatistic method (1983), the reorganization of the Niger-Congo family gives the following position to GBN:

I. Niger-Congo
A. Central Niger-Congo
c. North-Central Niger-Congo
1. Gurunsi (= 3 c,d,g of GREENBERG)
2. Tula-Longuda (= 6A1, 6A10, 6A7, 6A9 of GREENBERG)
3. Boa-Kula (= 6A13 of GREENBERG)
4. **Gbaya, Manza, Ngbaka** (= 6B1 of GREENBERG)
5. Cameroon-Ubangian (3 subdivisions):
5a. Chamba-Namsi (= 6A2, 6A4, 6A5 of GREENBERG)
5b. Mangbei-Mbum (= 6A6 of GREENBERG)
5c. Ubangian (4 subdivisions) :
Ngbandi (= 6B3 of GREENBERG)
Zande (= 6B4 of GREENBERG)
Amadi (= 6B7 of GREENBERG)
"kã" group (= 6B2, B5, B6, B8 of GREENBERG)

Here, GMN is one of the five original branches of NCNC. These results were built on only 29 cognate terms, a feature which limits their relevance. But if BENNETT'S hypothesis is not very strong, at least it shows that GMN is not Ubangian, Adamawa or Voltaic, but could be a separate entity in Niger-Congo whole.

Boïeldieu & Cloarec-Heiss (1987) applied to Greenberg's Ubangian a method combining lexicostatistics with phonic correspondances developed by W. Möhlig:

gbaya-manza-ngbaka	**820**				
zande-nzakara	79	**539**			
banda	109	115	**721**		
sango-yakoma	144	177	200	**924**	
ngbaka-monzombo	162	126	245	220	**664**
Subgroup	gbaya	zande	banda	sango	ngbaka
Nbr of languages compared	7	2	7	2	4

(Numerals in bold show internal average proximity of the languages of each subgroup; complete identity = 1000)

This table clearly shows that GMN and Zande-Nzakara have very little in common with other Ubanguian languages. Despite the fact that some phonic correspondances are taken into account, lexicostatistics, drawn up from only 100 terms, can give a preliminary idea of geolinguistic distance of the compared languages, but hardly allows us to distinguish between similarities due to genealogical filiation and those due to contacts.

At the moment, the most reasonable position is given by Boyd (1989): inside the limits of Greenberg's Ubangian, empirically taken as a provisional frame, we have three genealogical entities:

1. Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka (B1 of GREENBERG)
2. Ngbandi-Sere-Banda:
   a. Ngbandi-Sango-Yakoma (B3)
   b. Sere-Ngbaka-Mba (B6, B5, B7 + B8)
   c. Banda (B2)
3. Zande (B4)

My objevtive here is to point out some lexical affinities between Proto-GMN, Proto-Gur, Proto-Bantu and Proto-Sara-Bongo-Bagirmian and discuss their genealogical or contact possible status. Another aim is to develop some of the requirements I have applied in my own comparative work.

1. Lexical affinities of Proto-Gbaya with other Proto-languages

A. With Proto-Central Gur (Manessy 1979)

Manessy had previously reconstructed Proto-Gurunsi (1969) and Proto-Oti-Volta (1975), before comparing these two proto-languages with each other and also with Kurumfe. He called this new step in reconstruction Proto-Central, and gave 223 reconstructed items for Proto-Central : 62 are common to the three subfamilies Gu-OV-Ku, 105 to both Gu and OV, 39 to Gu and Ku, and 17 to OV and Ku.

I compared my 803 roots reconstructed for Proto-Gbaya with the 223 Gu-OV-Ku roots and obtained a total of 50 possible cognates between the two families : 20 of them characterize the whole Proto-Central family, 23 the Gu-OV set, 5 the Gu-K set and 2 the OV-K set. These 50 candidates to a genealogical link between Gur and Gbaya languages represent 22,4% of the compared roots. These comparisons do not claim to establish a genealogical link between Proto-Central and Gbaya, because they are not yet based on regular phonetic correspondences. They are given only to call attention to the fact that the same protocol applied to Proto-Gbaya and to “Ubangian” languages gives lower results :

Proto-Gbaya / Zande	7,9%
Proto-Gbaya / Banda	10,9%
Proto-Gbaya / Sango-Yakoma	14,4%
Proto-Gbaya / Ngbaka-Monzombo	16,2%

Thus, surprisingly, Proto-Gbaya has more visible affinities with Proto-Central Gur than with any of the so-called Ubangian languages.

B. With Proto-Bantu (Guthrie (1967-1970)

17 reconstructed items may be common to P-GMN, PCG and Proto-Bantu: these items are probably part of the Proto-Niger-Congo. 73 more items of my 803 Proto-Gbaya items can be related with Proto-Bantu, that is 90 possible cognates between these two families, representing 11,2 %. This is not very much, and if we have found some “fundamental” vocabulary, most of the 90 words belong to the “cultural” one, especially for some animals and the ironwork.

C. With the Sara subgroup of Sara-Bongo-Baguirmian

Here we have found only a few words, all belonging to the agricultural sphere, like “granary”, “cultivated field” and the verb “cultivate”. It confirms that the speakers of Proto-Gbaya were hunters-gatherers, and that they get agriculture from the northern Sara.

2. Observations on methodological requirements in historical linguistics

When I reconstructed Proto-gbaya, I drew my inspiration from the works of Gabriel Manessy (1975, 1979, 1990). He himself was in the line of Meillet and such comparative grammarians as Guthrie, but he hugely reformed and enhanced the method, especially by introducing precise requirements for the constitution of linguistic genealogical subfamilies. Guthrie for instance had accurately established the Proto-Bantu from comparative series and correspondence formulas, but the subfamilies he set up (the Bantu A to S zones) were more geolinguistic areas in contact than genealogical phylums defined by a set of shared innovations. For the selection of these innovations and their hierarchic organization, Manessy, according to the classical comparative method, gave priority to the morphological correspondences before the lexical similarities, but he also claimed that there was no absolute nor necessary criteria for the hierarchy. Their value is only operative and depends on each considered language group. The only firm requirement is the capacity of the selected criteria to base the differencial evolution towards new subfamilies, regarding the improbability of the similarities.

Following these points, I characterize Proto-gbaya with five distinctive features, the presentation order of which expresses a hierarchy from the most to the least discriminatory, as far as language filiation of the languages coming from it is concerned :

(1) A verbal morphology based on an opposition, for each verb, between a non marked form *CV<C>(i), and a marked one *|CV(C)a|, with vocalic alternations regarding (*-a / *-o) suffix as well as radical vowel (*e > *i, *o > *u).

(2) A tonal morphology where a relational morphotonem *|H| marking the relations [noun + noun], [preposition + noun] and [verb + next term], is mixed with the lexical or grammatical tone of the first term, to form bound grammatical tones *H et *LH / *L, different from the lexical tones in their morphological behavior and later evolution.

(3) A reeduced nominal morphology with a probable lack of nominal class system, but showing irregular vocalic alternations, no longer functional at the time the proto-language was spoken: they suggest that at least some nouns of the ancestral language had two forms nearing fossilization, proportional to both verbal forms (flexions *e / *i, *o / *u).

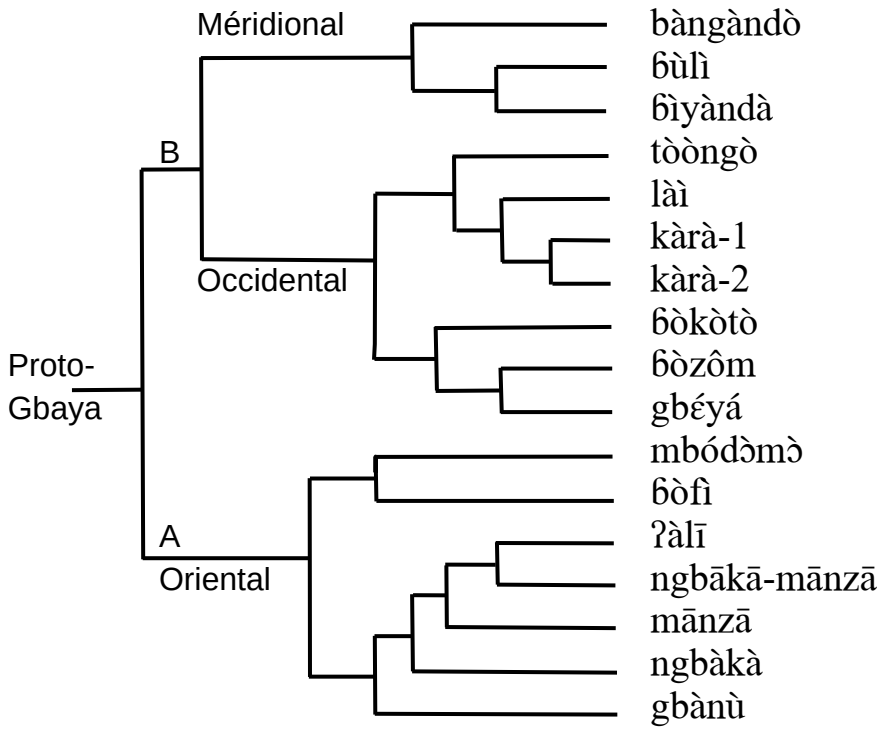
(4) Phonic features, the more salient of which are the existence of two lateral phonemes *l and *ɭ, and a flap phoneme *r ; a prenazalized *nz ; a subsystem of final consonants — part of the lexical roots in the case of the nouns, but added to them as derivational suffixes in the case of verbs; two distinctive musical tones, combining into four lexical schemes (tonal units characterizing nouns), *H, *L, *HL and *LH ; finally, an opposition between oral and nasal vowels.

(5) A vocabulary of its own, “grammatical” and “lexical”, composed by the reconstructions of 900 GCS, which includes 803 basic terms, 73 compounds and 14 grammatical bound morphems (tonal flexions, vocalic and consonantic suffixes).

Other features also characterize the Proto-gbaya, but they are either structural features, the later evolution of which is due to functional congruences, or persistences of it in the new languages. Therefore, all these features are not discriminatory for the gbaya-manza-ngbaka languages. We can mention the reconstructed phonological system for the consonants, based on the correlation oral ~ nasal, split into unvoiced ~ voiced and prenasal ~ nasal, and into labial, alveolar, palatal, back and labiovelar orders; a vocalic system with 7 orals et 5 nasals, and a lack of long vowels, but with V_1V_1 and V_1V_2 sequences; a predominance of lexical low tone *L, concerning one noun out of two; and a majority of CVCV structures, which represent 44% of the basic starred forms.

Genealogical Synthesis

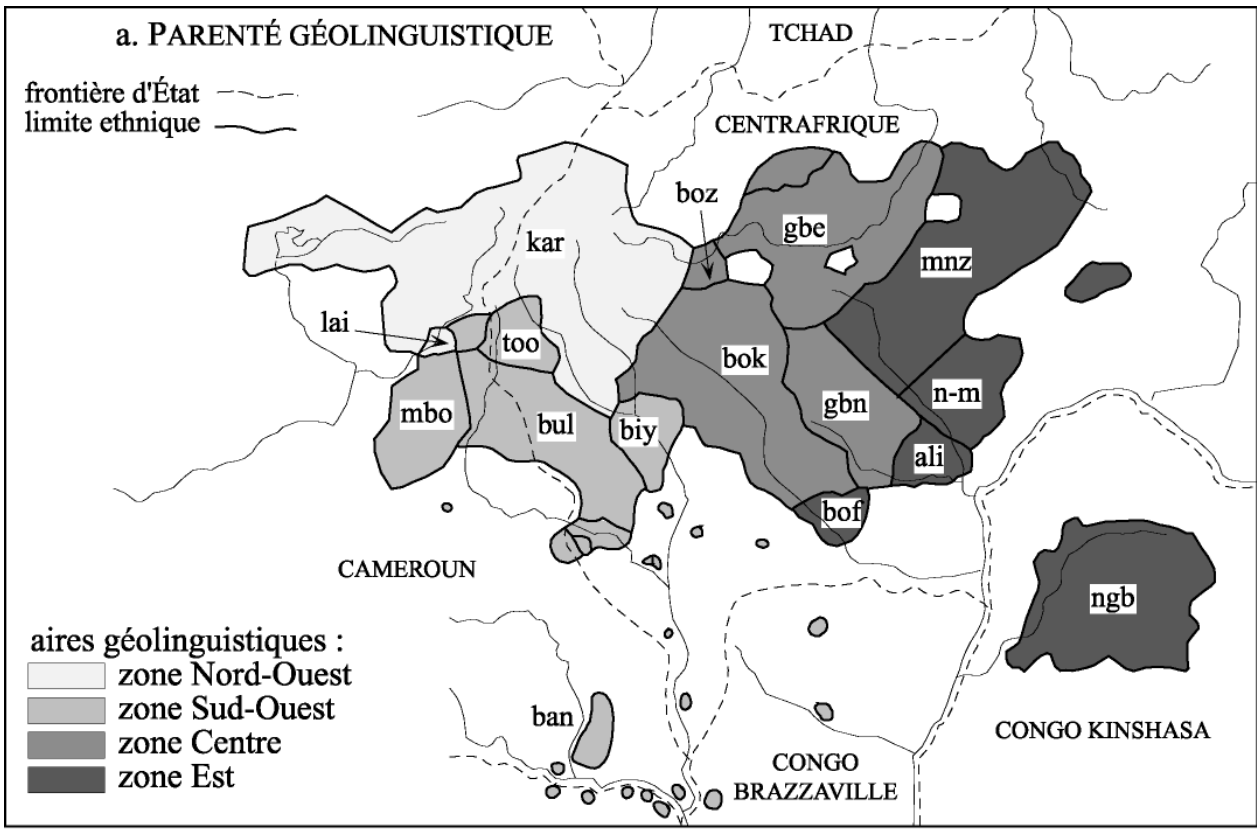
Reviewing and applying these criteria leads me to propose a representation of the evolution of Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka languages by means of the classical figure of a genealogical tree, where each branch split corresponds to a cluster of particular and unpredictible innovations, common to the languages located to the right of the branchings :

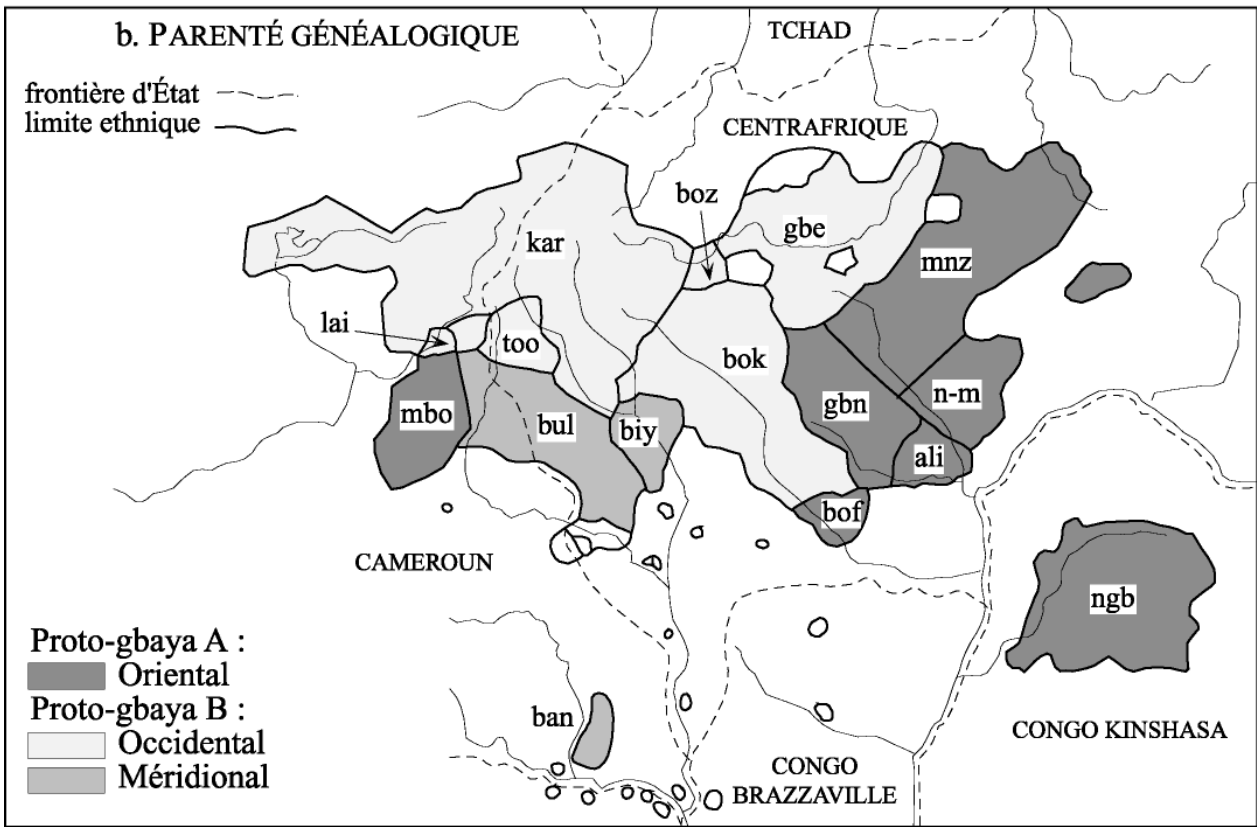


A comparison of this tree with the empirical groupings into geolinguistic areas (see map) shows, for example, that South-West area gathers five languages very similar by their structural features (lack of phonological nasal vowels, dérivation -si

“causative”, many lexical items, etc.), acquired by neighbor dissemination. But only two (’Buli and ’Biyanda) are genealogically close, and set up together with Bangando, more distant, a subgroup with common origin, the Southern (“Méridional”); Toongo is an Occidental dialect, that the later sociopolitical identification of its speakers to the ’Buli moved closer to the linguistic patterns of Southerner; Mbodomo, which presents 86% of the Swadesh list of terms in common with the neighboring ‘Buli and only 67% with ’Bofi, is though closely and clearly related to Eastern (unmarked form of the verbs, processing of *l̩, vocalic alternations, etc.), from which it is today separated by more than 700 km, with a total lack of contacts. Gbanu has many surface features of the Central Gbaya dialects like ’Bokoto, but it is genealogically Eastern, in particular because of its verbal morphology: it is with the Ngbaka, and not with its neighbor Ali, that it shares the most significant origine features.

Gbaya-Manza-Ngbaka relationships





APPENDIX

Proto-Gbaya / Proto-Central Gur (62 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta + Kurumfe) : 20 possible cognates

Proto-Gbaya	Proto-Central Gur	Proto-Bantu	English	French
dàn	don	≠	friend	ami
dáà	ca	≠	father	père
sa	yi	≠	to call	appeler
zɛ̀	ñen	≠	night	nuit
l̰í	yi	≠	face	visage
l̰i to suck/sucer	di	dí- G	to eat	manger
l̰e	dyi	(-jɪ- come NW)	to enter	entrer
bú	po	≠	white	blanc
ndàè cattle	na	– (cattle ≠)	ox	bœuf
gɔn	ko	≠	to cut	couper
nɔ	ño	-nʊ- G, -nyʊ- N	to drink	boire
bêm	bi	≠	child	enfant
wa̰á̰	van	≠	leaf	feuille
góròˋ	go	≠	kola nut	kola
nár	na	-nà G	four	quatre
dòm	ɗyʊɗ	≠	tail	queue
kor	ko	≠	to dry	sécher
dṵ̀kṵ̀l̰ḭ̀	kud	≠	heel	talon
tòm	tum	≠	work	travail
nám buffalo/buffle	nam	-yàmà, -nyámá G	meat	viande

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 105 Gurunsi + Oti-Volta : 23

Proto-Gbaya	Gurunsi +Oti-Volta	Proto-Bantu	English	French
tɛ̀	tɪ	-tí G	tree	arbre
ɓàà, ɓàkà	ɓa, ɓan	-bókò G	arm	bras
ʔo se casser	ko	≠	to break	casser
dùngì, dòngè	dyʊm	-dímà W	bat	chauve-souris
túl̰í	to	≠	elbow	coude
sæk couper, tailler	se	-céc- W	to cut, sharpen	couper
gɔ	go	-gòòb- CW, W	to bend	courber
ɗu puiser/draw from	ɗu	≠	hollow	creux
yai	ñɪn, ñɪɗ	≠	to untie	délier
l̰ì	ni	-ji N, E	water	eau
ñá	ña	≠	younger brother	frère cadet
tí	ti	≠	forehead	front
zé	ño	≠	smoke	fumée
wál̰á	nan	≠	fruit	fruit
naa	na	-nɪnà N	mother	mère
zí	jo	≠	fly	mouche
l̰ín	yɪd, yɪɗ	-yɪnà G	name	nom
kúì	ɕe	≠	egg	œuf
náɲ	nan	≠	foot	pied
kòrá	kol	≠	hen	poule
kìl̰ì sphérique	kiɗ	≠	round	rond
mbáɲ	meɗ	-mè N, C, SW	dew	rosée
zù	ʔyu	≠	head	tête

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 39 Gurunsi + Kurumfe : 5

Proto-Gbaya	Gurunsi +kurumfe	Proto-Bantu	English	Français
nɔ́ graisse, huile	nu	≠	fat, oil	graisse, beurre
ñín	ye	-yɪnò G	tooth	dent
bàfà	bad	≠	male	mâle
lémbè, leɓé	deɗm	-dímì G	tongue	langue
sáp	ta	≠ (swallow)	saliva	salive

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with 17 Oti-Volta + Kurumfe : 2

Proto-Gbaya	Oti-Volta +kurumfe	Proto-Bantu	English	Français
l̩íítò	yi	≠	two	deux
to	to	≠	to grind	piler

Proto-Gbaya possible cognates with Proto-Bantu-Bantu

Proto-Gbaya	Proto-Bantu	English	Français
l̩é	-jì CW, E	village	village
bùk	-bU G	ashes	cendres
kɔ̀nì, kɔ̀ndì	-kòndè G	banana	banane
nzèrè	-jèdU W, NE	beard	barbe
dɔ̰kɔ̰́, dɔ̰ɔ̰́	-dègU, dùgU NW,CW	beer	alcool
kòmbá	-gùbà CW, CE, SE	bellows	soufflets
nɔ́ɛ́	-nùní W, N, C, nòní NW	bird	oiseau
mbɔ̀ngɔ́, mbɔ́ɔ́	-bòngó N, CW	brain	cerveau
bèrè	-béédè G	breast	sein
dànà	-dàdò G	bridge	pont
gun	-kUnd- W	to bury	enterrer
tól̩í	-tút- G	to carry	porter
kadî NW, SW	-kád- CW, NE	to cease	finir
kɛ́l̩ì	-kádà G	charcoal	charbon
kɔ́lí	-kódud- G	to cough	tousser
tɔr	-tád- NW, SW, NE, CE	to count	compter
gun cover = bury	-gUn- C, SE	to cover	couvrir
kál̩á	-kádá G	crab	crabe
ngàndó SW, NW	-gàndú W, NE, CE	crocodile	crocodile
kókó	-kókò G	crust	écorce
yɔ̀l̩à	-yìdà CE	danse	danse
ɗuk	-dɪk- CE, SE	become deep	être profond
sál̩á	-cádá W, NE	feather	plume
gɛ̀n	-gònò CW, E	fish-trap	nasse
kòò NW, C	-kóókò NW, SW	grandparent	grand-père
búmɔ́	-bùdɪ CW, SW, E	hair on body	poil
dɔ̀nɔ̀	-dòndò CE, SE	hammer	marteau
dító, díó	-dɪtò NW, E	heary	lourd
ngùɓú	-gùbU C, SW	hippopotamus	hippopotame
kóngó	-gúngù NW	hoe	houe coudée
zák	-nyàngá C, SE	horn	corne

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