

MORIBUND LANGUAGES OF THE NIGERIA-CAMEROON BORDERLAND

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1. Introduction

1.1. Language endangerment in the Nigeria - Cameroon borderland

Nigeria and Cameroon are recognized as being the two most linguistically heterogeneous countries in Africa; indeed with 700 - 800 languages between them (roughly 12% of the world's languages), they constitute one of the most linguistically diverse areas in the world, despite having well below 1% of the world's population. The borderland shared by these countries is perhaps their most densely populated area, linguistically speaking. It might come as no surprise then that today we find this to be region with a relatively high incidence of language endangerment. Figures gleaned from Grimes (1996), supplemented by information from Crozier and Blench (1992) and my own field notes help to confirm this supposition. For a number of reasons, however, these figures must be treated as offering an impression only, rather than hard fact. First, I have arbitrarily chosen a cut-off point of approximately 1,000 speakers as being the 'endangered' marker; yet it is not all that difficult to find languages with fewer than 1,000 speakers that are relatively vital (at least according to their speakers), nor, on the other hand, is it difficult to find languages with well over 1,000 speakers that might be considered to be endangered, or dying out. Second, censuses in both Nigeria and Cameroon are frequently flawed, for a variety of reasons. And third, for a great many languages no population estimates are available.

However, with these caveats in mind, approximately 90 languages are listed in the *Ethnologue* entries for Cameroon and Nigeria as having 1,000 or fewer speakers; of these, just under a third (26) are described as dying out, nearly extinct, or extinct. Of the 90, over half (51) are located in the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland; of these, over a third (18) are described as dying out, nearly extinct, or extinct; in other words, well over half of all moribund languages in Nigeria and Cameroon are in this area. These figures are summarized in Table One.

Table One: Language contraction and death in Nigeria and Cameroon and the borderland.

	<i>Languages with fewer than 1000 speakers</i>	<i>Moribund languages</i>
Nigeria	60	15
Cameroon	30	11
Borderland	50	18

The indication, then, is that the borderland is an area of greater linguistic endangerment than other parts of Nigeria and Cameroon. This may or may not be an important conclusion, i.e. it may be distorted, a reflection of the amount of research that has been done in the various regions of the two countries - Blench (this volume), for example indicates a greater incidence of language contraction in Central Nigeria than previously believed. On the other hand, it may prove to be the case that our knowledge of the borderland also underestimates the incidence of language

contraction in this area. Either way, these figures can be assumed to reflect some form of linguistic reality: linguistically, the borderland is known to be particularly heterogeneous, and in an age where standardization and homogenization are growing trends, an area such as this can be expected to reflect these trends in a more dramatic fashion.

1.2. The Mambila region

The Nigeria-Cameroon borderland is a large area, geographically and linguistically diverse. It would be difficult to deal with the entire region and do justice to the situation in one paper; more important, our knowledge of much of the region is no better than the sketch given in the preceding paragraph. In this chapter, therefore, I focus on one particular area of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland: the Mambila region where, over the last three years, I have conducted field work. My main purposes are: first, simply to make known the existence (or former existence, in some cases) of a number of moribund languages in the region; second, to explore to some extent the causes of language contraction and death in the area; and third to examine some of the implications knowledge of these languages has for the linguistic history of the region. The Mambila region is relatively small - in terms of geography it constitutes less than 5% of the Nigeria - Cameroon border land, and probably not much more with respect to population. However, almost 25% percent of known moribund languages of the borderland are in this area. (Again, all the previous caveats apply here - only more so if at all, since the seven languages discussed are all known primarily through my own research.)

2. Moribund languages in the Mambila area.

The Mambila area is extremely heterogeneous, linguistically (see Figure One). In my survey work of the area I have recorded in excess of 30 languages and dialects; most of these can be or have been tentatively placed within the Mambiloid grouping Blench (1993); discussion of the validity of this grouping has been presented elsewhere (Connell 1996, in press) and need not be examined here. Among these, however, are seven languages that are either extinct - and quite recently so - or moribund. 'Moribund' is defined as not being transmitted to the younger generations. These are presented in Table Two, together with relevant demographic and (assumed) genetic information. They are listed according to vitality, defined in terms of frequency of use. Pertinent discussion of each follows.

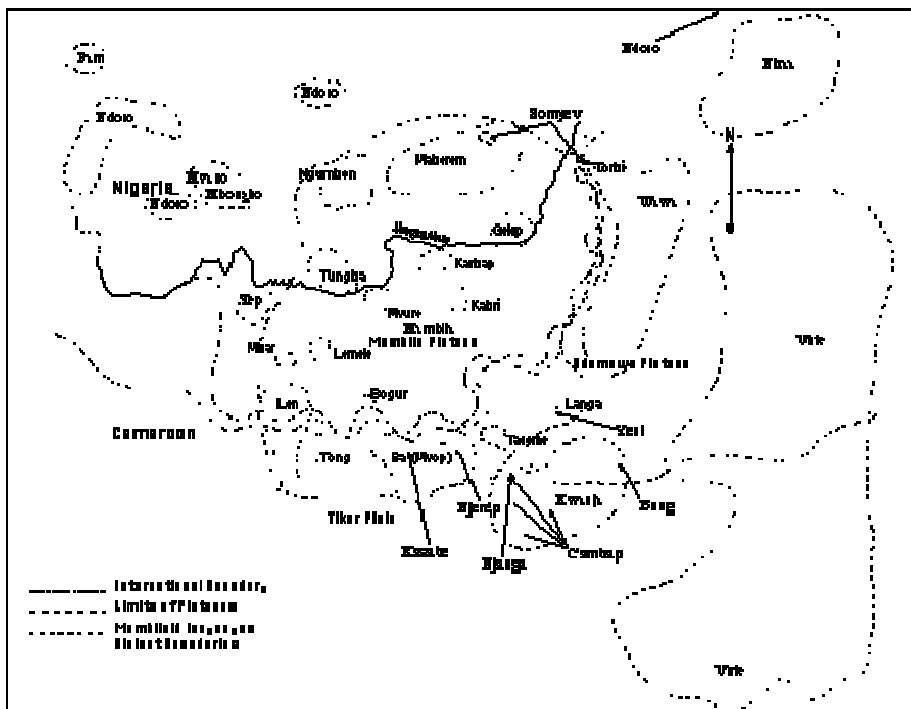


Figure One: Language distribution in the Mambila area. The moribund languages discussed are indicated in bold.

In addition to those languages marked on the map, non-Mambiloid languages spoken in the area include Tikar, Yamba (Grassfields, also known as Kaka in Nigeria), and Fulfulde. Tikar is spoken to the south of Ba and Tong Mambila, and according to oral tradition may have once extended as far north as the escarpment (cf. Zeitlyn 1992). Yamba settlements exist in the southwest of the Mambila Plateau and are scattered on the Tikar Plain and onto the Adamawa Plateau, where they are believed to represent a relatively recent presence. There are Fulani settlements scattered throughout the area, or Fulani quarters (*quartiers*) in many Mambiloid villages. Otherwise, areas on the map which don't reflect a particular language/lect (e.g. the areas between Mambila lects) are uninhabited.

Table Two: Moxibund languages of the Mambila region.

<i>Language</i>	<i>Number of Speakers</i>	<i>Closest Relative</i>
Cambap (aka Twendi)	35	Mambila / Langa
Somyev (aka Kila)	20	Tep, Wawa
Njanga	2	Kwanja
Njerep	6	Mambila / Langa
Bung	3	(Kwanja)
Kasabe (aka Luo)	0 (d. 11/95)	Mambila / Langa
Yeni	0	Mambila / Langa

2.1. Cambap

Cambap speakers (who call themselves Camba) are found in a number of Kwanja villages, and although three villages in the area, Sango, Camba, and Ndem Ndem are said to be Camba villages, there is no concentration of Cambap speakers in any of them. Given this dispersal, it is difficult to assume the language is used on a daily basis, though it is said to be used whenever speakers are together. The youngest speaker is about 50 years old, though some younger Camba appear to be showing some interest learning the language and can understand it to some extent. It is referred to in the literature (Blench 1993, Risnes 1989) as Twendi.

According to oral tradition, Cambap (like Njerep and Kasabe, see below) is now removed from the area where it was originally spoken, identified in Cambap oral tradition as the region around Djeni Mountain. (In Figure One this is approximately where Langa is located.) It appears to be have been at least a hundred years, and possibly much more, since the evacuation of this original area occurred; the consultant I worked with outlined several moves the Camba made before reaching their present area, indicating the migration occurred over a number of generations. One hypothesis, mooted in Connell (1995) is that the Fulani jihad of the last century, with its associated slave-taking and slaughter of resisters, decimated the local populations and precipitated the decline in fortune of a number of languages. Hurault (1995) dates the jihad in this region to the last part of the 19th century; he also suggests venereal disease, associated with the Fulani incursion, as a cause of population decline. It is possible that the jihad may have occurred too late to have instigated the dispersal, and a second possible precipitating factor are the Chamba incursions at the beginning of 19th century (see Fardon 1988).

All Cambap speakers now speak primarily Kwanja; which dialect depends on the village (as mentioned above, the Camba now find themselves scattered over several villages, all of which are predominantly Kwanja, but include the two main Kwanja dialects). In most cases it is the Sundani dialect which is favoured, though some use Ndung. Many are able to speak both Kwanja dialects; in addition, many have some command of Fulfulde and some speak a variety of Mambila.

2.2. Somyev

Somyev (the speakers call themselves Somyewe) is spoken in two villages, one in Cameroon and one in Nigeria, with the majority of the speakers (approximately 15) being in the Nigerian village of Kila Yang. The youngest of them is in his late forties, though some younger people in the community may have a limited understanding of the language. Depending to some extent on social situation, the language is used on a daily basis. It is referred to as 'Kila' in Meek (1931), as it is a language used only by blacksmiths ('kila' being the Fulfulde term for blacksmith). Now, in the face of imported goods and changing customs, the local blacksmith trade has lost its earlier importance. In earlier times, for example, a prospective husband was required to provide his future wife's family with (among other things) 10 hoes, which would have been made almost exclusively by the Somyewe. The loss of traditions such as this, together with the almost exclusive use of imported hoes, has ultimately affected the status of the language.

Like most people in the general region, the Somyewe use Fulfulde as a lingua franca; however the primary language of their community (i.e. Kila Yang) is Maberem, a Mambila lect, and it is this which the younger people - the sons and daughters of the former blacksmiths - know as their first language. In the Cameroon village where Somyev is spoken, the Somyewe have similarly adopted the language of that village, Torbi, also a Mambila lect.

2.3. Njanga

Njanga is spoken only in the village of Mbondjanga. It is considered to be a dialect of Kwanja, but initial work shows it to be considerably different - apparently more conservative - than other Kwanja dialects. At the time of writing it is spoken only by the chief of Mbondjanga and his *notable* on a more or less daily basis (i.e. "at some time during the day"); it is not known to what extent it may be understood by older people in the village. Oral tradition tells us Mbondjanga was formerly a Tikar settlement (Gausset 1997); it is not yet known what extent of influence, if any, Tikar has had on Njanga, though initial impressions are that any influence has been slight.

The Njanga have increasingly intermarried with the Sundani, another Kwanja group, and their dialect of Kwanja is the one now used almost exclusively in the village. A small and decreasing population, together with (or resulting in) the increasing intermarriage with the Sundani has apparently been the primary factor in the decline of this language.

2.4. Njerep

Njerep is, or was, most recently spoken in the Ba Mambila village of Somié. It is no longer used on a daily basis, though when together the few people who know the language may use it for joking or if they don't want to be understood by others. Information about Njerep comes from a variety of sources: a wordlist and songs collected from Njerep speakers; oral tradition gleaned from the same people; related traditions discussed in Zeitlyn (1992); and a census and survey of language use in the Njerep hamlet or *quartier* of Somié.

2.4.1. Njerep oral traditions

Perhaps not surprisingly, there are contradictions in the traditions concerning the Njerep; what is clear, however, is that they are immigrants to their present location. Precisely where they came from is not clear; some reports suggest Guesimi and others Djeni. However, the difference is probably unimportant, for as Figure One shows, these two areas are adjacent (as mentioned above, Djeni is roughly where Langa is spoken today; Guesimi is the location of Taceme), and mention of Guesimi in some traditions may well be nothing more than an indication of the route their migration took. The Njerep refer to Luo (i.e. Kasabe; see below) as being mutually intelligible with Njerep, and although Cambap is not mutually intelligible, the Njerep recognize it as being related to their language.

2.4.2. Njerep census

The census, done in January 1997, recorded 192 people living in the hamlet of Njerep (Mvamngo). Of these, almost half represent a recent immigrant population. Only four listed Njerep as a language used at home, and in no case does it appear to be the only language used; in fact, information gathered independent of the census suggests it is highly doubtful that the language is used at all except perhaps, as mentioned above, to joke or when a degree of secrecy or privacy is required. In addition to these, a fifth person indicated Njerep as a language she used outside the home (she is Njerep married to a non-Njerep), and a sixth Njerep speaker is known to live outside the hamlet in another quartier of Somié. Information on these speakers as to date of birth and parentage is given in Table 3.

The youngest of the Njerep speakers is now in her fifties, an interesting fact when one considers that the youngest Cambap and Somyev speakers are also of about the same age. What is more striking however is the fact that, based on the parentage of these Njerep speakers, we can assume that even as recently as the 1920s and 30s, there may have been no more than a handful of families speaking Njerep - perhaps as few as four.

Table Three: Njerep speakers

<i>Speaker</i>	<i>Year</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Mother</i>
B	1922	M	F1	M1
DM	1920s	F	F1	M2
NA	1939	M	F2	M3
BS	1940	F	F1	M4
KI	1945	F	F3	M5
MN	1930s	M	F4	M6

The survey also provided information on which languages are used as replacement languages for Njerep. In all cases, the Njerep speakers and their children listed Mvop, the Mambila lect (also called Ba) of the surrounding community, as the language of daily use, both inside and outside the home. Most also know some Fulfulde, and the younger ones (i.e. those who have been to school) also have some command of French, though use of these two languages is generally restricted to specific situations. Other languages, particularly the Mambila lect of Mbar, spoken mainly at Mbar on the Mambila plateau, are also spoken in the hamlet of Mvamngo, but these all appear to be recent arrivals. Although some offspring of Njerep speakers listed Mbar as a language they would use outside the home it was rarely listed higher than fourth in these cases.

2.5. Bung

Bung has three people who remember it; the one who apparently knows it best is not a native speaker, though he learned it relatively young. It is no longer used, though it was spoken at the village of Bounq on the Adamawa Plateau; it is not known whether it was ever more widespread. The wordlist collected for Bung shows its greatest resemblance to be with Ndung-Kwanja, though this may be for the simple reason that the speaker's dominant language is Ndung and there has been a certain amount of transfer; otherwise it shares lexical items with each of Tep, Somyev, and Vute, and contains a number of others which remain unidentified in terms of genetic affiliation, though they may be of Adamawa provenance.

The language spoken at Bounq today is the Ndung lect of Kwanja. As elsewhere in the wider region, Fulfulde is also spoken.

2.6. Kasabe

Kasabe was reportedly closely related to Njerep. Its last known speaker lived in the Ba Mambila hamlet of Mvurum near Atta. He died in November 1995; it is not known how long he had been the only speaker. A sister survives him but she reportedly does not know the language, nor do any of his children. It is known as Luo to speakers of Njerep. Like the Njerep and Camba, the Kasabe came from the Guesimi/Djeni area. It is not clear whether the Kasabe adopted the language of the village where they people settled, or whether they established their own settlements and later came to be dominated by the Mvop. However, one Njerep informant believed that the Luo (Kasabe) had settled in different villages in the mountains of the area, supporting the former possibility; this opinion also suggests that there may still be Kasabe speakers living, although before he died my consultant said he was not aware of any others.

Kasabe was replaced by Mvop (Ba Mambila). My Kasabe informant (he was said to be well over 100 years old when he died), reported that his mother had been born in the same village where he himself grew up, again indicating several generations had passed.

2.7. Yeni

Yeni, as I reported elsewhere (Connell 1995), is known only through a song. Comparison of words found in this song with other local languages suggests it was closely related to Cambap, Njerep, and Kasabe. This conclusion is supported by local oral tradition.

Details are not available as to who the descendants of the Yeni are, though oral tradition indicates that like the Camba, Njerep, and Kasabe, they once lived in the area of Djeni Mountain; in fact it may be assumed that 'Djeni' and 'Yeni' are the same word, i.e. the mountain is so-named because it was their territory. The area is only sparsely populated today, though as mentioned above a Mambila lect, Langa, is spoken there.

2.8. Other endangered or extinct languages in the region

Other than the seven languages looked at above, there are several other languages in the area which may be prove to be endangered in the short to medium term: Tep, Fam, Mbongo, and Mvanip are all probably spoken by fewer than 1,000 people. Wawa, with at least three dialects, is probably spoken by not more than 1,500 people. Also, there are several lects within the Mambila cluster which are spoken by fewer than 1,000 people: e.g. Langa, Torbi, Tong. In these cases, the language in question is used in the home, and inter-generational transmission is occurs normally; moreover, when asked directly, speakers of these languages will reply that they feel the language to be under no threat. That is, they don't consider themselves to be adopting another language, nor do they have any desire to do so.^[1] Evidence of influence from larger/more prestigious neighbouring languages however, suggests there may be cause for concern: lexical and possibly other influences from Tungba Mambila (Gembu) are observable in Tep and Mbongno, as are Mambila and Vute influences in different Wawa dialects, and lexical borrowing from Ffulfulde is general.

There is also some indication of other languages that have become extinct in the not too distant past. At Somié, the oral traditions (Zeitlyn 1992) speak of Liap, another Mambila clan said to have been the first immigrants to the Tikar Plain from the mountains around Guesimi. The Liap have since been absorbed by subsequent immigrants, though people can still trace their lineage to the Liap. Similarly, my consultant for Bung reported his father spoke a variety of Mambila which is now no longer used, and the region where he was from originally is now de-populated.

3. The linguistic history of the Mambila region

Knowledge of these moribund languages has a number of implications for our understanding of the linguistic history of the region and has shed some light on questions of the historical development of the local languages.

3.1. The linguistic history of the Mambila region.

In addition to the oral traditions discussed above, which suggests that Cambap, Njerep, Kasabe, and Yeni were all at one time located in the same area, linguistic evidence discussed elsewhere (Connell, 1996, in press) suggests that these languages were sufficiently closely related to each other to be said to have formed a cluster on their own. It is not clear whether Langa is a surviving member of this cluster, although it now appears this may be the case. It is also clear from the linguistic evidence that they are closely related to Mambila; indeed, it can safely be said they formed they formed a sub-unit of the larger East Mambila dialect cluster. I refer to this grouping as the Yeni-Kasabe cluster since these two lects apparently mark the geographical limits of its eventual dispersal.

Somyev, on the other hand, appears to share its closest affinities with Wawa and Tep. Wawa is more or less adjacent to where the Somyewe currently live, and is where, according to some oral tradition, they are said to have emanated. Tep, on the other hand, is located at the far end of the Mambila plateau. This distribution suggests two hypotheses: that the Tep migrated to their present location, or that the Mambila cluster is a group of languages which has imposed itself relatively recently in the area, thereby separating previously contiguous languages. It is the latter (supported by independent evidence), which is proposed in Connell (in press). In addition, Somyev is interesting for being the language of a particular caste or occupation though, as mentioned, it is apparently relatively closely related to Wawa and other languages of the region. The facts - both linguistic and sociolinguistic - of its development into a caste language need to be explored while this language continues to be spoken.

3.2. The linguistic evolution of the Mambiloid languages

Until ongoing historical linguistic research is completed, we cannot ascertain the total contribution these moribund languages will eventually make to our knowledge of the Mambiloid group. Thus far, however, data from the Yeni-Kasabe cluster has contributed strong evidence of a former system of segmental suffixes in operation in Mambila, which survives as tonal markers in the better known Mambila dialects.[\[2\]](#)

In addition, although the Njanga material collected has yet to be examined in detail, there seems little doubt that Njanga is best considered closest to other Kwanja dialects and that morphologically it may prove to be the most conservative of the three. If this assessment is accurate, Njanga will provide important insights into historical developments in Kwanja.

4. Causes of language contraction and death

In the absence of a detailed study, statements concerning the causes of language contraction and death in this area should only be considered provisional. There are, however, two reasonably clear conclusions. First, in the process of contraction, these languages are giving way not to incoming, 'colonial' languages, but to neighbouring ones; second, reduced population appears to be playing a prominent role.

It has been observed previously (Brenzinger *et al.* 1991) that language death in Africa typically seems to involve a shift, not to the languages of the former colonial powers, but to other indigenous languages, particularly national languages and *linguae francae*. In their view, the greater prestige of an indigenous language must play a major role in a shift to that language. In the present case, however, it is difficult to assign any role to prestige, except perhaps in a very restricted or qualified sense. The shifts identified, for example, have not been to a language which is associated with political dominance or a major religion; there is no rural-urban distinction, no dichotomy of traditional vs modern life or association of the adopted language with education; nor are modern or superior economies associated with the adopted languages, although in one case (Somyev), economic and cultural change has presumably played a role in the demise of that language.

A number of assumed causes of language contraction have been cited in section 2 in individual cases: de-population as a result of conquest (Cambap, Njerep, Kasabe), intermarriage (Njanga), loss of cultural traits (Somyev). Indeed, in most cases intermarriage can be assumed to have played a role, despite only being cited in the case of Njanga. However, with the exception of the Somyewe, there was and is no bar against intermarriage, and it may therefore be assumed that only when population declines to a critical point does this become a factor. Certainly in the Njanga case, reduced or low population can be assumed to underlie and exacerbate the apparent adverse effect of intermarriage. Of the factors associated with prestige in Brenzinger *et al.*, then, only minority vs majority status plays a role here, though it is by no means clear to what extent greater prestige should be associated with greater numbers in the absence of the other usual markers of prestige and, in the present context, given that the languages adopted are not necessarily the majority local language. They are, in a sense, simply languages which were in the right place at the right time - languages with which those doing the shifting had greatest contact, and it is therefore perhaps more a question of convenience than prestige.

On the surface, at least, the Somyev situation is anomalous. First, it may be assumed that the population of blacksmiths was always relatively small and relatively stable. Second, the Somyewe were endogamous; daughters were permitted to marry outside the group, though only to matrilineal peoples, and all male offspring became blacksmiths (Meek 1931). It is not known to what extent this may still be their practice, though with the decline of their trade, it may be assumed the practice of endogamy has been largely abandoned. It seems, therefore, that rather than a decline in population, inter-related changes in economic and cultural circumstances precipitated language shift among the Somyewe.

An critical factor with regard to population, then, may be a relatively rapid reduction in numbers, rather than a small but perhaps stable population. However, another important factor must be the nature of population movements: local populations were, in the relevant cases, apparently scattered, taking refuge in extant communities where they formed only a minority of the population, rather than re-establishing their own communities.

4.1. Does linguistic similarity play a role in language shift?

The fact that it is neighbouring local languages which are supplanting those that have become moribund or extinct leads to the question of whether, or to what extent, linguistic similarity plays a role in language shift. Certainly there are documented cases of language shift involving dissimilar languages, however it is not known whether, or to what extent, the degree of similarity facilitates or hinders the process of shift. This effect could be manifested both in terms of the length of time involved in the shift (though many other factors would interact here), and in structural changes to the dying language. In the cases discussed here, the shift has in most cases been to relatively similar languages, both typologically and as a result of genetic affiliation, however research has yet to be done that will provide even a tentative answer to questions of this nature. It may be noted, though, that in no case has Tikar, which is relatively different from other languages of the region, become a replacement language, despite the fact that in at least one case - that of Njanga - the receiving community was apparently Tikar (Gaussett 1997).^[3] Indeed in the case of the Kwanja generally they to a large extent moved into Tikar territory as they moved down of the Adamawa Plateau, although arguably their numbers were sufficient to provide some stability to the language.

5. Summary

My first aim in this paper has been to present some facts regarding a number of previously undocumented moribund languages of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland. It is a region of considerable linguistic heterogeneity, characterized by relatively small linguistic populations. I have examined some of the factors surrounding language contraction and death in the Mambila area of the borderland, and tried to draw attention to the potential contribution knowledge of these languages can make to our understanding of the linguistic history of this region. It is already too late to do much substantial linguistic documentation and analysis for most of these - two are already (and only recently) extinct, although another two, Cambap and Somyev, both have a sufficient number of speakers left, to make further work worthwhile. The others should nevertheless be

documented to the greatest extent possible. The contribution even these can make to our overall understanding of the linguistic history of the Mambila region cannot be judged without further research, and even at this early date they have provided valuable evidence in solving some puzzles in the historical development of Mambila.

Declining population appeared to be a major factor in the death of languages in the area; causes for the fall in population may be linked directly or indirectly to either or both of the Fulani jihad and the Chamba incursions in the region, upheavals which took place during the 1800s. If it does prove to be the case, as suggested in the introduction, that this area has a higher than average rate of language death, it may well be traceable to these upheavals of the 19th century.

It was noted that the situation in this region does not fit the pattern proposed in Brenzinger *et al.* (1991) as typifying the African reality; while, concurring with them, we do not find European languages replacing African languages in this region, we on the other hand do not find African lingua francae or African national languages replacing local vernaculars; rather it is neighbouring local languages which are benefiting from language shift. Moreover, these languages do not appear to have any particular prestige, vis à vis the ones they are replacing, associated with them.

In closing, a cautious note of optimism may be voiced: populations in the area appear generally to be on the increase (i.e. comparing current population estimates with those available in colonial reports for the area from the 1920s), a trend which may help to stabilize some of the smaller languages found there. Nevertheless, the long term prospects are not encouraging: the increasing importance, first of Fulfulde as a lingua franca, and second of French (in Cameroon) and English (in Nigeria) as languages of education and wider communication cannot bode well for the future fortunes of many of these small languages.

Finally, the specific details of language contraction and death found to be important here will not necessarily apply to the situation in the wider borderland. Populations have not been dispersed or decimated south of the Mambila region in the way that they have there or (presumably) farther north. Rather than suggesting population decline should be rejected as a cause of language contraction in the Mambila region, however, this fact indicates that the causes of language death are likely to be many and varied, and to some extent specific to the language(s) in question.

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