

**Lower Fungom linguistic diversity and its historical development: proposals
from a multidisciplinary perspective**

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Abstract

Lower Fungom, in Northwest Cameroon, is one of the most linguistically diverse areas of the Cameroonian Grassfields. Seven languages or small language clusters are spoken in its thirteen villages and five of them are not obviously closely related to each other nor to any other language spoken outside of the region. This paper discusses the non-linguistic factors that may have resulted in this surprising linguistic scenario. The region's overall ecology is examined and found unable to fully explain the situation. Ethnographic data, collected during recent field work in the area, are considered from the perspective of assessing the degree of correlation between linguistic boundaries and cultural boundaries. The emerging patterns are reviewed in light of oral histories, early colonial documents, and archaeological evidence. The detailed historical framework thus obtained indicates not only that the area has been characterized by a number of immigration events but also that in different periods these events have had different linguistic repercussions. The paper concludes by reconstructing several phases of the linguistic prehistory of Lower Fungom that seem, on the whole, to shed light on the processes that have led to its present linguistic diversity.

Lower Fungom linguistic diversity and its historical development: proposals from a multidisciplinary perspective

1 Introduction

Lower Fungom, located at the northwestern fringes of the Cameroonian Grassfields, is a small region extending for about 240 sq km (roughly the same size as the city of Boston or Amsterdam) where seven Bantoid languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in thirteen villages. Two of them (Kung and Mashi) share important similarities with other languages spoken outside of Lower Fungom and can therefore be affiliated with already known groups of Bantoid languages (Central Ring and Beoid respectively, see below for the latter denomination). The remaining five, instead, have not only no known close relatives outside of the area but cannot even be shown to be closely related to each other: this would seem to make Lower Fungom the most diverse area in terms of language density within the so-called Sub-Saharan fragmentation belt. Hombert (1980) coined the label “Western Beoid” for referring to these otherwise unclassified five unrelated languages – two clusters and three one-village languages – as a group. Good et al. (2011:Genetics), however, have found no special connection between Hombert’s “Western Beoid” and “Eastern Beoid”: in order to make clear that the languages spoken in Lower Fungom are separate from any other Bantoid non-Grassfields language of the area they have proposed to rename this non-genetic grouping as “Yemne-Kimbi” (from the names of the two rivers delimiting this area) and the formerly “Eastern Beoid” group simply as “Beoid”.

Lower Fungom makes no exception to the situation of widespread traditional multilingualism so common in the Grassfields region as a whole (Warnier (1979)), though we have no actual figures to show in this respect. Such overall tendency is contrasted, perhaps not only in our area, by a pervasive language ideology which stresses the coincidence between political units and speech communities.¹ Where a linguist, with the help of its analytical tools, will recognize at least seven separate languages or small language clusters, locals will in fact have few if any doubts in stating that each of the thirteen villages / polities speaks a language of its own, though they will also

¹ The degree of autonomy of the different small chiefdoms of Lower Fungom, as in any other part of Cameroon, has been strongly limited with the rise and establishment of Cameroon central government.

acknowledge that at least some of them 'rhyme' one another.

This astonishing degree of language density, both in our and locals' perceptions, has remained thus far devoid of any historical and ethnographic contextualization and, therefore, of any serious attempt to understand its etiology. Thanks to our ethnographic and archeological survey of the area and to archival research at the Buea Archives we are able to lessen this gap and will try to do so in this paper.²

The research reported here has taken us, at times, in directions that are unusual in linguistic research (e.g., exploration of secret associations). Our hope is that this paper may serve as a model for how data taken from disparate domains can significantly advance the reconstruction of the linguistic prehistory of a region, and, ultimately, facilitate traditional comparative linguistic work. So, while this work may not, at least on the surface, be clearly "linguistic" in nature, we believe, nevertheless, it represents an approach that has the potential to significantly improve our ability to understand the African linguistic past.

After a methodological introduction (section 2) we first give an exhaustive environmental overview (section 3) and then try to test the extent to which the linguistic scenario of Lower Fungom is captured by existing theories that connect linguistic diversity with ecological factors (section 4). Since this perspective proves to be insufficient, we divert our discussion toward the identification of historically meaningful cultural boundaries existing among the villages of our area. In order to do so in section 5 we present the terms of our sociocultural comparison and in section 6 attempt to interpret the emerging patterns. In section 7 we place all the data presented into a historical background informed in great part by the archaeological evidence we have gathered during our survey of the area. This step is prerequisite for advancing some proposals on the sociolinguistic history of Lower Fungom, summarized in section 8.

² The research on which this paper is based has been supported by a generous grant from the U.S. National Science Foundation (BCS-0853981). We would like to thank all our friends and colleagues at the University of Yaounde I, among whom Dr. Philip Mutaka (Linguistics) and Dr. Mesmin Tchindjang (Geography) for their essential help in our research activities. Here as in the accompanying paper, we wish to express our gratitude to Ngong George Bwei Kum, without whose patience and continued support this research would have not seen the light. My thanks go to Jeff Good for commenting on several earlier versions of this paper, and to Jesse Lovegren, Rebecca Voll, and Augusto Cacopardo who also contributed in various ways to the writing of this article. None but the author is responsible for its content.

2 Sources and methods

Lower Fungom societies are mentioned cursorily in the existing literature (Kaberry (2003 [1952]:99–101), Chilver and Kaberry (1968:30–32), Nkwi and Warnier (1982:190–195)) and apart from few probably first-hand data on Naki-speaking communities (Chilver and Kaberry (1968:88–89); Nkwi and Warnier (1982:190–99)) they essentially rely on the British colonial documents about this area (Smith (1929), Johnson (1936), Podevin (1916), Podevin et al. (1920)), none of which resulted from really extensive surveys.

As far as the German colonial period is concerned, we must recall that in his 1889 expedition Eugen Zintgraff must have passed to the southeast of Lower Fungom after he left Bum heading toward Kom area, when he mentions an unknown village called “Deng”, reportedly lying in a hilly area (see Chilver and Ardener (1966:19). As for German colonial documents it is noticeable that Sally Chilver, very cognizant of German documents dealing with the Bamenda area (see e.g. Chilver (1967b) and Chilver (1967a)), has not quoted them in her brief notes about our area so suggesting that the few conserved records are not relevant to our ends (see also Chilver and Kaberry (1968:119)). We have found of some interest the map in Jurisch (1907) as in it are reported the dates of the different visits to the area by the earlier German colonial officers.³ Finally, recent sociolinguistic surveys (Hamm et al. (2002)) have added little to our knowledge of the Lower Fungom history.

Similar situations of paucity of historiographical sources are the norm in most Sub-Saharan contexts, especially in areas that remained, like ours, outside of the dynamics of state formation (Horton (1972:78–80)). In such circumstances and in the light of our goal we could only endeavor to collect any kind of evidence might have possibly contributed to gain some insights of local history. We thus addressed our efforts to gather oral traditions, archaeological materials, geographic data, and ethnographic documentation (Vansina (1966:6ff.)).

The collection of oral traditions has figured prominently among the activities we have carried out in the field. During our extensive survey we have conducted nearly eighty interviews, both individual and collective, contacting in total about two hundred local people, equivalent to about 1.5 percent of the total population according to our estimate (see table 1). As far as research practices

³ We plan to directly assess the relevance of German archival documentation in the near future.

are concerned, we have deemed it necessary to hike throughout the region as much as it was physically tolerable. By so doing within a period of about fifty days we have visited all the permanent settlements found in the area except for two satellite hamlets lying to the east of Koshin (see figure 2), ending up by covering some 200 km total distance. This approach has enabled us to combine the collection of oral traditions with ethnographic observation. Though rather superficial, the latter has facilitated our recognition of the most basic biases that could condition our consultants in their self-conscious historiographic accounts, and this has urged that we included in our sample sources belonging to different 'families' or interest groups in each village (Rosaldo (1980:93–97), Vansina (1985:117,186ff.)).

In the same perspective of getting as many pieces and categories of evidence as possible we have extensively, although not yet completely, surveyed the Lower Fungom area in search for traces left by its older inhabitants. Moreover, since even the existing maps of the area all suffer from important limitations (see also Chilver and Kaberry (1968:1)) we have decided to keep track of our hike and of any places of interest we came across using a GPS system. These newly collected topographical data along with a hitherto unknown 1:25,000 map we have discovered in the Department of Geography of the University of Yaounde I⁴ have allowed us to draw new reliable maps of Lower Fungom (see figure 1 and figure 2).

Specialists in one or the other of the disciplines involved in this study—mostly anthropologists and historians—may well have reasons to raise their brows for some choices we have made in presenting and analyzing our materials. It is in this perspective that a few warnings are in order at the outset.

None could think that fifty days spent in the field are sufficient to get a good grasp of how a single given social group “works”, let alone fourteen such groups. In fact our research has never been addressed to the understanding of *current* sociopolitical and economic processes. Rather, we wanted to see whether it was possible to account for the present language distribution in historical terms. The only way for us to begin doing so was to initiate our investigation by checking the degree to which linguistic diversity was paralleled in sociocultural dimension or, put more roughly, to examine to what extent linguistic boundaries might be seen to coincide with cultural boundaries.

⁴ My thanks go to Prof. Mesmin Tschindjang and Mr. Kah Elvis Fang for their fundamental help in this regard.

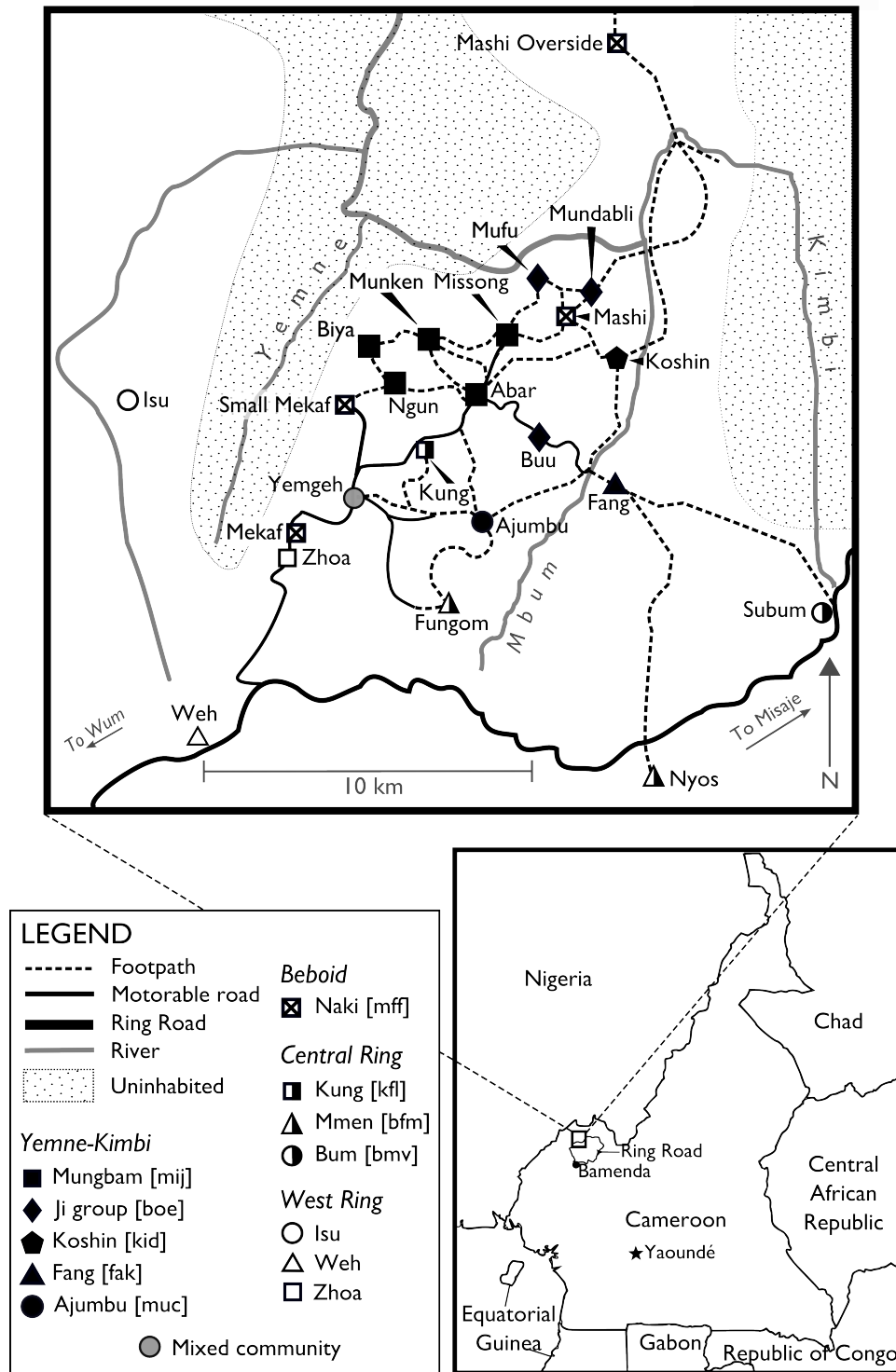
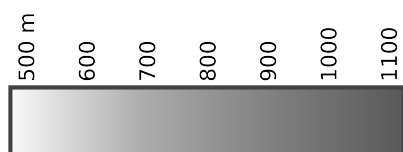
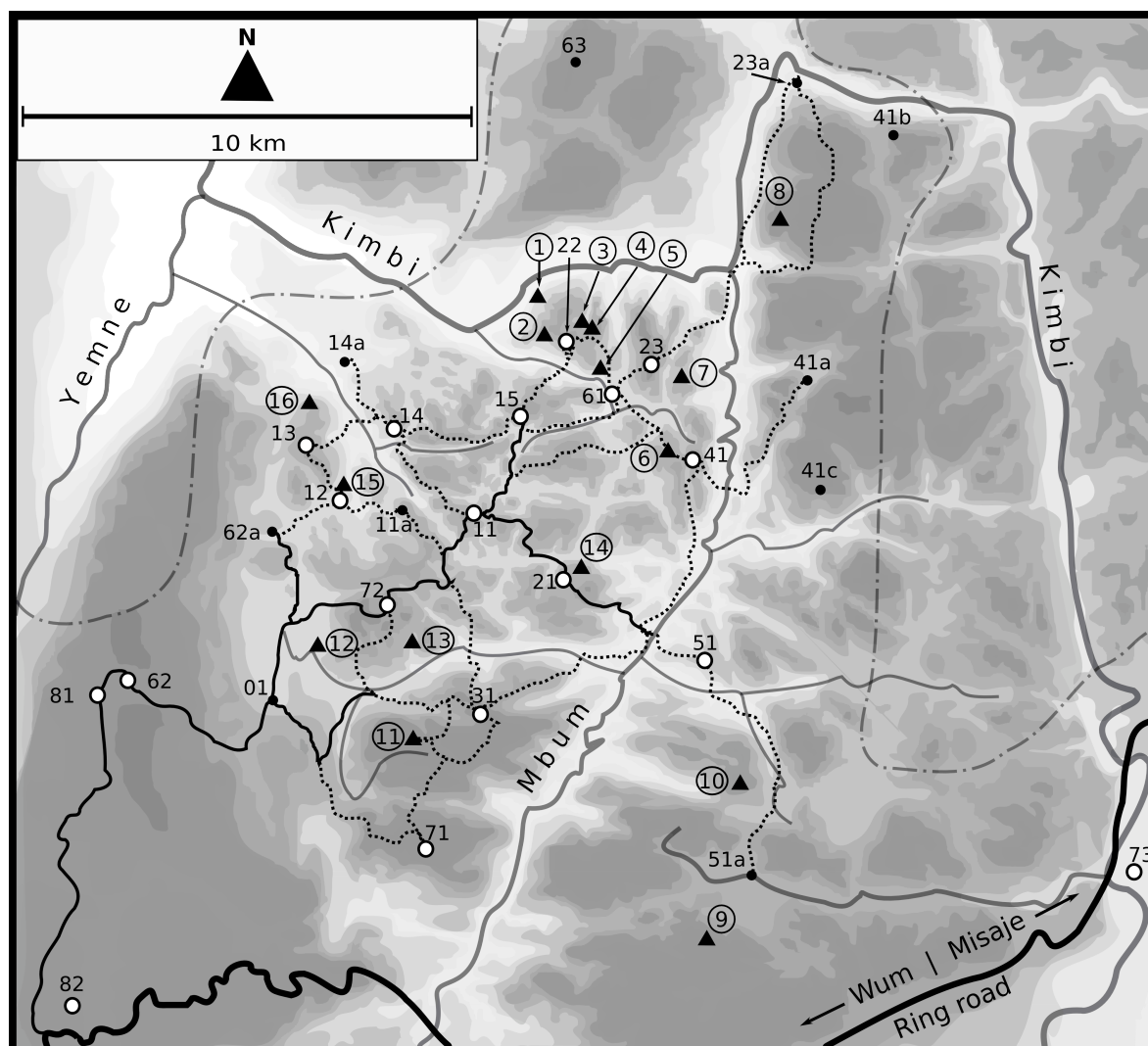


Figure 1: Lower Fungom and surrounding area

But how can one approach such a variety of situations, each of which is internally multifaceted, in the perspective of identifying distinctive features not only in synchrony but also, and more importantly, bearing some significance in diachronic perspective?



- Footpath
- Motorable road
- - - - Uninhabited area
- River

- Polity capital
- Settlement is either a quarter or outside any other polity
- ▲ Ancient settlement

Villages speaking a Yemne-Kimbi language		Villages speaking other languages		Archaeological sites	
Mungbam-speaking	Ji-speaking	Beboid	Naki-speaking	① Baawan	⑨ Mfum
11 = Abar	21 = Buu		61 = Mashi	② Mba Ku	⑩ Akfu
11a = Small Abar	22 = Mufu		62 = Mekaf	③ Kuntshin	⑪ Mgijani
12 = Ngun	23 = Mundabli		62a = Small Mekaf	④ Ntshamma	⑫ Lung
13 = Biya	31 = Ajumbu	Ring	63 = Mashi Oversight	⑤ Lembo	⑬ B@ts@ma
14 = Munken	41 = Koshin		Central	⑥ Nsom	⑭ Old Buu
14a = Munken Down	51 = Fang		71 = Fungom	⑦ Tsham	⑮ Ndjakponya
15 = Missong	51a = Mfum		72 = Kung	⑧ Kumbo	⑯ B@shia
No linguistic identity			73 = Subum (Bum)		
01 = Yemgeh			West		
			81 = Zhoa		
			82 = Kumfutu		

Figure 2: Detailed map of Lower Fungom and surrounding area. Fungom, Kumfutu, Mekaf, Small Mekaf, Subum, and Zhoa are not part of Lower Fungom. Language names are in bold.

We were forced to make a selection, and in so doing this study recalls the tradition of ethnographic surveys. Our selection was made more in accordance with pragmatic needs—privileging data that were at the same time easy to collect and to compare at large—than with pre-established scientific methodologies. Rough though this may seem, we have progressively refined a broad “questionnaire” which, especially concerning the weight accorded to sociopolitical institutions, is on the whole similar to like “ethnographer’s guides” devised by other scholars on the Grassfields area (Chilver and Kaberry (1963)).

Our second problem was how to evaluate the relevance of any of the selected sociocultural features, and of the differential patterns they revealed, in terms of language distribution. The link existing between cultural and linguistic boundaries, if any, is by no means straightforward. The factors leading to the formation of one may not coincide with those determining the other. Cultural phenomena may differ in different contexts due to specific recent developments, so that it would be misleading to base any inference on their contrast. By so saying we wish to ensure the reader that we have never thought of interpreting any single sociocultural difference unmediated as a historical index relevant to our ends. It is only through the superposition of the data resulting from several independent planes of investigation (i.e. language, archaeology, oral traditions, historiographical records, ecology) that a given sociocultural feature *can* be taken as such an index. We have deemed it opportune to accord higher relevance to a single feature only when this was particularly rich in social and historical implications (e.g. the names of what we call here the “higher secret associations”, see section 5.2) *and* the remaining evidence was not seen to contrast with them.

The sociocultural features we consider here do not appear to be distributed randomly throughout the area, rather, they seem to outline a broad division between, on the one hand, a relatively cohesive group of polities and, on the other, villages / polities which differ on a number of such features evidencing no common patterns among them nor with other single polities found within Lower Fungom. The overwhelming majority of oral traditions agree in representing some of the polities found in the former group as the earlier occupants of the area, whereas the others are nearly always depicted as recent immigrants. Archaeological and historiographical documentation offer several corroborating points to such views. For these reasons we have provisionally labeled “Lower Fungom Canon Societies” those participating in the relatively consistent group and “non-

Lower Fungom Canon Societies” all the others. By using this simple subdivision we assume that the existence of a relatively cohesive cultural area is determined by the long-standing existence of a network of contacts in the area and not by “common origin” whatever this might mean. In this light it is clear that the label “Lower Fungom Canon” is only a convenient abstraction. By using it we are not suggesting that some sociocultural features are to be held as the foundations of a “Lower Fungom tribe”—an untenable concept in both local and general terms. In section 6.3 and section 8 we will illustrate how we have tried to understand this framework in linguistic terms.

As a final warning, the reader should keep in mind that we could not assess the degree of vitality of many local social institutions. On this sole basis, and not in reference to any ethnographer’s views, we opted to limit the use of past tense forms to the treatment of undoubtedly defunct practices (e.g. war) and to generalize the present tense to all the rest of our discussion. By so doing we realize that we risk to give the reader the impression that Lower Fungom is a sort of fossil, where postcolonial history has brought little if any changes. Needless to say, it is not: Lower Fungom societies are alive, some of them probably declining, all surely undergoing substantial changes. We took this decision simply because we found no good reason to superpose the information given by our sources (and we mostly allude to our native consultants) with judgments which would have been for their most part preconceived, informed by a sort of romantic pessimism and not by results of a specific research.

3 Geographical setting and elements of topography

3.1 Physical geography, climate, natural environment

The region owes its name to the fact that the British colonizers established the area’s first Native Court in the village of Fungom. The attribute “lower”, as will be said below, refers to the lower elevation of this area if compared to those extending to its east, south, and west. Lower Fungom is not an administrative label and does not include Fungom village itself, nor Mekaf, Small Mekaf, and Zhoa (see figure 1).

Both physical boundaries and internal characteristics make it easy to set the Lower Fungom area apart from the surrounding physical context. Water courses participating into one single hy-

drologic system, that of the Kimbi river (known in Nigeria by the name of Katsina Ala), stand as clearcut boundaries to the west, north, and east: to the west the Yemne stream and the steep escarpments of the uninhabited valley along which it flows mark the physical border with the Isu area; to the east and to the north the Kimbi river cuts Lower Fungom (Fungom Subdivision, Menchum Division) off from Bum (Boyo Division) and Furu-Awa (a Subdivision within Menchum Division) respectively. Since the land contained within these limits, especially its central part, is characterized by a decreased overall elevation if compared to the areas lying to its south (whence the attribute “Lower”), this internal trait can be seen as constituting the Lower Fungom southern boundary.

The most readily apparent characteristic of Lower Fungom, and one which any traveller would find difficult to forget, is the amazing frequency and steepness of hills. Most of these are characterized by an abrupt ascent of about 250–300 m between the valley bottom and their somewhat narrow tops, which lie between 800 and 850 m, and rarely above 900 m.

Water is rather plentiful in the area. Apart from the hills comprised between the Mbum and the Kimbi rivers, allegedly rather dry, Lower Fungom is internally rutted by myriads of streams of varying size which flow along a northwest-southeast axis, pouring into either the Mbum or the northern tract of the Kimbi.

Climate is of the savanna monsoon type. The dry season lasts from mid-November through mid-March, when the climate becomes progressively wetter reaching its precipitation peak in August, the coldest month in a year. We had no access to actual measures of rainfall specific to our area, though using the available literature we may propose that a figure comprised between 1700 and 2200 mm per annum is probably correct (Hurault (1986:116), Nettle (1996:417), Nji Fogwe and Tchotsoua (2010:20)). Altitude and overall good drainage ensure the absence of tsetse fly throughout the area.

Lower elevation and abundant rainfall distributed over most of the year concur to account for the region’s higher incidence of wooded areas as opposed to what can be seen to the east and south of it. What we define here as wooded area refers to a regularly and widely exploited economic resource and thus must not be confused with forest, which is uncommon in Lower Fungom. In fact patches of forest are still visible only on hilltops (see below) and in form of galleries along the

humid bottoms of some valleys.⁵ In general most of Lower Fungom seems to fall in one of two distinct types of vegetal environment: on the one hand wooded areas within which oil and raffia palms are prominent, and on the other hand elephant grass, the vegetal species that dominates much of the Bamenda Grassfields.

3.2 Economy, communications, demography

Both types of environment testify more or less directly to the importance of land resources in local economies. The current productive system pivots around subsistence farming, where products are consumed by the producers and little accumulation for trade purposes is possible. However this holds true only insofar as crops like ground nuts, beans, corn, taro, bananas, plantains, and manioc are considered. Unlike these, in fact, exploitation of oil palm trees leads to surplus production of goods that can be traded, sap and palm fruit kernels representing a minor fraction of such palm-based market which is instead dominated by oil.⁶ As elsewhere in the Grassfields and along its periphery (see e.g. Kaberry (2003 [1952]:27)) any activities regarding the culture of oil and raffia palms, including the oil extraction process, are normally of exclusive male responsibility.

As far as domestic animals are concerned local people rear fowls, pigs, and goats in limited numbers and solely inside the village. In the area we also find some families of “Aku” cattle-herders. Hunting used to be an essential part of local economies and cultures but is today limited mostly to small game (cane rats and similar rodents). Communal hunts seem to not be practiced any longer in Lower Fungom. Probably due to the introduction of firearms and to an increased demographic pressure (see section 7), big game animals (antelopes, waterbucks, buffaloes, several species of monkeys and birds) are reported to have nearly disappeared in the area so that they are now found mostly in the forests to the north of Lower Fungom and in the few remaining forest galleries within it (especially in the area of Fang).⁷ Fishing is practiced along the major water

⁵ A remarkable exception is represented by Fang, which lies by far in the most forested environment found throughout our area.

⁶ Palm oil coming from this area is apparently much appreciated in Weh or Wum, but farmers are forced to sell it to traders at low prices. This does not allow most of the farmers to develop any form of individual accumulation of financial resources apart from that provided by the participation in so-called *ndjangi* ‘tontine’, see Warnier (1985:90–96). The rather limited coffee and cacao plantations do not seem to represent an important source of income.

⁷ Leopards and elephants are recalled in oral traditions and few valued old objects (leopard’s skin, pieces of elephant tusk) are rarely found among chiefs’ possessions. It is likely that these animals inhabited the area until one or two centuries ago. Much more recent is instead the local disappearance of crocodiles and hippopotami caused by the 1986

courses (Mbum and Kimbi rivers) mainly by the use of locally-made nets.

As far as means of communication are concerned, a motorable road, however in disrepair, leads from Weh to Abar (see figure 1). This is the only way to gain access to the area other than on foot. Apart from this and other minor motorable tracts, the whole area is crossed by countless footpaths, the principal of which are shown in figure 1 and figure 2. Footpaths connect it also with all surrounding regions. It is important to emphasize that the principal routes used for trade, especially in the past, between the Grassfields and the middle Benue area did not pass through Lower Fungom but either to its east (the Ibi-Bum route) or to its west (the Makurdi-Isu route) (see Warnier (1985:121–124)).

Electricity is absent in the whole area as is mobile phone network coverage except from few hilltops (in the surroundings of Ajumbu, Missong, and Munken) which are high enough to catch the signal coming from the south.

The region extends over about 240 sq km and its population is probably close to a figure of 14,000 (see table 1). The overwhelming majority of the population is distributed into twenty-two permanent settlements of varying size. Only few people, including a handful of “Aku” families, dwell in isolated houses or compounds. Demographic density is 58.3 per sq km; the average density of permanent settlements, one every 10.9 sq km, seems rather high. But by far more impressive is the density of polities: considering that the twenty-two permanent settlements coalesce to form thirteen small “chiefdoms” we get the ratio of one polity every 18.5 sq km (see figure 1, figure 2, and table 2).

3.3 Polities and settlement pattern

Each polity is named after and has its center in a village where the chief’s residence as well as the ritually and politically most important spots are located (see section 5.3). Usually this “capital” is also the polity’s most populated village and in eleven out of the thirteen polities it is found on the highest hilltop within their territory. Each of these main villages is made up of several “quarters” that usually correspond to separate kin groups (see section 5.3), a residential pattern that

emission of a large cloud of carbon monoxide from the nearby Lake Nyos, which flowed all along the Kimbi river valley where it suffocated nearly 2000 people and innumerable animals including fish (see Shanklin (1988)).

SUBGROUP	LANGUAGE	VILLAGE	POPULATION
Yemne-Kimbi	Mungbam [mij]	Abar	650–850
		Munken	around 600
		Ngun	150–200
		Biya	50–100
		Missong	around 400
	Ji [boe]	Mundabli	350–450
		Mufu	80–150
		Buu	100–200
	Fang [fak]	Fang	4,000–6,000
Beboid	Koshin [kid]	Koshin	3,000–3,500
	Ajumbu [muc]	Ajumbu	200–300
	Naki [mff]	Mashi	300–400
Central Ring	Kung [kfl]	Kung	600–800

Table 1: Lower Fungom villages

is nearly absent in the secondary (or satellite) settlements probably due to their recent foundation (see section 7). Some, like Koshin, Kung, Mundabli, Mufu, and, to a lesser degree, Ajumbu form rather compact settlements, where boundaries between quarters are not readily discernible. On the contrary, in villages like Abar, Missong, Munken, and Ngun quarters are physically well distinct, sometimes so distant one another to appear as though they were independent hamlets. Usually the capital's hilltop or physical center is occupied by a patch of dense forest within which the polity's most important secret association (see 5.2) has its ritual assembly place: for this reason this sacred forest area is normally inaccessible to foreigners and women.

4 Linguistic diversity and ecological factors

Physical geographical features have been often called upon to explain linguistic boundaries by earlier scholars on west Africa (see e.g. Mabogunje (1976:5)). As we have seen in section 3.1 Lower Fungom land morphology would at first sight appear to be a good candidate for this kind of isomorphic generalization. In fact, however frequent and steep, our region's hills can hardly have constituted major obstacles determining a degree of isolation of local groups able to account for the current linguistic scenario. In addition, excepting short periods at the peak of the rainy season, all the water courses located in the central area can be easily forded. Only the two major rivers, the Mbum and the Kimbi, may constitute actual physical boundaries of a certain relevance. For

instance we know that Fang, located to the east of the Mbum river, was connected with a rope bridge to the road leading to Buu and Abar only recently (reportedly around 1964). For this reason Fang people preferred to travel to Subum (see figure 1) rather than to Abar as the latter could be reached only after fording the ca. 15 meter-wide river through almost complete immersion in its waters.⁸ Excepting Fang all the other villages are within easy reach of each other during practically the whole year (see table 2).

	Abar	Ajumbu	Biya	Buu	Fang	Fungom	Koshin	Kung	Mashi	Mekaf	Missong	Mufu	Mundabli	Munken	Ngun
Abar	-	120	135	30	90	180	120	60	90	180	90	135	180	75	75
Ajumbu	120	-	135	150	210	60	240	60	210	120	210	255	300	195	105
Biya	135	135	-	150	210	120	150	90	120	60	75	175	240	45	20

Table 2: Selected walking distances between Lower Fungom villages (plus Fungom) expressed in minutes

General availability of cultivable land in nearly optimal conditions of watering (both in terms of rainfall and soil drainage) paired with healthy climate and proximity to forested areas, which oral traditions depict as having been wider and denser in the past, can have promoted the early adoption of sedentary settlement patterns by local groups. In this perspective we may say that Lower Fungom is to be ranked as an area of low ecological risk. This can be seen as having caused settlers to develop localist sociolinguistic stances (Hill (1996)), ultimately determining the presence of several small ethnolinguistic groups (Nettle (1996:413–14)) within its boundaries.

However, if we want to consider actual ethnolinguistic groups we have to base our analysis on local perceptions and models. In so doing we discover that a language ideology stressing the coincidence between village as a political unit (henceforth village / polity) and language lies beneath our abstract picture of affiliations and individualities among Lower Fungom languages. Though recognizing that some of the languages “rhyme” with each other, anyone in this area would affirm that each village / polity has a language of its own. We believe that such a scale of linguistic diversity is too small to be captured by Nettle’s purely ecological perspective: we can hardly justify the necessity for groups to develop such extreme, *village-level* localist attitudes

⁸ As a consequence of the building of the new bridge during the last decades many Fang families have decided to move their homes to the opposite bank of the Mbum, where they have founded a rather populous quarter called *kəvɪ* or Fang Overside.

unless we also posit some other intervening factors.

One factor that must be added in order to assess the ecological risk of a given area is its degree of exposure to outside threats. One further factor is to be seen in the conceptions of property (and hence wealth) peculiar to Subsaharan Africa as a whole. Here economic struggles have tended to be over people more often than over land (see e.g. Goody (1971:31ff.) and Kopytoff (1987:40ff.)). It is a truism to say that language plays a fundamental role in building one's identity. Yet this truism has in Subsaharan Africa a far lesser known mirror-image: linguistic identity may also constitute the essential tool for one to sanction the extent of its wealth-in-people. To make but an example, that the inclusion of wandering foreigners in one's own interest group or group of dependants is encoded constructing *e novo* kinship relations and gets formalized through adoption of one's language and ritual institutions by the newcomers is likely to be a nearly universal in pre-colonial Subsaharan societies (see e.g. the case studies in Kopytoff (1987)). In this view it is clear that the linguistic consequences of ethnic movements are likely to be obscured by the actualization of this inclusive folk model.

This twofold addition to Nettle's model calls for the inclusion of sociocultural and historical perspectives in our discussion. In so doing we shall be concerned at length with facts that appear to have no immediate relevance for linguistic studies—indeed languages will totally disappear from our sight in the next two sections and will re-emerge in section 6 and subsequent sections. However, we hope that the reader will concur with us in considering this excursus as a prerequisite for any attempt to shed light on the linguistic prehistory of Lower Fungom and consequently on the dynamics that have probably determined its present linguistic situation.

The next three sections are organized as follows. In the first (section 5) we introduce the sociocultural evidence collected during our fieldwork. This section serves two purposes: on the one hand it is meant to place Lower Fungom societies as a whole within the wider Grassfields context (section 5.1), on the other it provides the basis for identifying cultural boundaries within this area (section 5.2 and 5.3). In section 6 we discuss the emerging differential patterns by adding data coming from oral histories and colonial documents. Linguistic implications of such historical reconstructions are discussed throughout section 6 and are summed up in section 6.3, while in section 6.4 we use them for advancing some sociolinguistic proposals. The next section (section

7) discusses our archaeological findings in the area within a wider historical context and is meant to provide the basis for a chronological scheme through which assessing the tenability of the “sociolinguistic historical” proposals we have advanced in section 6.3. These proposals are further elaborated in section 8.

5 Sociocultural characteristics: distribution of names of higher secret associations and Lower Fungom Canon

5.1 Lower Fungom societies in a regional context

Emphasis on the existence of regional trade network and on the economic resources determined by environmental diversity has led Warnier (1985) to ascribe the pre-colonial societies of the Bamenda Grassfields to different types according to three related sets of phenomena: topography, settlement pattern, and political organization. At the periphery of the Grassfields, in areas where local economies relied essentially on palm oil production, communities were organized in “acephalous systems”, i.e. characterized by nearly absent hierarchical sociopolitical institutions, and were spatially distributed according to a dispersed settlement pattern. Instances of this prototype are pre-colonial Modele, Ngie and, to a lesser extent, Meta’ (Warnier (1985:200–206)). Leaving this area toward the centre of the Grassfields one encountered societies whose economies were gradually more specialized in productions of higher economic value per weight unit (in succession tubers, domestic animals, wood and iron production), whose settlement pattern was progressively more concentrated in large villages, and whose social (i.e. ritual and political) institutions showed a progressively more markedly centralized and hierarchical organization. Among the politically most centralized polities we can list, for the western Grassfields, Bafut, Mankon, Kom (Warnier (1985:11–21, 207ff.)), and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Bum (Chilver and Kaberry (1968:86–88)).

As we have seen in section 3 our area, located at the northern periphery of the Grassfields, is one where palm oil production is of paramount importance for local economies and craftsmanship is virtually absent,⁹ two features that the above mentioned model would predict to co-occur with dispersed settlement pattern and “acephalous” societies. This is not the case. Along with traits

⁹ The only noteworthy exception are the Mekaf’s traditional pottery makers but this, as we shall see in section 6.1.2, is a recent immigrant community in Lower Fungom.

consistent with an “acephalous” political system—like economically independent kin groups and a politically weak office of chief—in Lower Fungom societies we also find a markedly concentrated settlement pattern (see section 3.2) and this co-occurs with sociopolitical and ritual institutions that are not distributed at the level of the kin group, but at the level of the village. Though economically similar, here we are encountering societies that are clearly distinct from, say, pre-colonial Modele (cp. Masquelier (1978:49–53,81–82)) or Meta’ (cp. Dillon (1973:45,101–107)).

We will deal extensively with the settlement pattern of Lower Fungom societies in section 7. It is opportune to briefly introduce here some aspects of the other feature that sets these societies apart from any other community of palm oil producers, that is, the village-wide secret associations.

In each village / polity we find a set of associations which differ among themselves as to their functions, degree of formalization, and membership constraints. Some—like e.g. recreational dance groups, ritual dance groups, groups specialized in some ritual practices—play little if any role for the unity of the village: for this reason we call them here “lower associations” and will not deal with them.¹⁰ Others, our “higher associations”, are concerned with the governing of human affairs (e.g. justice, political interests) and of magical forces alike (mostly springing from the ancestors) and by virtue of being directly associated with the well-being and social order of the village as a whole are more interesting for our present purposes. By virtue of these characteristics, typically embedded in a tradition of indigenouness, they play a fundamental role for the construction of the village as a unified social body. In general, the unity of a Lower Fungom village / polity does not stem from the chief in and of himself unless we see him as the main guarantor of the village’s higher secret associations. We might even say that villages / polities as sociopolitical units seem to be possible only insofar as they possess institutions that, like the higher associations, overcome their internal fragmentation into antagonistic interest groups giving a common set of values to the village community as a whole. The tie binding together such potentially antagonistic kin groups in a superordinate group (village / polity) is thereby first and foremost of ritual nature (cp. also Horton (1972:101–103)).

The above picture is purposely broad as it is meant to characterize all the villages / polities

¹⁰ For the sake of clarity the terminology used in this article does not follow that used elsewhere by other scholars. For instance, we do not distinguish between “associations” and “societies” to make explicit their degree of formalization (as in Geary (1979)), rather, we do so by opposing “lower” and “higher associations”.

of Lower Fungom within both a regional context and the existing literature. Indeed on the whole they show many traits in common at all levels—economic, political, symbolic—yet they are by no means identical one another. The following sections are concerned with the identification of sociocultural features that indicate the existence of cultural boundaries among them.

5.2 Higher secret associations: names and distribution

Secret objects, secret practices, and secret words—the last typically but not only in the form of songs—are at the basis of any secret association, be it men’s or women’s. Membership is obtained through payment of an admission fee (traditionally in the form of food and drinks) and can be of closed type: especially for higher secret associations, seats are inherited on the basis of kinship and the total number of potential members is constant over time. To be member of a given association means that one has knowledge of its founding secrets and this enables one to participate in the association’s meetings, get a share of the juniors’ admission fees, and access sources of supernatural power. The last two aspects ensure that secret associations may represent an important economic resource.¹¹ As with any other instance of mobile economic resource, a given secret association or, better, its founding secrets are a capital over which individuals, households, or entire village-communities may wish to have control. Such control can be simply inherited through generations or it can be acquired by different means. Secrets can be traded, copied, or stolen between individuals or social groups, and it is even possible that the foundation of a given secret association be the result of an imposition by a community over another.

The name of a given association is inextricably connected with the nature of its secrets, and hence with its functions and the kind of supernatural power it can provide access to. For this reason the names of secret associations, especially of the “higher secret associations”, are remarkably stable over time and largely independently of the languages spoken by those who get control over them. This is why the spatial distribution of the names of associations can be held as a reliable index of a common heritage of secrets or of their exchange.

A review of the names of all the secret associations found in our area would take us far from our goals. What we want to assess is whether there are traces of common heritage, exchange, or mutual

¹¹ This is the aspect of secret associations that scholars have most often emphasized, see e.g. Geary (1979).

unrelatedness among polities, that is, among speech communities. In order to do so we have to focus upon higher secret associations: due to the essential role they play for the village community as a whole (section 5.1), commonalities and idiosyncrasies at this level are likely to provide important insights concerning the history of relations of a given village / polity. Commonalities may be indexes of shared 'origin' of the institutions or of tight connections between communities. The latter can be relations of friendship, where the exchange of secrets is the symbolization of a "brotherhood" or alliance between communities. Or it can be the result of a relation of inequality: the most commonly found is one where the buyer is in a way obliged to 'purchase' the secrets of the institution that becomes of paramount importance in its political system so that the seller will always have the right to enter the meetings of that association, get a share of the admission fees, and take part to the political life of that community. Another possibility is that a given village appears so successful that its secrets become desirable and hence sought for by others.¹²

In table 3 we illustrate the names of the higher secret associations known so far in Lower Fungom and in the two nearest centralized chiefdoms, i.e. Bum and Kom. In order to combine all these data in one table we had to broaden the definitions of the associations considered. For the sake of clarity we have adopted a distinction based on the prominence of political as opposed to ritual functions. This is only meant to facilitate comparison, not to give a clue about any of the peculiarities of the single associations nor of the systems they are part of.

We also present here the scant evidence we have concerning names of the inner circles, i.e. progressively more secret and hence powerful magical-ritual guilds whose membership seems to be determined by either historical primacy or, more rarely, by political prominence among the kin groups composing a given polity. Though insufficient for any further elaboration, this data nevertheless offers at least some possible comparative clues.

The emerging picture is no doubt still incomplete, yet it allows us to make some remarks. First of all we point out the clearest cases where Lower Fungom data are connected with evidence from polities located outside of it.

¹² The demand of a given secret depends, much like that of shares or goods in our stock markets, on the results it has obtained in the known history of its owner and potential seller. Still today when one is successful in any kind of activity or situation people often ascribe this success to the possession of a "strong medicine" so expressing their belief in the fact that all sort of events in one's life are determined by having access to a "medicine", i.e. to a secret knowledge materialized by membership in powerful lodges.

Village	Mainly political functions	Mainly ritual functions	Inner circles
Abar (M)	<i>əkpwinan</i>	<i>eko</i>	<i>itshung</i>
Ajumbu	<i>ntshuin</i>	<i>ntshuin</i>	?
Biya (M)	<i>əkponənəŋ</i>	<i>eko</i>	<i>itshung, kwifantə</i>
Buu (J)	<i>kə ?</i>	<i>kə</i>	<i>tzang, ntənəyən</i>
Fang	<i>kwifon</i>	<i>ntol, təm</i>	<i>təm ?</i>
Koshin	<i>kwifon</i>	<i>nti</i>	?
Kung	<i>kwifon</i>	<i>ntul, fəbafə</i>	?
Mashi	<i>ntshu</i>	<i>ntshu</i>	?
Missong (M)	<i>olam ?</i>	<i>olam, eko</i>	<i>itsang</i>
Mufu (J)	<i>ji (?)</i>	<i>ntshu</i>	?
Mundabli (J)	<i>kwal (?)</i>	<i>ntshu</i>	?
Munken (M)	?	<i>ntələ, ikwæ</i>	<i>itshung, ube</i>
Ngun (M)	<i>əkponənə</i>	<i>ikwæ</i>	?
Bum	<i>kwifon</i>	<i>ntul</i>	<i>chum, ?</i>
Kom	<i>kwifoyn</i>	<i>ntul</i>	<i>nggvu, kwifoyn ntu'u</i>

Table 3: Distribution and names of the higher male secret societies in Lower Fungom and in the two nearest centralized chiefdoms. In the 'Village' column (M) and (J) stand for Mungbam and Ji respectively and identify the affiliation of the language spoken in the village according to Good et al (2011).

1. In Fang, Koshin, and Kung *kwifon* is connected with the exercise of political power and with the office of chief. This is a trait that we observe in more centralized chiefdoms like the neighboring Bum (Chilver (1993:9–15.Jun.1960)) and Kom (or Bafut (Chilver and Kaberry (1962:13ff.))).
2. In at least one of the associations with mainly ritual functions of the villages of Fang, Koshin, Kung, and Munken we find forms akin to *ntul*, found also in Bum (Chilver (1993:8–9.Jun.1960)) and Kom (Nkwi (1976:32) and Chilver and Kaberry (1968:85)) whence it may well have diffused in other areas. In particular the Munken form, *ntələ*, seems nearly identical to an analogous institution found in the chiefdom of Fungom (not in the table, see Chilver and Kaberry (1968:92–93)).
3. Ajumbu, Mashi, Mufu, and Mundabli all possess one association whose name, *ntshu*, corresponds to analogous institutions found in Isu and Zhoa (not in the table, see Smith (1929:par.201)).
4. *kwifantə*, found in Biya, could recall Kom's *kwifoyn ntu'u*. In alternative, it is to be recalled that in Kom language *nto* means 'royal palace': this gives room to hypothesize that, again

under Kom influence, the Biya form could be analyzed as *kwifon nto* “*kwifon* of the palace”.

Now we can sum up the forms that seem to be peculiar to Lower Fungom. It will be noticed that either these are isolated or their diffusion is limited to Mungbam-speaking villages.

1. The names of the associations having “mainly political functions” found in Abar, Biya, and Ngun, can be all reduced to a shared root $-kp(w)\acute{V}nV-$.
2. The names of the associations having “mainly ritual functions” found in Abar, Biya, Mis-song, Munken, and Ngun, can be all reduced to a shared root $Vk(w)\acute{V}$.
3. *kə* and *ntənəyən* are known only from Buu.
4. *fəbafə* is known only from Kung.
5. *olam* is known only from Missong.
6. *ji* is known only from Mufu (unsure as to the actual reference of the term).
7. *kwal* is known only from Mundabli (unsure as to the actual reference of the term).

5.3 “Lower Fungom Canon” societies

The data introduced so far constitute only a part, however important, of the terms of cultural comparison that we will use later on. It must be clear at the outset that the names of higher associations should not be confused with the features we present here. In this section we outline twenty individual features—concerning topography and the overall system of sociopolitical institutions—whose distribution, summarized in table 4, has led us to postulate the existence of a cultural area we have for the time being defined “Lower Fungom Canon”, a label whose limits have been amply discussed in section 2. The names of the higher secret associations are not directly diagnostic as to the degree of adherence of a given society to our Canon. Rather, the two subsets of sociocultural characteristics contribute independently of one another to evaluate the extent to which linguistic boundaries can be accounted for in cultural and historical terms, a topic we will explore in section 6.

5.3.1 *List of the “Lower Fungom Canon” features*

1. Settlement pattern is not dispersed

Permanent settlements are all characterized by a certain degree of spatial concentration of houses (see also feature 3 below). Individual huts or small compounds scattered over cultivable land, if any, are occupied only temporarily according with agricultural activities.

2. Central location of the sacred forest

Located at roughly the physical center of the capital village, in the proximity of the chief's quarter, is a patch of dense forest. This area has a pronounced ritual significance for the village community and for this reason access to it is strictly forbidden to women and foreigners (see also feature 17 below).

3. The capital village of a polity is subdivided into quarters and residence is virilocal

We follow here local usage in calling 'quarter' a residential area internal to the village made of one or a number of compounds. In Lower Fungom Canon societies each quarter is the exclusive residential area of the male members of a distinct patrilineal kin group (in natives' representation). Patrilineal agnatic kinsmen live there together with their wives, children, and divorced (or unmarried) patrilineal agnatic kinswomen with their own offspring. Most commonly each quarter is named after its supposed founder, though it is not rare to find quarters whose names are semantically opaque.

4. Quarters are physically well distinct residential areas

Quarters can be characterized by a more or less compact settlement pattern but a strip of empty land always keeps them separate one another. Such empty strip can be at times so wide to make quarters somewhat closer to appear as discrete hamlets (i.e. Abar, Munken, Ngun).

5. Quarters coincide with exogamous units

This feature is directly related with feature 2 above. Partners must be sought outside of one's quarter as marriage between patrilineal agnatic kin is forbidden.¹³

6. Exogamous units act corporately most clearly in economic and political dimensions

Land is typically owned by such descent groups in the form of an uninterrupted plot only loosely, if at all subdivided among patrikin, who often cooperate in the pursuit of their economic activities,

¹³ It is clear that exogamy constraints may well include also the ban on marriage between matrilineal agnatic kin up to a certain genealogical depth. The latter aspect is however still unclear in its details and, in any case, would seem to fall outside of our present goals.

especially during large-scale agricultural practices like the clearing of fields by the use of fire. Resolution of lineage-internal conflicts is a matter dealt with at the level of lineage. In political terms patrilineages constitute the polity's principal interest groups, each of which is represented by a leader, the quarter head.¹⁴

7. Quarter head is a hereditary office and follows paternal or fraternal line

In the case of fraternal inheritance the relationship must be one of either full or half (same father) brothers. Genealogies of quarter heads are in general shallower than those of chiefs (see commentary to features 12 and 13 for more details on the latter).

8. Exogamous units do not seem to act corporately in ritual dimension

This feature has been isolated only *e negativo* on the basis of indirect evidence, that is, scrupulous visits to the villages and interviews. It is remarkable that in Lower Fungom Canon societies social institutions with prominent ritual-magical functions do not appear to be distributed by quarter. Houses of lower as well as higher associations (the latter are locally known as “law houses”) can be found in a number of quarters in each village but these are not kin group-based institutions. The former are more pertinent to the struggle among individuals to formalize their prestige. The latter, as pointed out below (see commentary to feature 15), are distributed according to decisions taken at the level of the village: though surely relevant to the prestige of the quarter head, presence of a “law house” in a given quarter does not mean that its particular ritual practices are specifically related with the kin group settled there, but only that the latter is particularly important within the village. In other words, what is missing in Lower Fungom Canon is an institution (i.e. a secret association) whose distribution coincides with kin groups, whose membership is limited to members of the kin group, and whose practices are both conducted by and aimed for the well-being of the kin group as a whole.

¹⁴ Patrilineal affiliation mobilizes most of the solidarity phenomena within each polity although it is clear that here like in other nearby areas—like the Menchum valley (cp. Masquelier (1993))—the network of relationships permeating social life is far more complex. First, it must be kept in mind that patrilineages are composed of several segments of shallower genealogical depth, materialized in the residential ‘compound’ units, which can potentially claim autonomy on all matters (only regarding exogamy their autonomy is conditional on their formalization as fresh lineage/quarter). These smaller segments are relevant especially in diachronic perspective since it is from such generation-segments that new patrilineages may arise through fission (see e.g. Middleton and Tait (1970 [1958]:4)). In synchronic view and relying on the data presently at hand it is impossible to define the extent to which these minimal lineages are significant in any social activity. For these reasons in this study we will deal only with the (maximal) patrilineages, i.e. those coinciding, at least in the “Lower Fungom Canon”, with quarters. Second, individuals refer to their own matrikin or in-law relations in specific occasions thus making it evident that patrilineal kinship hardly accounts for the whole network of relationships existing within these societies.

9. The chief has no control over coercive power (see also 12 below)

The chief alone is not able to activate any solidarity phenomena, nor to mobilize the whole village community as a corporate group unless his will is backed by an explicit consensus reached among the quarters' heads.¹⁵ The major features setting the chief apart from the quarters' heads (special share on big game and on any good reaching the village; right to free public work in his farms and possessions in general; prohibition to be touched; conciliatory attitude) are not in any way linked to the control of coercive power. On the contrary they seem to be motivated exclusively by the fact that the chief is accorded supernatural power by his community in the form of secret ritual knowledge. Yet, chiefs in Lower Fungom Canon societies cannot be defined 'sacred' like they are, for instance, in Bafut, Bum, or Kom (on the last see Chilver and Kaberry (1967:127) and Nkwi (1976:48–52)). Such knowledge, in fact, is not a prerogative of the chiefly kin group. It is the members of the higher secret associations, both men and women original to *all* the village's quarters (see section 5.2 and features 16–18), who bestow such knowledge on the new chief during the period of seclusion (two weeks to two months) following his installation.

10. The chief has no control over reproductive power

Another fact indicating that the chief here is not as sacred as in more centralized polities. He is not entitled to special rights on women—or, conversely, there are no men who are customarily limited in their access to women (see Warnier (1996)).¹⁶

11. Political authority is conditional on membership into higher secret associations

Anyone's authority, even the chief's, is strictly conditional on the successful payment of the extremely costly fees for admission into the higher secret associations (see section 5.1 and commentaries to features 15–18). Should a chief fail to fulfill such requirement he is not dethroned but his authority and the respect he is accorded by his fellow villagers will tangibly decrease. The greatest part of such

¹⁵ In this article we make no mention of the fact that villages always accommodate a chief and a "sub-chief". The former is usually defined by the community as the "Europeans' chief" or "administrative chief" while the latter is the "traditional chief". In most cases the present-day "sub-chief" used to be the sole legitimate chief until requirements and opportunities arisen during colonial times imposed him to name another man, usually the head of the most important quarter beside his own, since he himself was expected not to leave his village in accordance with his ritual status (see also Rutherford (1920) on other instances in the area and Ruel (1969:60–62) for analogous phenomena in the Cross River region). Throughout the article when we speak of chief we refer to the "administrative chief" unless otherwise stated.

¹⁶ The few cases in which the chief does have many wives (apparently always less than ten) are to be explained in economic and political, not in sacred terms.

sums are paid in the form of domestic animals and alcoholic drinks which are meant to be consumed by the members but, by the very nature of the membership representing the whole village, are in fact likely to be redistributed within the community at large. Membership into the higher societies can therefore be viewed as a formalized proof, a 'warranty' of the ability a man of influence has to contribute to the well-being *of the community as a whole*.¹⁷

12. Chief is given supernatural power by higher secret associations

As elsewhere in the region (see e.g. Chilver and Kaberry (1968:90) for Fungom and Masquelier (1978:238–241) for Modele), also in Lower Fungom Canon societies the chief is expected to provide “abundance of harvest, of game, and of children” (Pidgin *chop, bush, pikin*) to his fellow villagers and this he can do only as main priest of the higher lodges, i.e. through ritual-magical performances conducted in collaboration with the other members of the higher lodges.¹⁸ After being nominated and publicly announced, a new chief must spend a period of varying duration (up to two months) in the house of the “council” (see commentary to feature 16) where he is given “medicines” and revealed secrets by members of both men and women’s higher secret associations (see commentaries to features 15–18, and 20).

13. Chief is a hereditary office following paternal or fraternal line

Though the village community can exert considerable influences on the choice of the new chief, mainly thanks to their political representatives (quarter heads), the office of chief is seldom moved from one patrilineage to another unless as a consequence of major (and on the whole rare) sociopolitical re-adjustments. Inheritance through paternal line seems to be the most common, although in some cases chiefs alternate between two branches of one single (maximal) patrilineage.

14. Chief-list accommodates between six and eight names including the living chief

Length of a genealogy cannot be taken as an absolute historical clue reflecting, e.g., the antiquity of settlement of a given village or of the establishment of a given chiefly lineage (see e.g. Vansina (1985:182–185)). Too many “socially motivated distortions” (Irvine (1978:685)) may condition the

¹⁷ This seems to be at odds with other similar supra-lineage formalized institutions in weakly centralized societies, like the Ngbe of the Banyang, where the institution is given prestige by the authority that its members obtain according to their personal skills and wealth (see Ruel (1969:241–42)).

¹⁸ The fact that the traditional, once unique, chief is most often given the synonymous 'chief of war' by our consultants indicates that war (and hunt), the two principal communal activities of the village community as a whole, were the basic prerogatives of the office of chief (see also footnote 15).

composition and length of a genealogy. However, among such social distortions of genealogical knowledge we must reckon also the so-called “structural time depth” (Vansina (1985:118)), that is, the possibility that in a given tradition genealogical steps are fixed in number. At the very least, then, genealogies of appreciably different lengths from that stated here can be taken as indexes of a given village’s distance from our Canon.

15. Kwifon is not a prerogative of the chief

In all Lower Fungom Canon societies (and in general in Lower Fungom as a whole) we find associations going by the name of *kwifon*. This is an institution original to centralized chiefdoms, like Bum and Kom, where it is a closed regulatory society (Kaberry (1962)): its membership is in large part determined on the basis of the chiefly lineage’s relations and its main functions include enforcement of as well as monitoring over the chief’s power (see e.g. Nkwi (1976:64–96) and Chilver and Kaberry (1967:143–144) for Kom and Chilver (1993:9–15.Jun.1960) for Bum). By contrast, in Lower Fungom Canon *kwifon* is not connected with the exercise of chief’s power and authority and this is why many villages lacked it in table 3. In particular, (i) its membership is practically mandatory for all the male individuals of a given village / polity provided they pay a small fee, (ii) there can be more than one “house of *kwifon*” in each village, (iii) the distribution of such “houses” is virtually independent of the distribution of traditional authority in much the same way as it is for “lower” associations. All this ensures us that *kwifon* has been introduced somewhat recently in Lower Fungom Canon Societies and that here, unlike in more hierarchical ones, it is not in any way linked with the chief’s political power (see also Chilver and Kaberry (1968:89–90) and Geary (1979:60–65) for similar conclusions concerning nearby Weh).

16. Higher associations do not include *kwifon* and are basically of two types

In Lower Fungom Canon societies we find only two higher associations (see section 5.2 for their definition) and *kwifon* is not one of them, rather, it is to be considered a “lower association” (see above). One, possessing more pronounced juridical and political functions, we call here the “council”. The other, embodying the fundamental ritual-magical resource for a village community, we call here “highest lodge”. Functionally analogous institutions are found throughout Lower Fungom (see table 3) but when in the following we will use the terms “council” and “highest lodge” we will refer to a

whole “system”, as it were, which is instead peculiar to Lower Fungom Canon societies only.

17. Higher associations are reported to be original to the village

Feature 17 is of the utmost importance to understand the role these institutions play in a given village / polity. They provide the village community with means to organize social life and with common values that transcend lineage affiliation (on the importance of analogous institutions in Weh see Geary (1979:71) and for the fundamental role played by them in processes of village formation (see Horton (1972:101–103)). From this perspective it is conceivable that consultants may be inclined to represent the lynchpin on which reposes the identity of the village community as a whole not as an acquisition from an outside source but as an ancestral institution.

18. In both “council” and “highest lodge” membership is equally distributed by quarter

Both are open only to the quarters’ heads plus the chief and membership, though evidently hereditary as are these offices, is conditional on the payment of extremely high fees. Such constraint on membership cuts across lineage affiliation and is not based on struggle for personal prestige. Their principles lie in the allocation of legitimate authority among the men of the village. Their functions emphasize the duties of a somewhat stable hierarchy based on eldership and equally distributed among the quarters. For these reasons higher secret associations are to be seen as the clearest embodiments of the village as a sociopolitical unit (see also section 5.2).

19. “Council”, not the “highest lodge” can have more than one seat

Difference in function between “council” and “highest lodge” is reflected in the distribution and quality of their meeting places. The “council” may have more than one “house” and more than one open-air assembly place (circle of stone-slab seats) within the village. Its distribution always reflects relations of historical primacy—the status of being the first arrived in the history of the village—or of power among quarters: in any case the establishment of a house of the council seems to be the result of a communal decision taken at the level of the village in order to give public recognition of a given lineage’s importance. The “highest lodge” has instead only one, open-air assembly place located in the sacred forest, the holiest spot within the village / polity boundaries (see section 3 above) where we find a circle of stone slabs as seats, some vertical stones stuck into the ground, and sometimes a

house made exclusively of vegetal materials.¹⁹

20. There are two women's secret associations

Higher lodges and kwifon are of exclusively male membership, yet also women have their own secret associations. These amount to two in each village and differ one another in as much the same way as the inner circles of the highest lodge differ from the lodge itself, i.e. one is more exclusive and hence requiring a costlier admission fee than the other. There is an important ritual-magical side in these associations (see commentary to feature 12) but data at hand are too scarce in this regard.²⁰

Village	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	Tot.
Abar (M)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	20
Ajumbu	x	–	x	–	x	x	?	?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	–	–	n.a.	n.a.	–	11(2)
Biya (M)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	–	x	x	x	–	x	x	18
Buu (J)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	–	x	n.a.	x	x	18
Fang	x	–	–	–	–	x	–	–	?	x	x	?	x	x	–	x	–	?	x	x	9(3)
Koshin	x	–	x	–	x	x	?	?	–	–	?	–	x	–	–	–	x	n.a.	n.a.	–	6(3)
Kung	x	x	–	–	–	x	?	x	?	?	?	?	–	x	–	x	x	–	–	x	8(5)
Mashi	x	–	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	–	x	–	x	–	n.a.	–	14
Missong (M)	x	–	–	x	–	x	x	–	x	x	x	x	x	–	x	–	x	–	–	x	12
Mufu (J)	x	x	x	–	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	?	18(1)
Mundabli (J)	x	x	x	–	–	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	?	x	?	?	?	14(4)
Munken (M)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	?	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	?	x	x	–	x	17(2)
Ngun (M)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	20

Table 4: Lower Fungom Canon features in all the villages observed. x = feature is present, – = feature is absent, ? = unknown, n.a. = not applicable. In the 'Village' column (M) and (J) stand for Mungbam and Ji respectively and identify the affiliation of the language spoken in the village according to Good et al. (2011). In the 'Total' column the numbers of 'unknown' are enclosed in parentheses. It is to be noted that in the case of Buu the essentially historical purposes of our research have obliged us to include what we had witnessed in old Buu (abandoned in 1972) so to get a historically sounder picture for features 2-5.

¹⁹ As we have seen from table 3 within the highest lodge there can be one or more inner circles, i.e. progressively more secret and hence powerful magical-ritual guilds whose membership seems to be determined by either historical primacy or, more rarely, by political prominence among the quarters. Some of them have special meeting places, always in the open, but the scarcity of data at hand does not allow us to take them in consideration here.

²⁰ It is interesting to note that the women's associations more commonly accorded the highest status all go by names recalling Kom *fymbwen* (cp. Nkwi (1976:129–130)), also recorded in Aghem, Fungom, Mmen, Isu, and Zhoa under slightly different names (see Kaberry (2003 [1952]:99)). On the contrary the names of most of the remaining associations, all sharing a -*shaam*- root, seem to be peculiar to this area (see Kaberry (2003 [1952]:99)). There is no space here to deal with the formerly important figure of *na'tum*, sometimes translated by consultants as "Queen Mother": villages appear to markedly differ from one another as to the number and functions of *na'tum*'s in their own traditions (for a general overview see Kaberry (2003 [1952]:99–100)).

5.3.2 *Using our Canon for comparative purposes*

With the exception of few implication-rich features (especially features 8, 15, and 18), the sole tenable use we can make of such an oversimplified illustration lies in considering it in purely quantitative terms with no emphasis on little variations. The table above has the principal merit of exemplifying rather clearly the reasons that have led us to devise the label “Lower Fungom Canon”. There appears to be a threshold in the distribution: seven villages possess 85 percent or higher similarity with the Canon, the remaining have only 70 percent or less such similarity. The former are here labeled “Lower Fungom Canon societies”, the latter “non-Lower Fungom Canon societies”. Particularly striking degrees of divergence from the Canon (less than 50 percent) are found in Fang, Koshin, and Kung.

If we project these data upon the distribution of languages we obtain a remarkable degree of coincidence between our Lower Fungom Canon and the two language clusters of the area. In fact, with the only exceptions of Missong and Mundabli (the latter being more incompletely documented, though), villages where either Mungbam or Ji varieties are spoken are also the sole “Lower Fungom Canon societies”. Conversely, the four one-village languages (Ajumbu, Fang, Koshin, Kung) and the only Beboid language found in the area (Naki) show to be spoken in villages whose cultural patterns seem particularly distant from the Lower Fungom Canon. In the following section we analyze more in detail the distribution of all the features introduced so far and propose some interpretations.

6 Deviations from Lower Fungom Canon and their historical interpretation

In this section we shall be concerned with all the villages instantiating more or less pronounced deviations from our proposed Canon. Sociocultural features (section 5.3) are considered along with the names of higher associations (section 5.2) and with oral history, colonial documents, and linguistic observations. Our goal is to analyze the historical significance of these deviations, to assess the extent to which they can constitute cultural boundaries, and to begin shedding some light on their likely consequences / co-occurrences in linguistic terms. We shall analyze first (section

6.1) the most distant societies from our Canon—those possessing 14 features or less out of the 20 proposed above—beginning from the less surprising ones (i.e. those whose languages are affiliated with groups located outside of Lower Fungom). In section 6.2 we shall focus on those societies that, though on the whole close to our Canon—i.e. possessing 17 or more features—nevertheless differ from it for some relevant feature, or have secret associations with clear echoes outside of Lower Fungom, or both. The reader will notice that Abar and Ngun are conspicuously absent from our discussion. This is due to their being at the core of our Lower Fungom Canon and this fact, accompanied by other evidence (see section 6.3), makes them the best candidates as the earliest occupants of Lower Fungom.

6.1 Non-Lower Fungom Canon societies

6.1.1 *Kung*

Kung people are said to be original to Mawas, in the vicinity of Oku (Bui Division, some 40 km to its south east)²¹. Oral histories collected in Fungom and Bum all agree in reporting that Kung ancestors were living some 15 to 20 kilometers to the S–SE of where the present village is located in places called Tikum (Smith (1929:parr.34,37)) and Chikon (Pollock (1927:par.24)).²² Frequent raids and pressure from the south pushed the Kung northward. For perhaps one generation Kung ancestors occupied the hilltop whence around 1855 Mmen drove them off to found Fungom (see Smith (1929:parr.40–41) and Chilver and Kaberry (1968:90–91)).

This picture is corroborated by linguistic evidence: Kung [kfl] has been classified with the Central Ring languages found to the south, which include Mmen [bfm] and Oku [oku].

In this perspective it is interesting to note that such clear status as an immigrant to the area is also reflected in sociocultural terms: Kung is in fact one of the most divergent from the Lower Fungom Canon (cp. table 4 above).²³ As for its higher secret associations, we have already seen in section 5.2 that two important traits (functions of *kwifon* and presence of *ntul*) make Kung

²¹ Here and in the following, distances are to be understood as the crow flies. Cameroon administrative Region is North-West and Division is Menchum unless otherwise stated.

²² For other possible traces of Kung people in this southern area see: Chilver (1993:9.Jun.1960), Johnson (1936:par.34).

²³ In Kung society descent is matrilineal and hence on the whole matrilineages are much more important than patrilineages, two sides of an important characteristic that our framework does not capture with due clarity.

much more similar to the nearest centralized chiefdoms (Bum and Kom) than to any of the Lower Fungom Canon societies.

6.1.2 *Mashi*

The case of Mashi is very similar to that of Kung. Here, too, linguistic evidence and oral histories confirm each other. On the one hand we know that Mashi people speak a variety of Naki [mff], a Beboid language spoken also in Mekaf, Mashi Overside, Nser, and in other small settlements within the Furu-Awa subdivision to the north of Lower Fungom. On the other hand, all the Naki-speaking communities share a very similar tradition: reportedly they all came from Bebe-Jatto (Bui Division, some 45 km to its E-NE) and their ancestors were still living together in Mgbemgbi (in Furu-Awa, perhaps equivalent to the Melissa cited in Johnson (1936:par.33)) until pressures on the part of Isu pushed some families southward, where they later founded Mashi and Mekaf, whereas others were pushed northward and later founded Nser (Furu-Awa Subdivision) (Cantle (1929:par.6)). Hamm et al. (2002:5) note that Mashi and Mekaf people refer to themselves using the same ethnonym *ba*. Although the correctness of this information is debatable a factual proof ensuring that Mashi, Mekaf, and Nser represent themselves as “one people” is that each exogamous unit found in any of the three main Naki-speaking villages is still remembered as being historically linked to one specific “family” in each of the other two villages, though today these links do not seem to hamper intermarriages between their members.

That Mashi people (and their language) were immigrant to the area was also suggested by our sociocultural survey. Though not among the most distant from the Lower Fungom Canon, Mashi showed a clear divergent pattern sharing only 14 out of 20 features (see table 4).

Names of the higher secret associations confirm this picture. In Mashi we do not find two separate higher associations but only one, *ntshu*, whose name is found in several other villages of Lower Fungom (see table 3) as well as in Isu. The latter has been for long the second largest village / polity in the whole region after Wum (4183 total population in 1929, see Smith (1929:par.368)) and an important smithing (Smith (1929:par.275)) and trading centre located along one of the principal routes connecting the Grassfields with the middle Benue region (Warnier (1985:121–

124)). This makes it reasonable to assume that it exerted some influence over Lower Fungom societies in general—which we know did not have smithing nor actively practiced trade (see section 3.2)—and more in particular over those groups that, like Mashi and Mekaf’s ancestors, wandered through its territory (see also section 6.2.3). The diffusion of a higher secret association seems to fit well into the latter case (see also section 6.3 and 8). Furthermore in Mashi there are three female associations: beyond *shaamtə* and *fəmbwən*, known to most of the other villages, we find also an otherwise undocumented *fwan*, defined as “the *kwifon* of women” in natives’ view for its inclusiveness (see also footnote 20).

We have begun with the “easiest” cases. Both Mashi and Kung are so clearly set apart by virtue of their languages that we wanted to present them at the outset in order to test the validity of our sociocultural features. We believe that our Canon has passed the test.

6.1.3 Fang

Fang people are said to have come from Befang (about 45 km to its south west) but to be original to Bafang (west Region, Haut-Nkam Division, more than 170 km to the south of Fang). This tradition has been recorded also in British colonial documents (Hawkesworth (1927:par.5), Smith (1929:parr.42–43)) and it seems to be shared also by Befang people (see Abre (2003:7)). An anecdote found in Smith (1929:par.43) goes into the same direction: when, in 1921, the Assistant District Officer Gregg visited Fang accompanied by his Befang (“Mbelifang” in the original) carriers, the Fang people “refused to accept payment for food supplied to the carriers” as this would have conflicted with the “friendship” existing between them. This detail, however, is not sufficient for us to rule out the possibility that the relationship between Fang and Befang is actually fictive, secondary, constructed by both groups and as such non necessarily cogent in terms of a common provenance, let alone common language.

That Fang people may have moved to the area in recent times is strongly supported by socio-cultural facts. We have seen in table 4 that Fang is among the most distant societies from the Lower Fungom Canon (only eight sure features out of twenty). In particular here quarters do not coincide with exogamous units (feature 5) since members of any given lineage live scattered among quarters

(feature 3); in Fang quarters are more of an administrative than of a kinship-based kind and this determines that the office of quarter heads is not hereditary (feature 7) but rather elective (or perhaps selective on the part of the chief). The most apparent sociocultural differences are that in Fang (i) each lineage owns a hunting lodge (Fang *fəbwɔ*) whose seat is an externally peculiarly decorated “house of ritual” located in the lineage head’s compound (*contra* feature 8) and (ii) *kwifon* seems more closely related with the exercise of political power by the chief (*contra* feature 15, see also section 5.2).

The overall system of village-wide secret associations confirm that Fang is unrelated with Lower Fungom Canon, and their names confirm it has had intense relations with southern more hierarchical chiefdoms. In Fang we do not find only two higher associations. Rather, both *təm* and *ntol* have mainly ritual functions, whereas *kwifon* is more directly connected with the exercise of power on the part of the chief (see table 3). Fang themselves report that *ntol* was taken from (or perhaps imposed by) Nyos: this fully agrees with the southern models of such institution (i.e. Bum and Kom *ntul*) which we have already posited in the case of Kung (see section 6.1.1). Finally, the name of Fang’s ritual paramount institution, *təm*, is virtually a unicum.

We think that all these facts strongly support the idea of viewing Fang as a community that has had little contact with Lower Fungom as a whole in the past—this was also suggested by the recent construction of the bridge connecting it with the road to Buu and Abar (see section 4). Rather, it has probably been closely connected with more centralized chiefdoms located to the south (Nyos) and east of it (generally in Bum area), a possibility that memories of past intermarriage patterns with these areas seem to corroborate. Fang people also report to have occupied their current site after a somewhat long stay in Mfum, a now deserted site lying at the extreme southeast of Lower Fungom (see figure 2) which colonial documents sometimes report as “Fum”. They were forced to leave Mfum due to continued attacks led on them by Nyos people. This tradition is found also in the latter village: in Swabey (1942) we read that the first known Nyos chief “waged war on the village of Fuang [i.e. Fang] who formerly brought the kills of the chase to the Nyos chief but refused to do so in his time”. This early condition of “submission” of Fang to Nyos chief (who might well have imposed *ntol* / *ntul* to control Fang) does not conflict with the idea of Fang as relative newcomers to the area. Several consultants stated that Fang was occupied when Mashi but not yet Koshin had

settled where they are now. However, we are unable to assess the reliability of local oral histories as there has not yet been any serious attempt to compare Fang and Befang. Addition of new data to the few existing studies on the latter (Abre (2003) and Gueche Fotso (2004)) would certainly facilitate the completion of this task.

6.1.4 *Koshin*

All sources, both oral and written, agree in reporting that Koshin was founded by people originally settled in Bum area, not far from the present village of Sawe (Boyo Division), located at some 15 km to the south east of Koshin (see Pollock (1927:par.23) and Bridges (1933:par.94)). Koshin people add that their ancestors originated from Oku area (Bui Division, around 50 km to its S–SE). The tradition of provenance from Bum area is further corroborated by a map (in Bridges (1933)), which for its very nature is conceivably less exposed to sociocultural biased representations than are oral histories. In this map a site called Old Koshin is represented lying at some 8 km northwest of Sawe, in the vicinity of “Buabua” (in other sources also spelled “Buwabuwa”).

The tradition that sees Koshin as the result of recent immigration into Lower Fungom of an ethnically rather homogeneous foreign group would find sound support in sociocultural terms as Koshin is the most divergent society from the Lower Fungom Canon. An exhaustive discussion of all its differential features would require a separate section on its own. Suffice here to mention here the most important aspect: the traces of pronounced centralization of institutions.

Three out of the six quarters have the same name (*bədoŋ*) followed by a number, and the chief’s quarter is called *bədoŋ* 1: this means that *bədoŋ* 2 and *bədoŋ* 3 have arisen out of the first, therefore suggesting that in the past the chief had a privileged access to women, an attribute that makes this office particularly distant from its Lower Fungom Canon analogs (feature 10) and in turn closer to the figure of “sacred king” found in more centralized societies (cp. Nkwi (1976:37); see also Warnier (1985:209) for a similarly telling phenomenon in the history of Mankon). That Koshin exemplifies a more centralized type of political organization is also suggested by the fact that *kwifon* here seems compatible with a closed regulatory society: only the chief owns it, its only seat is located in the palace, and the new chief must spend the seclusion period that customarily

follows his nomination in this house and not, as in our Lower Fungom Canon, in the house of an institution, like the “council”, which escapes any direct relationship with the chiefly lineage and hence embodies the village as a whole. Control over a *kwifon* as such speaks in favor of a certain degree of control over coercive power by the chief (feature 9).²⁴

A higher political weight accorded to *kwifon* is a feature that is part of a radically different logic of organization of secret associations. To give but a rough idea, in Koshin there is no sacred forest within the village (feature 2) and nothing comparable to the twofold institution we have split into “council” as opposed to “highest lodge” (feature 17). Apart from *kwifon* there is only one secret association that has a predominantly ritual role in the social life of Koshin as a whole, *nti*, whose membership is not equally distributed among quarters (feature 16) and whose name recalls Bum and Kom *ntul* (see section 5.2, section 6.1.1, and section 6.1.3). Finally there is only one women’s secret association, *fymbwen*, and it closely echoes again a Bum institution whereas *(ə)shaam-*, apparently ‘indigenous’ to Lower Fungom (see footnote 20), is conspicuously absent.

If, on the one hand, all these idiosyncrasies may well be taken to confirm that Koshin people have migrated into Lower Fungom rather recently from the southeast, on the other hand their tradition of provenance would seem to conflict with linguistic evidence. Their presumed area of origin, Sawe in Bum area, is linguistically quite well known but the language spoken there (i.e. Bum [bm̩v], a Central Ring language) is not obviously related with Koshin. Nevertheless, results of still preliminary research we are conducting on the history of Bum area seem to indicate that Sawe people voluntarily abandoned their language shifting to Bum [bm̩v] once the prominence of the newly arrived Alung dynasty was established in Bum (perhaps in the first half of the 19th century) and that they were not the sole to do so in that area (see Chilver (1993:13.Jun.1960), Nyamnjoh (1997:10)). Other data point into the same direction. In fact several sources report that within the village communities of Mbuk, Mungong, Faat, and Fio—all under the Fon of Bum since the installation of the Alung dynasty—there are still speakers of their original languages, which seem to differ more or less markedly from Bum [bm̩v] (Lamberty (2002:3), Nyamnjoh (1997:10)). Among these languages Cung [cug], spoken only in Faat, is reported by speakers to be similar to

²⁴ Also interesting is the fact that in Koshin and nowhere else throughout our area we have found a throne hall populated with many wooden statues and a ritual dagger encircled with what could well have been a “corde à esclaves” (Warnier (1985:134)).

Koshin and initial lexicostatical analyses indicate that “it seems to be the furthest removed” from all the Beboid (formerly Eastern Beboid) languages so that it remains unclear whether it must be classified within the latter or the Yemne-Kimbi (formerly Western Beboid) group (Brye and Brye (2001:par.3.7)).²⁵

If so, and considering all we have said thus far, it would seem perfectly tenable to see Koshin language as a relic of the linguistic situation preceding the ascent of the Alung dynasty, that is, at a time when what is now Bum was politically (and linguistically) fragmented in perhaps not too dissimilar a way from present-day Lower Fungom.

6.1.5 *Ajumbu*

Also in the case of Ajumbu we find that extraneousness to our Canon coincides with a one-village language. Differently from the other one-village languages of the area, though, we know at least one variety that bore probably high resemblance with Ajumbu, that is, the nearly dead language once spoken in the now deserted village of Lung (see figure 2 and section 7). This is consistent with oral histories, all agreeing on the “indigenusness” of the population of both villages.

Available historical evidence seems thus to exclude that at the root of Ajumbu’s divergence from our Lower Fungom Canon (it has only 11 sure features) we can posit a somewhat recent immigration into the area. Let us review the principal differential features. In Ajumbu we find neither a sacred forest (feature 2) nor the usual distinction between a “council” and a “highest lodge” (feature 16). Here there is only one paramount secret association, called *ntshuin*, and it has a very unusual distribution. There are three *ntshuin* houses in Ajumbu—two in the traditional chief’s quarter and the other in the administrative chief’s—whose membership is identical but unevenly distributed among quarters (feature 18). These three *ntshuin* are ranked according to a hierarchy. The most powerful lodge is in the hands of the traditional chief and is said to be original to the village, the other two are instead reported to have been purchased from a Zhoa prince who

²⁵ Traces of a similar process of language shift from diversity to uniformity through adoption of the leading group’s language are probably to be seen also in Kom area. Shultz (1993:9) reports that the village of Ajung once formed an independent fondom and its inhabitants spoke a separate language: it was only recently, reportedly under the reign of the Kom chief Ndi (which Nkwi (1976:fig.4)) dates between 1926 and 1954), that the Ajung village head decided to adopt Kom language and customs. In 1993 one aged woman was reported to be still able to speak the old Ajung language.

had taken refuge in Ajumbu after being chased away from his native village.

All these peculiarities seem to point to the absence of an actually paramount institution embodying the unity of the village and, at the same time, to a rather recent introduction of *ntshuin*. We know that the present village was occupied in rather recent times after the arrival of Kung forced the abandonment of the old site of *bətsəma* (see figure 2). The area around Ajumbu is punctuated with the relics of several old hamlets (see also section 7 below) which are variously connected with one or the other kin groups found in present-day Ajumbu.²⁶ Consultants disagree as to the nature of these old settlements but it seems likely that they were once used by distinct kin groups, if not as their permanent settlements, at least as residences during the hunting season. Even so this would suggest that a remarkable degree of autonomy existed among these kin groups until very recently, and this would explain not only the probably late introduction of *ntshuin* but also the fact that it has not become a strong village-wide institution. In other words, the data at hand would seem to indicate that Ajumbu, recently unified as a village, has never reached the degree of political stability that characterizes Lower Fungom societies as a whole hence suggesting that, unlike the latter, it could resemble more closely the prototype of “acephalous society” typical of the Grassfields periphery (see section 5.1).²⁷

This must be coupled with the fact that Ajumbu is perceived of by most Lower Fungom people as an outsider to their area. This is essentially confirmed by the conspicuously low intermarriage rates between Ajumbu and any of the other Lower Fungom villages excepting Kung and Buu: Ajumbu relations seem to be polarized more clearly toward the south (see also table ??). This gives room to see Ajumbu and its language as substantially alien to the rest of Lower Fungom.

²⁶ One of these old hamlets, called *mgiyani*, was reportedly inhabited by Kutep people (others say Tiv) who left it long ago. Inhabitants of another of Ajumbu’s old satellite hamlets are said to have moved southwestward several generations ago and to have founded the village of Obang, not far from Bafut (but see some Obang linguistic data in Boum (1980)).

²⁷ This topic cannot be dealt with here, but research is being done, also with the help of remote sense imagery and GIS-based applications, in order to check the possibility that at the heart of the peculiarity of Ajumbu may have been an essential economic difference from its neighbors, i.e. that Ajumbu people used to rely greatly on hunting and gathering until quite recently.

6.1.6 *Missong*

Oral traditions depict Missong as having being founded in recent times by immigrant groups. The chief's kin group is reported to be original to a place called *ajumə* not far from Dumbu (Donga-Mantung Division, Misaje Subdivision) located at ca. 20 km to the E-NE of Missong. After leaving this place his ancestors are said to have lived for some time in *nca'*, in the area of Mashi Overside (Furu-Awa Subdivision), before finally establishing themselves in today's Missong. Since there are still two living people who are reported to have been born in *nca'* we may safely infer that the chief's ancestors must have settled in Missong rather recently, one assumption that might be seen to be confirmed also by the very short chief-list of four: only Mashi, on whose recent arrival we have little doubt, has such a short chief list. British colonial documents rarely mention Missong (variously spelled Bidjong, Bidjun) and when they do so they invariably represent it as a break-off from Munken (e.g. Smith (1929:par.35)).

There are a number of traits clearly setting Missong apart from the "Lower Fungom Canon". In Missong there is no sacred forest (feature 2) and each quarter is characterized by the presence of an unusual number of ritual spots, assembly places, and stone monuments indicating a pronouncedly diffused distribution of ritual-related institutions among the quarters and within them (feature 8). An institution that appears to have played a prominent role in Missong social life until recently is reported to have been called *olam*. Two features make this association very distant from what we know from the Lower Fungom as a whole. First, this is a hunting lodge whose seats and stone monuments are distributed by quarters, each "house" being accessible to the quarter's members only (countering feature 8). Second, the name of such institution is not found elsewhere in Lower Fungom.

Furthermore, what in our Canon is the highest lodge—hence characterized by only one open-air assembly place—in Missong has been surprisingly split among the three quarters though its name closely recalls that found in other Mungbam-speaking villages (Abar and Biya as well as Munken and Ngun though to a lesser degree, see table 3), a fact that seems to speak of a late introduction of the "highest lodge" type into a different system. Moreover, this suggests that in Missong there seems to be no trace of a unique village-wide sociopolitical institution apart from the chief, who is

in any case an apparently politically weak office.

Missong's uniqueness in this context is not limited to secret associations. For instance we know that each of the three quarters is subdivided into two exogamous moieties so showing that quarters do not coincide with exogamous units (feature 5). In addition, several of such moieties claim different provenances. Though consultants did not remember which language their ancestors once spoke, all affirm that they changed their language when settled in Missong.

At this point we are left with mere conjectures. Perhaps the picture that seems to best fit all these peculiarities is one of progressive settlement in this site by kin groups coming from disparate places roughly at the same time. This process would seem to have not determined any prevalence of one kin group over the other, but all seem to have acknowledged some ritual authority on the part of a Mungbam-speaking village / polity (see also section 6.3). This impression is apparently not conflicting with linguistic data: though sharing with them most of its structural features, Missong variety shows to possess several phonological, morphological and lexical idiosyncrasies that set it apart from the remaining Mungbam varieties (see Good et al. (2011:XX)).

6.2 Deviations within Lower Fungom Canon societies

6.2.1 Biya

The language spoken in Biya appears to be the second most divergent among Mungbam varieties. Good et al. (2011) point this out briefly concerning vowel phonology. The situation in its general terms is well summed up in Lovegren's words (p.c.): in phonological terms "[t]here are a couple of relatively regular correspondences between Abar, Ngun and Munken, but the data becomes unmanageable when either Biya or Missong is included".

Oral histories all agree in reporting that Biya has been founded by immigrant groups. In some cases the ancestors of the village community as a whole are said to have come from the area surrounding today's Fang, in others consultants have stressed the diverse provenance of the different kin groups now inhabiting the village. Colonial documents mention Biya (most often called Za') only rarely and report that it was under Kung.

Biya is a village apparently rather close to dissipation: it has been systematically depopulated

in the last decades so that today only few compounds have remained. Vitality of sociopolitical institutions has been greatly affected also by the sudden death of the latest chief, who has not yet been replaced and probably never will. These facts stand as important warnings against ascribing too much relevance to surface ethnographic data also because, in many cases, these can be hardly taken to be but recent developments. There are some points, however, that seem to overcome such limits. Biya is the only village in Lower Fungom having an inner circle called *kwifantɔ* which bears some surface resemblance with Kom *kwifoyn ntu'u*, “the *kwifoyn* of the night”, the most important inner lodge of Kom’s *kwifoyn* (see Chilver and Kaberry (1967:145) and table 3). It is striking that in Biya, membership into the higher associations is not regulated by quarter affiliation but is dependent exclusively on the payment of a costly fee. Even more unexpected is the fact that women are reported to be even admitted to become members of the “council” (*ukponənəng*).

Once again we see here the co-occurrence of linguistic and sociocultural peculiarities in the context of oral histories reporting foreign provenance of the founders.

6.2.2 *Munken*

Linguistically, Munken shows no macroscopic divergences as compared to the Mungbam cluster as a whole. Yet Munken people are reported to have come from Tabenken, also known as Tangmbo, Takie, or Tangmunken (on the latter see Chilver and Kaberry (1968:109) and Chilver (1997)). We are unable to check the reliability of this tradition at present but the evident similarity of the names of these villages, coupled with no apparent connections between their languages (in Tangmunken Limbum [Imp] is spoken), would seem to point to a later fictive representation of an early relation between them. In many colonial documents Munken and Kung ancestors are reported to have migrated together from the south, and to have split immediately before entering Lower Fungom.

Munken is on the whole quite similar to our Canon (17 sure features) but, especially concerning the system of higher associations, it is noticeably separate from the rest of the Lower Fungom Canon societies. Both higher associations of Munken, *ntəlɔ* and *ikwæ*, have more than one “house” and are reported to have mostly “spiritual power” so that it is difficult to apply here the distinction between a “council” and a “highest lodge”.²⁸ Our picture is surely incomplete and likely to be

²⁸ We are unable to assess whether in Munken *kwifon* used to play a more prominent role than it does in more typical

amended in the future. One fact, though, is already clear and could help explain what we have said here above. Even though we considered *ntələ* as an instance of our “council” type it is noteworthy that the surrounding polities located in the western part of Lower Fungom, when not *-kp(w)VnVn-* (found in Abar, Biya, and Ngun), all have *ntshu* probably introduced in the area from Isu (see section 6.1.2, section 6.2.3). By contrast *ntələ* appears to be very close, if not identical, to the name of an analogous institution found in Fungom (Chilver and Kaberry (1968:92), see section 5.2).

Considering the crucial role that such institution plays for the village community as a whole it is not surprising that Munken consultants have denied any past acquisition of this lodge, which is in fact reported to be original to the village. However, both this not unimportant peculiarity as well as the tradition of origin from Tabenken (and the somewhat dubious story of common migration with Kung) seem to indicate that at some time in the past Munken must have had important relations, though of unknown kind, with groups settled generally to the south, probably outside of Lower Fungom.

6.2.3 *Buu, Mufu and Mundabli*

Sociocultural and linguistic boundaries seem to coincide within the Ji-speaking area. Good et al. (2011:XX) state that: “it seems likely that the linguistic variety spoken in Buu is a distinct, though closely related, language from the varieties spoken in Mundabli and Mufu”. The same boundary seem to be manifested at considering cultural features. On the one hand we have Buu, a Lower Fungom Canon society reportedly “indigenous” to the Lower Fungom, a picture not contrasted by the fact that its higher associations bear names not encountered elsewhere both within and outside of Lower Fungom (see table 3). On the other hand we have Mufu and Mundabli, culturally closer to each other than to any other Lower Fungom society. They are to be acknowledged as instances of the Lower Fungom Canon²⁹ yet they are unique within this group in their having *ntshu* as their paramount secret association. Local traditions report it to be an indigenous institution but we have

Lower Fungom Canon societies.

²⁹ The low figure we have obtained for Mundabli with regard to our Canon (14 sure features) is strongly conditioned by our fragmentary data on its secret associations (four unknowns, see table 4) and could be misleading if taken at face value.

good reasons to connect its introduction with early contacts with Isu. Let us briefly consider local oral traditions.

Several kin groups of Mufu and probably the totality of those settled in Mundabli report that their ancestors were original to the Dumbo area, near Misaje in Donga-Mantung Division (Misaje Subdivision). Tradition has it that Mundabli ancestors arrived in Lower Fungom from the north, pushed by *bororo* raids (see also section 7.2). Oral histories concerned with Mundabli seem to offer several corroborating points to such tradition of northeastern provenance. For instance Mundabli is recalled in Bum as being an early “affine” of the Bum (see Chilver (1993:9.Jun.1960)) and when in the 1890s the Mundabli people abandoned their village for fear of attacks from the Mashi they went in self-exile to Kwe, or Kentani, not far from Misaje, where they remained until about 1917.³⁰ All these oral historical data seem not to conflict with the assumption that the presence of *ntshu* in both Mufu and Mundabli is the result of relatively close contacts with Isu, whose control over the forested regions located to the north of Lower Fungom has been already emphasized in the case of Mashi (see section 6.1.2).

6.3 Some provisional conclusions

In this section we have seen how the distribution of sociocultural features seems to be linked with observed linguistic boundaries and that both appear to find in oral histories some explanatory clues. At the clearest extreme of coincidence between these three orders of phenomena we find Fang, Koshin, Kung, and Mashi: the affiliations of their languages, their idiosyncrasies as compared to our sociocultural Lower Fungom Canon, and the completely consistent traditions of foreign provenance of their founders (at times even confirmed by other, independent historiographical sources) make it hard to dismiss the idea that they came from outside of our area taking along their languages.

Equally clear, but at the opposite extreme, are the instances offered by Abar, Buu, and Ngun: these are all Lower Fungom Canon societies and there is no oral history representing them as founded by foreigners. The names of their higher associations are not found outside of Lower Fungom. In the case of Abar and Ngun both these names and the system into which these in-

³⁰ We have ascertained that this tradition is to be considered reliable, see Podevin et al. (1920:26–27).

stitutions are found are practically identical one another. Abar and Ngun people speak closely related varieties of Mungbam, while Buu is a somewhat peculiar form of Ji. The fact itself that their languages “rhyme” with others in the same area adds to the already emerging impression of their long-standing presence in the area. At the very least we can assume that these languages were already spoken in our area when the above-mentioned immigrant groups gained access to it.

Then we have seen two cases where one order of data seems on the surface to be at odds with the other two. On the one hand we have Missong, whose status of non-Lower Fungom Canon society is associated with traditions of foreign origin of its inhabitants’ ancestors but conflicts with its language affiliation. However, such disagreement is rather superficial: true, Missong is a Mungbam variety, but one where our research team has found a number of distinctive linguistic features independently suggestive of significant non-Mungbam influence. It is this fact, together with traditions of disparate origins and with a chief’s genealogy of only four men, that make us believe that Missong variety is an idiom emerged *in loco* through admixture of one or a number of unknown languages with a Mungbam variety.

On the other hand we have Ajumbu. It is a non-Lower Fungom Canon society and its is a one-village language, yet these two seemingly mutually corroborating characteristics do not correspond to a tradition of foreign provenance of its founders. At a closer look, however, we have seen that Ajumbu is probably to be seen as the relic of a formerly wider area of language diffusion comprising at least the current Ajumbu area and the now deserted village of Lung, and this fact further corroborates the tradition of “indigenusness”. Our data also suggest that Ajumbu’s network of connections has been pivoting, as it does today, towards its south much more than to its north, i.e. to the heart of Lower Fungom. Ajumbu, then, seems to be alien to our area under many respects.

Finally we have a ‘grey area’ in which we include villages where varieties of Ji (Mufu and Mundabli) or of Mungbam (Biya and Munken) are spoken and which show an overall adherence to the Lower Fungom Canon. Yet some of their most important sociopolitical institutions bear what are probably best understood as signs of contacts with polities located outside of Lower Fungom, and their founders are said to have come from outside of our area. On the basis of the remarkable degree of consistency and overall reliability of local oral histories (a side result of our research) we would be inclined to seek to reconstruct a historical context that could account for the totality

of these aspects. Is there any possibility to reconstruct such context? Otherwise stated: can we envisage a reasonable explanation of why these supposedly alien communities might have changed their institutions and speech becoming very similar to those of communities already established in the area?

6.4 Firstcomers, newcomers, antagonistic newcomers

Lower Fungom history has been surely characterized by countless small-scale migratory events, as is generally the case in Subsaharan Africa and the Grassfields in particular (see e.g. Warnier (1985:5, 213–214)). On the basis of available literature (e.g. Warnier (1975:403–408), Geary (1980:51), Kopytoff (1987)), it can be safely assumed that under “normal” conditions, i.e. during periods of relative peace, the social dynamic between the earlier occupants of a given territory (henceforth “landowners” or “firstcomers”) and the newly arrived settlers (“newcomers”) has typically been one of inclusion of the latter in the former’s group of interest. This process of inclusion seems to have been encoded commonly in the idiom of kinship (newcomers are represented as landowners’ kin) and to have been formalized by the newcomers’ adoption of the landowners’ symbolic resources, i.e. ritual and language.³¹ Available evidence seems to ensure that this happened independently of whether newcomers ultimately became dependants of the landowners or got a more prominent political status (Fairley (1987)) as at the root of such process there was the recognition by the newcomers that ritual authority was in the hands of the previous settlers because theirs were the “mystical powers in relation to the land” (Kopytoff (1987:55)).

We may speculate that this pattern of inclusion applied only “under normal conditions”. In fact one may imagine that, in case the newcomers at the moment of their entrance into a given area were already organized as an independent and sizable group of interest, they might have been not only uninterested in getting incorporated into the landowners’ group of interest, but also substantially hostile to it. In a situation of potential (or actual) conflict there is little, if any, reason for symbolic resources to be passed from one to the other group. Rather, both interest groups, due to their antagonism over any kind of resources (people and land), will be likely to develop strong localist

³¹ While the importance of ritual in this process of incorporation has been amply documented, its linguistic co-occurrences seem to have been left often undetermined by anthropologists (but see also ?). In this perspective our work here might have some relevance for anthropologists too.

attitudes in ritual and in language.

Our impression is that the history of Lower Fungom we are able to gain access to at present has been characterized by both processes. For the sake of clarity we can subdivide local communities as having emerged through the prevalence of one process over the others:

1. Predominantly “firstcomers”: Abar, Ajumbu, Buu, and Ngun.

2. Predominantly “newcomers” arrived through small-scale migration phenomena: Biya, Munken, Misson, Mufu, Mundabli. The higher the adherence to Lower Fungom Canon, the longer the period of incorporation of the immigrant group into the landowner’s group of interest. Early newcomers in their turn may have become landowners for more recent newcomers: Munken, for instance, might have well been perceived of as landowner by the founders of Misson, and the same probably happened between Mufu and the immigrant Mundabli ancestors.

3. Predominantly “antagonistic newcomers”: Fang, Koshin, Kung, Mashi.

Is there anything in the available data that could help us verify this speculative reconstruction? The following section is devoted to this topic.

7 Elements of historical topography

The old settlements we have identified thanks to our archaeological survey can be subdivided into two types according to their location. On the one hand we have sites like Baawan, old Buu and Kumbə, which by virtue of being located on uneasily accessible hilltops clearly show to have been chosen according to their defensive potential. On the other hand sites like Nsom and Lung, which lie on the flanks of smooth hills, must be associated with groups whose main priority was undoubtedly not that of living in a naturally protected place.³² That the two settlement patterns correspond to two distinct historical phases is clearly shown in the history and archaeology of Buu and of Mufu.

³² It is difficult to say to which degree these settlement choices have been conditioned also by bioclimatic and soil quality factors. The latter, at any rate, can be hardly held to be determinant when security is threatened.

7.1 Archaeology of Buu and Mufu

Buu consultants clearly remembered that the extraordinarily poorly accessible site of old Buu was abandoned in 1972 after an undetermined period of occupation initiated by the emergence of external threats, among which we must probably reckon Fungom's expansion policies (see also section 7.2). They also state, though not too confidently, that before taking refuge on the hilltop Buu people used to live where the current village is.³³

In the case of Mufu our picture is by far more detailed than it is for Buu. In the area surrounding the present village we have found the relics of several old hamlets. These are called Baawan, Kuntshin, Lombo, Doggum, Mba Ku and Ntshamma (see figure 2). Consistent ethnohistorical data indicate that the oldest settlements of the area were Ntshamma, Lombo, Kuntshin, and Mba Ku—all sites more accessible than Baawan and present-day Mufu—whereas Baawan was occupied in a later phase by people formerly settled in Lombo. Mufu consultants have emphasized that it was after the arrival of Mashi people from Mashi Overside that defense became a priority.³⁴ In that period, dating back to the second half of the 19th century (see below), all the inhabitants of these small hamlets first tried to fortify their settlements or to move to naturally well-defensible sites (like Baawan) and eventually decided to unite their forces and to occupy permanently the best-defensible site of all, that is, today's Mufu. Here each of these formerly spatially distinct kin groups has founded a separate quarter.

This process of synoecism where previously independent hamlets located in open land sites coalesce to form a rather compact settlement (the village) in a well-defensible position is also attested at least in Mundabli (where the older settlements of Kumbə and Tsham were abandoned and people merged in the present site of Mundabli) and, though less clearly, in Ajumbu (see section 6.1.5). This is a universally common pattern, well documented in the Grassfields at large (see Warnier (1975:86ff.) for Mankon) as well as in Tivland (Bohannon (1954:5–7)), and is invariably related with the emergence of violent threats.

The historical phenomena that immediately come to mind in this respect as far as the recent

³³ Many details—among which the degree of linguistic similarity between Buu, Mufu, and Mundabli—lead us to suspect that “Older Buu” was located somewhere more to the north.

³⁴ As a corroborating evidence we can cite that the lyrics of a ritual song sung at the installation of Mufu traditional chief, a political office directly associated with war (see footnote 15) can be translated as “Mashi people have come to Ntshamma, let us make war on them!”.

history of the Grassfields is concerned are represented by Chamba and Fulani raids dating back to the first half of the 19th century. Let us try to place Lower Fungom within this regional historical framework.

7.2 Chamba and Fulani raids in the history of Lower Fungom

Mounted raiders are locally known by the name of *gainyi*, a term apparently closely related with Tiv *ugenyi* "early raiders, some of whom may be of Jukun origin" (Fardon (1988:85–86)). Also reported in historical sources are terms like *bara*, *bororo*, usually translated as "Fulani", and the Pidgin phrase *red mauts* "red mouths". Apart from few cases these terms seem to be used indiscriminately in oral traditions and cannot be taken to refer to "tribal names" but only as appellations "given to raiders coming from a northern or north-easterly direction" (Chilver and Kaberry (1968:18–19)).

We have found only few traces of their passage in Lower Fungom in local oral histories, but we have not conducted a specific inquiry in this direction. British colonial officers, on the contrary, have dealt quite extensively with this topic and have reported that *gainyi* pillaged and burnt Munken and Abar (Smith (1929:par.53)) and that, immediately outside of our area, "Fulani" hordes raided Isu, Kuk, Mmen, Weh, and Zhoa (Swabey (1942)). Smith (1929:parr.53–54) has recorded a tradition according to which an alliance comprised of the so-called Chap peoples, i.e. Mmen, Nyos, and Kuk, defeated and chased away definitively the *gainyi* at Nyos. Apparently reliable arguments allowed Smith to date such battle at around 1850, and the subsequent foundation of Fungom to 1855 (Smith (1929:par.41)). This allows us to date the raids mentioned above at a period between 1820 and 1850 (cp. Smith (1929:par.54), Johnson (1936:par.33,39,42,43), Chilver and Kaberry (1968:15–19,132–134), Geary (1976:89–93), and Fardon (1988:85ff.)).

Our data allow also a further refinement of our understanding of those events. Nowhere in Lower Fungom do we have reason to believe that raids had an impact as great as they had in Weh. The latter was devastated by *gainyi* who occupied the area for several years, while the local population took refuge in Kuk, Mmen, or Kom whence some of them returned only two decades later around 1850 (Geary (1976:74,88) and Geary (1979:54)). On the contrary all sources report

that villages located in more hilly environments to the north and northeast of Weh had been raided “only once”, and that in some cases—like Kuk and Zhoa (Swabey (1942))—locals minimized their losses by hiding “in the bush”. Several independent sources even say that Isu managed to chase the raiders away towards the north (cp. Geary (1976:87) and Swabey (1942)). As for Lower Fungom, it is important to recall that its internal physical characteristics (i.e. frequency and steepness of hills), the presence of a relatively wide inhospitable stripe of land running all around Lower Fungom—uninhabited today and most probably in the past as well—and its additional insulation from the outside determined by the Kimbi river to the east and north and the Yemne valley to the west are three factors that may well have prevented mounted hordes from disturbing the area.

What we have illustrated thus far suggests that Lower Fungom, being a resource-rich *cul de sac* naturally protected from outside threats, is likely to have represented a shelter area for communities living in the surrounding areas. However it is to be noted that, apart from some echoes in Mundabli traditions (see section 6.2.3), all the immigrant groups to our area mention threats other than the Chamba raids as the determining factors of their wanderings. As we have recalled in other parts of this paper Mashi was pushed southward by Isu, Fang northwestward by Nyos, Koshin northward by Kom, and Kung northward by Mmen / Fungom. The motivations lying behind the supposed migration of the ancestors of Biya, Missong, Munken and of some of the Mufu quarters are still obscure.³⁵ The widely documented processes of synoecism and of village fortification documented in Lower Fungom must be seen, in our view, as due to the arrival of presumably sizable foreign groups of *refugees*, not to raids. This would explain why the overwhelming majority of our consultants recalled the “tribal wars” and not the *gainyi* or *bororo* as the main historical events that have marked deeply the history of our area.

7.3 The site of Nsom and the chronology of the “tribal wars” period in Lower Fungom

In terms of chronology the facts recalled above basically indicate that Lower Fungom underwent a period of substantial sociopolitical (and sociolinguistic, as we shall see) changes largely after the end of the Chamba raids period. The archaeological site of Nsom provides fundamental evidence in this regard (see figure 2). All consultants contacted have it that this was a Kutep settlement and

³⁵ In the case of Munken the story told is very similar to quite common plots of early fights within kin groups.

that the arrival of Koshin caused its abandonment. Fardon (1988:78–87) informs us that Chamba raids in Kutep area were particularly frequent during the first decades of the 19th century. Chilver and Kaberry (1968:16) say in this regard that one of the southward migrating Chamba groups “appears to have moved west from the Banyo-Tibati area with Buti and Tikar allies, and to have finally settled in about 1840 in the Takum district after reducing or incorporating the Kutep and the Kentu”. The two British scholars also added that “this movement [...] was responsible for the southward migration of some of the intrusive groups now found along the northern borders of the Bamenda Grassfields” (Chilver and Kaberry (1968:16–17)). Nsom seems to fit perfectly into this framework and this allows us to roughly date its foundation between 1800 and 1840.

Very notably, relics of Nsom are scattered over the smooth flanks of two hills, and not on an inaccessible hilltop (see figure 2). This ensures us that when the Kutep founders of Nsom arrived in Lower Fungom this was a relatively peaceful area. We have already noted (section 6.3) how in non-conflictual periods the “normal” pattern between earlier settlers and newcomers was likely to be one of inclusion, especially in terms of symbolic behavior (i.e. ritual and language). It is then reasonable to think that this inclusive pattern might well have been at work at least until Nsom was founded, i.e. up until some time between 1800 and 1840.

Our situation is particularly fortunate because there are other significant historical facts that can be dated. We know that Fungom was founded around 1855 by Mmen people after they chased away the Kung. The latter report that their own ancestors first took refuge in the vicinity of Koshin, and that at that time (i.e. conceivably before 1860) Nsom had already been abandoned. After forcing the Kutep to leave Nsom, Koshin did the same to the Kung, whose chief is reported to have been killed by them. This ensures us that between 1840 and 1860 we are already in the ‘tribal wars’ period. In all likelihood during this period conflicts between antagonistic interest groups promoted the centralization of settlement pattern and this co-occurred with the development of markedly localist attitudes in both ritual and language.

8 From inclusion to conflict: toward a sociolinguistic chronology of Lower Fungom

At this point we can add a sociolinguistic dimension to what we have summarized thus far. The following is a provisional proposal for a “sociolinguistic chronology”, as it were, of the Lower Fungom area.

1. The earliest phase we are able to reconstruct sees Lower Fungom as a relatively peaceful area characterized by the presence, at least in its northern and southern fringes, by somewhat scattered residential patterns not much dissimilar as compared with those found in pre-colonial Modele and Meta'. Buu, Ngun, as well as the majority of the quarters of Abar and of what will later become Mufu and Ajumbu are already settled in the area. Apart from the last, all the other communities constitute what could be seen as an area of cultural convergence: our Lower Fungom Canon is developed in this period. Under such “normal conditions”, that are likely to have lasted for some centuries, small immigration phenomena are welcomed by the “landowners” who see in the “newcomers” potential dependents or allies. This is materialized by inclusive practices especially in symbolic behavior, i.e. ritual and language, sanctioned by intense intermarriage. This means that either newcomers are incorporated in the existing communities or, if they remain autonomous, they are likely to acquire several of the landowners’ cultural and linguistic traits. In this view we can hypothesize that it is in a late phase of this period, perhaps in the second half of the 18th century, that the ancestors of Munken arrived in the area. This hypothesis is required if we want to take into account all the sociocultural features of Munken in the context of oral histories reporting their ancestors as foreigners and of a “complete incorporation” of its language within the Mungbam cluster (long period of cohabitation with Mungbam-speaking villages).
2. Between 1800 and 1840 there is a first wave of immigrants from the north. Ancestors of Mundabli, Biya, and of some Mufu quarters arrive at this time. Kutep refugees also arrive and found Nsom. The area seems to remain essentially peaceful, though at this time Chamba or Fulani incursions took place. Inclusive pattern of small groups of newcomers on the part of landowners is still at work (even probably increased in intensity due to the however modest

external threats).

3. Between 1840 and 1860 Fang, Mashi, Koshin, and Kung enter the area. Beginning of the “tribal wars”. Emergence of Mufu and Mundabli as individual villages. Old Buu is occupied by Buu people. Kung pressure on Lung begins. Nsom is abandoned. Abar, Munken, and Ngun develop fortifications. The outbreak of conflicts and subsequent coagulation of formerly more autonomous social groups to form villages promotes the adoption of localist attitudes in both ritual and language.
4. Tribal wars continue until the arrival of the Germans in the area. Between 1905 and 1909 Germans organized at least three military expeditions to Lower Fungom (see Jurisch (1907), Smith (1929:par.68–75), Johnson (1936:par.47)). Ajumbu village is founded before the arrival of the Germans. Oral traditions indicate that the latter have supported all the immigrant groups, most clearly in the cases of Koshin, Kung, and Mashi, at the expense of earlier settlers.³⁶ Localist sociolinguistic attitudes continue.
5. After the passage to British control (1916) the major phenomena are the dissipation of Lung (about 1930) and very recent processes of re-settlement on open land (as in the case of Buu people who left Old Buu in 1972, or of the new quarter of Fang emerged after the construction of a bridge on the Mfum river in 1964). The sociopolitical and linguistic scenario is crystallized as it is seen today. Linguistic ideology is by now firmly anchored to the localist attitude according to which one village’s political independence is directly manifested in possessing a language of its own.

9 Conclusions

In this paper we wanted to seek historical explanations for the striking degree of linguistic density found in Lower Fungom. First we have considered existing theories that see in ecological factors the determinants of the development of sociolinguistic localist attitudes. These theories have pro-

³⁶ For instance the most important festival in Koshin customs, *nəmgə*, is closed by a ritual song whose refrain goes “German white men, when will we see you again?”. All Koshin consultants explicitly recalled the Germans as benefactors.

vided a useful starting point but proved to be insufficient in our case. In particular these models, by their very nature, cannot take into due consideration social as well as symbolic processes that may well have conditioned the adoption of extreme localist attitudes (such as those documented in Lower Fungom) to much the same degree as do purely ecological factors. We have thus introduced two fundamental considerations. On the one hand we have drawn attention to the importance of including the degree of natural protection from outside threats as an important index for assessing the ecological risk of a given area. On the other we have emphasized that in Subsaharan African societies wealth is conceived of more in terms of people than of land and, hence, that this urges a re-adjustment of the variables to be considered for our purposes. The former consideration has called for a detailed discussion concerning the history of our area with special attention to the identification of cultural boundaries among the societies of Lower Fungom. The latter consideration has led us to take a critical view on any of the results we might have obtained from this ethnographic and historical survey. In fact the folk model of wealth-in-people, associated with processes of inclusion of newcomers by firstcomers, is likely to have direct linguistic consequences that might well blur the historical 'objective' reconstruction: if newcomers arrived during non-conflictual periods they were likely to be incorporated by the landowners. We assumed that the longer the period of cohabitation between "landowners" and "newcomers" the more advanced the stage of incorporation of the latter into the former's system, both in cultural and linguistic terms.

With this important caveat in mind we have tried to identify cultural boundaries that may be considered significant in historical terms. In order to do so we have combined twenty sociocultural features that distinguish a relatively homogeneous group of villages / polities (Lower Fungom Canon Societies) to all the remaining villages / polities. It soon became apparent that such cultural boundaries coincided by and large with linguistic boundaries: Ji- and Mungbam-speaking villages are the only Lower Fungom Canon Societies, while all the one-village languages are spoken in non-Lower Fungom Canon Societies. The inclusion of oral histories and colonial documents has further corroborated the idea that ancestors of those who speak one-village (Fang, Koshin, Kung) or Beboid languages (Mashi) had entered somewhat recently into our area, while several Ji- and Mungbam-varieties could be seen to have been spoken for long in Lower Fungom. This amounted to much, yet not to the whole story.

On the one hand Ajumbu, though among the firstcomers, was so idiosyncratic with the rest that we have proposed to see it as fundamentally alien to Lower Fungom as a cultural, as opposed to a geographic, area. On the other Missong, Biya, Munken, Mufu, and Mundabli showed more or less entangled a sets of data. This has prompted us to refer to our archaeological survey. By so doing we wanted to provide a chronological framework that could be of some help for us to figure out whether in the history of our area we could identify a historical caesura. In fact, excluding the alien Ajumbu and taking in due consideration local oral traditions, the evidence at hand seemed to suggest that the main difference between, say, Munken and Koshin lay probably in the fact that the founders of the former arrived in a period when the landowners were inclusive, while the latter arrived when the landowners were not inclusive. It is in this perspective that we have reconstructed, basing our argumentation on both archaeological findings and extensive references to the existing literature, a chronological framework that appears to give a reasonable explanation of most of the problems recalled above, if not to all of them.

Future research will likely amend our picture in some of its details. However, we believe that both the basis of our methods and further developments of our study might easily prove to be useful for many other contexts in the Grassfields. We hope that our perspective will add a whole set of considerations, and hopefully of new research, on the rather enigmatic linguistic distribution of the Grassfields region as a whole.

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