

What are we trying to preserve?
Diversity, change, and ideology at the edge of the Cameroonian Grassfields

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Abstract

Discussions of endangered languages often frame language death as being associated with the loss of knowledge as embedded in a particular language. At the same time, it is also clear that the losses associated with language endangerment need not be restricted to individual language systems but can also involve the disappearance of distinctive language ecologies. This paper explores the language dynamics of the Lower Fungom region of Northwest Cameroon, which offers an extreme case of linguistic diversity within the already exceptionally diverse Cameroonian Grassfields, focusing on what we can learn by looking at the languages from an areal and ethnographically-informed perspective. In particular, key aspects of the local language ideologies will be explored in some detail, and it will be argued that in this area languages are used to symbolize relatively ephemeral political formations and, hence, should not be taken as reflections of deeply-rooted historical identities. This conclusion has significance both regarding how research projects in the area should be structured as well as for what it might mean to “preserve” the languages of a region which historically appears to have been characterized by frequent language loss and emergence conditioned by changes in territorial and political configurations.

1 Preserving languages or language dynamics?

A conspicuous feature of the endangered languages discourse is the focus on the consequences (whether scientific or social) of the loss of *languages*.¹ This is perhaps most strikingly seen in statements like, “the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages” (Krauss 1992: 7), which choose to characterize the “crisis” of endangerment in numerical terms that suggest languages are easily conceptualized as discrete objects. It is also an essential part of characterizations of the significance of endangered languages that stress their role as “repositories for cultural knowledge” (Harrison 2007: 7), clearly implying that the loss of the language implies the loss of “treasures” contained within them (see also Crystal (2000: 32–26) and Nettle & Romaine (2000: 14), among others). Hill (2002) has critiqued motifs like these under the headings of *enumeration* and *hyperbolic valorization*, and the forces that have caused linguists to adopt them are clear enough: They are effective at “selling” the need for significant efforts to be devoted to the world’s less-resourced languages (Hill 2002: 119; Dobrin et al. 2009: 38–40) (see also Duchêne & Heller (2007) for a broader contextualization).

The ideologies in which this approach to endangered languages is embedded are clearly open to criticism on general academic, and perhaps even more broadly sociopolitical grounds (see, e.g., Edwards (2010: 51–56)). However, the observation that guides this paper is more narrowly linguistic in nature. In conducting work on the languages of a small, but exceptionally diverse, region of Cameroon, what appears to make them “special” is not their value as self-contained storehouses of a culture but, rather, their utility as tools for the flexible construction of multiple identities. In an African context, this is not a fundamentally novel idea, as the “complicated” (Childs 2003: 175) nature of multilingualism in Africa has been discussed in detail elsewhere (see, e.g., Irvine & Gal (2000: 47–59); Blommaert (2007); Lüpke (2010)). Our new contribution here is first offering an account of the development of linguistic diversity in such a multilingual context in a region which has, heretofore, seen relatively little study, thereby introducing an additional case to the unfortunately small catalog of available studies that have been conducted

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along these lines (Storch 2011: 213) (section 3). We then look at our analysis of the history of the region's linguistic diversity in light of contemporary ideas of language documentation (in the sense of Himmelmann (1998); Woodbury (2011)) and suggest that it calls for a more nuanced approach to the relationship between documentary methodology and ecological contexts than has generally been found to this point (section 4).

On the whole, we hope that this paper will make clear the need for work on endangered languages to become more sensitive to the cultural contexts in which these languages are embedded, rather than assuming that ideas about language which make sense in Western contexts straightforwardly apply to other parts of the world. We acknowledge, at the outset, that this point may be obvious to many readers, but our impression is that it has yet to significantly inform most work on language documentation, making it worthwhile to emphasize it in the context of a volume like this one. We begin by giving a general overview of the linguistic situation of our area of focus in section 2.

2 Lower Fungom: Ethnolinguistic background

2.1 Languages and villages

Our area of focus, the Lower Fungom region of Northwest Cameroon, is one of the most linguistically diverse parts of the Cameroonian Grassfields, itself an area whose linguistic diversity has been noted for some time (Stallcup 1980: 44). Located in the Grassfields' northwest periphery (see figure 1), the core inhabited area stretches roughly ten kilometers both north to south and east to west, making it about the size of Guernsey island. Including less densely settled outlying areas, the entire region is around 240 square kilometers, comparable in area to the Pacific island of Niue.

Seven languages, or small language clusters, are spoken in Lower Fungom's thirteen recognized villages, meaning there is about one language per thirty-four square kilometers. By way of comparison, the famously linguistically diverse country of Vanuatu (see, e.g., Evans (2010: 214)), has about one language for every hundred square kilometers.² Four of Lower Fungom's languages are restricted to a single village. While its languages can all be reasonably

² See François (2012) for a discussion of the language dynamics of a region of north Vanuatu which, superficially at least, appears to show comparable patterns to what is found in Lower Fungom.

classified as Bantoid (see section 2.2), five of them do not have any established close relatives outside of the region, nor can they be straightforwardly shown to be closely related to each other (see section 2.3). The linguistic picture is paralleled by an ethnographic one which shows considerable diversity in social organization across the region’s villages as well. The discussion in this section provides an overview of the pertinent features of the region. More detailed analysis is provided in Good (to appear); Good et al. (2011); Di Carlo (2011).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Table 1 lists the linguistic affiliations of each of the Lower Fungom villages along with rough population estimates. Dashed lines indicate villages whose varieties are sufficiently distinctive from closely related varieties that they are probably best associated with their own “language” if only linguistic criteria (such as unacquired mutual intelligibility) are considered. Mungbam, the Ji group, Fang, Koshin, and Ajumbu are only known to be spoken within Lower Fungom and have no established close relatives outside of the area.³ Unlike these, Naki is spoken in Mashi as well as in villages outside of Lower Fungom, three of which—Mekaf, Small Mekaf, and Mashi Oversight—appear in figure 1. Kung is spoken only within the village of Kung but has been classified with the Central Ring languages found to the south, which include Mmen [bfm]. A dialect of Mmen is spoken in Fungom, a village to the south of Ajumbu which, for largely accidental historical reasons, lent its name to the wider region. The label *Lower Fungom* was then applied to refer to the lower-elevation territories found within this area.

³ Throughout the paper, we follow a convention of referring to Mungbam as though it were a language while referring to the Ji group rather than the Ji “language” for two reasons. First, the divergence between Buu and the other members of the Ji group appears to be greater than that between Missong and the rest of Mungbam, giving strong evidence for distinct languages within the group. Second, the name Mungbam has been specifically crafted to refer to the speech varieties of this language in what we believe is a reasonable way (Good et al. 2011: 114–124), while the label Ji references a local isogloss involving the word for ‘dog’, rendering it inappropriate as a language name.

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
	Koshin [kid]	Koshin	3,000–3,500
Ajumbu [muc]	Ajumbu	200–300	
Beboid	Naki [mff]	Mashi	300–400
Central Ring	Kung [kfl]	Kung	600–800

Table 1: Lower Fungom villages

In terms of social identification, with the partial exception of Mashi which in some respects acts as part of a larger Naki unit, even villages speaking closely related varieties in Lower Fungom view themselves as autonomous, each having their own chief, and identify their language as being spoken only within the village itself, though they often recognize that other villages speak languages which “rhyme” with theirs (i.e., that are perceived as lexically and grammatically similar). On the whole, then, the region can be characterized as dominated by a localist attitude with respect to language rather than a distributed one (see Hill (1996)).

The languages of Lower Fungom appear to be relatively vital, despite their small size. Children born and raised in its villages generally still speak the language associated with their home village. Anecdotal observations suggest that the increasing use of the local lingua franca, Cameroonian Pidgin, may be leading to the decline of knowledge of local languages as second or third languages insofar as bilingualism in one’s native language and Cameroonian Pidgin may be replacing older patterns of multilingualism. However, this issue has yet to be examined

systematically (see also Hamm et al. (2002: 20)).⁴ It does seem clear, however, that the *idea* of a lingua franca in the region is of relatively recent provenance, arising due to European contact. Menang (2004: 903–904) gives a date around the mid nineteenth century for the first major influx of a pidgin English variety along the Cameroonian coast which was the precursor to contemporary Cameroonian Pidgin. Before this, communication between different linguistic groups was apparently achieved via multilingualism rather than a dedicated trade language (Warnier 1980: 832).

2.2 Broad genetic context

The languages of Lower Fungom have all been classified in the Bantoid group (see Watters (1989)). This puts them among the closest relatives to the well-known (Narrow) Bantu group of languages, which dominate southern sub-Saharan Africa. The primary basis for this classification is their Bantu-like systems of noun classes (see Good et al. (2011)), which are nevertheless divergent enough from the noun class systems associated with Bantu languages (Maho 1999; Katamba 2003) to suggest they should be treated as part of a higher-level grouping within Benue-Congo, the subgroup of Niger-Congo in which the Bantu languages have been classified.⁵ Specific arguments for the placement of these languages within Bantoid, as opposed to other subgroups of Benue-Congo with “Semi-Bantu” (Johnston 1919) noun class systems, such as Cross River (Faraclas 1986) or Jukunoid (Storch 1997), have never been developed, though, based on an impressionistic comparison of noun class systems of Lower Fungom languages with those of other non-Bantu Bantoid languages, this strikes us as a reasonable, if not proven, classification.

Nevertheless, we believe a general note of caution is required when discussing issues of classification in this part of the world. It has often been assumed that tree-based models of language classification can be usefully associated with the Bantoid languages. This is, perhaps, best evidenced by the tree diagrams seen in handbook chapters such as Williamson & Blench (2000) that are propagated as much by “scholarly inertia” (Childs 2003: 47) as empirical evidence (Dalby 1971: 17; Heine 1980: 295). It is also seen in various attempts at lexicostatistical

⁴ François (2012: 105–106) describes a similar pattern in northern Vanuatu, on the basis of more detailed data than is available to us.

⁵ See Dimmendaal (2011: 318–324) for an up-to-date overview of the composition of the Niger-Congo family.

classifications (Piron 1997; Bastin et al. 1999) (see also Nurse (1994–1995)). However, as pointed out in the recent overview by Schadeberg (2003: 154–160), despite success in reconstruction, establishing clear-cut subgroups for Bantu and its Bantoid relatives has proven difficult. This is not a new concern. Möhlig (1979; 1981), for example, develops an approach to diversification in Bantu that emphasizes the role of wavelike change in shaping the family while markedly de-emphasizing the role of traditional genetic descent.

Beyond providing general context for the discussion of diversity in Lower Fungom to be presented below, the issue of how to model language change and language classification within Bantoid has direct significance regarding how we should understand the region’s diversity. The earliest survey work on the region, described in Hombert (1980), privileged the “unilinear monogenetic model of language history” (Möhlig 1981: 251) and interpreted its diversity as being primarily the result of divergence of varieties of the various villages from a common proto-language, a model which was sustained in the later survey of Hamm et al. (2002). The analysis to be presented here in section 3, by contrast, will highlight the role of social changes in triggering the region’s diversity, most prominently changes involving increased sociopolitical risk in the area (which has conceptual connections to Nettle’s (1996) notion of *ecological risk*, but focuses instead on risk due to hostile interactions among nearby groups rather than to more general environmental factors connected to food production). This, in turn, will have consequences regarding how the situation of Lower Fungom should potentially prompt us to refine documentary methodology, as will be discussed in section 4.

2.3 Local genetic and areal linguistic context

Lower Fungom’s linguistic diversity is not an isolated pattern but, rather, represents an extreme within the already diverse Cameroonian Grassfields. This area has been culturally distinctive potentially since the Iron Age in this part of Africa, which dates to, perhaps, two or more millennia ago (Rowlands & Warnier 1993: 514), and has been characterized by Stallcup (1980: 44) as the most linguistically “fragmented” part of the so-called sub-Saharan Fragmentation Belt (Dalby 1970: 163), a region of sub-Saharan Africa characterized by high language density.⁶ The Grassfields region is also characterized by relatively high population

⁶ We use the term Fragmentation Belt here following earlier work. However, one must be cautious in applying the fragmentation metaphor too literally, insofar as it has a possible implication of a former “unity” which has since

density (Warnier 1980: 831), local economic specialization (Warnier 1979: 410), frequent internal migration (Warnier 1979: 412–413), and pervasive multilingualism (Warnier 1980: 832) (see also Voorhoeve (1980: 66) for brief remarks on this last point).

The whole of the Grassfields area (roughly comprising the Northwest and West regions of Cameroon) is about the size of Belgium, with perhaps around seventy local languages. Most of its languages are classified with the Grassfields Bantu group of Bantoid (see Watters (2003)), including one of the languages of Lower Fungom, Kung. One of the other languages of the region, Naki, seems reasonably classified within the Beoid subgroup, comprising around seven languages, found primarily at the northeastern edge of the Grassfields, with Naki being a western outlier. The other languages, grouped under the referential, rather than genetic, Yemne-Kimbi label in figure 1 have no known close relatives, though this is almost certainly, at least partly, due to lack of necessary comparative work rather than these languages being actual isolates within Bantoid (see Good et al. (2011: 107–1108) for more detailed discussion).

The entire Grassfields area is fairly high in elevation and relatively hilly. While Lower Fungom is not one of the higher elevation areas within the Grassfields, steep hills are nevertheless its dominating characteristic, and many settlements are found on relatively inaccessible hilltops, a point of significance for the discussion in section 3. Lower Fungom also has a fairly abundant water supply, which probably largely explains its relatively high population density as compared to points in the Grassfields to the immediate south.

Despite being at the geographic periphery of the Grassfields and not speaking languages of the Grassfields group, Lower Fungom's societies are clearly part of the Grassfields cultural area, if not "core" members of it. The most widely accepted reconstruction for the history of the Grassfields (exemplified in Warnier (1985: 15–20)) connects patterns of economic specialization with patterns of sociopolitical consolidation and stratification, conditioned, in part, by local ecologies. In particular, groups in lower-elevation and moister peripheral areas of the Grassfields (which include Lower Fungom) have tended to specialize in production of palm oil and have been associated with less centralized sociopolitical institutions. By contrast, as one moves south from Lower Fungom towards the center of the Grassfields, progressively more centralized and

broken apart. A more appropriate label—at least for the Grassfields—might be to consider the region to be marked by "singularity" rather than fragmentation, in the sense of Fowler & Zeitlyn (1996: 1), where language differences are emphasized as part of the justification of a multiplicity of distinct political communities rather than as resulting from the dismantling of a once coherent unit.

internally hierarchized societies are encountered and production of more specialized products (e.g., iron tools and wood carvings) begins to dominate the local economies. Lower Fungom's position in an area not characterized by such political consolidation—i.e., where villages do not join into larger units such as kingdoms—has clearly been an important factor in fostering its linguistic diversity.

In the next section, we will offer a reconstruction of Lower Fungom's recent linguistic history on the basis of linguistic, ethnographic, and historical evidence.

3 Lower Fungom: Historical reconstruction

3.1 Two historical phases

The key elements of our reconstruction of Lower Fungom's recent linguistic history are depicted in figures 2 and 3. Figure 2 proposes a language distribution for the region for about two centuries ago where predecessors of three of region's languages or language groups were dominant. Rather than populations being concentrated in compact settlements, as is the case today, they would have been more dispersed, perhaps even in the form of relatively isolated compounds associated with individuals claiming common descent in the form of a kin group, or, perhaps, as a series of federated hamlets. While we can only reconstruct this pattern for Lower Fungom, it is attested for nearby groups to the southwest of the region, which bear a similar geographic and economic relation to the rest of the Grassfields (see, e.g., Warnier (1985: 200–206); Masquelier (1978)).

[Insert figure 2 about here.]

Figure 3 depicts the settlement patterns of the present day, in a less schematic fashion than what is given in figure 1. The locations of the recognized villages are given with larger symbols (following the same conventions as those in figure 1), with outlying settlements, always associated with one of the villages, indicated with smaller symbols of matching shapes. The symbols for Naki-speaking villages and for Kung are also somewhat smaller than those of groups with no known close relatives outside of Lower Fungom. The village of Missong, speaking a distinctive variety of Mungbam, is associated with a special symbol for reasons to be clarified in

section 3.4. The reconstructed areas associated with the earlier language group distributions in figure 2 are included in figure 3 for ease of comparison.

In section 3.2 the historical phase depicted in figure 2 will be discussed in more detail, and in section 3.3, the historical phase depicted in figure 3 will be discussed. Our evidence for these two phases involves a combination of linguistic, ethnographic, archaeological, and ethnohistorical information, in some cases supplemented by archival records. We will discuss some aspects of the evidence where relevant. Fuller documentation of it can be found in Good et al. (2011) for the linguistic points and Di Carlo (2011) for discussion of other domains.

Of course, as is often the case with the sort of historical reconstruction attempted here, the data we have collected from different sources does not seamlessly integrate to create a simple historical narrative. Moreover, the two historical phases we reconstruct are deliberately idealized, and the facts on the ground would have deviated in the past (and continue to in the present) from these idealizations in some ways, most notably seen in cases where contemporary villages are associated with various outlying hamlets, as found, for instance, for Fang, Koshin, Abar, Munken, and Mundabli. Indeed, as will be discussed in section 3.4, Lower Fungom habitation patterns are well understood as responses to different degrees of risk in the region's ecology (understood broadly to encompass both natural and human factors), which have not resulted in changes between discrete "states" of settlement but, rather, initiated processes favoring a more dispersed pattern of settlement over a more concentrated one. As such, the attestation of cases intermediate between idealized models of dispersion and concentration should be considered unsurprising from a historical perspective.

3.2 The first phase: Three dispersed language groups

Based on linguistic evidence alone, two of the Lower Fungom language groups, the Mungbam dialect cluster and the Ji group would already be good candidates for having occupied the region for some time due to their association with multiple distinctive varieties.⁷ We will argue in section 3.3 that the internal differentiation of these groups should not be trivially associated with "natural" divergence resulting from geographic dispersal of the sort implied by methods like

⁷ Of course, alternative interpretations for such diversity are available. For instance, related groups could have migrated into the area, thereby "importing" their diversity. However, in this case, evidence from other sources, to be discussed immediately below, uniformly point towards a scenario where the presence of the three groups discussed here predates the presence of the languages limited to a single village to be discussed in section 3.3.

glottochronology (see McMahon & McMahon (2005) for overview discussion). Nevertheless, whatever the precise conditions under which the different varieties arose, their presence suggests these language groups have been located in Lower Fungom longer than languages like Fang, Koshin, Kung, and Naki, which are all restricted to a single village.

Ajumbu is a special case in this context. It, too, is a one-village language at present. However, this appears to be a relatively recent development. As late as the early twentieth century, another language, most generally referred to as Lung, now only remembered by a handful of speakers, was also found in Lower Fungom (see Troyer et al. (1995: 9–10) and Di Carlo (2011: 83)). The (limited) vocabulary data we have collected seems to indicate that Lung was a close relative of contemporary Ajumbu. This relationship appears to be confirmed by ethnohistorical accounts. As two of our consultants (one from Ajumbu, the other a Lung rememberer) have described, “Ajumbu had no boundaries with Lung [and vice versa]; we were like brothers.”⁸ Thus, Ajumbu’s status as a one-village language within Lower Fungom is almost certainly innovative historically. There is no evidence of anything comparable for the other one-village languages.

These linguistic facts are largely complemented by evidence from a number of other domains. Oral histories collected throughout Lower Fungom, for instance, consistently treat Fang, Koshin, Naki, and Kung as more recent entrants to the region. (Though, as will be discussed in section 3.4 and section 3.5, oral histories also treat some Mungbam and Ji villages as being more recent entrants.) Similarly, excepting superficial resemblances in economic and symbolic terms, the cultures of the villages of Fang, Koshin, and Kung (and, to a lesser extent, Naki-speaking Mashi) differ from those of Mungbam- and Ji-speaking villages, as well as from each other, suggesting they have been subject to distinct influences. (See section 3.5 for relevant discussion of Ajumbu on this point.)

While we have collected less archaeological data, what we have uncovered is also consistent with the scenario depicted in figures 2 and 3. For instance, there are remains of previous areas of habitation that are suggestive of a shift from more dispersed to more concentrated settlement that can be associated with contemporary Ajumbu-speaking and Ji-speaking groups.⁹

⁸ This description is drawn from Di Carlo’s field notes and was provided by Sah Nicholas and Pa Joe.

⁹ At least one of these “Ajumbu” settlements appears to have been occupied by Lung groups, who, as discussed, would have spoken a variety closely related to Ajumbu rather than Ajumbu specifically.

virtue of being located outside of the main trade routes and characterized by a remarkably hilly environment, it seems likely that Lower Fungom was raided only on isolated occasions (Di Carlo 2011: 91). So, while in other (richer and more accessible) areas movements to more defensible locations, such as hilltops, probably took place in direct response to such raids, in Lower Fungom they were presumably triggered by the in-migration of groups of refugees who took shelter there after being forced to leave their earlier settlements due to the raids (Di Carlo 2011: 91–92).¹¹ The Chamba are still remembered in the ethnohistorical accounts we have collected throughout Lower Fungom under the local variant name of *Gainyi*, but references to them are far outnumbered by references to the period of the so-called “tribal wars”, which followed the Chamba raids and saw many villages fighting against each other. There is little doubt that it was during this period of conflicts that most of the changes in Lower Fungom’s settlement patterns, as discussed in section 3.3, took place.

In speaking of refugee movements here, we must be careful to distinguish organized migrations of multiple kin groups, or even whole villages, which we believe to have significantly altered the level of risk in Lower Fungom, to small-scale movements of individual kin groups, which we do not refer to using the label *refugee* here. Movements of the latter type appear to have been long characteristic of the Grassfields region (and presumably beyond) (Warnier 1984: 399; 1985: 5, 213–214), and there is no reason to suspect they were particularly disruptive to local systems of social organization when they took place. Quite the contrary, societies in the region appear to have had standard means of incorporating relatively small incoming groups (see Kopytoff (1987)). The need to make a distinction between these two kinds of population movements will become clearer in section 3.3 and subsequent sections.

3.3 The second phase: Village crystallization and in-migration

As discussed in section 2.1, Lower Fungom societies can, at present, be described in terms of what we have termed “villages” here. We employ this term in a rather specific sense (which we believe is fully consistent with its use in the wider literature on Grassfields’ societies), and it refers to not merely a “clustered” settlement, but rather a settlement with a specific social,

¹¹ For an instance of synoecism caused by the emergence of external violent threats in the Grassfields see Warnier (1975: 86ff.) for Mankon. On the same process accompanied by fortification, see also Warnier (1984: 405). For an instance of how strong an impact Chamba raids had on easily reachable areas see Geary (1976: 74, 88; 1979: 54) on Weh.

political, and physical character. The two most prominent features of what we term *canonical* Lower Fungom villages (see Di Carlo (2011: 65–77)) for present purposes are: (i) that they do not have a fully unified social structure but, rather, are composed of exogamous quarters which typically occupy a distinct physical space from each other and serve as the primary units of economic and political organization (see section 3.4 below) and (ii) that their inhabitants recognize the ritual authority of a single chief who, though relatively weak in political terms, is traditionally credited to own special powers capable to ensure the villagers’ well-being. As consultants describe it, the chief must give *bush*, *chop*, and *pikin*. Translated from Cameroonian Pidgin, this means the chief should provide abundance of ‘harvest’, ‘game’, and ‘children’, respectively.

We focus on these two features since they establish villages as representing only a weak unification (via the ritual chief) of otherwise competing interest groups (quarters). They are therefore characterized by a constant tendency towards “fission” (Kopytoff 1987: 26) rather than serving as the “primordial embryo” (Kopytoff 1987: 7) of a language-culture complex of the sort that is presently valorized in much of the endangered languages discourse. This model of village structure also puts our second phase of Lower Fungom history into an appropriate perspective: The Mungbam and Ji villages and the village of Ajumbu appear to represent innovative political formations from previously “acephalous” patterns of social organization which underwent a process which we informally refer to as *crystallization* here (see also Kopytoff (1981: 373)). This process did not create a new, indivisible community. Rather, it resulted in a politically expedient “federation” of kin groups which retained significant autonomy.

This process of crystallization must be contrasted with the quite distinct pattern of in-migration of refugee groups, as introduced in section 3.2, which effectively brought whole villages, as a unit, into Lower Fungom. That such in-migration explains the presence of two villages in Lower Fungom, Kung and Mashi, is essentially incontestable. From the linguistic side, the Kung language appears to be well-classified within the Central Ring group of languages, otherwise spoken just to the south of Lower Fungom, suggesting recent entry from that direction. Mashi speaks a dialect of the Naki language, otherwise found in a number of villages to the north and west of Lower Fungom, again suggesting an outside origin. Moreover, the historical analysis prompted by the linguistic facts converges with analyses indicated by non-linguistic evidence.

For example, oral histories regarding the Kung and the Mashi place their origins outside of Lower Fungom, and each has distinctive cultural traditions from other Lower Fungom villages.

The villages of Koshin and Fang also appear to have entered Lower Fungom via in-migration of refugee groups, though the lack of known close linguistic relatives of the Koshin and Fang languages means that this can only be established by virtue of non-linguistic evidence. As with Kung and Mashi, oral histories treat both groups as having outside origins. Furthermore, each is culturally distinctive within the Lower Fungom context and both notably show indications of having had close relations with communities with more stratified social structures than what appears to have been the historical norm in palm-oil producing areas like Lower Fungom (see section 2.3).

Most likely due to their relatively high populations, social cohesion, and the involuntary nature of their movements triggered by mounted raids (see section 3.2), the migrations of the Kung, Mashi, Koshin, and Fang into Lower Fungom were not associated with incorporation into existing societies but, rather, merely shifted the physical location of outside groups, leaving their social structure relatively intact. Oral histories are consistent with this view. For example, the sentences in (2) depict the last stage of a migration that would bring Koshin speakers to Lower Fungom. It portrays them moving as a unit and settling in one location. Moreover, as seen in (1), which is drawn from the same oral history and almost immediately follows the fragment given in (2), Koshin history treats the group as forming a dense settlement on a hilltop upon their arrival in Lower Fungom.¹²

(2) a. *SO b̀̀ ká gwá f̀̀ b̀̀ ká tiká bānyé b̀̀b̀̀ Sávì.*

so 3p CONT separate exit 3p CONT leave 2.brother 2.their Sawi
 “They then separated and left their brothers from Sawi.”

b. *B̀̀ ká nê ká nî kà bà wá mà SOTEE*

3p CONT leave CONT walk PRT 5.bank 5.DET LOC so.long

ká dí jīē fá bā mà f́́ wēn.

CONT come reach place 3p be there now

“They then went along the banks until they came and reached where they are today.”

¹² See the discussion surrounding (1) for details on the source of the data in (2) and on the glossing conventions.

We believe it is likely that these in-migrations were the main trigger of the crystallization processes affecting the older inhabitants of Lower Fungom just described above: As antagonistic newcomers entered the region, those already present underwent processes of synoecism shifting from previously autonomous kin groups into federated villages in order to increase their potential for controlling increasingly scarce natural resources.^{13,14}

At the moment of contact with colonial administrators—and more importantly for present purposes, surveying linguists—this means that the situation in Lower Fungom was not the result of “natural” differentiation of languages into dialects which, in turn, developed into new languages, as implied by the earliest serious linguistic treatment of the area (Hombert 1980). Rather, what was (and still can be) witnessed is a moment of exceptional “hyper-diversity” triggered by the chance confluence of social, ecological, and historical factors. This underscores the observation of Kopytoff (1987: 7) that, rather than adopting the stereotype of Africa as a “continent mired in timeless immobility”, we should instead view it as characterized by a “ceaseless flux among populations” (see also Zeitlyn & Connell (2003)).

While we believe this overall picture presented above is more or less valid as a general framework for understanding recent Lower Fungom history, not surprisingly the details of some of the villages complicate the story somewhat. We discuss aspects of the problems they raise in the next two sections, paying special attention to the case of the Mungbam-speaking village of Missong, whose history, as we will see, offers a clear counterbalance to the prevailing notion of languages as the storehouse of unique cultural “treasures” (see section 1).

3.4 The exemplary case of Missong and the rest of Mungbam

The historical reconstruction we have given here implies, in some sense, that villages in Lower Fungom speaking varieties of Mungbam represent a continuation of speech varieties of an “indigenous” population of the region. However, three of the Mungbam-speaking villages, Biya, Munken, and Missong are actually associated with oral traditions treating them as newcomers to the area. When this is set against the fact that the two other Mungbam villages, Abar and Ngun,

¹³ See Fleisher (2010) for discussion of synoecism in a Sub-Saharan African context.

¹⁴ For the most part, the oral histories of Lower Fungom’s villages that we have collected neither corroborate nor contradict this claim, except for those of the Missong (see section 3.4) which do support it. However, we do not believe this is particularly surprising since explicitly referencing a process of synoecism in an official oral history would partly contradict the historical justification for the existence of the village as a “natural” entity.

are not associated with such traditions, the linguistic facts are unambiguously at odds with the historical representations. There is, however, a straightforward way to account for this: Villages like Biya, Munken, and Missong may very well have been founded (at least partly) by immigrants to the area that eventually shifted to a Mungbam variety. We will explore this possibility first via an examination of the village of Missong, which is the most exceptional of the Mungbam villages, and then return to the less striking cases of Biya and Munken.

In figure 3, Missong was given a special symbol intended to suggest an “imperfect” connection between it and the other Mungbam varieties, and it is distinctive in both linguistic and cultural terms. As discussed in Good et al. (2011: 115), Missong is linguistically differentiated from the other Mungbam varieties lexically, phonologically, and morphologically, to the point where it may in fact be most reasonable to treat it as a distinct language. Di Carlo (2011: 84–85) further delineates Missong’s cultural distinctiveness. For example, the structure and distribution of its secret associations reveal that in Missong, unlike most of the other villages of the region, the balance of control over ritual and political power is skewed towards quarters, at the expense of the village as a united whole.¹⁵ Indeed, Missong quarters could almost be seen as miniature villages insofar as they are not even exogamous units, as in the overwhelming majority of Lower Fungom societies, but each of them is in fact composed by two exogamous moieties.

Oral traditions reinforce the observed lack of political cohesion among quarters. All the kin groups we have contacted, for instance, claim distinctive provenances to the point where there seems to be virtually no lineage which could be held as “indigenous” to the village site. To give just some examples: When asked to specify the provenance of their respective families, one of our Missong consultants mentioned “Fang side”, the village chief offered “Adjumə, not far from Dumbu”, while another man recalled “Tsha” (location unknown) and “Ufayu” (today’s Mashi Oversight).¹⁶ If such statements are treated as instances of direct historical data, the composite structure of Missong would be obvious. Alternatively, one could treat them as political

¹⁵ Secret associations, at least in the Grassfields, are “secret” primarily by virtue of the fact that its members have access to and know secret objects, practices, words, songs, etc., which are believed to have magical powers and are kept secret from the non-initiated. There are secret associations for men as well as women in the Lower Fungom villages (and in the broader Grassfields as well), and they play a highly significant role in the maintenance of social cohesion in the area. (See Di Carlo (2011: 67–70) for further discussion of Lower Fungom’s secret associations and Horton (1972: 101–103) for discussion of the key role of secret associations in processes of confederation of diverse kin groups into villages in the history of West Africa.)

¹⁶ See the map in figure 1 for the locations of Fang and Mashi Oversight. Dumbu (also known as Dumbo) is roughly to the east of the Lower Fungom, but not particularly distant from it, and is associated with the Beboid language Kemezung (see Brye & Brye (2002: § 3.5))

statements intended to legitimize some form of ownership or power—that is, as a kind of Malinowskian charter, as in the famously debated case of the historical role of the Tikar in the Grassfields (see Jeffreys 1964, Chilver & Kaberry 1971 and more recently Fowler & Zeitlyn 1996: 6–15). If this were the case, however, they would represent elements of an unusual kind of charter where historical “differentness” is used to justify present-day political consolidation. This leads us to believe that the historical interpretation is the more likely one, at least in its broad outlines.

Moreover, the list of remembered chiefs in Missong is comparatively short in the Lower Fungom context, consisting of just four names rather than a more typical six to eight, suggesting that the village is understood by its inhabitants to be a relatively recent amalgamation, regardless of its actual history.¹⁷ This is exemplified in the words of Buo Makpa Amos, a senior member of the Bambiam moiety of the Bikwom quarter of Missong, during his reconstruction of village history (all the following names refer to exogamous units found within the village): “Bikwom was the first, the early people, then the Bidjumbi came, then the Biandzəm, then we, the Bambiam, and the Bakpaŋ and finally the Myam”. Although they would not necessarily agree on all details, we believe the claim that Missong was progressively populated by unrelated kin groups would be shared by many, if not most, Missong elders.

Significantly in the present context, the local perception of the linguistic variety associated with Missong follows a similar pattern. Far from being understood as the “ancestral code” (see Woodbury (2005; 2011)) of its people, it is instead taken to be of recent provenance. And, this perception is not limited to Missong but is also found in other Mungbam-speaking villages, some inhabitants of which have characterized Missong people as having “stolen” their language. Moreover, the Missong do not question this history, and some Missong consultants have even suggested that the group is particularly adept at learning the languages of others—a positive reorientation of outside perceptions.

What appears to be the most straightforward historical account for what we see in Missong is that the village represents an amalgamation of immigrant groups of diverse origin. Those who

¹⁷ Length of genealogies cannot be taken as an immediate historical index (see Irvine (1978) and Vansina (1985: 182–185)). However, among the social distortions of genealogical knowledge there is 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 length from that encountered most commonly in a given area can be taken as indices of a given village’s distance from local norms. (See Goody & Watt (1963: 308–311) for discussion of how colonial ideologies of “history” and the interpretation of genealogies clashed with those of the Tiv, a group primarily based in Nigeria in an area roughly to the north Lower Fungom.)

arrived at an early date entered the sphere of influence of some Mungbam-speaking groups (likely associated with present-day Munken or Abar) and began practicing intermarriage, preferring these over other neighboring groups. This meant the newly emerging village group had a Mungbam-based model to develop an idiom common to all its members.¹⁸ As this process of partial mimesis was taking place, other kin groups joined the emerging village which, according to the local ideology, had to develop a language of its own in order to be legitimized as a politically independent unit. It is probably best to reproduce here an excerpt, drawn from Di Carlo's fieldnotes, again from Buo Makpa Amos, which elucidates both this process and its underlying ideology. Parts of the excerpt of particular interest to the present discussion have been highlighted:

As my father told me, we were from Fang side, even in Bum side there were many of us. *When you people are cooperating you speak one language. If you speak one language, you cooperate.* As a group of relatives moves, the brothers may decide to split, each choosing a different place to stay. This is what happened to us. We left the early place in Fang side as a whole and arrived in Abar. From here we scattered. Now, we Bambiam from Missong have relatives in Abar, in Buu, in Ngun. Each family attached itself to a village and therefore had to speak the general language used there. For example, *we Bambiam attached ourselves to Bikwom and hence had to adopt their language; Bikwom people are attached to Bidjumbi and Biandzəm to form the village of Missong, and this is why they all had to use the same language, that is, Missong.* This is why all the descendants of the family that moved from Fang side now speak different languages.

We believe, therefore, that the development of Missong can best be understood as resulting from a twofold process. On the one hand, immigrant groups underwent a process of mimesis with surrounding Mungbam-speaking groups. On the other hand, the emerging group was motivated to develop a locally distinctive idiom for political reasons and did so by incorporating influences of the original languages of the new immigrant groups (Zeitlyn & Connell (2003: 119)). If we situate this process with respect to the two idealized phases of Lower Fungom history discussed above, we can speculate that some of the earliest kin groups which would come

¹⁸ In Missong, as in most of Lower Fungom societies, residence is virilocal, meaning that women, once married, are expected to move to the husband's father's compound. Therefore, high numbers of Mungbam-speaking women in a village of otherwise composite nature may have fostered the adoption of a Mungbam variety as the village-wide "lingua franca".

to form Missong—of presumably diverse linguistic origin—had settled among Mungbam-speaking groups during the first phase but had not been fully incorporated into these societies when the second phase, that of crystallization, took place. They then amalgamated with members of other incoming immigrant groups into a partly crystallized village for purposes of defense, with the adoption of a common language being one of the most overt signs of this new political entity.

Under such a scenario, the Missong variety of Mungbam could be considered to be a partly mixed language, along the lines of the celebrated case of Ma'á (Mous 1994; 2003a; 2003b; Thomason 1983; 1997). The mixture would have been between closely related, and grammatically broadly similar, languages. Thus, it would be less striking than the Ma'á case, but, nevertheless, sufficient to make Missong's distinctiveness in the local context both readily detectable by the linguist and quite salient to speakers of other Mungbam varieties.

Within Mungbam, Missong represents the most visible example of a village with an apparently “composite” history and, thereby, represents the case we can most reliably reconstruct. However, two other Mungbam villages, Biya and Munken, show comparable indications of such histories. In the case of Biya (see Di Carlo (2011: 85)), available data suggests it is the second most distinctive Mungbam variety in linguistic terms, after Missong. Moreover, its oral traditions explicitly treat it as being composed of immigrant groups, and it shows some divergent cultural traits with respect to its secret associations. In the case of Munken (see Di Carlo (2011: 86)), it is not obviously divergent linguistically from the two remaining Mungbam villages, Abar and Ngun, but its oral traditions suggest an outside origin for the village and it, too, shows some divergence in the nature of its secret associations.

It would be inappropriate to come to definitive conclusions on the basis of the available evidence in these cases, but it seems reasonable to also associate these patterns with the historical presence of non-Mungbam migrants in the populations that were to develop into these villages. For whatever reason, however, these migrants did not inhibit the development of relatively cohesive villages, at least when compared against Missong. One possible factor in this regard would presumably be numerical: Whereas the patterns that we see in Missong suggest comparatively few Mungbam speakers present during the formation of the village, in Biya and Munken they were presumably greater in number. Another possible factor could include the timing of the entry of any outside groups, who might have lived among Mungbam speakers for a

longer period of time than those who would ultimately comprise Misson, meaning that they either may have given up their earlier language before formation of the village or had already acquired more or less native competence in a Mungbam variety in a multilingual setting.

3.5 The Ji group and Ajumbu

As indicated in figure 2, we also believe the Ji group of languages and Ajumbu to represent a continuation of societies that had been present in Lower Fungom for some time, as opposed to the other groups which appear to be the result of relatively recent refugee movements. The multi-village Ji group shows comparable patterns to Mungbam insofar as there is evidence to suggest that some of its villages may represent historical amalgams of groups of distinct ultimate provenance. Ajumbu raises additional issues insofar as we have no reason to suggest that it has incorporated outside groups but it, nevertheless, shows cultural divergences in comparison with the other “older” groups in the region which call for some explanation. We briefly discuss each of these groups in turn in this section, focusing on points of relevance to the relationship between a community, a culture, and a language.

As indicated in table 1, there is a significant division within the Ji group between Mundabli and Mufu, on the one hand, and Buu, on the other hand. Indeed, Buu is probably best considered a separate, though closely related, language to Mundabli and Mufu, which, on linguistic grounds, appear to represent dialects of a single language. This division is not too surprising when geographic factors are considered: Mundabli and Mufu are relatively close to each other in Lower Fungom’s northeast periphery, while other groups intervene between them and the more centrally located Buu, which has closer ties at present to Mungbam-speaking Abar than either Mundabli or Mufu.

At the same time, other factors seem to be at play as well in the differences among the villages (Di Carlo 2011: 86–87). Oral traditions treat Buu as being “indigenous” to Lower Fungom, while all Mundabli quarters and some Mufu quarters have oral traditions indicating outside origin. Mundabli’s oral traditions are corroborated by those of the Bum, a group speaking a Central Ring language found to the southeast of Lower Fungom.¹⁹ Moreover, the Mundabli

¹⁹ Subum, whose location is indicated on the map in figure 1, was the site of an important Bum-speaking village before a natural disaster at a nearby volcanic lake, Lake Nyos, triggered a displacement of its population to other areas (Shanklin 1988; Lamberty 2002: 4).

appear to have gone into self-exile to the east of Lower Fungom between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (due to fear of attack from the village of Mashi) during which time they undoubtedly had significant contact with communities outside of Lower Fungom. We can, therefore, see the languages of the Ji group as following a similar overall historical pattern to Mungbam: One village, Buu, was probably little affected by incorporation of outside groups, while the other two, Mundabli and Mufu, appear to represent historical amalgams of groups with diverse origin, with those groups probably having had a greater impact on Mundabli than Mufu.²⁰ Our comparative data on the speech varieties of the Ji group is relatively limited as compared to that of Mungbam. So, we cannot reliably align linguistic data with data from other sources, but what has been collected does not contradict this view.

Unlike Mungbam and the Ji group, there is only one extant village speaking Ajumbu (though see section 3.2 for evidence that there were once at least two villages speaking this language, or very closely related languages). Therefore, we do not have the problem of explaining divergences among villages. However, as mentioned above, Ajumbu cultural traits are distinctive enough from those of the other groups that we believe to have been present in Lower Fungom in our reconstructed first phase (see figure 2) as to require some discussion. For example, its oral traditions represent it as indigenous to the area. At the same time, other Lower Fungom groups do not show evidence of close connections to Ajumbu, and its strongest relations appear to be outside of Lower Fungom, with the village of Fungom (see Di Carlo (2011: 83–84)).

Our conclusion from this is that the predecessors of today's Ajumbu speakers were likely somewhat culturally distinct from those of Mungbam or the Ji group even during our reconstructed first phase in figure 2, though we cannot say more beyond this with any certainty. It is important to bear in mind that the time depth of the caesura between our first and second phase is relatively shallow, at about two centuries ago, while the Grassfields cultural area is, perhaps, two millennia old (see section 2.3). This leaves plenty of room for historical developments to have affected the region which are, at least at present, beyond the reach of our ability to reconstruct, and it is not impossible to imagine, for instance, that the Ajumbu may represent an

²⁰ As we have seen in the long excerpt from Buu Makpa Amos's ethnohistorical account quoted in section 3.4, Buu may have been affected to some degree by incorporation of outside groups. So, we are not arguing that it represents a "pure" continuation of earlier groups. The difference between it and the other Ji villages should be understood to be of degree rather than kind.

older layer of habitation than the Mungbam or the Ji (or vice versa), which could help explain these divergences.

There is one additional aspect of Ajumbu oral history, not directly relevant to its position within Lower Fungom, but, nevertheless, of significance for the broader topic of this paper which is worth mentioning here. While Ajumbu’s oral traditions give no suggestion of culturally diverse origins, unlike, for instance, those of Missong, Munken, or Mundabli, they do explicitly claim that groups historically associated with Ajumbu have contributed to the formation of amalgamated groups in locations to the south and the east of Lower Fungom. For example, the Ajumbu claim to be the origin point for groups to the southwest in Obang, whose inhabitants are classified as speaking the Befang language of the Menchum subgroup of the Grassfields group (see Boum (1980)). They also claim to have contributed to the population of the village of Mbuk in the Bum area, which is reported to speak its own language (Lamberty 2002: 3), which, according to one of our consultants, can be characterized as a “mix” of Ajumbu and Bum elements.²¹ A text fragment from an oral history describing this is given below in (3).²²

- (3) a. *Ādzú āgyá gyàŋ nyèny fê bā nyèny yì Bûm Mbūká.*
 2.Ajumbu 2.some separate leave here 3p leave go Bum Mbuk
 “Some Ajumbu split and left here for Mbuk in Bum.”
- b. *Bā bâ dū kà dú ādzú yà bā dú kwēny kà*
 3p now speak PRT 5.language 2.Ajumbu 5.DET 3p speak meet PRT
bā dú ádzú zó bàsà yò dú yò
 with 5.language 2.Ajumbu call mix go.IPFV language go.IPFV
bàsà yò nyū bāgyá ā dú Bûm yē mā.
 mix go.IPFV 8.thing 8.some LOC 5.language Bum 5.DET LOC

²¹ The available data on the language of this village is quite limited (comprising a wordlist of less than fifty terms (Chilver & Kaberry 1974: 40)). So, we cannot verify this description.

²² The text fragment in (3) is drawn from an oral history recited by Che Martin and transcribed by Good with the assistance of Zang Martina. Transcription conventions largely follow Tadadjeu & Sadembouo (1984) (see Good et al. (2011: 13) for further details). While the most crucial aspects of the meaning of the fragment for present purposes are believed to be secure, the glosses may not fully reflect all grammatical distinctions, especially those coded primarily via tone, and the tone transcriptions themselves reflect the surfacing tone patterns rather than a tonemic representation. Glossing abbreviations are as follows: 2, 5, 8: noun class; 3p: third person plural pronoun; DET: determiner; IPFV: imperfective; LOC: locative; PRT: tense-aspect particle. Further grammatical information on Ajumbu can be found in Good et al. (2011: 133–140).

“They now speak a language close to Ajumbu that sounds as if it was mixing with things from the Bum language.”

The conceptualization of Ajumbu as a village being associated with diaspora communities, who no longer necessarily speak the Ajumbu language is clearly significant for understanding the nature of Ajumbu “identity”. It also attests to the fact that, in local terms, incorporation is not viewed as a strictly one-way process of one group “absorbing” another group. The fission of a group into multiple new groups is also explicitly recognized as a possibility, as already pointed out by Kopytoff (1987).

4 Lower Fungom ideologies and documentary ideologies

4.1 Essentialism, indexicality, and identity

We have provided above a reconstruction of the linguistic history of Lower Fungom emphasizing the relationship between certain sociopolitical entities (i.e., villages) and “languages” in the region, which we believe have bearing on our understanding of the connection between languages and cultures, a topic we will explore in the present section.

Lower Fungom’s linguistic history may appear to be somewhat distinctive when set against, say, that of better known European languages, though we should be quick to point out that we do not believe it to be particularly unusual in the context of the Grassfields, where comparable situations have often been reported, if not as well explored. Indeed, the earliest comprehensive ethnographic study of the Grassfields already provided an outline for the historical scenarios discussed above:

The major problem of historical reconstruction in this area is the incompatibility of language distribution with alleged ethnic origin and institutions...The present politico-social units of the [Cameroon] Grassfields are for the most part composite units, sometimes grouped round intrusive dynasties or built by conquest, or by the slow adhesion of smaller groups in favoured areas, or, more recently, by the temporary agglomeration of small groups seeking protection from attack. The history of the [Cameroon] Grassfields, therefore, must do without simple schematic maps showing broad directions of migration, though some of the effects of invasion in the early 19th century or the expansion of particular states can be demonstrated. (Chilver & Kaberry 1968: 6–7)

Chilver & Kaberry's (1968) ethnohistorical insights have largely gone unheeded in the linguistic literature on the Grassfields, which has, instead, tended to uncritically assume the classic Stammbaum, or family-tree, model of language differentiation.²³ However, our own examination of Lower Fungom aligns quite well with their depiction, and our impression is that, at least in cases like that of Missong (see section 3.4), it offers a more insightful characterization of the linguistic situation than applying models of historical reasoning devised from examinations of European languages onto the Grassfields landscape (see, e.g., Greenberg (1972: 196)).

The repercussions of even partly accepting such a model of language development have significance across a number of domains. Here, we would like to highlight its impact on the conceptual understanding of the nature of a "language" in a given society. To do so, we must attempt to characterize key aspects of the language ideologies we are uncovering in Lower Fungom. Our present understanding of them must be considered somewhat tentative. Nevertheless, we feel confident enough that they lend sufficient insight to the overall picture to provide a sketch of it at this point, and we begin by contextualizing multilingualism in the area since that will help elucidate the relationship between *individual* identity and language, and thus add to the discussion above on the relationship between *village* identity and language.

Throughout Lower Fungom at birth every child receives (traditionally) two names: One is given by their (social) father, the other by their mother's father.²⁴ While the former is more likely to become the most used, and ultimately the only name recognized by Cameroon's administration, the latter—not a nickname but a real personal name usually taken from the repertoire of names peculiar to the maternal kin group—is kept somewhat hidden and used only by the child's maternal kin. This twofold identity can also have a linguistic side. If the child's parents come from two different villages and, hence, are speakers of two different languages (at least in local perception), then the child is expected to learn both languages and use them in the appropriate circumstances. Simplifying somewhat, the father's language is the exclusive code to be used for communication with their paternal kin, whereas the mother's language must be used with their maternal kin. In essence, the child acquires distinct identities with respect to each kin

²³ The adoption of this assumption was hardly a forgone conclusion in African linguistics where, before the widespread acceptance of Greenberg's (1966) classification of African languages, analyses involving language "mixture" were not uncommon (see, e.g., Welmers (1974: 2–3) for critical discussion).

²⁴ Comparable patterns of assigning multiple names to a child are found elsewhere in the Grassfields (and beyond), though not necessarily with precisely the configuration we have found in Lower Fungom. The collected articles in Mbonwe-Samba et al. (1993) give an overview of naming practices for a number of Grassfields groups.

group. This is the clearest (though not the only) instance of the significance of multilingualism for the region's traditions.²⁵ It indicates that the local culture acknowledges (and prizes) the possibility for an individual to develop multiple social identities, stressing language as a major means to symbolize them.²⁶

Indeed, this is merely one prominent, linguistically-oriented example of a more general tendency of maintaining (often latent) networks of solidarity groups apparently common to much of sub-Saharan Africa:

[E]ach person was attached to several groups of solidarity. Depending on the context, one expected support from each and offered it to each of them. In times of conflict, one tried to mobilize the maximum contextually relevant group. Since traditional African societies were structured in terms of corporate groups, individual survival was possible only by being under the protective umbrella of one or another such group, and the larger and more powerful it was, the safer one was. The most immediate and most secure groups of support were those based on ties of kinship. (Kopytoff 1987: 24)

We have already seen the extremely localist sociolinguistic attitudes that dominate Lower Fungom resulting in a coincidence between villages and languages (see section 3.4).²⁷ At the same time, one must also recognize the possibility for *individuals* to use different idioms in order to maintain multiple affiliations, and hence social identities, regardless of their “official” village of residence.

In order to make sense of these patterns, we believe it is useful to consider two heuristic “orientations” that can be associated with language ideologies, *essentialist* and *indexical*, each of

²⁵ For example, it is not uncommon for the same pattern to apply with respect to grandparents, so that by learning the languages associated with their villages a child can gain additional affiliations (though they do not also receive additional names in such cases). Of course, individuals also may learn to speak multiple languages for more familiar reasons, e.g., by going to school in an area with a local language distinct from theirs or to gain access to economic opportunities where knowledge of another language is useful.

²⁶ Wolff (1967) gives another example of how names have been linked to social solidarity (or lack thereof) in a nearby area of Nigeria where subordinate groups adopted names from historically dominant groups, with the pattern shifting away from this with a change in political attitudes towards the relevant subordinate–superordinate relationship.

²⁷ We have adopted Hill's (1996) sense of localist here. However, we should point out an interesting difference between the cases she considers and ours. In her interpretation of Tohono O'odham dialect differentiation, speakers associated with a geographic area which had less access to crucial resources (especially water) were analyzed as more likely to adopt a distributed stance over a localist one as manifested by their greater propensity towards employing linguistic traits of other dialects as part of a strategy to help gain access to resources of other groups. In Lower Fungom, comparable goals appear to be achieved via multilingualism. A key difference between her case and ours is that she was concerned about change in dialects within a single language community, rather than a set of communities speaking distinct languages (whether in linguistic or local terms).

which references a kind of social meaning that can be applied to a given lexicogrammatical code. The essentialist orientation can be understood in terms of the matrix of cultural assumptions through which “[l]anguages are loaded with particular ontological commitments, including...notions of ‘purity’, the notion that languages can isomorphically (iconically) reflect the essences of their speakers...and the notion that particular languages embody qualities ranging from rationality to recidivism (McIntosh 2005: 1920)”. The essentialist orientation is a key component to the so-called “Herderian equation” of language, culture, and nation (see, e.g., Hymes (1968; 1972); Foley (2005)) that intimately informs dominant language ideologies in the West and elsewhere.²⁸

In considering the indexical orientation of language, we are interested in the ways in which the use of language in a given context associates a speaker with “particular ways of being and acting” (Johnstone & Kiesling 2008: 7).²⁹ McIntosh (2005) relates essentialism to indexicality as follows:

Not only is language essentialism important to the way people conceptualize language; it also has implications for the way we think about language-in-use. It is common for sociolinguistics and linguistic anthropologists to suggest that particular linguistic practices, including code choice, constitute an ‘index’ of identity, context, social relations, or interpretive frames...*Yet the notion of ‘index’ risks treating language as nothing more than a semiotic pointer to something else, and obscures the fact that sometimes language is treated as if it were the bearer of special ontological properties in and of itself.* (McIntosh 2005: 1921; emphasis added)

McIntosh’s (2005) warning about the potential problems with overemphasizing language’s role as an “empty” semiotic pointer is an important one. At the same time, our own understanding of the linguistic situation of Lower Fungom suggests that the language ideologies of the region do indeed stress the indexical orientation of languages without necessarily loading them with particular ontological commitments associated with the essentialist orientation.

Lower Fungom is an area where discrete social groups live close to each other and, on the whole, perceive themselves as being of nearly equivalent socioeconomic status. The absence of a

²⁸ Nichols (1993) presents a study of the Slavic expansion of clear interest in the present context that suggests that it was, at least partly, driven by the dynamics that developed when Slavic speakers with a strongly essentialist linguistic orientation came into contact with speakers of other languages whose relationship to their primary speech varieties emphasized the indexical orientation.

²⁹ For more on our use of indexical, see, for example, Silverstein (2003); Johnstone & Kiesling (2008).

recognized hierarchical relation between villages, and hence of an agreed upon preference for a given target identity, is embedded in a context where key cultural aspects are shared at a regional level. This situation is probably to be seen as a fertile ground for “pure” indexicality to become central to local language ideologies, which assign languages only a marginal role as expressions of some cultural essence exclusively connected with a given “ethnic” group. This pattern is seen both when examining the historical development of a village like Missong and when looking at the social significance of multilingualism in the region. We explore these points in more detail in the next section.

4.2 Indexicality in Lower Fungom (and possibly beyond)

If it is the case that languages in Lower Fungom are associated with ideologies that treat them as strongly indexical but only weakly essential, this has clear implications for our understanding of what is “lost” when a language ceases to be spoken. For instance, if a language is conceptualized as one of the outward manifestations of something more fundamental, such as an ethnicity or a nation, the loss of that language will be taken to imply the loss of that deeper thing, including the “culture” shared by its speakers. By contrast, if language is conceptualized first and foremost as an index of group identity and, hence, primarily as a symbolic resource allowing a group to claim political independence (see section 3.4) and, through multilingualism, for an individual to maintain multiple affiliations with different groups, then it is legitimate to wonder just what would be “lost” when such a language disappears. We can examine this issue in both synchronic and diachronic terms.

On the diachronic side, we have argued that, once aggregated, newly emerged village communities, such as Missong, voluntarily crafted what were to become their common and unique languages and cultures as a means to establish cohesion and autonomy in a fluid regional context. It would, therefore, seem clear that the language and culture that we observe today in a place like Missong represent historically quite shallow innovations obtained through variations on linguistic and cultural “themes” that the newly emerged group could absorb from surrounding groups or retrieve from the pre-confederation past of its forming segments. If Missong, and similar villages in Lower Fungom, were to disappear, it appears to be undeniably true that some kind of “culture” would be lost. However, the nature of this culture, arising as the result of a temporally recent response to changing ecological conditions, is not of the type that is so

frequently valorized in the rhetoric surrounding endangered languages, which emphasizes the significance of language as a link to some sort of ancient “indigenouslyness” (see Errington (2003: 724–726)).

On the synchronic side, due to traditional predominance of multilingualism, if we wanted to establish the number of total speakers of a given language of Lower Fungom, we would be obliged to consider the whole area and not confine ourselves to the village which gives the name to the language. This means that, at any given moment, the “speech community” associated with a particular language consists both of those resident in its associated village and of significant numbers of non-residents. A given individual, therefore, has the potential to participate in the “cultures” of more than one village–language complex. Since patterns of multilingualism are linked to the specific life (and especially family) history of an individual, the implication is that residents of Lower Fungom are bearers of diverse assortments of not only multilingual, but also multicultural, competences, rendering the relationship between individuals and local cultures intrinsically variegated. The loss of a village–language complex in such a context cannot reasonably be associated with the loss of a “people” or an “ethnicity”, at least as commonly understood, since inhabitants of Lower Fungom do not segregate into the neatly defined groups that such notions presuppose. Rather, the loss of one of these “hyper-local” cultures would merely represent a shift among the kaleidoscopic array of allegiances that characterize the Lower Fungom social space.

Both of these considerations emphasize the independence of the indexical and essentialist orientation in language ideologies and make visible the lack of generality of commonplace assumptions often found in the endangered languages literature such as the uniformity and continuity of the relationship between language and culture in the history of a community and the idea of a unified (and prototypically geography-bound) speech community which is the bearer of a consistent “culture” (see also Errington (2003) for relevant discussion).³⁰

To return to our exemplary case, what this means is that, under our interpretation, people who speak Missong do so when they wish to index their affiliation with the current village of Missong, without specific intention to express some deeper sense of “Missonghood” associated

³⁰ The relative lack of clearly bounded speech communities in the Grassfields adds to the number of examples calling for the dismissal of such a concept and its substitution with the broader notion of “community of practice” (see, e.g. Bucholtz (1999); Eckert (2000)).

with differential ethnic markers. Furthermore, the ability to speak Missong merely gives one the power to index such affiliation, rather than implying an immutable feature of identity.³¹

Seen from this perspective, we believe it would be mistaken to equate the loss of Missong—or presumably any of the languages of Lower Fungom—with something so extreme as “dropping a bomb on the Louvre”, to quote one popularized instance of Hill’s (2002) thematic category of hyperbolic valorization.³² To stretch the analogy a bit, the language of Missong is perhaps better understood as an individual work of art in the Louvre of the wider Grassfields “ecumene” (Kopytoff 1981) rather than as an entire museum in and of itself.³³

There is a potentially negative conclusion one can reach on the basis of this last point: That the indexical orientation of Lower Fungom language ideologies makes its languages, in some sense, less “valuable” than languages associated with a strong essentialist orientation which are, thereby, conceptually intertwined with their associated cultures. In fact, this conclusion would appear to be inescapable if we choose to emphasize the role of endangered languages as repositories of cultural knowledge that constitute “priceless treasures” (see Hill (2002: 123–135)). Cultural knowledge is, of course, encoded within the speech variety of Missong, but most of this knowledge can also be found in other languages of the Grassfields. The “treasures”—if we choose to adopt such a word—are better understood to be found at the level of the “palm oil belt” of the Grassfields (and perhaps beyond), rather than in any one language. We will explore this issue, and its consequences for language documentation in the next section.

4.3 Lower Fungom and documentary agendas

As implied by programmatic work like Himmelmann (1998; 2006), and made more explicit in work like Woodbury (2005; 2011), typical documentation projects, at present, are oriented

³¹ Of course, one may find individuals in the community who outwardly attribute deeper significance to the language, though we suspect these would most likely be those with the greatest stake in the ongoing cohesion of the village, who, as a result, would have a strong interest in ensuring key indices of village identity would be maintained as a way of demonstrating village strength—that is, the original indexical significance of the Missong language would acquire an additional indexical significance of a higher order in the sense of Silverstein (2003).

³² The original source for this appears to be Ken Hale as quoted in an article in the August 1999 issue of *National Geographic*.

³³ At the same time, we are aware that there are cases of African languages which show other, apparently more “essential” patterns. Rottland & Okoth Okombo (1986), for example, describe a case in sub-Saharan Africa where language attitudes appear to align more closely with something like the Western notion of ethnicity than what we see in Lower Fungom. Lüpke (2010: 160–161) describes something similar. In both cases, however, these are relatively recent developments.

towards documenting a speech variety that is idealized as being uniquely associated with a community and conceptualized as an “ancestral code”. Such projects not only align well with *nostalgic* (see Woodbury (2011: 178)) impulses to document codes, or features of codes, whose near-term loss is anticipated, but they also cohere with the default stance of linguists that a documentation project’s most natural descriptive outputs are characterizations of a language in the form of a grammar, a dictionary, and set of annotated texts—that is, a language is treated as a stable synchronic object rather than as a dynamic entity whose character is bound to a sociohistorical context (see also Silverstein (1998) for relevant discussion).

Such a documentary ideology partners naturally with language ideologies dominated by essentialist claims, which is not surprising to the extent that language documentation has arisen in contexts where languages are normally conceptualized in these terms. It matches up less comfortably, however, with ideologies emphasizing primarily the indexical quality of languages. This is because the social significance of languages associated with such ideologies does not derive from their perceived intrinsic relation to some ancestral inheritance but, rather, in the way they are opposed to—and, therefore, derive their social meaning from—the other languages of their milieu. In other words, the “meaning” of Missong is only recoverable when one realizes that the variety is *not* the same as Abar, Munken, or Buu, etc., and that its differences are locally construed as sufficient to classify it as a distinct language (regardless of the linguist’s judgment). Of course, languages understood in essentialist terms also derive some of their significance by means of oppositions to other languages, but there is a critical difference in conception: For such languages, the differences among them will ultimately be understood as deriving from ethnic “essence” rather than as an individual’s overt signalling that, at a given moment, they are expressing solidarity with one group over another.

This suggests at least three lessons with respect to documentation of languages like those of Lower Fungom, where indexical ideologies of language predominate. First, any documentation of them that does not take their sociohistorical context into account is likely to be inadequate if one of the ultimate uses of documentation is not merely to make a record of the language but also to explore connections between the structure of the language and the culture of its speakers. Moreover, it seems especially important for such languages to document their relations to the other languages that play a significant role in their local ecology. Cobbinah (2010) and Lüpke (2010) make similar points with respect to the documentation of the Baïnouk group of

languages spoken in Senegal, which appear to be found in an environment with important similarities to what is found in Lower Fungom. It may be reasonable to suggest, therefore, that a key lesson that sub-Saharan African languages may hold for work in language documentation is that we must be wary of the usually implicit assumption that the “normal” way to document is to delineate a single lexicogrammatical code as the object of investigation and should view this, instead, as a response only appropriate to certain contexts.

A second lesson, related to the first, is that we must be careful to not get caught up in our own rhetoric and allow it to define our approach to language documentation in a time of extensive endangerment. If it is the case that languages of Lower Fungom—and perhaps of a good deal of sub-Saharan Africa—are more typically characterized by indexical rather than essentialist orientations, this is clearly an important and interesting dimension of linguistic variation, on top of variation within lexicogrammatical codes themselves, which needs to be documented if we are to (perhaps nostalgically) capture the range of known linguistic variation.

Finally, we must bear in mind that issues like those discussed here are difficult to discern when researchers are embedded in an ideological context that assigns primary value to languages in their role as “repositories” as opposed to other possible roles they have, such as their use in constructing a larger social space. Put differently, in the context of the Lower Fungom, if we focus on documenting only “languages”, we will be failing to gather information on what lessons the region has to offer us in the area of language dynamics. This is a striking gap when we consider that the extreme linguistic diversity of this region may provide important lessons for the maintenance of small languages in other parts of the world.

4.4 A methodological conclusion

We have argued here that “canonical” notions of documentation at present derive from ideologies which may align only quite poorly with local language ecologies and would like to conclude with a brief methodological point. Each of the villages of Lower Fungom comprises an entity which is relatively clearly circumscribed in local terms and also maps well onto Western notions of settlement. Moreover, the local context assigns a particular lexicogrammatical code to each village signifying its “talk”. It would, therefore, be quite simple for a linguist to arrive in, say, Misson and to document its language in the canonical way and apparently improve the state of our understanding of an endangered language.

However, what we have seen here is that, if they were to adopt such an approach, they would fail to see the lesson Missong offers for understanding the local significance of “language” in Lower Fungom, prompting us to wonder what other important linguistic facts might be masked by approaches that emphasize the documentation of individual ancestral codes as the primary academic response to endangerment. What has been required to overcome this problem, in our case, has been an approach to language documentation which integrates comparative grammatical data with the results of ethnographic and historical investigation. Such work is inevitably more difficult than more grammatically-focused documentation, and we are well aware it is beyond the reach of many projects. Nevertheless, if the documentary endeavor is to result in a record not merely of endangered codes but also of endangered ways of deploying codes in social interaction, it would seem to be essential.

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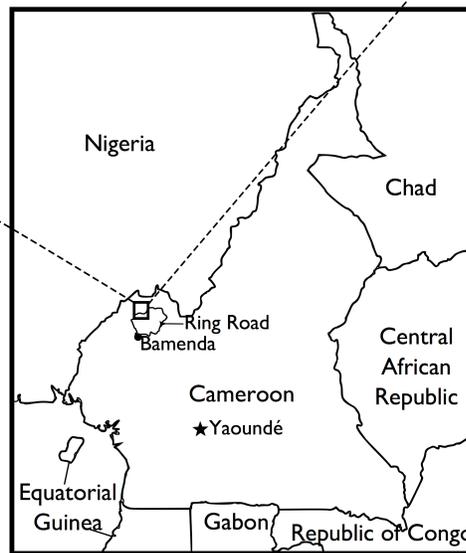
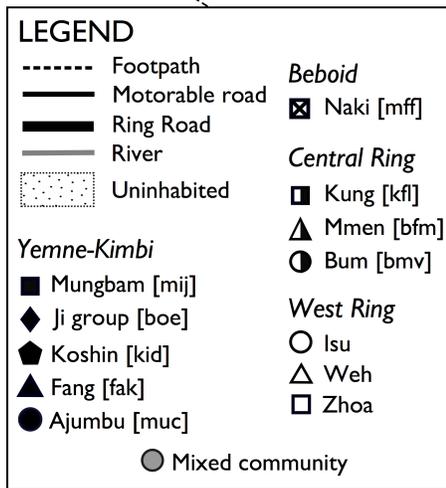
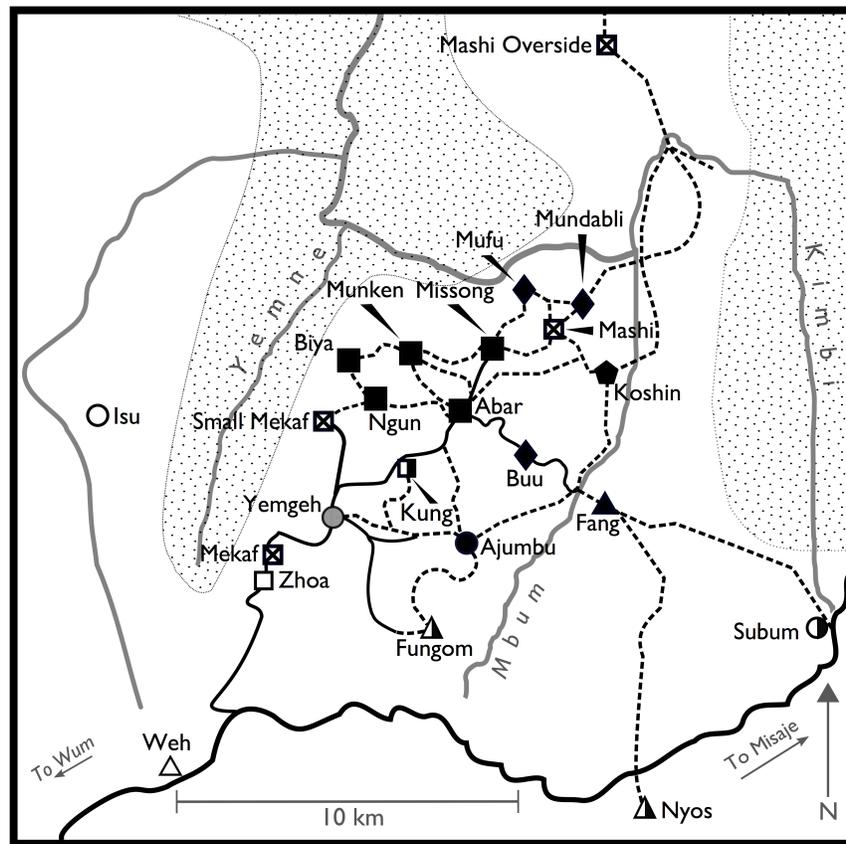


Figure 1: Lower Fungom and surrounding area

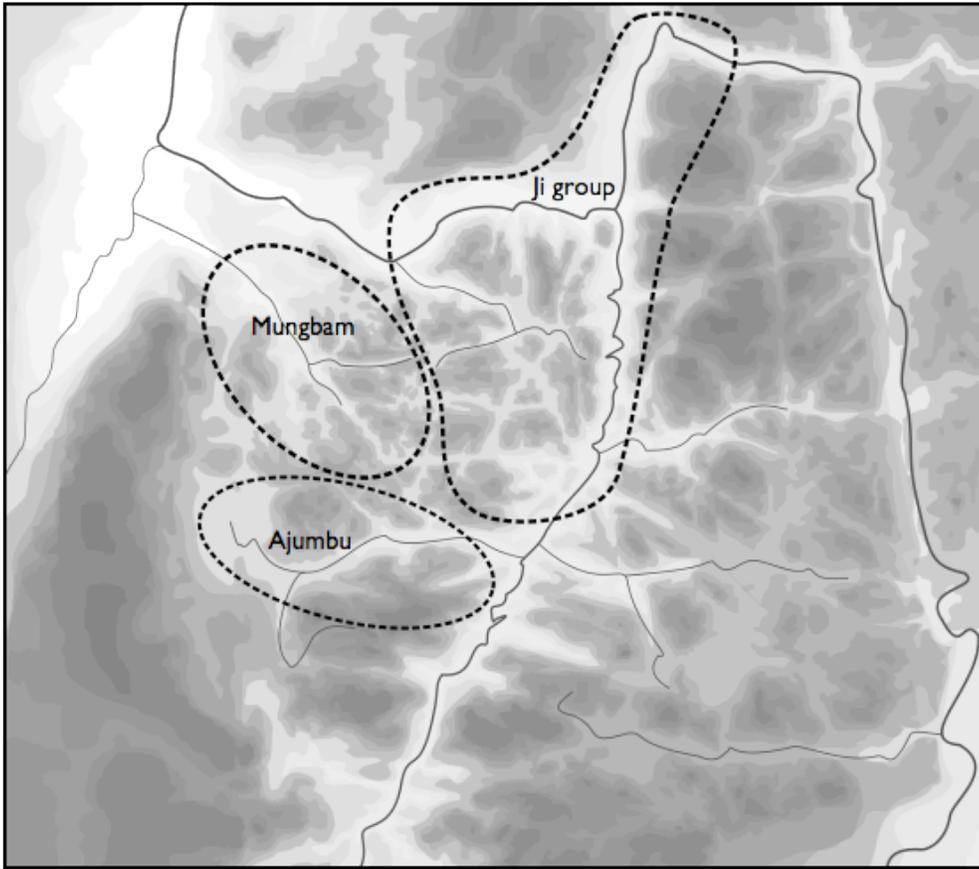


Figure 2: Reconstructed historical language distribution in Lower Fungom (circa 1800)

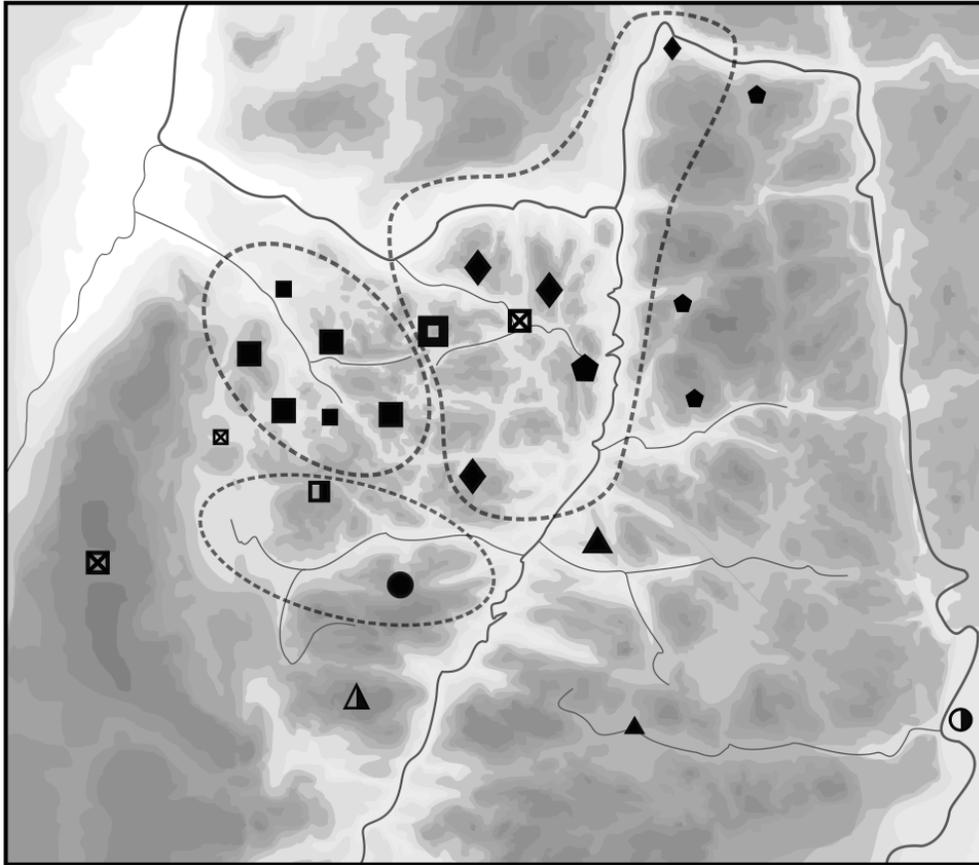


Figure 3: Present-day distribution of settlements