

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 in 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.

Keywords: language history, social factors of language change, ethnography, archaeology, language ideologies

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 Beboid respectively, see below for the latter denomination). The remaining five have no known close relatives outside of the area and 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 Beboid’ to refer to these five otherwise unclassified languages – two clusters and three one-village languages – as a group. Good et al. (2011:par.2.2), however, have found no special connection between Hombert’s ‘Western Beboid’ and ‘Eastern Beboid’. 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 former ‘Eastern Beboid’ group simply as ‘Beboid’.

Lower Fungom is 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 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 acknowledge that at least some of them ‘rhyme’ with one another.

This astonishing degree of language density, both in our and locals’ perceptions, has thus far lacked any historical and ethnographic contextualization and, therefore, 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.

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, that it represents an approach that has the potential to significantly improve our ability to understand the African linguistic past.

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.

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 a prerequisite for advancing some proposals on the sociolinguistic history of Lower Fungom, summarized in Section 8. The ethnohistorical focus of this paper is complemented by the extensive linguistic overview of the Yemne-Kimbi languages found in Good et al. (2011).

2. Sources and methods

Lower Fungom societies are mentioned cursorily in the existing literature Kaberry (2003 [1952]:99-101), Chilver & Kaberry (1967a:30-32), Nkwi & Warnier (1982:190-195) and apart from few probably first-hand data on Naki-speaking communities (Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:88-89; Nkwi & 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 actual 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 & Ardener 1966:19). 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, suggesting that the few conserved records are not relevant to our ends (see also Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:119). The map in Jurisch (1907) and the 1906 issue of the *Deutsche Kolonialzeitung* include some interesting data concerning the military expeditions conducted in this area by earlier German colonial officers.² Finally, recent sociolinguistic surveys (Hamm et al. 2002) have added little to our knowledge of 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 we could only endeavor to collect any kind of evidence that might possibly contribute to insight on local history. We thus addressed our efforts to gathering oral traditions, archaeological materials, geographic data, and ethnographic documentation (Vansina 1966:6ff.).

2. Other German colonial documents will hopefully be inspected during our next field trip to Yaounde.

The collection of oral traditions figured prominently among the activities we carried out in the field. During our extensive survey we conducted nearly eighty interviews, both individual and collective, contacting in total about two hundred local people, equivalent to ca. 1.5 percent of the total population according to our estimate (see Table 1). As far as research practices are concerned, we deemed it necessary to hike throughout the region as much as it was physically tolerable. Within a period of about fifty days we visited all the permanent settlements found in the area except for three satellite hamlets lying to the east and north of Koshin (represented as 41a-c in Figure 2), covering some 200 km total distance. This approach enabled us to combine the collection of oral traditions with ethnographic observation. Though rather superficial, the latter facilitated our recognition of the most basic biases that could condition our consultants in their self-conscious historiographic accounts. This prompted us to include in our sample sources belonging to different ‘families’ or interest groups in each village (Rosaldo 1980:93-97, Vansina 1985:117,186ff.).

Ethnographic and ethnohistorical information have been complemented with archaeological data collected during our extensive, though undoubtedly incomplete, survey of the area. Since even the existing maps of the area all suffer from important limitations (see also Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:1) we decided to use a GPS system to keep track of our hike and of any places of interest we came across. These newly collected topographical data, along with a hitherto unknown 1:25,000 map found in the Department of Geography of the University of Yaounde I, 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. A few warnings are in order at the outset.

No one would claim 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 never aimed at 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 the sociocultural dimension or, put more roughly, to examine the extent to which linguistic boundaries might be seen to coincide with cultural boundaries. 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 a diachronic perspective?

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, on the whole recalls similar ‘ethnographer’s guides’ devised by other scholars for the Grassfields area (Chilver & Kaberry 1963).

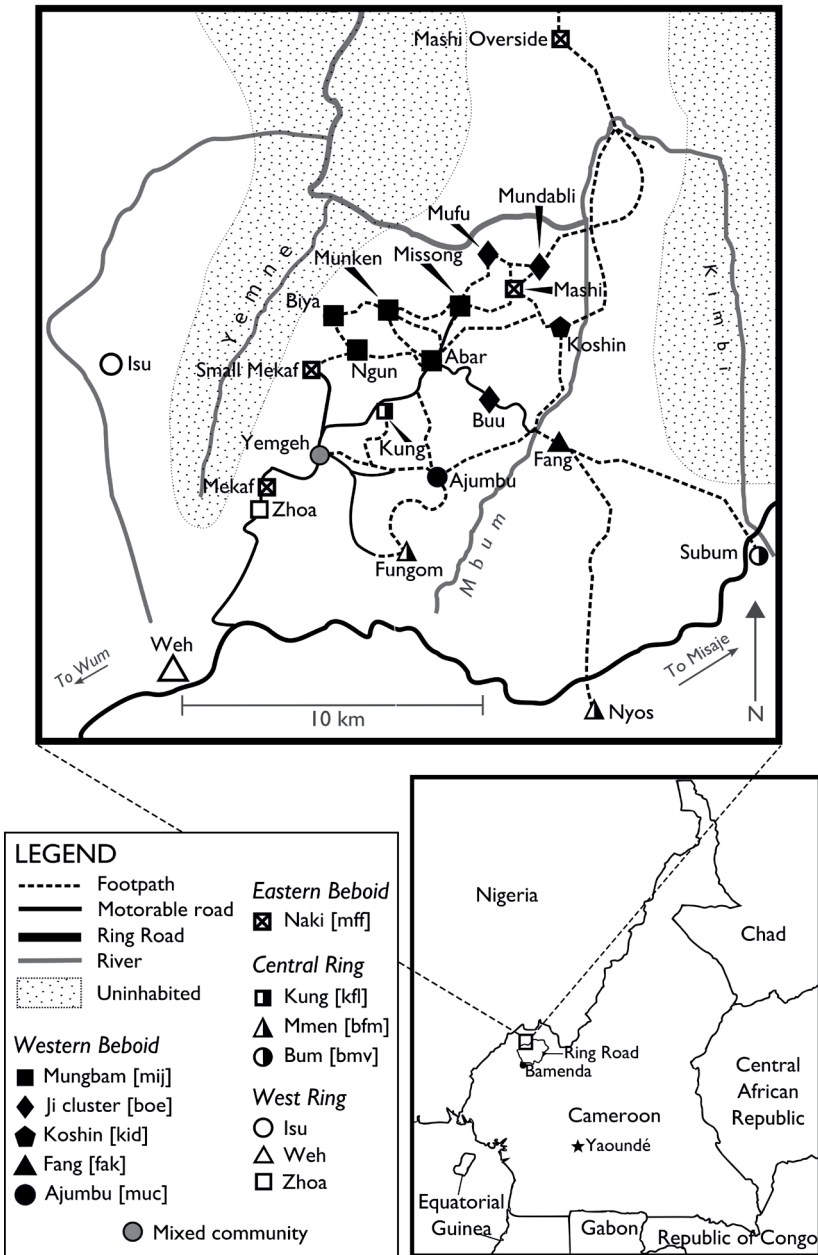


Figure 1: Villages and languages of Lower Fungom and surrounding area

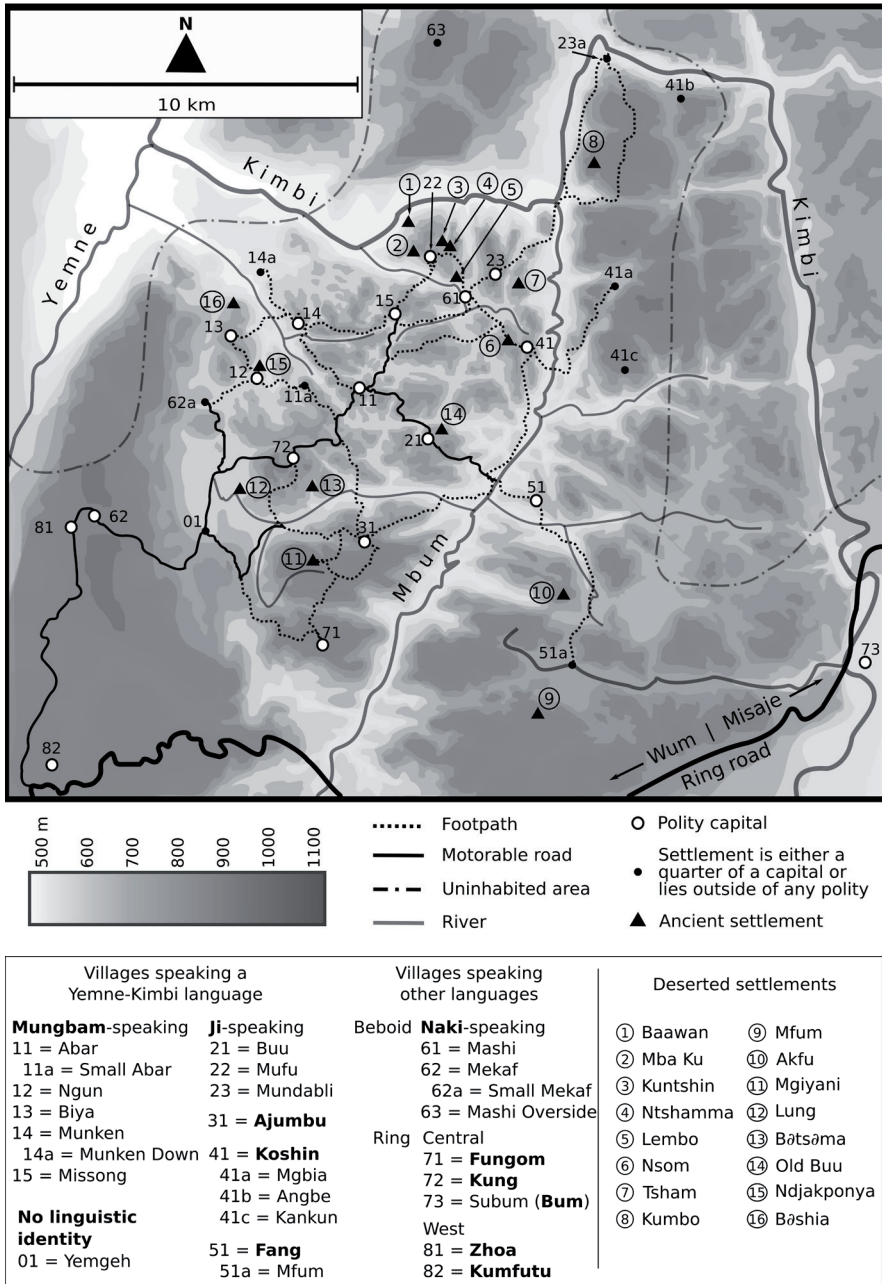


Figure 2: Detailed relief and hydrology map of Lower Fungom and surrounding area representing both living and deserted settlements known thus far. The villages of Fungom, Kumfutu, Mekaf, Small Mekaf, Subum, and Zhoa are not part of Lower Fungom. Language names are in bold.

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 it would be misleading to base any inference on their contrast. This is to make clear that we have never thought of interpreting any unmediated single sociocultural difference 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 in contrast with them.

As will be shown later, 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 (demonstrating 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. 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. We realize that in so doing we risk giving 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 the most part preconceived, informed by a sort of romantic pessimism rather than results of 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 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 hydrologic 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 (itself 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, 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 of the 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 between 1700 and 2200 mm per annum is probably correct (Hurault 1986:116, Nettle 1996:417, Nji Fogwe & Tchotsoua 2010:20). Altitude and good overall 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. Patches of forest are still visible only on hilltops and in the the form of galleries along the humid bottoms of some

valleys.³ 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, and in much the same way as it is documented in other societies settled at the periphery of the Grassfields (see e.g. Baeke 2004:94 on the Wuli of Lus, Donga-Mantung Division, Northwest Region), 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 a palm-based market, which is instead dominated by oil.⁴ As elsewhere in the Grassfields and along its periphery (see e.g. Kaberry 2003 [1952]:27 and Baeke 2004:90-94), 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 within residential areas. In the area we also find some families of ‘Aku’ (Fulani) 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 do not seem to be practiced any longer in Lower Fungom. Probably due to the introduction of firearms and to 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).⁵ Fishing is practiced along the major water courses (Mbum and Kimbi rivers) mainly by the use of locally-made nets.

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

4. 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 **njangi** ‘tontine’, see Warnier (1985:90-96). The rather limited coffee and cocoa plantations do not seem to represent an important source of income for Lower Fungom peasants.

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

Data obtained during both our land survey and our interviews seem to indicate that iron has never been smelted nor forged in this area (as predicted in Warnier 1992:200). According to our sources, in the past locals bartered palm oil or kernels in exchange for iron tools traded in Lower Fungom by foreign merchants or obtained from Isu or directly from Nigeria. Only in Koshin two blacksmiths are reported to have worked locally for some time. In both cases these were men who emigrated from the village around two generations ago, acquired the smithing techniques elsewhere, and finally brought them back to their original village. Nowadays there is no local production of iron tools anywhere in the area.

Concerning means of communication, a motorable road, although 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 also connect the area 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 a 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 some 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 a few people, including a handful of 'Aku' families, regularly 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. 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 1).

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 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. Meanwhile, in villages like Abar, Missong, Munken, and Ngun, quarters are physically well distinct, sometimes so distant from 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 has its ritual assembly place: for this reason this sacred forest area is normally inaccessible to foreigners and women (see 5.2.).

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

4. Linguistic diversity and ecological factors

Earlier scholars on West Africa have sometimes relied on physical geographical features to explain linguistic boundaries (see e.g. Mabogunje 1976:5). As we have seen in Section 3.1, Lower Fungom land morphology would at first glance appear to be a good candidate for this kind of isomorphic generalization. In fact, our region's hills can hardly have constituted major obstacles that lead to a degree of isolation of local groups, which would account for the current linguistic scenario. However steep, Lower Fungom hills are very close to each other and do not in any way hamper communication among groups, though some footpaths can dissuade from continual frequentation due to their abruptness. Likewise water courses, at least those located in the central area, can be easily forded except for short periods at the peak of the rainy season, during which locals put up temporary rope bridges. Only the two major rivers, the Mbum and the Kimbi, may constitute actual physical boundaries of a certain relevance. For instance, we know that the rope bridge connecting Fang, located to the east of the Mbum river, to the road leading to Buu and Abar was built 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.⁶ Excepting Fang all the other villages are within easy reach of each other during practically the whole year (see Table 2).

6. As a consequence of the building of the new bridge, over the last few 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 *kævi* or Fang Oversight.

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

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

General availability of cultivable land in near-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, are likely to have promoted rather high demographic density and continuous exploitation of local resources. In other words, Lower Fungom is to be ranked as an area of low ecological risk and this may have caused settlers to develop localist sociolinguistic stances (Hill 1996), a situation which the ecological model proposed by Nettle (in Nettle 1996) sees as ultimately leading to the formation of several small ethnolinguistic groups (Nettle 1996:413-14).

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 speaker community and village as a political unit (henceforth village/polity) 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 model: we can hardly justify the necessity for groups to develop such extreme, *village-level* localist attitudes unless we also posit some intervening factors.

First, we should also include the degree to which a given area is exposed to outside threats, since these are likely to profoundly condition agricultural productivity. More importantly, and regardless of such an objectivistic and deterministic approach, we should recall that both the environment and the ‘well-being’ can be socially constructed. In fact, earlier scholars have argued that, as a general rule, economic struggles in Sub-Saharan Africa 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 Sub-Saharan 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 take 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 nearly universal in pre-colonial non-centralized

Sub-Saharan societies (see e.g. Colson 1970, Cohen & Middleton 1970b and the case studies in Kopytoff 1987).⁷ 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 only be discussed in Section 6. However, we hope that the reader will concur with us that this excursus is 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 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 6.4 we use them to advance some sociolinguistic proposals. Section 7 includes a summary of our archaeological findings in the area and of our attempts to contextualize them within a wider historical context. This section underpins the chronological framework intended to help us assess the tenability of the 'sociolinguistic historical' proposals we have advanced in 6.4. 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 a 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) as well as contemporary Wuli society (see Baeke 2004:29-30). Leaving this area toward the centre of the Grassfields

7. While the importance of ritual in this process of incorporation has been amply documented, its linguistic co-occurrences often seem to have been left often undetermined by anthropologists (but see also Zeitlyn & Connell 2003). In this perspective our work here might have some relevance for anthropologists, too.

one encountered societies whose economies were gradually more specialized in productions of higher economic value per weight unit (in succession tubers, domestic animals, wood carvings and iron tools 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 for the western Grassfields, we can list Bafut, Mankon, Kom (Warnier 1985:11-21, 207ff.), and, to a somewhat lesser extent, Bum (Chilver & Kaberry 1967a: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,⁸ two features that the above mentioned model would predict to co-occur with a dispersed settlement pattern and ‘acephalous’ societies. This is not the case. Along with traits 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 rather concentrated settlement pattern (see Section 3.2). 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 (cf. Masquelier 1978:49-53,81-82) or Meta’ (cf. Dillon 1973:45,101-107), or contemporary Wuli (cf. Baeke 2004:112-113, 258-259, 281).

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, as far as we are aware, sets these societies apart from any other community of palm oil producers: 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. Here the adjective ‘secret’ stresses that these associations are unified by secrets, not that their membership is secret (see Section 5.2). 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.⁹ Others, our ‘higher associations’, are concerned with the governing of human affairs (e.g. justice, political interests) and of magical forces alike. By virtue of these characteristics – directly associated with the well-being and social order of the village as a whole and typically embedded in a tradition of indigenusness – they play a fundamental role for the construction of the village as a unified social body and, for this reason, are more interesting for our present purposes. 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

8. The only noteworthy exception are the Mekaf traditional pottery makers but Mekaf, as we shall see in Section 6.1.2, is a recent immigrant community in Lower Fungom.

9. 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’.

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 (cf. also Horton 1972:101-103).

The above picture is purposely broad as it is meant to characterize all the villages/polities 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 to 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 in Lower Fungom: 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 a closed type: especially for higher secret associations, seats are inherited through paternal line 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. 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.¹⁰ 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. As we shall see, it is even possible that the foundation of a given secret association be the result of an imposition by a community over another.

In general, the name of a given association is inextricably connected with the nature of its secrets, and hence with its intended functions and the kind of supernatural power it can provide access to. For this reason the names of secret associations tend to be stable over time, 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 between social groups.

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 unrelatedness among villages. 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

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

idiosyncrasies at this level are likely to provide important insights concerning the history 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 in the political life of that community. Another possibility is that a given village appears so successful that its secrets become desirable and hence sought after by others, who then incorporate, superpose, or translate them into their own pre-existing traditions.¹¹

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 our descriptive categories, hence characterizing secret associations for their prominence of political functions as opposed to ritual functions. This is a convenient abstraction not immune from objections: in Lower Fungom, as elsewhere in the Grassfields and beyond, only the (western) ethnographer can distinguish ritual from political power, whereas the traditional view would find it impossible to set them apart. In fact any secret association has a ritual-magical core. Some also have important political non-ritual functions: these associations are here labeled as having 'mainly political functions'. At any rate, the table should not be taken to give clues about any of the peculiarities of the single associations nor of the systems they are part of. It is only meant to facilitate a comparison of the names of the secret associations found in Lower Fungom and surrounding areas.

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 lodges whose membership seems to be determined by either historical primacy or, more rarely, by political prominence among the kin groups composing a given polity. Inner circles may differ as to their parent association: most of the times this is the one having 'mainly ritual functions', sometimes (as e.g. in Kom) this can also be the association having 'mainly political functions'. Though insufficient for any further elaboration, this data nevertheless offers at least some possible comparative clues.

11. 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. When one is successful in any kind of activity or situation people often ascribe this success to the possession of a 'strong medicine' thereby 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	Secret associations with mainly political functions	Secret associations with mainly ritual functions	Inner circles
Abar (M)	əkpwīnan	eko	itshung
Ajumbu	ntshuin	ntshuin	?
Biya (M)	əkprōnānang	eko	itshung, kwifantɔ
Buu (J)	kə ?	kə	tzang, ntənəyən
Fang	kwifon	ntol, təm	təm ?
Koshin	kwifon	nti	?
Kung	kwifon	ntul, fəbafə	?
Mashi	ntshu	ntshu	?
Missong (M)	olam / nlyam	olam, eko	itsang
Mufu (J)	ji (?)	ntshu	?
Mundabli (J)	kwāl (?)	ntshu	?
Munken (M)	?	ntələ, ikwæ	itshung, ube
Ngun (M)	əkprōnənə	ikwæ	?
Bum	kwifon	ntul	chum, ?
Kom	kwifoyn	ntul	nggvu, kwifoyn ntu'u

Table 3: Distribution and names of the higher male secret associations in Lower Fungom villages and in the two nearest centralized chiefdoms—i.e. Bum and Kom. 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).

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.

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 earlier scholars have observed in more centralized chiefdoms (Nkwi & Warnier 1982:58). The closest such examples to our area are Bum (Chilver 1993:9-15.Jun.1960) and Kom (Nkwi 1976:88-94).
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**, encountered also in Bum (Chilver 1993:8-9.Jun.1960) and Kom (Nkwi 1976:32) and Chilver & Kaberry (1967a:85). 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 & Kaberry 1967a: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. **kwifantɔ**, found in Biya, could recall Kom’s **kwifoyn ntu’u**. Alternatively, 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)VnV-**.
2. The names of the associations having ‘mainly ritual functions’ found in Abar, Biya, Missong, Munken, and Ngun, can be all reduced to a shared root **Vk(w)V**.
3. **kə** and **ntənəyən** are known only from Buu.
4. **fəbafə** is known only from Kung.
5. **olam** / **nlyam** 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 type 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 reconstruct the history of the Lower Fungom communities, hence providing telling data as to the magnitude of cultural boundaries in the area. In Section 6 we will use these data to evaluate the extent to which linguistic boundaries can be accounted for in cultural and historical terms.

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 to agricultural activities.
2. Central location of the sacred forest
Located at roughly the physical center of the capital village of each polity, 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 from one another. Such empty strip can be at times so wide that quarters appear to be 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.¹²
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 that is only loosely if at all subdivided among patrikin, who often cooperate in the pursuit of their economic activities, 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.¹³
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).

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

13. 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 (cf 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 is their autonomy 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 & 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 matrilin 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.

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 ritual institutions (i.e., secret associations as a whole) do not appear to be distributed by quarter. Houses of lower as well as higher secret associations (the latter are locally known as ‘law houses’) can be found in a number of quarters in each village but 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, the 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 appears to be 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 at the well-being of the kin group and not of the village as a whole.¹⁴

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 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 as ‘sacred’ like they are, for instance, in Bafut, Bum, or Kom (on the last see Chilver & Kaberry 1967b:127 and Nkwi 1976:48-52).

14. Cases like that exemplified in Baeke (2004:253), in which the researcher discovered that in Wuli society some associations were quarter- and not village-based only after several months of work in a single village, call for caution in any conclusions we might draw concerning secret associations due to the short duration of our field research.

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’. It appears that in many cases the present-day ‘sub-chief’ used to be the sole legitimate chief until requirements and opportunities that arose during colonial times obliged him to name another man, usually the head of the most important quarter beside his own, to act on his behalf 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). At present, however, the two figures seem to share most of their key features. Unless otherwise stated, throughout the article when we speak of chief we refer to whom locals label ‘chief’ as opposed to ‘sub-chief’ regardless of the history of these offices.

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 sums is 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 associations 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 & Kaberry 1967a 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 influence on the choice of the new chief, mainly thanks to kin groups' 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.

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.

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 recalled by our consultants as having once been the 'chief of war' 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). Interestingly, Baeke (2004:109) tells us that the office of the 'chief of hunt/war', as opposed to the 'chief of rain/agriculture', is connected with the earliest settlers in Lus area.

14. Chief-list accommodates between six and eight names including the living chief. Too many ‘socially motivated distortions’ (Irvine 1978:685) may condition the composition and length of a genealogy, and hence 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). However, among such social distortions of genealogical knowledge we must also reckon 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) whose membership is in large part determined on the basis of the chiefly lineage’s relations and whose main functions include enforcement of as well as monitoring over the chief’s power (see e.g. Nkwi 1976:64-96 and Chilver & Kaberry 1967b:143-144 for Kom and Chilver 1993: 9-15.Jun.1960 for Bum). **Kwifon** of Lower Fungom Canon societies evidently contrasts with this prototype. 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 (cf. Table 3 and see Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:89-90 and Geary 1979:60-65 for similar conclusions concerning nearby Weh).¹⁹

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 we use the terms ‘council’ and ‘highest lodge’ hereafter we refer to a whole ‘system’, as it were, which is instead peculiar to Lower Fungom Canon societies only.

19. Some institutions documented by Baeke among the Wuli of Lus, all connected with the earliest ‘layer’ of secret associations (Baeke 2004:333), appear to closely recall our **kwifon**. This parallel between Wuli and Lower Fungom societies, on the whole culturally and economically similar to each other, suggests the possibility that **kwifon** was not introduced *e novo* in our area but that it replaced existing institutions of the same kind. See also our proposal in Section 8.

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 Web 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 as an ancestral institution, rather than an acquisition from an outside source.

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 form 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 materialize the importance of a given kin group. 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 of plant materials only.²⁰

20. As we have seen in Table 3, within the highest lodge there can be one or more inner circles, i.e., progressively more secret and hence powerful magical-ritual lodges 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. There are two women's secret associations

Higher lodges and **kwifon** are of exclusively male membership, yet women also have their own secret associations. These amount to two in each village and differ from one another in 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 requires 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.²¹

5.3.2. Using our Canon for comparative purposes

With the exception of a few implication-rich features (specially 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 slight variations. Table 4 has the principal merit of demonstrating 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 Misson 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) are 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 interpretation.

21. It is interesting to note that the women's associations more commonly accorded the highest status in Lower Fungom all go by names recalling Kom **fymbwen** (cf. 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).

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	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, see Section 7.1.) to get a more historically sound picture for features 2-5.

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 clearly echoing

like institutions 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 long-established centers of cultural irradiation in 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).²² 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 a place called Tikum (Smith 1929:parr.34,37) or Chikon (Pollock 1927:par.24).²³ Frequent raids and pressure from the south pushed the Kung northward. Kung ancestors then occupied, perhaps for no more than one generation, the hilltop whence around 1855 Mmen drove them off and founded Fungom (see Smith 1929: parr.40-41 and Chilver & Kaberry 1967a: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 society is in fact one of the most divergent from the Lower Fungom Canon (cf. Table 4 above).²⁴ Concerning 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 more similar to the centralized chiefdoms of Bum and Kom than to most of the neighboring societies of Lower Fungom.

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

22. 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.

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

24. In Kung society, descent is matrilineal. On the whole matrilineages are much more important than patrilineages, two sides of an important sociocultural feature that our framework does not capture with due clarity.

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) (Cattle 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 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, Warnier 1984:407) 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 communities 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 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 **fəmbwen**, known to most of the other villages under nearly identical names, we find also an otherwise undocumented **fwan**, defined as ‘the **kwifon** of women’ in natives’ view for its high degree of inclusiveness (see also footnote 21).

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:par.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 not necessarily cogent in terms of a common provenance, let alone common language.

That Fang people may have moved recently to the area they now occupy is supported by sociocultural 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, 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 **fəbwə**) 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 to Lower Fungom Canon, and their names give the impression that it had intense relations with more hierarchical chiefdoms located to the east and south of it. 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 an 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.

Besides the names and functions of some of their higher associations, there are several other data that seem to support the idea that Fang people used to have much more contact with communities settled to the south (Nyos) and east of it (Bum): (i) the recent construction of the bridge over the Mbum river toward Abar (see Section 4); (ii) the ancestral village, Mfum (sometimes spelled as 'Fum' in colonial documents), is located at a short distance from Nyos (see Figure 2); (iii) memory of past intermarriage patterns favoring Bum over any other foreign area; (iv) oral traditions about the relationship with Nyos. Concerning the last point, a tradition found in both villages has it that Fang ancestors were forced to leave Mfum due to continued attacks led on them by Nyos people. In Nyos, British colonial officers were told 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' (Swabey 1942). 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. We are unable to assess the validity of such claims nor the reliability of several oral traditions. Needless to say, addition of new

data to the few existing studies on Befang (Abre 2003 and Gueche Fotso 2004) would certainly facilitate this task by shedding light on the issue of whether Fang and Befang languages can be considered as historically connected to one another.

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 20 km to the south 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) and that, after leaving the village near Sawe, they settled for some time in a site called Ndangansi (lying in the vicinity of present-day Kimbi River village, at some 10 km to the southeast of Koshin), a place that still retains a special role in Koshin ritual life. 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 a rather ethnically homogeneous foreign group would find sound support in sociocultural terms, as Koshin diverges the most 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 the most important aspect: the traces of pronouncedly centralized 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 (cf. 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).²⁵

25. Also interesting is the fact that nowhere in Lower Fungom but in Koshin have we witnessed a throne hall populated with many wooden statues (also present in Fang) and a ritual dagger encircled with what could well have been a ‘corde à esclaves’ (Warnier 1985:134).

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 capital village hill (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** (where the last segment is a super-high anterior vowel, see Good et al. 2011:par.3.5.2.2), whose membership is not equally distributed among quarters (feature 16) and whose name recalls Bum and Kom **ntul** (see Sections 5.2, 6.1.1, and 6.1.3). Finally, there is only one women's secret association, **fyumbwen**, and it closely echoes again a Bum institution whereas **(ə)shaam-**, apparently ‘indigenous’ to Lower Fungom (see footnote 21), is conspicuously absent.

If, on the one hand, all these idiosyncrasies may well be taken to confirm that Koshin people 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 [bmv], a Central Ring language) is not obviously related to 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 [bmv] 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 in the same direction. Several sources report that within the village communities of Mbuk, Mungong, Faat, and Fio – all under the Fon of Bum – there are still speakers of the languages used in these villages before the advent of the Alung dynasty and their subsequent absorption into Bum. These languages seem to differ more or less markedly from Bum [bmv] (Lamberty 2002:3, Nyamnjoh 1997:10). Among them Cung [cug], spoken only in Faat, is reported by speakers to be similar to 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 & Brye 2001:par.3.7).²⁶

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 in Bum before the ascent of the Alung dynasty, that is, at a time when what is now Bum was politically (and linguistically) fragmented in perhaps a fairly similar way as present-day Lower Fungom.

26. 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 fongom 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.

6.1.5. Ajumbu

Also in the case of Ajumbu we find that extraneousness to our Canon coincides with a one-village language. Unlike 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 settlement of Lung (see Figure 2 and Section 7). This is consistent with oral histories, all agreeing on the ‘indigenoussness’ 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 had taken refuge in Ajumbu after being chased away from his native village.

All these peculiarities seem to point to the absence of a truly 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 after the old site of **bətsəma** (see Figure 2) had to be abandoned due to the arrival of Kung people. 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.²⁷ 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 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).

This must be coupled with the fact that Ajumbu is perceived 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

27. One of these old hamlets, called **ngiyani**, 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).

more clearly toward the south (see also Table 2). This gives room to see Ajumbu and its language as historically separate from the rest of Lower Fungom.

6.1.6. Missong

Oral traditions depict Missong as having been founded in recent times by immigrant groups. The chief's kin group is reported to be native to a place called **ajumə** not far from Dumbo (Donga-Mantung Division, Misaje Subdivision) located at ca. 20 km to the east-northeast of Missong. After leaving this place, his ancestors are said to have lived for some time in **ntsha'**, in the area of Mashi Overside (Furu-Awa Subdivision), before they moved to today's Missong. Since there are still two living people who are reported to have been born in **ntsha'**, 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 the sacred forest is not located at the physical center of the village nor is it adjacent to the chief's quarter (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** or **nlyam**. Two features make this association clearly distant from what we know from the Lower Fungom as a whole. First, this appears as 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 an institution is not found elsewhere in Lower Fungom.

Furthermore, in Missong there is an institution bearing a name, **eko**, which is found in other Mungbam-speaking villages where it designates what we have called here the highest lodge (see Table 3). Surprisingly, Missong's **eko** seems distributed among quarters, each having one house of **eko**, hence countering feature 19 above. This would seem to speak of a late introduction of the 'highest lodge' type into a on the whole different system, also suggesting that in Missong there are no traces of a unique village-wide sociopolitical institution excepting the (politically weak) chief.

Missong's distinctiveness 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 speech when settled in Missong by 'stealing the language from neighbors' (in our consultants' words).

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 apparently does not conflict with linguistic data: though sharing with them most of its structural features, the Missong variety possesses several phonological, morphological and lexical idiosyncrasies that set it apart from the remaining Mungbam varieties (see Good et al. 2011:par. 3.2.1).

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:par.3.2.2.2) 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 close to dissipation: it has been systematically depopulated in the last decades so that today only few compounds remain. 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 because, in many cases, these can only be taken to be 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 **kwifantə** 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 & 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 even be admitted to the 'council' (Biya **əkponənəng**).

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 or Tangmunken (see Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:109 and Chilver 1997). We are unable to check the reliability of this tradition at present but the evident similarity of at least one of the alternative names of Tabenken (Tangmunken) with Munken, coupled with no apparent connections between their languages (in Tabenken 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, **ntələ** 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 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**, which was probably introduced in the area from Isu (see Sections 6.1.2 and 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 & Kaberry 1967a:92, see Section 5.2), in turn connected, at least on the surface, with Kom and Bum **ntul**.

Considering the crucial role that such an 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 peculiarity as well as the tradition of origin from Tabenken (and the somewhat dubious story of common migration with Kung, see above) 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

Within the Ji-speaking area, sociocultural and linguistic boundaries seem to coincide. Good et al. (2011: Section 3.3.1) state that:

"The work that has been done on Mufu and Buu indicates that the varieties Mufu and Mundabli can probably be considered dialects of the same language, while Buu is probably best considered a distinct language. Speaker reports match our own linguistic assessment in this regard".

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

The same boundary seems to be manifest in cultural dimension. 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. Let us briefly consider local oral traditions.

Several kin groups living in 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 may be the result of relatively close contacts with Isu, whose importance for Lower Fungom communities has been already emphasized in the case of Mashi (see Section 6.1.2).

6.3. Some provisional conclusions

In the preceding pages we have seen how the distribution of sociocultural features seems to be linked with observed linguistic boundaries and that both appear to find some explanatory clues in oral histories. 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 totally consistent traditions of foreign provenance of their founders (at times even confirmed by other, independent 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 the names of these institutions and the system into which they 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

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.

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

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.

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 (comprised of Jeff Good, Jesse Lovegren, and the present author) 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 speaking 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, a fact further corroborating 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 peculiar within 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 (i.e. Abar and Ngun for Mungbam, and Buu for Ji-speaking communities)?

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 Sub-Saharan Africa and the Grassfields in particular (see e.g. Warnier 1984:399, Warnier 1985:5, 213-214). On the basis of the available literature (e.g. Cohen & Middleton 1970a, 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. Especially in non-centralized societies as those under analysis, 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 (see also footnote 8). 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 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, Missong, 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 as landowner by the founders of Missong, 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 (see Figure 2) which, by virtue of being located on uneasily accessible hilltops, appear to have been chosen for their defensive potential. On the other hand, sites lying on the flanks of smooth hills, like Nsom

and Lung, must be associated with groups whose main priority was undoubtedly not that of living in a naturally protected place.³¹ That the two settlement patterns correspond to two distinct historical phases is shown in the history and archaeology of Buu and of Mufu.

7.1. Archaeology of Buu and Mufu

Buu consultants reported 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 include expansion policies of the village of Fungom (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.³²

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, Ləmbo, Dōggum, Mba Ku and Ntshamma (see Figure 2). Consistent ethnohistorical data indicate that the oldest settlements of the area were Ntshamma, Ləmbo, 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 Ləmbo. Mufu consultants have emphasized that it was after the arrival of Mashi people from Mashi Overside that defense became a priority.³³ 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 – in which 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 Ajumbu (see Section 6.1.5) and, though less clearly, in Mundabli, where the older settlements of Kumbə and Tsham were abandoned and people merged to form the present village. 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.

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

32. 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.

33. As corroborating evidence we can cite that the lyrics of a ritual song sung at the installation of the Mufu traditional chief, a political office directly associated with war (see footnote 16) can be translated as 'Mashi people have come to Ntshamma, let us make war on them!'

The historical phenomena that immediately come to mind in this respect as far as the recent history of the Grassfields is concerned are represented by Chamba and Fulani raids dating back to the first half of the 19th century. We now 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 & Kaberry 1967a:18-19).

We have found only few traces of their passage in Lower Fungom in local oral histories, but it should be recalled that we have not conducted a specific inquiry in this regard. 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 a 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 (cf. Smith 1929:par.54, Johnson 1967a:parr.33,39,42,43, Chilver & Kaberry 1967a:15-19,132-134, Geary 1976:89-93, and Fardon 1988:85ff.).

Our data also allow 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 and then occupied for several years by **gainyi**, while the local population took refuge in Kuk, Mmen, or Kom whence some of them returned only two decades later, i.e., 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’. In this regard, Lower Fungom is not only a very hilly region, but also appears to be hardly accessible due to the presence both of sizable rivers to its north (Kimbi) and east (Mbum) and of a wide inhospitable strip of land running all around it.

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 surrounding areas. It is to be noted that, excepting 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 cause 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 and might well be connected with factors we often find in the history of the Grassfields, including conflicts over succession or determined by accusations of witchcraft.³⁴ The widely documented processes of synoecism and of village fortification documented in Lower Fungom must be seen, in our view, as being 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

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 deserted settlement of Nsom provides fundamental evidence in this regard (see Figure 2). All consultants contacted have it that this was a Kutep settlement and 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 & Kaberry (1967a: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 & Kaberry 1967a:16-17). Nsom seems to fit perfectly into this framework and this allows us to roughly date its foundation between 1800 and 1840.

Interestingly, the relics of Nsom are scattered over the smooth flanks of two hills, and not on an inaccessible hilltop (see Figure 2). This assures 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 chased the Kung away and reportedly killed their

34. In the case of Munken the story told is very similar to rather common plots of early fights internal to kin groups.

chief. 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 patterns 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.³⁵

1. The earliest phase we are able to reconstruct (which we would be inclined to date roughly from 1600 to 1800) sees Lower Fungom as a relatively peaceful area characterized by the presence, at least in its northern and southern fringes, of somewhat scattered residential patterns not much dissimilar from those found in pre-colonial Modele and Meta’. The ancestors of most of the quarters of Buu, Ngun, Abar and of several of the lineages which will later found Mufu and Ajumbu are already settled in the area. Apart from the last, all the other communities participate in what could be seen as an area of cultural convergence: our Lower Fungom Canon is developed in this period. Under such ‘normal conditions’ 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 communities).
2. Between 1800 and 1840 there is a first wave of immigrants from the north: Kutep refugees arrive and found Nsom. Ancestors of Mundabli, Biya, and of some Mufu quarters arrive at this time from an easterly or northeasterly direction. The area seems to remain essentially peaceful, though at this time Chamba or Fulani

35. It should be recalled, however, that this is no doubt an oversimplified picture. There is no space here for us to contextualize and nuance our proposals in consideration of the wider scenario concerned with the historical dynamics of the Grassfields in the last millennium (see e.g. Warnier 1984), and we wish to do so in a separate study that we hope to publish in a journal specialized in African history and anthropology. For instance, the ‘peaceful’ connotation we ascribe to the early phase discussed below should not be taken but as a useful simplification, not in any way meant to affirm that such a vaguely bounded period was never punctuated with conflicts between groups nor that it was not preceded by phases of conflicts. The resulting view could appear as a unilinear evolution from a simple to a complex situation. At a closer look, the reader will realize that this is instead a description of a cycle that can have taken place endless times in the history of this area at large.

incursions take place. Inclusive pattern of small groups of newcomers on the part of landowners is still at work (even probably increased in intensity due to external threats, however modest).

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 denser villages promotes the adoption of localist attitudes in both ritual and language. Institutions original to more centralized chiefdoms (like Kom **kwifoyn** or Bum **kwifon**) are probably introduced in the traditional systems of many Lower Fungom societies at this time.
4. Tribal wars continue until the first decade of the 20th century. Between 1905 and 1909 Germans organized at least three military expeditions to Lower Fungom (see Jurisch 1907, Smith 1929: parr.68-75), Johnson (1936:par.47), Deutsche Kolonialzeitung (1906: 166). 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 events are the dissipation of Lung (about 1930) and very recent processes of re-settlement on open land (as, among others, the case of Buu people who left Old Buu in 1972 and the new quarter of Fang which emerged after the construction of a bridge on the Mbum 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 considered existing theories that see in ecological factors the determinants of the development of sociolinguistic localist attitudes. These theories provided 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 drew 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 emphasized that in Sub-Saharan African societies, wealth is conceived of more in terms of people than of land and, hence, that this demands a re-adjustment of the

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.

variables to be considered for our purposes. The former consideration 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 led us to take a critical view of the results we 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 tried to identify cultural boundaries that may be considered significant in historical terms. In order to do so we combined twenty sociocultural features that distinguish a relatively homogeneous group of villages/polities (Lower Fungom Canon Societies) from 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 longer in Lower Fungom. This amounted to much, yet not to the whole story.

On the one hand, Ajumbu, though among the firstcomers, appeared so idiosyncratic with the rest that we have proposed to see it as fundamentally distant from Lower Fungom when considered as a cultural, not as a geographical area. On the other hand Missong, Biya, Munken, Mufu, and Mundabli showed more or less entangled 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 figuring out whether in the history of our area we could identify a historical caesura. In fact, excluding the ‘extraneous’ 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 probably lay 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 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 for 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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Note on transcription

All words in local languages have been rendered in a simplified orthography lacking both tone representation and, in some cases, a fine-grained differentiation among segments. Essentially, this means favoring conventions paralleling English pronunciations of Roman letters and using digraphs that will largely be transparent to English readers (e.g., *sh* for [ʃ] or *ny* for [ɲ]). Only two signs, *y* and *j*, are often troublesome in anthropological writings and need a separate note on their usage in this article: the former can represent the palatal glide and the palatalized second articulation of stops; the latter always stands for the alveo-palatal affricate.

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Résumé

Le Lower Fungom, au nord-ouest du Cameroun, compte parmi les zones présentant la plus grande diversité linguistique des Grassfields camerounais. Sept langues ou petits groupes de langues sont parlés dans ses treize villages, et cinq d'entre eux ne sont manifestement pas étroitement liés les uns aux autres, ni à aucune autre langue parlée en dehors de la région. Le présent article examine les facteurs non linguistiques qui ont pu être à l'origine de ce scénario linguistique surprenant. L'écologie de la région, examinée dans son ensemble, s'avère incapable d'expliquer pleinement la situation. Les données ethnographiques récoltées lors d'un travail de terrain effectué récemment dans la région servent à évaluer le degré de corrélation entre les frontières linguistiques et culturelles. Les modèles qui s'en dégagent sont ensuite revus à la lumière des histoires orales, de documents des débuts de la période coloniale et de données archéologiques. Le cadre historique détaillé ainsi obtenu indique non seulement que cette région a été caractérisée par un certain nombre d'événements migratoires, mais aussi qu'à différentes périodes, ces événements ont eu diverses répercussions linguistiques. L'article conclut en reconstruisant plusieurs phases de la préhistoire linguistique du Lower Fungom qui semble, globalement, jeter la lumière sur les processus ayant conduit à sa diversité linguistique actuelle.