

PROTO-BANTU *K AND *G IN THE MBAM LANGUAGES: A PROBLEM IN CLASSIFICATION

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Abstract: The Bantu Mbam languages of Cameroun appear at first glance as a very coherent unit, in spite of having been put by Guthrie (1953) in two different groups (A40 and A60). Indeed they differ in their treatment of the two Proto-Bantu velar stops *k and *g, the latter being generally quite diagnostic in differentiating among larger Bantu units. This contribution will examine in detail the reflexes of the two proto-sounds, examine possible explanations and tentatively suggest directions for further research.

Key words: Bantu, Mbam, classification, diachronic phonology, velar consonants

1. Introduction

The Mbam languages (first identified as such by Dieu & Renaud 1983) are spoken near the northernmost limit of Narrow Bantu languages in Cameroun, by the confluence of the Sanaga and Mbam Rivers, about 80 km north-northwest of Yaoundé. They had initially been separated in two groups in Malcolm Guthrie’s classification (Guthrie 1953), part of the languages being put together with Basaa and neighbouring languages in group A40, the rest forming the “Sanaga” group or A60. Further data collection on those henceforth poorly attested languages showed that they shared many common features in phonology (principally the vowel systems), lexicon and morpho-syntax, which led to their being grouped together as “Mbam languages”.¹

¹ A not altogether felicitous name, since it creates a risk of confusion with “Mbam-Nkam” or “Eastern Grassfields”.

The aim of this short contribution is to draw attention to a notable difference in the diachronic reflexes of P(roto)B(antu) velar consonants among the various Mbam languages, leading to a possible query on the validity of a Mbam clade — and thus justifying to a certain extent Guthrie’s (1953) original two-way split of these languages (if not the validity of his A40 group).

2. The position of the problem

A very striking correspondence set is exhibited by all² Guthrie’s “Zone A” languages i.e. PB *k > Ø and *g > k (Philippon, to appear); the presumably old weakening of *k to Ø can be justified by the complete neutralization of PB *k-initial stems with *Ø-initial stems (noted as *y by Guthrie (1967–1970), a practice I will follow here³); examples:

- *-*kádi* ‘wife, woman, female’: Londo A11 *ɲw-ár(ána)*, Kundu A122 *ɲw-àrì*, Duala A24 *módí* < *mu-á-*, Kpe A22 *ɲm-áli*, Akoose A15C *mw-áád*, North-Bobe A31a *w-a:m*, Southwest-Bobe A31b *mw-á:rì*, Basaa A43a *ɲw-áá*, Bekwil A85b *my-él*, Kwakum A91 *ɲgw-ál*
- *-*kútà* ‘oil’: Duala A24 *m-ùúlà*, Akoose A15C *m-öl*, Southwest-Bobe A31b *m-uítá*, Basaa A43a *m-òó*, Bekwil A85b *m-úl*, Kwakum A91 *ɲg-ú’tó*
- *-*kónì* ‘firewood’: Akoose A15C *hy-õn*, North-Bobe A31a, Southwest-Bobe A31b *l-óm*, Kwakum A91 *f-ón*
- *-*yédi* ‘moonlight’: Londo A11 *ɲw-é:ri*, Duala A24 *módi* < *mu-é-*, Kpe A22 *ɲm-éli*
- *-*yákà* ‘year’: Londo A11, Kundu A122 *ɲw-â*, Kpe A22 *ɲm-áà*, Akoose A15C *mw-é*, North-Bobe A31a *lóa* < *lu-áa*, Kwakum A91 *my-á*

² Apart from the Mbam languages discussed below, the only exception to this statement concerns Kpa (Bafia) A53 (and presumably the other, poorly-known, A50 languages) where PB initial *k and *y have neutralized for verbal, but not nominal, stems. Discussed in note 27 below.

³ This differs from Meeussen’s (1976) transcription of Ø-initial with *j (Wills, to appear)

°-y t s ‘boil, abscess’⁴: Basaa A43a *ɔ̄-ɔ̄r*, Bekwil A85b *d- l*, Kwakum A91 *ɔ̄-  t s*⁵

This fusion of the reflexes of *k and *y is necessarily ancient enough to have preceded the *g > k shift, otherwise both *k and *g would have shifted to  . This has indeed happened in some languages, e.g. Duala A24, but a look at their closest relatives shows that the process is much more recent, since most of them have retained /k/ < *g and a few exhibit the intermediate stage /h/; cf. for example *-g d i ‘rope’ > Duala *m- d i* and Mongo A261 *m -k d i*, Banofo A32a * -h d i*, vs. *-k d i > Duala *m- d i*, Mongo and Banofo *mw- d i*.

For the sake of comparison, here are examples of the regular *g > k shift in Northwestern languages:

*-g b- ‘divide, share, distribute, sell’: A111 *-k b-*, Akoose A15C *-k b*, Basaa A43a *-k p*, Kpa A53 *-k p*, Ewondo A72 *-k b*

*-g ng  ‘root’: Balong A13 * -kang *, Akoose A15C * -k ng*, Isubu A23 *mo-kang *, Basaa A43a * -k ng*, Bulu A74 * -k ng*

*-g  ng  ‘log’: Londo A11 * k k *, Akoose A15C * -k g*, Duala A24 *muk k *, Basaa A43a * -k k*, Ewondo A72 * .k g*, Kwakum A91 *k k *

*-g  ng  ‘spear’: Londo A11 *d -k ng *, Akoose A15c * .k ng*, Bapuku A32b * -k ng *, Basaa A43a *li-k ng*, Kpa A53 *ri-k ng*, Ewondo A72 *a-k ng*, Bekol A832 *l -kw ng*, Kwakum A91 * -k  *⁶

*-g d ⁶ ‘leg, foot’: Londo A11 *d -k *, Balong A13 * -k *; Yasa A33a * -k  *, Akoose A15C * -k  *, Basaa A43a *k   / m -k  *, Kpa A53

⁴ Although not reconstructed by Guthrie (1967–1970) or Meeussen (1976), this stem is widespread in the region.

⁵ The case of Kwakum A91 is difficult, since the language while still maintaining a class system has generally incorporated PB class prefixes into stems and added new prefixes. Hence the separation between prefixes and stems as given in the examples is not justified synchronically, but appears reasonable from a diachronic angle.

⁶ Although both Guthrie (1967–1970) and Bastin & Schadeberg (n.d.) give the tones as LL, some languages are clearly LH.

ì.kōō, Ewondo A72 *a-kōl*, Bekwil A85b *kō* / *mē-kō*, Kwakum A91 *kōl°*, Seki B21 *u.kolú*

In C₂ position, we often find unreleased /kʰ ~ gʰ/ sometimes weakened to /ʔ/, but also /k/ or /ɣ/ intervocalically:

*-*bàgò* ‘hoe’: Isubu A23 *lì-βàkù*, Yasa A33a *ì-βàkù*, Basaa A43a *βàkʰ* / *bi-βàkʰ*, Southern Fang A75 *è-bàx*, Bekol A832 *bòògʰ*, A842 Koonzime *bòʔ*, A91 Kwakum *ì-βàkì*

*-*dúg-* ‘to paddle’: Balong A13 *-lókʰ*, Kpe A22 *-lúk-anε*, Yasa A33a *-dúkà*, A43a Basaa *-lúkʰ*, Eton A71 *-dúgʰ*, Fang (Bitam) A75 *-dúʔ*, Koonzime A842 *-dúʔò*, Mpiemo A86c *-dúyò*, Seki B21 *-dúkò*

*-*yóg-* ‘hear’: Balong A13 *-yókʰ*, Akoose A15C *-wógʰ*, Mongo A261 *-wók-àlè*, Bapuku A32b *-yókà*, South Kogo A43c *-óx*, Fang (Bitam) A75 *-wóʔ*, Mekaa A83 *-gwágʰ*, Mpiemo A86c *-gwóyò*, A91 Kwakum *-dʒóʰkó*

3. The Bantu reflexes of PB *k and *g

If we take a bird’s eye view of the situation for the *whole* of the Bantu area, we can come to the conclusion that the evolution of PB *k and *g has split the Bantu domain into three:

- a) the northwestern area just mentioned with *k > Ø and *g > k; this seems to extend deep into the rainforest (covering parts of Guthrie’s zones C and D),⁷
- b) the West Western group of Grollemund et al. (2015) or West-Coastal of Bostoen et al. (2015) where *k and *g both > k (most of Guthrie’s zone H + groups B40 to B80, with probably a few zone C languages),
- c) the Savanna languages comprising all the rest where *k > k and *g > g, (with the latter exhibiting a strong tendency to weaken to ɣ or Ø; e.g. PB *-*gàmb-* ‘speak’ > Yao P21 *-gààmb-*, Shambaa G23 *-yàmb-*, Shona S10 *-àmb-*).

⁷ See further note 35.

A strong hypothesis would be that this three-way split represents genuine clades (or genetic groupings), but the issue is too intricate to be discussed here and will be the object of a separate contribution. This chapter will only deal with its implications for the Mbam languages.

4. Mbam sub-classification

To facilitate the discussion, a tentative sub-classification of Mbam languages — based partly on their treatment of *k and *g, but taking also into consideration lexicon and morphology — would be as follows:⁸

- Western-Mbam: Nen A44 and Maande A46 — plus probably Nyokon A45 and Tuotomb A461, which however are too imperfectly attested to be included here,
- Northern-Mbam: Yambeta A462,
- Central Mbam or Yambasa: Yangben (or Nuasue) A62A, Mmaala A62B, Elip A62C, Baca A621, Gunu A622,
- Eastern Mbam: Ki A621,
- and possibly:
- Southern Mbam: Mbure A623.⁹

Note that the amount of lexical and grammatical information varies widely for the various languages and that Baca A621 and Mbure A623, as well as, to a lesser extent Yambeta A462 are quite poorly known.

5. The treatment of PB *k and *g in Mbam

5.1. One major phonological difference between the Mbam languages is in the treatment of PB *g and *k: Eastern Mbam (Ki) reduces both to \emptyset (like a few other NW languages such as Duala A24 — see above) whereas the other languages split into two strongly contrasted groups:

⁸ This sub-classification differs considerably from the one proposed by Boyd (2015) on the basis of vowel harmony processes; it is much closer to her lexicostatistical classification, which however results in a nested tree, whereas I refrain from suggesting a more inclusive classification of my primary groups.

⁹ Alternatively, Mbure might be a rather marginal member of Central Mbam.

Western Mbam has the “Northwestern” innovation *k > Ø and *g > k, whereas the other sub-groups surprisingly have the reverse situation, i.e. *k > k and *g > Ø like many Savanna Bantu languages, but no other Northwestern language to the best of my knowledge.

This is of course of great importance, because the question arises as to how this different evolution can cut across the Mbam languages? Are Western Mbam (and perhaps Ki) really “Northwestern” languages that have converged with the rest of Mbam through contact? And if so, where do the Northern and Central Mbam languages belong in the Bantu genealogy?

5.2. In order to be able to answer this question, it is necessary to look in detail at the data: regular correspondences illustrating PB *k and *g are quite impressive. Consider the following:¹⁰

C₁ *k > /Ø/ in Western and Eastern Mbam, /k ~ g/¹¹ in the others:

*-kádá ‘crab’: Nen *nʷ-áná*, Yambeta *nì-gán*, Yangben *nì-kán*

*-kádí¹² ‘wife’: Nen *mw-ájí*, Yambeta *pà-gán* (pl.), Yangben *à-káñi*

°-kádà(gà)¹³ ‘charcoal’: Nen *ɣ-ánàkà*, Ki *ìy-áná*, Yambeta *kì-gàn*,
Yangben *kì-kànà*¹⁴

*-kòdì ‘hawk (sp.)’: Nen *hʷ-òlì*, Yangben *nù-kòl*

*-kót- ‘bind’: Maande *-(w)ɔ́t-ókɔ*, Ki *-wótá*, Yambeta *-kóda*, Yangben *-kót*

¹⁰ PB forms are from Guthrie’s (1967–1970) Comparative Series, unless otherwise indicated.

¹¹ There is no voicing contrast in the Mbam languages, apart from Gunu and Ki, where /k/ and /p/ (from *ɲk and *mp respectively) contrast with /g/ and /b/. In the other languages, voicing of stops depends on the environment (often voiceless word- or stem-initially, voiced intervocally)

¹² Reconstructed by Guthrie (1967–1970) with a HL pattern, but corrected by Meeussen (1976) to HH.

¹³ Guthrie (1967–1970) reconstructs *kádà. The form with a *-g- suffix, frequent in the region is given in (Bastin & Schadeberg n.d.).

¹⁴ The tones are as given in the sources. No analysis of the various tone systems has been attempted.

C1 *g > /k/ in Western Mbam, / / elsewhere:

- *-g nd- ‘go, walk’: Maande -k nd ¹⁵, Ki -ind , Yambeta - nd , Yangben - nd 
- *-g ddi ‘rope’: Maande n -k li, Ki nw- ri, Yambeta n -w d , Yangben nw- li
- *-g  ng  ‘spear’: Nen n -k  g , Ki i-d - ng ¹⁶, Yambeta n - ng, Yangben n- ng
-  -g m-¹⁷ ‘tap palm-wine’: Nen -k m , Yangben - m , Baca - m 

In a number of cases it might appear as if /g/ had been retained in the non-Western Mbam languages when preceded by certain nasal class prefixes (only those of the shape *NV in PB, i.e. 1 *m -, 3 *m , 4 *mi, 6 *ma; not classes 9 or 10 where the prefix has the shape *N- and which I treat as forming unit phonemes e.g. /mb/, /nd / etc.). Consider the following examples:

- *-g ng  ‘root’: Nen m -k ng , and Ki  ng ng , Yambeta  ng ng
- *-g nd  ‘journey’: Nen m -k nd , and Ki  ng nd , Yangben  ng nd¹⁸, Gunu  ng nd 
- *-g ni ‘guest’: Maande  -k ni¹⁹, Ki b-ini²⁰ (pl.), Yangben  ng- ni / p- ni

This analysis where *g > g /  __ is certainly tenable, all the more so, since the regular reflex of the unit phoneme *ng is /ng/ [ng ~  ]

¹⁵ /a/ is the regular reflex of *  in Maande (and Mmaala/ Elip)

¹⁶ /d / in Ki is normally the reflex of *j; it has possibly been inserted here as an onset-filler. It is definitely not a segmental reflex of *g.

¹⁷ Although found neither in Guthrie (1967–1970) nor in Bastin & Schadeberg (n.d.), this stem must be reconstructed for PB on the evidence of North-Bobe A31a -?eba and Swahili G42d -gema.

¹⁸ Underlying /ng/ is always realised [ ] in Central.

¹⁹ Note the tone pattern LH, attested in all Mbam languages as well as in Kpa A53.

²⁰ For the vowels, note that the sequence -e- -i- is forbidden by the constraints of Mbam vowel harmony (cf. Boyd 2015)

in all Mbam languages. It is not however the only possible one; consider the following examples where PB C_1 is safely reconstructed as * \emptyset (Guthrie's (1967–1970) notation *y, Bastin & Schadeberg (n.d.) — misleadingly – j):

*-yícò ‘eye’: Ki *n-ísó* / àng-ísó, Yambeta *nì-ìs* / àng-ìs, Gunu *ni-iso* / àng-íso

*-yidá²¹ ‘louse’: Ki *n-íná* / àng-íná, Libie *nì-ìni* / èng-ìni

*-yíb-, *-yúb- ‘steal’: Ki *ùng-úbí*, Yangben *èng-épi* / pè-épi, Baca *àng-íp* ‘thief’

So that it would appear that the class prefixes themselves take an *Vng-* allomorph in front of vowel-initial stems (this is also Boyd's (2015) analysis). It is thus possible to claim that the forms given above should be analysed òng-àngá, èng-ènd, etc. with the regular \emptyset reflex of *g and the *Vng-* allomorph of the class prefixes.

One exceptional case where C_1 *g > /k/ even in non-Western Mbam is the following:

*-gò- ‘fall’: Nen *-kò*, Yangben, Baca *-kwà*, Mmaala / Elip *-gwà*, Mbure *-kòwà*

The conditioning factor might be the monosyllabicity of the stem.

Besides, I have found only *one* stem of certain PB origin with an irregular correspondence, i.e. *g > Western Mbam / \emptyset /:

*-gàb- ‘divide’: Nen *-(w)àfà*, Maande *-(w)àafana* vs. Yambeta *-àbà*, Yangben *-àpà*, Mmaala *-àf*, etc.

This isolated irregularity, might possibly be due to contact with the Northern or Central languages (Ki does not appear to have this stem).

²¹ Variant of Guthrie's (1967–1970) *-dá, reconstructed by Bastin & Schadeberg (n.d.).

C₂ *k reflexes are by and large unproblematic: /Ø/ for Western and Eastern Mbam, /k ~ g/ elsewhere; here are all the cases I found:

- *-b k- ‘practice divination’: Maande -*bw *, Ki -*b w *, Mmaala -*b k*,
Gunu -*b ga*
- *-c k- ‘wash’: Nen -*s *, Ki -*s w *, Yambeta -*s k*, Mbure -*s ga*
- *-t k  ‘night’: Maande *b -t *, Ki *w -t u *, Yambeta *k -d k*, Gunu *bu-*
d g 
- *-y k  ‘year’: Nen *pw- *, Yambeta *w-  k*, Mbure *pw- k*
- *-y k  ‘smoke’: Nen *mw- y *, Ki *n -ii*, Yangben * -n ki*, Mbure *n k*
- *-b k  ‘arm, hand’: Maande *  -b *, Ki * m-b  *, Yambeta * m-b k*, Gunu
 mb g 
- *-d k- ‘plait’: Nen -*n *, Yambeta, Yangben, Mbure -*n k*, Ki -*n w *,
Gunu -*n ga*
- *-t k  ‘buttock’: Nen * -t *, Maande *in-d *, Yambeta *n -d k*, Gunu *t dag *
(redupl. <  -*nta(kv)takv*)

These data perfectly confirm the regularity exhibited by C₁ correspondences: PB *k > Western and Eastern Mbam Ø, others k ~ g.

One should probably add two other stems where Western Mbam has /h/ instead of /Ø/ for PB C₂ *k:

- *-k k  ‘pangolin’: Nen *h - h *, Maande *hi- h *, Yambeta * -k k*, Ki *k  *,
Yangben *  k*, Gunu *k g *²²
- *-(n)y k  ‘snake’: Nen *m - h *, Maande * i- h *, Ki *n  *, Yangben *n k*,
Gunu * n g *

The insertion of /h/ serves to prevent a hiatus, the retention of the final vowel probably being due to tonal reasons (certainly so in Nen).

²² C₁ /k/ or / / in the non-Western languages is not an irregularity but is due to the nasal prefix of cl. 9 which combines with the initial consonant: N+ k > /k/ in Ki and Gunu, / / in the other languages; Western Mbam has this item in cl. 19 (prefix *hl-*) so no pre-nasalization.

C_2 *g appears less straightforward, however; the really regular cognates are few in number:

*-jɔ̀gù ‘elephant’: Nen *mì-sàkù*, Ki *nd̥ɔ̀*, Yambeta *nd̥ɔ̀?*, Yangben *nsò*, Mbure *nd̥ɔ̀*

*-yég- ‘be leaning’: Nen *-ík-ìn-*, Yambeta *-íy-ìm*, Yangben *-ěy-ímèt*, Baca *-ěy-íb-ìt* to which might be added the following purely Mbam stem²³

°-bágá ‘monitor lizard’: Maande *ɪ-báká*, Ki *mbá*, Yangben *mbá*, Baca *mbá*

Other regular PB stems have a more limited distribution (generally absent from Central Mbam):

*-dògù ‘palm-wine’: Maande *mà-lùkù*, Yambeta *màlò?*

*-tò(ó)g-²⁴ ‘draw water’: Nen *-tòk*, Ki *-t-ít-á*, Yambeta *-tú-àt*

However limited the data, one can draw the following C_2 correspondences for *g, which fits in comfortably with the C_1 correspondences: Western Mbam /k/, Yambeta /ʔ/ (final), /Ø/ (intervocalic), all others /Ø/.

Note however a secondary regularity, which also applies to reflexes of *k: if both * C_1 and * C_2 are velar stops (voicing does not seem relevant) then both will tend to appear as /k ~ g/ in all languages, as in:

*-gègò ‘molar tooth’: Maande *à-kìkà*, Yambeta *kì-gìk*, Yangben *kì-kèk*

*-kòògò ‘sugar-cane’: Nen *mò-kòkò*, Yambeta *í-gòk*

*-kók- ‘pull’: Maande *-kók-íta*, Mmaala *-gógò*, Baca *-gógà*

Other stems exhibit only limited irregularity: for instance *-kógò ‘chicken’ appears as Nen *m^v-òkò*, Yangben *ŋò* (ŋ < *ŋk), Baca *ŋgòò*; but Maande *ì-kòkì* has the ‘double velar’ phenomenon.

²³ Note however *è-βág* / *bì-βág* in Ejagham (Bantoid)!

²⁴ The long vowel is an artefact of Guthrie’s (1967–1970) reconstruction.

There are besides quite a large number of items where all the languages have C2 /k/; however none of these reconstruct to PB with one notable exception:

*-*d g*- ‘bewitch’ (here: ‘poison’): Nen -*l k *, Yambeta -*l k*, Mmaala -*l g *, Gunu -*l g *; and the deverbative ‘poison (n.)’: Nen, Maande *hi-l k *, Yambeta, Yangben *i-l k*, Mmaala / Elip *i-l g *; the meaning ‘witch(craft)’ is however attested in Maande *ji-l ki*, Libie *gi-l gi* and even Ki *i-r gi* — the latter must be a loan since Ki *g always >  , so perhaps the other attestations are borrowed too.

The following cases are problematic: there is a well-attested stem *-*yig*- ‘to learn’, for which Guthrie (1967–1970) also suggests a variant  -*y g*, which is fairly well-represented in the northwest; it is the one which appears in Nen, as can be seen below; the other Mbam languages however, including Maande seem rather to reflect a form  -*y g*-, since in Maande and Mmaala /a/ (in [-ATR] context) and /e/ ([+ATR]) are the regular reflexes of PB * ϵ .²⁵

Nen -* k- n *, Maande -(w)*  k- n- n *, Mmaala -*y g- l- ni*, Baca -*yik- l *.

So this stem is irregular in more than one way and no conclusions can be drawn from it. Possibly it spread through the school system?

Another puzzling stem is the following:

 -*t g*-²⁶ ‘keep livestock; domestic animal’: Nen -*l k* (v.), *i-l k * (n.), Maande -*t k * (v.), * t k * (n.), Yambeta *i-d k* (n.), Yangben *p -l k* (n.), Mmaala / Elip *gi-d g * ‘domestic animal’, but *b -l k * ‘ox’ [!]

²⁵ In other Mbam languages the reflexes of * ϵ and * ι > I (= /i/ [+ATR], /u/ [-ATR])

²⁶ Inexplicably left out by Guthrie (1967–1970), this stem has been identified by Bastin & Schadeberg (n.d.) but only as a nominal ( -*t gi* ‘domestic animal, meat’) and attributed to ‘zone A’ only. In reality it is widely attested throughout Guthrie’s “zones” D, E, F, G, M, N, P and is even found sporadically in the northwest (where cattle herding is admittedly not prominent), e.g. Vove B305 -*t ya*.

As can be seen, the data are contradictory: C₁ /l/ in Nen and /t ~ d/ in the rest regularly reflect PB *t; on the other hand, /l/ in Central Mbam can only reflect *d (PB *t > l is a purely Nen reflex²⁷).

Leaving aside these sporadic irregularities in C₂, it seems clear that the Mbam languages differ strikingly among themselves as to the treatment of PB velar stops. I summarize them again in Table 1, including pre-nasalized stops.

Table 1

Reflexes of PB *(ŋ)k and *(ŋ)g in the Mbam languages

C ₁				
PB	Western	Northern	Central	Eastern
*k	∅	k ~ g	k ~ g	∅
*ŋk	ŋg	ŋ	ŋ (Gunu k)	k
*g	k	∅	∅	∅
*ŋg	ŋg	ŋ	ŋ	ŋg
C ₂				
*k	∅	g	k ~ g	∅
*ŋk	— ²⁸	—	—	—
*g	k	∅ ~ ?	∅	∅
*ŋg	ŋ	ŋ	ŋ	ŋg

It can be seen that synchronically all the languages surface with the same contrast i.e. /k ~ g/ vs. /ŋg/, but the diachronic origin of this contrast is quite different.

6. Other northwestern languages

Let us now see in Table 2 how the situation would appear in other northwestern Bantu languages (for the sake of brevity we will look at C₁ only).

²⁷ Shared with most Northwestern languages, but unknown from the rest of Mbam; cf. Philippson (to appear) and below.

²⁸ Nŋ is unattested in C₂ position.

Table 2

PB velars in selected northwestern languages (C₁)

PB	Kpa A53	Duala A24	Pongo A26	Akoose A15C	S.E. Bobe A31c	Basaa A43a	Bulu A74	Kwakum A91
*k	Ø ~ glide ²⁹	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø	Ø
*ŋk	g	k	k	k	g	k	k	k
*g	k	Ø	k	k	ʔ	k	k	k
*ŋg	g	ŋg	ŋg	ŋg	g	ŋg	ŋg	k ^(h)

Leaving Kpa aside we see the *k > Ø / *g > k change affecting all the Northwestern languages in a uniform manner.³⁰ If this change is indeed old as indicated by the fact that in all the languages (again apart from A50) the reflexes of *k and *y³¹ have entirely neutralized, why does this change appear to split across the Mbam languages? Are these made up of two groups having converged through contact (recall that Guthrie (1953) put the Western Mbam languages — but not Ki — in a different group from his A60 “Sanaga” languages — he didn’t mention Yambeta on which he must have had no information; I suspect that the different reflexes for *k and *g must have played a role in his

²⁹ The situation in Kpa (and apparently the other A50 languages, although the data are quite scarce) is puzzling: in verb stems PB *k and *y C₁ completely neutralize to Ø, with a glide being inserted initially to maintain a verb stem template CVC-: PB *-y c- ‘open mouth’ >Kpa -uy s-men, *-k ng- ‘fry’ > -uy n, *-y g- ‘swim’ > -w   , *-k mb- ‘scrape’ > -w m-. But in noun stems a contrast is retained, with *y > Ø and *k > glide: *y m  ‘thing’ > f- m, *-k p  ‘bone’ > k -w p (not **f- p) – note that there are very few nominal items reflecting PB *k. This might indicate a more recent origin of the process in A50, and indeed one example might confirm that the change is in progress, namely *-k t  ‘oil’ > Fa A51 m -w  , but Kpa A53 m-  . So the A50 languages are probably not to be included under the same node as the Northwestern languages where *k > Ø is old and regular.

³⁰ As discussed in §1 above, the case of Duala *g > Ø is likely to be a recent development.

³¹ Recall that *y in PB reconstructions indicate a Ø-initial.

decision)? Or else do the Western Mbam (and Ki) languages really belong to one clade with Northern and Central Mbam, but have been subject to lateral influence which spread the *k > Ø innovation?

7. Other criteria

What other criteria might we use to decide? We might want to look at indications from the lexicostatistics, other phonological features and possibly morpho-syntactic features.

7.1. Lexicostatistics

In the most recent lexicostatistical classification entirely devoted to the Mbam languages (Boyd 2015), on the basis of the Swadesh 200-word list (but due to gaps in the database no language had more than 190 entries, going down to only 165 for some), Western Mbam, consisting of Nen-Maande and Northern (Yambeta) always split first from the tree in whatever method (Branch Average, Furthest Neighbour etc.), the first split being represented sometimes by Northern, sometimes by Western. Ki on the other hand always clustered with Central (for Boyd's classification based on the evolution of the vowel systems see below). On the other hand the all-Bantu classification of Grollemund et al. (2015) based on about 100 items (not the Swadesh list) has all Mbam forming one clade, with Western more distant from the rest and Yambeta as a very weak member of a non-Western group. So the lexicostatistics at least supports a basic division between Western and the rest.

7.2. Other phonological innovations

7.2.1. "Double reflexes"

A well-known characteristic of languages in the northwest is that of "double reflexes" (Stewart 1989; Janssens 1993, Blanchon 1991; Philippon to appear). Basically, one PB phoneme can be represented by two reflexes, "fortis" and "lenis". As demonstrated by Philippon

(to appear), the only solidly attested “double reflexes” in the languages concerned affect voiceless stops and most robustly PB *t which exhibits “fortis” /t/ and “lenis” /l/. One exception concerns PB *d which presents double reflexes (with varying realisations) in some languages, most notably Basaa A43a (Teil-Dautrey 1991), Kpa A53 and Kwakum A91 (Philippson to appear). However the reflexes in question are tonally conditioned (in C₁): “fortis” appears when the V₁ is H and “lenis” when it is L.

Now this tonal conditioning is prevalent in all Mbam languages and concerns not only PB *d but also *b. The reflexes are the following:

*d: “fortis” /n/ (before H), “lenis” /l ~ ɾ/ (before L) in all languages
 *b: “fortis” /b ~ p³² in all, “lenis” /f/ in Western, /h ~ Ø/ in the rest³³

We have seen above that a tonal conditioning for *d also applies to a couple of non-Mbam languages; however *b does not appear to be affected outside of Mbam and also the /n/ reflex for “fortis” *d is a striking characteristic of the group. This evolution constitutes a strong argument for the unity of Mbam, including Western.

7.2.2. Vowel harmony processes

Vowel harmony processes these have been particularly well-studied by Boyd (2015): her revised classification of the Mbam languages (Boyd 2015: 356, Table 100) places Western, Yambeta and Tuki in a different

³² Recall there is no voicing contrast in most Mbam languages; cf. note 11 above.

³³ The only other significant case of a “double reflex” concerns Nen alone, namely the case of PB *t which splits into /t/ and /l/ as in most northwestern languages (excepted A31 Bobe and A91 Kwakum); since even closely-related Maande does not have this split, it is probably due to lateral influence from some neighbouring language (e.g. Basaa A43a?). This conclusion might be supported by the fact that Nen has the “lenis” reflex /l/ even in the case of the stem for ‘five’ (P.B. *-t    ) which is “fortis” in all other languages affected by the /t/ ~ /l/ split. This might well be due to “over-application” of a borrowed rule.

branch from Central. I am however somewhat reluctant to grant much weight to the criteria used since they mostly concern surface realizations. Evolutions which I would consider as more important diachronically, such as PB *ε > /a/ in Maande (Western), and Elip and Mmaala (Central) cut right across groups!

7.2.3. Treatment of *NC̣

Treatment of *NC̣ (which I consider as unit phonemes) shows the following realizations (Table 3).

Table 3

Realizations of PB *NC̣

Western	Northern	Central (- Gunu)	Gunu	Eastern
NC̣	N	N	Ç	Ç

There are generally four strategies for the treatment of original *NC̣ in Bantu languages: retention (NC̣), voicing of the oral part (NÇ), denasalization (Ç), loss of the oral part (N). Three of these are found in Mbam languages and one (denasalization) cuts across the Central group. However, voicing found in Western Mbam is only shared with A50 and Bobe A31 in the whole region (both of these having later denasalized to Ç³⁴). This unique development, thus strongly sets Western Mbam apart from the rest.

7.3. Morpho-syntactic criteria

7.3.1. Class systems

The class systems of the various Mbam languages are quite homogeneous; they all retain the distinction between classes 6 (NP *a-*) and 6a (NP *ma-*).

³⁴ And then devoiced in many A31 dialects. Note that most lexicostatistical classification put Bobe A31 in a clade with the Mbam languages. Though I consider this to be an artefact of the lexicostatistical method, a better point could be made for joining A31 to *Western* Mbam — assuming the latter not to be part of a Mbam clade.

This is a retention since it is widely found in Western Grassfields (not in Eastern) and thus not particularly diacritic. On the other hand Northern, Eastern and Central Mbam (to the exclusion of Western) have a class with NP *mU*-³⁵ as the plural of cl. 19 (NP *pI*-). Since it is found in a number of Southern Bantoid languages (e.g. Bebid) this prefix must be a retention too, although it is strange that it should have disappeared from practically all Grassfields languages. At any rate its absence also from Western Mbam suggests the isolation of the latter from the rest of Mbam.

7.3.2. Verb TAM systems

Verb TAM systems are not helpful since they vary very widely even between closely related languages (this is true throughout the Bantu domain). The structure of the VP in Nen has drawn attention since it has the basic order SOV; however this is completely isolated not only in Mbam but in the rest of Narrow Bantu where SVO is robustly attested.³⁶ In the same vein, Maande has a very original combination of two SP affixed to the TAM marker, thus: SP₁-TAM-SP₂ where SP₁ has the shape generally found with SP in Bantu (e.g. 1pl. *tU*-), whereas SP₂ is reminiscent of independent pronouns (e.g. 1pl. *-(A)sU*). Whatever the origin of this formation it is restricted to Maande and not found in the rest of Mbam, so not diagnostic for the status of Western.

8. Conclusion

This rapid examination of various data (lexical, phonological and morpho-syntactic) although not overwhelmingly conclusive does seem

³⁵ Very often labelled cl. 18, but I follow Hombert (1980: 92) who says "Although the [...] prefix is similar to [Bantu] class 18 [...] we do not think it corresponds to the locative Bantu cl. 18".

³⁶ Of course, this applies to *nominal* objects; as is well known in the majority of Bantu languages a *pronominal* object is prefixed to the verb stem.

to confirm a distinct status to Western Mbam vis-à-vis the other Mbam languages. However, within the scope of this chapter, we must focus on the velar reflexes examined above.

Assuming, as seems secure from the data, that the original PB situation contrasted *k and *g, we can see that Northern and Central Mbam, which have retained *k as /k/ and weakened *g to Ø are quite reminiscent of the Savanna languages, i.e. Grollemund et al.'s South Western + Eastern branches (Grollemund et al. 2015: 2), where *k > /k/ and *g is either retained as such or weakened to /ɣ/ or /Ø/ as mentioned in §3 above. On the other hand Western Mbam (and Ki) exhibit the diacritic “northwestern”³⁷ change. It would seem that Northern / Central Mbam split from other northwestern languages before the weakening of *k and so retained the original PB situation (later weakening *g to Ø).

If this is the case, it appears that the unity of the Mbam languages is not genetic but due to convergence, although it must be admitted that there are no other features which would indicate securely the membership of Western Mbam in a Northwestern clade. Is one diachronic phonological innovation however diacritic, sufficient to determine membership in a genetic group? It seems to me that the answer to this question must await the further examination of putative members of this Northwestern clade as outlined in note 35.³⁸

³⁷ The extent of the *k > Ø / *g > k shift is not entirely determined: it definitely includes all the languages of Guthrie's “zone A” (non-Western Mbam and perhaps A50 excepted), several but not all B20 languages, and an appreciable number of forest (“zone C”) languages extending even into “zone D”. (I use quotes to stress the fact that Guthrie's zones are purely referential and not genetic groupings.)

³⁸ Contrariwise I would consider the weakening to Ø of both *k and *g in Ki as due to more recent developments, in view of Ki's great similarity to the Central languages, both lexically and at the level of morpho-syntax. Again, this remains to be examined in depth.

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