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## **The noun class system in Mbəkum**

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### **1. Language**

Mbəkum is a Wide Grassfields Bantu language spoken in the village Akum in the North West Region of Cameroon, south of the city of Bamenda. The chiefdom of Akum is inhabited by approximately 7000 people and stretches 12 kilometres along a highway leading from Bamenda to Bafoussam.

The language is one of seven varieties in the Mankon cluster whereas Mankon itself is seen as the standard of these dialects: Chomba, Songwa, Njong, Alatening and Mbatu.

Mbəkum is widely known as Akum or Bagangu. But all informants state that their language's name is Mbəkum. Akum is the name of the village and Bagangu is a name given by the Bali which means "people of Agangu", the name of the then fon of the Akum people.

The following map shows all the languages/villages of the Mankon cluster:



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MEZAM DIVISION SHOWING NORTHERN MEZAM.

Map 1: Languages and villages of the Mankon Cluster (from Yenshu Vubo and Ngwa 2001)



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### 2. Classification

The classification of the Mankon dialect cluster has undergone a series of modifications but the bottom line is that it is one of the languages of the Ngemba language group within the Mbam-Nkam branch of Grassfields Bantu.

### 3. Language documentation

Leroy 1977 deals with the morphology and nominal classes of Mankon and Leroy 2007 provides a “Descriptive Grammar of Mankon”. However both works are not easily accessible to the Mankon community for two reasons. First, her work is written in the French language for an English speaking audience (the Anglophones in Bamenda). Second, her approach is designed for the academic audience and does not have a practical pedagogic and anthropological advantage to the Mankon speech community. Chi Che’s contribution (2011) about the Kingdom of Mankon contains some linguistic aspects. To the present day, only preliminary contributions dealing specifically with the Mbækum have been published.

For instance, there are attempts by the Akum people themselves to develop their language. There are some minor publications prepared by the community mainly on sociolinguistic aspects of the language, provided by the Akum Dialect Association. The community tries very hard to preserve their language to continue their culture and to develop educational material so that the language can be taught in primary schools. Children tend to lose the language because they use English and Pidgin-English more often instead of Mbækum.

### 4. Data collection

During a first fieldtrip<sup>1</sup> in August/September 2011 I collected most of the data. I worked with three informants, all male, and we met for ten sessions, each lasting about 2 hours. I elicited

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<sup>1</sup> The fieldtrip was funded by the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung



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most of my data, following several questionnaires I had prepared, mainly nouns and some short verb phrases. All sessions were audio-recorded by myself.

During a short second fieldtrip in August/September 2012 I worked with two other speakers of the language (my former informants are important people in the community and thus very busy). One of them an elderly woman with whom I could collect some folk tales. The other informant, a man, could help me to transcribe most of the folk tales.

### 5. Noun class system

Before I present the noun class system of Mbəkum, I would like to give a short overview on the phonology.

#### 5.1 Phonology

Mankon exhibits a seven vowel system, consisting of i, ε, ə, i, a, ɔ, u. The phonemic status of the vowels o and e is not yet clear. The consonant system of Mbəkum includes affricates, labiovelars and sets of labialized and palatalized phonemes.

##### 5.1.1 Simple consonants

There are 26 simple consonants in Mbəkum.

	labial	alveolar	palatal	velar	labiovelar	glottal
<b>plosive</b>	p b	t d		k g		ʔ
<b>nasal</b>	m	n	ɲ	ŋ		
<b>prenasalized plosives</b>	mb	nd				
<b>trill</b>		r				
<b>fricative</b>	f v	s z	ʃ ʒ	ɣ		
<b>approximant</b>			j		w	
<b>lateral approximant</b>		l				
<b>affricate</b>		ts	tʃ			

Table 1





## The noun class system in Mbækum



Basically, each noun belongs to just one class. The classes can be coded as affixes. The main criteria for a noun class is the concordial system affecting other words.

Examples (2) and (3) show the concord affix for definite articles.

- |     |            |          |             |
|-----|------------|----------|-------------|
| (2) | Àdundâ     | z-á      | ‘the roof’  |
|     | Cl.7:roof  | Cl.7-DEF |             |
| (3) | M̀bàṅ      | w-á      | ‘the stick’ |
|     | Cl.9:stick | Cl.9-DEF |             |

Semantically noun classes also provide information about cognitive categories in a culture, physical design or function.

- |     |       |  |                |
|-----|-------|--|----------------|
| (4) | Àtú   |  | ‘tree’         |
|     | Àfú?ù |  | ‘leaf’         |
|     | Àtíṅè |  | ‘banana plant’ |

All these nouns denoting items in the semantic field of ‘trees and plants’ are assigned to class 7. In Mbækum the noun classes are marked by prefixes and all prefixes have a low tone. Mbækum has eight noun classes listed in table (4). The concordial system extends to definite markers, pronouns (possessive, demonstrative, personal, relative), and quantifiers. This is shown in (5) and (6).

- |     |            |              |             |
|-----|------------|--------------|-------------|
| (5) | M̀bàṅ      | w-á          | ‘the stick’ |
|     | Cl.9:stick | Cl.9-DEF     |             |
| (6) | M̀bàṅ      | z-á          | ‘my stick’  |
|     | Cl.9:stick | Cl.9-POSS.my |             |



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Noun class	Noun Prefix	Example	Concord (def.article)
1a	∅-	∅-sambaŋ "lion" ∅-tá "father"	wá
1b	Ñ-	ñ-dímá "brother"	
2	bə-	bə-sambaŋ "lions" bə-tá "fathers" bə-líma "brothers"	bá
3	í -	í-ŋómátù "hair" (sg)	wá
5	nə -	nə-bəʔə "pumpkin"	ná
6	mì - /mè-	mì-ŋómátù "hair" (pl) mè-bəʔə "pumpkins" mè-wurə "oil"	má
7	à-	à-məʔə "banana"	zá / wá
8	ə- / í -	í-məʔə "bananas"	
9 <sup>1</sup>	N-	ŋúə "honey" ñkié "water" ñdā "house, hut"	wá

Table 4: Mbəkum noun classes

There are five singular classes and three plural classes which are arranged in pairs forming the following genders:

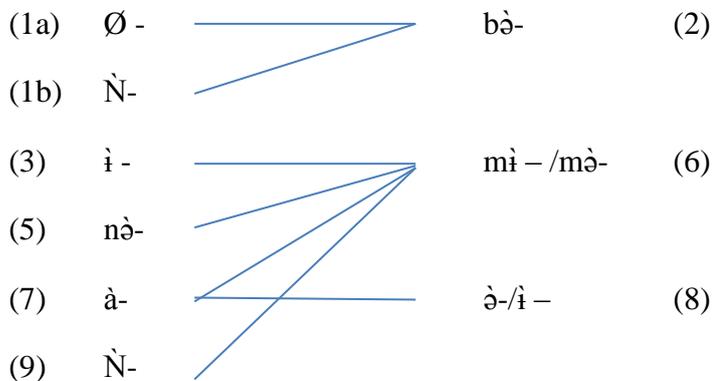


Table 5



## The noun class system in Mbəkum



Compared to Mankon and the other dialects, Mbəkum lacks two noun classes, i.e. classes 10 and 19.

The noun classes in Mbəkum do not reflect a very clear semantic categorization of the nouns, but some generalizations can be made:

- i) Gender 1/2 contains animates, whereas all the other classes contain inanimates.
- ii) Most nouns for animals are assigned to gender 1/2. Those which are assigned to different genders are transferred to 1/2 as soon as the animal becomes personified as actors in folk tales, e.g.

(7) àfunə            w-á ...            ... a            kúnə    àtú            nkwinə ...  
 Cl.7:tiger<sup>2</sup>    Cl.1-DEF            ... 3SG            enter    Cl.7:head Cl.9:hill

The tiger ... he entered the top of the hill...

In other contexts than folk tales the agreement of *àfunə* ‘tiger’ would follow the pattern of gender 7/8, as shown in (8):

(8) àfunə            z-á                            ‘the tiger’  
 Cl.7:tiger            Cl.7-DEF

iii) Most of the nouns for liquids can be found in class 6, whereas some are assigned to class 9 instead. Concerning class 6: when alternating with a singular class, it expresses plurality. Otherwise there are mostly abstracts or mass nouns in this class.

iv) There is no class 19 for diminutives which you can find in the other varieties of Mankon and all other Ngemba languages. In Mbəkum the diminutives are expressed via periphrasis with the word for ‘small’:

<sup>2</sup> Two informants confirmed independently that *àfunə* denotes ‘tiger’. As a proof they showed me the fur of a tiger.



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- (9) mǎjǎ                    ‘small’  
mǎjǎ mǔnǎŋ            ‘small book’

v) Classes 16, 17, 18 for locatives do not exist in Mbəkum. But there seem to be traces of a locative *á* which occurs only in relative markers and only if the noun which is modified is in the singular.

vi) Derivational processes: Nouns can be derived from verb stems by prefixing class 7 *à-* or class 9 *Ñ-*. It seems that by prefixing class 7 agents nouns (as shown in 10) are derived whereas by prefixing class 9 nouns of actions (exemplified in 11) can be derived.

- (10) m̀báré                ‘to be stupid’  
àbàrə                ‘stupid man’

- (11) jə                    ‘to eat’  
ñjəʔə                ‘eating, food’

vii) The plural of class 2 is restricted to plurals of animates. As for the distribution of the other two plural classes, class 6 is more common than class 8. I tried to find out whether it is possible to “switch” between plural classes 6 and 8 and for some nouns my informants agreed that it is possible. So it seems that this noun class system (which is already reduced compared to the other languages of the Mankon cluster) tends to further lose class 8 as a plural class.

- (12) Àtíŋə                ‘waist’  
Cl.7:waist

- (13) ìtíŋə                ‘waists’  
Cl.8:waist

Also possible:

