

FRACTAL HISTORY ON THE AFRICAN FRONTIER:

MAMBILA – NJEREP – MANDULU

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If the idea of fractals contributes anything to the study of history, it may be that there is no one way of viewing or describing history that is inherently more valuable, legitimate, or praiseworthy than the rest. Changing the lens of the microscope, zooming in or zooming out, makes the subject under examination neither more understandable and revealing, nor less. It simply shows a different aspect of the complexity that exists at all levels. Explaining history requires all the different orders of complexity. There is work enough for everyone¹.

Introduction

This paper originated in continuing work by the authors (separately and together) on both sides of the Nigeria-Cameroon border. This has included linguistics, ethnography, archival, demographic, and oral historical research. We present a short case study later in the paper. Our broadest conclusion can be summarized thus: at different levels of generality, accounts of historical origins mask similar degrees of complexity at other levels that is difficult to untangle, and which includes factors not apparent at all levels. Each level has 'its own' history. Further complications arise as the various levels affect one another. This is a view of history as being essentially fractal, as we discuss below.

With this perhaps somewhat opaque summary in mind, we consider the variety of histories that can be given for one part of the Cameroon/Nigerian hinterland. Note that the archaeological evidence which is tantalizingly incomplete has been left out of these accounts. The little that is known suggests that there is still further complexity than that alluded to below. For example, a preliminary archaeological survey conducted by Rigobert Tueche in the Somié area in April, 2000 has revealed a sequence of occupation more complex than anything recorded in the oral histories that we discuss here.

Fractals are an intriguing and important part of chaos theory². For the purposes of our analysis their crucial characteristics are not mathematical as such (some of the mathematics

¹ H.W. Brands, 'Fractal History, or Clio and the Chaotics', *Diplomatic History* **16**, (1992), 495-510.

² See *ibid.* for a sympathetic introduction to fractals by a historian.

was elaborated to represent the characteristics in question). In particular, a fractal structure is one that displays the same complexity at whatever magnification it is viewed. Examples abound: a snowflake has a structure of bifurcating tendrils each of which is itself composed of bifurcating tendrils... Presented with a photograph without a scale it is impossible to tell the magnification. Such reflexivity is very different from the atomic model in which some simple building blocks can be identified from which the rest is made. Rather it is a recursive, almost Borgesian, model in which complexity within complexity (without end) is the basic principle from which structure stems. Or, to push one of Vansina's metaphors a little, what appear from the air to be 'paths in the rainforest' may turn out at closer inspection to be more like a large set of cattle tracks in the dry season bush – small paths meandering in different directions with bush in between – with each such path open to the same redescription. However, although fractal structures have the same *degree of complexity* on all scales, they do not necessarily have the same *structure* at different scales. There are phenomena that occur only at certain scales, and which thereby are poor models or metaphors for other levels.

The idea of layer upon layer of complexity is consistent with Vansina's 'Paths in the Rainforest' and Kopytoff's African Frontier thesis³. The latter seeks to explain how competition between rivals could have led to political fission. The resulting polities were similar in many respects to those which the founders left. Part of the process of building on the fact of secession was to accentuate differences; such was the basis of the split they would do everything possible to emphasise the difference. One means of achieving this was to develop linguistic markers so that each group spoke a different dialect⁴. If some immigrants arrived from elsewhere, speaking a different language, then new words and even conceivably new grammatical features could enter the language, and so on. The success of a polity could lead to neighbouring groups wanting to share in that success. Alliances may have been made

³ I. Kopytoff, 'The Internal African Frontier: the making of African political culture', in I. Kopytoff (eds.), *The African Frontier: the reproduction of traditional African societies*, (Bloomington, 1987), 3-84 and J. Vansina, 'Paths in the Rainforest. Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa', (London, 1990).

⁴ R. Fardon, 'Contrast and Comparison. Notes from a Middle-Belt West African practice', (London, 1999 p 18) uses Paul Richard's term 'creolizing convergence' in his discussion of ethnogenesis in the Cameroon-Nigerian middle-belt.

for mutual defence and to let the others have access to the rituals that were seen to underlie the success of the new settlement. The new polity could become a small state encompassing more than one village... This is a summary account of how ethnogenesis may have occurred. However, this approach is reversible. Epidemic and war could have led an existing polity to dispersion - the remaining population may have scattered and settled with other, more successful, groups who thereby gained followers and possible sources of new words, rituals and so on. A group may have ceased to be just as it could have come into being.

As well as being consistent with such approaches the idea of fractal explanations raises some questions about the difficulties of arriving at consistent regional, let alone continental, generalizations. Such generalizations encounter problems related to scale; some features are apparent only at particular scales or levels of explanation, and are misleading when used as models for different levels of generalization (although these are of comparable complexity). This is common when dealing with African history for reasons that we try to explain here.

The history of group X, and the answers to such questions as 'What is your history?', 'Where do you come from?' critically depend on the definition of group X, the bounds of the second person plural pronoun (i.e. just who comprises the 'you' being discussed). In one way this is reminiscent of the uncertainty of the use of the word 'tribe' and can be seen as taking seriously the multiple identities available and examining that multiplicity for its implications for historiography⁵.

Consider the history of Okuku that Karin Barber gives in the course of an examination of Yoruba Oriki praise poetry. The town and its population are heterogeneous; different families trace their origins to different places. As a consequence, one plausible and consistent approach would be to describe the town's history as diverse and as heterogeneous as its population. This does not help the historian very much. However, in the light of such problems, historians need to be clear from the outset about the level of the account they are seeking and let that determine the appropriate type of explanation. There is no point in (nor

⁵ See K. Barber, 'I could speak until tomorrow: Oriki, Women and the Past in a Yoruba Town', (Edinburgh, 1991), and the earlier discussion on 'tribes in Africa' e.g. M.J. Fried, 'The notion of tribe', (Menlo Park, CA, 1975), A. Southall, 'The illusion of tribe', *Journal of Asian and African Studies* **5**, (1970), 28-50.

any possibility of) explaining the Bantu Expansion in terms of micro-movements of named individuals – though this would be necessary to understand how a particular village *quartier* achieved its present form. This is more general than the African Frontier as described by Kopytoff – the position holds for city-states, towns, as well as for the small villages in the bush in between.

In what follows, we illustrate this hypothesis through a particular case study; the level of detail given changes as we rely more on our own data rather than on other existing sources, which could be further used to expand any one of the sections far beyond the summaries given here. We return to the question of the more general applicability of this approach in the closing paragraphs of the paper.

A Series of Levels

1) The Bantu Expansion over the last four thousand years is believed to have originated in what is now the West and South-West provinces of Cameroon and the adjacent region of Nigeria⁶ pushing east and south into the forest, and then south into the highlands and plateaux of Southern Africa. It has traditionally been described in terms of a mass migration of the Bantu, with perhaps a few branches, as suggested by Map One. More recent work⁷, suggests such a view is a gross oversimplification; in the closing paragraphs of this paper we argue the Bantu expansion can be illuminated if viewed from the perspective of a fractal history.

***** Insert Map One about here *****

⁶ E.g. J. Vansina, 'New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion'', *ournal of African History* **36**, (1995), 173-195; D. Nurse, 'The Contributions of Linguistics to the Study of History in Africa', *Journal of African History* **38**, (1997), 359-391, S. MacEachern, 'Genes, tribes, and African history', *Current Anthropology* **41**, (2000), 357-384.

⁷ Vansina, *ibid*.

2) People, often referred to simply as ‘Horsemen’ in the oral traditions we have collected, expanded south from the northern savannah into the Bantu speaking region, and west into the Jukun area. This movement forced some local groups into highland fastnesses and dispersed others who were pushed south, displacing others in their turn. These eventually met other groups moving north displaced by the Atlantic slave trade and east from the coast. The identity of the horsemen is not always clear or stated in the traditions. Some make specific reference to the Fulbe, while others would appear to indicate the Chamba.

***** Insert Map Two about here *****

MAP Two⁸

3) A congeries of languages is established by this time on the Adamawa and Mambila Plateaux, along the escarpments of these, and onto the Tikar Plain, an area of approximately 60,000 square kilometres⁹. Linguistically, these languages are diverse but clearly related, and all are considered to be Bantoid, i.e. they are assumed to share a common parent with Proto-Bantu. It is difficult to assess what type and degree of relationship or contact existed among the different linguistic groups in question. The boundary areas between the different groups reflect linguistic borrowing that is indicative of considerable contact. Different lexical strata can be discerned among the languages across the region, also reflecting a certain degree of mixture among different linguistic groups.¹⁰ On the other hand, the histories of these groups as summarized in the work of Eldridge Mohammadou¹¹ do not contain accounts of contacts

⁸ From R.O. Fardon, ‘Raiders and Refugees. Trends in Chamba Political Development 1750-1950’, (Washington D.C., 1988) (with permission).

⁹ Population figures are uncertain. There are some 10,000 Mambila speakers in Cameroon and 80,000 in Nigeria. The total number of Kwanja speakers does not exceed 10,000.

¹⁰ These phenomena are also present in other ostensible linguistic groupings of the region, such as Dakoid, as described by R. Boyd, (1994). Historical Perspectives on Chamba Daka. Köln: Rüdiger Köppe Verlag.

¹¹ E. Mohammadou, ‘Traditions Historiques des peuples du Cameroun Central. Vol 1: Mbéré, Mboum, Tikar. Vol 2: Vouté, Nyèm-Nyèm, Kondja.’, (Tokyo, 1990), ‘Traditions Historiques des Peuples du Cameroun Central. Vol 2: Ni-zoo, Vouté et Kondja.’, (Tokyo, 1991) and others such as Siran on the Vute, (J.-L. Siran, ‘Emergence & Dissolution des

that would adequately explain the linguistic evidence. It is clear, though, that the different groups arrived at different accommodations with the horsemen from the north. Some were enslaved by them, others fled, some resisted, and still others escaped direct enslavement by recognising their tutelage and giving tribute (some in the form of slaves) . Map Three shows the present distribution of these languages which, as a group, are now generally referred to as Mambiloid.

***** Insert Map Three about here *****

Map 3: The distribution of the Mambiloid languages. (NB, The range of Vute extends farther south than the map permits showing).

Evidence for the affiliation of these languages is presented in Table 1, where a particular sound shift which defines the Mambiloid group relative to Proto-Bantu and other nearby but more distantly related languages is illustrated. The table includes a number of Mambila lects from both West and East Mambila, other languages from the Mambloid group, Proto-Bantu, and other neighbouring Bantoid and non-Bantoid languages. Gaps in the

Principales Guerrières Voute', *Journal des Africanistes* **50**, (1980), 25-57) Burnham on the Gbaya (P. Burnham, 'Opportunity & Constraint in a Savanna Society (The Gbaya of Meiganga, Cameroun)', (London, 1980), 'Raiders and Traders in Adamawa', in J.L. Watson (eds.), *Asian & African Systems of Slavery*, (Oxford, 1980)), Gaussett on the Wawa and Kwanja (Q. Gausset, Les avatars de l'identité chez les Wawa et les Kwanja du Cameroun. Unpublished PhD., Université Libre de Bruxelles (1997), Historical account or Discourse on Identity? A Reexamination of Fulbe Hegemony and Autochthonous Submission in Banyo. History in Africa, **25**, 93–110 (1998)) and Zeitlyn, Mial and Mbe on Mambila (D. Zeitlyn, N. Mial & C. Mbe, 'Trois études sur les mambila de Somié, Cameroun', (Boston, Mass., in press 2000)).

See J. Hurault, History of the Mambila chiefdom of Mbor (Sonklong). Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford, **XXVI** (1), (1995), 87–98 and Gausset, *Historical Account or Discourse on Identity? A Reexamination of Fulbe Hegemony and Autochthonous Submission in Banyo*.

table are indicative of either a non-cognate form in the language in question or in some cases simply a lack of information. The sound shift is a palatalization which involved a change of stem initial /k/ to /tS/, or in the case of Mvanip and Ndoro to /S/ or /s/. There are apparent exceptions to this palatalization: for example, Len, kWE!l, ‘fat’ is cognate with other Mambiloid forms for ‘fat’, but appears to be part of a Grassfields substratum influence in Len¹²; Mvanip kup ‘navel’ is probably borrowed from nearby Tungba, which is the dominant Mambila lect in the local area. These and other exceptions, such as the failure of the palatalization to occur in Mambila ‘navel’, are treated at length elsewhere¹³, which presents further evidence establishing the relation of Mambiloid to Bantu. Where available, cognate forms from nearby non-Mambiloid languages are also included in Table 1, to help establish this sound shift as a diagnostic characteristic of Mambiloid.

¹² B. Connell Implications of the Fricative Vowels in Len Mambila. Paper presented to the 27th Colloquium on African Languages and Linguistics, Leiden (1997).

¹³ B. Connell, ‘Mambila, Mambiloid and Bantoid: the Bantoid roots of the Mambiloid languages’ (In preparation).

Table 1. Evidence for the linguistic affiliation of Mambiloid

		road/path	fowl	death	elbow	fat	guinea fowl	navel	shadow	night
West Mambila	Len	tsɛ̃r	tsɔr	tsu	tsàgár	kʷél	ndʒá	kāp	ɛtsɪm	tsíp
	Lemele	tʃir	tʃɔr	tʃiè	tʃàgòr	tʃɛɹ	ngɔ̃	kó̃p	tʃimɪ	tʃip
	Tungba	tʃir	tʃɔr	tʃi	tʃàkòr	tʃɛɹ	ngɔ̃	kó̃p	tʃimɪ	tʃip
	Bogur	tsír	tsɔ̃r	tʃiè	tʃàkɔ̃r	tʃiè	ngiè	kó̃p		
	Ba	tʃér	tʃuár	tʃiò	tʃàkòr	tʃèlè	ngā̃	kɪbɪ	tátʃemā	tʃibí
East Mambila	Njerep		tʃɔ̃r		tʃàkudū			kimbɪ		tʃimbí
	Cambap	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɔ̃	tʃɔ̃			ngā̃	kómbɔ̃n	tʃútʃuòmɪ	tʃimbó
	Langa	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɔ̃	tʃɛ	kɛndū	tʃari		kimbɔ̃n		tʃimbí
	Karbap	tʃidɪ	tʃɔ̃dɔ̃	tʃiè	kɛdɛ	tʃeli	tʃaga	kɔ̃bɔ̃		tʃimbɔ̃n
	Gelep	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɔ̃	kwene	kɛndū	tʃari	tʃangap	kɔ̃mbɔ̃n	tʃumu	tʃimbɔ̃n
	Torbi	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɔ̃	tʃiè	tʃɛndɛ			kómbɔ̃n	tʃumú	tʃimbɔ̃n
	Maberem	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɔ̃	kwɛm		tʃáɹ	tʃāngā	kómbɔ̃n	tʃumbú	tʃimbɔ̃n
	Ngumbon	tʃindɪ	tʃɔ̃ndɛ	kwɛ	tʃàkündū	tʃɛrè	ngájɛp	kémbɛn	tʃumú	tʃémbɛn
Other Mambiloid	Ndung		tʃɪn	sāā			ngā̃ ɲ	tʃim	tʃútʃòm	tʃitʃuɲ
	Sundani			tʃwāā				tʃimɪ		
	Wawa			tʃɔ̃	tʃkɛndā̃			tʃómbā̃		tʃimbɔ̃n
	Vute		tʃɔ̃nɛ	tʃé			tʃu tʃɔ̃b	tʃómè	tʃò	tʃúm
	Somyev		tʃuɔ̃r	tʃúɛ	kár ndɛ		tʃitʃaɲa	tʃútʃábɪ	tʃimətʃɪ	(simna)
	Tep		tʃɔ̃n	tʃúā		kóɹ	ngā̃	tʃkʷɛ̃m	tʃɛtʃɔ̃m	tʃimɪ
	Mbongno							tsimbɪ		
	Mvanip		sɔ̃ndu				səɲ	kup		jimbe
	Ndoro		fóɔ̃rā	tʃá̃			tʃítʃáɲā	tʃumā		
	Nizaa		(sɔ̃w)	tʃwāā			tʃā̃	tʃó̃w		
	Proto-Bantu	-kíndo (football)	-konda (pigeon)	-kúā	-kókɔda	-kúta	-kánga	-kɔ̃bú		
	Proto-Grassfields		gú̃b	kúā (die)						
	Tikar	-cin								kwèbbi
	Dakoid						kāā	wúbɛn		
	Proto-Jukunoid		*-kúh	*kwu				*-kóm		
	Mbum (Adamawa)				kòkòr ndòk				tètɛm	díkím (dark)

Sources for the table are as follows: Vute, G. Guarisma, 'Etudes Vouté (langue bantoide du Cameroun) (Bibliothèque de la SELAF 66-67)' (Paris, 1978); Nizaa, Eñdresen (ms); Proto-Bantu, MRAC (Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale), Bantu Lexical Reconstructions II (Tervuren, 1998); Tikar, E. Jackson, 'Dictionnaire Tikar - Français' (unpublished ms, n.d.); Proto-Grassfields, L. Hyman, Proto-Grassfields Reconstructions (unpublished ms, n.d.); Jukunoid, K. Shimizu, *Comparative Jukunoid* (Vienna: universität Wien, 1980); Dakoid, Boyd, *Historical Perspectives*; Mbum, S. Hino, *The Classified Vocabulary of the Mbum Language in Mbang Mboum (with Ethnographical Descriptions)* (revised 1985 ed.), x (Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1978).

4) A congeries of dialects is often lumped together on maps under a single label, ‘Mambila’, but linguistically similar dialects are not always geographically adjacent. Some people speak different but related languages describing them as different dialects on the basis of a common ethnic identity (see Map Three). Mambila itself, on one level, can be considered as such. It comprises two clusters of dialects, with Tungba, Mvure, Lemele, Mbar, Len, Bogur, Tong, and Ba forming one cluster (West Mambila), while the other cluster, East Mambila, consists of Ngumbon, Maberem, Torbi, Gelep, Karbap, Kabri, Langa, Taceme, Njerep, and Cambap. Mutual intelligibility to some extent exists between adjacent lects within each cluster, but not throughout the cluster, and not between the two clusters. Tungba, Mvure, and Lemele are all mutually comprehensible, as are Mbar and Len, and Tong and Bogur.

Some of the evidence for the complexity of the relations between these languages and dialects is given below. More has been published. What this shows on a smaller, i.e. regional, scale is similar to the complexity of the Bantu expansion that Vansina¹⁵ discusses: the evidence is not compatible with a single movement of people. One set of movements has involved speakers of Njerep, Kasabe and Cambap, which are now geographically discontinuous with the East Mambila lects to which they bear closest affinity. Table 2 gives evidence of their relatedness, both to Mambila as a whole, and the East Mambila cluster in particular.

¹⁵ Vansina, ‘New Linguistic Evidence and ‘the Bantu Expansion’’

Table 2. Evidence for the relatedness of Njerep, Kasabe and Mambila

	head	eye	tongue	face	elbow	skin	navel	back	blood
Njerep	fálí	ngfē	líbā	ngfē	tʃákūdū	pàndā	kímbí	ngóɔdʒék	hwómí
Kasabe	fálí	ngíí	nīmá	—	wúlú mbámá	pàndā	kíbí	kàmè	wómó
Cambap	ngā	ngārin	nōmān	mbòm sī-ì	ngōnō bē-ì	fāndā	kómbōn	kàma	wámá
Langa	ngéí	ngāre	nómān	mbòm	kēndū	fāndā	kímbōn	hāmù	wámì
Gelep	wī:n	ndʒāre	nōmān	mbòm	kēndū	—	kōmbán	kāmù	wóm
Karbap	hōn	ndʒāre	nōmān	njīmōnī	kēdē	fādā	kōbō'	ngāɔdʒā	wómí
Ba	fá	ndʒālō	lébā	ndʒālō	tʃákōr	par	kíbí	ngōgò	hwóm
Sundani	ngū	nēri	nēm	mó:dò	ngōnō	pándá	tʃímì	dʒōmdínà	fámà
Ndung	ngā	nín	némnà	gbēmsi	ngū'n bí	pān jír	tʃím	kōmō	kfēm
	person	food	salt	yam	calabash	dog	crab	bird	fowl
Njerep	nòrò	já	—	—	gbá	būndū	—	gálè	tʃōrō
Kasabe	nòr	já	tómō	—	gbá	būndū	kámbá	nōnū	tʃōndō
Cambap	nòr	járáp	tómó	tùà	gbá	būndū	kámbá	nūnū	tʃōndō
Langa	nòr	járáp	tómó	tùà	jiri	búndú	hámbā	nūnū	tʃōndō
Gelep	nòr	jārāp	tómó	tùà	gbá	būndū	kāmbān	nūnū	tʃōndō
Karbap	nòr	dʒī jā ngí	tó:m	tùà	gwá	bōdí	kābān	nūnūŋ	tʃōdō
Ba	nwār	jāp	túóm	tùè	ngàp	bōr	kāp	nōn	tʃūār
Sundani	wirā	jénbù	ndómù	mò:bò	ndīkpéŋdā	dʒi'	kámbā	nōnō	tʃúndè
Ndung	wàr	jēn	ndôm	mōē	sō y	dʒi	kām	nū'n	tʃi'n

It is apparent from the data in Table 2 that the two Kwanja lects, Sundani and Ndung, are distinct from the others. Developments reflected, for example, in the initial consonants of *'navel'*, *'person'*, *'blood'*, and *'salt'* establish this. Among the other languages (the Mambila set) there are a number of developments evident, though those seen for Ba are most striking. The vocalic developments reflected in *'person'*, *'salt'* and *'fowl'*, and the change in morpheme structure, showing words of the form CVCV(C) contracted to CVC (e.g. *'skin'*, *'dog'*, *'crab'*, and *'fowl'*) in particular, set Ba apart. Njerep, on the other hand, shares characteristics with the remainder, viz. Kasabe, Cambap, and the East Mambila lects Langa, Gelep, and Karbap.

Not all the comparative series in Table 2 form complete cognate sets. Some appear to be borrowed. For example, the $\text{ɔg} - f$ correspondence seen for *'head'* between Njerep and Kasabe on one hand and Cambap and Langa on the other is indicative of an influence from Ba on Njerep and Kasabe; the true situation is more likely reflected in *'eye'*, as there are other items which could be cited showing the same correspondence. Similarly, comparing *'eye'* and *'face'*, we are inclined to conclude that the semantic extension of *'eye'* to *'face'* in Njerep is an influence of Ba. And, the form found for *'navel'* in Kasabe can reasonably be assumed to be a borrowing from Ba, as can the form for *'tongue'* in Njerep.

Others of the comparative series are indicative of lexical innovation. On the basis of this evidence, the two Kwanja lects are again established as separate (cf. *'elbow'*, *'yam'*, *'calabash'*, and *'dog'*). Among forms for *'eye'*, those in Njerep, Kasabe, Cambap and Langa constitute one set of cognates, while those in Gelep, Karbap and Ba, form another. Both *'face'* and *'back'* group Camba, Langa and Gelep; on the evidence of *'back'* Kasabe is also included with this grouping. *'Calabash'* groups all of these with the exception of Langa.

In short, the combined evidence of phonological developments and lexical innovation clearly demonstrates the greater linguistic proximity of Njerep to Kasabe and Cambap, and these three to Langa, Gelep, and Karbap, all East Mambila lects. It will be noted, though, that many of their shared similarities are apparent retentions; it is Ba that has in many respects innovated compared to the other Mambila lects. It is therefore difficult to propose a subgrouping among the East Mambila lects on this basis.

5) A single Mambila village in Cameroon. Somié, also known as Ndeba in Ba-Mambila, or Cokmo (sometimes written Tchokmon), is presently located at 6° 28' N, 11° 27' E in the Bankim sub-division of the Province of Adamawa, Cameroon.¹⁶ It lies on the Tikar Plain in the extreme southwest of the Province, near the border with Northwest Province and the Nigerian frontier. The chief traces his origins, as do the chiefs of neighbouring villages, to a site near the international border with Nigeria. According to local informants, group of brothers separated, and each founded a different village lower down near the edge of the fertile plain. Each village tends to disparage some of its neighbours. This is often expressed in the claim that the chief of another village (with which there is enmity) are descended via a female link although they do come from the ancestral site. Gender weighted genealogical disputes form part of the play of inter-village rivalry. The village itself is composed of '*quartiers*'¹⁷, some named, some implicit and recognised in actions such as the division of labour when communal work is done in the chief's fields. Some *quartiers* have their own titular heads, and some of these have their own histories to tell, which is somewhat at variance with the histories told by the chiefs and their advisors. For example, in the history dictated by Charles Mbe to his son, he tells how the people of his hamlet, Duabang, were 'enslaved' by the people of Somié¹⁸. Others again speak (or spoke) different dialects or languages. Indeed, it was the pursuit of an all but extinct language (Njerep) spoken by those of one *quartier* that precipitated the joint research of which this paper is a part.

All Mambila on the Tikar Plain came from the Mambila Plateau and the adjoining areas of the Adamawa Plateau. It is within this context that the history of the Njerep, and the village of Somié and its surroundings is to be understood. The present population is the result

¹⁶ The village has moved three times, most recently in 1964. In 1995 the population of the village centre was 612.

¹⁷ We retain the French spelling to help remind us, a) that there are more than four quarters(!) and that there is no exact Mambila term, the Fulfulde 'fatere' or the french '*quartier*' often being used. In the Mambila language itself a group of people is identified by the use of plural markers, b̀ Luo, b̀ Luo b̀.

¹⁸ See D. Zeitlyn, 'Un fragment de l'histoire des Mambilas: un texte du Duabang', *Journal des Africanistes* **62**, (1992), 135-150., Zeitlyn, Mial, et al., *Trois études sur les mambila de Somié, Cameroun*

of several (at least three, and possibly four) waves of immigration by different groups of Mambila down from the Mambila Plateau onto the Tikar Plain. No clear and detailed picture emerges from the oral history concerning these events, as accounts from different informants are contradictory¹⁹. The named groups of immigrants are Liap, Ndeba, Njerep and Mvop. It is a matter of controversy whether the Liap or the Ndeba were the first arrivals, though both may have had a hand in pushing the Tikar away from the base of the escarpment and further into the plain. Little is now known of the Liap other than that they came from the area around Chichale mountain, near Guessimi on the Adamawa Plateau. In Somié, some people are still occasionally described as Liap through patrilineal descent. The Liap are said to have hidden from subsequent invaders in caves. Some informants recount a story of Liap performing a dance in a cave which collapsed, trapping or crushing the dancers. Others talk of caves at the River Pongong (near Tor Luo hill) in which, it is said, Liap pots may be found.

Even less is known of the Ndeba, other than that they too came from the Guessimi area, and that they gave their name to the village. They are said to be the people who dug the trenched forts visible in aerial photographs and on the ground at Gumbe and in the forest of Duabang²⁰. We could discover no account of any cultural practices to distinguish them from their successors.

These early immigrants were conquered or absorbed in their turn by subsequent waves of Mambila invaders. The second wave of immigrants to the present Somié area (considering both Liap and Ndeba as part of the first) is itself divided into different groups. All accounts agree this wave originated on the Adamawa Plateau, probably in the area of Djeni Mountain (*Aigue Mboundo* on current maps of Cameroon), and introduced the Njerep and the Luo. The linguistic evidence presented above establishes that Njerep and Kasabe (the language of the Luo) were closely related, and these two with a third language, Cambap. However, elicited accounts differ as to the degree of differentiation between the Njerep and

¹⁹ See D. Zeitlyn, 'Sua in Somié. Mambila Traditional Religion', (Sankt Augustin, 1994); Zeitlyn, Mial, et al., *Trois études sur les mambila de Somié, Cameroun*.

²⁰ Zeitlyn, *Un fragment de l'histoire des Mambilas: un texte du Duabang*.

the Luo. The most common version suggests these two groups were one with the Camba (aka Twendi²¹), and only differentiated when they left the villages of Sango and Camba (an intermediate stop, already on the Tikar plain) fleeing to the hills at the foot of the Mambila escarpment to escape horsemen. The horsemen in most accounts, as mentioned above, are Fulbe invaders, though at least one local historian suggests this movement was earlier, and precipitated by the Chamba invasion of a slightly earlier period.²² Fardon's map (Map Two above), suggests the Chamba did pass through this region.

Although descendants of the Njerep and Luo now live at the foot of the Mambila escarpment, on the Tikar plain, they still identify the villages in the mountains which they established, and one local mountain bears the name Tor Luo (to~r = 'hill, mountain'). What is unclear is whether these two differentiated themselves from Camba in the way just described, or at an earlier time, possibly when leaving the Adamawa Plateau homeland. Perhaps one pointer with some bearing on the question is that the Luo claim to have songs not known to the Njerep. This alone cannot be taken as evidence of a long history of separation, but does point to a certain degree of cultural differentiation. Whatever the case, the Njerep and Luo are now separate and appear to have been so since they reached their present locations. Their separate accounts of relations with their neighbours, as discussed below, confirm this especially since the Njerep (but not Luo) claim to have conquered the Ndeba.

As is common throughout this area, chiefship is marked by rights over game such as buffalo: a specified portion of any royal animal killed must be sent to the chief of a particular group to acknowledge their superior status. According to our informants, Njerep and Ndeba once exchanged buffalo thighs, a mark of reciprocal respect, and it was the breaking of this custom which led to the conquest of Ndeba by Njerep. The breaking of the custom is more a

²¹ Connell, B. (1998). Moribund languages of the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland. *Endangered Languages in Africa*. M. Brenzinger. Köln, Rüdiger Köppe Verlag: 207–225.

²² Mial Nicodeme, citing the published work of Eldridge Mohammadou (1990 & 1991). There is potential for confusion between the two names 'Camba' and 'Chamba'; both are pronounced the same, [tSamba], though at present there is no evidence of a connection between the two.

symptom than a cause, but granted the symbolic importance of buffalo in the region, any local ruler who was politically ambitious could use claims to buffalo as part of their political strategy. Hence a local war could well be triggered by refusal to give a buffalo thigh in tribute. Traditions concerning buffalo rights also exemplify local history in the case of the Luo. The Luo, allies of the Mvop retain buffalo thighs for themselves. They are said to have been granted this right by Tulum, the Mvop ancestor, after Luo healers treated him for spear wounds incurred in a battle with the Tikar. More people today know about the curing than about who Tulum and his followers were fighting – there is considerable uncertainty on this point.

The last wave of Mambila immigrants onto the Tikar Plain were the Mvop who came down the escarpment from the village of Mvor on the Mambila Plateau, southwest of Dorofi. Much hinges on the reasons for the arrival of the Mvop on the Tikar Plain. In the central part of Somié, it is said to have been a conquest. War started over the giving of dues, such as palm oil and royal game, to the Mvop. In this case, it is claimed, the thigh of a buffalo which had been killed was not sent to Tulum, the Mvop chief at Mvor. (We have not yet found an explanation of why the Ndeba were expected to do this **before** their conquest by the Mvop.) In Somié, two hamlet headmen name new chiefs and are accorded great respect. One of these is the head of Njerep hamlet, and thus the head of Ndeba. The other is the head of Gumbe hamlet who is of Mvop descent but through a female link. By giving the Ndeba a role in the process of chiefly succession they are involved in a more profound way than a ‘mere’ conquered population. This may reflect a close relationship prior to the arrival of the Mvop.

The site of Mvor has been documented by Jean Hurault²³. Oral tradition tells us that a group of children of Tulum, their common ancestor in Mvor, founded the villages of Sonkolong, Somié and Atta. Some of the grand-children of Tulum were ruling as chiefs

²³ J. Hurault, Une application de la Photo-interpretation a l'Archeologie de L'Afrique Tropicale: la Reconstitution des Modes de Peuplement et Systèmes Agraires Disparus. Exemple de l'Adamaoua Occidental. *Bulletin 75 de la Société Française de Photogrammetrie et de Télédétection*. (1979): 22 & Plate VII, Les Anciens Peuplements de Cultivateurs de L'Adamaoua Occidental (Cameroun-Nigeria). *Cah. Sci. Hum.*, 22(1), (1986): 131 & Plate III, 'A report on archeological surveys in the Cameroon-Nigeria Border region', *Africa* 58, (1988), 470-6.

when the Germans first arrived in the area at the beginning of the Twentieth Century. The colonial archives include some dates from the succession to chiefship in the 1920s and later about Somié and its neighbours, given in Table 3.

Table 3: Chronology of chieftaincies in Atta, Sonkolong and Somié as recorded in archival and other documentary sources.

Date	Atta	Sonkolong	Somié	Source
pre-1913		Kémé		Moisel: Kamerun map sheet F2 Fumban
1923	Timi			Migeod 1925
1930-33	Mérou			Nat'l Arch – Ydé ²⁴
pre-1933		Ka		Nat'l Arch – Ydé
1933-42		Baworo		Nat'l Arch – Ydé
1942	Ngah			Nat'l Arch – Banyo
pre-1950			Kolaka	Nat'l Arch – Ydé
1950			Ndi Etienne	Nat'l Arch – Ydé
1953	Gah			Nat'l Arch – Ydé
1956	Gah Timi			Nat'l Arch – Ydé

We turn, finally, to Mandulu. Despite having worked in the area for fifteen years this term was new to us when we heard it for the first time in March 2000 while we were undertaking further work on the Njerep²⁵. As part of his work on Mambila dialects, Connell had taken a linguistic census of the Njerep *quartier* of Somié in which people were asked questions concerning both the languages they spoke and what group they belonged to (e.g. are you Luo, Njerep, Mvop). When discussing our results with Mial Nicodeme, one of the most knowledgeable local historians, he described some people as being Mandulu rather than Njerep. These terms were used as if they were comparable, although on further enquiry it became clear that ‘the Mandulu’ are a group of descendants²⁶ of Mandulu who came from

²⁴ Dossier 1AC 1845/3.

²⁵ See B. Connell & D. Zeitlyn, Njerep: A postcard from the edge. *Studies in African Linguistics* 29. (in press).

²⁶ Note that Mambila do not have a lineage-based kinship system, but a cognatic system in which two different kin and residency based groups were once identified; see e.g. F.

near the escarpment that now forms the Cameroon-Nigeria frontier (from near Tamnyar, to be more specific), at approximately the same time as the Mvop arrived on the Plain, and settled not in the village centre but in the area of Njerep. He also said that Mandulu had powerful medicine with which he treated the Njerep. Mandulu's descendants now form a part of the Njerep on a residential basis, and increasingly few people remember the name Mandulu at all. The location of the old compound is known by elder people in Njerep, and by descendants of Mandulu in the village centre. Mial described Mandulu as being Mambila in origin whereas the Njerep 'come from' the Kwanja. Note here the shift from talk of one person and his descendants (a kin group) to talk of a larger political group; this illustrates the problems mentioned above, that the answers to questions such as 'What is your history?', 'Where do you come from?' critically depend on the definition of group X. In the course of one conversation the scope of the pronoun 'you', or a name such as Mandulu, may shift in ways that can mislead and confuse.

The Njerep connection with Kwanja alluded to by Mial must be seen in light of the movements out of the Djéni region described above. One result of these movements was²⁷, the creation of a Kwanja identity, which is still evolving. The Cambap, who as we have seen share a certain portion of their history with the Njerep, and who recognize their language as being Mambila (i.e. close to the East Mambila lects, as discussed earlier), now largely see themselves as ethnically Kwanja.

Summary of the history of Somié village. Given the uncertainties and complexity of the regional history of the last two centuries, the following seems the best current summary. However, readers should recall that the archaeological evidence, incomplete as it may be, has already revealed a sequence of occupation more complex than anything recorded in the oral histories we summarize here

Rehfishch, 'The Dynamics of Multilinearity on the Mambila Plateau', *Africa* **3**, (1960), 246-261, and Zeitlyn mss. *Talking Mambila Kinship*.

²⁷ Following Q. Gausset, 'Pouvoir et bilinéarité chez les Kwanja', *Ngaoundéré-Anthropos (Revue de Sciences sociales)* **2**, (1997), 89-104.

The Tikar Plain was inhabited by proto-Tikar.²⁸ It appears that during the 19th century – possibly earlier – speakers of four languages, Cambap, Kasabe, Njerep, and Yeni²⁹, left the area around Djeni Mountain. They settled in, or perhaps established, various villages farther west and south, in the foothills and on the Tikar Plain. The most plausible hypothesis is that the Fulani jihad in Northern Cameroon during the 19th century (an extension of the Sokoto Jihad) was the primary cause of this upheaval, though there is some indication that the movement occurred, or at least began, prior to the jihad, perhaps as a result of the Chamba Leko incursions³⁰. The Kwanja, too, were pushed southward until some settled on the Tikar Plain, where they eventually mixed with the Camba and Yeni. It is again not clear who came first; however the most probable scenario is that they were all part of a general movement and arrived on the plain at more or less the same time. Meanwhile, the Mambila (Mvop) came down from the Mambila Plateau, and incorporated Ndeba, Njerep and Liap hamlets situated at the bottom of the escarpment, but could not expand further into the Plain because of the Tikar who had become bigger and more centralized³¹. Pressure from the Fulbe is cited by local informants to account for these changes. In any event, it appears that the factors that led to these movements also precipitated the decimation of the peoples involved, ultimately resulting in considerable intermarriage and leaving uncertain their viability as linguistic groupings tenuous. Ethnic identity has survived somewhat longer, but it too is clearly not as strong as it once was, as the Njerep and Luo now see themselves as Mambila (as do Ndeba and Liap), while the Camba and Yeni now, to a large degree, see themselves as Kwanja.

²⁸ The identification of proto-Tikar is itself controversial see D. Zeitlyn, 'Eldridge Mohammadou on Tikar Origins', *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* **26**, (1996), 87-98, Mohammadou, *Traditions Historiques des peuples du Cameroun Central. Vol 1: Mbéré, Mboum, Tikar, Traditions Historiques des Peuples du Cameroun Central. Vol 2: Ni-zoo, Vouté et Kondja*, I. Fowler & D. Zeitlyn, 'Introductory Essay: the Grassfields and the Tikar', in I. Fowler & D. Zeitlyn (eds.), *African Crossroads: intersections of history and anthropology in Cameroon*, (Oxford, 1996), 1-16.

²⁹ We have not previously discussed the Yeni; they appear to have been another sister group to the the Camba, Luo and Njerep, who have now been completely absorbed by the Kwanji. Their language is now extinct.

³⁰ As suggested by E. Mohammadou, 'Traditions Historiques des peuples du Cameroun Central. Vol 1: Mbéré, Mboum, Tikar. Vol 2: Vouté, Nyèm-Nyèm, Kondja.', (Tokyo, 1990); Fardon 1988 gives an overview of Chamba history.

³¹ Hurault, *A report on archeological surveys in the Cameroon-Nigeria Border region*.

Discussion/Conclusion

Reflecting on the fractal qualities of African History has helped us explain some of the perplexities that have arisen in the course of our separate and collaborative research careers. Asking informants questions about their history masks a variety of different ambiguities about our own and our informants understanding of what we and they themselves are about. Questions such as 'Where do you come from?' appear to be precise, yet are profoundly ambiguous. Even assuming a second person singular pronoun, how will this 'you' take the question? Which type of identity will it be taken as referring to, (thereby determining the type of answer it receives)?

An informant in Somié could say 'I am Mambila therefore I'm from here', 'I'm from Somié therefore I'm from Mvor', 'I'm Njerep therefore I'm from Sanga', or 'I'm Mandulu therefore I'm from up there'. But it doesn't necessarily end there, nor must it start with being Mambila. At either end the chain could be extended – leading informants and historians into confusion and perplexity, especially when levels interact and collapse upon one another or split – as, for example, ethnic groups come into existence or cease to be separate. Such is history.

In the light of this approach, let us return to the larger question of the Bantu expansion, and perhaps much of African (pre-)history, which can be seen from a fractals perspective. Much recent work³² has made it clear that the 'single mass migration' concept of the Bantu expansion is untenable. In Vansina's view, the Bantu expansion has involved as many as nine major diffusions, and within each of these a number intertwining influences can be discerned. This additional complexity is reflected in the presence of 'mixed' or stratified languages³³ and in the fact even today Bantu languages are being absorbed by other Bantu

³² E.g. W. Möhlig, 'Stratification in the History of the Bantu Languages' *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika*, Band 3: 251–316 (1981); T. Janson, 'Southern Bantu and Makua' *Sprache und Geschichte in Afrika*, Band 12/13: 63–106 (1991/1992); J. Vansina, 'New Linguistic Evidence and 'the Bantu Expansion'', (among others).

³³ Möhlig, *ibid.* Möhlig declines to use the term 'mixed' in its usual sense in linguistic studies; the phenomenon he describes (and the term he uses) is different strata in the lexicons

languages³⁴. Vansina and MacEachern in different ways, and using different evidence, provide cautions against the hidden metaphoric uses of our terms of explanation. The Bantu languages expanded in different ways from the ways in which human populations moved. Clearly population shifts affect languages, and language shift affects culture and identity, but the connections are not direct and one cannot be read off the other.

of Bantu languages that have come about, presumably, through considerable contact between different Bantu groups.

³⁴ As noted by Vansina; see also B. Connell, 'Language Endangerment in Central Africa', to appear in M. Brenzinger (ed), *Language Diversity Endangered*. Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.