

MBEMBE ORTHOGRAPHY GUIDE

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Abbreviations

F1	Future (very soon)	F2	Future (same day)
F3	Far Future (tomorrow to infinity)		
PROG.	Progressive (IMPF)	P. PROG.	Past Progressive (P. IMPF)
NEG	Negation marker		
P1	Immediate past	P2	Near past or today past
P3	Yesterday past	P4	Very far past
PART1	Particle one		

C	Consonant
N	Nasal
V	Vowel
^N C	Prenasalized consonant
C ^r	Consonant plus r cluster (i.e. consonants followed by r)
^N C ^r	Prenasalized consonant plus r cluster
C ^w	Labialized consonants (i.e. consonants followed by w)
^N C ^w	Prenasalized labialised consonants
C ^{wr}	Labialized Consonant plus r cluster
C ^y	Palatalized consonants (i.e. consonants followed by y)
^N C ^y	Prenasalized palatalized consonants

Examples of tense marker abbreviations:

ḥ	yí	dɔ.	“I am going.”	PROG. (IMPF)
<i>I</i>	<i>PROG</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	dɔ	yí.	“I have gone.”	PERF. P1
<i>I</i>	<i>go</i>	<i>P1</i>		
ḥ	le	dɔ.	“I went (this morning).”	P2
<i>I</i>	<i>P2</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	ya	dɔ.	“I went (yesterday).”	P3
<i>I</i>	<i>P3</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	yá	dɔ.	“I went (far past).”	P4
<i>I</i>	<i>P4</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	lè	dɔ.	“I will go (soon).”	F1
<i>I</i>	<i>F1</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	ke	dɔ.	“I will go (this evening).”	F2
<i>I</i>	<i>F2</i>	<i>go</i>		
ḥ	ká	dɔ.	“I shall go (far future).”	F3
<i>I</i>	<i>F3</i>	<i>go</i>		

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1. Introduction

Mbembe is a language (Mbembe Tigon) spoken in Ako Sub-Division a language of the Jukuniod family. Ethnologue (Gordon 2005:66) gives the following details:

“Mbembe, Tigon (Tigum, Tigon, Tigong, Tigun, Tikun, Akonto [nza] 36,000 in Cameroon (1982 SIL). Population total all countries: 56,000. North West Region, Donga Mantung Division, Ako Sub division, north of Nkambe. Also spoken in Nigeria. Class: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Jukunoid, Central, Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo, Mbembe. Dialects: Ashuku (Kitsipki), Nama (Dama, Namu), Nzare (Ndzale, Nsare, Izale, Izare, Njari), Kporo, Eneeme. Lg. Dev't: Literacy rate in second language: 15% to 25%. Other: Entirely different from Mbembe of Nigeria which is in Cross River group. Traditional religion.”

Another document in which Mbembe is classified is the Cameroon Linguistic Atlas (ALCAM).

Mbembe as a language shares boundary with Limbum spoken by the Wimbun people in Nkambe, Saari spoken by the Besaa people in Misaje, Adere which is one of the Mfumte villages in Nwa Sub-Division, Ageng near Ande, Bebe spoken by Dumbu people in Misaje, Jukun (Ndama language) spoken by Ndaka people who are ethnically Mbembe and Hausa spoken in neighbouring Nigeria. The Mbembe people call their language “cha Mbémbe” or simply “Mbémbe”, the word “cha” meaning language.

The villages of Mbembe are Abafum, Abuenkpa, Abuenshie, Ako, Akwaja, Akwenko, Akwesse, Amba, Ande, Assa, Berabe, Buku, Jevi, Mbande, Mbiribua, Mpenchere, Ndaka (they speak Jukun), Zembeabru. There are some Mbembe speaking villages across the border in Nigeria. These include villages like Abong, Akwenko, Ashia, Ashuku, Edobe, Ekwefro, Eneme, Mbesa, Sabongida-Ekwanwe, Zabe.

It is obvious that the population figure given above from Ethnologue has changed so much in the course of time. The Cameroon Association for Bible Translation And Literacy (CABTAL) in its 2005 calendar estimates the Mbembe population to stand at 66,100 people.

The Mbembe people are commonly called Njari people which some say is pejorative. An indigene of Mbembe is known to the people as “ɲwa mbémbe” which means “child of Mbembe” and the plural is commonly known to them as “wá mbémbe” which on the contrary means “people of Mbembe” (and not children of Mbembe as with the singular).

In terms of language typology, Mbembe is an isolating language. Though generally understood throughout the whole area, the Mbembe language is spoken in slightly different ways. The language can be broken down into five varieties (dialects) namely Berabe, Akwaja (pó ákó), lower Mbembe I, lower Mbembe II and Kuta. These dialectal differences range within few sounds and words but this does not cause any barrier across the whole area in terms of mutual intelligibility. The use of the language is very vital in the community with no threat of losing this vitality from the influence of any other language.

The Mbembe language committee has approved the Berabe dialect as the reference dialect as it fulfils the primary criteria for choosing a reference dialect as written in the

Manual for Developing Writing Systems in African Languages 1998, eds. Wiesemann U, Sadembouo E, Tadadjeu M. So the examples used in this document are primarily from the Berabe variety.

2. The Alphabet

The Mbembe segmental alphabet has 33 letters with 25 consonants and 8 vowels. They are represented below in upper and lower cases:

A a, C c, B b, Ch ch, D d, E e, E e, F f, G g, Gb gb, H h, I i, J j, K k, Kp kp, L l, M m, N n, Ny ny, Ij ij, O o, O o, P p, R r, S s, Sh sh, T t, U u, V v, W w, Y y, Z z, Zh zh

2.1 Consonants

The consonant phonemes, their allophones and graphemes are presented in the Table below. We also show their use in various positions in the word.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/p/	[p]	P p	pu <i>hole</i>	ápú <i>shade</i>	—
	[p ^h]		pe <i>dry out</i>	—	—
/b/	[b]	B b	bé <i>dog</i>	ábó <i>penis</i>	—
	[b ^h]		bé <i>goats</i>	—	—
/t/	[t]	T t	tóke <i>type of drum</i>	átɔ <i>squirrel</i>	—
/d/	[d]	D d	dɛ <i>bees</i>	àdò <i>onion</i>	—
/k/	[k]	K k	kókò <i>horse</i>	àkò <i>chest</i>	—
/g/	[g]	G g	gù <i>fence</i>	águ <i>bedbug</i>	
/kp/	[kp]	Kp kp	kpo <i>bush</i>	ákpá <i>chaff</i>	—
/gb/	[gb]	Gb gb	gbòko <i>meet</i>	émbàgbète <i>bastards</i>	—
/f/	[f]	F f	fidè <i>rat</i>	àfe <i>chiefs</i>	—
/v/	[v]	V v	vényi <i>elephants</i>	àvu <i>owl</i>	—
/s/	[s]~[θ]	S s	sɛ <i>sheep</i>	èsò <i>tapping chisel</i>	—
/z/	[z]	Z z	zɛɛ <i>today</i>	ézɔ <i>oil</i>	—
/ʃ/	[sj]~[ʃj]~[ʃ]	Sh sh	shò <i>journey</i>	áshi <i>palm oil place</i>	—
/ʒ/	[zj]~[ʒj]~[ʒ]	Zh zh	zhi <i>sharp</i>	édézhe <i>grandchildren</i>	—

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/tʃ/	[tsj]~[tʃj]~[tʃ]	Ch ch	cha <i>medicine</i>	àchu <i>story</i>	—
/dʒ/	[dzj]~[dʒj]~[dʒ]	J j	ji <i>maggot</i>	kóje <i>dances</i>	—
/h/	[h]	H h	húŋ <i>grammatical particle</i>	yehè <i>no</i>	—
/m/	[m]	M m	mé <i>flower</i>	ámú <i>worm</i>	—
/n/	[n]	N n	nû <i>sun</i>	ánu <i>bed</i>	—
/ɲ/	[ɲ]	Ny ny	nyi <i>hoe</i>	ényé <i>excreta</i>	—
/ŋ/	[ŋ]	Ŋ ŋ	ŋu <i>snake</i>	áŋɔ <i>piece</i>	átelohúŋ <i>that</i>
/l/	[l]	L l	lò <i>spices</i>	àlo <i>musical instru.</i>	—
/r/	[r]	R r	—	penyára <i>grind teeth</i>	—
/w/	[w]	W w	wà <i>spoilt</i>	éwe <i>shame</i>	—
/j/	[j]	Y y	ya <i>porcupine</i>	kúyà <i>pig</i>	—

2.1.1 Prenasalized Consonants

There are consonant clusters in Mbembe where the first consonant is a nasal consonant that is pronounced at the same place of articulation as the following consonant. Some of these prenasalized consonants are syllabic with the nasal consonant bearing a tone but we still put them in the same table for now. The tone on the syllabic nasal is not predictable. Fifteen consonants may be preceded by such a homorganic nasal consonant as in the following chart:

Consonant Cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/mp/	[mp]	Mp mp	ímpê <i>stone</i>	àkwampa <i>locusts</i>	—
/mb/	[mb]	Mb mb	mbó <i>hunger</i>	ámâ <i>nests</i>	—
/nt/	[nt]	Nt nt	ntòmbò <i>banana</i>	—	—
/nd/	[nd]	Nd nd	ńdó <i>door</i>	àndò <i>cow</i>	—
/ŋk/	[ŋk]	Nk nk	ńkoko <i>shield</i>	ŋwánku <i>orphan</i>	—
/ŋg/	[ŋg]	Ng Ng	ngo <i>hut</i>	bwengà <i>cure</i>	—
/ŋkp/	[ŋkp]	Nkp nkp	ńkpa <i>elephantiasis</i>	àkpenkpe <i>old</i>	—

/ŋgb/	[ŋgb]	Ng ngb	ngbô <i>frog</i>	ngbón gbò <i>plain</i>	—
/mf/	[mf]	Mf mf	mfó <i>cobra</i>	ńtemfe <i>spider</i>	—
/mv/	[mv]	Mv mv	ínvré <i>winnow</i>	mâmvè <i>crocodile</i>	—
/ns/	[ns]	Ns ns	nseká <i>prostitute</i>	mànsù <i>groundnut</i>	—
/nz/	[nz]	Nz nz	nzo <i>one (1)</i>	àzo <i>evening</i>	—
/nʃ/	[nʃ]~[nsj]	Nsh nsh	ńshe <i>elephant</i> <i>grass</i>	tenshi <i>bedroom</i>	—
/ntʃ/	[ntʃ]	Nch nch	nchibá <i>last</i>	ɲwabénchrè <i>leech</i>	—
/ndʒ/	[ndʒ]	Nj nj	nje <i>feather</i>	ńkwènjì <i>pestle</i>	—

2.1.2 Consonant Plus r Cluster (Cʳ)

Consonant plus r cluster are consonants followed by the flap /r/, thereby creating a constriction (a consonant cluster) in the words in question (CrV). There is often the tendency to relax this constriction by the insertion of the same vowel that comes at the end of the flap before the flap (CVrV) but the decision to write the words with the flapped cluster has come from the fact that the native speakers realize a single syllable in such words when they hum the words. The Mbembe consonants that are directly followed by the flap are presented below in different words showing them in different positions of occurrences.

Flapped Consonant	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/pr/	[pr]	Pr pr	pre <i>belly</i>	yáprá <i>compounds</i>	—
/br/	[br]	Br br	brú <i>bundle</i>	àbré <i>bag</i>	—
/tr/	[tr]	Tr tr	tro <i>debt</i>	étre <i>flying ant</i>	—
/dr/	[dr]	Dr dr	dra <i>root</i>	púdru <i>buttock</i>	—
/kr/	[kr]	Kr kr	krákô <i>pangolin</i>	ékré <i>flock</i>	—
/gr/	[gr]	Gr gr	grò <i>kolanut</i>	kpégrò <i>hundred</i>	—
/kpr/	[kpr]	Kpr kpr	kprò <i>vomit</i>	àkprà <i>prostitute</i>	—
/gbr/	[gbr]	Gbr gbr	gbru ékpò <i>snore</i>	ágbròbyé <i>gecko</i>	—
/fr/	[fr]	Fr fr	fru <i>okra</i>	èfri <i>hat</i>	—
/vr/	[vr]	Vr vr	vro <i>fruit</i>	évrá <i>shadow</i>	—

/sr/	[sr]	Sr sr	srákàda <i>book</i>	èsre <i>sorrow</i>	—
/zr/	[zr]	Zr zr	zre <i>name</i>	vèzri <i>punishment</i>	—
/tʃr/	[tʃr]	Chr chr	chru <i>fence</i>	áchrabá <i>soles</i>	—
/dʒr/	[dʒr]	Jr jr	jrè <i>blunt</i>	kajrè <i>rough</i>	—
/mr/	[mr]	Mr mr	mra <i>salt</i>	ámra <i>crust</i>	—
/nr/	[nr]	Nr nr	nré <i>tongue</i>	enru <i>sleep</i>	—
/ŋr/	[ŋr]	ŋr ŋr	—	áŋrú nwé <i>bridge of nose</i>	—
<p>Of the four nasal consonants, only the palatal nasal ny is not always followed by the letter r. A vowel always comes in between them as in the words nyírí = tooth, penyárá = gnaw. This is the same case with the palatal glide y as in the words yùrùpò = accuse and àyàrà = string of bead.</p>					
PRENASALIZED CONSONANT PLUS R CLUSTER					
/mpr/	[mpr]	Mpr mpr	mprà <i>grassland</i>	dàmpri <i>moth</i>	—
/mbr/	[mbr]	Mbr mbr	mbrì <i>half</i>	ámbrí <i>vagina</i>	—
/ntr/	[ntr]	Ntr ntr	ńtré ásè <i>fin</i>	ńtré <i>how?</i>	—
/ndr/	[ndr]	Ndr ndr	ńdro <i>rope</i>	fèndrè <i>mole</i>	—
/ŋkr/	[ŋkr]	Nkr nkr	ńkro <i>cheek</i>	chónkro <i>fingernails</i>	—
/ŋgr/	[ŋgr]	Ngr ngr	ngru <i>person</i>	ángrokpe <i>parrot</i>	—
/ŋkpr/	[ŋkpr]	Nkpr nkpr	ńkprékpò <i>island</i>	—	—
/mfr/	[mfr]	Mfr mfr	ńfre <i>vegetable</i>	ŋwamfru <i>caterpillar</i>	—
/mvr/	[mvr]	Mvr mvr	ńvré <i>winnow</i>	—	—
/nsc/	[nsc]	Nsr nsc	ńsrápyo <i>charcoal</i>	ávrónsrè <i>rainbow</i>	—
/nzc/	[nzc]	Nzr nzc	ńzre <i>virgin</i>	—	—
/ntʃr/	[ntʃr]	Nchr nchr	ńchre <i>iron</i>	ŋwabénchrè <i>leech</i>	—
LABIALIZED CONSONANTS PLUS R CLUSTER					
/kwr/	[kwr]	Kwr kwr	kwre <i>guinea corn</i>	pókwré <i>new</i>	—

2.1.3 Palatalized Consonants

Another kind of consonant cluster is where the second consonant is the palatal glide [j], which is always written in Mbembe as "y". Several consonants may be followed by this glide, as in the following chart:

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/pj/	[pj]	Py py	pyo <i>fire</i>	njìpye <i>testicle</i>	—
/bj/	[bj]	By by	byɔ <i>soup</i>	b̀̀byé <i>taboo</i>	—
/kj/	[kj]	Ky ky	—	kp̀̀kyá <i>soldier</i>	—
/kpj/	[kpj]	Kpy kpy	kpye <i>horn</i>	èkpyadè <i>praises</i>	—
/fj/	[fj]	Fy fy	fyè <i>egg-plant</i>	áfýɔ́ <i>cotton</i>	—
/vj/	[vj]	Vy vy	vyó <i>in-law</i>	évye <i>mushroom</i>	—
/mj/	[mj]	My my	mya <i>outside</i>	ámýɔ <i>neck</i>	—
PRENASALISED PALATALIZED CONSONANTS					
/mbj/	[mbj]	Mby mby	mbyakpè <i>enlarge</i>	ámbyèmbye <i>stinger</i>	—
/mvj/	[mvj]	Mvy mvj	mvýɔ <i>hare</i>	—	—

Note: The letters “sh, zh, ch, j” are not contrastively palatalised in Mbembe, hence should never be followed by the palatal glide “y.”

2.1.4 Labialized Consonants

Labialised consonants form another kind of consonant cluster where the second consonant is the labiovelar glide [w], which is always written in Mbembe as "w". The following consonants may be followed by this glide, as in the following chart:

Consonant Cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/pw/	[pw]	Pw pw	pwè <i>send</i>	zhewé <i>vegetable</i>	—
/bw/	[bw]	Bw bw	bwâ <i>chimpanzee</i>	ábwè <i>lump</i>	—
/tw/	[tw]	Tw tw	twa <i>dig</i>	—	—
/dw/	[dw]	Dw dw	—	byádwe <i>vegetable</i>	—
/kw/	[kw]	Kw kw	kwɔ <i>grave</i>	àkwàtì <i>box</i>	—
/gw/	[gw]	Gw gw	—	ègwè <i>type of fruit</i>	—
/kpw/	[kpw]	Kpw kpw	kpwe <i>python</i>	ákpwéde <i>beewax</i>	—
/tjw/	[tjw]	Chw chw	chwô <i>five</i>	ákáchwè <i>rhizone</i>	—
/dʒw/	[dʒw]	Jw jw	jwɔ <i>song</i>	njìjwó <i>eye</i>	—

Consonant Cluster	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/fw/	[fw]	Fw fw	fwè <i>fowl</i>	áshefwə <i>foot</i>	—
/vw/	[vw]	Vw vw	vwè <i>wives</i>	ávwé <i>pap</i>	—
/sw/	[sw]	Sw sw	—	áswe <i>wing</i>	—
/mw/	[mw]	Mw mw	mwê <i>mouth</i>	ànàmwe <i>deaf mute</i>	—
/nw/	[nw]	Nw nw	nwe <i>nose</i>	ngunwa <i>man</i>	—
/ɲw/	[ɲw]	ɲw ɲw	ɲwa <i>child</i>	sheɲwè <i>forget</i>	—
PRENASALIZED LABIALIZED CONSONANTS					
/mpw/	[mpw]	Mpw mpw	—	kpâmpwa <i>ringworm</i>	—
/mbw/	[mbw]	Mbw mbw	mbwà <i>flour</i>	mbwâmbwâ <i>thunder</i>	—
/ndw/	[ndw]	Ndw ndw	ndwè <i>toad</i>	ndwandwâ <i>weight</i>	—
/ɲkw/	[ɲkw]	Nkw nkɲ	ɲkwènɲi <i>pestle</i>	chankwà <i>proverb</i>	—
/ɲgw/	[ɲgw]	Ngw ngw	ɲgwa <i>plantain</i>	ngwangwara <i>frogs</i>	—

2.1.5 Consonant Orthography Rules

The following rules on the use of consonants for the proper spelling of words are important to master:

Never write “c” alone, always write “ch”.

Whenever you hear “th” write “s” as a harmonisation principle.

Never write “shy”; always write “sh” as a harmonisation principle.

Never write “zhy”; always write “zh” as a harmonisation principle.

Never write “chy”; always write “ch” as a harmonisation principle.

Never write “jy”; always write “j” as a harmonisation principle.

Always write “y” for palatalised words e.g. **pyo** “fire”

Always write “w” for labialised words e.g. **àkwàti** “box”

The letter “ny” is never directly followed by the letter “r”.

Never put a consonant at the end of a word except the letter “ɲ”.

When you hear a nasal before p, b, f, or v, write m.

When you hear a nasal before t, d, s, z or sh, write n.

When you hear a nasal before k, g, kp, or gb, write n.

Note that the difference between nw and ɲw is very distinct.

2.1.5 Consonant Cluster Chart

The following chart presents all the different consonant clusters as used in the Mbembe orthography:

Grapheme	^N C	C ^r	^N C ^r	C ^{wr}	C ^y	^N C ^y	C ^w	^N C ^w
P p	mp	pr	mpr	—	py	—	pw	mpw
B b	mb	br	mbr	—	by	mby	bw	mbw
T t	nt	tr	ntr	—	—	—	tw	—
D d	nd	dr	ndr	—	—	—	dw	ndw
K k	nk	kr	nkr	kwr	ky	—	kw	nkw
G g	ng	gr	ngr	—	—	—	gw	ngw
Kp kp	nkp	kpr	nkpr	—	kpy	—	kpw	—
Gb gb	ngb	gbr	—	—	—	—	—	—
F f	mf	fr	mfr	—	fy	—	fw	—
V v	mv	vr	mvr	—	vy	mvy	vw	—
S s	ns	sr	nsr	—	—	—	sw	—
Sh sh	nsh	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Z z	nz	zr	nzr	—	—	—	—	—
Zh zh	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ch ch	nch	chr	nchr	—	—	—	chw	—
J j	nj	jr	—	—	—	—	jw	—
H h	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
M m	—	mr	—	—	my	—	mw	—
N n	—	nr	—	—	—	—	nw	—
Ny ny	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ŋ ŋ	—	ŋr	—	—	—	—	ŋw	—
L l	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
R r	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
W w	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Y y	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—

2.2 Vowels

There are eight vowel letters in Mbembe. Some of these letters are long and so are written double as spelling rules for the language, yet the question of contrastive vowel length is still doubtful and needs further investigation to actually confirm the existence of long vowels in the language. This because the available examples are very minimal and not enough to make an affirmative conclusion. Otherwise, it is highly probable that Mbembe does not have long vowels. Nevertheless we have equally presented those cases that should be written double because of an assumed vowel length quality.

2.2.1 Short Vowels

Below are all the eight vowel phonemes in Mbembe, presented with their allophones and proposed graphemes. The sounds are shown as they occur in different positions of the word. Note that there are two “a” letters: **a** and **α**.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/i/	[i]	I i	—	fidè <i>rat</i>	kwáyí <i>money</i>
/u/	[u]	U u	—	búshá <i>animal</i>	kúsù <i>cat</i>
/e/	[e]	E e	ébo <i>time</i>	prétá <i>family</i>	shé <i>heads</i>
/o/	[o]	O o	—	àdòmbu <i>ram</i>	kpo <i>bush</i>
/ɛ/	[ɛ]	ɛ ɛ	—	gendu <i>tax</i>	pè <i>viper</i>
/ɔ/	[ɔ]	ɔ ɔ	—	bòbu <i>taboo</i>	ésho <i>bovine</i>
/a/	[a]	A a	átɔ <i>squirrel</i>	ákpáchù <i>sky</i>	àdá <i>cutlass</i>
/ɑ/	[ɑ]	ɑ ɑ	—	bwadà <i>beautiful</i>	gba <i>kill</i>

2.2.2 Long Vowels

Once more some words are written double as spelling rules for the language based on the fact that the native speakers tend to drag out these words in their pronunciation. There are very few cases of words with long vowels. We have equally presented those cases that should be written double because of vowel lengthening quality.

Phoneme	Allophone	Grapheme	Initial position	Medial position	Final position
/u:/	[u:]	Uu uu	—	—	kpùu <i>red</i>
/e:/	[e:]	Ee ee	—	—	fee <i>far</i>
/ɛ:/	[ɛ:]	ɛɛ ɛɛ	èɛ <i>yes</i>	—	yée <i>same</i>
/ɔ:/	[ɔ:]	ɔɔ ɔɔ	òɔ <i>yes</i>	—	—

Here are two examples to show contrast in vowel length

fe *kapok tree* **yé** *oversized*
fee *far* **yée** *same*

We should note where a word is pronounced by drawing out the vowel in question, the vowel should be written double as an orthography rule. Please, watch out because such words to be written double are very rare. Do not confuse words with contour tones with the feature of vowel length.

3.1 Tones

We have identified eight surface tones in Mbembe: three level tones: high [á], mid [ā] and low [à]; and five contour tones: high-low [â], high-mid [á̂], mid-low [à̂], mid-high [ǎ] and low-high [ǎ̂]. Let us note that the low-high tone is actually phonetically pronounced as low-mid.

3.1.1 Lexical Contrast Marked by Diacritics

As of this point in time, we have found some minimal tone pairs for words that contrast high tone, low tone, mid tone, rising tone and the falling tone, each one with the others. Though we may not have as many words with contour tones (high-mid, mid-low, mid-high, low-high and high-low) as there are with level tones (high, low and mid tones), the point is that all 8 tones are attested in the language. The high-mid (á), the mid-low (â) and the mid-high (ã) have so far not been found in any minimal pairs with other contour tones. On a general note, we propose an orthographic rule where all the level tones are marked by diacritics: high (á) and low (à) except for the most recurrent of the tones: the mid tone (a), which remains unmarked in spite of its presence. Falling tones (high-mid, mid-low and high-low) are written as the high-low tone (â) whereas all rising tones (mid-high and low-high) are assumed to be low-high but are marked by not putting a diacritic mark on the syllable (a). It is common orthographic practice to indicate non-contrastive or less contrastive tones or one of the well attested contrastive tones by specifically omitting to mark a diacritic over the vowel. See the chart below.

Tone	Phonetic	Grapheme (Diacritic)	Examples	Frequency
High	[á]	á	ndó <i>door</i>	common
Mid	[ā]	a	chwɔ <i>work</i>	very common
Low	[à]	à	krɔ̃ <i>neck</i>	common
High-low	[â]	â	byâ <i>cane rat</i>	common
High-mid	[ã]		chwô <i>five (5)</i>	very rare
Mid-low	[ã̃]		áfrê <i>abscess</i>	not common
Low-high	[ǎ]	a	mbɔ <i>lizard</i>	common
Mid-high	[ã̃]		chu <i>bud</i>	not common

3.1.2 Tones on Long Vowels

The following table is simply to indicate how tones are marked on those vowels that are written double on the basis of lengthening. As you can observe from the table, when a vowel has to be written double based on its long quality, the diacritic is marked only on the first of the two vowels and the second vowel is left empty. If it is a mid tone, the two vowels are left empty since a mid tone is never marked (or indicated with a diacritic). See table below.

Tone	Phonetic	Grapheme (Diacritic)	Examples	Frequency
High	[á:]	áa	<i>yéé</i> <i>same</i>	rare
Mid	[ā:]	aa	<i>fee</i> <i>far</i>	rare
Low	[à:]	àa	<i>kpùu</i> <i>red</i>	rare
High-low	[â:]	âa	—	not found
Low-high	[ǎ:]	aa	—	not found

Our proposal is to write all Mbembe words as they occur in isolation (i.e. as they occur when pronounced by themselves), and it is these forms that will be written in the lexicon (dictionary). Mbembe speakers should have no problem reading or pronouncing the actual phonetic tones in a sentence once they recognize the meanings of the individual words in that sentence.

It is fairly easy to find Mbembe words where the only difference between them is tone. For example, note the minimal tone pairs below between the five different tones, including the mid tone which is not marked:

zɔ́ [zɔ́] “net”	bá [bá] “leg”
zɔ̄ [zɔ̄] “python”	ba [bā] “line up”
zɔ̀ [zɔ̀] “water”	bà [bà] “crack”
té [té] “antelopes”	kpɔ́ [kpɔ́] “body”
tê [tê] “antelope”	kpô [kpô] “bowls”
pɔ́ [pɔ́] “feel”	bú [bú] “thing”
pɔ̄ [pɔ̄] “hear”	bu [bū] “you”
shè [ʃjè] “cricket”	mbò [mbò] “umbilical cord”
shê [ʃjê] “insult”	mbɔ̄ [mbɔ̄] “lizard”
chè [tʃjè] “egg”	châ [tʃâ] “medicine”
che [tʃjé] “light”	cha [tʃǎ] “carry (on head)”

Since we are trying to simplify the tone marking system by not making any marks on mid tones and by not making any marks on any rising tones, we do end up with some words which are written the same but pronounced slightly differently tonally, as in the following examples:

nu [nú] “there”	mya [mjā] “dew”
nu [nū] “smell”	mya [mjǎ] “breasts”
chwɔ̄ [tʃwɔ̄] “ashes”	chu [tʃū] “day”
chwɔ́ [tʃwɔ́] “work”	chu [tʃú] “bud”

nya [ɲǎ] “partridge”
nya [ɲā] “partridges”

It should be noted that leaving tones off of the preceding tone pairs is an experiment. It is hoped that the actual meaning behind occurrences of these ambiguously written words will be clear to Mbembe speakers, at least in the vast majority of situations. However, if in the future this written ambiguity is judged to be confusing, it is always possible for the Mbembe community at that time to introduce additional written tones, most likely by writing rising tones wherever they occur. Our main motivation in trying this experiment is to try to minimize the number of tone marks that Mbembe people need to write.

FINAL NOTE ON TONE: There seem to be some evidence for more than three different tone levels in Mbembe. There is a set of disyllabic words with the High-Mid (H-M) tone melody pronounced at a higher pitch and another set with the same H-M melody pronounced at a lower pitch. This leads us to suspect that there may be two mid tone levels (M1 and M2), thus giving the melodies H-M1 and M1-M2. This is a phonetic difference which needs to be checked further, maybe by tape recording the voices and comparing the pitch levels. There are so far no minimal pairs distinguished by these two tone melodies, so no orthographic distinction is made between them.

3.1.3 Grammatical Meanings Marked by Diacritics

So far we found singular/plural pairs in nouns only distinguished by tone. However, no particular tone can be attributed as marking plural.

As for other grammatical function of tone, this remains for future study.

4. Word Division

This will hopefully be examined further at some later point in time. Criteria need to be set for distinguishing compound nouns from associative noun phrases. Prepositions will be written separately from their following locative nouns only if the noun in question makes sense when separated from the preposition. Besides, intuitively, native speakers can easily tell those simple lexical entities (separate words) that make up sentences in their language, and these words are separated from one another with a space. We need to remind ourselves that except for borrowed words or ideophones, the only consonant that can come at the end of a word is the nasal ɲ. All vowels, long or short can come word finally but only some vowels come word initially. Single vowels and nasal consonants can serve as distinct words like “a” in the sentence **À na ntré?** “(How did you sleep?)” and “ɲ” in the response “**ɲ ná sɔbe** (I slept well)”. Personal pronouns for instance should be separated with a space. For example

i) ɲ ya.	ii) À ya.	iii) È ya.
<i>I come.</i>	<i>You come.</i>	<i>He comes.</i>

Just as in other languages, we have compound words some of which may be hyphenated but this has not been done yet for us to have the criteria as earlier mentioned. Considering that our numerals are too long when written as single words, the separation of the different words that sum up a number is preferable. See the two examples below with the numbers 11 and 30:

Je jú nzo.

Ten plus one.

Gbangru gbè je.

Twenty plus ten.

Note: This needs to be tested in the community and in the language committee precisely to see which option will be easier for use. Nonetheless, a general mastery of the orthography rules will be helpful in word division especially when the individual has some doubts.

5. Punctuation and Capitalisation

The punctuation marks and the rules that govern the Mbembe language are the same as those for English. The punctuation marks used for Mbembe are therefore as follows:

- 1) Full stop (.)
- 2) Question mark (?)
- 3) Exclamation mark (!)
- 4) Comma (,)
- 5) Colon (:)
- 6) Semicolon (;)
- 7) Quotation marks (“ ... ”) and (‘ ... ’)

5.1 Full Stop (.)

The full stop (.) in Mbembe marks the end of a declarative sentence.

Nyi ká yá nána.
we F2 come tomorrow
We shall come tomorrow.

ŋá ŋé byézi.
give me food
Give me food.

5.2 Question Mark (?)

The question mark (?) marks the end of an interrogative sentence.

Nyá á le ya ñè?
who did P1 come here
Who came here?

A yí ðo nyâ?
you IMPF go where
Where are you going?

5.3 Exclamation Mark (!)

The exclamation sign functions to express interjection, surprises, excitement and forceful commands as well as simple commands; as below;

Pwète!
stop
Stop!

5.4 Comma (,)

Commas are used to separate clauses or parallel words within a clause, as below:

È lè ɲɔ yí, pwèté ne gè.
he if deny PERF allow you him
If he has refused, allow him.

5.5 Quotation Marks (“ ” and ‘ ’)

Quotation marks (“...”) occur at the beginning and end of direct speech, as below:

Tùká ya bi le, “Nyá dù àbre ɲε?”
Tuka P2 ask that who touched bag my
Tuka asked, “Who touched my bag?”

5.6 Colon (:)

Byé átelɔhé a fɔ ge nu tú yi: àdá, fɔ, sù bàfɔ wo mra.
things these you buy them there market PART1: cutlass, knife, soap and with salt
Buy these things in the market: cutlass, knife, soap and salt.

5.7 Semi colon (;)

Bo yí mbà tê ngru éví mó mu; wa yi mbò éví mɔ.
they HAB born NEG man thief P3 NEG; people IMPF learn stealing just
Thieves are not born; people just learn how to steal.

5.8 Capitalisation

Capital letters are used at the beginning of sentences, used on proper nouns, used after a quotation mark.

At the beginning of a sentence:

Jè wo má nyâ?
home your be where
Where is your home?

Proper nouns:

Dò bé Àsă le e yá.
go call Asa that he come
Go and call Asa to come.

6. Need for further testing of the orthography

Any new orthography needs people to use it for a time before potential problems reveal themselves. Mbembe language with its complexity requires testing but readers should understand the complexity in the tone system and take note of the rules that have been given.

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