

MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH

A RAPID APPRAISAL SURVEY OF MBUKO

[DIAMARE DIVISION, FAR NORTH PROVINCE]

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1 Background**

This report describes a preliminary linguistic and sociolinguistic survey conducted in February 1994 in the Mbuko-speaking area in the Far North Province of Cameroon. The research was carried out by Miss Caroline Grant and Miss Elizabeth Jarvis of the Société Internationale de Linguistique (SIL).

The Mbuko language is spoken in the Canton of Doulek, Méri Subdivision, Diamaré Division, Far North Province of Cameroon.

The population of Mbuko speakers is approximately 10,000. This is the figure given in the Atlas Linguistique du Cameroun (ALCAM, Dieu and Renaud 1983), and also in the 1982 census figures.

The Ethnologue (Grimes, 1992) gives 6,700 speakers. However, in 1992, a mother tongue speaker visited the local community leaders and gave an estimated population of more than 11,600. In ALCAM, the code for Mbuko is 132; in Ethnologue the language code is MQB.

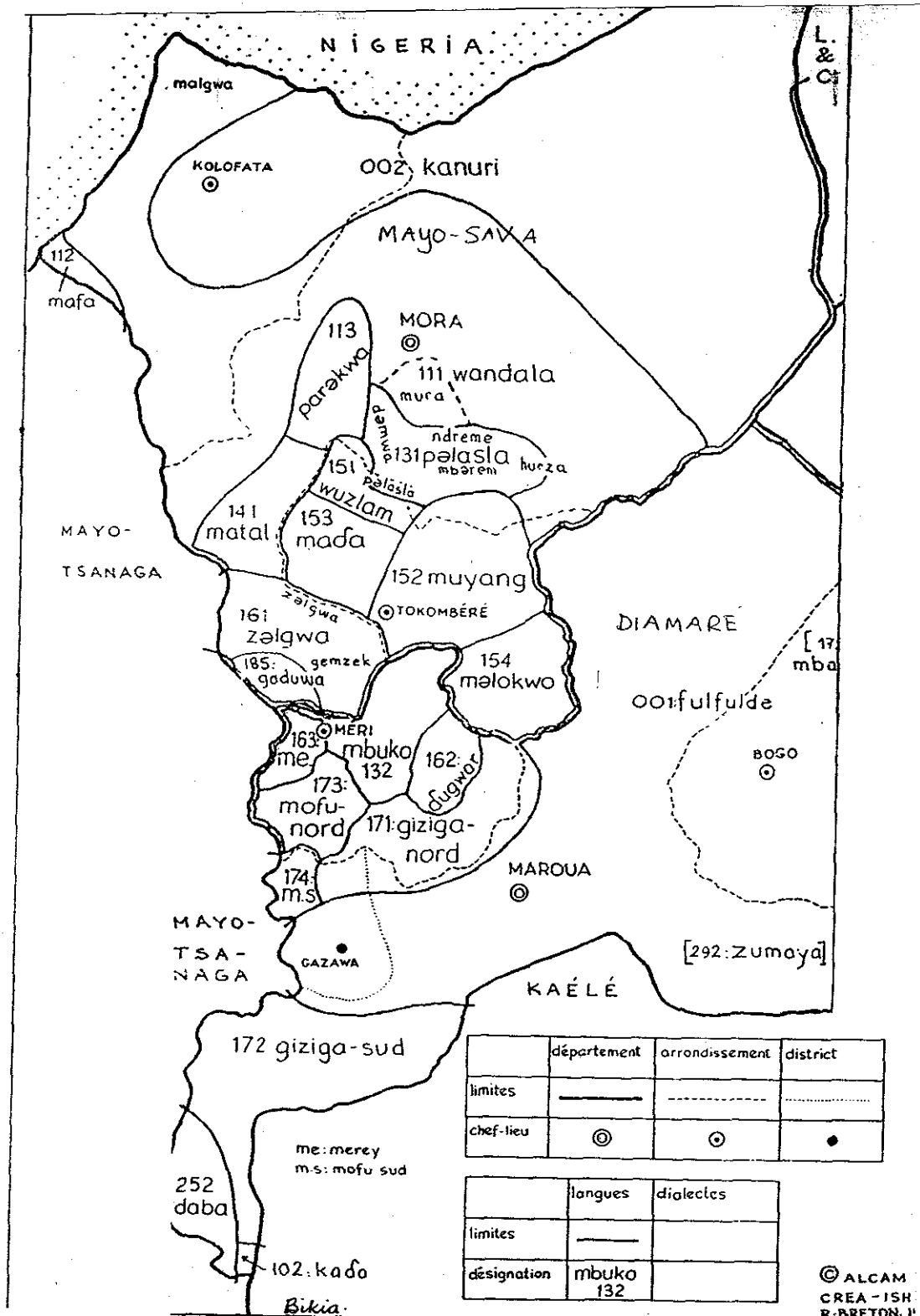
**Linguistic Description: Ethnologue: Chadic, Biu-Mandara, A, A.5.**

**ALCAM: Chadic, Centre, Wandala-Mafa, Mafa, North East.**

**Previous studies on Mbuko:**

Mr. Tanyi Mbuagbaw of the Cameroon Bible Translation Association (CABTA) visited the Mbuko area in December 1991, and has worked on a preliminary orthography (published 1992). Notes on the grammatical construction of the Mbuko language will be published as part of the Lexicon in March 1994, and a phonology will also be published in March 1994. Mr. Mbuagbaw, a speaker of the Kenyang language from South West Province, also took a 2,000 item wordlist in Mbuko.

Map showing the extent of the Mbuko-speaking area, and surrounding languages.



## **1.2 Purpose of the Survey**

The purpose of this survey was as follows:

- to assess the need for standardisation in the Mbuko language, by means of questionnaires and interviews;
- to assess the likely level of local support and commitment to a language standardisation project in the Mbuko language;
- to determine the dialectical make-up of the Mbuko language situation.

### **2.2.0 PROCEDURES**

This survey made use of a method known as Rapid Appraisal. This approach is characterised by its limited goals (to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation in a particular area), and by its specific, non-technical procedures (usually limited to informal interviews with administrative and traditional authorities, church and mission leaders, and group and individual questionnaires, where deemed necessary). Other data may also be collected where relevant, such as additional linguistic data, and information on the community's felt needs for development.

Throughout the survey, three major areas were kept under consideration:

- (a) the dialect situation and the level of comprehension of related speech forms, and the corresponding attitudes;
- (b) possible bilingualism with languages of wider communication (particularly with French and Fulfuldé), and its extent, as well as corresponding attitudes;
- (c) the viability of the language and the feasibility of a language development project, as revealed in overall language attitudes and reported patterns of language use.

This particular research was carried out by means of two interviews, each with a group of Mbuko community leaders. One such interview was held in the village of Gadgalao, the second in the village of Dalgaza (also known as Ndolouko). Interviews were also held with church leaders from the Union des Eglises Evangéliques du Nord Cameroun (from now on referred to as the UEENC), from the Roman Catholic community, and from the Seventh Day Adventist Church. An ALCAM 120 item wordlist was also taken and recorded on cassette, with a Mbuko speaker from the village of Dalbaye.

### **3.0 RESULTS AND EVALUATION**

#### **3.1 Dialect Situation and Inherent Intercomprehension**

According to the data collected, there is only one dialect form of the Mbuko language spoken in the language area. Although there may be very slight differences of pronunciation and an extremely small number of differences in lexicon, there is apparently no difficulty in comprehension between all of the Mbuko-speaking villages. A small child of about 5 years old has no problems understanding someone from another Mbuko village, even if he/she has not had any previous contact with speakers from there. Mbuko speakers see themselves as being one people, united, not only by their language but also by other cultural and social ties. Most of the Mbuko villages are accessible at all times of the year, and the two which are cut off in rainy season are only inaccessible for 2 or 3 days at the most.

##### **3.2.0 Multilingualism:**

##### **3.2.1 Neighbouring languages**

Languages which neighbour with Mbuko (with their ALCAM codes) are as follows:

Meri (163);  
Mofu-nord (173);  
Dugwor (162);  
Giziga-nord (172);  
Zulgo (161); and Gemzek, a variant of Zulgo;  
Muyang (152); and  
Melokwo (154).

Only Fulfuldé is spoken uniformly as a language of wider communication throughout the community. Other languages are spoken as second languages depending on their proximity to the neighbouring language community, as shown in the following table.

| MBUKO VILLAGE | NEIGHBOURING LANGUAGE |
|---------------|-----------------------|
| Dalbaye       | Meri                  |
| Wangotozom    | Meri                  |
| Dalgaza       | Meri                  |
| Zlengatak     | Meri                  |
| Zlengatak     | Dugwor                |
| Dugwor        | Dugwor                |
| Doulek        | Melokwo               |
| Mandavaye     | Melokwo               |
| Meklopo       | Gemzek                |
| Magdzalang    | Muyang                |
| Bize          | Mandara               |

In the above cases, there are Mbuko mother tongue speakers who are able to understand, to a certain extent, the language spoken by their neighbours. Some Mbuko speakers can apparently speak the second language concerned, but it seems that in most cases, there is only a very superficial level of comprehension. However, unless a Mbuko person has had sufficient contact with speakers of the neighbouring language, he will not understand it, and will be compelled to use Fulfuldé in order to communicate. Unless one of his parents is a speaker from the neighbouring language group, a small child cannot understand the other language.

### 3.2.2 Languages of Wider Communication

#### Fulfuldé:

Fulfuldé, as stated above, is spoken as a language of wider communication by many Mbuko speakers. However, it is used only for reasons of trade and commerce, and with non-Mbuko speakers. Fulfuldé is also used in certain churches, as shown in section 3.3.1 below. It does not seem to be understood at a very deep level, and the majority of women, children, and elderly people do not understand it well, if at all.

#### French:

French is the language of instruction in the Mbuko area's primary schools, as well as in the secondary school at Méri, which serves the Mbuko area. It should be noted that there have not been government primary schools in the Mbuko area for longer than ten years.

It was reported that many Mbuko children are often unable to complete their primary education because of financial constraints, and a very small number complete their secondary studies. There are some Mbuko speakers who have learned French as a result of moving away to larger towns, or as a result of pursuing studies, for example,

at Bible school. Nevertheless, the number of Mbuko speakers who are highly proficient in spoken French is, at the time of writing, not large. It is quite likely that this situation will change in the future. At the time of the survey, it did not seem likely that use of French would encroach upon the use of the mother tongue, at least in the immediate future.

### **3.3.0 VITALITY AND VIABILITY:**

#### **3.3.1 Language Use within the General Community:**

Mbuko is used in all domestic domains, and in communication with other mother tongue speakers. The mother tongue is spoken at all times within the home, in the fields, among friends of the same age, and in all contact with other Mbuko speakers.

Fulfuldé is employed in the larger markets where contact with non-mother tongue speakers occurs.

#### **Use of the mother tongue in church setting:**

Most of the Mbuko population are reportedly churchgoers of some kind, and there is a smaller group of Muslims, which make up for about one fifth of the entire community.

#### **Union des Eglises Evangéliques du Nord Cameroun (UEENC):**

During the church services, the Bible readings, the sermon and the prayers and songs. are all interpreted into Mbuko from Fulfuldé, because the women, children, and older people do not understand Fulfuldé sufficiently well.

The UEENC have established a mother tongue language committee of approximately ten members, some of whom live outside the language area. In 1989 a mother tongue Mbuko translator, Robert Nelezek, was appointed to work on language development. He has already translated considerable amounts of the New Testament into his own language. The UEENC seem to be well motivated to producing Scriptures in the mother tongue.

#### **The Roman Catholic Church:**

Bible portions from the Lectionary are translated orally into Mbuko week by week by some of the catechists. The liturgy and some songs and hymns are translated orally into Mbuko. There seems to be a strong desire to have mother tongue Scriptures among the Mbuko Catholics with whom we spoke.

#### **Seventh Day Adventist Church:**

Pastor Medjara Pierre and his Assistant Pastor, Bouba Mattieu were both interviewed in the village of Ndoloko, where there is an Adventist Church. Bible readings, sermons, and songs are interpreted from Fulfuldé into Mbuko because the women and the children do not understand Fulfuldé. The overall head of the Adventist Churches in the Far North, Pastor Paul Klavac (who is a mother tongue Mbuko speaker) feels that there is a definite need for Scripture translation in the Mbuko language.

### 3.3.2 Migration patterns and language use

From the information obtained, it seems that traditionally, Mbuko people can marry people from almost any other ethnic group, with the following exceptions:

(1) the Dugwor in the village of Mikiri; (2) with the Meri people; (3) and with the people from northern Gemzek.

Otherwise, it is common for Mbuko women to marry someone from a neighbouring language, with the result that often the children from such marriages will adopt the language not only of their mother, but also of their father's family and of the host community. This also applies to the Mbuko men who tend to stay within the language area and who can marry women from the surrounding villages, with the same exceptions applying as above.

French is the language of instruction in the six primary schools in the Mbuko area. However, the schools have been in existence for less than ten years, and there are, at present, a small number of children who have continued their education into secondary school. Thus, only a small number of younger adults are proficient in French. The secondary schools are found in Tokombéré and in Meri, where the Mbuko students are exposed to speakers of other languages.

Once Mbuko children have stopped attending school (usually during their Primary education, as above), they usually help out in the family fields until they are old enough to look for employment in the nearby major towns, such as Maroua. Many such young people have settled in Maroua, and return home to their village periodically, but only return to settle at retirement age. Often the younger people return when it is harvest season in the village. Most Mbuko return to their own villages during Christmas. According to the groups which were interviewed, most of the young people stay in or near the Mbuko language area. However, depending on changes and developments in the economic climate in Cameroon, this pattern may change in the near future, and should be taken into consideration before the implementation of a language development programme by SIL.



### **3.3.3 SOCIO-LINGUISTIC FACTORS (cf. Watters 1990)**

#### **Homogeneity of the linguistic community (social cohesion)**

The Mbuko-speaking community seems to be both sociologically and linguistically homogenous. The Mbuko villages are well linked by unsurfaced roads, and only two villages are cut off during rainy season for 2-3 days at the most. The Mbuko people participate in traditional cultural activities together, which provide yet another unifying factor in the community as a whole.

#### **Presence of non-mother tongue speakers within the community:**

In the village of Gadgalao, we were told that there were people from Méri and Giziga who had settled there; in Ndoloko village, we were told that outsiders do not tend to settle in the village, and that the only outsiders who stay temporarily are Giziga traders.

From these patterns, it seems that the Mbuko language is still being spoken by the majority of people in the Mbuko area, and that those who return from other towns and cities continue to speak their mother tongue when they return.

#### **Openness to change and development**

Mbuko people seem generally to be open to change and development. There is a Mbuko development committee in Maroua, which is seeking to build a development centre in Dalbaye village. Apparently, many of the educated men resident in Maroua are Muslims, and the Development Committee is made up both of Christians and Muslims.

#### **Presence at a local level of a middle-aged leadership**

Within the Mbuko community itself, there seem to be a large enough number of leaders who would be able to take up responsibility when the present leaders are no longer there. Most of the existing leaders are aged between 30 - 40 years, and are resident in the Mbuko villages. The traditional community leaders on the Cantonal level are Fulfuldé-speaking Muslims, who for the most part are not Mbuko speakers.

From the sociolinguistic factors described above, it may be said that the Mbuko community is a changing community. However, it seems that changes are taking place slowly. For example, most Mbuko have not been able to obtain even a primary education until very recently, because of the lack of schools; the provision of local health centres and dispensaries has been fairly recent, and many medicines are not easily afforded by the majority of the people, who are thus obliged to resort to more traditional practices and treatments.

According to Watters' paper, the crucial time to begin a mass literacy project (if that is what is desired by the community) is now, ie, when the community is in the process of change, and yet where social cohesion is still intact, and where traditional patterns of leadership can be of benefit to such a programme.

#### **4.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR STANDARDISATION**

According to the data obtained during this preliminary evaluation, it seems that the Mbuko-speaking community would benefit from the standardisation of their language into written form. This may well encourage schoolchildren to benefit more fully from the education which is currently offered to them in the medium of French in government-sponsored schools. It has been proven, in other situations within Cameroon, that children who learn to read their own mother tongue first, have less difficulty learning how to read in one of the national languages, ie, English or French. The Mbuko situation would seem to be an ideal situation for the commencement of a mother tongue literacy language project.

There is an obvious need within the Christian community, in the Protestant, Adventist and Catholic churches, for translation of materials for worship and also of the Scriptures. It seems that the Mbuko-speaking Muslims would be open to learning how to read and write their mother tongue as well.

As noted above, in section 1.1, some preliminary linguistic work has already been started, notably by Mr. Tanyi Mbuagbaw of CABTA. His work has actually complemented the work of the UEENC mother tongue translator, Mr. Robert Nelezek. It seems that each of the main Christian denominations (ie, the UEENC and the Roman Catholic Church) is interested in promoting Bible translation and literacy initiatives in the mother tongue. It is highly recommended that these efforts be co-ordinated, in such a way that work is not unnecessarily repeated and time wasted.

Any initiatives towards language development would have to be supported by the entire community for them to succeed. Therefore, we would particularly encourage those who are already committed to the development of the Mbuko language to gain the interest and the widespread support of the Mbuko people, and involve them on a local level with the work.

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