

**MINISTRY OF SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL RESEARCH**

**A RAPID APPRAISAL SURVEY  
OF MENGAKA (ALCAM 930)  
BAMBOUTOS DIVISION, WEST PROVINCE**

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## 1. Background

This report describes a rapid-appraisal survey of Mengaka, a Bamileke language of the West Province of Cameroon, carried out on 17-18 May 1993 by Lawrence Seguin of SIL (Société Internationale de Linguistique) and Domche-Teko Engelbert of the Department of African Languages and Linguistics, Faculty of Arts, Letters and Social Sciences, University of Yaoundé I.

Mengaka is listed as code 930 in the Atlas linguistique du Cameroun or ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:123) and code XMG in Ethnologue (Grimes 1992:197). Its linguistic classification as given in ALCAM and Ethnologue is as follows:

ALCAM: Niger-Kordofan, Niger-Congo, Bénoué-Congo, Bantoïde, Bantou, Grassfield, Est-Grassfield, Bamiléké-Central

Ethnologue: Niger-Congo, Atlantic-Congo, Volta-Congo, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Southern, Broad Bantu, Wide Grassfields, Narrow Grassfields, Mbam-Nkam, Bamileke.

Alternate names listed in Ethnologue are Gham, Bagam, and Megaka; Gham and Bagam are also listed in ALCAM. Neither ALCAM nor Ethnologue list any dialects.

The Mengaka-speaking area comprises the villages of Bagam and Bamendjing in Galim Subdivision, east of Mbouda, the administrative seat of Bamboutos Division in West Province. Galim is a "commune rurale" that is a part of Bagam village. Appendix A shows the location of the Mengaka area with respect to the town of Mbouda and the neighbouring languages.

There are approximately 20,000 speakers according to 1987 census figures obtained from the Galim subdivision office (personal communication, cf. Appendix B). The term "Mengaka" will be used throughout this report to describe the language.

During pre-survey research in Yaoundé, no evidence was found of prior linguistic studies or standardisation efforts in Mengaka. ALCAM (p. 159) does not classify Mengaka as a language for which standardisation is possible or immediately desirable. In 1987, a Mengaka speaker took the "Découvre ta langue" course offered by SIL in Yaoundé. During the survey itself the team was shown a 1993 calendar written in French orthography.

## 2. The Survey

### 2.1 Goal of the Survey and Procedures

A rapid-appraisal survey was carried out to clarify the need for codification of Mengaka by attempting to gain a general overview of the sociolinguistic situation of the language.

Rapid-appraisal surveys are based on the use of specific, non-technical means that take relatively little time, primarily interviews with groups and individuals. Thus, useful information can generally be acquired in one or two days per village visited. Rapid-appraisal methods provide an overall impression of potential need for codification through limited subjective reports from local inhabitants, and this may be sufficient for ascertaining need. In-depth linguistic and sociolinguistic research would yield a more comprehensive picture if unanswered questions were left after the survey. The pitfalls of self-reports have been well documented (e.g. see Seguin 1991).

Three major areas are considered in a rapid-appraisal survey:

a) **Dialect situation:** What are the perceived mutually comprehensible dialects of the language and the level of intercomprehension between them? It is assumed that two speech varieties may be dialects of the same language if, 1) speakers perceive them as such, and/or 2) children are reported already to understand the other speech variety by age 5 or 6. Otherwise, it is possible that the other speech variety is a separate language, comprehension of which is more or less easily acquired depending on linguistic similarity and the speaker's exposure to it.

b) **Multilingualism:** What is the extent of oral and comprehension proficiency in languages of wider communication (LWCs) as well as in geographically and linguistically neighbouring languages?

c) **Language vitality and viability:** What is the potential for success of a language development project in a given language, as indicated by reported patterns of language use? An indicator of vitality is that the mother tongue (hereafter referred to as "L1") is actively used in the home (between parents and children and among siblings) and in village settings (conversation between mother-tongue speakers, traditional gatherings).

Consideration is also given to the attitudes of the community under study towards L1, other dialects, related languages, or languages of wider communication with which they have contact. Attitudes help predict the acceptability of literature materials in L1. In this report the definitions of "dialect" and "language" are those given for the French words "dialecte" and "langue" in ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:19). "Speech form" or, alternatively, "speech variety," is broader in meaning and corresponds to that of "variété" in ALCAM (Dieu and Renaud 1983:19).

The specific procedures used during this survey were as follows:

**Word Lists:** Two 120-item ALCAM word lists were collected: one from 4 middle-aged men at Bamendjing, and the other from 5 speakers of varying ages at Bagam. These represented the two major villages of the Mengaka area. (Galim is under the Bagam paramount chief.) A synchronic comparison for lexical similarity was carried out in

Yaoundé after the survey, and a percentage of lexical similarity calculated. The lists are available through the SIL Survey Department in Yaoundé.

**Group interviews:** Two standard rapid-appraisal group interviews were conducted with leaders of the Bagam and Bamendjing communities. More specifically, in Bagam the team interviewed three older leaders of the community as well as two young men in their 20's, and in Bamendjing a group of 5 community leaders, including the paramount chief's representative. In neither case was the paramount chief himself present.

Besides the three above-mentioned areas of concern, questions were asked concerning migration patterns, intermarriage, and local development, where relevant to L1 vitality and the potential success of a language development project.

Because of SIL's specific interest in Bible translation, interviews were also held with leaders of Christian churches from the two communities surveyed, the major denomination being the Eglise Evangélique du Cameroun (EEC). The pertinence of church use of local languages to future language development lies in the fact that, in other communities, churches have been the primary users of materials written in the local language.

**Individual questionnaires:** No individual questionnaires were filled out during this survey.

### 3. Presentation of Analysis

#### 3.1 Dialect Situation and Intercomprehension

The inhabitants of Bagam and Bamendjing speak a single, homogeneous language called "Mengaka" [mɛngááká], with no reported variations in pronunciation or vocabulary. The area covers that shown in Figure 1.

The inhabitants of Bagam and Bamendjing call themselves "Ghap" [ɣap] and "Benzin" [benzin] respectively.

Lexical similarity analysis showed a 91% degree of similarity between the two lists, with a margin of error of 3%. Slight phonetic differences were noted between the two lists.

#### 3.2 Multilingualism

##### 3.2.1 Knowledge of neighbouring languages

The language groups surrounding Mengaka include "the Balis" or "Mungaka" (including the villages of Baligam, Baligashu, Balikumbat, and Baligansin), Bati, Bamun, Bamenyam, Ngomba (whom they call [bɛndap]) and Ngombale (whom they call [ngɛmbaa]).

**"The Balis":** Though not bordering directly with the Mengaka area, these villages were discussed with the Bagam group. They were not discussed with the Bamendjing group, however.

The information given was conflicting. Some statements seemed to indicate Mengaka was closely related to the speech varieties of these villages, whereas other statements seemed to indicate big differences. A clear statement was not obtained as to intercomprehension either.

**Bati:** Bati (or "Ti") is a dialect of Mungaka (ALCAM 900) separated from the main body of Mungaka speakers. The Bagam group reported there to be reciprocal comprehension, but contact was needed first for a Mengaka speaker to understand Bati. The conclusion, therefore, is that Mengaka people have extensive contact with the Bati.

The Bagam group's responses contrasted with the Bamendjing group's assertion that generally only those who lived on the border with the Bati people could understand their language. Nevertheless, the Bamendjing have a lot of contact with the Bati, whom they consider a separate people.

**Bamun:** Both groups said that there was widespread comprehension of Bamun, especially among the older people, but it appears to be less extensive in Bagam than in Bamendjing. In Bamendjing the group said that they tend to speak to Bamun people in Bamun, and the Bamun respond in their own language. Given that Bamendjing is right on the border with the Bamun-speaking area, it is not surprising that there would be greater contact with the Bamun and thus a greater knowledge of their language. Both groups stated that young people tend to use French.

**Bamenyam:** Only the Bamendjing group was asked about Bamenyam, and they said that Bamenyam is very difficult for them to understand.

**Babadjou/Bamessingue, Ngomba:** The Bamendjing group said that they do not understand these languages.

An interesting point made by the Bagam group was that there is generalised comprehension of Mengaka in Galim Subdivision, even among Bamenyam and Bati speakers, as they constitute the most populous linguistic group in the area.

### 3.2.2 Knowledge of languages of wider communication

In Bamboutos Division, as in West Province in general, French is a major language of wider communication (LWC) through its use in education and local government administration. Cameroon Pidgin English ("Pidgin") also has considerable influence, as Bamboutos Division borders on the English-speaking North-West Province. During the survey it was also discovered that there is widespread, but apparently uneven knowledge of Bamun in the area (cf. section 3.2.1).

**Pidgin:** Perceptions differed between the two groups concerning the ability to speak and understand Pidgin. In Bagam, the interview group reported that older men and many young people know Pidgin, but that older women have trouble communicating in it. In Bamendjing, both old men and old women, especially "bayam-sellams" (market women), are reported to speak and understand Pidgin. The young people do not know Pidgin but tend to be more proficient in French.

**French:** In both villages it was affirmed that French proficiency is quite widespread among young people, but much less so among older people. Nevertheless, as the Bagam group stated, there are certain isolated areas of the Mengaka area where French is not spoken.

Given the reported widespread knowledge of Bamun and French, bilingualism in these languages appears relevant to evaluating the need for language standardisation in Mengaka.

### 3.3 Language Vitality and Viability

#### 3.3.1 Language Use

L1 (whether in Bagam or Bamendjing) is reported to be commonly used in the home, during work in the fields, and with friends in the village. Other languages appear to be used primarily for contact with outsiders, such as at markets, clinics, or government offices in Galim. Both groups felt confident that the Mengaka language would not disappear with time, even though the Bagam group did complain about the "deformation" of the language by young people, who were mixing it with French. Still, they did not feel that these changes would ultimately result in the Mengaka language dying out.

#### 3.3.2 Church use of local language

Two EEC pastors were interviewed: a man in his 40's who pastors the EEC church in Galim, and a man in his 60's who pastors the EEC church in Bagam-Centre. Their responses revealed a mixed use of French and Mengaka during church services. Songs could be in a variety of languages, either French, Mengaka, or Bangangté, the last of which used to be the main church language. Songs sung in Mengaka are not written down.

The liturgy is only in French. Bible readings and sermons are given first in French and then interpreted into Mengaka by lay preachers who prepare the interpretations in advance. Notices are in Mengaka and sometimes in other local languages and French, depending on whether outsiders are present.

Language use outside of church services depends on the group which meets. Doctrinal teaching is carried out in Mengaka for adults and French for young people ("élèves et intellectuels"). Choirs conduct their meetings in Mengaka and French. The Union chrétienne des jeunes gens (covering ages 15-60) conducts its twice-weekly meetings only in French. The group's executive also holds its meetings in French only.

The pastors admitted the possibility of having two services, one in French and one in Mengaka, if written materials were available in Mengaka.

### 3.4 Attitudes toward the Mother Tongue

Both groups expressed keen interest in seeing the mother tongue developed into written form. As one of the Bagam interviewees said, "Le développement de la langue mengaka est capital pour nous." They would like to see it introduced as a medium of instruction at Cours élémentaire 1 and 2 levels, as well as used for personal literacy within the general population. It does not matter whether the variety used is from Bagam or Bamendjing, as there is no difference. The Bamendjing group also responded positively to the idea of using Bamun for these same two purposes, although this was not the case for the Bagam group, who were interested only in seeing Mengaka used.

Despite this interest, to date no real efforts have been made in the community to systematically develop Mengaka into written form, and those attempts that have been made have been restricted to calendars and church songs.

A young Mengaka student took SIL's "Découvre ta langue" course in 1987 and produced a paper, "Ze'e Ngwe'e Mengaka," but apart from attempting to write or translate some church songs in Mengaka, he has not pursued this initiative. He did say though that the survey team's visit renewed his interest. SIL also has on file a letter from a local pastor requesting assistance in putting Mengaka into written form.

In Bamendjing there is an active development committee whose focus has been on building a "foyer" for the community. There are many elites living outside the community who are active in contributing to community development. The Bagam development committee, for its part, has been inactive for 2 years.

### 3.5 Socio-economic Factors

Watters (1990) describes three socio-economic factors that affect the nature and development of language programmes: social cohesion, attitudes towards development, and middle-aged leadership. Each factor is defined in positive or negative terms. (In reality, a community can fall within a wide range of values for each factor, but the bipolar relationship is suggested for simplicity's sake.) A positive value for each factor reflects a community in which conditions are likely to contribute to the successful development and implementation of a language programme.

#### 3.5.1 Social cohesion: positive

The Mengaka community shows signs of social cohesion, though not in every respect. On the positive side, linguistically Bagam

and Bamendjing are united by a homogeneous Mengaka language. Customs are also reported to be identical. Geographically, there are no major topographical features separating Bagam from Bamendjing, although some quarters were reported to be rather isolated. The generally poor quality of roads in the area probably makes travel difficult during rainy season. Politically, Bagam and Bamendjing are both governed under Galim subdivision.

As for factors which do not contribute to cohesion, the Mengaka community is governed between two paramount chiefs, although there does not appear to be animosity between the two groups. Economically, Bagam is much closer to Mbouda than Bamendjing is, and yet Bamendjing is connected to Mbouda by a good road that is regularly served by public transport. Bamendjing also has extensive contacts with Bati and Bamun; it is not known if this is the case between Bagam, Bati and Bamun as well. In terms of religion, the population is divided amongst Muslims, Christians, and those who follow traditional practices.

#### 3.5.2 Attitudes towards development: positive

Attitudes towards development are positive, as evidenced by the existence of development committees in both Bagam and Bamendjing (although the Bagam committee is currently inactive). When the Bagam committee was active, it dealt with issues such as opening up isolated areas, improving water supplies, rural electrification, health, and education.

There is a large number of schools in the Mengaka area, most of which are at primary level, although there is a college (Collège d'enseignement secondaire, CES) in Galim. Most children go to primary school, but few go on to further studies because of the lack of means.

#### 3.5.3 Presence of middle-aged leadership: positive

Middle-aged leadership appears to be present in the community, as evidence by the fact that both interview groups consisted of people in the 35-60 age range. Both groups mentioned that rural exodus, a problem in the past, is now reversing itself, with most young people staying in the village or returning to the village from the cities because of the dearth of employment. Most of these may be the less-educated segments of the community who are not likely to assume leadership. On the other hand, there could still be those, like one of the young men interviewed in Bagam, who have a university education and yet are obliged to stay in the village. Men such as these, as they grow older, may develop into the type of middle-aged leadership that could help bring into fruition a mother-tongue development programme.

#### 3.5.4 Classification of Mengaka community

Using Watters' classification, it appears that the Mengaka community is either a changing or a changed community. The



difference is that a changing community's middle-aged leadership is still present, whereas a changed community's is not. Watters suggests (1990:6.7.8) that language programme development and implementation are likely to be more successful in changing communities, where the leadership can actively promote the programme. In changed communities, however, where the leadership is not present, he maintains that the best type of literacy programme would be one which focused on specialised interest groups, namely, churches, cultural associations, cooperatives and so on.

Owing to the division of the community among Christians, Muslims, and traditionalists, the need for written materials may not be equally perceived by each group, making community-wide literacy programmes difficult. Although churches appear to be greatest potential users of written material, the benefit could accrue to the entire community, provided materials relate to issues of wider interest, such as agriculture and health.

#### 4. Recommendations concerning Standardisation

Mengaka appears to meet the criteria for a language standardisation project: the language is in daily use, no other language seems to be replacing it on a wide scale, and attitudes towards mother tongue development are positive. Before a project is initiated, however, a more in-depth study of French bilingualism should be carried out, especially as it affects young people. The influence and potential acceptability of Bamun as the primary written means of communication is also well worth further consideration. Since the language is perceived to have only one variety, it should not be necessary to choose a reference standard; nevertheless, leaders of both Bagam and Bamendjing should be brought together to agree on where a language team should settle.

#### 5. ALCAM Changes

It is recommended that "Ghap" and "Benzin" be added as alternate names for Bagam and Bamendjing respectively.

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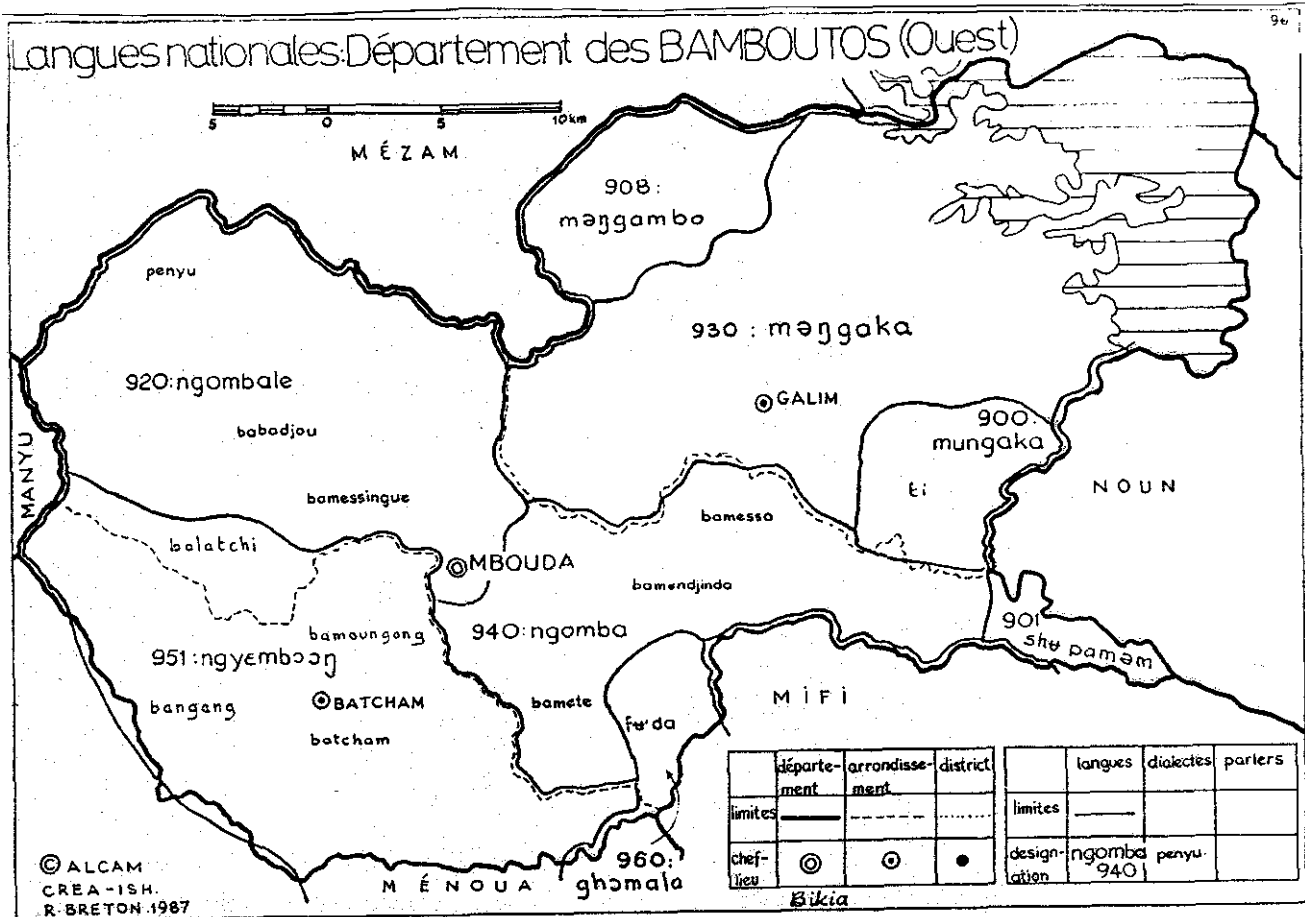
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APPENDIX A

LOCATION OF MENGAKA-SPEAKING AREA

(Source: Breton and Fohtung 1992:111)



## APPENDIX B

### CENSUS FIGURES, GALIM SUBDIVISION

(Source: Galim Subdivisional Office, May 1993)

Area: 513 sq. km.

	Area	1987 pop'n
Bagam	291 sq. km.	17,468
Bamendjing	115	3,566
Bamenyam	65	4,497
Bati	42	2,768
		<hr/>
		28,299

- 1) Galim urban centre has between 1,000 and 2,000 inhabitants.
- 2) Natives ("autochtones") outnumber outsiders (estimated 75%/25% ratio).