

MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION, COMPUTER SERVICES  
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BACA (BONGO) SURVEY REPORT

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Background

Baca(1), or Nubaca, is a speech form found in the Centre Province of Cameroon, Mbam Division, Bokito Sub-Division. It is spoken in the village of Bongo in the Yangben canton (traditional chiefdom). The present population is estimated by the administration at some 800 persons.

It is a Bantu language, counted by Guthrie as a variety of Yambasa (A.62) in the Sanaga group but with its own codes in the Linguistic Atlas of Cameroon (ALCAM; Dieu 1983) and the Ethnologue (Grimes 1988a,b). In all, six speech forms are included in Guthrie's A.62 (followed in parentheses by the name of the central village):

Name	ALCAM	Ethnologue Code
Gunu, or Nugunu	541	YAS (Nu Gunu)
Elip, or Libie	542	EKM
Mmaala (Begni)	542	MMU
Yangben	542	YAV
Baca (Bongo)	543	BAF (Nu Baca)
Mbule (Mbola)	544	MLB (Dumbule)

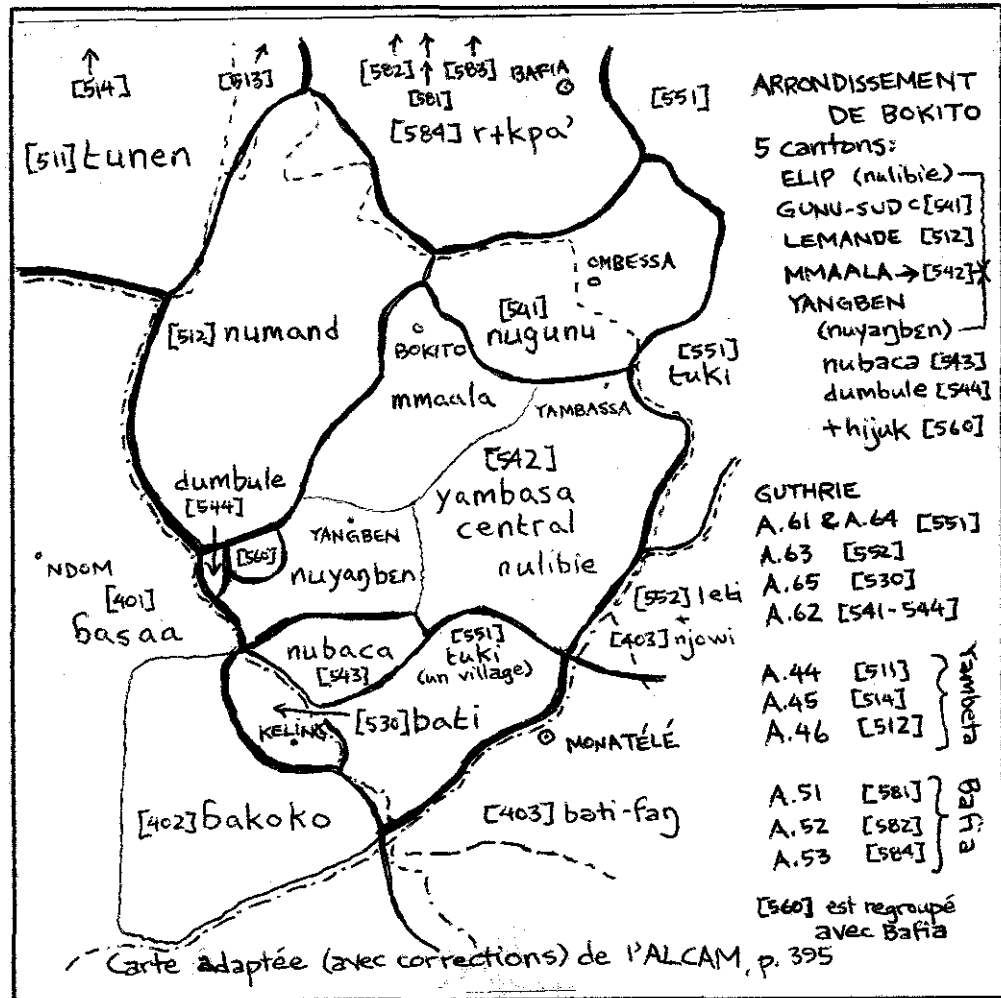
Table 1 Yambassa speech forms.

For lack of a single name for the speech varieties subsumed in its number 542, ALCAM uses the term "Central Yambasa". This contrasts with Gunu, which is "Northern Yambasa" and Baca, which is "Southern Yambasa" (one may suppose that Mbule is another southern Yambassa dialect). Incidentally, there is a village called Yambassa in the Elip canton.

To these may be added a seventh speech form, Bati, classified by Guthrie as A.65 (ALCAM number 530, Ethnologue code BTC).

The other speech forms assigned to Guthrie's "Sanaga group" (A.60) are Tuki or Sanaga (Ngoro A.61 and Bacenga A.64 correspond to two of what ALCAM lists as six dialects of Tuki [551]) and Leti (Mangisa A.63, ALCAM Leti [552]).

Of these speech forms, Yangben and Mbule are also spoken in the Yangben canton and are the neighbouring languages to the north and northwest. An isolated Sanaga-speaking village, Nyamanga I, is found to the east (still in the Yangben canton), on the road to the Elip canton. There are no villages to the southeast until one crosses the Sanaga river. To the south and southwest of Bongo, across the Liwa river, Bati is spoken. There are four Bati villages in the Bati canton, Ndom Subdivision, Sanaga-Maritime Division of the Littoral Province. A rapid appraisal survey was conducted in Bati in conjunction with the present survey (Grant 1992).



No Scripture has been prepared in Baca, and apparently no linguistic research has been published on the language. At least three unpublished word lists have been collected, of which two were available to the survey team (see below). A survey of the languages of the Bokito Subdivision, including Bongo (=Baca), Mbola (=Mbule), Yangben, Elip, Mmaala, and Gunu (southern dialect) was done in 1981 by Terri Scruggs and Carrie Taylor (linguistic report Scruggs 1982, sociolinguistic report Taylor 1982). The northern dialect of Gunu, spoken in the Ombessa Subdivision, and Bati, in the Ndom Subdivision, were not included in their survey.

Included in Scruggs' report are their lexical data (approximately 175 items) and a lexicostatistical analysis of the data. According to this analysis, Baca (Bongo) is 73% cognate with Yangben, 65-67% cognate with Elip and Mmaala, and 62% cognate with Mbule (Mbola). (The percentage for Bongo with Gunu was not calculated.) Based on the rule of thumb that speech forms showing less than 80% similar lexicon are probably separate languages, she concludes that Elip, Mmaala, and Yangben are "closely related but distinct languages" and that the varieties spoken at Mbola and at Bongo are "entirely distinct languages" as well (Scruggs 1982:17,18). Gunu is a sixth distinct language.

Additional lexical data (approximately 120 items) had been collected in 1976-77 by Christiane Paulian for Nugunu (=Gunu) (northern dialect), Mmaala, Yangben, Dumbule (=Mbule) and Nubaca (=Baca). Lexicostatistical analysis of these data indicated that 88% of the Baca vocabulary in the sample was similar to the Yangben data, 79% was similar to the Mmaala and Mbule data, and 74% was similar to the Gunu data.

Finally, an analysis by the author of a conflation of the eleven lists above and of a list taken in Bati in January 1992 (approximately 200 items) and using the inspection method to decide on plausible divisions into similarity classes yields the following figures (based on about 140 items):

Bati					
68	Mbule [two lists]				
70	79	BACA [two lists]			
66	77	89	Yangben [two lists]		
63	72	82	88	Mmaala [two lists]	
62	71	81	89	90	Elip
57	66	77	78	85	82 Gunu [two lists]

Table 2 Lexical similarity percentages for Baca and related tongues.

Because these figures are based on a small sample (fewer than 150 items), the "true" proportion of similar lexicon for any pair of speech forms could be three to six percentage points higher or lower. As a relative measure, however, they confirm the classification of Baca with the other Yambassa dialects, as Guthrie calls them, at least in the area of lexicon.

One interesting aspect of this table is signs of the influence of geographical proximity and population on similarity figures. Elip, Mmaala, and Yangben show the highest degree of similarity among them. They are spoken in the cantons of the same name, each of which borders the other two. Also, according to the Ethnologue (Grimes 1988a), there are at least two thousand speakers of each of these speech forms (Elip: 6000, Mmaala: 5000, and Yangben: 2000). Yangben probably has a higher proportion of similar vocabulary with Baca, which is spoken in the Yangben canton, than do Mmaala and Elip. Mmaala and Elip, similarly, probably have a higher proportion of similar vocabulary with Gunu than Yangben does. The Gunu-speaking area borders on the Mmaala and Elip cantons, but not the Yangben canton. The number of Nugunu speakers is listed at 35,000 speakers, but it appears that the centre is outside the Bokito subdivision. The other two speech forms (Bati and Mbule) are spoken to the west of Yangben, each by fewer than one thousand people. A slight "chaining" effect is also visible for Bati and Mbule: the similarity figures for each of these speech varieties with the other five seem to decrease slightly as the geographical distance increases.

Taylor lists "Bongo" and "Mbola" as dialects of "Yangben", but calls Mmaala and Elip separate "languages". According to her interview data, however, "Mbola" is not well understood in three of the other four villages of the Yangben canton; also, only one of the six respondents from those villages said that people from Mbola could understand his

speech. Furthermore, some of the responses from the two people from Bongo were so divergent from those of the others from the Yangben canton that these responses are presented separately (Taylor 1982:12). Taylor's use of "language" and "dialect", therefore, probably reflects administrative divisions rather than linguistic or even sociolinguistic considerations.

### 1.2 The Survey

The Baca Rapid Appraisal Survey was carried out in conjunction with the Bati Rapid Appraisal Survey in January 1992 by Engelbert Domché of the University of Yaoundé and SIL members Jürg Stalder, Douglas Boone and Caroline Grant. The data collection in Bongo village took place on 29 and 30 January.

### 1.3 Purpose of the Survey

Baca is listed in the Bible Translation Needs Bulletin 1 (Grimes 1988b:56) as a possible translation need, which is to say, little or nothing was known about the need of the people of Bongo for local-language Scriptures. Accordingly, the purpose of the present survey was to revise this status to either "probable translation need" or "unlikely translation need" by means of a rapid appraisal of the sociolinguistic situation in the Baca-speaking area(2).

More broadly, the goal of the Baca survey was to evaluate the need for codification (development of a standard written form) and Bible translation in Baca.

The survey team had just spent two days researching the Bati speech form, across the river, and had heard that there was a special tie between the speakers of these two tongues. A secondary goal, therefore, was to determine if the people of Bongo also felt a special affinity with the Bati people. If the two groups consider themselves to be one people, the whole sociolinguistic situation in the two groups would need to be taken into consideration before recommendations were made concerning whether or not to develop their speech forms.

As the linguistic similarity between Baca and the Yambassa dialects in the broadest sense, notably Gunu, Mmaala, Elip, and Yangben was already established to the team's satisfaction, no linguistic data were collected. Instead, research was limited to sociolinguistic questioning.

## 2.0 PROCEDURES

The Baca survey was conducted using a recently developed approach 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 specific, non-technical procedures (usually limited to conversations with politico-administrative authorities and church and mission leaders, informal interviews, and group and individual questionnaires(3)). Other information, such as additional linguistic data (where this is lacking) or felt needs for development, may also be collected if time allows and as this information is seen to be helpful.

Using these procedures with a focussed set of objectives, survey goals can be met in a short time, usually less than a week. Such was the case for the present survey, in which sufficient data were collected in two interview sessions: one in the afternoon and one the next morning.

An additional advantage of the rapid appraisal strategy is that because evaluation of the information can be done while still in the language area, the team is much less likely to return from the survey with gaps in the data or unanswered questions.

Two group interviews were conducted, one with the chief of Kélandé, the southernmost quarter of Bongo, and the other with the village chief. Also participating in each interview were other citizens of Bongo who were on the chiefs' compounds at the time.

The survey team pursued the research with three aspects of the sociolinguistic situation in mind. They are:

- (a) the dialect situation, the level of comprehension of related speech forms and the reason for this comprehension, and the degree of feeling of solidarity with the people who speak them. (Solidarity is a factor in assessing the possibility that one of these speech forms could be used as the standard form for written materials, including Scripture).
- (b) The extent of familiarity with languages of wider communication (LWCs), such as French or Ewondo, and the attitudes toward these LWCs.
- (c) The feasibility of a language development project in the local language, as revealed in overall language attitudes and reported patterns of language use.

For determining how well related languages are understood and whether comprehension is based on inherent intelligibility (due to linguistic similarity) or to language learning (due to contact with speakers of the language, two diagnostic questions were used.

"If you are in that place, what language do you use, what language do they use, and how well do you understand each other?"

"Can even a young child from this place understand someone from that place? (If not,) How old must the child be?"

In this report, "spontaneous" comprehension means comprehension based on inherent intelligibility; "acquired" comprehension means comprehension based on having learned the speech form, at least passively.

### 3.0 RESULTS AND EVALUATION

#### 3.1 Dialect situation and linguistic relationship to other speech forms

Baca is spoken in the four quarters of the village of Bongo: Kélandé, Kanoko (Bongo-Centre), Bongo-Méne, and Bopili. There is no appreciable dialectal variation, and no difficulty in comprehension between people from different quarters.

Baca speakers are reported to understand Bati, even the children, which is a sign of spontaneous (unlearned) comprehension. Most can also understand the three "central Yambassa" speech forms (Yangben, Mnaala, and Elip), but this is apparently due to the fact that the people of Bongo have learned them, since younger children are said not to understand these speech forms. It seems that some Baca speakers understand the people of the village of Mbola, whose speech is marked by greater differences from the other Yambassa speech forms; this is probably also the result of a learning process in the course of contact between people from the two villages.

The people of Bongo feel a bond with Yambassa people in the broad sense (which includes Gunu, Mnaala, Elip, Yangben, Mbule, and Bati). They recognise stronger historic ties with the Bati and with the inhabitants of the villages of Balamba I and Balamba II in the Elip canton.

It was stated that the speech of Bongo was "purer" than Bati; the latter was said to be influenced by Basaa.

A rapid appraisal survey will soon be conducted to assess the need for a language codification project for the speakers of Mbule, Yangben, Mnaala, and Elip. It is likely that should a project be undertaken, the people of Bongo could benefit from the written materials produced, since there seem to be no barriers due either to lack of understanding or to attitudes.

#### 3.2 Languages of Wider Communication: proficiency and attitudes

The older people of Bongo generally are able to speak Pidgin, Ewondo, or Basaa. In contrast, the younger generation learns French. Children learn French early, even before starting school. It is reported that they use both Baca and French when at play. It is generally agreed that the younger people speak French better than the local language. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the people of Bongo are favourably disposed toward the languages of wider communication (LWCs) used in their area.

#### 3.3 Feasibility of a language project: Overall language use and attitudes

Some people who come from Bongo are interested in writing their language; their motivation is the preservation of Baca and the teaching of the mother tongue to young people. They want the next generation of Baca speakers to "speak it right". In this context, it seems that language shift may be underway(4). That is, French seems to be replacing Baca and without a concerted effort by the people of Bongo, a language development project in Baca would not be feasible. In fact, French is used in almost all aspects of daily life, including family life. It is, of course, the language of instruction in school as well.

The only established church in Bongo is the Roman Catholic church. Although there is singing in Bongo, the written materials used (such as Scriptures and missals) are in Ewondo or French. A catechist said that French and Ewondo are used in the chapels, French more than Ewondo. He also said that French liturgy had to be interpreted into Baca but Ewondo did not. It is possible that he was referring to the needs of the older generation. The curate uses French in Bible studies with the youth, apparently without the need for interpretation.

Some people from Bongo are starting to attend meetings of the Assemblies of God; the survey team did not find out what language or languages they use in their meetings. However, it was reported that Protestants from Bongo went to Kelleng (in the Bati area) for services.

The same catechist already mentioned has transcribed some Baca songs, and, as has been noted, there is interest in preserving the vocabulary and grammar in written form.

Finally, the number of Baca speakers is fewer than one thousand persons (one village), and many of the young people have left for the cities. These facts make it unlikely that a Baca language development project could be successful.

#### 4.0 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The present survey confirmed that there is a distinct and unified speech form called Baca spoken in the village of Bongo. That is, Baca is a speech form separate from "central Yambassa", Bati, and Mbule (at least on sociolinguistic grounds) and there is no dialectal variation within Baca.

Apparently, each of these related speech forms is either inherently intelligible to Baca speakers or easily learned by someone from Bongo who has contact with people who speak them. If one of these speech forms were to be chosen to be used as the standard written form of Yambassa, Bati would not be the best choice in the eyes of the people of Bongo because it is seen to be influenced by Basaa. A rapid appraisal of the situation in Mbule (Mbola) and the Yangben, Mmaala, and Elip varieties ("central Yambassa") is to be conducted very soon. Should codification and Bible translation be deemed valuable in Yambassa, the people of Bongo might be willing and able to learn to read and write it.

Although the speakers of Baca recognise historical and linguistic affinities with the Bati, they have equally good relations with the other surrounding people groups. The situation in the Bati canton need not affect the recommendations concerning the Baca speech form.

As a rule, the citizens of Bongo are multilingual. The older generation is more familiar with Ewondo, Basaa, and Pidgin, and younger people speak French. According to the village chief, young people are more proficient in French than in the local language. Evaluating the French language proficiency of the people in Bongo was, of course, beyond the scope of the present survey.

The profile of second language use among the residents of Bongo suggests that language shift is underway. Still, there is a desire to retain the mother tongue and to pass it on to succeeding generations. French has a



utilitarian function in most domains while Baca probably serves as a language of ethnic identity. It would seem that for written use and probably even for the transmission of Scriptures, French is appropriate; the situation does not seem to justify the development of the local language.

Three recommendations follow from these observations:

- (1) The Bible translation need status of Baca (Nu Baca, Ethnologue code BAF) can be changed from "possible" to "unlikely". This recommendation is based on signs of language shift in favour of French.
- (2) When survey is done in Moule (Mbola), Yangben, Elip, and Mnaala, the survey team should remember the possibility that speakers of Baca could also benefit from the standardisation of Yambassa. (If that survey results in a recommendation that Yambassa be codified, the people of Bongo could be kept informed of the plans of those involved in standardisation of the language. The language development team would also be encouraged to invite representatives from Bongo to serve on the oversight committee.)
- (3) People from Bongo who are interested in putting their language into writing would be welcome to attend SIL courses on the analysis and development of local languages, such as the "Discover your Language" course. The motivation, however, would be to preserve the language itself rather than the preparation of an extensive literature.

#### NOTES

1. Apparently, the preferred pronunciation of Baca is "Ba-tcha".
2. Scruggs' and Taylor's survey data are not sufficient basis for a revision of this status. Although they touch on questions of intelligibility (Taylor 1982) as well as presenting linguistic data (Scruggs 1982), information on language use and attitudes is sketchy. Also, Taylor's report does not distinguish between spontaneous and acquired comprehension, so that the question of inherent intelligibility is not answered.

Taylor's report does suggest reference dialects for each canton, but her recommendations are based on interviews in which "language" was apparently defined as "varieties of speech in a single canton". Thus the possibility of one standard form serving more than one canton is not considered. She does raise the possibility that more than one standard written language might be needed for the Yangben canton: while the speech of Yangben village is the recommended reference dialect, she indicates that "the dialects of Mbola and Bongo" might also be codified. As intelligibility was the main focus of study, this could be interpreted as a readiness to classify Moule and Baca as separate languages.

3. Usually the surveyor poses the questions orally, reading from the form, and then notes the responses. Strictly speaking, the survey

[NOTES]

instrument so used is not a questionnaire but an interview schedule, since the term "questionnaire" is often reserved for a form submitted to the respondent to read and to complete in writing.

4. Fasold (1984:240) indicates that "language shift will occur only if, and to the extent that, a community desires to give up its identity as an identifiable sociocultural group in favor of an identity as a part of some other community." Alternatively, the LWC might acquire the status of conveying identity in the group now marked by use of the local language. It is not clear that either is the case for the people of Bongo, and the suggestion that language shift may be underway should be read in this light.

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