

**Review of: Bodomo, Adams, Hasiyatu Abubakari and Samuel Alhassan Issah (2020).
Handbook of the Mabia Languages of West Africa. Glienicke: Galda Verlag.**

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The *Handbook of the Mabia languages of West Africa* represents a novelty amongst the increasing number of handbooks that have appeared on the market during the last two decades. It is an exclusive volume on a relatively small language group of the Niger-Congo family: the Mabia languages. Other language groups and families have been addressed in several chapters of more general handbooks, but this book is, to the best of our knowledge, the first special volume on a single language group in West-Africa. The volume has appeared with Galda publishing house, a publisher who has specialized in African studies, although not predominantly on language-related topics. The volume comprises 398 pages (plus 10 pages of an introduction (i-x)) and presents twelve articles on different topics on Mabia languages and cultures. The collection opens with an introductory survey on several overall linguistic features of the Mabia languages. It then contains six articles on various linguistic topics, three articles on music, and one article on oral literature. The last article in the volume is again of a more general nature in that it discusses oral genres from a more comprehensive perspective. The articles of the volume represent a good overview on the linguistic diversity of the Mabia languages and also on some cultural perspectives related to language. It is therefore a recommended book not only for linguists with an interest in West African languages, but also for scientists from neighbouring fields. The editorial trio consists of one distinguished scholar in the field, Prof Adams Bodomo, and two junior linguists, Dr Hasiyatu Abubakari and Dr Samuel A. Issah. Young scientists are also found among the group of authors. This is a very welcome aspect of the volume, since it gives the new generation of African scholars a platform to present their knowledge and ideas concerning their languages and cultures. In the following, we give an overview over the chapters of the volume before we present our evaluation.

Chapter 1: Mabia: Its Etymological Genesis, Geographical Spread, and some Salient Genetic Features (Adams Bodomo)

In chapter 1 of the volume, Adams Bodomo provides a succinct overview over various features shared by the Mabia languages. After briefly outlining the history of research on the Mabia languages and the genesis of the term *Mabia*, Bodomo turns to common typological characteristics of the Mabia languages, focusing on five languages in particular, Búli, Dagaare, Dagbani, Kusaal, and Gurunɛ. Discussing phonetics and phonology first, the author compares consonant and vowel inventories and shows that many sounds are shared across the languages, with [ATR] and nasalization being prominent features. Similarly, all Mabia languages are argued to be tone languages, with tone performing both lexical and grammatical functions in the languages of this family. Furthermore, several shared features in the morphological component are identified: all Mabia languages have a more or less complex noun class system marked overwhelmingly by suffixes, contrasting with other language families in the region.

The pronoun inventories across the languages appear to be very similar, arguably with a near complete lack of case distinctions, except for a nominative-accusative distinction in the first person singular in Dagaare, Kusaal, and Dagbani. Additional lexical similarities are described for the systems of adpositions, based on body parts in all the languages and overwhelmingly postpositional, and the number systems. Turning to syntax last, Bodomo highlights Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs) in addition to the shared SVO order as uniting property of the Mabia languages. In this chapter, Bodomo achieves various goals. Not only does he provide a background for the papers to come in the volume, he also manages to provide a short, yet interesting description of the salient features of the language family.

Chapter 2: Focus Marking in Serial Verb Constructions in Kusaal (Hasiyatu Abubakari)

The second chapter of the volume, written by co-editor Hasiyatu Abubakari, kicks off the first logical section of the volume, concerned with various linguistic topics in the study of the Mabia languages. In particular, Abubakari is concerned with in-situ focus marking in Serial Verb Constructions (SVCs), a pervasive phenomenon in the Mabia languages in general, in Kusaal. Starting with an in-depth description of focus in Kusaal, the author shows that Kusaal, with a typologically rare pattern, allows the marking of contrastive focus in-situ with the particles *ń* and *ńε* for subjects and objects, respectively. Turning to focus marking in SVCs in Kusaal, it is then argued that in addition to the typologically frequent and well described strategy of left-dislocating the focused constituent, it is also possible to mark shared constituents, i.e. objects and subjects, as well as the verbs and larger constituents, in-situ using the same particles as in simple clauses. The focus particles in these contexts behave very similar to their uses in simple sentences, in that they adjoin to the elements to be marked as in focus. The chapter closes with a rather short analysis of the phenomenon in the Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) framework that is accompanied by a review of previous treatments of SVCs and information structure in LFG, respectively, which will prove very useful for potential readers. Finally, two critical remarks concerning the chapter are in order. First, the author is not always very precise in the terminology used and some points could have been improved by a more detailed discussion. Second, the paper would have benefited significantly from more careful proofreading, as the text, but also the examples still contain mistakes that might confuse the reader.

Chapter 3: A Survey of the Pronominal Systems of Three Mabia Languages: Kusaal, Dagbani and Gurenε (Agoswin A. Musah, Samuel Alhassan Issah, Samuel Awinkene Atintono)

With this chapter, the volume turns back to a more comparative approach in that the three authors, Agoswin A. Musah, co-editor Samuel Alhassan Issah, and Samuel Awinkene Atintono discuss the pronoun inventories of three of the Mabia languages, Kusaal, Dagbani and Gurenε. In this very descriptively oriented paper, the authors cover, after a short introduction, nearly all the major pronominal categories providing many examples for the respective cases. Starting with personal pronouns, they show that these pronouns show person and number distinctions, with each language having some idiosyncratic property: Dagbani distinguishes animate from inanimate third person pronouns, but lacks the paradigm of emphatic pronouns present in Kusaal and Gurenε. Kusaal on the other hand has a human/non-human distinction in the third person. All three languages distinguish between subject and object forms at least in one instance. Second, the authors turn to demonstratives, where a clear distinction between distal and proximal forms can only be observed in Dagbani. Emphatic pronouns are briefly discussed

next before some considerable amount of time is spent describing reflexive pronouns in the three languages, which, in all cases, are transparently compositional, consisting of the respective personal pronoun combined with a reflexive marker. After providing a short description of reciprocals in the languages, the authors turn to relative pronouns and interrogative pronouns in the last two sections. All three languages have a particular relative pronoun for animates and a more general one, and the interrogative pronouns cover the usual uses. The chapter provides a very comprehensive overview of the pronominal forms in the three languages and will serve as a starting point for future research into this topic in Mabia languages. Unfortunately, similar to the previous chapter, lack of diligent proofreading leaves the reader confused, especially when it comes to mistakes in the glossing. In addition, some uncommon terminological choices require close attention on the part of the reader.

Chapter 4: Coordination in Safaliba (Kenneth Bodua Mango)

Kenneth Bodua Mango presents a description of coordinated structures in Safaliba. The author addresses additive, adversative and disjunction coordination patterns with syntactic conjuncts of various categories. It is shown that Safaliba has two different conjunctions for nominal ((*à-ní*) and verbal (*á*) additive coordination. With respect to disjunctive coordination, it is argued that Safaliba uses the conjunction *bíí* across all categories. The author goes on to discuss the particle *ká*, which has been proposed as another conjunctive element in the literature on Safaliba, arguing that it should rather be analysed as a complementizer introducing hypothetical statements. Safaliba has a further conjunction, *ché*, which has an additive or an adversative interpretation. The choice between the two meanings is performed based on contextual knowledge. The article gives a thorough overview of the topic in Safaliba and at the same time leaves several empirical questions open for further research.

Chapter 5: The Definite Morpheme in Bùlì (Abdul-Razak Sulemana)

Abdul-Razak Sulemana presents a careful in-depth analysis of the formation of the definite and its relation to nominal class in this chapter on Bùlì, using Optimality Theory (OT). After giving the various patterns of definiteness marking in Bùlì, all via suffixation of what appears to be a CV morpheme, the author presents his main claim, namely that the actual definiteness marker in Bùlì is a high tone. Consequently, what has been analyzed as the definite morpheme in older works is actually just an epiphenomenon, created by the need for a tone bearing unit for the high tone. Sulemana then derives the various shapes of the definiteness morpheme, the quality of the vowel, the nature of the consonants and the possibility of gemination, from the phonological make-up of the stem the morpheme attaches to. To achieve this, he utilizes various optimality theoretic constraints and their orderings to derive the optimal candidate in each case. Unfortunately, the complex nature of the data, especially with gemination, make some very specific constraints necessary, for example **ηη* or **bb*, which at least slightly undermines the generality of the analysis. In the second, much shorter part of the chapter, Sulemana extends this analysis to the pronoun used to refer back to the various categories of nouns from the first part, which amounts to an analysis of the noun class system in Bùlì. Again, it is claimed that the pronoun/noun class is phonologically related to the stem, in that it is simply a right-truncated version of the stem that has again undergone some phonological changes which are accounted for in an OT framework. In this part of the chapter, the nature of the constraints is not justified as neatly as in the first part, as sometimes the generality of the new constraints seems questionable. Despite this, the author presents a very well-argued proposal that ultimately reduces the creation of the definite form of a noun, and by extension

its pronoun/noun class, to a high tone, reducing the noun class system of the language to phonological variation in the noun stem.

Chapter 6: Diphthongs and Diphthongization in the Gurene Dialect of Farefari (E. Avea Nsoh, Atipoka Helen Adongo)

E. Avea Nsoh and Atipoka Helen Adongo investigate diphthongs and diphthongization in Gurene, a dialect of Farefari. They argue that diphthongs are part of the phonemic inventory of the language, and that, at least in parts, diphthongization has developed diachronically from various morphophonological processes. After an introduction of the Gurene vowel system and a phonetic definition of the diphthongs, the authors give a short overview of diphthongs in Dagaare and Kɔnni. The phenomenon is not attested across all Mabia languages. Thus, Dagbani does not have diphthongs in its vowel inventory. With respect to Gurene, the authors classify its 23 diphthongs into canonical and non-canonical occurrences. Canonical diphthongs are claimed to be basic elements of the phoneme system of Gurene and appear in ideophonic and non-ideophonic words. Concerning the ideophonic diphthongs, the authors argue that they have existed already in Proto-Farefari. They are phonemes that do not allow allomorphs. In contrast, diphthongs in non-ideophonic words do show allomorphic variation with monophthongs if the involved vowels appear between words. Since Gurene exhibits root harmony, the canonical diphthongs show ATR-harmony: the ATR-feature of the first root vowel determines the quality of the second vowel. In addition, the two participating vowels always show the same tone. The authors go on to argue that non-canonical diphthongs have emerged – and are emerging – through diachronic morphophonological processes. Thus, in a derived non-ideophonic word, the voiced velar plosive /g/ in the onset of a suffix may undergo elision thereby creating a vowel sequence between the last stem vowel (whose quantity is reduced) and the remaining nucleus of the suffix. The VV sequence may undergo diphthongization during language change resulting in a diphthong in a CVV stem. The idea to classify the Gurene diphthongs in basic and derived items is very convincing as it elegantly accounts for the variability with respect to allomorphy, syllable structure, and harmony. The investigation of ideophones is novel and well-motivated. The article is nicely embedded into the existing research on the topic and is insightful also with respect to diphthongization in other Mabia languages.

Chapter 7: A Morphological Analysis of Personal Proverbial Names in Mampruli (Amidu Fatawu)

Amidu Fatawu discusses the morphological formation of proverbial names in Mampruli. The analysis is carried out within the framework of Lexical Morphology. Proverbial nouns in Mampruli are either monomorphemic or consist of several stems forming compounds. The author provides examples for proverbial names formed by compounds of different categories. The constituents may involve not only the lexical categories N, V, and A but also functional elements, such as negation and interrogative phrases. The compounds undergo several phonological processes, especially vowel deletion and subsequent nasal assimilation. The paper ends with the remark that the proverbial names may also appear in shortened forms. It has to be said that the morpho-phonological analyses are not always complete and in part lack informativity. Thus, tonal processes are not considered at all, the categorization of the compound elements is in parts inconsistent, the choice of technical terms not always to the point. At the same time, the paper nicely shows the diversity and creativity of proverbial name formation in Mampruli, which reveals very interesting socio-cultural features of the Mampruli society.

Chapter 8: Assessment of Supernatural Characters as Aesthetic Elements in Dagaaba Folktales (Martin Kyiileyang)

Martin Kyiileyang discusses supernatural characters in Dagaaba folktales. The author begins by familiarizing the reader with the prototypical characters of the supernatural trickster in folktales across African cultures. Personalized as animals or humans, the characters revolt against the oppressive power of the ruling class. Kyiileyang argues that the stories invite adolescents to identify with the figures on their search for their own self. The author continues to review the literature on African folktales. He discusses the embodiment and psychological endowment of the main characters and concludes that they represent the whole spectrum of human virtues and vices in the African societies. With respect to the aesthetic elements in the African oral traditions, Kyiileyang characterizes various components of style that form the specific verbal art of this genre. Finally, he stresses the importance of the oral tradition in African cultures in general. Referring to investigations on oral traditions in Ghana, he highlights modern research trends which have developed new strategies of documentation. Turning to the intrinsic concern of the paper, the supernatural characters in the Dagaaba folktales, the author starts to extensively re-narrate a folktale from an existing collection. The narration presents the character *Zumwapiel* who performs supernatural powers on Spider and his family. Subsequently, three other folktales are summarized. The chapter ends with a section describing some of the aesthetic elements in the presented folktales. The author claims that the delineation of the characters and narratives employed in the tales represent the major aesthetic elements in the texts, which are accompanied by various stylistic embellishments. The paper makes the socio-cultural influence of the folktales, especially the role of the supernatural characters, nicely accessible to an uninformed reader and presents a good overview on the existing research on the topic. At the same time, the discussion of the aesthetic connotations of these figures remains to some extent vague and could have been a little bit more analytical. The author suggests several times that the appearance of the supernatural in itself represents an aesthetic element, a claim that the reviewers – both from a non-oral culture – cannot fully comprehend. This might be due to the fact that the experience of an aesthetic sensation is tightly coded in the culture of a society. An analysis of an aesthetic element can therefore not be detached from an investigation of its cultural reception.

Chapter 9: A Literary Linguistic Analysis of the Kasena Dirge: Its Nature and Form (Asangba Reginald Taluah)

In his chapter, Asangba Reginald Taluah discusses Kasena dirges, songs performed at funerals of the Kasena people in the language Kasem. Approaching the topic from both a literary and linguistic perspective, the author starts the chapter with an in-depth introduction to research on performative oral traditions, the Kasena, and dirges in general. In the next part, the author turns to the dirges of the Kasena people and defines the two most important properties of the dirges as needing to be educational and possessing an aesthetic charm to make the didactic concepts more appealing to the audience. Discussing several specific Kasena dirges in more detail next, Taluah highlights again and again that the analysis of the dirges cannot be separated from their actual performance, as only through the performance do they show their full potential. Nevertheless, various properties of four different dirges are discussed in more detail, focusing on several lexical and structural idiosyncrasies. Especially in light of the author explicitly highlighting the importance of the performative aspects of dirges, some more discussion of concrete performative techniques in this section might have helped the reader to gain an even better picture of the cultural contributions of these dirges. Despite this very minor criticism,

the author manages to paint a very comprehensive picture of Kasena dirges and their importance in Kasena society.

Chapter 10: The Nature of Performance of Farefari Anaanuure Women's Songs (E. Avea Nsoh, Habiba Alhassan)

In their chapter, Habiba Alhassan and E. Avea Nsoh discuss a different kind of song genre, namely the *Anaanuure Pɔgesi yumma (APY)*, a type of song exclusively performed by women's groups of the Farefari people, focusing on the Gurenɛ dialect of the Farefari language. The authors spend the first half of their chapter tracing the history and development of this genre of song, highlighting the intimate relation of the groups performing the songs to the role and status of women in the Farefari society as a whole, and how the main focus of those groups was initially not the singing of the songs but the mutual support provided by its members. In the second part of the contribution, the authors turn to an analysis of various components of the APY, stressing the performative aspect by initially providing brief descriptions of the various roles (lead singer, chorus, audience) during the performance. This is followed by a stylistic analysis of some important rhetorical devices and other stylistic features in the songs. All of the songs discussed are given in full in the appendix. The chapter manages very nicely to present the APY in its many facets, while at the same time highlighting its cultural significance.

Chapter 11: Cultural and Poetic Analysis of the Dagaare and Sisaali Dirges (Moses Luri)

This chapter constitutes the second contribution of the volume to deal with dirges. In it, Moses Dramani Luri describes these funeral songs in the Dagaare and Sisaali languages. After a brief introduction to the studies of Dirge in other languages of the region, Luri focuses on two widely used rhetorical techniques, repetitions and parallelism, providing various examples of their uses and their different subtypes. In the second part, the author shows how various prevalent elements of the two groups' cultures can be made visible with a closer look at parts of various dirges, mostly looking at the reflection of the properties in the metaphors employed in the songs. It would surely have improved the chapter even further if the author had made use of the rhetorical devices discussed in the first part in the analysis presented in the second part. However, it clearly manages to outline the cultural significance of the dirges in the two societies discussed, and beyond.

Chapter 12: Documenting Gurenɛ Oral Genres in Northern Ghana: Lessons from the Field (Samuel Awinkene Atintono)

Samuel Awinkene Atintono rounds out the volume with his contribution, a discussion of his own fieldwork gathering oral genres of the Gurenɛ language and of various related issues and problems. After a brief introduction to the language, he discusses the various goals of his fieldwork, highlighting the need to gather and document aspects not only of moribund languages but also of slowly dying aspects and genres of otherwise frequently spoken languages. The need to document these highly endangered oral traditions is very prevalent, not just in Gurenɛ, but all the other Mabilia languages and many others. The author then goes on to provide a brief description of the fieldwork process and the various methods used to record various genres, which culminated in the creation of a corpus hosted at ELAR in London and accessible online. This is followed by a more hands-on description of important practical aspects of field work and potential problems that might arise, which, in line with the whole chapter, will prove useful for future fieldworkers. The chapter provides a very apt conclusion

to the volume, with its call to action for documentation even in non-endangered languages and by providing some hints as to how to do so.

Evaluation of the volume

Reading through the articles of this volume provides the reader with a wealth of interesting data and facts on the Mabia languages and cultures. The volume testifies to a lively community of scientists within diverse research traditions. With respect to linguistics, the reader is acquainted with various interesting aspects of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of individual languages. In the articles on music, the authors present various aspects of singing culture, especially the dirges and women songs of the Farefari. Two articles are concerned with aspects of the oral literature prevalent in African culture. The large array of topics investigated in this volume makes the reader acquainted with many interesting linguistic and cultural aspects of the Mabia languages. The discussions are independent of specific theoretical frameworks, which offers further research perspectives for scientists from different traditions. The diversity of the topics discussed attests to an increasing scientific interest from members of the Mabia society to investigate properties of the languages of their cultures. This is a very welcome trend, which is definitely boosted by this new handbook.

We have to note, though, that the diversity of the themes also represents a potential flaw of the handbook. A critical assessor could see here a collection of rather arbitrary phenomena from an equally arbitrary set of languages instead of well-planned overviews on the most characteristic properties of the Mabia languages. As a representative example, the single article on phonology in the volume offers a good and comprehensive analysis of the diphthongs of one language. In a handbook, however, one could have expected a survey over the typical and prevalent phonological properties of the Mabia languages, including their tonal systems. This would have allowed the reader to better conceptualize the languages as a group with their sound systems. This example is representative for the other areas as well. Cross-linguistic generalizations over languages and phenomena are rather scarce throughout the volume. In this sense, the reference to a handbook in the title is, at least from our point of view, too ambitious. A second problem of the handbook concerns its formal presentation. Several of the articles have apparently not been thoroughly proofread. As it is known that the editorial companies have reduced their engagement in supervising the copy-editing of a publication, authors and editors themselves could have taken some more care regarding this matter.

Despite these drawbacks, we are convinced that the handbook will offer an important impulse for the establishment of a research tradition that is attracting not only young scientist members from the Mabia society, but also foreign researchers with an interest in the extremely rich and fascinating landscape of Mabia languages.