

THE NOUN CLASS SYSTEM IN MBEMBE¹

K. BARNWELL

The aim of this paper is:

- (a) To give a factual description of the noun class system in Mbembe.
- (b) To show the patterning of labial and palatal, back and front, features within this system.
- (c) To suggest some points of comparison in the system of related languages.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. The Mbembe language belongs to the Benue-Congo language family and is spoken in the Cross River area to the north of Calabar province. Neighbouring languages are Yakur [Lokə], Etung, Ukelle and Ekajuk, all of which have noun class systems showing similar phenomena.

This description is based on the Adun dialect of Mbembe. Except where stated, all examples are from this dialect.

1.2. A phonemic transcription is used throughout. Vowel phonemes comprise:

i u
 e o
 ε ɔ
 a

and the lengthened vowels ɔ: and a:. Consonant phonemes comprise:

V'less fortis plosives	p	tt	c	kk	kp
V'less lenis plosives		t		k	
Voiced plosives	b	d	j	g	gb
V'less fortis fricatives	ɸ	f	s		
V'less lenis fricatives		f'	z		
Voiced fricatives	β	v			
Short nasals	m	n	ɲ	ŋ	
Lengthened nasals	m:	n:			
Lateral		l			
Flap		r			
Semi vowels			y	w	

1.2.1. c and j represent alveo-palatal affricates.

1.2.2. Note that there is a phonemic contrast between the fortis and lenis articulation of certain voiceless consonant sounds. For typographical reasons this distinction is marked as follows:

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fortis	tt	kk	s	f
lenis	t	k	z	f'

No voiced sibilant occurs in the Adun dialect.

1.2.3. The bilabial consonants p b ϕ and m may be palatalized: py by ϕ y my. The velar consonants k g ŋ may be labialized: kw gw ŋw.

1.2.4. The following tone marks are used: ' high tone, ` low tone, ' high tone with downstep influence onto the following tone, ~ rising glide, ^ falling glide. Where no tone is marked this indicates that the vowel is elided in normal pronunciation of the utterance.

1.2.5. Open transition is symbolized ə. A hyphen indicates a morpheme boundary. Morpheme boundaries are marked only where relevant.

1.2.6. N represents a nasal consonant homorganic to the point of articulation of the following consonant. All noun roots have an initial consonant.

2. NOUN CLASSES

These are set up on the basis of: (a) sets of noun prefixes with consonantal concord elements; (b) singular/plural pairings of these sets. The following sets occur:

	Noun prefix	Concord element		
		A	B	C
		Singular only		
Set 1	o-/ɔ-	kw	k	w
Set 3	e-/ɛ-	c	d	d
Set 5	N-	kw	k	w
Set 7	i-	kw	k	w
Set 9	i-	f	f	v
Set 11	a-	kw	k	w
		Plural only		
Set 2	a-	p	b	b
Set 4	e-/ɛ-	py	by	by
		Singular or plural		
Set 6	o-/ɔ-	f	f	v
Set 8	i-	s	j	j
Set 10	N-	s	j	j

2.1. The occurrence of the prefixes o-/ɔ- and e-/ɛ- is phonologically conditioned. o- and e- occur where the first vowel in the noun root is a close or half-close vowel. ɔ- and ɛ- occur where the first vowel in the noun root is an open or half-open vowel. It is of interest that in the Osopong dialect of Mbembe there is a three-way harmony system. Corresponding nouns in the e-/ɛ- sets have the prefixes i- before a close vowel, e- before a half-close vowel, ɛ- before an open or half-open vowel. Examples:

é-wùrɔ̀	'dress' (Osopong: i-wure)
è-rùŋɔ̀	'night' (Osopong: i-ruŋɔ̀)
è-rín	'waist' (Osopong: i-rin)
è-só	'head'
è-jò	'water-pot'
è-jà	'sacrifice'

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2.2. The majority of nouns belong to sets 1, 3, 2, 6 and 10. Singular set 1 paired with plural set 2, and singular set 3 paired with plural set 10 are the largest classes. Only two or three examples occur of each of sets 7, 9 and 4. These are all very common nouns: e.g.

ì-cò	'year'	[set 7]
ì-bòm	'cocoa yam'	[set 9]
è-cên	'yams'	[set 4]
è-kpó	'things'	[set 4]

It is possible that these are remnants of larger classes which, because of their frequent use, have resisted some change in the system. Comparison with related languages suggests that historically there has been a movement towards the simplification of noun class systems within the group.

2.3. Some observations may be made on the semantic correlations of the nouns belonging to particular classes.

2.3.1. Set 1 pairing with set 2 seems to correspond to Meinhof's Bantu *mu-/βa-* class. Most nouns with a personal, human connotation belong to this class, e.g.

ò-nòŋ	'person'	plu.	à-nòŋ
ò-vá:r	'chief'	plu.	à-vá:r
ò-bàzè	'Ibo man'	plu.	à-bàzè
ò-bàkpà	'Hausa man'	plu.	à-bàkpà
ò-bìrà	'slave'	plu.	à-bìrà

Other 'personal' nouns occur in sets 5, 7 and 11 with the 'labial' or 'rounded' concord elements *kw-w* as for set 1, e.g.

ŋ-ŋwà	'child'	ń-n:à	'older woman'
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In animal fables the personalized hero, *é-kwòr* 'tortoise', although having an *ε-* prefix as for set 3, occurs with concord elements as for set 1.

A few other *e-/ε-* prefix nouns occur with set 1 concord elements when denoting position. For example, the noun *è-ttém* 'heart' is a regular member of set 3, occurring with the *c-d* set of concord elements except when used to denote position, when it occurs with *kw-w* concord elements, e.g.

ka è-ttém	<u>kw-á:bè</u>	'in their midst'
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2.3.2. Many 'animals' belong to set 3, pairing with plural sets 2 or 10, e.g.

è-vú	'goat'	plu.	à-vú
è-béβá	'cutting grass'	plu.	à-béβá
è-fá	'dog'	plu.	ń-fá
è-kkándè	'cat'	plu.	ŋ-kkándè
è-cè	'leopard'	plu.	ń-cè
è-sím	'civet cat'	plu.	ń-sím

2.3.3. Many nouns with a verbal root belong to set 3 (no plural form); e.g.

é-pyíβá	'evil'	(pyíβ 'to be bad')
è-tòmà	'beginning'	(tòmà 'to begin')
è-kó:ká	'revelation'	(kó:ka 'to show')

2.3.4. Liquid and abstract nouns belong mainly to set 2, e.g.

à-sí	'water'	à-tùk	'palm wine'
à-nà	'oil'	à-wà	'soup'
à-kpèn	'life'	à-càmijì	'smallness'

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2.3.5. Some 'limbs' occur together in set 1 pairing with set 10; e.g.

ò-bó:k	'hand', 'arm'	plu.	ṁ-bó:k
ò-tá:k	'thigh'	plu.	ṁ-tá:k
ò-βò	'leg'	plu.	ṁ-mò

2.3.6. Some words with a connotation connected with the supernatural or with ceremonial significance occur in set 6, e.g.

ò-kà	'cult'	ò-ttò:k	'thing'
ò-tá:n	'sorcery'	ò-kim	'masque'
ò-nùṅ	'salt'	ò-dá:ṅ	'foufou'

3. CONCORD

3.1. Concord is manifested in the verb prefix and verbal auxiliary prefix, and in the prefix of numerals from 1 to 7. These prefixes are identical in form to the noun prefix of the governing noun, except in the case of set 2 nouns, where, under certain conditions, the verbal prefix is ma-. For examples, see section 4 below.

3.2. Consonantal concord elements are manifested as follows:

3.2.1. Concord element A occurs:

(i) In the possessive pronoun:

Set 1	ṁ-só:m	<u>kw</u> -à:m	ṁ-só:m	<u>kw</u> -ò	ṁ-só:m	<u>kw</u> -è
	'house	my'	'house	your'	'house	his'
Set 3	è-fá	ç-â:m	è-fá	ç-ṡ	è-fá	ç-è
	'dog	my'	'dog	your'	'dog	his'
Set 2	à-sí	p-â:m	à-sí	p-ṡ	à-sí	p-è
	'water	my'	'water	your'	'water	his'

cf. also examples a, d, f, m, o and q below (section 4).

(ii) As the 'relative' pronoun (proclitic to a clause or noun phrase):

Set 1	ò-vá:nóṅ	<u>kw</u>	ò-dé	mácó	ká:m	mà
	'chief-person	who	he-is	like	me	here'
Set 3	è-nò:ná	ç	è-tèn	òyòk		
	'finger	which	it-points (to)	friend'		
Set 4	è-kpó	pṅ	í-tó:ṅ			
	'things	of	ear'	(earrings)'		

cf. also examples a, b, e, h, i, k, n, and p below.

(iii) In the qualifier 'new':

Set 1	ṁ-só:m	ò-βá- <u>kw</u> -è	Set 3	é-wùrò	è-βá-ç-è
	'house	new'		'dress	new'

cf. also example a below.

3.2.2. Concord element (B) occurs in:

(i) the free pronoun:

Set 1	ò-ròkòtúm	<u>k</u> -è	kwá	méndà	máncí
	'cassava	it	which	today	I-will-eat'

cf. also examples h, i, l, n and o below.

(ii) the reduplicated form of the free pronoun:

Set 2 mòyén á-vá:r á-fà b-ě-b-ě
 'we-have chiefs two only'

cf. also examples c and j below.

3.2.3. Concord element C occurs in:

(i) the numeral 'one' and its plural form 'some':

Set 1 ǔ-só:m w-ànè Set 3 ǔ-fá d-ànè
 'house one' 'dog one'

Set 2 à-nòŋ b-ànè
 'people some'

Set 1 ǔ-vá:nòŋ ŋ-w-ó má-w-áné-w-ánè
 'chief-person that one-one' 'that very same chief'

cf. also example g below.

(ii) the demonstrative:

Set 1 ǔ-nòŋ ŋ-w-ó Set 8 ì-βòn n-j-ó
 'person that' 'places those'

cf. also examples a, b, g, i, k, o, p and l below.

(iii) the emphatic particle:

Set 1 ǔ-vá:nòŋ w-ó Set 3 ǔ-fá d-ó
 'chief-person it-is' 'dog it-is'

cf. also examples c, d, e, h, i, m, n, p and q below.

4. EXAMPLES TAKEN FROM UNELICITED TEXT MATERIAL

Examples given in this section include a sample from each set. References written underneath the examples refer back to section 3.

(a) Set 1 ǔ-nòŋ ŋ-w-ó kw-ámínà kw ó-pe ǔ-βá-kw-é
 'person that our who he-died recently'
 Cii Ai Aii Aiii

(b) Set 1 ǔ-vá:nòŋ ŋ-w-ó kw ó-de ǔ-vá:nòŋ kw ídén
 'chief-person that who he-is chief-person who big'
 Cii Aii Aii

(c) Set 3 ǔ-wùcèn d-ě-d-ě d-ɔ é-d é-kwu é-díβ ó-rà:ŋà
 'sun only it-is he-comes he-visits river'
 Bii Ciii

(d) Set 3 ǔ-gbá ɔ-á:m d-ó ê
 'bush my it-is' 'it is my bush'
 Ai Ciii

(e) Set 3 ǔ-cè ɔ ɔ wùra ñzá:m d-ó mâ
 'name which before I-forgot it-is here' 'this is the name
 Aii Ciii which I forgot
 before'

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- (f) Set 5 m-pyì kw-â:m
 'drinking-horn my'
 Ai
- (g) Set 7 ì-cò ŋ-w-ó má-w-áné-w-ánè
 'year that very-one' 'that very same year'
 Cii Ci
- (h) Set 9 ì-bòm f ò-p-ò-pé f-è v-ó fè kò àtér àwò:n àcí
 'yam which it-dies it it-is which you-instead you-cook you-eat'
 Aii Bi Ciii Aii
- ì-bòm is the unique representative of this set. There is irregular agreement in that the verb prefix is o- not i-.
- (i) Set 2 á-gbá:n m-b-ó p ó-tte óβòn óβón b-è b-ò
 'family-group that which father begets they it-is'
 Cii Aii Bi Ciii
 'á-tine ákúβá
 hold Akubha-rite'
- (j) Set 2 à-dí-dén:òŋ b-ě-b-è b-ě-b-è b-ě-b-è
 'important-men only only only' very emphatic
 Bii
- (k) Set 4 è-kpó m-by-ó py ó-tte ódábè
 'things those which father tied'
 Cii Aii
- (l) Set 6 ò-kìm m-v-ó mòyéré f-è bé òkwà
 'masque that we-call it Okwa'
 Cii Bi
- (m) Set 6 ò-ttò:k f-è v-ò ó-jiβ ò-tàm
 'thing his it-is it-good it-very'
 Ai Ciii
- (n) Set 8 ì-dimá s ì-ci è-dén ì-je è-dùk j-è j-ò
 'calabash which it-first it-bears fruit it it-is'
 Aii Bi Ciii
 ì-ci è-dén ì-ttàmè
 'it-first it-matures'
- (o) Set 8 ì-zè n-j-ó s-è j-ě ì-βóβò ì-d ì-ttò ka ó-rá:ŋà
 'blood that her it it-flowed it-fell in river'
 Cii Ai Bi
- (p) Set 10 ñ-dénsé n-j-à j-ó s-ó mòtìm òsa á-kpèn pé ka ó-yágbín
 'ways these it-is which we-take we-finish life his in world'
 Cii Ciii Aii
- (q) Set 11 á-gá kw-à:m w-ó má è
 'needle my it-is here'
 Ai Ciii

5. VARIANTS IN OTHER MBEMBE DIALECTS

5.1. From the summary in section 2 it can be seen that the concord element C is often the voiced counterpart of concord element A. Exceptions are:

Set 3. In Osopong dialect, corresponding forms have concord with j in place of d. The dominant pattern suggests that this was probably the earlier form. This is born out by comparison with the related language of Yakur (Lokə) (cf. F. D. D. Winston 'The nominal class system in Lokə', AFRICAN LANGUAGE STUDIES, vol. III (1962), p. 57).

Sets 8 and 10. In the two subdialects of the Okom dialect, corresponding concord elements have voiced [z] and r in place of j. There is a regular sound correspondence between voiceless lenis z in Adun, voiced [z] in Okom 1, and r in Okom 2. Again the dominant pattern suggests that the voiced form is the earlier one.

Sets 1, 5, 7, 11. Oferekepe dialect has gw in place of kw in corresponding concord elements.

5.2. The A and B concord elements differ in form only in sets where the A element is kw or f. In the Okom dialect the B element is always identical in form to the A element.

5.3. There is a degree of mobility in the membership of classes in different dialects. This is also evident from the limited comparison which has been possible with word lists of related languages. It seems that the system may be more persistent than the membership.

6. SINGULAR/PLURAL PAIRING

Singular prefixes		Plural Prefixes				
		Palatal			Labial	Neutral
		e- py-by (4)	i- s-j (8)	N- s-j (10)		
c-d	e- (3)	—	—	310	—	68
Palatal						
s-j	i- (8)	—	—	—	106	12
s-j	N- (10)	—	—	—	6	—
kw-w	i- (7)	—	—	—	2	—
f-v	i- (9)	1	—	—	—	—
Labial						
f-v	o- (6)	1	—	—	—	8
kw-w	o- (1)	—	12	4	—	420
kw-w	N- (5)	—	—	3	—	12
kw-w	a- (11)	—	—	—	—	11

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Numbers indicate the number of nouns so far recorded in each class. In addition 150 nouns (verbal roots) in set 3 and 60 nouns (abstracts and liquids) in set 2 have been recorded which have no singular/plural contrast, and a number of nouns in other sets which have no plural form but otherwise fit into the pattern shown above.

The following pattern emerges:

Singular sets with prefix *i-* or with prefix *N-* with 'palatal' concord elements (*s-j* agreement as opposed to *kw-w* agreement) pair with plural sets with prefix *o-/ɔ-*.

Singular sets with prefix *o-/ɔ-* or with prefix *N-* with 'labial' concord elements, pair with plural sets with prefix *i-* or prefix *N-* with 'palatal' concord elements.

'Palatal' singular sets therefore pair with 'labial' plural sets and vice-versa.

In addition most singular sets pair with plural sets with the 'neutral' prefix *a-*.

7. COMPARISON WITH RELATED LANGUAGES

A comparison of the variants in the systems of other Mbembe dialects throws a little light on the historical relationship of these dialects (cf. section 5). A comparison of the systems of related languages might also reveal points of interest. In the Etung noun system (as outlined by Dr K. L. Pike and Mr and Mrs T. Edmondson) the dominant pattern seems to be that 'palatal' singular prefixes pair with 'labial' plural prefixes, with only a few examples of the reverse pattern. The Yakur system (as outlined by F. D. D. Winston) shows a two-way patterning similar to that of Mbembe.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The International African Institute has made arrangements with Wm. Dawson and Sons Ltd, of 16 West Street, Farnham, Surrey, for the reprinting of a number of its linguistic works, including certain volumes in the *HANDBOOK OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES* series. The following volumes, all of which had been out of print for a number of years, are now available as photolithographic reprints from Dawson's:

THE PHONETIC AND TONAL STRUCTURE OF KIKUYU, by L. Armstrong (1940). Price £5.

A STUDY OF THE KANURI LANGUAGE, by J. Lukas (1937). Price 45s.

THE EASTERN SUDANIC LANGUAGES, volume 1, by A. N. Tucker (1940). Price £6.

HANDBOOK OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES, SPECIAL STUDIES:

BANTU: MODERN GRAMMATICAL, PHONETICAL AND LEXICOGRAPHICAL STUDIES SINCE 1860, by C. M. Doke (1945). Price 30s.

THE CLASSIFICATION OF THE BANTU LANGUAGES OF AFRICA, by M. Guthrie (1948). Price 30s.

THE SOUTHERN BANTU LANGUAGES, by C. M. Doke (1954). Price 55s.

Full information on these and other linguistic publications is given in the 1968 publications list of the Institute. Copies of the list are obtainable on application to the International African Institute, St Dunstan's Chambers, 10/11 Fetter Lane, London, E.C. 4.