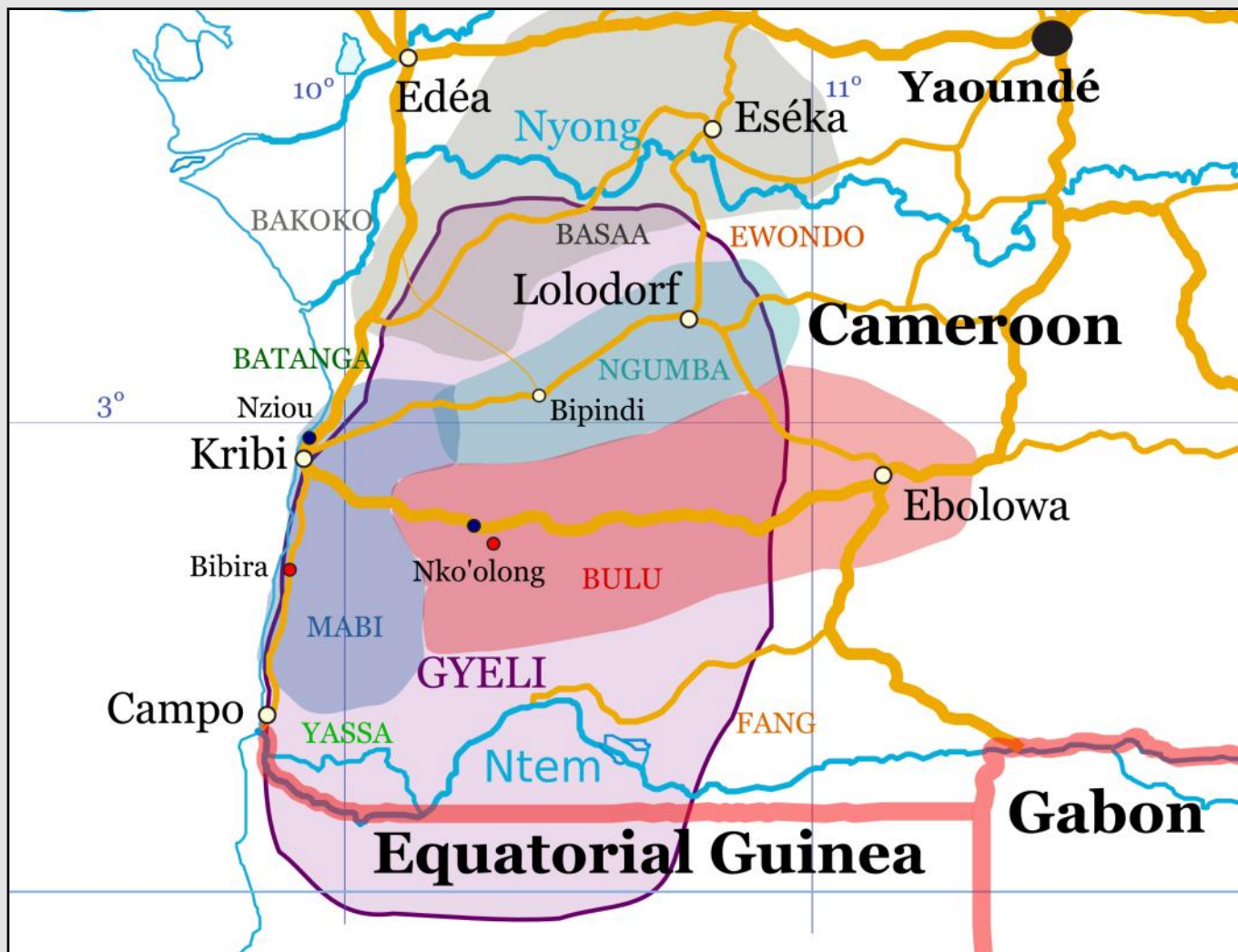


Documentation of Bakola of Cameroon



Language map of the Bakola/Bagyeli area and its neighboring languages

The Bakola/Bagyeli people

The Bakola/Bagyeli people of Cameroon are the western-most “Pygmy” hunter-gatherer group of Central Africa. They call themselves *Bakola* in the north of their region and *Bagyeli* in the south. There are about 4000-5000 Bakola/Bagyeli who live in villages, containing 20-30 inhabitants on average, scattered over a vast area of 12.500 km². This area is also home to several groups of farmers, who are culturally distinct. Linguistically, however, both foragers and farmers speak closely related Bantu languages.



Bagyeli hunters in the rain forest

As hunter-gatherers, the Bakola/Bagyeli mainly make their living by hunting and trapping, and exploiting forest products such as nuts, wild fruit, honey, and tubers. The Bakola/Bagyeli used to be mobile foragers, but as they become increasingly sedentary due to societal and environmental changes, small-scale farming adds more and more to their diet. Other sources of income depend on relations with outsiders. For instance, tourists bring gifts and pay for taking pictures. Also, the Bakola/Bagyeli sell forest products to their farming Bantu neighbors and perform dances at weddings and funerals for them, and serve as traditional healers for both other Bakola/Bagyeli and Bantu farmers.



Traditional healer Bikanda Patrice treating a patient who is suffering from magical worms

The language

The language of the Bakola/Bagyeli is a Bantu language, just like the languages of the neighboring farmer groups. In contrast to the other languages, however, the language of the Bakola/Bagyeli is endangered because they are currently forced to abandon their traditional lifestyle. Due to massive changes in their environment such as the construction of the biggest port in Central Africa, deforestation, expansion of palm oil plantations and the construction of more and more roads, the animals that the Bagyeli/Bakola depend on, disappear. As a result, they are forced to change their subsistence strategy, become sedentary and adapt more and more to a farming lifestyle. In the course of these changes, the Bagyeli/Bakola culturally adapt to their neighbors who are thought of as having a higher prestige than the hunter-gatherers. One aspect of this adaptation is that the Bagyeli/Bakola shift to their neighbors' languages.



Nandtougou Marie with a leaf under her scarf to prevent the rain from falling

The Bakola/Bagyeli shift to different farmers' languages depending on the group that they are primarily in contact with. For instance, the Bakola in the northern part are mostly in contact with Basaa speakers, thus their language is mostly influenced by Basaa. In this way, several Kola/Gyeli dialects emerge.



Youngest dancer decorated for the *Wapea* dance with a mask of leaves

The team

Maarten Mous (Leiden University, Netherlands)
Raimund Kastenholz (Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany)
Emmanuel Ngue Um (Université de Yaoundé I, Cameroon)
Daniel Duke (Leiden University, Netherlands)
Nadine Borchardt (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Germany)
Christopher Lorenz (Freelance cameraman)



Bagyeli children in the village *Bibira* – the village was relocated a few months later due to the construction of a port

Linguistic research

Since little was known about the language of the Bakola/Bagyeli, much research was needed. Even basic information, such as the number of vowels present in the language, had to be addressed. Our team investigates three Bakola/Bagyeli dialects in depth, one that is in contact with Basaa, one in contact with Kwasio and one in contact with Bulu. This includes describing the dialects' grammars based on a substantial number of recordings which our team has collected. The content of these recordings includes traditional narratives and stories as well as demonstrations of everyday activities such as honey collection, building traps, huts or drums, and decorating a person for dancing. Further, the team has collected a huge number of ethnobotanical terms accompanied by vernacular descriptions of a plant's use.

- (1) ɔ̀, b̥a-gyɛ̀li m̥é l̥aw̥
yes 2nc-Gyeli 1SG speak
'Yes, I speak Gyeli.'
- (2) done, l̥é-ké̃ l̥é yà l̥é b̥é nà yà l̥aw̥ l̥é-nd̥é
done, 5nc-language REL:5 1PL come shall COM 1PL speak 5EMPH:5PRO this
'So the language that we shall speak and that we speak is this.'
- (3) w̥é, m̥p̥w̥é à n̥z̥í w̥úmb̥é nyà nỹmb̥é̃ it̥ag̥g̥n̥é m̥b̥
EXCL 1.dog 3SG come want EMPH smell 3.white.person 9.arm
'Hey, the dog really wants to smell the arm of the white person.'

Example sentences

The Bakola/Bagyeli language situation provides a unique opportunity to witness how languages change as they come into contact with one another. One aspect we investigated was how color words and their meanings change due to language contact. In general, the Bakola/Bagyeli borrow color words from their farming Bantu neighbors while those borrow color distinctions from the colonial language French.

CONTACT ADDRESS

Nadine Borchardt
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Institut für Asien- und Afrikawissenschaften
Unter den Linden 6, 10099 Berlin

nadine.borchardt.1@hu-berlin.de