

Chapter 4: Local system of plant classification

The study of folk classification is concerned with discovering the principles by which classes of organisms are naturally organized in the preliterate mind, whereas nomenclatural studies are devoted to the description of linguistic principles of naming the conceptually recognised classes of plants and animals in a particular language.

(Berlin, 1973: 259)

Most folk classification and nomenclatural systems in traditional societies are orally transmitted, rooted in a clearly defined geographical area and inextricably linked to cultural cognition and representation.

This dissertation aims to gain insight into the basic principles of this local classification system, with regards to basic plant and ethnoecological categories and nomenclature, as well as domains of plant knowledge. I focus on vascular plants only and present the ethnobotanical data collected through my research based on current theories of folk biological classification, especially the hierarchical system of classification developed by Berlin (1973, 1992). Berlin and his colleagues suggest a conceptual organization of the biological world organized through a set of hierarchical ranks: kingdom, life form, generic, specific and varietals, with intermediate categories that can be named and occur between the life form and generic ranks.

4.1. Categories of Mambila ethnobotanical classification

Mambila folk classification of plants is a general purpose classification system with some special purpose groupings and is based on cultural consensus. The plant kingdom and unique beginner is recognised covertly but remains unlabelled. Life forms that were found in this study are based on a distinction between tree (**tuú**), vine (**tubu**) herbaceous plant, grass/sedge and bulbous plant (**logo**). Herbaceous plants, grasses and sedges are seen as one category and labelled “grass” (**nyuri, nyuru**). I found evidence for the existence of an unnamed intermediate (certain plants recognised as weeds based on their uselessness or their invasiveness in the fields) and a named intermediate rank (e.g. **fleur, nyuri fé**) for introduced or new species that did not exist in the old village and are believed to have been introduced by cows as a consequence of transhumance. When these plants are used ornamentally for the aesthetic value of their flowers, they are labelled **fleur** (French loanword); otherwise they are referred to as **nyuri fé** (‘new grass’). Although categories such as ‘bush’ and ‘palm’

are known by French speakers as ‘arbuste’ and ‘palmier’, there is no Mambila word to specify these life forms (also trees that are said to be “more like vines”) indicating a possible intermediate rank. Certain plant species, such as the conspicuous food/medicinal plants **yoó** (*Vernonia amygdalena*) and **teér** (*Elaeis guineensis*) were free listed by individuals in the categories of both ‘tree’ and ‘herb’.

Some plants are grouped into cross-cutting categories based on their appearance, their widespread use or cultural importance- **logo** is a generic label for bulbous plants of which particular species are used in magico-ritual medicine; **yoó** (*Vernonia amygdalena*) and **teér** (*Elaeis guineensis*) are conspicuous food plants and sources of petty cash.

No word was found for the category of weeds, but most informants indicated a covert category by using such phrases as “it destroys the field” or “it is a bad herb”.

Folk generics are abundant and common for salient and culturally important plant species such as **cèb** (*Cucurbit* spp.), **nwàgàm** (*Zea mays*), **nder** (leafy green vegetable species belonging to diverse families), **ngan** (*Kola*, *loro Raffia* spp., **lemú** *Citrus* spp., **kunu** *Musa* spp., **càgàmbor** *Eleusine* spp). Although not mentioned in free lists, a large percentage of the elicited generics contained specifics that had a descriptive modifier (e.g. **nwàgàm masara** *Zea mays*, **càgàmbor tela** *Paspalum paniculatum*).

Under-differentiated lumping under the generic name **nder** was observed in the case of **nder toón**, **nder noón**²⁶ and **nder mvomdé** (*Amaranth* spp).

4.2. Nomenclature

As far as the limited scope of this dissertation was able to establish, the Mambila nomenclature of plants presents a reasonable, although not always perfect guide to classification.

4.2.1. Generic names

In naming generics, both arbitrary and non-arbitrary words are employed and can refer to plant behaviour or their use and activity context. The name for **càgàmbor** (*Eleusine indica* and *Paspalum paniculatum*) is made up of the words for ‘dawn’ and ‘courtyard,’ and **cinjolo** (*Bidens pilosa*) loosely translates as ‘movement of the eye’. Other generic names are metaphors for plant morphology, like **ɲulamar** (*Nauclea latifolia*) ‘swollen abscess’ and **tiendoop** (*Emilia coccinea*) meaning ‘rat’s ear’. The generic name for a particular tree

²⁶ Both unidentified.

species with peeling bark (**kuliweéh**) can be translated as ‘young-old’ or ‘I come back renewed’. Due to this name it sometimes gets confused with **lamngér**²⁷, another, unrelated tree with peeling bark. Similarly, **njamjer** (*Markhamia tomentosa*) gets its name from **njam** ‘urine’.

4.2.2. Folk-specific names

Clues to ethnoecological or plant classification, new or introduced species, as well as plant use and activity context, are often embedded in the Mambila names of plants.

Adjectival markers in binomials can clarify plant category (**nyuri cimi**, **nyen suàgà**) and are especially helpful with homonyms, when plants of different categories have the same generic name as in the case of the herbaceous plant **cinjolo** (*Bidens pilosa*) and a tree with the same name (**tuú cinjolo**)²⁸. The generic name **cinjolo** refers to the opening and closing movement of the eye and both plants are used medicinally in a way that makes the patient sneeze. Adjectival markers also act as pointers to taxonomy as is demonstrated by **san mabonn** and **san tela**, two different *Ocimum* species in the Lamiaceae family differentiated by contrastive use of the words for male (**tela**) and female (**mabonn**) based on morphological difference. They can also mark cultural importance (**libi bâ** ‘libi of the Mambila’; the ceremonial ointment **beér** uses bark ingredient of **tuú beér** (*Baphia nitida*). Furthermore, they can denominate vegetation zones (**ngèna fií**: ‘ngèna of the savanna’, **nyuri sem** ‘grass of wet area’) or refer to introduced or new species (**nyuri fé** ‘new grass’). A good example of this is **libi nàgà** (*Malvaceae* ssp.) as opposed to the culturally important **libi be beér** (*Sida rhombifolia*). **Nàgà** means ‘cow’ and is used in several plant names to indicate that it was introduced by transhumant cattle herds (i.e **feér nàgà** (*Solanum* spp.). Folk-specific plant names often represent plant use or activity context (**nyuri kwaá** ‘cough grass’, **tuú huôm** ‘blood tree’), some of which have already been forgotten or are not applied anymore (**tuú tu□m** ‘salt tree’). In the case of particular plant species that are employed in different uses by male and female specialists, the same plant can have two different names and refer to its activity context or use. The plant species *Scropalia dulcis* was called **nyuri njuaa** ‘good luck grass’ by a male specialist healer and **nyuri hwaṅ nar** ‘childbirth grass’ by a specialist female healer. Introduced plant species are often binomials constructed from their life form label and a loanword from the language through which it was introduced (**nyuri tí** ‘tea grass’, **tuú mangoro** ‘Mango tree’).

²⁷ Both still unidentified.

²⁸ Unidentified.

4.3. Ethnoecological categories

Understanding how local people name, classify and categorise their natural environment is an important factor in gaining information about the active ethnobotanical knowledge of an individual and informs about subsistence management and land tenure. Among the Mambila, some vegetational units established within the framework of this dissertation are distinguished by morphology, habitat and composition of the flora (eg forest, savanna, transition zone between forest and savanna, areas close to water, river banks, fields), while others refer to another status such as land tenure or human habitation (eg. field, **kapti** ‘home garden’, village, courtyard). Sometimes, ecological zones for certain species were lumped together in a sort of a residual cross-cutting category such as "everywhere except in the forest", reflecting species invasiveness, commonness and distribution.

4.3.1 The Field (**ɲuen**). Among the Mambila, cultivated vegetation is characterised as **ɲuen**, which translates to ‘field’. These vegetation types are agro-ecosystems, which are characterised not only by the dominant cultivated species, but by the various cultivated and non-cultivated plants that grow in association. Each kind of **ɲuen** is identified by the name of the dominant or culturally most significant species cover. The different types of **ɲuen** are: **ɲuen nwàgàm** (‘corn field’), **ɲuen sèngâr** (groundnut field), **ɲuen kúkúm**, (‘manioc field’). Generally, cornfields are the most important for the local subsistence management and are planted with one or more of the four local varieties of corn (*Maize* ssp.): "**bafia**", "**jalong**", "**masara**" and "**nyecar**" (old variety, now rarely found). Cornfields vary in size between 3 - 10 ha, and are located at varying walking distances of up to a maximum of one hour from the village. They are intercropped with various leafy vegetables (predominantly from the families of Cucurbitaceae, some Amaranthaceae, as well as the culturally salient *Solanum nigrum*).

4.3.2. Coffee plantations and oil palms

I have not been told a Mambila word for coffee plantation; people use the French loanword ‘champ de café’ and refer to site associated species as plants that “grow with the coffee” (such as *Musa* ssp. and two wild growing *Voacanga* species, the seeds of which are used in the pharmaceutical industry). Intercropping coffee fields has become important due to the destructive effects of fires on sparse plantations.

Oil palms (*Elaeis guineensis*) grow in the village as well as in various locations in the wild and were traditionally semi cultivated in the wild.

4.3.3. The home garden (kapti)

The **kapti** is a type of a home garden around the house and can be very small with only a few fruit trees and a few cultivated plants, or spread over a larger area and be a miniature version of an intensely cultivated field with a complex plant assemblage. Cultivated plants in a **kapti** are usually conspicuous food plants such as mango and avocado trees, banana, maize, taro, and some condiments. Some **kaptis** also have plants for medicinal use, some flowering ornamentals, and they often represent an opportunity for individualistic experimentation with plant species.



Figure 10. Home garden (kapti) with some maize and *Cucurbit* ssp. (photo R.K.)

4.3.4. The Savanna

There are two different words for the savanna indicating the importance of this ecosystem to the Mambila:

- Fii**: Savannah vegetation zone, with a variety of herbaceous plants, shrubs, grasses, sedges and medium to tall trees and wet areas. small shrubby, fire-resistant trees
- **La Brousse**: This French loanword demarcates a dryer savanna that is more open, with small shrubby, fire-resistant trees, and that is subject to seasonal fires.

4.3.5. The Forest (**homo**)

Homo (' unmarked forest') signifies both primary and secondary tropical forest with tall, large canopied trees, vines, and a large variety of herbaceous plants.

4.3.6. Lake, water, stream (**dua**)

Dua demarcates any area in the proximity of water, be it the creek where the women wash clothes or trap fish, by the lake, or where there is a wet area in the savanna.

4.3.7. The village (**lɔɔ**)

Participants often were more precise and named specific areas in the village (i.e. behind the Catholic mission, next to the dispensary, at someone's house, along the path, etc.).

4.3.8. The Courtyard (**càgà**)

Certain plant species are planted in the immediate surroundings of living compounds, either for culinary purposes or as charms and to dispel witchcraft.



Figure 11. Sondué Michel teaching Mambila literacy in his courtyard; note the bulbous plant at the wall (photo R.K.)