It has long been known that African noun class systems are not an isolated phenomenon in Bantu alone. Traces of noun classes have been observed in virtually all of the postulated sub-branches of Niger-Congo, with the possible exception of Mande. It is nonetheless true that a sizeable proportion of Niger-Congo languages exhibit the properties of a one-time universal system of noun classes (probably with prefixes and suffixes denoting class membership—see Welmers [forthcoming] for an exemplification of this position) that has by and large been reduced to nothing in Mande and to an insignificant role in much of Kwa. Somehow a complex noun class system was levelled, leaving groups of languages still undeniably related to those languages maintaining such a system (i.e. Bantu). How was this effected? What were the intermediate steps involved? In the Bamileke cluster of languages in Cameroon may lie a possible answer to these questions. Here we observe that in languages traditionally qualified as Semi-Bantu or Bantoid much of the noun class system they once shared with Bantu has been lost. In the Fe'fe' dialect (spoken in the vicinity of Bafang) there are strong indications that the remaining noun classes will survive no more than another generation or two.

In the following exposition we shall present data from Fe'fe' dialect establishing a set of seven sg/pl noun class pairings (genders). Some attention will be focused on three other Bamileke languages (Ngwe, Bangangté, Bandjoun), which we have not personally investigated, but about whose noun classes documentation is available from the literature.

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1 We would like to thank the directors of the Nufi schools in the Bamileke region of Cameroon for helping and encouraging us on many occasions.
This paper is divided into three sections. In the first, the criteria for distinguishing Bamileke noun classes are presented along with those groupings we have arrived at. In the second section we discuss the productivity of these noun classes. In the final section, Fe'fe' is considered in the broader context of comparative Benue-Congo. It is our contention that much of what we shall present actually occurred in some form or another in many of the languages of Kwa (Igbo, Yoruba, Nupe) and in Mande, resulting in the present absence of noun classes in these languages. Thus it is highly instructive to consider the status of Bamileke noun classes.

1. **Noun classes in Fe'fe'**

In Bantu languages the noun class membership of a specific noun is typically identified by its class prefix. In addition, complex processes of concord in a variety of situations help to establish the identity of a noun's class membership. In some Bamileke languages many of these concord properties are maintained. Thus, as Dunstan [1966] reports, noun class concord in Ngwe is observed in possessives, adjectives, demonstratives, relatives, and a variety of other constructions. Nominals also generally consist of a class prefix plus a noun stem. On the basis of these phenomena it is possible to set up a system of noun classes in Ngwe. Other dialects, however, do not mark the identity of noun class membership as pervasively as in Ngwe. While Bangangté and Bandjoun seem somewhat intermediate [Voorhoeve 1968], the only context in which the full range of noun classes are differentiated in Fe'fe' is in the observed concord of possessive pronouns. In most cases the original noun class prefix has been lost—or, if it once consisted of a nasal consonant plus a vowel, neutralized as a fully assimilated nasal prefix. We shall witness the remaining function of this nasal prefix in our discussion of classes A and F below.

We now present the noun classes of Fe'fe' accompanied first by their respective possessive pronoun concord, and second by their respective noun class prefix, if any. These classes are exemplified in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Possessive Concord</th>
<th>Class Prefix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A. sg.</td>
<td>ø-</td>
<td>(mèn)ø-/N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>b-</td>
<td>(pù)N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. sg.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. sg.</td>
<td>z'-</td>
<td>ø-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. sg.</td>
<td>ø-</td>
<td>ø-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>z-</td>
<td>ø-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. sg.</td>
<td>ø-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>z-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. sg.</td>
<td>n-'/l-</td>
<td>ø-/N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. sg.</td>
<td>ø-</td>
<td>ø-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Fe'fe' Noun Classes

In the second and third columns a tone mark over a consonant (or ø) denotes the tone of the immediately following vowel of the pronoun. ['] denotes mid, ['] lower-mid and ['] low. Elsewhere ['] denotes high tone. The tone is given only in the singular, since plural tone is predictable (and invariant). In addition to A-G there are apparently four mass classes in which there is no sg/pl alternation. Their concordial agreement is identical to parts of A-G and are best seen as mass classes (i.e. as classes of things that do not readily lend themselves to being counted). We list these additional classes in Table 2.
Table 2

Fe'fe' Mass Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Possessive Concord</th>
<th>Class Prefix</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>H.</td>
<td>z-</td>
<td>φ-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>m-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.</td>
<td>φ-</td>
<td>N-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.</td>
<td>n²/1²</td>
<td>φ-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3

Exemplification of Fe'fe' Noun Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Possessive Concord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. sg.</td>
<td>mèn'jwìë</td>
<td>'woman'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>pùn'jwìë</td>
<td>'women'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>sën</td>
<td>'friend'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nsën</td>
<td>'friends'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. sg.</td>
<td>nèšù</td>
<td>'cane'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nèšù</td>
<td>'canes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>nè</td>
<td>'animal'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nè</td>
<td>'animals'²</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. sg.</td>
<td>čwì</td>
<td>'bone'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nčwì</td>
<td>'bones'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>thù</td>
<td>'tree'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nthù</td>
<td>'trees'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. sg.</td>
<td>sùo</td>
<td>'hoe'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>sùo</td>
<td>'hoes'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>wù</td>
<td>'thing'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>zhù</td>
<td>'things'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

²The word for 'animal' is assumed to be derived from a nasal prefix before a noun stem with initial /n/. There is a nasal cluster simplification rule in Fe'fe': N+N → N in these cases.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Possessive Concord</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E. sg.</td>
<td>mvūa</td>
<td>'dog'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>mvūa</td>
<td>'dogs'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>mvhī</td>
<td>'goat'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>mvhī</td>
<td>'goats'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. sg.</td>
<td>kwā'</td>
<td>'ring'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nkwa'</td>
<td>'rings'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>mbā?</td>
<td>'button'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>mbā?</td>
<td>'buttons'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. sg.</td>
<td>thū</td>
<td>'head'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nthū</td>
<td>'heads'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sg.</td>
<td>khù</td>
<td>'foot'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pl.</td>
<td>nkhu</td>
<td>'feet'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H.(mass)</td>
<td>zi?</td>
<td>'sweat'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mass)</td>
<td>lwō?</td>
<td>'yams'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I.(mass)</td>
<td>nčē</td>
<td>'saliva'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mass)</td>
<td>nzē</td>
<td>'feces'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.(mass)</td>
<td>mvēn</td>
<td>'grass'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mass)</td>
<td>nkēn</td>
<td>'news'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K.(mass)</td>
<td>pē</td>
<td>'hate'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(mass)</td>
<td>pē</td>
<td>'tarrot'</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Classes A-K are exemplified in Table 3, above, using the pronoun a 'my' to illustrate possessive concord. Some of these classes contain a large number of nominals (e.g. C, E, I), while others have very few members. Note that some classes are distinguished primarily by possessive concord, while others are differentiated by taking into the consideration the

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3 All citations are given in semi-phonemic form, differing in some detail from the orthography used by the Nufi schools in Cameroon. We do not wish to ignore the residue not accounted for in our analysis. Thus we cannot explain the tone in the singular pē? l-া (pl. mbā? m-া 'my house/houses').
pairing in which each class enters (the singulurs of A and E or D and G are the same, though their respective plural differs). We shall return to this matter below. Note also for the moment that classes A and F (see Table 1) contain nominals differing in prefix. In the case of F, it is probable that we have a merger of two once distinct classes, one of which (as mbà? 'button') was characterized by a nasal prefix throughout, and one of which (as kwà? 'ring') was characterized by a nasal prefix only in the plural. In class A, we note the troubling fact from Table 2 that sën 'friend' does not have a nasal prefix in the singular, while njwàl 'wife' (and all other nouns of this class) do. (The optional prefixes mèn-/pù- are discussed in Section 3.)

One final note is relevant to the noun classes we have just set up. There is a pair of kinship terms ('father' and 'mother') which although apparently belonging to class E (though not impossibly to class A), exhibit some anomalous characteristics in the possessive construction. In the singular possessor pronouns, illustrated now with respect to 'dog',

(1) 
vwa \text{-} à 'my dog'
vwa \text{-} ò 'your dog'
vwa \text{-} I 'his dog'

the following patterns are observed:

(2) 
mbè? + ò-ò \rightarrow [mbò?ò] 'my father'
mbè? + ò-ò \rightarrow [mbò?ò] 'your father'
mbè? + ò-ò \rightarrow [mbò?ò] 'his father'
mà + ?-ò \rightarrow [màvò] 'my mother'
mà + ò-ò \rightarrow [màe] 'your mother'
mà + ò-ò \rightarrow [màa] 'his mother'

Thus, whereas the normal singular possessive pronouns are à 'my', ò 'your' and i 'his, her, its', in these two cases only we find instead o 'my', e 'your' and a 'his', not to mention the apparently suppletive form of 'my mother'.

Our proposed explanation for these exceptional characteristics might attempt to explain \[màvò\] 'my mother' by positing a complex historical form: mà + vhu 'parity' + o. This would also explain the anomalous lower-mid tone by the productive rule of downdrift after a low tone in Fe'fe'.

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kinship terms is given below. They are tentatively analyzed as belonging to class pairing E, since they take $z$- concord in the plural. (We understand, however, that some speakers use plural concord b-, that which would classify these forms as class pairing A.)

2. Productivity of the noun classes

We have seen in the above tables the only means by which we can successfully differentiate the noun classes of Fe'fe'. In this section we would like to present data that would seem to suggest that the present noun class system exists as such only as the result of an extensive levelling process. Much of what remains is also subject to levelling.

The first evidence of class merger is semantic. Only three of Fe'fe' sg/pl pairings are fairly homogeneous in this regard: class A (comprising a limited set of personal nouns), class E (in which we find an abundance of animals) and class G (body parts). This is not to say that there are no exceptions. Class A is exceptionless as it admits no non-human nouns, but class E contains some non-animals, while other classes contain a limited number of scattered personal nouns and animals. However, it is constructive to view A and E as forming a (basically animate) class together. We shall see the motivation for this below. Some class E members are: ńgẹ́p 'chicken', muwa 'dog', nū 'snake', njwẹ́ 'leopard', mūt 'goat', mbā? 'father', mā 'mother', nčẹ́ 'basket', and nkà? 'reed'. Among the members in class G are: vāk 'bone', tèn 'buttock', wū? 'hip', sī 'face', thū 'head', pō 'hand', khū 'foot'. We have found extremely few non-body parts in this class. Many other body parts are to be found in class pairing C, although they form a minority in C by virtue of the size of this class. Among these body parts are: čwē 'bone', zōk 'knee', kūa 'penis', zōk 'eye', zōk 'hip', tē? 'navel', lām 'tongue', sē? 'tooth', pēn 'breast', hā 'armpit', and ńwā? 'cheek'. Finally—to complete those classes characterized by semantic unity—all of the mass classes consist of either mass nouns or abstract nouns, or both. Class I consists of the following elements: nząt 'feces', nći 'saliva', ngwā? 'salt', nza 'nose' (= snot), nōk 'hair', nkẹ́p 'medicine' (= bark), nkẹ́wẹ́ 'black-eyed peas', ndùa 'cloud', and nsìsì 'urine', among others. It may not be possible in all cases to predict the noun class from the semantic nature of the noun, but
it is clear that if a noun is placed in this class (I), it is conceived of as a mass--i.e. as something not to be differentiated by number. As a final illustration, we stated above that few non-body parts occur in class G. One example, hu 'leaf', is to be found there. This noun is quite noteworthy in that it changes meaning depending upon its class membership. When it is in class G its meaning is 'leaf'. When it is in class H (a mass class), its meaning is 'medicine' (as from a leaf). One other example: ye normally means 'ghost' when in its non-mass class (in which it is sole member, part of the residue referred to in footnote 2), but means 'breath' in mass class H again. However, as we shall now see, this semantic productivity is extremely limited, suggesting that different semantic properties were blurred as the various noun classes merged with one another.

We have been insisting that this noun class system is in the process of dying out. One clear indication of this observation is that unless Mr. Tchokokam has heard the possessive concord of a noun, he is unsure and usually unable to assign it to a noun class. In this case, though his uncertainty is always reaffirmed, he will tend to assign new or unfamiliar lexical items to class C. For class C is the generally productive class. All neologisms and borrowed words fit into this class. Thus we observe the following borrowings from Pidgin English:

(6) fidwa z-ː 'my flower'
    fam z-ː 'my farm'

This observation would seem to confirm our view that Fe'fe' noun classes have largely lost their initial semantic significance, with the few noted exceptions. If they hadn't, we would expect borrowings to fit into different classes according to their semantic content. Note however that although 'flower' and 'farm' are considered to be mass nouns (they have no plural), we ignore the possible debate over whether these should be assigned to C, as we have done, or to H, since we shall later collapse H with the singular of C. The important factor in this process is that these words were not put into one of the other mass classes--notably class I, which is the most developed in terms of numbers. In adopting
such words as they did, Fe'fe' speakers point toward another tendency of their language: the decline of sg/pl distinctions. We shall return to this issue below.

To summarize the discussion so far, the occurrences of noun class concord in Fe'fe' have been reduced to one context. For this reason the Fe'fe' speaker is often unsure (or ignorant) of the noun class identity of a given noun. In most environments in which there was noun concord in Proto-Bamileke, there simply is a lack of any grammatical agreement whatsoever. Thus, consider in (7), the set of pre-posed possessive pronouns, whose function differs only slightly from the post-posed pronouns we have thus far been considering.

(7) yà wúzà 'my food' (=my portion of the food)
    yô wúzà 'your food'
    yì wúzà 'his food'
    yô wúzà 'our food'
    yî wúzà 'your (pl.) food'
    yà wúzà 'their food'

The pronouns in the first column are invariable. Not only do we always obtain y-, but also the tone is predictable: low for the singular set, mid for the plural person set. This should be compared with the post-posed counterparts, for example: wúzà yô-'my food' (class D). There are no plural pre-posed possessive pronouns, such that 'my dogs' can only be mvùa yô, and never *zà mvùa. The decline of sg/pl distinctions is seen a second time.

In most cases we observe that one class has been generalized to replace all of the others. In anaphora, for instance, a complete gender (sg/pl pairing) has come to be used for all nouns, as we see in (8):

(8) mô? thû 'the other tree' + yì mô? 'the other one'
    mô? nthû 'the other trees' + zî mô? 'the other ones'

Cf.: yî bê 'this one', zî bê 'these ones'

Thus we see that the anaphoric pronouns are yî/zî for 'tree' (class C) as well as for nouns of all other classes, despite the clear resemblance
of these markers to the possessive concord of class E (and lo! Bantu 9/10). This is not the only case where class E has become general. In relative constructions we find that yî is employed, though covering both singular and plural (a third instance of sg/pl decline) as we see in (9):

(9) mû yî â kà yî lâ kà šûa
    child X he PAST see Y PAST leave (X+Y = rel markers)
    'the child that he saw left'
    pû yî â kà yî lâ kà šûa
    'the children that he saw left'

BUT: *pû zî â kà yî lâ kà šûa

In (4) we saw the concord in the singular possessor pronouns for 'dog' (class E). Let us complete that table with the plural set of possessive pronouns:

(10) mvûa y-ô: 'our dog'
    mvûa y-ì: 'your (pl.) dog'
    mvûa y-à: 'their dog'

It seems reasonable to propose that the initial y- that we find in the plural possessors originally comes from the singular of class E. In post-nominal singular possessor pronouns ('my', 'your (sg.)', 'his'), we would claim, the concordial element fell, leaving it intact only in the above positions. (Compare the pre-nominal possessive pronouns in (7), where we observe this y- in all persons, which we now identify as the singular concord marker of class E which in this construction has been generalized to all nouns.) Having recognized this process, we are now in a position to explain the forms for 'father' and 'mother' in (5) above. Two processes are involved. First, Fe'fe' speakers chose, for whatever reason, to use plural possessive pronouns ('our', 'your (pl.)' and 'their') for the corresponding singular pronouns ('my', 'your', 'his') in the case of 'father' and 'mother'. One can imagine a cultural setting for such a move, perhaps politeness of some sort. These plural forms, then, came to be used indifferently for (semantic) singular and plural (e.g. 'my' and 'our'), as in (11):
In present day Fe'fe' these forms have only the plural interpretation. The second step was that at the time when initial concord consonants fell in the singular series of possessive pronouns, this y- fell, creating once more a sg/pl person dichotomy in these exceptional pronouns. This rule of consonant drop (which would have had to apply to the semantic class of singular) left the way open for irregular vowel and tone assimilation to yield two identical vowels with mid tone in series. Let us take note in this explanation, that the form y-è: for second person plural is also heard and is perhaps more frequent than y-î:, though Mr. Tchokokam prefers the latter.

Thus, to summarize, it is important to recognize that although we have distinguished noun class pairings A-K on the basis of possessive concord, this concord is recoverable in the singular possessed noun only in the set of singular possessor pronouns. In other words, we can determine the class membership of a noun in the singular only by looking at what concordial prefix turns up in the frames: 'my X', 'your (sg.) X' and 'his X'. In other positions the concordial prefix is generalized to y-, though it maintains the tone of the singular set of pronominal possessors. Thus we observe the following:

(12) A.  sèn  y-è:  'our friend'
    sèn  y-î:  'your (pl.) friend'
    sèn  y-à:  'their friend'
B.  nṣù  y-è:  'our horn'
    nṣù  y-î:  'your (pl.) horn'
    nṣù  y-à:  'their horn'
C.  thù  y-è:  'our tree'
    thù  y-î:  'your (pl.) tree'
    thù  y-à:  'their tree'
D. njwlɛ y-ð: 'our leopard'
   njwlɛ y-Ʌ: 'your (pl.) leopard'
   njwlɛ y-à: 'their leopard'

etc. (The tone of the plural possessor pronoun in class C concord is mid, despite the fact that the singular pronouns receive lower-mid tone. This has to do with the complex tonemic system of Fe'fe' and other Bamileke languages and does not seriously affect our statement that the plural pronouns receive a tone that correlates with the tone received by the singular series.) Thus we see that the actual marking of the possessive concord is even more limited than we have implied. Remembering that 'my tree' is thw ฯ-ø, we should expect the form *thw ฯ-ð: 'our tree', but see from the above examples under C that a crucial aspect of possessive concord has already been lost.

In the examples we saw in Table 3, we observed that when the possessed nominal is singular, at least, the tone of the possessive pronoun depends on the possessed noun’s noun class. Thus, classes A, B, E and F are all characterized as low-tone classes, while C, D and G are best seen at this time as non-low-tone classes (see Table 1). We find a tonal demonstration of noun class membership in noun plus noun associative constructions, which although incomplete (given only two possibilities: low or non-low), provides some indication of the direction in which the language is shifting. In Fe'fe' the nomen rectum follows the nomen regens, which in the case of classes C, D and G undergoes a tonal uplifting (low becomes mid, lower-mid becomes mid and mid becomes high), as now illustrated in the singular of these genders:

(13) C. thw + mũ → thù mũ 'the child's tree'
     D. wũ + mũ → wú mũ 'the child's thing'
     G. khù + mũ → khû mũ 'the child's foot'

In classes A, B, E and F there is no tonal change:

(14) A. sɛn + mũ → sɛn mũ 'the child's friend'
     B. nʂu + mũ → nʂu mũ 'the child's cane'
     E. mvũa + mũ → mvũa mũ 'the child's dog'
     F. kwə? + mũ → kwə? mũ 'the child's ring'
In the above examples we have seen two different situations arising out of the decline of the different noun classes. First it was said that in many constructions where concord once was obtained there simply is a lack of any sign whatsoever. Thus there is no subject-verb agreement, no concord in demonstratives or subject relative pronouns. In the second situation, we observe that the concord marker of one class (e.g. class E in anaphora) is extended to cover all classes. Thus it would appear that in reducing the functional load of the various noun class markers, Fe'fe' had two options: first, to suppress concord marking of any type, or second, to adopt one invariant form for all noun classes. We have yet another possible option.

In object pronouns (where we assume an original full concord marking), instead of choosing one class to extend to all occasions, a new alignment of animate versus inanimate has been obtained. The full set of (invariant) direct object pronouns is the following:

(15) ə 'me' yo 'us'
o 'you' yi 'you (pl.)'
i 'him, her' ya 'them'

(Here tone depends on the tone of the verb form that precedes them.) We see from (15) that in the plural series it is once again (the singular of) class E (class 9 of Bantu) that has won out. All of these pronouns are invariant, but also semantically animate. (The consonant that sometimes appears before the singular series properly belongs to the verb stem that precedes it.) Thus, in the sentence

(16) à kà yi nĩ (from /yĩn/ + /i/)

he PAST see him

'he (recently) saw him/her'

the third person singular direct object can only refer to an animate being—that is, 'him', 'her', or 'it' (an animal). If one should wish to say 'he saw it' where 'it' is [-animate], it is necessary to use the paraphrase 'he saw that thing' (= the thing in question),
(17) à kā yī wū lá
he PAST see thing that
'he (recently) saw that thing'
or, if the reference is clear enough, one can suppress the object altogether:
(18) à kā yī
he PAST see
'he (recently) saw (it)'

The same constraint holds for the third person plural 'them'. One says 'those things' or simply omits the pronoun.

This distinction exists in other aspects of the pronominal system in Fe'fe'. The third person pronouns 'his/her/its' and 'their' are limited to [+animate]. The following set of subject pronouns is employed in the case of animates:

(19) n(ga) 'I'  pa  'we'
o  'you'  p(ə)n  'you (pl.)'
a  'he, she, it'  po  'they'

(Once again, tone is not constant. While po is generally high, the o others are usually low or rising.) Note that the plural pronouns appear to have a prefix identical to the plural of class A (Bantu class 2), which we have seen to be an animate (human) class (see footnote 5). While a 'he, she, it' and po 'they' are exclusively [+animate], we find a separate pronoun yə 'it, they' used for inanimates. Its interesting distinguishing characteristic is that while there is a singular/plural distinction in animate subjects, this same yə is used for singular and plural, once again pointing toward the eventual obliteration of sg/pl agreement in the language.

Thus we have seen three different situations arising out of one process: the levelling of noun classes in Fe'fe'. One interesting note relevant to the second situation (where one class displaces all others) is that where the singular of a class was generalized to all singulars
(as we saw class E employed for all plural possessor pronouns possessing singular nouns), the corresponding plural (class E plural \(z-\) in this instance) has not become generalized in the corresponding possession of plural nouns. Instead, as we shall now see, the singular \(y-\) is in the process of replacing all plural concords as well. Thus this process is not best seen as a regular one.

In this sub-section, we shall now argue that the overt singular/plural distinction in concord is breaking down in Fe'fe'. We have already alluded to several instances where plural is no longer clearly distinguished from singular. For example, we have just observed that the inanimate subject pronoun \(ya\) is not differentiated for number, while in other parts of the language such a distinction is still maintained. We have all but lost the ability to determine the number of a noun from its noun class prefix—while a prefixed \(N-\) marks the plural in classes A, B, C, E, F, and G, classes B and E exhibit a nasal prefix in the singular as well, while mass classes I and J also require a nasal prefix and have already failed to distinguish singular and plural (despite the logical possibility in many cases, e.g. \(nd\) 'cloud', class I). There are other indications of the imminent loss of this distinction, all from the behavior of possessive pronouns themselves. First, recent borrowed words, as we have noted, come into the language undifferentiated for number—we saw this in the case of 'flower' and 'farm'. Second, distinctions in plural possessor pronouns have been largely wiped out. While the tone of a possessor of a singular noun is predictable only from the individual noun class (some are low, others lower-mid and mid), the tones of pronouns possessing plural nouns have been completely regularized. The singular persons always have lower-mid tone, while the plural persons always have mid tone. We observe this in the following:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{mvwā } z-\ddagger & \quad \text{'my dogs'} \\
mvwā \quad z-\ddagger & \quad \text{'your dogs'} \\
mvwā \quad z-\ddagger & \quad \text{'his/her dogs' }
\end{align*}
\]

These tones are predictable in this way, despite the identity of the noun class of the possessed nominal. Thus there has already been a
considerable amount of levelling underlying this simplification. This situation has its correlate in the noun plus noun associative construction examined in the singular in (13) and (14) above. In the singular it was seen that only in the case of some classes was there a tonal upstep in this construction. In the plural, however, all possessed nouns undergo such a tonal phenomenon. Thus, compare the uplifted tones in (21) to their singular counterparts in (13) and (14):

(21)  
A. nsɛn mʊ 'the child's friends'  
B. nšũ mʊ 'the child's canes'  
C. nθhũ mʊ 'the child's trees'  
D. zhũ mʊ 'the child's things'  
E. mvũa mʊ 'the child's dogs'  
F. nkũwɛ mʊ 'the child's rings'  
G. nkhu mʊ 'the child's feet'

As the raising of this tone depends upon the non-low nature of possessive concord, this is not surprising. It is explained by the generalization illustrated in (20). The clearest indication, however, of the fate awaiting the plural in Fe'fe' is that the widespread y- that we saw in the plural series of pronouns possessing singular nouns has now come to be used in plural persons possessing plural nouns as well. The following forms are rapidly replacing the forms in the second column of (20):

(22)  
mvũa y-ọ: 'our dogs'  
mvũa y-ɪ: 'your (pl.) dogs'  
mvũa y-ɑ: 'their dogs'

This means that when this latter set is used, nouns in class D are undeterminable for number as we see in (23),

(23)  
suo z-ọ: 'our hoes' + suo y-ọ:  
then, suo y-ọ: = 'our hoe'/ 'our hoes'

while nouns in other classes can be interpreted as to singular or plural solely on the basis of tone. (suo mʊ is also ambiguously 'the child's hoe'/ 'the child's hoes'.) In addition, the functional load of the nasal
plural prefix in C and G is increased—it alone tells you if the noun possessed is plural or not, as in (24):

(24) C. nthù m-ð: 'our trees' → nthù y-ð:
    cf. thù y-ð: 'our tree'

nkhu m-ð: 'our feet' → nkhu y-ð:
    cf. khù y-ð: 'our foot'

But, Fe'fe' speakers fail in many cases to use the nasal prefix anyway. Nouns (such as unpaired body parts) that are not normally used in the plural have already become confused: the noun sì 'face' has an etymological plural nsì 'faces', but a Fe'fe' speaker may be unsure of whether 'our faces' is sì y-ð: or nsì y-ð: . All of these observations point to the likelihood that the plural, as a morphologically marked category, is fading out—as it has done elsewhere in West Africa.

3. Comparative Benue-Congo

We are now in the position to consider the task of reconstructing proto noun classes. Our task can be seen to entail two objectives: first, to reconstruct the noun class system that the proto-language of Bantu and Bamileke (henceforth, Bantoid) had, and second, to reconstruct the individual noun stems and designate the noun class to which each stem originally belonged. The first objective requires several considerations. Our procedure should be first to reconstruct Proto-Bamileke, its noun classes and noun stems, and then to expand our efforts to encompass more and more ground, linguistically. Unfortunately it would be premature of us to present any more than a few observations at this time. The Bamileke languages have been grossly neglected by all but a very few scholars in the field and the information available is scanty and not always adequate in quality. Although the Bamileke languages differ markedly in phonetic detail, a deep phonology (internal reconstruction) of each dialect would (according to all indications) lead us to many common underlying forms. Thus we have not only been able to posit certain Proto-Bamileke roots despite limited information, but also have had some success in relating these posited forms to Proto-Bantu. (For further discussion and exemplification, see Hyman and Voeltz [forthcoming],) In addition to setting up
the classes, we should want to isolate the semantic correlates associated with each class, if any. Also, we should want to provide the morphophonemic rules accounting for primary, secondary and tertiary concord, if applicable. Finally, we should provide the singular/plural pairings of these noun classes.

In this section we would like to reanalyze the noun classes we presented in section 1. We would like to do this while incorporating data from related languages. The forms of Ngwe, Bangangté and Bandjoun are from Voorhoeve [1968], although the Ngwe forms and correspondences to Bantu classes are attributed to Dunstan [1966]. The need for the Luganda forms (secondary concord in some instances) will become evident in a moment. The singular/plural pairings of the Bamileke forms correspond to those of the Bantu items. We now enlarge upon the table presented in Voorhoeve [1968] providing additional information from Comparative Bantu (from Guthrie [1967]), Luganda and Fe'fe':

(25) Table 4
Comparative Noun Classes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CLASS</th>
<th>Proto-Bantu</th>
<th>Luganda</th>
<th>Ngwe</th>
<th>Bandj.</th>
<th>Bngt.</th>
<th>Fe'fe' P.C.</th>
<th>Fe'fe' N.P.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. A</td>
<td>mu</td>
<td>mu/y/e</td>
<td>g`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>(y)`</td>
<td>Ø`</td>
<td>(nɛn)Ø/N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. A</td>
<td>ba</td>
<td>ba</td>
<td>b`</td>
<td>p`</td>
<td>(c)`</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>(pù) N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. B</td>
<td>mu</td>
<td>mu/gu</td>
<td>g`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. B</td>
<td>mi</td>
<td>mi/gi</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. C</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>li</td>
<td>d`</td>
<td>ts</td>
<td>c`</td>
<td>z`</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. C</td>
<td>ma</td>
<td>ma/ga</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m`</td>
<td>m</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. D</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>ki</td>
<td>z`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>Ø`</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. D</td>
<td>bi</td>
<td>bi</td>
<td>b`</td>
<td>p`</td>
<td>c`</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>Ø</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. E</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>ni/y/e</td>
<td>z`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>y`</td>
<td>Ø`</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. E</td>
<td>ni</td>
<td>ni/zl</td>
<td>z`</td>
<td>ts`</td>
<td>c`</td>
<td>z</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. F</td>
<td>du</td>
<td>lu</td>
<td>l`</td>
<td>/n`</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. G</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>ku</td>
<td>g`</td>
<td>Ø`</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td>Ø</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(The plurals of classes 11 and 15 are identical to class 6.) Thus we have reanalyzed the classes referred to as A, B, C, D, E, F and G as 1/2, 3/4, 5/6, 7/8, 9/10, 11/6 and 15/6 respectively. Mass classes H, I, J and K are reanalyzed as 5, 6, 9 and 11. The remainder of this paper will be devoted to validating the correspondences seen in Table 4.

Let us first evaluate the assignment of the more conservative Ngwe nominal system to the Bantu classes listed in Table 4, positing correspondence rules wherever possible. The Ngwe forms show very strong correspondences to the Bantu system. There is first of all the d' of class 5 corresponding to *di and the z' in Ngwe to the Luganda zi of class 10. Ngwe class 3 g' corresponds to secondary concord gu in Luganda. Classes 4 and 6 are realized as m', corresponding to mi and ma, respectively. In these cases (as opposed to class 3) the plural classes 4 and 6 have taken the basic noun prefixes for concord. Ngwe 2 and 8, both of which are realized as b', furnish a clear correspondence with Bantu ba and bi, respectively. Thus we are able to provide a number of correspondence rules, seen in (25):

\[
\begin{align*}
(26) & \quad CR1 \quad PB \quad *mV \quad : \quad Ngwe \quad m \quad / \quad \ldots \quad \ldots \\
& \quad CR2 \quad PB \quad *bV \quad : \quad Ngwe \quad b \quad / \quad \ldots \quad \ldots \\
& \quad CR3 \quad PB \quad *dI \quad : \quad Ngwe \quad d \quad / \quad \ldots \quad \ldots \\
& \quad CR4 \quad PB \quad *gV \quad : \quad Ngwe \quad g \quad / \quad \ldots \quad \ldots 
\end{align*}
\]

(CR1 is to be read, for example: 'Proto-Bantu *mV corresponds regularly to Ngwe m in a given environment.') It is not clear that Guthrie's reconstructed form for class 10, *ni, is the correspondence for the Bamileke forms in Table 4. It is doubtful that *ni would correspond to z. Rather we recognize PB *dIni of which it is the *di (Cole's class 8x) that corresponds to Ngwe z:

\[
(27) \quad CR5 \quad PB \quad *dI \quad : \quad Ngwe \quad z \quad / \quad \ldots \quad \ldots 
\]

The nasal prefix of class 10 nouns is seen as deriving from the *ni part of our reconstruction.

Most important about these rules is the fact that even within the noun class systems of languages which have lost most distinctions we can find
regular correspondences. This fact raises serious questions regarding the status of Bamileke languages vis-à-vis Bantu, particularly in view of Guthrie's claim that it is sufficient to classify a language as Bantu if it shows regular correspondences in the noun class system and if it shows a sufficient number of correspondences with Common Bantu roots (see Tucker [1964:215] for the first discussion of these criteria). That these criteria, although arbitrary in some respect, can be satisfied for the Bamileke languages is certainly demonstrable [Hyman and Voeltz, forthcoming].

The case for the Fe'fe' noun classes and their assignment to corresponding Bantu classes is perhaps a little less obvious. We have suggested a number of reasons for this above, namely, the large extent to which noun class distinctions in Fe'fe' have been and are being levelled, leaving considerably less traces than in Ngwe. Nevertheless we have assigned correspondence pairs to Bantu classes 1/2, 3/4, 5/6, 7/8, 9/10, 11/6 and 15/6. We will review the evidence presently.

As in Ngwe, PB *bV (e.g. class 2 *ba) corresponds to b in Fe'fe' (see discussion of class 8 below). We can therefore extend CR2 as follows:

\[(28) \text{CR2'} \quad \text{PB } *bV : \text{Ngwe } b : \text{Fe'fe'} b / \ldots \]

(CR2' should properly be understood as correspondences between PB and Proto-Bamileke.) Also as in Ngwe, PB *mV corresponds to Fe'fe' m:

\[(29) \text{CR1'} \quad \text{PB } *mV : \text{Ngwe } m : \text{Fe'fe'} m / \ldots \]

Given CR1' and CR2' we have classified A and B as 1/2 and 3/4 respectively.

Where Ngwe has maintained a distinction between the behavior of super-closed i (i) and i (i), Fe'fe' has generalized on the behavior of i, allowing palatalization of d to z before *i and *i (before or after their ultimate merger). Thus:

\[(30) \text{CR3'} \quad \begin{bmatrix} \text{PB } *dI \\ \text{PB } *dI \end{bmatrix} : \begin{bmatrix} \text{Ngwe } z \\ \text{Ngwe } d \end{bmatrix} : \text{Fe'fe'} z [/\ldots \ldots \ldots ] \]
Accordingly we can relate classes C and E to 5/6 and 9/10, respectively. Additionally we observe that the nouns of class I are mass nouns, that their noun concord is a nasal, and that their concordial agreement is that of the plural of C, and thus class 6. Conversely, class H corresponds to the singular of C, and thus class 5.

What about the possessive concord in class 1 in Fe'fe'? According to CRI' we would expect m. Notice, however, that class 1 and class 9 possessive concords are identical, namely $\emptyset$, pointing toward the possible (historical) relationship between classes 1 and 9. (We return to this question below.)

In addition to accounting for the concord markers, we must also be prepared to explain the presence or absence of nasal prefixes in the various classes. We may predict them on the basis of the Bantu noun class correspondences we have supported. Let us assume that the underlying form for the prefixes of classes 3, 4 and 6 is m. This m is realized as /m/ before a vowel (as in possessive concord), but is assimilated to the following consonant by the rule in (31):

\[(31) \quad [+\text{nasal}] \rightarrow [\text{a position}] / \_\_ \_ [\text{a position}]\]

(In the case of would-be NN clusters, these are simplified to single nasal consonants.) Observe that this rule extends also to class 9 (and of course class 10, which differs solely by the addition of d) where a presumed underlying /n/ is also assimilated to the following consonant.

Within the classes so far related to Bantu forms, there exist a number of problems. First, what is the source for the possessive concord in classes 1 and 9? Second, class 1 nouns normally have a nasal prefix, but there is at least one clear example lacking such a prefix (sɛn 'friend'). Are we to recognize two genders, both of which have the same concords, but which are distinguished by the presence or absence of a nasal? We would have to sub-divide 11/10 in the same way (see Table 1). Although this position would be consistent with our methodology, it is not clear to us how we might predict the concordial agreement in these
classes other than assuming that they have the same cognates in Bantu, thus bringing us back to our first analysis. Finally, what is the source for the prefixes men- and pw in classes 1 and 2? It is not certain that these forms are cognate to any Bantu forms. If they cannot in fact be related by rule, this would lead to some interesting speculation: it has been argued [Givón forthcoming] that Bantu class 1/2 is a Bantu innovation, by splitting class 9/10 and assigning most [+human] nouns to class 1/2. Is it possible then, that Bamileke experienced a parallel development? On the other hand the forms men- and pw- are quite close to their hypothetical counterparts *mu and *ba. (Bantu *b does in fact correspond to Fe'fe' [p].) Does this then suggest that the creation of class 1/2 preceded the Bantu-Bamileke split (as Givón concludes) and that 1/2 has to be in fact reconstructed for what we term 'Bantoid'? All indications point in this direction. In Voorhoeve and de Wolf [1969], for example, the cognates of Bantu 1/2 in Bantoid are the most frequently occurring classes. All the instances of nasal prefixes in nouns of classes 1 and 2 can be argued to be transfers from classes 9 and 10, retaining their original prefix (n-), but adding the noun prefixes of 1/2. The men/pw prefixes of Fe'fe' 1/2 curiously resemble the sg/pl pair wên/pw 'person/persons'. (In most dialects 'person' is mën, so we needn't concern ourselves with this detail.) Thus we would have to conclude that some kind of compounding has taken place to create 1/2 from 9/10. This remarkable instance seems not too distant from the type of evidence one has longed for in the quest for deeper insight into Bantu noun class creation. At this point, we take note of the potential importance of Fe'fe' 1/2 and refrain from further speculation.

Bamileke 7/8 corresponds less obviously to Bantu *ki/*bi. The first piece of evidence for class 8 is that we find b’ in Ngwe. Secondly, we find that class 8 is realized as zl in some Bantu languages (e.g. Zulu) as it apparently is in Fe'fe'. We suggest that this z has its source in *b[, where the super-closed [ has palatalized the *b [β]. We favor this over Cole's proposed class 8x dj, since we obtain b in Ngwe and can motivate a change of the form,
(32) PB *b{i} [βi] → Fe'fe' z

as we see in the correspondences:

(33) PB *bina\(^5\) 'to dance' : Fe'fe' zɛn 'to dance'

(See Hyman and Voeltz [forthcoming] for further discussion.) Also keep in mind that PB *ba is reflected as b\(^6\) in Fe'fe'. We can therefore propose that Bantu *b is cognate to Fe'fe' b before a, and z before i. Class 7, however, is not as clearly demonstrable. We note that Fe'fe' 7 is identical to what we are calling Fe'fe' 15. We are assuming that these are the correct cognates to the Bantu classes partially on the grounds that there are Bantu classes which group in the same manner, i.e. 7/8 and 15/6. But we are also considering some more substantive evidence in this assignment. We see from Table 4 that both 7 and 15 are realized as Ø⁻ in Fe'fe'. We have noticed that Bantu prefixes containing nasals are reflected as nasals and that those containing voiced consonants in Bantu have reflexes in b, d, z or l (class 11, as we shall see) in Fe'fe'. There are no cognates with Bantu prefixes which contain voiceless consonants. We therefore, by elimination, have the option of assigning those nouns taking Ø⁻ concord to Bantu 7 (*ki), 12 (*ka), 13 (*fu) or 15 (*ku). In the case of those nouns taking class 8 plural, we feel that 13 is out on the grounds that it is basically a plural or mass class. We know of no Bantu language which has the plural class 8 and does not have as its singular counterpart class 7. Class 12 is certainly a possibility, but again we are excluding it because of the absence, to our knowledge, of any Bantu language which pairs it with any class other than 13 or 14. Similarly, class 15, to the extent that it is not a mass class, pairs with 6 in Luganda and ChiBemba and a number of other languages. Furthermore, in Bamileke, it contains mostly body

---


\(^6\)In Fe'fe' underlying /b/ is realized as [p] as in the following rule: b + p / #. That is, at the beginning or end of a word.
parts, again paralleling the Luganda and ChiBemba class. By accepting 7/8 and 15/6 as such for Fe'fe', we assume that at some stage 7 and 15 merged, perhaps after the loss of initial *k in both cases. One indication of this is the pair wū/zhū 'thing/things' in which the prefixes of 7/8 irregularly remain before a stem consisting of a hypothetical ū. Most other Bamileke dialects exhibit a palatal consonant in the singular form, such as Bangangté yū, where we see that in addition to the loss of *k, the typically Bantu gliding rule 1 → y operates. We might explain the form wū for class 7 in Fe'fe' (where we expect yū) by hypothesizing that 7 and 15 merged as 15 (where *k falls and u + w). This solution does, of course, need further validation.

Finally, class 11 has no noun prefix, that which we would expect for a non-nasal cognate such as Bantu *du. It has n alternating with 1. The 1 can be related to PB *du by regular correspondence, while we note that [l] and [n] often occur as free variants in Bamileke [Hyman and Voeltz, forthcoming].

4. Summary

In the present paper we have shown that the seven genders which must be recognized for Fe'fe' can be treated as twelve morphological agreement classes, all of which are cognate to Proto-Bantu forms. We have also seen cognate forms from Ngwe, Bangangté and Bandjoun from Table 4. Although it is somewhat premature to consider the implications of this study on the Proto-Bantoid noun class system, we would like to suggest that it is very unlikely 1) that Bantoid as a whole fully matches the inventory of classes of Proto-Bantu (i.e. Bantu may have innovated a number of classes after its separation from Bantoid); and 2) that no more than ten or twelve classes will ever be reconstructable for Bantoid.

7The [w] in 'things' is assumed to be the result of the rule: iu → w. This rule is discussed in Hyman and Voeltz [forthcoming].
REFERENCES


