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► **To cite this version:**

Pius W. Akumbu. Babanki literacy classes and community-based language research. Shannon T. Bischoff; Carmen Jany. Insights from practices in community-based research: From theory to practice around the globe, 319, De Gruyter, pp.266-279, 2018, Trends in Linguistics. Studies and Monographs, 9783110524741. 10.1515/9783110527018-015 . hal-03691828

**HAL Id: hal-03691828**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03691828v1>**

Submitted on 1 Sep 2022

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Pius W. Akumbu

# Babanki Literacy Classes and Community-Based Language Research

**Abstract:** Most of the linguistic work on Babanki, a Central Ring Grassfields Bantu language of Northwest Cameroon has been for the scientific world and not directly beneficial to the community. Such work on the language include Hyman (1979, 1980), Menang (1981, 1983), Tamanji (1987), Phubon (1999, 2002, 2007, 2014), Brye (2001), Mutaka and Phubon (2006), Akumbu (1999, 2008, 2009, 2011), and Akumbu and Chibaka (2012). Community participation in the above projects has been limited to providing information while the linguists have analyzed and published the findings. Efforts to give back research products to the community have met several obstacles including the lack of interest in reading and unavailability of electricity. This study draws from experiences in recent language documentation projects on Babanki (Akumbu 2013, 2014) and argues that in addition to using modern information and communication devices where possible, literacy classes present the best opportunities for the Babanki community to utilize research products.

**Keywords:** Babanki, literacy classes, community-based, research

## 1 Introduction

If linguistic research on endangered languages does not arouse interest in maintenance and/or revitalization, or if research outputs do not actually reach the target language community, then the research has only been completed partially. This is exactly what happens when results end up as excellent publications in bookshelves and at best, stimulate further investigations and promote knowledge in the scientific world. The goal of this paper is to contrast, as a native speaker, the theoretical work that has been done on Babanki against work that involves and gives support to the community. Advances in language documentation in recent years have emphasized the need to shift from doing work on language that is of direct benefit only to the researcher, to design projects that would allow community

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<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110527018-015>

members to also benefit (Cameron et al. 1992; Dwyer 2006; Hinton and Hale 2001; Rice 2006; Handman 2009). While recent work (Storch 2011; Lüpke 2011; Good 2012) has clearly highlighted the African perspective, I adopt Czaykowska-Higgins' (2009: 24) definition of Community-Based Language Research cited in Good (2012: 29) as follows:

Research that is *on* a language, and that is conducted *for*, *with*, and *by* the language-speaking community within which the research takes place and which it affects. This kind of research involves a collaborative relationship, a partnership, between researchers and (members of) the community within which the research takes place.

The Babanki (ISO 693–3 [bbk]) community is made up of approximately 39,000 people (Lewis, Simons, and Fennig 2016) living in two separate villages - Big Babanki and Babanki Tungo in Northwest Cameroon. The dialects spoken in the two villages have only a few phonological and lexical differences which, however, do not hinder mutual intelligibility. Close to 90% of the inhabitants of Babanki are farmers. With the exception of craftsmen, and those who live out of the village, 9 out of 10 people make their living from cultivating the land (Akumbu and Wuchu 2015). In addition, Babanki has an oral tradition and its members lack a reading culture. The society is also highly stratified such that during ceremonies women sit separately from men and each group gets involved in different kinds of activities. In particular, women would be busy cooking and making other necessary arrangements while the men are discussing and drinking palm wine. When food is ready they are served the best share and then the women themselves would have the rest. It should also be mentioned that the Babanki are mostly Christians although Islam is gaining grounds with the coming of Saudi Arabians to the village in 2007. That notwithstanding, some people still engage in the worship of various gods.

One of the ways to give meaning to the monumental research work on Babanki which has contributed immensely to the development of outstanding linguistic theories such as Autosegmental Phonology, Lexical Phonology, and Register Tier Theory (see section 2) and has produced excellent scholars, is to ensure that the Babanki people are given the opportunity to familiarize themselves with, and if possible, utilize the research products. Work on the language should involve the community so as to support the maintenance and revitalization of the language as well as increase its documentary capacity. This entails engaging community members in decisions about what to document, what to do with the outputs, as well as giving them updates on research activities. This is pertinent because “in the end, it is the community people, not outsiders, who maintain or abandon their language: it is their choice if and how to revitalize, maintain, and fortify their

language (Dwyer, Brenzinger and Yamamoto 2003). Nevertheless, the researcher could, if possible, make their skills available during the conception, planning and implementation of revitalization activities.

As a native speaker working on the language, I observed that most of the existing materials have not had any impact on Babanki maintenance or revitalization.<sup>1</sup> This is essentially so because the results of the work never get back to the community. I therefore began to think of how my work could become useful in preventing the endangerment and death of the language. The most available channel is the involvement of the community of users at all stages of the research activities (Himmelman 1998; Rice 2011; Crippen and Robinson 2013). The more people get actively involved and are made to own the output of the activities the more interest they would have in developing and using their language, thereby avoiding its extinction.

Getting involved in the multimedia documentation of the language offered me the unique opportunity to move away from collecting information from a few individuals, writing papers and publishing in Journals or writing books, to getting large numbers of people involved in determining what should be recorded, where and when and what we could do with the products. The people were motivated to participate because they understood, after sensitization that documenting the language would help preserve it. In this paper, I focus on the opportunity to bring the output of the documentation activities to more Babanki people in literacy classes. However, before doing that, I illustrate that most previous work on the language never got back to the community.

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<sup>1</sup> I was born and raised in an ordinary Babanki family although my father was from the royal family. Like in most homes in the village, we grew up speaking Babanki, a scenario which has changed remarkably in the last 10–20 years due to the influence of Christianity and modernism which have ushered in Cameroon Pidgin, the lingua franca of North West Cameroon. Cameroon Pidgin is common among youth and students who also speak some English and to a lesser extent French. English and French are the two official languages of Cameroon. English is the language of education and administration in Anglophone Cameroon (Northwest and Southwest Regions) while French is used in the other eight Regions of the country (Francophone Cameroon). The Babanki people who have been to school and learned English (since it is the language of instruction) may speak it with each other whereas French is occasionally used by those who have been exposed to it by living in Francophone Cameroon or learning it in school as a foreign language. Babanki is not taught in school yet and Babanki children are not allowed to use the language in the school environment. The language is not favored since it is neither a language of education, work, nor business. However, the Cameroon government has had plans since 1998 with Law no 98/004 of 14 April 1998 on the orientation of education to introduce indigenous languages and cultures in school.

## 2 Linguistic work on Babanki

By the late 1970s researchers began to take interest in the study of Babanki and since then many linguistic analyses of the language have been done. Unfortunately, the studies have been useful to the authors and the scientific world but of little or no impact to the Babanki community itself. This is mostly due to the fact that academic linguists are constrained by the need to either obtain academic qualifications, satisfy funding agencies, or produce original publications and advance science. For these reasons, even linguists who are community members have tended to focus on their personal academic interests than on the general interest of the community.

Some “outside” linguists have collected and analyzed data from Babanki and have either published their findings as journal articles or submitted them to academic institutions to obtain qualifications. The most outstanding ones include Hyman (1979, 1980); Tamanji (1987); Brye (2001); and Mutaka and Phubon (2006). At the same time the following linguists who are Babanki community members have equally worked on the language for similar reasons like outside linguists. For example, Menang (1981), proposed an analysis of the language spoken by *Nakang* (a masquerade in Babanki). He illustrated the differences between this restricted dialect and the ordinary day-to-day language of the people and exposed some of the connotative meanings that arise from this special usage. Menang (1983) undertook an elementary study of word classes in Babanki paying attention to the nouns alongside their concord systems. The two works by Menang were not published and the manuscripts are no longer available even to the author (Thaddeus Menang, Personal Communication).

As a requirement to obtain a Master’s degree in Linguistics, Akumbu (1999) identified and described phonological processes that occur within the nouns of Babanki. Using the generative approach, he captured changes that occur within the nouns in isolation, as well as at phrasal level. That work, like most of those that follow were done because the Cameroonian university system directs these community members towards theoretical work in order to earn a degree which would possibly enable them (later on) to get the support to do development work on their language. This strategy leads the community members to work on the language for their individual benefit rather than for the benefit of the community.

Phubon (1999) contains a study of the phonological system in Babanki done for her BA Long Essay. She laid emphasis on the phonological rules that relate postulated underlying forms to the phonetic forms. To obtain a Master’s degree in Linguistics, Phubon (2002) attempted an identification and explanation of the phonological and tonological processes that occur within the verb in Babanki.

One of the major findings of the work is that the verb in this language exhibits two tonal levels, high and low. The other tonal melodies, mid, rising and falling are derived through tonological processes. Using the Lexical Phonology model, Phubon (2007) identified and explained some phonological and tonological processes that occur in this language in order to obtain a Diploma of Advanced Studies in Linguistics.

Akumbu (2009) identified and described the two grammatical categories in Babanki that are used for temporal specification (tense and aspect), and demonstrated in the paper that there is a co-occurrence constraint that operates between tense and the time adverbials they occur with. Akumbu (2011), unlike Hyman (1979), proposed a synchronic account of tone in the Babanki associative construction within the framework of Register Tier Theory, making use of only a few tone rules. He concluded that the behavior of tones in the associative construction is conditioned by the presence of a nasal in the onset position of the juxtaposed noun roots.

Akumbu and Chibaka (2012) provide a description of the grammar of Babanki in a way that it will be useful to the learners and teachers of the language, as well as to others interested in this and other Grassfields Bantu languages. The book was published in Germany because of the university requirement that researchers should publish high quality work abroad and also because the authors received financial support from the Asien-Afrika-Institut, University of Hamburg.

Phubon (2014) presented a PhD dissertation on the phrasal phonology of Babanki and argued that the phonological and intonational phrases are prosodic domains for the application of phrasal rules. She showed that there are some rules which are only sensitive to syntactic constructions and used the prosodic hierarchy theory to explain how rules operate in the different domains in which they apply.

The Babanki–English lexicon (Akumbu 2008) differs from the studies above in that (1) it was not a university project and (2) it got to the community. The lexicon of over 2000 entries serves as an introduction to Babanki words and phrases. This work had been initiated in 2002 by SIL Cameroon and some Babanki people. When I started working with the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL) in 2006, I was encouraged to verify the existing data base and to augment the entries. After working on it for two years, the lexicon was published with funds from the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation<sup>2</sup> and 1,000 copies distributed to the community.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.rogerblench.info/KWEF/KWEF/KWEF%20opening%20page.htm>

There is therefore a lot of work done on the language but apart from the Babanki-English lexicon which was distributed among the Babanki people in the villages and cities of Cameroon, none of the other works listed above is available to the community. In most cases, the materials have been kept in university libraries in Cameroon or abroad. Even the Grammar book published in Germany has not reached the Babanki community due to lack of information on its existence and the high cost. The thirty copies I received as author from the publisher were insufficient for myself and my colleagues. This situation mirrors what Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) has described as “language research conducted by linguists for linguists.” Even in cases where some published materials have reached the community, only a few educated and highly motivated individuals have read them because the Babanki are mainly farmers and are either not literate in English or lack a reading culture. Literacy classes offer the unique opportunity to explore some of these materials and make them useful to the custodians of the language.

### **3 Work done by SIL Cameroon and the Cameroon Association for Bible Translation and Literacy (CABTAL)**

Unlike the work done by academic linguists for the scientific world, SIL Cameroon and CABTAL have been principally interested in working with and for the community.<sup>3</sup> The leading principle at the two organizations is that literacy and Bible translation must be locally owned and locally driven because such an approach fosters sustainable community development. While work by missionary linguists has come under criticism (Pennycook and Makoni 2005; Rehg 2004; Grenoble and Whaley 2005; Keane 2002; Dobrin and Good 2009; Handman 2009), I simply attempt to present the situation as it has been up until now. CABTAL believes in facilitating language projects so that the speakers (users) can take individual and corporate responsibility for the transformation of their communities in order to

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<sup>3</sup> Formerly called the Summer Institute of Linguistics, SIL International is a non-profit, scientific educational organization of Christian volunteers that specializes in serving the lesser-known language communities of the world. They further focus on the application of linguistic research to the literacy and translation needs of the minority language communities. SIL Cameroon ([www.silcam.org](http://www.silcam.org)) came into existence in 1967 and since then has worked on more than 130 Cameroonian languages.

foster lasting success. SIL Cameroon began work in Babanki in 1998 by sending a survey team there to make a preliminary evaluation, based on both lexicostatistics and on village based speakers' perceptions of the level of inter-comprehension within Babanki and between Babanki and adjacent languages. They were also to determine the feasibility of developing literacy materials in the Babanki language and to identify the attitudes of village residents toward the idea of reading and writing Babanki or any adjacent languages. The results of the survey reported in Brye (2001) pointed to the probable success of a program to develop literature in the Babanki language.

In 2004, CABTAL took over the work initiated on Babanki by SIL Cameroon and subsequently introduced literacy classes and the Bible translation project in 2006. It was then that the first ever orthography statement/guide was proposed for the language (Hedinger and Viwun 2004). By September 2006 there were six literacy classes going on in Babanki villages and the number soon increased as several protestant churches in the area began to encourage adults to read and write in their own language. In 2006, I joined CABTAL to work as a linguist responsible for the description of aspects of the Babanki language and the development of literacy materials.

Information from their website shows that CABTAL believes strongly that development is started and cultivated through literacy.<sup>4</sup> When a person learns to read, their eyes are opened to a whole new world of possibilities. Opportunity to see their life in a new light suddenly becomes a reality. New doors are blown open and positive change can begin to take root. They want to facilitate change, rather than implement and be responsible for change. Only when a community catches the vision and their own dream, does their development remain long-term. Literacy skills allow access to information on health, HIV/AIDS, agriculture, commerce, further education, community events, and government programs. Mother-tongue literacy transforms a culture, leading to the development of new skills and knowledge, fresh confidence, and the ability to function as full members of society. CABTAL considers this *functional literacy* giving that there is little incentive to read if what an individual learns is not applicable to their life. Through literacy and Bible translation, the bondage of fear is loosed, people transition simply from existing to thriving, and a community starts to plan for the future and the daily lives of oral language speakers improves significantly. The above views have not gone unchallenged as it has been pointed out that "Missionary literacy work can carry with it certain biases, prioritizing reading over writing and

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4 [http://www.cabtal.org/?page\\_id=86](http://www.cabtal.org/?page_id=86)



approaching texts as inherently truth-bearing” (Schieffelin 2000 cited by Dobrin and Good 2009). Similarly, Dobrin and Good (2009: 621) have observed that:

Cultural assumptions about how the very process of speaking works may be at odds with Christian views; for example, the alignment of speech with inner belief that is so valorized by Western Judeo-Christianity (being truthful, nonsecretive, and so on) is by no means universal.

This notwithstanding, CABTAL is involved in the preparation and production of literacy materials (alphabet charts, reading books, and teaching materials), training of teachers as well as writers who can create stories and books in their own language. CABTAL could serve as a foundation or starting point for what Czaykowska-Higgins (2009) identifies as a “Community-Based Language Research model which allows for the production of knowledge on a language that is constructed for, with, and by community members, and that is therefore not primarily for or by linguists.” Literacy can therefore be the first step in developing a community-based language research model regardless of who (linguists or missionaries) helps bring literacy to the community and their motives. This is particularly so because it enables the community of speakers, specifically those who are participants in the classes, to gain greater agency in the documentation process.

## 4 Babanki literacy program

As noted earlier, CABTAL introduced literacy classes in Babanki in 2006 and started to operate in six protestant churches in different locations in the two Babanki communities. Up until today the classes are free of charge and are held once a week. The aim is to help the participants develop self-confidence, obtain a certain degree of literacy, systematize their existing knowledge in order to promote a detailed understanding of local issues affecting them, provoke critical thinking on daily issues surrounding their lives, and to challenge cultural myths that slow down their development. The classes are aimed at everyone who would like to learn to read and write Babanki. However, a majority of the participants are those who have had some formal education and are therefore literate in English. The classes are dominated by female adults and only a few children attend irregularly. By June there were 32 classes running in the two Babanki villages. While new classes are created, the number of participants has continued to increase even in existing classes over the years. The class with the smallest number of participants in June 2016 had four students while the largest had 53. When the literacy classes started in Babanki, we prepared the orthography guide

and then the Babanki-English lexicon. While Babanki is not yet taught formally in schools, there are plans to do so following the new development in Cameroon to promote the use of indigenous languages in primary and secondary schools. When this eventually happens, such literacy materials emanating from this kind of work by CABTAL will help in the teaching and learning of the language.

The facilitators are encouraged to link teaching to the daily realities of the learners.<sup>5</sup> The aim is to make learning to be as interactive as possible so that the participants would contribute to their own learning. The facilitator's role is to generate discussions of interest to the learners and to guide the process. The materials for learning are to be generated by the learners.

Learning to read and write is known in the Babanki community and in many other parts of Africa to be a thing that happens in a formal school setting. It is also known to be something that happens in and about a different foreign, whiteman's language, English. Getting people to learn to write and read Babanki was at first an infeasible activity. To an extent, it could be unimaginable among those who had at least been to school but rather undreamt of among adults who have never gone to school. This explains why in the six initial classes, there were 49 female participants who had been to primary school in the past, only 16 male participants who had also been to school and 11 children who were attending primary school. This was the kind of feeling at the time literacy classes were introduced in Babanki but the impressions quickly changed once the people began to understand that it was possible for them to write their own language to the extent that they could write and read their names. In 2014, 24 participants out of 146 in 22 classes said that they had never set foot in class before but are now able to write and read a few expressions in Babanki. It should be mentioned that emphasis in the literacy class is on reading and writing. In class, therefore, the facilitators mostly write out lessons on the blackboard and then guide the participants to read after which they are encouraged to write.

Most of the (illiterate) men are not used to sitting with women in the same setting. Due to this cultural fact, and for the reason that the literacy classes are linked to Christianity which attracts more women than men in Babanki, it has been quite difficult to get men to participate in the classes. However, along the years some non-Christian adults have joined the classes to experience what the others tell them. There hasn't been any attempt to set up separate classes for male and female learners.

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<sup>5</sup> The teachers in the classes can either be male or female. In June 2016, seven out of 12 teachers were people who had completed elementary school while six had completed secondary school. Four were employed as Primary school teachers in the village while the rest were not formally employed elsewhere. The teachers live in the village and engage in farming like most other people and then teach once a week.

## 5 The role of language documentation projects

When I got funding to document Babanki oral literature, my desire was to make sure that the results of my work should be of benefit to the community.<sup>6</sup> The first project was to document the language of Babanki ritual performances which contains poetic forms, lexical items and grammatical structures not found in everyday Babanki speech and which are threatened by the strong influence of modernism and especially Christianity which have caused the number of people who still engage in ritual performances to drop drastically. Consequently, the Babanki cultural values inherent in the ritual performances are no longer cherished and transmitted to younger generations. The second project extended to the collection of riddles, folktales, farm work songs, spells, curative chants and myths. It was also meant to prepare Babanki people to continue the collection of their folklore themselves. By the very nature of the projects, therefore, I had the obligation to involve community members at all stages of planning and execution of activities as well as utilization of the documentation outputs. The projects were therefore community-based, since they allowed the production of knowledge on Babanki for, with, and by the community members.

The first project was approved in July 2013 and by the end of November 2013, we had set up a team of four men and six women to work as consultants. Before we finally started in January 2014 each consultant was sufficiently informed of the activities and time schedules of the project. In the course of the project, we made sure every decision on which activity to record, who would be involved and who would participate in the processing of the recording was taken only after consulting a majority of the consultants.

Everything went on as planned but we noticed that the materials we were recording were not really being useful to the rest of the community members to whom we shared. From the outset, we chose to store our recordings on micro SD cards which would be used with cell phones since only a few people own television sets, CD and/or DVD players. The situation was made more difficult because only about 10% of the territory has electricity and the rest of the village depends on personal generators or bush lamps and torches. The problem therefore arose

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<sup>6</sup> The *Multimedia Documentation of Babanki Ritual Speech* project (January 2014 – December 2014) was supported by the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP) and the *Multimedia Documentation of Babanki Oral Literature* (December 2014 – November 2015) received funding from the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research. The second project is meant to continue the work started during the first and to ensure that a permanent team is put in place for the documentation of Babanki oral literature.

from the fact that it is difficult for a person to charge the battery of their cell phone and then run it down within a short time. This is so because as of 2016 it cost 200 FCFA (approximately 40 cents) to pay for a full battery charge in a locality where most people depend on their farm produce to make a living, using money from the sale of some of their crops only rarely to purchase what they cannot produce. People would therefore accept the micro SD cards but would prefer to answer or make calls with their phones rather than run down the battery by playing a ritual performance. However, whenever we decided to gather people and show them something we had recorded, they turned out in large numbers. This forced us to begin to think of a better way of dissemination since one of our major objectives was to raise awareness and encourage the use of the language. It is at this moment that we thought of the literacy classes as a possible avenue for dissemination.

In a literacy class, there is need for teaching aids that foster the understanding and use of the language while engaging participants' emotions. Watching a performance by familiar people in a familiar context involving everyday experiences of participants inevitably enhances learning and creates value in the language. Participants quickly realize that their language is equally important and can be recorded and stored in different media that people can watch or listen to. In watching such activities and listening to the use of language they also discover the beauty and wealth of their cultural values. All the above help to motivate and encourage them to continue learning to read and write but above all to intensify speaking.

The only time participants in the CABTAL course (most of whom do not have television sets) had the opportunity to watch performances either on TV or on a projector was when we arranged for a projection in their class. They watched with excitement and expressed the desire to have more projections, suggesting that the videos were particularly interesting. This probably explains why enrolment in classes in 2015 increased drastically to 262 from 102 in 2013.

The recorded resources undoubtedly offer the best materials to use in the classrooms for promoting language and culture. In addition, this is the only setting where participants make the effort to read textbooks that are available in the language. For example, nearly all of them own a copy of the Babanki-English lexicon and report that they turn to it regularly especially when confronted with spelling difficulties in Babanki.

The participants eventually pass on the knowledge and experiences they gain in the classroom to their family members. Since most of the participants are mothers, their children have a greater exposure to the language and language resources. The younger participants equally carry the information to their parents and friends thereby motivating other community members to develop interest in the literacy classes. This probably explains why the number of classes continues to grow and the participants per class increase.

## 6 Conclusion

Babanki literacy classes offered us the unique opportunity to bring the results of our documentation work to the community members. This is particularly so because no matter the day-to-day contents of the classes and their syllabus, they undoubtedly provide a forum for community members to come together and consume research results created with or by them. By going through the literacy classes, we reached directly to those who took part in the classes including both facilitators and participants. In addition, we indirectly reached out to their family members as they carried their knowledge and experiences home and shared them. It was also observed that the classroom setting was the most likely place where the community members could make use of published materials in the language such as the Babanki-English Lexicon and the pedagogic grammar of Babanki. While other publications could not be useful to the participants because of their scientific nature, letting them know that so much work has been done on the language and published either in Cameroon or abroad encouraged them to know that their language is worthy and should be used and transmitted to younger generations.

This experience leads to the understanding that while researchers conduct research, publish, and archive their findings using up-to-date technology, they should figure out a way to disseminate the results, i.e., take them back to the people of the study area. It is evident that in the case of a community like Babanki which is primarily dominated by the oral tradition, giving people an opportunity to watch or listen to products of research could have a greater impact than reading would have; the challenges with reading being at least two-fold. First, the number of literate people in English is small, and secondly, the published materials rarely get back to the community. While a few people would play the SD cards in their cell phones and some would play the DVDs, a majority can best be reached through literacy classes. Since the classes are currently going on, every researcher who conducts research on any aspect of the Babanki language can pass through the classes to reach out to the community and make the results of the research available and useful to the people in the study area. This solution is most likely to work in other Cameroonian communities with ongoing mother-tongue literacy classes. This is feasible because the number of such classes has continued to increase throughout communities where CABTAL and SIL Cameroon are present.

In a whole, this paper represents an African voice talking about endangered African languages and proposing ways by which linguistic research in Cameroon can be both collaborative and community based.

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### Web Resources

- [http://www.cabtal.org/?page\\_id=86](http://www.cabtal.org/?page_id=86). Accessed on 11 January 2015.
- [http://www.drussa.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1501%3A](http://www.drussa.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1501%3A). Accessed on 16 February 2015.
- <http://www.silcam.org/>. Accessed on 26 January 2015.
- SIL 2008 Annual Report <http://www.silcam.org/documents/AR08.pdf>