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## **Remnants of nasal prefixes in Western Grassfields Bantu**

Pius W. Akumbu & Jeffrey Wills

Studies on Grassfields Bantu nominal morphology have often cast doubt on the presence of nasals in prefixes in Western Grassfields Bantu (WGB). In fact, the presence of nasals in prefixes in Eastern Grassfields Bantu and their assumed absence in WGB has been used, among other factors, to establish the distinction between the two groups of Grassfields Bantu. This paper illustrates that Babanki and other WGB languages display remnants of nasal prefixes of various lexical items. These remnants cannot be completely accounted for by borrowing and phonological processes but rather they suggest that Proto-Western-Grassfields also had nasal prefixes as seen in Proto-Eastern-Grassfields and Proto-Bantu.

**Keywords:** nasals, prefixes, borrowing, concords, remnants, Grassfields Bantu

## Introduction

Since the 1960s, there has been great interest in the varying presence or absence of nasal consonants in the noun prefixes of certain classes of Niger-Congo languages. Proto-Bantu (PB) is reconstructed with nasals in cl. 1, 3, 4, 6, 6a, 9, and 10 by Meeussen (1967), but Proto-Benue-Congo (PBC) is reconstructed without any nasal prefix except in cl. 6a by de Wolf (1971). So, the question of the evolution of these nasal prefixes has been under discussion for a long time (see Hyman 2018 for a summary of the problem and its history), including a proposal to reconstruct them as far back as PBC (Miehe 1991).

Particular attention has been paid to Grassfields Bantu (GB) languages because of the distinction between Eastern Grassfields Bantu (EGB) and Western Grassfields Bantu (WGB) based, in part, on the presence versus absence of nasal consonants in nominal prefixes (Stallcup 1980, Hyman 1980a, 2018). These studies of GB consider that the nasal consonants that are reconstructed in the noun class prefixes of PB and Proto-EGB are often missing in the WGB languages today. In fact, the presence of nasal consonants in prefixes of EGB nouns and their assumed absence in WGB has been used, among other factors, to establish the distinction between the two Grassfields groups and point to what looks like a shared innovation of Eastern Grassfields and Bantu. The relevant differences between EGB and WGB, identified by Stallcup (1980: 55), are listed in Table 1.

Eastern Grassfields Bantu	Western Grassfields Bantu
a. presence of nasal consonant in the prefix of class 1 and class 3 nouns	absence of the nasal consonant in these prefixes
b. no distinction between classes 6 and 6a. Both have a consonant in their prefixes	distinction between class 6 <b>a-</b> and class 6a <b>mǎ-</b> . A nasal consonant is present only in class 6a.
c. presence of nasal consonant in the prefix of all gender 9/10 nouns	absence of nasal consonant in the prefix of some gender 9/10 nouns

**Table 1.** Differences between EGB and WGB related to nasal consonants in prefixes

Hyman (2018) revisits the differences and presents, more fully, the reconstructions of noun class prefixes which have been proposed for Proto-Bantu by Meeussen (1967), Proto-Benue-Congo by de Wolf (1971), Proto-Eastern- and Western-Grassfields Bantu by Hyman (1980a). In Table 2 (extracted from Hyman 2018: 224), the partial or ambiguous status of the nasal in the Proto-WGB cl. 1, 9 and 10 prefixes is marked by parentheses to indicate that “the presence of a nasal is lexeme-specific in cl. 9 and 10” (Larry Hyman p.c.).

class	Proto-Bantu	Proto-Benue-Congo	Proto-EGB	Proto-WGB
1 (sg.)	*mù-	*ù-, *ò-	*Ñ-	*ù(N)-
3 (sg.)	*mù-	*ú-	*Ñ-	*ú-
4 (pl.)	*mì-	*í-	—	*í-
6 (pl.)	*mà-	*à	*mè-	*á-
9 (sg.)	*Ñ-	*è-, *ì-	*Ñ-	*ì(N)-
10 (pl.)	*Ñ-	*í-	*Ñ-	*í(N)-
6a (-)	*mà-	*mà-, *nà-	*mè-	*má-
7 (sg.)	*kì-	*ki-, *ke-	à-	kí-

**Table 2.** Reconstruction of relevant noun class prefixes

Two questions arise about the meaning and implications of these parentheses:

- (i) Under what conditions do these nasals appear? In other words, if “lexeme-specific”, then with which lexemes and why?
- (ii) How should these parentheses be interpreted in reconstructing the noun prefixes of Proto-Grassfields (PG) and Proto-Bantu-Grassfields (PBG)? That is, are the partial nasals in WGB relics or innovations?

An important part of the story is the concord system which has related but varying prefixes in contemporary and reconstructed Benue-Congo languages. Probably for the sake of simplification, the concord affixes (which can differ before consonants and vowels) are usually omitted in noun-prefix charts, but the two sets of affixes can impact each other, as we will discuss later.

We shall see that the WGB languages do preserve more nasal consonants (whether as prefixes or syllable onsets) than are often recognized and that, most likely, some ancestral variety once had regular nasal prefixes of the sort seen in EGB and Bantu. In other words, this paper argues that one should reconstruct nasal consonants in the prefixes of cl. 1, 9 and 10 in PG and, thus, for PBG. The minimal evidence for cl. 3, 4, and 6 is also discussed. In this way, we add support to the reconstruction of nasal consonants in nominal prefixes at a pre-Bantu stage.

Drawing inspiration from Babanki, a Central Ring language in WGB, this paper first examines numerous nouns with nasal onsets in gender 9/10 which reflect, in various ways, the nasal prefixes seen in PB and PEG. Frequent parallels from other languages demonstrate that this situation holds true for the entire WGB group, a heterogeneous group composed of the Ring languages (Central, East, South, West), the Momo languages (Hyman 2018: 200), and possibly others. A brief presentation is also given to the data from cl. 1 and 3, and reassignments from gender 9/10 to other classes. Next, evidence is presented of separable nasal prefixes in WGB deverbatives. Although these nasal elements do not function as prefixes in the nominal inflectional system (the stem is the same in the singular and plural), they are clearly still productive prefixes in the derivational system of several WGB languages. Finally, the possible origins of these substantial but varying nasal elements in contemporary WGB languages are discussed. Consideration is given to borrowings, phonological loss, class reassignment and morphological impact

from the concord system. We conclude that Proto-WGB might have inherited nasal prefixes but a variety of factors led to a restructuring of the noun system.

### 1. Nasals in Babanki noun classes

The nominal systems of WGB languages have a number of noun class and concord prefixes (and sometimes suffixes) that are separable from the noun root. It is generally agreed (Hyman 1980b, Blood 1999, Akumbu & Chibaka 2012, Möller 2012, among others) that the only prefix involving a nasal is the cl. 6a prefix (e.g., the word for ‘birds’: Babanki **mè-ńín**, Kom **mī-ńúyn**, Oku **əm-nán**). But the number of nouns with initial nasals in other classes is substantial and, equally important, not susceptible to an easy generalization about their presence or absence. Since the discussion in this study will rely considerably on the Babanki nominal system, we present its 12 noun classes in Table 3.

class	Affix	Example	Gloss	class	Affix	Example	Gloss
1	Ø-	ɲkèʔ	‘cock’	2	və-	və-ɲkèʔ	‘cocks’
3	ə-	ə-tó	‘hut’	13	tə-	tə-tó	‘huts’
5	ə-	ə-lóm	‘yam’	6	à-	à-lóm	‘yams’
7	kə-	kə-kí	‘chair’	8	ə-	ə-kí	‘chairs’
9	Ø-	ndzàm	‘axe’	10	-sə	ndzàm-sə	‘axes’
19	fə-	fə-ńín	‘bird’	6a	mə-	mə-ńín	‘birds’

**Table 3.** Babanki noun classes

#### 1.1. Nasals in class 9

Western Grassfields cl. 9 and the plural cl. 10 have been described as having zero nominal prefixes since noun roots in these classes either unambiguously begin with a single C or with an NC where the N does not function as a prefix (Hyman 1979 for Aghem, Möller 2012 for Men, Tunviken 2013 for Moghamo, Anderson 2014 for Isu, Achiri-Taboh 2014 for Ngamambo).<sup>1</sup> The controversy over the status of these nasals as prefixes or part of the root in GB remains unsettled in the literature. Achiri-Taboh (2014) presents empirical and conceptual evidence that the ‘N’ is not a prefix in Ngamambo (Momo). Even in EGB, there is no complete agreement over the issue. Tamanji (2009: 31) makes it clear that the gender 9/10 ‘N’ is not actually a prefix in Bafut:

...we have decided to maintain the nasal consonant as the prefix of classes 9 and 10 for the sake of consistency with the Proto-Bantu system and with the description of related Grassfields Bantu languages... I will maintain the homorganic nasal as the prefix for these classes and simply refer to them as inseparable prefixes which are probably undergoing reanalysis as part of the stem in Bafut and in a wider range of Grassfields Bantu languages.

1. Class 10 is lost in West Ring in favor of class 13 as plural of class 9 (Hyman 1980a: 254).

In Babanki, for example, of 120 gender 9/10 nouns on the basic wordlist in Akumbu (2008), 33 begin with **n**, 28 with **m**, 26 with **ŋ**, and 5 with **ɲ**, for a total of 92 nasal onsets (76.7%), while all the non-nasal onsets add to only 28 (23.3%).<sup>2</sup> As seen in Table 4, Grassfields languages generally have nasal-initial words in cl. 9. This is illustrated both in EGB: Fe’efe’e (Bamileke), Mankon (Ngemba), and WGB: Babanki (Central Ring), Lamnso’ (East Ring), Babessi (South Ring), Isu (West Ring), Moghamo and Oshie (Momo).

Language	‘animal’	‘back’	‘horn’	‘house’	‘sheep’ <sup>3</sup>	‘thorn’
PG	*nàm`	*jɲm	*ndóŋ	*ndáb`	*jì(e)l	*njóŋ`
PB	*nyàmà	*jùmà	*tóngu	*dábò	*gú	*jí(n)gùà <sup>4</sup>
<i>Eastern Grassfields Bantu</i>						
Fe’efe’e	nəə	ndzám	ndē?	ndūa	nzāa	ndzwe?
Mankon	ɪnámə	ndzùmə	ndóŋə	ndá`	ndziə	ndzóŋə
<i>Western Grassfields Bantu</i>						
Babanki	ɲám	dzəm	ndóŋ	—	ndzù	ndzóŋ
Lamnso’	ɲám	ndzəm	lɔŋ	lāv	ndzi	ɲjóŋ
Babessi	ɲò:	nzò	nduó	ndó?	ndzÿ	ndzuó
Isu	ɲám	dzəm	ndóŋ	n̄dāw	ndzò	—
Moghamo	ɲám	ɪndzɪm	ndóŋ	nép	ɪndzək	ɪndzəŋ
Oshie	ɲí	ɪndzùm	ɪndóŋ	ɪní	ɪndzək	ɪndzəŋ

**Table 4.** Some class 9 nouns that maintain nasals from Bantu-Grassfields stems<sup>5</sup>

As seen in Table 3, some of these nouns have nasal gender 9/10 parallels in EGB (Fe’efe’e and Mankon) and Bantu. Other examples include ‘hair’ (PG \*nùŋ, PB \*joidí 11/10); Babanki ɲɪŋ, Lamnso’, Moghamo, Menemo and Ngie ɲóŋ; and ‘cloud’ (PG \*bàk`): Babanki mbò?, Kom and Men mbà?, Oku mbàk, Ngwo mbè?. Since Babanki and other WGB languages have nasals in many gender 9/10 nouns, it might be that the 9/10 nasal prefix seen in EGB and Bantu was also generally

2. We have not included morphemes which are derived from other morphemes by semantic extension. Babanki examples in this paper are from the Kejom Ketinguh dialect spoken by the first author.

3. It is unclear to what extent the reconstructions for ‘sheep’ are related, or reflected in the modern languages.

4. BLR assigns this stem to cl 3/4 and 5/6, based only on Central and Eastern zones of Bantu.

5. Throughout this paper, contemporary language forms are those collected by the Grassfields Bantu Working Group in the 1970s. Proto-Grassfields reconstructions are those of Hyman (2007). Proto-Bantu reconstructions are taken from BLR3 (Bastin, Coupez, Mumba & Schadeberg 2002). The \*j in BLR reconstructions has been maintained, although in many cases \*y or a vowel-onset seems preferable; see Wills (forthcoming). The dash (—) is used when the current word with that meaning is non-cognate. Italics are used for forms that diverge from those illustrated by a set of examples.

present in Proto-WGB, suggesting that these forms have a common inheritance. Evidence that the nasal is not due to borrowing because of contact is presented in §4.

However, for some nouns, the nasal consonant is usually absent in WGB, despite its presence in EGB and PB cognates, as seen in Table 5.<sup>6</sup>

Language	‘bee’	‘dog’	‘goat’	‘fish’	‘skin’
PG	*yúʻ	*búà	*búḽ	*súʻ	*gùbʻ
PB	*jíkì	*búà	*búdi	*cúí	*gùbò
<i>Eastern Grassfields Bantu</i>					
Feʼefeʼe	—	mvāa	mvī	—	ḡgòp
Mankon	ìnúè	ḡbvúò	ḡbýè	ìfúà	ḡgòbè
<i>Western Grassfields Bantu</i>					
Babanki	zù	bú	byí	ʃù	gwù
Lamnsoʻ	yúū	dʒwí	bv̄li	sé	wūn
Babessi	mpfúʔ	bvó	bvóm	tʃá	ɣâ
Isu	zú	bvō	bī	ítʃí	ɣú
Moghamo	dʒók	bók	ḡwíʻ	ʃú	gôp
Oshie	èdzógó	èbók	èbwí	èswí	àzòbí

**Table 5.** Examples of WGB class 9 nouns without nasal prefixes

Hyman (1980b: 251) points out that ‘bee’, ‘dog’, and ‘goat’ all have a nasal prefix in EGB but no prefix in WGB, so one could think of a common change for these nouns at the proto-WGB stage – hence the lexeme-specific parentheses around the nasal in his reconstruction of the noun prefixes in cl. 9 and 10.

However, the presence of a nasal in Babessi **mpfúʔ** ‘bee’ indicates that the full story must be more complex.<sup>7</sup> There are also instances where Babanki has lost the nasal which other WGB languages maintain, e.g., ‘dream’ (PG \*jēm): Babanki **dʒòm**, Lamnso **ndʒəm**, Moghamo **ndʒəm**, Menemo (Momo) **ndʒòm**, Ngie (Momo) **indʒəm**); ‘hunger’ (PG \*jè(ŋ), PB jàdà): Babanki **dʒiŋ**, Moghamo **ndʒək**, Menemo **ndʒì**, Ngie **indʒèy**).

6. The list of Babanki cl. 9 nouns without nasal onsets is **bàʔ** ‘stiff hill’, **bàm** ‘cliff’, **byí** ‘goat’, **byì** ‘pit, ditch’, **byì** ‘camwood’, **bú** ‘dog’, **bviʔ** ‘maggot’, **dʒàŋ** ‘palm nut’, **dʒəm** ‘back’, **dʒì** ‘path’, **dʒiŋ** ‘hunger’, **dʒòm** ‘dream’, **fyi** ‘hernia, kidney’, **gə** ‘bundle’, **gì** ‘voice’, **gù** ‘skin (of man)’, **gyégyé** ‘beard’, **pfəm** ‘cliff’, **pfèn** ‘mountain’, **ʃi** ‘hoe’, **ʃù** ‘fish’, **ʃòkùʔ** ‘mouse, rat’, **tsəŋ** ‘bangle’, **tʃí** ‘fireplace’ (cf. **əʒíʔ** ‘fire’), **tʃi** ‘bad medicine’, **zùʔ** ‘silk’, **zù** ‘bee’, **zù** ‘snake’.

7. This mixed presence and absence of nasals is paralleled in the Beboid languages, such as Noni where the initial nasal is missing in the cl 9 nouns **dʒòm** ‘antelope’, **bìè** ‘goat’, **bwě** ‘dog’, but present in **ŋjàm** ‘animal’, **ndʒèè** ‘sheep’, **ndvū** ‘cloth’ (Hyman 1980a: 187), and Nchane, where “about 25% of gender 9/10 nouns have an NC onset” (Boutwell 2020: 69).

A great majority of class 9 nouns in WGB have nasal consonants, and about a quarter do not. The data do not always show a lexeme-specific division between those nouns with and without a nasal consonant. On the one hand, many languages have a nasal consonant while others lack it for a specific lexeme, e.g., Babanki, Aghem **ndzám** ‘axe’, but Ngwo **édzā**, Moghamo **dzám**; Babanki, Babungo **mbò?** ‘cloud’, but Moghamo **ìpà?**, Oshie **pà?**, Ngie **ìpà?**. On the other hand, many languages do not have a nasal consonant on a specific lexeme whereas others have it, e.g., Babanki, Babungo **dzìŋ** ‘hunger’, but Moghamo, Ngie **injeŋ**, Oshie **ènzèk**; Babanki **zù** ‘bee’, Aghem **ézú** ‘bee’, but Babessi **mpfú?**; Babanki **dzèm** ‘back’, Aghem **dzèm** ‘back’, but Babessi **nzò**.

The number of WGB class 9 nouns with nasal consonants is uncertain because some nouns of class 9 origin seem to have been reassigned or transferred to other classes. In particular, class 19, which was apparently diminutive in origin (Akumbu & Kießling 2020), often replaced the basic form in other classes, including class 9, e.g., Babungo **fəzúz** 19 ‘bee’ and Bu **fəzúa** 19 ‘snake’. Babanki has a number of nouns of class 9 origin now in class 19.

- (1) Babanki class 19 nouns of class 9 origin
- a. **fəjín** ‘bird’ (also Kom **fjnyyn**, Oku **fənón**, Babungo **fənwó**) — PB \*jùnì 9
  - b. **fəndzìndzì** ‘fly’ (also Kom **fìndzèndzè**, Oku **fəmbəŋ**, Babungo **fəníndì**) — PB \*gì 9/10, \*gìngì 9/6, 9/10 (reduplication)<sup>8</sup>
  - c. **fəjìtə** ‘path, road’ (cf. Fe’efe’ **mánzì**) — PB \*jìdà 9<sup>9</sup>
  - d. **fəmbván** ‘salt’ (also Kom **fjngván**, Oku **fəngwàŋ**, Babungo **fəŋwái**) — PG \*gwán<sup>10</sup>

The Babanki word **fəkò?/ŋkò?** 19/6a ‘tree/firewood’ is unique in creating a cl. 19 singular but apparently keeping the old cl. 10 form for the collective or plural, without adding the new cl. 10 suffix (i.e. \***ŋkò?sə**) or the cl. 6a prefix **mə-** (i.e. \***məŋkò?**). The same pattern is also seen in Kom **fìkà?/ŋkà?** 19/6a and Weh **fìkà?/ŋkà?** 19/6a, as well as in Bafut (EGB) **fìkwēē/ŋkwēē** 19/10 (cf. PB \*kúni 9/10, 11/10).

The reverse process (bringing in non-nasal nouns into cl. 9) also affected the proportion of initial nasals in cl. 9. For example, Babanki has **fɪ** ‘hoe’ in cl. 9 while that lexeme is in cl. 7 in other WGB languages, such as Lamnso’ **kisó** and Isu **kádzɔ**, as it is in some EGB languages, such as Bafut **àsɔ** 7/8 ‘hoe’.

8. The original cl. 9 form is preserved in Bum, i.e. **ndzìndzì** ‘fly’.

9. The original cl. 9 form is preserved in Babanki and Aghem, i.e. **dzì** ‘road’.

10. The first nasal in this lexeme seems to have been interpreted as a cl. 9 prefix at the PG stage but was perhaps earlier part of the root (cf. PB \*jòngúa 3).

## 1.2. Nasals in classes 1 and 3

Compared to cl. 9 where many nouns show the nasal prefix, only a few Babanki cl. 1 nouns, such as those listed in (2), have a nasal that could reflect the PB \*m̃ prefix, also used for agent nouns discussed in §3 below.

(2) Various Babanki class 1 nouns with nasals<sup>11</sup>

<b>ɲìŋgòŋ/və̀ɲìŋgòŋ</b>	‘god’
<b>mbàsə/və̀mbàsə</b>	‘vegetable’
<b>mbə̀ŋ/və̀mbə̀ŋ</b>	‘hammer’
<b>mbwə̀ŋsə/və̀mbwə̀ŋsə</b>	‘savior’
<b>mbvóm/və̀mbvóm</b>	‘python’

Whatever the origin of these nouns, it appears that the nasal has become part of the stem since the cl. 2 prefix **və̀-** is added before the nasal. This situation is seen in other languages as well, e.g., Bafanji (EGB) **ŋgə̀/pàŋgə̀** 1/2 ‘stranger’ (Hamm 2011: 7, 9).

The fact that the nasal is losing its ability to function as the cl. 1 prefix in Babanki (and Lamnso’) is seen in its absence where it is still present in some WGB languages, as illustrated in Table 6.

Language	‘child’	‘husband’	‘man’
PG	*áǹ	*lúm	*báŋà
PB	*jána	*dómè	*dómè
<i>Eastern Grassfields Bantu</i>			
Fe’efe’e	mūu	ndhū	mbā?
Mankon	múə̀	ndómə̀	m̃báŋə̀
<i>Western Grassfields Bantu</i>			
Babanki	wàn	lím	wùlám
Lamnso’	wān	lūm	lúmèn
Babessi	věmbwà?	ndó	mbô
Isu	wā	ŋŋā̄m	wìŋā̄mə̀
Moghamo	ŋwáǹ	ínóm	m̃bāŋə̀
Oshie	èŋwó	wènóm	wènóm

**Table 6.** Examples of WGB class 1 nouns with and without nasal prefixes

Although not consistent, these words in Table 6 provide some evidence that some Proto-WGB cl. 1 nouns had a nasal consonant in their prefix.

There are fewer Proto-Benue-Congo reconstructions of Babanki nouns of cl. 3 than of cl. 1 or 9, but Babanki retains the nasal in a few cl. 3 words shown in Table 7, which are also cl. 3 in PB.

11. Babanki **ŋkáŋ/və̀ŋkáŋ** ‘cornbeer’ has Ring cognates in cl. 1, 6, and 9 but looks like it was originally in cl. 6 (cf. PBC \*ma-kiam ‘beer’).

Language	‘branch’	‘tail’
PG	*táb`	*kùn`
PB	*tábì	*gòndó
<i>Eastern Grassfields Bantu</i>		
Fe’efe’e	—	ḡkwèn
Mankon	ḡdzáʔà	ḡkùḡḡ
<i>Western Grassfields Bantu</i>		
Babanki	əntám	əḡkwìn
Lamso’	tám	kún
Babessi	ntáʔ	—
Isu	—	úkwē
Moghamo	fítáp	íkōn
Oshie	ḡzáʔ	ókōn

**Table 7.** Examples of Babanki class 3 nouns with nasals

Ring languages only have a vocalic prefix in cl. 3, e.g., Babanki ə-kwén ‘bed’ and ə-tyím ‘heart’, but EGB has two subclasses of cl. 3 nouns, those with vocalic prefix ɪ and those with prefix N, e.g., Bafut ɪ-kùù ‘bed’ and ḡ-tíí ‘heart’ (Tamanji 2009: 26-28). Hyman (1980a: 182-83) reconstructs \*i- as the PEG cl. 3a prefix (from cl. 11) and suggests that cl. 3 and 11 merged in WGB. The lack of a nasal in the cl. 3 prefix of WGB may be due to the generalization of the vocalic prefix over the entire class.

WGB languages agree in showing no nasals in cl. 4 and 6 (Hyman 1980: 251). Class 4 is absent in EGB as well as East Ring, South Ring, and some Central Ring languages (Babanki and Bum), so a comparison of EGB and WGB is not possible. The class survives in some Momo languages such as Ngwo and Ngamambo, and is marginally present in West Ring and the rest of Central Ring, but without a (nasal) consonant in the prefix. Class 6 is present throughout WGB but lacks a (nasal) consonant in the prefix as it is marked by a vowel prefix.

## 2. Nasal prefixes in Babanki deverbatives

Evidence for synchronic nasal prefixes in the noun formation system of WGB comes from deverbatives, which can be gerunds, results, or agents. Gerunds directly relate to the action described by the verb, for example, ‘*hunting is fun*’, which relates to the process of hunting. Result nouns describe the results of actions, for instance, ‘the *building* is tall’ or describe events such as ‘the *meeting* will be brief’. Finally, agents refer to persons or things that perform an action. Deverbatives reveal that the nasal is, or recently was, separable in at least those WGB languages where it can be prefixed to verb roots to derive nouns.

Babanki gerunds and result nouns are currently derived by prefixing the noun cl. 5. The cl. 5 prefix is more productive and can derive both gerunds and results, e.g., **búm** ‘hunt’ > **ə-búm** ‘hunting’. But Babanki also has a few in cl. 9.

Verb root	Gloss	Result	Gloss
<b>táʔ</b>	‘reward’	<b>n-táʔ</b>	‘reward’
<b>tím</b>	‘send’	<b>n-tím</b>	‘message’
<b>sán</b>	‘split’	<b>n-sán</b>	‘sprout’
<b>kóʔ</b>	‘chop’	<b>ŋ-kóʔ</b>	‘gap, cut’
<b>tʃə</b>	‘sting’	<b>n-tʃə</b>	‘sting’

**Table 8.** Babanki result nouns in class 9

This pattern appears in other Bantoid languages. Some EGB languages also use N- marking to derive cl. 9 verbal nouns, e.g., Mankon (Leroy 2003) **ñ-tʔʔ** ‘pushing’ (< **tʔʔ** ‘push’), **m-bèʔé** ‘breaking’ (< **béʔé** ‘break’), **ŋ-gʔʔ** ‘crushing’ (< **ʔʔ** ‘crush’), and Bafut (Tamanji 2009) **ñ-luʔ** ‘jumping’ (< **luʔ** ‘jump’), **m-bwiʔ** ‘sleeping’ (< **bwiʔ** ‘sleep’), **ŋ-wòó** ‘falling’ (< **wòó** ‘fall’). Deverbatives in -n- also occur in Beboid (Boutwell 2020: 106) **ki-n-téne** ‘argument’ (< **téne** ‘argue’), **fi-n-tédé** ‘story’ (< **té**: ‘tell’).

This group of cl. 9 result nouns is apparently small because a more marked syllabic prefixation in cl. 7 absorbed it.<sup>12</sup>

verb root	gloss	gerund	gloss
<b>bwóm</b>	‘build’	<b>kə-m-bwóm</b>	‘building’
<b>lón</b>	‘beg’	<b>kə-n-lón</b>	‘begging’
<b>tʃə</b>	‘kick’	<b>kə-n-tʃə</b>	‘kicking’
<b>lè</b>	‘lose’	<b>kə-n-lè</b>	‘losing’
<b>ɲəʔ</b>	‘write’	<b>kə-ɲ-ɲəʔ</b>	‘writing’
<b>kù</b>	‘snore’	<b>kə-ŋ-kù</b>	‘snoring’
<b>fáʔ</b>	‘shave’	<b>kə-m-fáʔ</b>	‘scissors’
<b>pfi</b>	‘die’	<b>kə-m-pfi</b>	‘cadaver’
<b>ʃwìn</b>	‘lock’	<b>kə-n-ʃwìn</b>	‘lock’
<b>zàs</b>	‘loosen’	<b>kə-n-zàs</b>	‘key’

**Table 9.** Babanki nouns derived with class 7 prefix and a N- prefix

12. In addition to the ten nasal-initial forms, there are also five forms derived by simply affixing **kə-** to verb roots, e.g., **bàn** ‘hate’ > **kə-bàn** ‘hatred’.

The presence of the nasal suggests that Babanki gerunds were originally in cl. 9 and were then reassigned to cl. 7. Similarly, we see a nasal prefix in Kom cl. 7 nouns like **āmbūʔsĩ** ‘drill’ (< **bū** ‘bore a hole’), **ānsi** ‘sifter’ (< **sì** ‘sift’), **āntʃuəʔ** ‘grater’ (< **tʃuəʔ** ‘grate’), **ānyes** ‘broom’ (< **yēs** ‘sweep’). Although we do not have sufficient evidence, it might be that the nasal is an imperfective marker that functions as an agentive marker.

Agent deverbatives can also be productively formed in cl. 1 with a nasal prefix N- (cf. PB \***mo-VERB-i**) in some Western and Eastern Grassfields languages, such as Kom (Table 10), and Ngəmbà (Table 11):

verb root	gloss	gerund	gloss
<b>gùf</b>	‘drive’	<b>ŋ-gùf</b>	‘driver’
<b>gwò</b>	‘share’	<b>ŋ-gwò</b>	‘sharer’
<b>pfi</b>	‘harvest’	<b>m-pfi</b>	‘one who harvests’
<b>ʃfi</b>	‘tune’	<b>n-ʃfi</b>	‘song leader’
<b>tòʔ</b>	‘support’	<b>n-tòʔ</b>	‘supporter’

**Table 10.** Kom (Central Ring) agent nouns in class 1 (Loh 2001: 102)

verb root	gloss	gerund	gloss
<b>ppí</b>	‘lose’	<b>m-bbĩ</b>	‘loser’
<b>pó</b>	‘build’	<b>m-bò</b>	‘builder’
<b>tsó</b>	‘eat’	<b>n-tsó</b>	‘one who eats’
<b>tóem</b>	‘kick’	<b>n-tóem</b>	‘one who kicks’
<b>kʷó</b>	‘shave’	<b>ŋ-kʷò</b>	‘one who shaves’
<b>ya</b>	‘speak’	<b>ŋ-gà</b>	‘speaker’

**Table 11.** Ngəmbà (EGB) agent nouns in class 1 (Solange Mekamgoum p.c.)

However, Babanki has only a few agent deverbatives in cl. 1, seen in Table 12.

verb root	gloss	gerund	gloss
<b>zén</b>	‘buy’	<b>n-zén</b>	‘buyer’
<b>báʔlɔ́</b>	‘sell’	<b>m-báʔlɔ́</b>	‘seller’
<b>yáʔ</b>	‘hold’	<b>ŋ-yáʔ</b>	‘one who initiates’
<b>gùf</b>	‘drive’	<b>ŋ-gùf</b>	‘driver’

**Table 12.** Babanki agent nouns in class 1

Since cl. 9 and cl. 1 were merging phonologically in Babanki, confusion between result and agent deverbatives could likely arise. Apparently, one solution was to reassign result nouns to cl. 7, as we saw above, but another was to use an alternative process for deriving agent deverbatives by compounding ‘person’ with the verbal noun (‘the person of/for building’).<sup>13</sup> Derivation of Babanki agent deverbatives by compounding is applied productively irrespective of whether the cl. 5 or 7 prefix is used to form the gerund.

gerund	gloss	agent	gloss
<b>kə-nlón</b>	‘begging’	<b>wù kə-nlón</b>	‘begger’
<b>kə-bàn</b>	‘hatred’	<b>wù kə-bàn</b>	‘enemy’
<b>ə-dém</b>	‘play (n)’	<b>wù ə-dém</b>	‘player’
<b>ə-dʒèʔ</b>	‘journey’	<b>wù ə-dʒèʔ</b>	‘traveler’

**Table 13.** Babanki compound agents

If, as suggested above, the nasal is an imperfective marker that also functions as an agentive marker, then it is dropped in compound agents because the agentive role is marked by **wù** ‘person’. The nasal, therefore, seems to have been a separable and productive prefix at some stage of Babanki in a limited number of cases where it could be added to verb roots to derive agent or deverbal nouns. Additionally, these patterns provide some explanation for the restructuring that happened to the inherited cl. 9 or cl. 1 derivations.

In sum, the separable nasal prefixes for cl. 1 agents and cl. 9 verbal nouns (both productive and fossilized) in the derivational system of several WGB languages are parallel to the nasal prefixes in those classes in EGB and Bantu languages.

### 3. Accounting for the distribution of nasals in WBG

In the preceding sections, we have seen that in WGB languages:

- (i) Class 9 nouns generally have nasal onsets,
- (ii) A small number of cl. 1 and 3 nouns have nasal onsets,
- (iii) There is a productive set of nasal prefixes for certain deverbatives in cl. 1 and 9.

What are the proto-forms and processes that can account for these facts?

If nasal prefixes were originally absent in PWG, a possible explanation for their presence in WGB languages today would be that they spread through lexical borrowing from EGB languages due to contact. However, while this hypothesis might work for those Ring and Momo languages geographically close to EGB, it would not work for those further away. Examples of the presence of nasals are

13. A similar process is seen in Tiv, using **òr** ‘person’: **òr-súlé/mbá-súlé-v** ‘farmer(s)’ (Angitso 2020: 244-49), and deverbatives in Vute (Mambiloid), using **nir** ‘person’: **ni-yéb** ‘sick person’ (Thwing 1987: 42; Connell & Ladd 2020: 29-30).

found in languages quite distant from EGB influence, in forms that are clearly not borrowings. An example is the word for ‘moon’: Babessi **ɲwé**, Kom, Mbizinaku **ǎndʒɔŋ**, Oku, Weh, Zoa **ndʒɔŋ**, Ngie **úmák**, Moghamo **ímák** (versus EGB: Mankon **sàŋá**, Bafut **sàŋ**); and the word for ‘ground’ Babanki **nsé**, Babungo **nsí**, Babessi **ntʃí**, Kom **ǎnsé**, Oku **ntiè** (versus EGB: Fe’efe’e **tʃāʔ**, Mankon **ɪʃyê**).

Although contact is pervasive in the Grassfields area and borrowing could have occurred through intermediary languages, the wide geographical distribution of the numerous nasals seen in WGB makes us think that contact is not a good explanation for most of them. In particular, a productive morpheme like the nasal prefix in agent nouns in cl. 1 of Kom (Central Ring) is harder to explain as arising through contact, especially since Babanki (spoken in the area between Kom and EGB languages) has fewer of them, apparently relics.

Assuming that the nasals seen in the nominal prefixes of WGB languages are parallel to those seen in EGB and Bantu but were not borrowed, then the most likely explanation is that they were inherited from common ancestors, i.e. PG and PBG. Without entering into a discussion of all Bantoid languages, it should be noted that initial nasals are also seen in the Beboid languages, a Bantoid group adjacent to the Ring languages. Influence from EGB languages is even less likely in this case for they are in contact with only one EGB language (Limbum), and many nouns are not cognate, e.g., Noni **ɲpàm** ‘animal’ (vs. Limbum **pà:**), **ndvū** ‘cloth’ (versus Limbum **tʃēʔ**), Nchane **ñsàŋ** ‘friend’ (versus Limbum **ɲkār**), **mbē** ‘grasshopper’ (versus Limbum **rsūu**). Yemne-Kimbi languages, another Bantoid group spoken adjacent to Ring languages, have no contact with EGB, but they have initial nasals in some forms, e.g., Fang **ɲkóŋ** ‘chief’, **mbòló** ‘cow’ (Mve *et al.* 2019), and Bu **nsūn** ‘friend’.

If we are led to reconstruct nasals in certain nominal prefixes for PWG (at least cl. 1, 3, 9 and 10), then it is necessary to explain why WGB languages often lost these nasals, either partially in some classes or more fully in others. Possible processes leading to loss are discussed in the following.

### 3.1. Semantics : lexeme-specific loss

As we saw above, certain cl. 9 nouns, such as ‘bee’, ‘dog’, ‘goat’, ‘snake’, ‘fish’ consistently lack nasals in WGB languages. Insofar as many of these are animal names, it is remotely possible to imagine that some process of personification in stories or totems led to prefix-less forms, like the prefix-less cl. 1a in PB used for kinship terms and personal names (Meeussen 1967: 100).

Some support for a process like this (although clearly later and independent) is seen in Babanki where some of the original WGB cl. 9 nouns are now in cl. 1 where a nasal is also in partial use. On whether the N is a prefix or not, cl. 9 takes a plural prefix (for its modifiers) in cl. 10 on loan in some WGB languages such as Ngamambo, which shows that it rather has a covert prefix, as argued by Achiri-Taboh (2014). These nouns must have featured in cl. 9 earlier as in many other Ring languages. A majority of the nouns are animal names, as seen in Table 14.

Language	‘antelope’	‘cane rat’	‘dwarf cow’	‘pot’	‘potato’	class
Kom	ɲgʷó	ndzìlì	mbòŋ	ntòin	ndòŋ	9
Oku	ɲgà	ndzìwìl	mbòŋ	ntòn	ndòŋ	9
Aghem	ɲgʷó	ndzìlò	mbòŋ	tòe	ndón	9
Men	dʒìŋ	ndzìlè	mbòŋ	tòin	ndòŋ	9
Babanki	ɲgó	ndzù	mbòŋ	ntòn	ndòŋ	1

**Table 14.** Nouns in WGB class 9 but in Babanki class 1<sup>14</sup>

It could also be that the assignment of these Babanki nouns to cl. 1 is influenced by contact with EGB languages such as Bafut where the corresponding nouns are also assigned to cl. 1, e.g., the words for ‘pot’ and ‘potato’, as well as ‘cock’, ‘horse’, ‘cat’. But the actual forms do not appear to have been borrowed, e.g., Babanki **ntòn** ‘pot’ (vs. Bafut **àntòò**) or **ɲkà?** ‘cock’ (vs. Bafut **àɲkàgì**). This analysis needs further investigation since we lack sufficient concrete empirical evidence.

Regardless of whether the shift of these particular nouns was through Bafut influence or independently in Babanki (or both), the point is that we can imagine an early WGB process by which cl. 9 animal names were associated in certain contexts with cl. 1 and thus possibly with a prefix-less category.

### 3.2. Phonological loss

The Nun, Nkambe and Ngemba subgroups of EGB regularly have nasal prefixes, which might have formed the basis for the claim that “Mbam-Nkam languages have nasal consonants in the prefixes of cl. 1 and 3, all nouns in cl. 9/10 have a nasal consonant in the prefix” (Watters 2003: 228).<sup>15</sup> Within EGB, however, there is a mixture of reflexes. In the Bamileke subgroup, for example, some languages like Fe’efe’e still have standard nasal prefixes in cl. 1, 3, and 9, as we saw above, but others have lost their nasals for phonological reasons. One example of a phonological change is Mankon (Leroy 2003) where the nasal is lost before fricatives and other nasals, as in **ɪfúə** ‘fish’.

However, accounting for the loss of the nasal as an overall phonological change across WGB seems implausible due to the range of sounds involved. Since some of the relevant words have an initial fricative or affricate, it could be proposed that nasals are lost before fricatives or affricates. But there are counterexamples to the loss before affricates, and they cannot be attributed to borrowing (e.g., Babanki **ndzám** ‘axe’ (Bafut **ndzàà**), **ndzàŋ** ‘song’, **ndzón** ‘thorn’ (Bafut **ndzón**), **ndzán** ‘xylophone’, **ntɪm** ‘drum’ (Bafut **ɲgò**), **ndzísə** ‘clothes’). Considering a completely

14. Note that not all nouns of a given class in a given GB language feature in the same class in other GB languages.

15. Note, however, the absence of nasals sometimes in Nun: Bangangte **vát** ‘body’, and Nkambe: Bangu **dʒə** ‘back’, **bvə** ‘dog’, **dók** ‘horn’, **ɖyə** ~ **pà?** ‘house’, **dʒók** ‘thorn’, Bazou **pà?à** ‘house’, Balengou **pà?à** ‘house’.

different set of sounds, Spreda (2000: 11) proposes that for gender 9/10 nouns in Metta (a Momo language) “a syllabic nasal prefix becomes zero before voiceless obstruents and nasals” and that a number of nouns such as **bú** ‘dog’, **gôp** ‘skin’, **dʒɔ** ‘snake’ exceptionally do not have nasal prefixes. An interesting distributional observation about Babanki is the fact that none of the nasal-less cl. 9/10 nouns in Akumbu (2008) begin with simple **t**, **d**, **s**, or **k**, but this is hardly a natural class. Also, six gender 9/10 nouns begin with **b** whereas 21 nouns begin with **mb**, so other rules or factors must have played a part. Over the thousands of years from PWG to the present, phonological changes probably played a role in various languages. But the many exceptions suggest that a phonological approach alone is insufficient.

In fact, phonological rules for nasal loss seem insufficient even in certain EGB languages. Consider the phonologically similar roots in Batié which has **dəŋ**° ‘bamboo’, **dóŋ** ‘horn’, **dʒəm** ‘back’ but also **ndʒè** ‘hunger’; in Bayangam, Baham, Bahouav which have **gwěŋ** ‘salt’ but also **ŋgɔ**° ‘stone’; or in Bangou which has **dʒə** ‘back’ but also **ndʒə** ‘axe’. Similarly, Nissim (1980: 83-87) demonstrates that in Bandjoun the nasal drops out before voiced obstruents and voiceless fricatives, e.g., **dʒi** ‘hunger’, **fó** ‘chief’ but is still there before voiceless obstruents, e.g., **ŋkhə** ‘rope’ (even though exceptions such as **khə** ‘message’ exist). For this reason, Bandjoun (EGB) likely has fewer nouns with nasal prefixes than Moghamo (WGB) which better preserves nasals. In the Grassfields wordlist of 300+ nouns, Bandjoun contains 33 with nasal prefixes while Moghamo has 38 from various noun classes.

### 3.3. Impact of the concord system

An obvious source of nasal loss to consider is influence from other parts of the nominal morphological system. In particular, Benue-Congo languages typically have a concord system parallel to the nominal system for all classes. The reconstruction of PB and EGB concord prefixes (Meeussen 1967; Hyman 2018) has only a few differences from that of the nominal prefixes, among which are a nasal only in cl. 6a (EGB also cl. 6) and with high tones everywhere except for cl. 1 and 9. In the Bantu languages, the impact of concord prefixes (also called pronominal prefixes or pre-prefixes) on nominal prefixes is not infrequent. For instance, in cl. 5, the PB pre-prefix **\*dɪ** and nominal prefix **\*i** show reversals or replacements in individual languages, e.g., Masaaba (JE31) **li-si-**, Ganda (JE15) **e-ri-**, Xhosa (S41) **i-li-**; Lingala (C36d) **li-**, Tuki (A601) **i-/ni-** (Katamba 2003). Another example is seen in the development of the cl. 10 prefix in Myene-Nkomi (B11e) **\*dí-ñ-** > **\*i-ñ-di-** > **i-(di-)** (Grégoire and Rekanga 1994) Likewise, in numerous EGB languages, the cl. 5 nominal prefix is actually the reflex of the concord, as in ‘spear’: Bafou (Bamileke subgroup), Adere (Nkambe) **li-kəŋ**°, Limbum (Nkambe) **rkəŋ**°, Ngwe (Ngemba) **lɛkɔŋ**, and so **\*li-** has been reconstructed as the PEG cl. 5 nominal prefix (Hyman 1980a: 182).

The high frequency of the concord markers (used before and after an adjective, e.g., Babanki **ndzəm sə-fi-sə** ‘new axes’, **gú sə-mú.<sup>u</sup>sə** ‘old shoes’) could easily have an impact on the nominal prefixes. This is clearly what happened with the Proto-Ring cl. 10 nominal suffix **\*-sə** which was originally a concord marker.<sup>16</sup>

16. In general, it is likely that the presence of nominal class suffixes is the result of influences between the nominal and concord markers in various syntactic structures. See the section on

In WGB, this concord influence seems to have been widespread. In Babanki (Table 15), there is one set of concord forms before consonant-initial stems and one before vowel-initial stems, e.g., *kə-kím kə-mù?* ‘one crap’ vs *kə-kím ək-óm* ‘my crap’.

class	affix	before C	before V	class	affix	before C	before V
1	∅-	ə-	əɣ-	7	kə-	kə-	ək-
2	və-	və-	əv-	8	ə-	ə-	əv-
3	ə-	ə-	əɣ-	9	ə-	ə-	əv-
5	ə-	ə-	əɣ-	10	-sə	sə-	əs-
6	à-	à-	àɣ-	13	tə-	tə-	ət-
6a	mə-	mə-	əm-	19	fə-	fə-	əf-

**Table 15.** Babanki concord prefixes

It is noteworthy that in Babanki the pre-consonantal concord series is identical to the nominal prefix series, with the slight divergence of cl. 1 and 9 (concord prefixes have a vowel ə instead of nominal prefixes ∅).

It is not only the prefix segments which are identical in most WGB languages but also the tones, suggesting that both the WGB nominal and concord prefixes follow the inherited concord pattern with high tones everywhere, except in cl. 1, 6a, and 9.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the low tones seen on nominal prefixes in PB and PEG in other classes are no longer fully present in WGB. Accordingly, Hyman (1980a: 182, 2018: 224) reconstructs the PWG nominal prefix series with tones and segments that are mostly identical to the concord series.

class	nominal prefix	concord	class	nominal prefix	concord
1	ù(N)-	ù-	7	kí-	kí-
2	bá-	bá-	8	bí-	bí-
3	ú-	ú-	9	ì(N)-	ì-
5	í-	í-	10	í(N)-	Cí-
6	á-	gá-	13	tí	tí
6a	mə	mə	19	fí-	fí-

**Table 16.** PWG nominal prefixes and concords (Hyman 1980a: 182)

East Benue-Congo prefixal and suffixal morphology in Good (2018: 35-40).

17. Most WGB languages have a H prefix except in classes 1, 6a, and 9 (Akumbu & Hyman 2017: 1), but a few including Babanki, Lamnso’, and Bamessing have generalized low tones on all nominal prefixes, while Bum appears to use either L prefixes or H suffixes (Hyman 1980b: 248). Going the other direction, “Aghem and apparently some Weh speakers have H tone prefixes even for class 6a, for example, Aghem *níáə* ‘wine’. This should not be the case, and may be a secondary (analogical) development” (Hyman 1980b: 257).

It is hard to escape the impression that the two series have for the most part merged in WGB in favor of the historical concord series.

Given this impact of the concord series (which historically lacked nasals except in cl. 6a), it would not be surprising that the WGB languages often replaced the nasal nominal prefixes with the corresponding non-nasal concord prefixes. In particular, the nominal prefixes of cl. 1, 3, and 9 have acquired an initial vowel from the concord series. The homorganic nasal prefix in cl. 9/10 possibly lasted longer because it was distinctive enough from all the other syllabic prefixes in the system, and even there it was eventually reanalyzed as part of the stem. The derivational nasal prefixes surviving in agent and result nouns in WGB were part of the word formation process and thus more removed from concord influence.

## Conclusion

The high number and distribution of cl. 9 nouns with initial nasals, and the separable nasal prefixes for cl. 1 agents and cl. 9 verbal nouns in the derivational system of several WGB languages cannot easily be explained merely by borrowing from EGB. Rather, the various categories illustrated above support the case for nasal consonants in the prefixes of cl. 1, 3, 9, and 10 in Proto-Western-Grassfields and the common ancestral languages of Proto-Grassfields and Proto-Bantu-Grassfields. Nevertheless, divergence is observed among and within various sub-groups of Grassfields, i.e., some languages have nasal prefixes while others have them sporadically or lack them altogether. The presence versus absence of nasal consonants in prefixes cannot simply be explained as a phonological change. Rather, these divergences must have been motivated by morphological decisions as specific languages or groups reduced or restructured the set of inherited nominal prefixes and concords. For example, WGB developments generating a loss of nasals in certain environments might have obscured the distinctive nasal prefixes of cl. 9/10 and led to hypercorrection or reanalysis and the inclusion of other words (without nasal marking) into cl. 9. In particular, the WGB nominal prefixes seem to have been influenced by the corresponding concord prefixes.

One expects some variation in a language or groups of languages over a period of more than a thousand years and WGB is no exception. It would not be surprising to find this pattern of reduction or restructuring elsewhere, as suggested by the occasional presence of nasal prefix relics in various Niger-Congo languages (Miehe 1991).

Beyond Grassfields, there are scattered examples of nasal prefix preservation throughout Bantoid, enough to give reason to think that nasal prefixes might be reconstructed for some stage before PB and PGB. Preservations are most often seen in vowel-initial roots where the class marker could contract with the root. For example, the nasal of the cl. 1 prefix is preserved in the word for ‘child(ren)’ (PB *\*(ù)-mù-ánà* 1, *\*(á)-bà-ánà*) in numerous languages, e.g., Kenyang (Mamfe-Nyang) *mǎ́/bǎ́* (1/2) and Ejagham (Ekoid) *m̩mǎ́n/ǎ́βǎ́n* (1/2). We even find variation inside language families, e.g., nasals in Nchanti (Beboid) *m<sup>w</sup>á/bǎ́ǎ́* and Misaje *ɲg<sup>w</sup>á/bǎ́ɲ* (Beboid) but not Noni (Beboid) *<sup>w</sup>wán/bǎ́ɔm* (1/2); likewise the nasal is present in Moghamo (Momo) *ɲwán<sup>h</sup>/bǎ́n<sup>h</sup>* (1/2) but not Babanki (Ring) *wán/vúnó* (1/2).

Similarly, the nasal prefix for cl. 6 (plural of cl. 5, not 6a) prefix is seen in the word for ‘eye(s)’ (PB \*(**df**)-i-ícò/\*(**á**)-mà-ícò 5/6) in Kenyang (Mamfe-Nyang) **néséʔ/àmík** and Ejagham (Ekoid) **èyáʔ/àmáʔ**, but it is absent in Noni (Beboid) **jísá/ējísē** and Esimbi (Tivoid) **ísí/ósí**. In Momo, the nasal is generally absent in ‘eyes’, e.g., Njen **iyí/àyi**, but is partially present in Lower Mundani **àyí/mèyí** or **yítsí**.

The distribution of these remnants suggests that there was not a phonological rule which added or removed nasals (which should have applied to these forms as well), but rather that there was a morphological change. For example, in Mbaw (Mambiloid) **ɲʷán** or **šʷón/bòmún** ‘child(ren)’ it looks like the cl. 1 \***mo** prefix is now competing with the cl. 19 prefix \***pi** (with an appropriate diminutive meaning). In general, one possible explanation for many languages is the replacement of some or all class prefixes by pre-prefixes or concords, just as Ring nominal prefixes often match the concords. But in vowel-initial roots like ‘child’ and ‘eye’, in some languages the prefix became integrated into the same syllable as the root and was reanalyzed as part of the root, which prevented its replacement.

In sum, generalizations about the presence or absence of nasal prefixes in various Grassfields branches need to be carefully crafted. A combination of phonological changes, borrowings and class re-assignments may play a role in some Eastern Grassfields languages, as they apparently did in Babanki. The loss or merger of classes and the not infrequent reassignment of nouns to alternative classes is a topic that needs more consideration in all these languages.

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**Résumé**

Les études sur la morphologie nominale en bantu des Grassfields ont souvent mis en doute la présence de nasales dans les préfixes en bantu des Grassfields de l'Ouest (WGB). En fait, la présence de nasales dans les préfixes en bantu des Grassfields de l'Est et leur absence supposée dans le WGB ont été utilisées, entre autres facteurs, pour établir la distinction entre les deux groupes de bantu des Grassfields. Cet article montre que le babanki et d'autres langues WGB laissent apparaître des restes de préfixes nasals de diverses formes lexicales. Ces vestiges ne peuvent pas être complètement expliqués par l'emprunt ou des processus phonologiques, mais ils suggèrent plutôt que le proto-Grassfields de l'Ouest avait également des préfixes nasals comme on le voit en proto-Grassfields de l'Est et en proto-bantu.