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## Chapter 1

# A community approach to language documentation in Africa

Pius W. Akumbu

LLACAN (CNRS - INaLCO - EPHE)

Although still not common, some recent language documentation projects in Africa have adopted the community-based approach (Good 2012; Bischoff & Jany 2018) which allows for the participation of community members at various stages of the documentation process. This approach is highly favored over the traditional method of linguistic inquiry that was based on the speech of one or a few individuals, i.e. the ‘ancestral code’ (Woodbury 2011). However, it appears that even within this current framework, the linguist reaps the greatest academic and financial benefits while community members end up with linguistic outputs that do not meet their current livelihood needs. I argue in this paper that instead of focusing on the documentation of African languages while neglecting current survival needs of community members, and thereby legitimizing and accompanying language death, linguists and funding agencies should conceive linguistic projects as community development projects. If linguistic projects assist in community development and maintenance, languages and cultures are more likely to be preserved, making linguistic work meaningful and useful to African communities.

## 1 Background: My personal story

For the purpose of this paper, I would like to provide some background information about myself. I am that village boy who was born to parents who practiced subsistence farming in Babanki Tungo in North-West Cameroon. My mom and my sisters went out early to the fields each working day and tilled the soil all day with hoes, usually under the scorching sun. In the evening they returned with food and cooked, using firewood, for us to eat before going to bed. My father and the rest of the male folk were responsible, among other things, for clearing the

fields and gathering firewood. This circle continued daily until the country Sunday which is the resting day of the week (we have an eight-day week, one of the days is set for rest, another for business at the local market, and the remaining six for farming). That was and still is the typical lifestyle of a Babanki family. When I turned six and my right hand could go over my head and touch my left ear, I was ready for school where I met and was forced to use English although I knew and spoke only Babanki. I trekked barefooted for approximately 3.5 miles each way. After school, I went another mile to fetch water and eventually firewood which will be used for cooking. By the time food was ready and I ate, I would be so exhausted that all I could do was listen to a few stories before sleeping off on my bare bamboo bed without any mattress, just to start all over the following morning. In the end it worked out favorably for me because I somehow was able to make it through primary school and move on to secondary school. Only four of my 72 classmates did same and I was the only one who went on to graduate level. The secondary school was 15 miles away from home. Since I could not trek that distance on a daily basis I had to go live there and walk home every Friday to gather food which I carried back on my head on Sunday. I eventually went to the University of Yaoundé 1, in a distant French-speaking part of Cameroon some 350 miles away from Babanki. There I studied linguistics. Interestingly two decades later, I returned to Babanki for fieldwork and what I observed was the same cycle for those Babanki children who were still in the community. The situation has remained the same several decades down the line. The lands have become barren, there is no electricity, no potable water, children still walk several miles to school, women still till the fields with hoes, and so on. On the other hand, there are tons of journal articles and books on the Babanki language. Many linguists, including myself have become successful and famous, with various promotions because of data from Babanki and other language communities whose lots have not changed. The issue I struggle with is how linguists can contribute to improving the lives of people who produce the languages they study. In this paper, I try to make a case for linguistic work as part of community development, something different from the data mining that continues to happen in various forms in parts of Africa.

## **2 The state of African languages and cultures**

While the dynamics of language use and evolution in multilingual Africa provide some optimism about the future of languages of the continent (see, for example, [Di Carlo & Good 2020](#); [Lüpke 2019](#); [Mufwene 2004](#); [2016](#)), the endangerment of

the languages and cultures of Africa continues to accelerate. From personal experience, I can attest to the decline in use of the Babanki language and the loss of many cultural practices. I speak as a Babanki community member who spent most of his first 20 years in Babanki before moving to continue school and eventually work in various parts of Cameroon. While growing up forty-fifty years ago we all mostly spoke Babanki in the community, a scenario which has changed drastically due to the influence of modernism which has ushered in Cameroon Pidgin English, English and French.<sup>1</sup> Babanki is not favored since it is neither a language of education, work, or business. This scenario is true of other rural communities across Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa. The persistence of language endangerment across the African continent can be linked to several factors, including, but not limited to, economic pressures, increased mobility<sup>2</sup>, spread of mass/social media, and pressure from dominant languages.<sup>3</sup> It can also be seen as one of the consequences of colonialism since the colonial project for Africa mostly portrayed whatever was African (language, culture, religion, etc.) as negative. As elsewhere in the world, e.g. among Native American Indians (see [Holmes 2018](#)), the colonizer set out to erase and make invisible what belonged to the colonized. The French assimilation policy, for instance, was meant to kill the African in us, to make us hate ourselves and believe that we have to become like our colonizers to survive ([Zambakari 2021](#); [Eko 2003](#)). After more than a century of enforcing and reinforcing that, aspects of traditional African systems and practices such as education and religion have been transformed radically. Africans have made so much effort and progress to be civilized and modernized; to transition from ‘primitive’, ‘pagans’, ‘savages’, and ‘uneducated’ to fit colonial standards. Some Africans go as far as hating themselves, hating their skin color, knowledge, innovation, skills, and ultimately lack belief in themselves. Others, including parents, siblings, peers, and teachers shame and punish children for

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<sup>1</sup>Cameroon Pidgin English, the lingua franca of Anglophone Cameroon, 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.

<sup>2</sup>A related factor is the modern capitalist economy (connected to colonialism) where lingua francas became important. People learned Pidgin on the plantations, for example, and brought it back to the villages.

<sup>3</sup>The argument that the evolution of a language is dependent on its ecology has been developed by [Mufwene \(2001; 2005; 2008\)](#).

speaking their languages (Bwesigye 2014). People are shamed for remembering and practicing their cultural and traditional customs and rites. Consequently, many Africans have remained in their shells, hiding their true selves and pretending to be who they are not and can never become. Ngugi (1986: 9) argues that “language was the means of the spiritual subjugation” such that the moment Africans lost their languages was also the moment they lost their bodies, gold, diamonds, copper, coffee, tea, and many other natural resources. In brief, the domination of African languages by the languages of the colonizers was the means to dominate the African mental universe and all that goes with it – culture, art, dances, religions, history, geography, education, and so on.

This is to say that colonialism contributed its share to language and culture endangerment and death in Africa. As mentioned above, Africans have been made, directly or indirectly to believe that all what is African, including our languages and cultures is worthless, and that we need to be transformed, that we need to develop not just socio-economically but mentally. In such a context it is difficult to get people to regain interest and rebuild a sense of self-worth for themselves, their languages and cultures. Africans are now rushing for formal education and all the modern technological advances, and it does not seem reasonable for us to be convinced that our erstwhile informal education, passed orally from generation to generation through storytelling around a fireplace, as well as our traditional technology, including our means of communication such as the talking drums, are worthy and should be preserved and promoted. Some people used all the means at their disposal at some point to successfully make Africans know and believe that their practices were primitive and ugly and should be abandoned. We are now working so hard to get better at abandoning and taking up what is ‘best’, as we have been made to understand.

On the other hand, current linguistic research (description and documentation) kind of validates, stands by, watches, accompanies, and even accelerates the language endangerment process. Keeping aside SIL linguists who mostly do linguistics and language development over extended periods for religious purposes, linguists are rushing to document African languages in order to have something to look back to when the languages would have died completely. Many Western researchers obtain funding, go to Africa, gather some community members, do community-based documentation, prepare and archive recordings, conduct analyses, attend and present at conferences, publish, advance linguistic theory, gain academic promotion and fame, while the community continues to lose its language and culture. It is not about the community; all that matters is

the language for current and future exploitation by those with the skills and resources. Newman (1998: 15) insists that “the justification for doing research on an endangered language has to be the scientific value of providing that documentation and in preserving aspects of that language and culture for posterity. The purpose cannot be to make the few remaining speakers feel good.” As Harrington (1941) put it, “if you can grab these dying languages before the old timers completely die off, you will be doing one of the few things valuable to the people of the remote future. You know that. The time will come and soon when there won’t be an Indian language left in California, all the languages developed for thousands of years will be ashes, the house is afire, it is burning. That’s why I said to go through the blinding rain, roads or no roads...”. While this is laudable as a call to keep records of languages before they die, it can be seen as a way of condoning and accompanying death much more than working to prevent it. By documenting languages and watching them die instead of seeking to conserve and preserve, the colonial practice is reinforced. The linguistic world has evidence and is so convinced that many of the world’s languages are in danger of disappearing (Krauss 1992; Crystal 2000). Language endangerment is used to justify language documentation – it ensures that researchers (especially those trained in European and American universities) obtain language documentation funding.<sup>4</sup> As required by their donors, funding agencies are able to fund only the documentation of highly or critically endangered languages (the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme (ELDP), for example would not even consider funding revitalization projects)<sup>5</sup>. This is quite unusual. Humanity does not

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<sup>4</sup>The general lack of influence of native speaker linguists in the field of linguistics has been pointed out previously (Crowley 2007; Tsikewa 2021) and this is quite obvious in language documentation in Africa. For example, I found that of the 108 ELDP grants in Africa between 2003 and 2019, 75 percent had been granted to those trained in Europe or America and only 25 percent to those trained in Africa (<https://www.eldp.net/en/our+projects/projects+list/>, accessed on December 3, 2021). Overall, those trained in Africa manage to get the Small Grants while those trained elsewhere obtain the Major Grants.

<sup>5</sup>Similarly, NSF projects may involve one or more of the following three emphasis areas: (1) Language Description: To conduct fieldwork to record in digital audio and video format one or more endangered languages; to carry out the early stages of language documentation including transcription and annotation; to carry out later stages of documentation including the preparation of lexicons, grammars, text samples, and databases; to conduct initial analysis of findings in the light of current linguistic theory; (2) Infrastructure: To digitize and otherwise preserve and provide wider access to such documentary materials, including previously collected materials and those concerned with languages which have recently lost all fluent speakers and are related to currently endangered languages; to create other infrastructures, including conferences to make the problem of endangered languages more widely understood and more effectively addressed; (3) Computational Methods: To further develop standards and

have the habit of standing by and watching death happen. Usually, efforts are made to find a cure. The world has not stood by to watch COVID-19 gradually destroy humanity. All kinds of efforts are being made, particularly between 2020 and 2022 to find a way out of the virus. We cannot afford to and should not continue to accompany endangered (sick) languages to death.

This is the context in which language documentation activities and linguistic fieldwork in Africa have been taking place over the last 60 years or so. In some sense the colonial experience has been carried over to linguistic work in the African continent. While African languages have contributed largely to the advancement of linguistic knowledge (see, for example, [Hyman 2003a,b](#); [Lionnet & Hyman 2018](#)), Africa itself has probably benefitted only in very minor ways from the study of its languages. [Tsikewa \(2021\)](#) has demonstrated that until now linguistic fieldwork training has largely neglected the needs of communities such that colonial approaches to linguistics continue to prevail. Most concerns identified and addressed in fieldwork courses and training revolve around the wellbeing of the fieldworker, not that of the community. She further points out that critiques of the kind of training provided to those who do linguistic fieldwork are many ([Macaulay 2004](#); [Ahlers 2009](#); [Grenoble 2009](#); [Newman 2009](#); [Brickell 2018](#)) reflecting the reality that community members' needs and wellbeing are not equally prioritized. At best, what is said about community needs is limited to giving back products of linguistic work such as dictionaries, grammars, reading materials, as well as providing training to community members, gifts that are not immediately useful to the community, as I will further discuss later. Linguists focus on language and its documentation ignoring the interests and needs of communities. They argue for the usefulness of documentation for future generations, ignoring the current users and their needs. It is not entirely helpful to document a language to keep it in archives while allowing the community to disappear. In this sense, SIL linguists generally seek to promote literacy, education, socio-economic opportunities, even if the overall goal is Bible translation

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databases to make this documentation of a certain language or languages widely available in consistent, archivable, interoperable, and Web-based formats; to develop computational tools (taggers, parsers, speech recognizers, grammar inducers, etc.) for endangered languages, which present a particular challenge for those using statistical and machine learning, especially deep learning methods, since such languages do not have the large corpora for training and testing the models used to develop those tools; and to develop new approaches to building computational tools for endangered languages, which make use of deeper knowledge of linguistics, including language typology and families, and which require collaboration among theoretical and field linguists, and computational linguists, and computer scientists and engineers (<https://www.nsf.gov/pubs/2020/nsf20603/nsf20603.htm>, accessed on March 3, 2022).

and spiritual growth.<sup>6</sup> I submit in this paper that if linguists should have the interest of communities in mind and consequently, think of ways to preserve the communities where they work then language endangerment will be slowed down or averted to some extent. As a member of a community that has been the object of linguistic research for decades, I propose ways in which linguistic work can be transformed from being purely linguistic projects to community development projects in which language documentation occupies some space in the scale of preference. Projects that encourage community members to desire to continue living in their community or attract outsiders into the community should be highly encouraged. Linguists should do all they can to accompany these languages and practices along with their speakers into modernity.

A number of questions come to mind, including how linguistic work in Africa can be done in a way as to create a lasting positive impact not only on communities but in the global effort to attain equality of some sort for all and promote cultural diversity. I certainly do not have the perfect answer to the question but will propose a community approach which takes into account the development needs of communities. Inspiration for this comes from the fact that in rural Africa, the most linguistically vibrant areas are those with potable water, health centers, electricity, roads, and schools. Therefore, linguistic projects should seek to provide some of these facilities in order to help maintain communities and encourage the preservation and use of their languages. Before presenting the community approach to language documentation, I will first discuss why the popular community-based approach on which I build needs to be revisited.

### **3 The community-based approach to language documentation**

Community-based research has become a valued model in linguistic research in recent years, particularly in the areas of language documentation and revitalization. According to Rice (2018: 15), “community-based research begins with a research topic of practical relevance to the community and is carried out in community settings. Second, community members and researchers equitably share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the design, implementation, and dissemination. Finally, the process and results can

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<sup>6</sup>Linguistic work by missionary linguists has come under criticism (e.g., Dobrin & Good 2009; Grenoble & Whaley 2005; Handman 2009; Keane 2002; Pennycook & Makoni 2005; Rehg 2004) but my concern here is on linguists’ contribution to community development in general.



transform and mobilize diverse ideas, resources, and experiences to generate positive action for communities.”

This research model that emphasizes collaboration between linguists and language communities encourages research on a language, 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 between researchers and members of the community. It is community-based because a researcher joins efforts with community members to carry out activities in that community for the benefit of both parties (Bischoff & Jany 2018; Cameron et al. 1992; Czaykowska-Higgins 2009). According to Ochocka & Janzen (2014), community-based research is community-driven (i.e. it begins with a research topic of practical relevance to the community and promotes community self-determination, participatory (i.e. community members and researchers equitably share control of the research agenda through active and reciprocal involvement in the research design, implementation and dissemination), and action-oriented. The goals of the researcher and community members must be clearly defined in order to establish a productive long-term collaboration in which both parties benefit from the interaction. Leonard & Haynes (2010) stress the importance of collaborative consultation in defining research roles and goals. Ameka (2006: 70) insists that “unless the records of the languages being documented are the product of collaboration between trained native speaker and non-native speaker (anthropological) linguists, they will not be real, or optimal descriptions representing the realities of the languages.”

A closer examination of this current approach to language documentation reveals a series of pitfalls that beg urgent reconsideration. It appears that in community-based projects in the African context, the researcher brings the expertise, equipment, tools, finances while the community actually just provides the language – the mining field (Kadanya 2006; Akumbu 2020). In some cases, to be allowed to supply the language data, i.e. participate in a project, community members are required to sign various papers or provide their finger prints – sometimes an extremely traumatizing experience to those who have never been to school or who dropped out and may not even be able to write their names. Holmes (2018: 153) highlights some of the shortcomings of the community-based approach raised by McDonald (2003: 84) who argues that “first, community-based research is located in communities. So what? Almost by definition ethnographic research is located in communities...The issue is that community-based research needs to be about something more than location”. Continuing from McDonald’s

theorizing, Evans (2004: 60) notes that “...the term ‘community based’ says nothing about the role of the community in the research process.” Community members in rural parts of Africa may, at best, give an opinion on some aspects of the project but rarely participate in crucial decision making since they do not have the academic ability or financial power to do so. I examine some of the issues in detail in order to demonstrate that community members in the African context do not benefit much from current linguistic work.

Concerning the identification of community needs, the expectation is usually that the linguist establishes contact with the community prior to submitting a grant proposal. This means that the linguist has the opportunity to find out what the community needs and to aim at meeting such needs. In general, the focus is on linguistic needs since they fall within the scope of the researcher’s focus. Hardly are social and community development needs taken into account Ngué Um (2019: 377-383), presumably because linguists are not social workers or because such “participation exacts a great deal from the fieldworker” (Samarin 1967: 14). It might also be that the linguist simply wishes to focus on pure fundamental research and “resist the ever-present pressure to justify our work on grounds of immediate social relevance” as recommended by Newman (1998: 15). Therefore, the linguist, sometimes in collaboration with some community members identifies some linguistic product such as a dictionary that will be given back to the community as a means of meeting the community’s desire to have its language in written form. This might have been done by asking people yes-no questions like, “Would you like a dictionary for your language”? I find this misleading because in most parts of Africa, linguistic needs do not feature as priority among the livelihood and survival needs of communities. In February 2022, using WhatsApp, I asked Cameroonians living both in cities and rural areas what they thought were the needs of their communities. Of 126 responses I got, the top five needs were potable water (126), roads (125), electricity (124), health facilities (117), schools (115). A few others mentioned food, security, and peace, as shown in figure 1.

Interestingly, no respondent mentioned anything related to language and culture. Of course, if people have survival needs and are given a choice they will certainly point to pressing current needs; they won’t ask for language development and preservation which cannot contribute to their livelihood at the moment. The results of this survey point to the fact that community needs identified and focused on in linguistic projects do not actually reflect the real needs of communities in most parts of Africa. The linguistic needs that communities

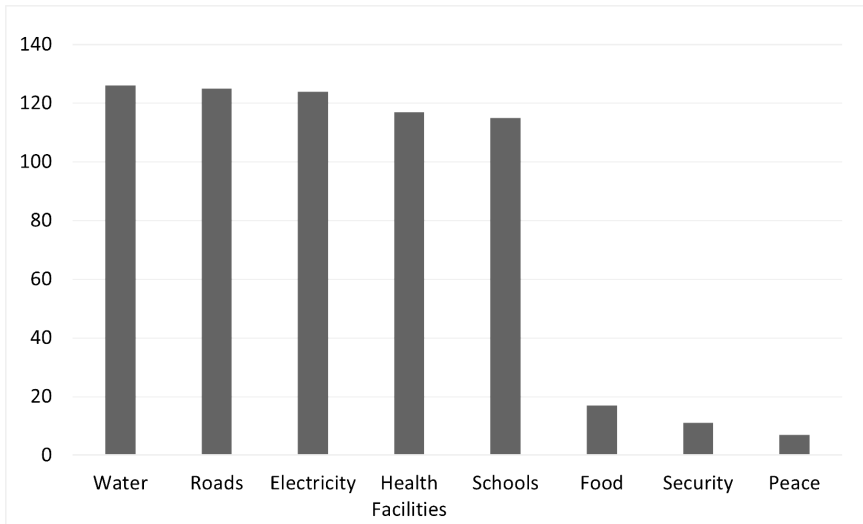


Figure 1: Community needs identified by Cameroonians

are made to identify or accept are constrained by the options linguists present to those who represent communities in the projects. When the researcher eventually meets the need by ‘giving back’ some output of the project, e.g. dictionary, storybook, etc. to the community, it doesn’t do much good to them because more than 90 percent of community members are probably illiterate in the language of the publication and cannot consume the product(s). The limits of such intellectual materials have been pointed out by several researchers, e.g. [Mufwene \(2016; 2017\)](#), and [Akumbu \(2020: 84\)](#) who observes that “sometimes, a linguist can think of giving back to the community and some copies of the grammar may be made available – but of what use is this to people who in most cases are illiterate in the foreign language used to write the grammar, and are also unable to read and write in their own language?”

[Tsikewa \(2021: 309\)](#) notes that viewing ‘giving back’ via pedagogical resources as equivalent to collaboration is a widely perpetuated misconception. She adds that according to [Sapién \(2018: 208\)](#) ‘giving back’ via pedagogical resources is not representative of “true collaboration [that] seeks to ‘work together’ to set goals and undertake projects that are of balanced mutual benefit and depend on contributions from all stakeholders.” Without doubt, community members in the African context usually welcome and celebrate linguistic work and its products since that is, at least, better than nothing. It is often so when someone does not

have a choice and typically does not have the opportunity or privilege to decide, as I will demonstrate shortly. Obviously, not many people will choose what may only be useful for future generations since they also have and want to meet current needs. If linguistic products can only preserve the language or culture for future generations when the language would have died, people will welcome them only because they cannot have what will serve their immediate needs. In fact, as suggested by [Ngué Um \(2019\)](#), language preservation efforts should be combined with social work. He proposes that “...in critical language endangerment situations of West Africa where language survival and economic welfare are intertwined, both actions should inform each other, and be carried out collaboratively, so that the people whose language is endangered may be ‘saved’ along with their language, as opposed to being left to perish while the language is preserved (p.391).”

This is to say that linguists (and funders) need to give community members a chance to identify their real needs and then integrate them in their language development projects. [Akumbu \(2020: 91\)](#) mentions the Pig for Pikin initiative of the KPAAM-CAM project in Lower Fungom<sup>7</sup> and the water supply initiative implemented by the Beezen Language Documentation Project<sup>8</sup> which resulted from researchers fulfilling the wishes of two remote communities in North-West Cameroon to provide basic needs revealed by community members themselves (see [Good 2012](#)). Linguistic products would have been of no immediate use to these communities and the researchers, being outsiders, could not know exactly what the communities needed most. Therefore, giving community members a chance to identify what is useful for the entire community at that time in point is the best way to understand and integrate community needs in a language documentation project. People could be asked open ended questions such as “what do you need?” Responses to such a question will most likely point to urgent community needs. This leads to the second issue, that is, who benefits from community-based language documentation projects?

The aim of a language documentation project is to provide a comprehensive record of the linguistic practices characteristic of a given speech community ([Himmelman 1998](#)). The materials collected are archived so that they can be accessible to other interested parties. Funders of linguistic work desire to sponsor projects that meet the goal of documenting and archiving. One of ELDP’s objectives is to “create a repository of resources for linguistics, the social sciences,

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<sup>7</sup><https://ubwp.buffalo.edu/kpaamcam/research-communities>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.aai.uni-hamburg.de/afrika/medien/beldop.pdf>

and the language communities themselves”.<sup>9</sup> When funding is obtained the researcher travels to the community and collaborates with a handful of community members to create recordings of the language in use. The researcher goes ahead to process the collected materials, and eventually archives them out of the community in high standard digital formats.<sup>10</sup> The researcher most likely produces publications of various sorts, and gains recognition and academic advancement. The successful completion of one project increases the researcher’s chances of obtaining more grants. This is to say that the researcher clearly obtains both financial and academic benefits, some in the short term and others in the future. On the other hand, the funders use the success stories of researchers to justify expenses and secure further funding from their donors.

An interesting activity that deserves attention is archiving. The current archiving paradigm is where the neo-colonial aspects of language documentation are most visible since the archive is where the “extracted” language data is stored, mostly for use by researchers, use which can be construed as exploitation. While it is possible that archived materials may someday be useful to future generations, current community members have little access or control over what is archived. As mentioned earlier, community members are most likely to have given their consent for making their materials accessible, but they may have little or no formal education or ability to understand fully what is involved before giving ‘informed’ consent. Instead they simply agree to the request of the linguists who have financial power and are visiting the community.<sup>11</sup> Meissner (2018: 273-274) discusses the problem of archiving and access to community members and it emerges clearly that archives do not primarily serve current community members’ needs.

Regarding financial benefits of community-based linguistic projects, it is obvious that communities benefit the least. Most budgets cover costs related to personnel (e.g. collaborating researchers, (post)doctoral candidates) salaries or allowances, equipment, travel, lodging, feeding, and payment of consultants. It is often the case that the greater part of the budget will cover the researcher’s

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<sup>9</sup><https://www.eldp.net/>, accessed March 4, 2021.

<sup>10</sup>Community members who provided the data may have little knowledge of where the materials are archived, nor what can be done with them. Even if the researcher had clearly informed them and, of course, obtained their verbal consent that the materials will be kept at ELAR in the UK or CERDOTOLA in Cameroon, that really does not have any implications for the community at that moment. The open access materials are available to the researcher and other interested persons, but are not as accessible for the community members.

<sup>11</sup>Part of African hospitality involves being kind to guests to the extent that someone may give consent just because it is requested by the outsider.

expenses and other project costs while consultant payment will be in the neighborhood of 10 percent of the budget. The following graph roughly shows how a language documentation budget of 100,000 USD is most likely distributed in some community-based projects.

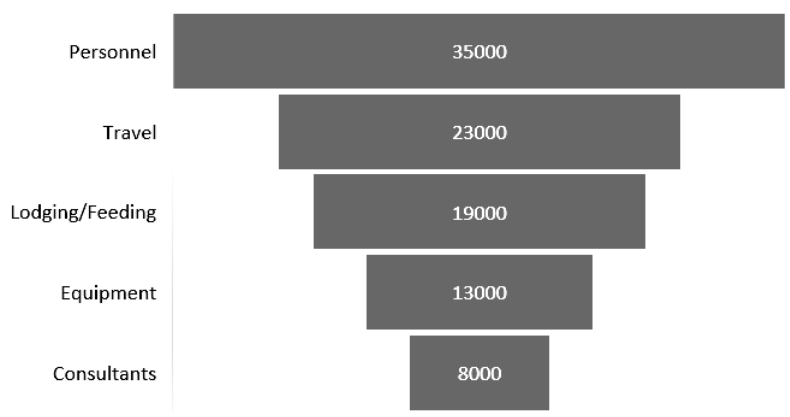


Figure 2: Allocation of 100,000 USD language documentation budget

Arguments for, as well as reasons for not letting consultants have more money are many and varied. While offering practical advice on the payment of consultants, [Bowern \(2008: 162-163\)](#) notes that “it might not be appropriate in all cultures to pay people in money; that may be considered insulting...it’s also useless if there’s nowhere to spend the money... your consultants may wish to be paid in alcohol, or in cigarettes. Paying with cigarettes can be more valuable to the recipient than paying in cash, because cigarettes can be traded or used to ‘buy’ favours.”

For these and several well justified reasons, community members who serve as consultants may end up with a tiny part of the budget (1 or 2 USD an hour) which in some cases even creates conflict with those community members who do not benefit directly. As [Ngué Um \(2017: 13\)](#) points out “bargaining with consultants implies negotiating with only a few of them, usually less than a dozen in the course of a project. This may be a source of felt discrimination and frustration by non-involved community members.” What is obvious is that the payments are for individuals and not for the entire community. Therefore, the community as a whole does not directly benefit from linguistic projects. Some researchers do not spend substantially in the community as they avoid buying local food items. For obvious reasons related to health, some researchers go to com-

munities with potable water and food items such as energy bars and may not buy or consume local products. In such communities, linguistic projects leave very little economic and financial impact and, clearly, do not contribute much to community development. Therefore, even if the project is community-based in some sense, it only enables the exploitation or mining of the community's linguistic resources and does not leave the community with any considerable benefits. This explains why communities in Africa where linguistic projects and linguistic fieldwork in general have been carried out for several decades have not been transformed as a result of the linguistic work. At the same time, the researchers working on the language(s) have become highly successful and built solid careers based on the data from the communities. Apart from the Pig for Pikin initiative of the KPAAM-CAM project in Lower Fungom and the water supply initiative of the Beezen Language Documentation Project which I mentioned earlier, I am not aware of community development projects that have been initiated by outside linguists working in the Cameroonian Grassfields.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, and since the establishment of the Grassfields Bantu Working Group in the early 1970s (Elias et al. 1984), Grassfields Bantu languages have contributed significant amounts of data that have led to advances in the field of linguistics and produced world class linguists. This is to say that the community benefits the least (keeping aside the argument that in the long run when the language would have died future generations will have products of language documentation to turn to). Even in contexts where the researcher 'gives back' some output of the project, e.g. dictionary, storybook, etc. to the community, these do not serve any immediate purpose because, as pointed out earlier, it is probably the case that the majority of the community members are illiterate in the language and cannot read.

It is necessary to reflect on how linguistic work can be done in the African context in a way that it will be more beneficial to the community of speakers whose languages are documented and exploited. In the next section I propose that linguistic projects should be conceived and implemented as part of community development projects.

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<sup>12</sup>The dynamics and level of involvement of SIL linguists in communities where they work are quite complex. In particular, many SIL linguists spend years or decades living and working in Africa and, therefore, generally integrating and contributing to community development in various ways that I do not consider in this study. It also appears that as missionaries, most SIL linguists are funded by their home churches and related organizations rather than by language documentation funding agencies.

## 4 Community approach to language documentation in Africa

The idea of doing linguistic work for the benefit of target language communities is not new. Various scholars have sought to suggest ways in which community needs and interests should be taken into consideration by linguists (e.g. Dobrin 2008; Henderson et al. 2014; Ngué Um 2017; 2019). One of the suggestions has been to move from community-based to community-centered research (McDonald 2003; Evans 2004; Holmes 2018). In this approach, the research is “both located at the community, and one that centralizes community concerns and participation” (Evans 2004: 60). In addition, community members have the possibility to “interpret and take ownership of research in which they can see themselves reflected and named” (Holmes 2018: 157). She adds that when she followed an “indigenous community-centered process, they [community members] were in control of this research process, and however they felt comfortable participating was up to them, during the process itself and after it was over, at any time.” (Holmes 2018: 157). While the community-centered approach will ensure that linguistic goals are met in ethically acceptable ways, it falls short of meeting the survival needs of communities in the African context (see also Ngué Um 2017). I believe we need to do more humanistic linguistic work that takes into account and strives to meet the needs of each community that is being studied. In other words, linguists should seek sustainable ways of doing linguistic work while also contributing to community development. Linguists could, at least, desire and find ways to engage in interdisciplinary (Hill & Ameka 2022) or cross-disciplinary work (Mufwene 2022). Work of this nature involves collaboration across disciplines (see, for example, the activities of Wuqu’ Kawoq|Maya Health Alliance, a healthcare NGO in Guatemala (Henderson et al. 2014), and experiences on collaboration between linguists and communities in North-West Cameroon (Good 2012). If linguistic projects do not cater for community needs, languages will be documented and described but they will eventually die out. It is preferable to rather want languages to be alive and to evolve based on their ecology (Mufwene 2001; 2005; 2008). Once a community is vital, its language will also be. As Ngué Um (2017: 10) puts it, “in Cameroon, there appears to be a correlation between language vitality and the community’s wellbeing ... the less economically empowered a community, the less the members are inclined to asserting and performing the group’s identity through language use, and the more exposed and endangered their cultural heritage. African communities whose languages are most endangered also almost happen to be the most economically and



politically marginalized: e.g. the Bakola, the Bati, the Bezen, etc.”

I suggest, therefore, that the researcher should accompany the community in its quest for survival by seeking funds for community development beyond what is used to pay a few consultants. Donors and funding agencies should not continue to think that they are only responsible for linguistic work since they consider linguists to not be in charge of community development. They should finance community development projects in order to slow down or reverse language endangerment and death while supporting linguistic projects. To consider this point seriously is to confront and desire to decolonize linguistic work in general and language documentation in particular. It requires going against “the colonial, linguist-focused model that has been so widely critiqued” (Tsikewa 2021: 306). Therefore, there is need to come to terms with the fact that challenges with language preservation in Africa are, in part, attributable to the impact of colonialism on the continent. The reality is that where African languages find themselves today, and therefore need reclamation, is not the sole responsibility of community members. The colonial history that is partly responsible for the present state of affairs is well known and demands honesty about it. Decolonizing linguistics can be challenging considering where the expert knowledge and funding come from. Nevertheless, the desire to maintain cultural diversity and ensure the respect of linguistic rights globally makes it possible at this point in time to seek ways to do linguistic work in Africa for the good of target community members.

As I mentioned earlier, meaningful linguistic work in Africa should be embedded in community development work. Linguistic work should be conducted alongside activities that seek to retain community members in their original settings. Without potable water, roads, electricity, schools, healthcare facilities, internet connection, jobs, etc. rural exodus is inevitable, and once someone leaves a community they are unlikely to return and live there anymore, especially if they succeed in a city<sup>13</sup>. One way to counter rural exodus is to contribute to the provision of the facilities people go looking for. A linguistic project with community development in mind will identify those community needs that lead to

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<sup>13</sup>Jeff Good (pc) has pointed out the fascinating and impressive ability of Cameroonian Grassfielders to maintain their connection to their villages while in the urban diaspora. This is done, for instance, by sending children to live with relatives in the villages for some time and through country meetings (regular monthly meetings of members of the same village living in a specific urban area). There are also several people who choose to retire to their village (or near their village). This relationship between community members in the diaspora and their language and culture certainly helps and should be strengthened.

exodus and seek ways to provide them to ensure the maintenance and survival of languages and cultures. Situations where the availability of schools helped in the retention of young community members and promoted the continued use of languages are found in parts of Africa. In North-West Cameroon, for example, communities whose languages have continued to be more vibrant are those where secondary schools were established between the 1950s and 1970s, i.e during the independence era. Languages such as Lamnso' (ISO 639-3 [lms]), Kom (ISO 639-3 [bkm]), Bafut (ISO 639-3 [bfd]), Limbum (ISO 639-3 [lmp]), and Aghem (ISO 639-3 [agq]) are known to be spoken much more than other languages in the region. The presence of schools in these communities accelerated the provision of other amenities such as water, electricity, roads, and health facilities enabling the retention of several children in the communities until they became about 20 years old before leaving to pursue tertiary (university) education. As young people below the age of 20 stayed in their communities they continued to experience their culture for an extended period of time and to use their languages more extensively. They studied in English while living in their community, speaking their language and practicing community customs and traditions such as hunting, participating in traditional dances, doing farming, etc. The children continued to receive informal education from their parents, family and the community at large, thereby getting rooted in their culture but also getting exposure to the world through formal education. In urban centers across Cameroon it is very common to hear people from the communities listed above speaking their languages freely in public spaces. Even in university milieus students from some of these communities are often heard discussing other subjects such as chemistry or literature in their mother tongues. Communities in North-West Cameroon where schools were established early enough have greater rates of language and culture transmission than those that lacked schools and had to send their teenage children elsewhere for school.

Communities that lacked schools until recently sent their teenagers aged approximately 12 – 15 to other places where they could attend secondary school. Of course, the children left their languages and cultural practices behind or, at best, practiced them only minimally whenever it became possible. Most of those who were successful in school only returned occasionally for a few days during holidays and eventually settled in urban centers where they work and have built their own families away from their original communities. The consequences are obvious: the language is not used frequently and, therefore, not transmitted to younger generations, making it endangered and requiring urgent documentation before extinction. What I say here is true of a majority of communities in

North-West Cameroon including Babanki where I come from. I left at the age of 18 and almost four decades later I have not had many opportunities to live in the community for more than one month at a given moment since I had to continue studying and working hundreds of kilometers away from the community. The consequence is lack of transmission of my Babanki language to my children who were all born and raised in urban areas far from other Babanki speakers. While the non-transmission of my mother tongue to my children may be a surprise to people who know me and my engagement in the promotion of mother tongue based multilingual education it represents the reality of many indigenous community parents who are sometimes blamed for not speaking their languages. As *Phyak (2022)* puts it, “blaming indigenous communities and parents for not speaking their languages is unfounded because they would like to, but structures, systems and ideologies do not allow spaces for indigenous languages.”

Concretely, therefore, I propose that linguistic grant applications should include at least 20 percent of the budget for community development projects. The linguist should truly allow community members the liberty to select an urgent community development need that should be funded. From the results of the survey I presented in section 2 above, it is very unlikely that an African community will desire language or cultural preservation which *Ngué Um (2017: 5)* describes as “more or less, often peripheral”. They are more likely to go for crucial needs such as those he thinks allow for “coping with daily survival (very strong!), ensuring a better future for the kids (very strong!), socio-economic empowerment and security of the group (strong!)” (*Ngué Um 2017: 5*). A linguist with an interest in community development will find ways to justify the request of 20 percent of the budget for this non-linguistic work, which they might describe as “community compensation” (*Anna Belew, pc*). Funding agencies should become sensitive to community needs and willfully approve funds for community compensation rather than simply allocating money for documenting and archiving languages while ignoring the owners and producers of the knowledge. I do not understand why a funding agency can give, say 100,000 USD to a linguist to document a language but cannot give 20,000 USD to assist the speakers of that language. If some funders make provision for overheads of up to 40 percent to host institutions I believe they can do more for host communities, e.g. by setting aside funds for community overheads. This has nothing to do with the one or two dollars given to the few select consultants who work directly with the researcher. If a linguist is interested in a language, as well as in the speakers of that language, 20 percent should be a good minimum request for the interest of that community. Once the funding is obtained the responsibility of executing the chosen project

should be given to the village or community development association so that the linguist can play only a supervisory role (allowing more time for research). Development associations are found in many African communities and carry out development work of all sorts, e.g. construction of schools, health centers, roads, etc. If this is done, at the end of the project, the linguist will fulfil their agenda of collecting data for scientific inquiry, safeguarding the language heritage, assisting the community in language development efforts, obtaining academic benefits and building capacity in scholarship, while the target language community will have either potable water supply, a school, health facility, road, electricity, or whatever they needed most. The success of the project will also be used by the funding agency to convince its donors to continue supporting linguistic work. It appears to be a win-win situation for all involved.

Another thing that needs to be considered is the payment of consultants. In general, consultants are paid according to local rates and standards measured in diverse ways. [Bowern \(2008: 162\)](#) suggests to “pay consultants in scale with the local economy, and tie the rate to the closest equivalent job (e.g., a teacher).” While there are many complications involved (see, for example, [\(Mc Laughlin & Seidou Sall 2001\)](#)). I believe consultants can be paid reasonably well, if not at international rates but high enough to compensate for their knowledge which is indispensable for linguistic analyses. I do not think it is terribly bad to pay a consultant more than a teacher, especially because the consultant’s job is for a limited period of time. Paying a consultant about 20 USD a day in a rural African setting is very likely to empower them in unimaginable ways. I have heard of a consultant in a locality in North-West Cameroon who was able to replace the grass roof of his house with zinc sheets and prevent water from dripping through each time it rained. Another was able to pay for his education after working as a consultant over an extended period.<sup>14</sup> If linguists consider the amount they themselves earn per hour while working with those consultants to whom they pay one or two dollars an hour, it will become obvious that more needs to be done. Consultants can be made to feel that by speaking their language(s) they are doing important work and can earn reasonably well.

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<sup>14</sup>As I mentioned earlier, community members who are not involved in a project and, therefore, are not paid may be disgruntled. It is possible that such adverse effects will be minimized in situations where social work that can benefit the entire community is also implemented.

## **5 Conclusion**

In this paper I have argued that instead of focusing on the documentation of African languages while neglecting current survival needs of community members, and thereby legitimizing and accompanying language death, linguists and funding agencies should conceive linguistic projects as community development projects. If linguistic projects assist in community development and maintenance, languages and cultures are more likely to be preserved, making the discipline meaningful and useful to African communities. Identifying community projects for funding should be the community's responsibility and, as demonstrated, community members are most likely to choose basic survival needs such as potable water, electricity, roads, schools, and health facilities instead of language development. If any of these survival needs are provided while doing linguistic work, the linguist can consider that they have given back something useful to the current generation. Such an accomplishment will most likely help retain community members and ensure continued use and transmission of the target language(s). While the linguist will continue to advance their academic career, target community members will also gain substantially from having better living conditions. I have proposed that funding agencies should become sensitive to community needs and approve 20 percent of budgets for community development rather than simply allocating money for documenting and archiving languages while ignoring the owners and producers of the knowledge. I also suggest that consultants should be paid reasonably well, if not at international rates but high enough to compensate for their knowledge which is indispensable for linguistic work.

## **Abbreviations**

CERDOTOLA = Centre International de Recherche et de Documentation sur les Traditions et les Langues Africaines, ELAR = Endangered Languages Archive, ELDP = Endangered Languages Documentation Programme, KPAAM-CAM = Key Pluridisciplinary Advances on African Multilingualism – CAMeroon, NSF = National Science Foundation, SIL = Summer Institute of Linguistics

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