An introduction to Mbaham

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Uppsala Working Group on Empirical Linguistics (WoGEL)

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Agenda

1 Initial overview

2 Field report

3 10-minute grammar sketch

4 Conclusions and perspectives

1 Initial overview

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4 Conclusions and perspectives

Mbaham

- Non-Austronesian ('Papuan') language in West Papua
- Fewer than 1,000 speakers
- Definitely endangered, despite high prestige (Cottet 2015: 16–22)

Figure 1: Indonesia (© OCHA)

Earlier work

- Grammar sketches: Flassy et al. (1984) and Flassy (2002)
- Descriptions of phonology: Flassy et al. (1987) and Cottet (2015) (different dialects)
- BA theses on individual features: Husin (2009), Dabamona (2011), Mozes (2011), Yulianingrum (2012)
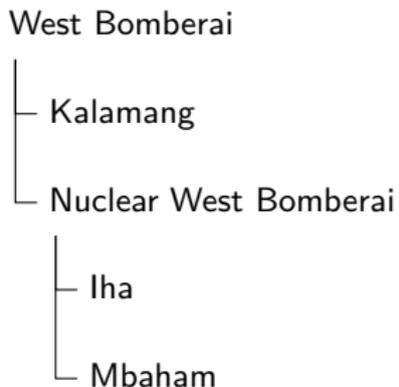- Comparative work: Usher & Schapper (2018) and Usher & Schapper (2022)

Classification I

West Bomberai

├─ Kalamang

└─ Nuclear West Bomberai

    ├─ Iha

    └─ Mbaham

Figure 2: Affiliation according to Glottolog

Classification II

Greater West Bomberai

— Kalamang

— Timor–Alor–Pantar
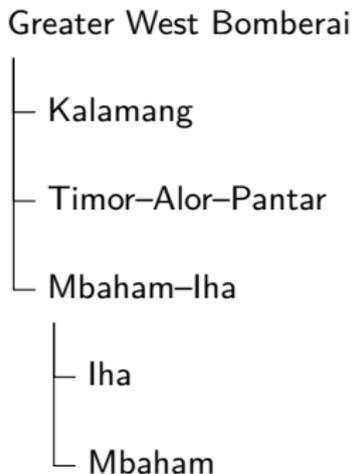
— Mbaham–Iha

   — Iha

   — Mbaham

Figure 3: Affiliation according to Usher & Schapper (2022)

Figure 4: Non-Austronesian languages of Papua and neighbouring islands
(© Kwamikagami | CC-BY-SA-3.0)

'Mapping Bomberai'

- Research project at UU, 2024–26 (PI: Eline Visser)

- Documentation of ten Bomberai languages (plus one on the Bird's Head)
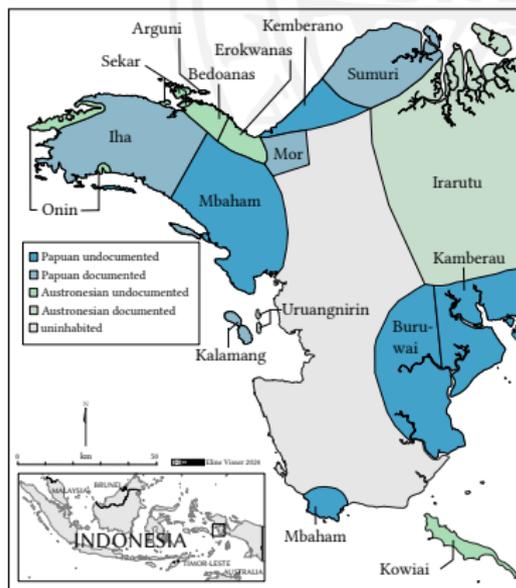
- Funded by the Wenner-Gren Foundations

Figure 5: Languages of the Bomberai peninsula (© Eline Visser)

Mbaham area

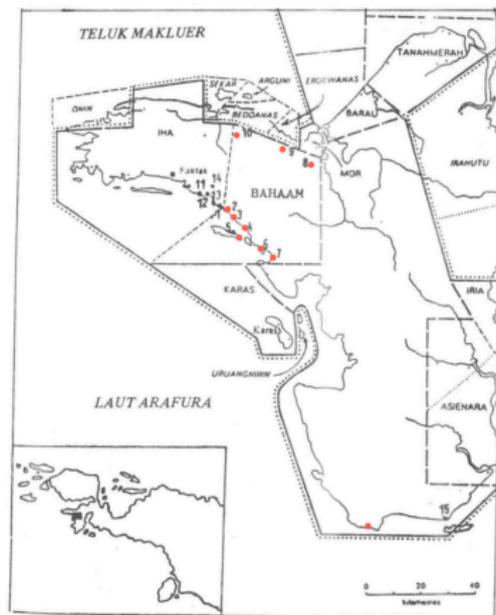Figure 6: Mbaham-speaking villages according to Flassy et al. (1987: xvii)

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Survey trip

- First survey trip in December 2025 (rainy season)
- Based in Fakfak and Kokas with trips to the villages Urat (3 days), Sanggram (1 day), Saharei (2 days), and Kinam (1 day)
- Longer field trip planned for 2026 (dry season)

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Fakfak weather (own photo, 1 Dec 2025)

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Low tide in Urat (own photo, 5 Dec 2025)

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Animal life (own photo, 7 Dec 2025)

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Journey from Urat to Fakfak (own photo, 7 Dec 2025)

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Sunset in Kokas (own photo, 18 Dec 2025)

Challenges

- Managing expectations
- Different conceptions of time
- Weather conditions
- Linguistic ideology: Mbaham as an 'ancestral' language

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Corpus at the moment

- Own documentation (video/audio) *c.* 6 hrs (*c.* 5 transcribed)
  - Translations from Indonesian to Mbaham (questionnaires on TAME and basic morphosyntax)
  - Stimulus-based elicitation (pear film and *caused accompanied motion* task)
  - A few free conversations (not analysed yet)
- Own written notes (*c.* 50 pp.)
- One audio recording from Eline Visser (EV)
- Supplemented with earlier work (Flassy et al. 1984, 1987, Cottet 2015)

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Phonology overview: consonants

Table 1: Consonant phonemes

	bilabial	alveolar	palatal	velar	labiovelar	glottal
plosive	p b	t d	(c ɟ)	k g	k^w	
prenas. pl.	^{m}b	^{n}d	(^{ɲ}ɟ)	^{ŋ}g	$^ŋ g^w$	
nasal	m	n		ŋ		
tap		ɾ				
fricative		s				h
approx.			j		w	
lateral		l				

Phonology overview: vowels

Table 2: Vowel phonemes

	front	back
high	i	u
mid	e	o
low	a	

Grammar overview

- Constituent order: S/A (P/Obl) Pred
- Marking on the predicate: tense, aspect, mood, polarity, valency, person, number …
- No case marking of S/A/P, but postnominal clitics marking oblique relations and information structure
- Complex noun phrase and frequent use of compounding

Constituent order

(1) *meyá unggwá wówgas=tawa cégas nawá=weyt*
    child DEM.DIST spoon=INS food consume=DECL(?)
    'The child is eating with a spoon' (elic.)

Some predicate morphology

- Tense: recent tense, (remote) past, future…?

- Aspect: progressive, completive, habitual…?

- Mood: declarative (?), imperative, desiderative, debitive…?

- Polarity: negative

- Valency: caused accompanied motion…?

- TAM markers index S/A argument; a few verbs have suppletive plural stems (e.g. SG *wes-* ~ PL *wuru-* 'go')

Aspect (and mood?) marking

(2) *andú mák   paré-yendatmeyen*
    1SG language speak-1SG.PROG.(DECL?)
    'I am speaking' (EV)

(3) *undú wirík mák   paré-yapapmeyap*
    1PL two language speak-1PL.PROG.(DECL?)
    'The two of us are speaking' (EV)

Predicate fusion

(4) *kópi   yawí tuwá-yap kwáw wérye=ninggye … wéh-a*
    coffee still EXIST-? 3SG go_buy=NEG   go-GER(?)
    iryé=ninggye
    buy=NEG
    'There is still coffee; s/he doesn't go to the store to buy'
    (elic.)

Unclear morpheme boundaries

(5) *andú kande-yagówatapmeyen*
1SG   know-1SG.DES(?).DECL(?)
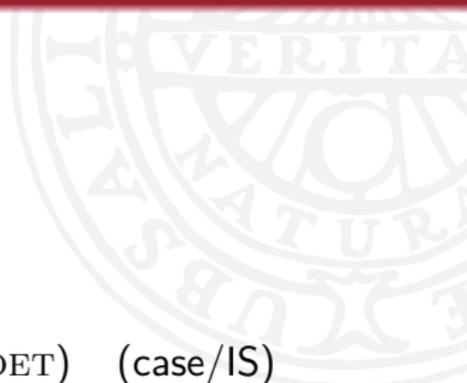'I want to know' (elic.)

Postnominal clitics

Table 3: Postnominal clitics

Function	Form
BENEF	=*kahin*
LOC1/ALL	=(*a*)*n*
LOC2	=*ngga*
INS/ABL	=C*awa*
COM/'and'	=*nggun*
'or'	=(*y*)*em*
'only'	=*yowm*
focus?	=*m*
topic?	=*hin*

Locative clitics

(6) *munggwó yawí wiryá=n   téyt*
    banana   still tree=LOC1 EXIST
    'There are bananas on the tree' (elic.)

(7) *munggwó wiryá=ngga nonówmya*
    banana   tree=LOC2 NEG.EXIST
    'There are no bananas on the tree' (elic.)

Noun phrase structure

(POSS)   N   (MOD)   (CL)   (NUM)   (DET)   (case/IS)

Noun phrase structure

(8) *kam=nggén*   *kwye=rik=mó=nggun*
     3SG.POSS=jerrycan CL[INAN]=two=DEM=COM
     'with his two jerrycans' (CAM task)

Noun phrase structure

(9) *tam=bárang=mo   rúsak*
     2SG.POSS=thing=DEM   break

     'your thing is going to break' (free discourse)

Classifiers

Table 4: Classifiers (known so far)

Function	Form	Function	Form
ANIM	*ow=*	transport	*mur=*
INAN	*kwye=*	seat/rest	*tinggye=*
round	*ku=*	container?	*cem=*
string	*tur=*	container?	*mir=*
cluster	*wis=*	'house'	*nggis=*
flat	*twe=*	'garden'	*man=*
long	*pihik=*	'day'	*kis=*
surface	*puon=*	'year'?	*keh=*

String classifier *tur=*

(10)   *meyá namíher kameyákameya umwó kam=séyr*
     child   male   little   DEM   3SG.POSS=fish
     túr=kono=nggun   *wés=weyt*
     CL[string]=one=COM   walk.SG=DECL(?)
     'This little boy is walking with a string of fish' (CAM task)

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Conclusions

- Mbaham still insufficiently documented; grammar only poorly understood
  - Especially 'predicate complex' and clause combining
- Many features in common with other languages of the area – but apparently sociolinguistically unique

Perspectives

- Next field trip planned for dry season 2026 – biggest priorities predicate morphology and transcribed narratives
- Longer term: complex clauses and survey of dialectal diversity
  - Dialectal differences are salient but probably relatively recent
- Greater West Bomberai (Usher & Schapper 2022) possibly first link between 'mainland' and 'outlier' Papuan languages
  - Great prospects for comparative work

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