Lexical Tone in Proto-Mambiloid

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The Bantoid sub-group Mambiloid comprises some 10 different languages of which Mambila. with at least 12 different dialects and over 100,000 speakers, is the largest; among the others are Kwanja, Ndoro, Vute, and Wawa, each of which also has dialectal variation, and Tep, Mbongo Mvanip, Ndunda, Somyev, and Nizaa, none of which is reported to have demonstrable dialectal variation. While for many of these the only data available are extended wordlists, most Mambiloid languages appear to have four contrastive lexical tones; Nizaa and Vute have three lexical tones, while one distinguishing feature among Mambila lects is three as opposed to four tones.

Historical reconstruction of the latest common parent of the Mambiloid languages is only in its early stages, particularly with regard to tone. The lack of correspondence in tone across those languages with four tones, however, suggests they have evolved their systems independently, rather than having inherited them. Unpublished work by Connell for Mambila, comparing across its dialects, suggests the route by which the Mambila system evolved from two to three and then four tones in those dialects which have four. Independently, Endresen, in unpublished work using internal reconstruction, shows how Nizaa has evolved from a system of two tones in Pre-Nizaa to three in modern Nizaa. One feature shared by Nizaa and Mambila is that verb roots typically contrast just two tones, while nouns contrast three (Nizaa) or four (Mambila), suggesting the proliferation of tone contrasts with nouns is tied to the loss of noun class prefixes. Building on these insights, the present work proposes a reconstruction of the contrastive lexical tones of Proto-Mambiloid, and attempts to trace its evolution in the present day Mambiloid languages. Comparison is also made with reconstructed Proto-Bantu tones, allowing for comment on the lexical tones of the common parent of Proto-Mambiloid and Proto-Bantoid.