

“This Child Is This Small Only on His Age”: Negotiating Age and Authority in Everyday Interactions in Ngəmba, Western Cameroon

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Abstract

This paper examines the emic concepts pertaining to age in Ngəmba, a language spoken in the Western Region of Cameroon. It explores both the terminological concepts available in the language for talking about age and their usage in everyday speech. Drawing upon video recordings of spontaneous interactions obtained through ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork conducted between 2015 and 2023 within this community, I analyse how age disparities and similarities are negotiated through social interactions. This includes examining advice speech events and interactional routines such as turn taking, bodily actions, and linguistic behaviours during greetings and receiving gifts. The paper underscores the role of verbal and non-verbal indicators of power and familiarity in establishing relationships. By uncovering the age dynamics and the socio-cultural significance of age in social interactions, this study makes a substantial contribution to the broader discussions on age negotiation and intergenerational dynamics. Furthermore, it addresses a notable gap in the existing literature on age-related topics in Ngəmba, paving the way for further exploration of the interplay between traditional values and evolving social dynamics concerning age within the Ngəmba community and beyond.

Keywords: age dynamics and social roles; conceptualisation of age; social interactions; Ngəmba; Western Cameroon

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About the author

Solange Mekamgoum is a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Hamburg's Institute of African Studies. Her research primarily centres around the utilisation of language in everyday social interactions and descriptive linguistics of the Eastern Grassfields languages, particularly Ngɔmba, which is spoken in the West region of Cameroon. Currently, she is involved in the "Numeral classifiers of Benue-Congo languages" project. Solange has published on subjects including phrasal polarity, the communicative significance of Ngɔmba personal names, the description of the Ngɔmba interrogative verb, and the functionality of rebuke and advice speech events.

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1 Introduction

1 *áa* *mé* *à* *zhǎ* *mbá* *lé?à* *mbá* *pàpá*
 3SG.EMPH child 3SG again cs.be day.PROX cs.be papa
 ‘He is merely a child. Yet today (on this occasion), he is papa.’

The above statement, uttered by MT during a dowry ceremony, wherein he refers to BT as both a child and a papa, is contradictory and alludes to a notable shift in the perception of age and the roles ascribed to individuals within the Ngəmba community. Traditionally, children are regarded as being in a state of dependency or as descendants of a particular parent, and they are not fully acknowledged as adults until they have attained a specific age or milestone. Seniority based on chronological birth order has been recognized across African societies as an important principle of social organization (Lüpke and Storch 2013; Mitchell and Jordan 2021). However, MT’s comment challenges this belief and implies that age may no longer be the sole determining factor in defining adulthood or childhood. In the light of this, the primary aim of this contribution is to explore the social implications and cultural significance of age in combination with gender within the Ngəmba community.

Ngəmba is a term that encompasses both linguistic and ethnographic aspects, including the language, the ethnic community, and the geographic location. It represents a group of five dialects that exhibit a high level of mutual intelligibility among speakers. These dialects, known as Bamendjou, Bameka, Bansoa, Bamougoum, and Bafounda, are spoken in three administrative divisions in Western Cameroon. The research discussed in this context was conducted in the Bamendjou area, and thus on the Bamendjou dialect. Ngəmba is considered a “transition dialect” (Watters 2003, 233) between the Eastern and Western Bamileke language clusters of the Eastern Grassfields language group. It has various alternative names, including Ghəməlá?–West and Ghəməlá?–Ngəmba, which were given by Dieu and Renaud (1983, 124) and Eberhard et

al. (2023) respectively, as they classified it as a dialect of Ghəməlá?. Other names for the language are Ngemba-Ghəməlá? (Hammarström et al. 2023), Bamileke-Bamendjou (Joshua Project),¹ and western Ngəmba (Watters 2003). The number of Ngəmba speakers is estimated to be between 200,000 (*kê ngəmbà* 2008, 4) and 500,000 according to various sources.

Ngəmba is a language that has not received much attention in terms of research, but it has caught the interest of local language activists and professional linguists. The scientific committee for the development of Ngəmba, called *kê ngəmbà*, has been involved in developing written materials and promoting literacy (*kê ngəmbà* 2008, 2014). Some linguists, such as Fossi (1997, 2004, 2015), Fossi and Ouafu (2012), Tadjou Fongang (2020), and Mekamgoum and Kießling (2023), have focused on describing grammatical aspects of Ngəmba. Others, like Makamthe (2003) and Mensah and Mekamgoum (2017), have explored anthroponyms (personal names) in Ngəmba. Talla Makoudjou (2011) has studied the symbolic language of Ngəmba, while Kuitche Fonkou (1988), Fossi and Kuitche Fonkou (2014), and Makamthe (2017) have focused on oral discourse in the language. Mekamgoum (2013, 2022) has contributed to the study of pragmatics, and the language activist Deeh Segallo (2015, 2016, 2019) has compiled lexical items and proverbs.

Until now, there has been a noticeable absence of research that specifically delves into age-related matters in Ngəmba. This study fills that void by unravelling the significance of age and its social implications and making a significant contribution to broader discussions

¹ Joshua Project, “Bamileke-Bamenjou in Cameroon.” https://joshuaproject.net/people_groups/10623/CM

on age negotiation and intergenerational dynamics. By examining how individuals of varying ages and social standing engage with one another, the research aims to uncover how people navigate and establish relationships. Specifically, it explores how age difference and equality are affirmed or challenged through the use of bodily and verbal markers of power and familiarity, such as address and kin terms, deference displays, and *màkù?* 'respect' strategies. These dynamics are explored within the context of established patterns of verbal and non-verbal communication, as well as the roles individuals assume in ritualized exchanges.

The data pertaining to age negotiation matters utilized in this study were gathered over an extended period of time through ethnographic and linguistic fieldwork.² The fieldwork took place primarily between 2015 and 2023 in Bamendjou, a district situated in the Upper-Plateau Division of the West Region of Cameroon. French, one of the two official languages, dominates in this region. The data were collected in both video and audio formats within two family compounds located in different neighbourhoods, namely Ndang and Mboum. While additional recordings were made in other locations, the speakers were all connected to these two main families. These recordings encompassed a wide range of social

interactions, including conversations, meetings, and cultural events. It is important to note that these recordings were not specifically intended for the purpose of extracting data for the present study, as the fieldwork served other scientific objectives. In order to uphold ethical considerations, all participants involved in the recordings were informed about the purpose of the research and provided their informed consent. To protect their privacy and confidentiality, participants are generally anonymized, unless they explicitly expressed their desire to be recognized. Over time, the composition of these two families has changed, with most of the children now having grown up and left the village to pursue education, work, or marriage in cities. However, their traditional annual gathering remains an occasion for all family members from across the country to come together. In 2023, the family compound in Ndang consisted of only three permanent members: the grandmother and her two granddaughters, aged 13 and 10, who had come from Yaoundé to continue their studies there. During my six-month stay, I observed that the predominant language of communication in their home was French, as the girls did not understand the Ngamba language. This compelled the grandmother to express herself in French for mutual comprehension. However, she would switch to Ngamba when visitors were present or when conversing with me, as I am a native speaker. At the other compound, and in contrast to the family in Ndang, I noticed that Ngamba served as the primary language of communication, although the grandparents occasionally incorporated French into their conversations.

This paper is organized into six sections. Following the introduction, Section 2 focuses on the social, linguistic, and ethnographic context of Ngamba. Section 3 elucidates the emic notions associated with age, while Section 4 uncovers its sociocultural ramifications. Section 5 delves into a fine-grained interactional analysis of the negotiation of age disparities and age equality, considering various

² Except for Extract 2, which was recently recorded in July 2023, all other verbal interactions examined in the current research originate from my PhD thesis on advice, submitted in late 2022 and defended in early 2023. The data has been annotated following the Leipzig Glossing Rules, while the transcription predominantly employs the General Alphabet of Cameroonian Languages (AGLC), as proposed by Tadjadjeu and Sadembouo (1984). Morphological glosses which are not found in the Leipzig Glossing Rules are as follows: ALT 'alternative question morpheme', ANA 'anaphoric', CONJ 'conjunction', CONT 'continuative', CS 'consecutive', EMPH 'emphatic', EXIST 'existential', F0 'general future', FREQ 'frequentative', HAB 'habitual', HONO 'honorific', INTERJ 'interjection', IS 'impersonal subject', MIT 'mitigator', NH 'near-hearer demonstrative', P2 'hesternal past', P3 'distant past', PART 'particle', POT 'potential', QT 'quotative', S 'subject'.

advice exchanges and customary body actions and gestures. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2 Sociocultural background

The Ngɔmba culture is strongly connected to the agrarian lifestyle of its people. Agriculture remains the predominant activity, with a focus on essential crops like potatoes, sweet potatoes, plantain, banana, groundnuts, maize, yellow hairy yams, cocoyam, taro, and cassava. These crops serve as the main sources of sustenance and contribute to the local economy. Ngɔmba people view community and extended family as essential, emphasizing cooperation and solidarity, and valuing the strength and support that come from being part of a close-knit community. Collective effort is important as the people rely on each other for both practical and emotional support. The practice of the ancestral cult and worship of ancestors is an integral part of their religious and spiritual life. They believe in a supreme being called *ssí*, as well as ancestral spirits, whom they often consult for guidance and protection. Christianity has also made its mark on Ngɔmba culture, with many people adopting Christianity as their primary religion. This has had a significant influence on their religious practices, blending traditional beliefs with Christian teachings and rituals (Warnier 2007).

Age-related hierarchy is significant in Ngɔmba culture as it serves to establish a sense of juniority and seniority among siblings, as well as distinguishing between adulthood and childhood within the community as a whole. I illustrate this with a vignette. During a recorded interaction in 2016 in Bamendjou, during a harvesting activity, a 16-year-old girl named Lili displayed a scene of intense fear when she encountered a caterpillar, rolling herself over and over on the ground. Present on that day were six individuals, including Lili's mother (MJ), grandmother (Mami Lo), and elder sister (VC). Lili's fearful behaviour elicited humorous comments from all participants in the speech

event. However, what struck me was the fact that VC was rebuked by MJ and Mami Lo for not advising Lili about the negative social and economic consequences of excessive fear. This indicates that VC failed to meet the expectations placed upon her as the senior to Lili. In other words, VC's role in that situation was to provide advice to her younger sister, especially considering that Lili had behaved similarly in the past whenever she encountered caterpillars. This rebuke highlights the presence of multiple layers of seniority in Ngɔmba culture, and the varying responsibilities associated with different generations. In this particular example, at least two distinct layers of seniority can be identified: senior siblings acting as seniors to their younger siblings, and parents acting as seniors to their older children. On the one hand, it is the duty of older siblings to impart social knowledge to their younger counterparts by offering advice and thereby guiding them towards displaying prosocial behaviours. On the other, the parents assume the responsibility of socializing the older siblings into their role as advisors. The convergence between these two generations (parents and children) lies in the expectation that seniors should correct and guide their juniors. Despite Lili and VC belonging to the same generation as children of the same parents, there is evidently an experience-based differentiation in age. It appears that Lili possesses the privilege of exhibiting behaviours associated with immaturity, while VC is obligated to rectify such immature conduct.

Traditional age is not determined solely by one's chronological age, but rather by a combination of factors such as family lineage, achievements, and social standing. It serves as a symbol of experience, wisdom, and authority, and individuals who hold higher traditional age positions are granted certain privileges and responsibilities within the community. Adults are held in high regard. Their wisdom and experience are highly valued as "age confers epistemic primacy in certain knowledge

domains” (Mitchell and Jordan 2021, 50). As they assume the expected responsibilities, they gain status and *màkù?* ‘respect’. They are often given priority, are allowed more time and space to speak in social interactions, and are often consulted before making important decisions. This is because they are seen as the custodians of knowledge and history, referred to metaphorically as *nàpũ? ñwà'nà* ‘book’ (lit. ‘roll of book’), that is, as a book that needs to be opened all the time and read to acquire all sorts of knowledge and wisdom. Thus, their advice is given great weight. Younger members are expected to show *màkù?* ‘deference, respect’ and obedience to their seniors, which is demonstrated through greetings, gestures, and adherence to interactional norms, customs, and traditions. They may lower their gaze and adopt a more submissive posture when in the presence of adults, reflecting the cultural value placed on age and wisdom. During conversations, they are expected to listen to the older ones and wait to be prompted before they take their turn. Physical contact, such as hugs, is typically reserved for interactions among peers or with younger individuals. However, handshakes can occur in adult-child interactions, provided that the adults initiate the gesture. It is crucial to note that age negotiation is not a one-way street. Younger individuals also negotiate their traditional age through various means, such as acquiring education, gaining professional experience, or achieving notable accomplishments. These achievements can enhance their social standing and provide them

with more power when they navigate social interactions.

3 Conceptualizing age groups and age-related hierarchy in Ngõmba

Ngõmba employs the word *mé* to represent the concept of ‘child’, which serves as basis for a range of specific terms indicating different age categories. These terms include *mèxxhí* ‘newborn’ (lit. ‘fresh child’), *mândò* ‘young child’ (lit. ‘small child’), *mênjjwí* ‘young woman’ (who has begun developing breasts), *membànjà* ‘young man’ (who has grown a beard and is ready to marry a wife), and *méndù* ‘adult’. These specific terms are contextually employed, with the term *mé* encompassing the age range from newborn infants to individuals capable of autonomous and mature actions. In practice, there exists a binary distinction between two age groups: individuals are either categorized as *mé* ‘child’ or as *méndù* ‘adult’. Consequently, in everyday interactions, it is not always straightforward to delineate clear boundaries between life stages and determine the commencement or culmination of childhood and adulthood.

In Extract 1, a fascinating metadiscourse unfolds on the topic of age and hierarchy which emphasizes the distinct conceptualizations of *mé* ‘child’ and *méndù* ‘adult’. This metadiscourse stems from a casual conversation that lasted for 98 minutes and was recorded in 2015 in Bamendjou-Mboum, engaging a total of eight participants. Line numbering is consecutive across all examples in the paper.

Extract 1

2 CT: *ndǎŋ mēndũ ě m-bá w-è ñèn-ě chǒ là*
 so adult DIST CS-be 1-DIST person-REL pass.2SG DEF
 ‘Hence, an adult is that person who surpasses you.’

3 *mēndũ cə zhú m-bá w-è chô ndǎ? né ñgũ?ntstsó lá bhə*
 adult NEG again CS-be 1-DIST pass.2SG only on age DEF NEG
 ‘Additionally, an adult is not that one whose superiority is determined by age alone.’

- 4 à bhě mândò?mè mbòò kà ttshóé ná
 3SG be.EMPH small.child and.2SG P2.IPFV give.birth FOC
 mbò kwécí mǒ
 CONJ.2SG meet-3SG on.it
 ‘Even if it is a small child you have given birth to, if you encounter them on it (i.e., engaging in a particular activity),’
- 5 mbǎ mëndǎ mppwó né zh-ézhò nnò
 then.3SG grownup to.2SG on 7-DEM.ANA issue
 ‘they become an adult to you in that regard,’
- 6 mbún_ηgá wǐ tǎ zhé?cós
 because.3SG just before initiate.2SG
 ‘as they are still to guide you (into it).’
- 7 ST: mbò pá là zhě η-ga mbε ηgá
 and 3PL.IS P3.IPFV again CS-say EMPHQT
 ‘And it is actually asserted that’
- 8 hmm nòη fǎfók jak tthwó mëndù mbàǎ kwó? tthwó mε
 hmm hair white lack head grownup then.3SG.F0 climb head child
 ‘Hmm, if an adult fails to fulfil their responsibility, the burden of that responsibility will be transferred onto the child.’
 ((lit. if white hair does not find a grownup’s head, it will climb onto a child’s head))
- 9 ES: mbàâ ndá? chú? mëndù
 then.3SG already remain grownup
 ‘then, s/he (that child) has already become a grownup.’

In Line 2, CT offers a general definition of the concept ‘adult’ by asserting that an adult is a “person who surpasses” others, thereby introducing the notion of hierarchy and superiority without stating the exact domain in which this superiority is determined. The initial specific meaning of ‘adult’ is then provided in Line 3. CT utilizes the adverb *ndà?* ‘only’ to indicate that chronological age serves as but one determinant of adulthood. However, beyond this aspect, age should be comprehended as a sociocultural construct, as there exist additional characteristics that contribute to the determination of who qualifies as an adult and who qualifies as a child.

Consequently, in lines 4–6, CT presents a second specific meaning of ‘adult’. By contextualizing ‘adult’ in relation to ‘child’, CT implies that social roles can undergo a reversal in scenarios where an actual adult lacks expertise in a particular domain where an actual child possesses expertise. In such situations, the child can assume the role of an adult by virtue of their expertise, while the adult assumes the role of a child due to their lack of expertise. CT thus establishes a metaphorical mapping between ‘adult’ and ‘expert’, and between ‘child’ and ‘novice’.

Finally, in lines 7–8, another speaker, ST, lends support to CT’s conceptualizations and employs an age-related proverb, literally

“if white hair does not find a grownup’s head, it will climb onto a child’s head”, wherein the third meaning of these terms emerges. This utterance is metaphorical in nature and cannot be interpreted literally. “White hair” is often used as a metaphor for old age, wisdom, or experience. One possible interpretation of this proverb is that when an adult neglects or fails to carry out their obligations, the weight and burden of these responsibilities are then transferred onto the child, who is left to take on tasks that were never meant for them. The other interpretation is that if a person does not gain wisdom or experience as they grow older (symbolized by white hair), it will be passed on to the next generation or younger individuals (symbolized by climbing onto a child’s head). Thus, this proverb emphasizes the importance of (i) fulfilling one’s responsibilities and obligations, and (ii) acquiring knowledge and personal growth throughout one’s life. Extract 1 provides insight into the Ngɔmba’s three distinct conceptualizations of age groups: ADULT AS OLDER PERSON VS. CHILD AS YOUNGER PERSON, ADULT AS EXPERT VS. CHILD AS NOVICE, and ADULT AS MORE KNOWLEDGEABLE PERSON VS. CHILD AS IGNORANT/LESS KNOWLEDGEABLE.

In Ngɔmba culture, the establishment of a relative hierarchy based on age is also accompanied by specific terminologies. The term *ncchàmppyè* is utilized to denote a senior, which literally translates as ‘the one who passes in front’. Conversely, the term *nchù?njùm* identifies a junior, literally indicating ‘the one who remains behind’. When individuals are of the same age, they are referred to by the monosyllabic concept *sú* ‘friend’, indicating that Ngɔmba conceptualizes age-mates as having harmonious relationships. These age-related distinctions gain even more significance during traditional rituals and ceremonies, including dowry ceremonies, funerals, birth celebrations, and family gatherings, where specific roles and responsibilities may be assigned based on age, seniority, or

juniority. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that chronological age is not always the key determinant, as people tend to renegotiate their relative age (Berman 2014, 116) during actual interactions, as we shall see.

4 Sociocultural implications related to the meaning of age in Ngɔmba

The discussion in Section 3 above is centred on a discourse in which the aim of speakers is to clarify the concepts of ‘child’ and ‘adult’. In this section, I explore the practical implementation of these notions by analysing two separate interactions that were documented in different speech contexts and events.

The second extract under discussion is a recorded interaction that occurred during a dowry ceremony in July 2023 in Bamendjou-Ndang. It is from here that the utterance in the introduction is taken. This interaction involves two prominent figures from the bride’s family: MTat, the bride’s brother, aged 39, and FH, approximately 72 years old, and successor to the bride’s great-grandfather. FH assumes the role of addressing both the audience and the young couple during the ceremony. Three weeks prior to this event, MTat had tragically lost his father, who was 74 years old at the time of his passing. His late father held a position of utmost authority within the family and possessed a nobility title. Consequently, MTat, as his father’s rightful successor, now shoulders the responsibilities of his father’s position and is entrusted with overseeing the dowry ceremony of his sister, who, in this particular scenario, is regarded as his own daughter. This transition occurred due to MTat’s ascension as the family head following his father’s demise. However, given his limited experience and novice status in conducting the rituals associated with such traditional ceremonies, FH, an experienced family head with extensive knowledge, guides and supports MTat throughout the proceedings.

Extract 2

- 10 FH: *hmm cáčchó là kák ne mbûm mmí bhó*
 hmmm type.of.bird never be.small on 6.egg 6.3SG.POSS NEG
 'hmmm, nobody is ever too small to fulfil their responsibilities'
- 11 *áa mé à zhǎ mbá lé?-à mbá pàpá*
 3SG.just child 3SG again CS.be day.PROX CS.be papa
 'He is merely a child. Yet today (on this occasion), he is papa.'
- 12 *tà pǎ zhũ nnó mǎlù? n-jú hâ mmí*
 until is again drink wine CS.again give 3SG.POSS
 'to the extent that they have drunk today and given his own wine' ((he has partaken in the drinking of wine, customarily reserved solely for the family's head))
- 13 *kwà? zzhí wǎ cíchî lá? â ngó sshyê zzhí ngá*
 EMPH him 1.PROX among people 3SG.be CS.F0 know him QT
 'And he himself, in the presence of others, he has to know that'
- 14 *á bha?á tǎ mbóó tǎ?l e?-à mbóó ñkwyé*
 3SG like.this before CONT start day.PROX CONT CS.grow
 'he, from this very day, he is growing ((maturing)).'
- 15 *à cǎ mbìn njàm bhó áa ñkwyé*
 3SG NEG CS.return back NEG 3SG.CONT CS.grow
 'He is not regressing; he is growing ((maturing)).'
- 16 *mbě_wó_lá zhũ m-bá sáéé ngà bhà nà kwyé*
 whosoever again CS.be aspire QT be to grow
 'And everybody aspires to grow (and nothing else)'
- 17 *pø náñê pǎñ mbà lá*
 1PL.INCL stay good eh DEF
 'I greet us all eh!'
- 18 Aud: *ô ô*
 ((Honorific)) 'yes! yes!'

What transpires here specifically is that FH, at a certain point, steers his talk towards elucidating to the attendees, particularly the groom's family and those unacquainted with MTat and his story, the rationale behind MTat assuming a leading role in the event and why they should acknowledge him as a figure of authority rather than fixating on his youthful age. FH aptly initiates this speech activity

by metaphorically referencing MTat in Line 10 as the tiniest bird, known as *cáčchó* to the Ngamba people. Despite its small size, this bird continues to fulfil its primary duties of egg-laying, just like the larger bird species. Coincidentally, MTat is also the youngest son of his deceased father. However, despite these circumstances, he has wholeheartedly embraced his social and cultural obligations

with utmost diligence in his role as his father's successor. This is fully reflected in Line 11, in which FH makes a core paradoxical statement, "He is merely a child. Yet today (on this occasion), he is papa". On the one hand, MTat is referred to as a child, suggesting that he is still young in age and therefore not fully mature. On the other hand, in the specific context of the dowry ceremony, he is referred to as a papa, which signifies a more mature, adult role by virtue of his new social role as successor. In essence, even though MTat is still actually a child, in this context of the dowry ceremony, he is expected to fulfil the responsibilities and obligations associated with being a papa, such as taking on his late father's role of being the family leader. This self-contradictory utterance, at least from an outsider perspective, also highlights the fluidity of social roles and the idea that individuals may be assigned different roles and responsibilities based on specific circumstances or contexts. It suggests that age is not the sole determining factor in defining roles within the Ngamba community, and that other factors, such as community recognition and ceremonial significance, may come into play. This notion is evident in Line 12, where FH explicitly mentions the sociocultural implications of what he has been explaining: MTat has just taken part in the drinking of the dowry-paying wine, which is reserved solely for family heads like him. Equally, FH seizes this opportunity to indirectly draw MTat's attention to his newly acquired social

and traditional role, which entails the display of behaviours and responsibilities associated with maturity, wisdom, and experience, as indicated in Lines 13–16. Furthermore, these statements serve as a form of implicit apology to the participants of the event, acknowledging the unconventional arrangement of having two individuals instead of one leading the dowry ceremony. This deviation from the norm is attributed to MTat's lack of maturity in handling such matters, prompting FH to subtly advise MTat to mature and improve, from that day onwards (Lines 13–14).

The subsequent interaction (Extract 3) that I am about to discuss presents a comparable scenario. It is a low-high dyad that occurred in Bamendjou in 2020. It is part of an advice exchange that takes place in the mother's kitchen, where TC, a twelve year old, assumes the role of the advice giver during the evening cooking session. Both parents and children are present in this context. The mother had stored some spices in a glass bottle and now needs to open it in order to use some of the spices for the meal she is preparing. Despite her efforts, she is unable to open the bottle, as it seems to be stuck. The father then takes the glass bottle and attempts to open it as well, but to no avail. One of the daughters also tries to open it. At a certain point, the youngest son, TC, offers his advice on how such difficulties are typically resolved. Thus, he proceeds to provide advice to his father, mother, and older siblings.

Extract 3

19 TC: *mè mbútrɔ khiʔí bhə n-tú nə cwɔʔ bháʔa*
 but bottle HAB be CS-strong INF open COMP.NH
 'But (come on!) when a bottle is difficult to open like that one'

20 *pá pè múpu? n-tɔk cwo njéna n-té? á ne cwɔʔ nɔ*
 is take knife CS-pass.through under cover push 3SG MIT open isn't.it
 'one usually takes a knife, slides it beneath the cap, exerts pressure, and it effortlessly pops open, is it not so? (It truly is as simple as that!)

21 Dad: *kǎ TC*

‘Is that so, TC?’

22 TC: *âm Pá*

‘Yes, papa!’

23 D1: = *pð p-à ndòŋ à pð cə sáŋ*
 1PL.INCL 1AGR.PROX quantity PROX 1PL.INCL NEG think

‘And the whole bunch of us, we did not think (and none of us had thought of this solution)!’

24 Mum: [*má(n) ǎ kək ndòŋ ǎ nè ŋǔʔntstsǎ*
 child PROX be.small quantity PROX.EMPH ON age.3SG.POSS

‘This child is this small only on his age,’

25 Dad: = *tə m-bá tthwúu m-bá mɛndù mbà*
 yet CS-be head-3SG.POSS CS-be grownup INTERJ

‘yet in his thinking, he is grownup, huh!’

26 Mum: [((holds knife and pass it to her husband))

27 = *mə sóŋ ɔ ndì m-bá mɛndù tə mmjɔ*
 1SG tell 2SG ndi CS-be grownup until finish

‘I tell you (you are right), a complete grownup!’

28 D2: [*àŋ_vrɛ*
 ‘Indeed!’

29 Dad: [((opens glass bottle

30 D1: *máŋsəwɔ lə lǎŋ ɔ TC*
 EXCL who P3.IPFV teach 2SG TC

‘Amazing! Who taught you, TC?’

Extract 3 is important in two key aspects. Firstly, it demonstrates that actual age does not determine an impressively mature mindset. Instead, it underscores the significance of exhibiting the relevant wisdom or experience required to effectively solve specific problems, such as employing the appropriate technique to open a challenging glass bottle (Line 20). Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, it sheds light on the perception of hierarchy based on age and the sociocultural implications associated with

this hierarchy. It draws attention to the differentiation between social and situational roles, as evidenced by the fact that a child aged 12 can be ascribed with the psychological attributes of “a complete grownup” by his parents (Lines 24–27) and elder siblings. In this interaction, the youngest family member, TC, gives advice to the adults without showing the appropriate level of *məkù?* ‘respect, honour, deference’ that children should display when addressing grownups. TC uses a syntactic strategy, i.e.,

initiating his advice utterance with *mè* ‘come on!’ and incorporating a tag question *nǎ* ‘is it not so’, that would normally be considered rude and disrespectful, and would potentially induce *só* ‘shame, embarrassment’ for his parents and seniors, as his utterance comes across as condescending and implies that TC holds a higher position of power than his parents and seniors. My observations indicate that if children have to advise their parents or elders, they frequently employ hedging language to soften their advice message. This is achieved through the use of polite expressions such as *sású* ‘please’ or *mbé* *ó* ‘could you (do X), as well as conditional syntactic constructions like *ó ké è [...] mbo...* ‘if you did X...’. Such linguistic strategies serve to convey their messages in a manner that is both courteous and respectful of the hierarchical social dynamics inherent in their relationships with adults.

The first notable aspect of this situation is that, instead of rejecting TC’s advice due to his lack of life experience and the need for him to speak respectfully to his parents and older siblings, they actually consider his advice to be valuable and immediately put it into practice (Lines 26, 29). However, in Line 22, we can see that despite his initial inappropriate utterance, TC still shows *màkù?* to his father by responding with “yes, papa!”. He adds the kin term “papa”, which is a common way of marking *màkù?* ‘respect, deference’ towards fathers or anyone with a father’s characteristics and thereby establishing hierarchy.

The second significant issue here is the way TC is praised for his advice and how D1 openly admits their lack of knowledge of opening glass bottles, as seen from Line 23 onwards. But the core aspect of this situation is TC’s mother declaring that TC, despite being a child, is only small in terms of age (Line 24). The father supports this claim by adding that TC “is a grownup in his thinking”. Immediately, the mother takes action by passing the knife to the father (Line 26), further elevating TC’s status by stating that he is “a

complete grownup” (Line 27). This may seem contradictory to those who are not familiar with the Ngɔmba culture.

When Mum, Dad, and D1 assert that TC thinks like a fully mature adult, they are not only claiming his high knowledgeability but also altering TC’s role from that of a child to that of a full-grown adult. This shift in situational roles also implies that Mum, Dad, and TC’s older siblings are now considered children, resulting in a high-low interaction dynamic, where TC is now the more knowledgeable person and the others are less knowledgeable. This change in social roles serves the purpose of face work because perceiving TC as a grownup in this situation allows the biological adults to focus on the effectiveness of TC’s advice while downplaying any condescending tone in his speech, which lacks markers of *màkù?*. This scenario aligns with the statement made by ST in Extract 1 (Line 8), where it is suggested that if an adult’s wisdom is absent, it will manifest in a child, who will then assume the role of a grownup: “if white hair does not find a grownup’s head, it will climb onto a child’s head”. In this case, Mum, Dad, and the older siblings lack the necessary knowledge to open a glass bottle, while TC, despite being biologically a child, possesses the expertise to provide efficient information and solve the problem. This highlights how the participants in the event negotiate TC’s age, ultimately redefining him as a grownup due to his extensive knowledge and proficiency in opening a glass bottle.

5 Navigating age in diverse social interactions in Ngɔmba

Interactional practices, such as advice speech events, greeting rituals, gift-receiving, turn-taking, seating arrangements, avoiding standing in doorways, and usage of kin and address terms are among the ways in which individuals navigate age differences or display familiarity. The following subsections will provide a more

detailed exploration of how these are applied in actual interactions in the Ngɔmba culture.

5.1 Advice speech events and use of kin and address terms

This subsection examines two extracts. The first exchange (Extract 4) which I will analyse is a short low-high interaction that somehow stands in stark contrast to Extracts 2 and 3,

discussed previously. This interaction, which took place during farm work in Bamendjou-Mboum in 2017, revolves around a granddaughter (Gd) advising her grandmother (Gm) to consider stopping her work and taking a break. The four lines presented here are subsequent to the advice act and aim to show age negotiation within an asymmetrical relationship.

Extract 4

31 Gm: *pép mət á? ménà wà mpphó tá hécá*
 wait 1SG begin finish 3AGR.PROX ridge before rest
 ‘Wait, let me finish this ridge first before I take a rest!’

32 Gd: *ngâŋ méré à fâ? ta kù? chíná bhá?a*
 No mother 2SG work until.3SG be.enough stand COMP.NH
 ‘No, **mother!** You have worked enough. Discontinue your work at this point!’

33 Gm: *mán ă*
 child PROX
 ‘**This child!**’

34 ((puts the hoe on the ground and sits down))

As the interaction unfolds, the grandmother acknowledges the benefit of her child’s advice message, albeit subtly resisting it by suggesting that the timing for its implementation is not appropriate (refer to Line 31). It is only after uttering the phrase “this child!” that she eventually decides to act upon the advice (Line 34). By uttering it, the grandmother reasserts her higher social status over her grandchild, thereby reclaiming her authority and seniority. If she had implemented the advice without reaffirming her position as the adult figure, it would have appeared as if the child was asserting superiority due to her presumed superior knowledge in that particular situation. Hence, by uttering “this child”, the grandmother recalibrates the power dynamic and reaffirms her status as the grown-up. This example demonstrates how individuals negotiate age and

power difference by using words to strengthen or restore their actual social position, which they perceive as being threatened by their interactant.

Kin terms are frequently utilized upwards to establish a hierarchical structure in social interactions (Fleming and Slotta 2015). This is exemplified in Line 32, where Gd refers to her grandmother using the kin term “mother”. This choice to use “mother” is rooted in the cultural practices and cognitive framework of the Ngɔmba community, where there is no differentiation between parents and grandparents. From their perspective, anyone who fulfils the role of a parent, regardless of biological relation, grandparent status, or similar characteristics, is considered a parent. Gm, to the contrary, does not hedge her utterance with any kin term or name, as observed

in Line 31. This is because when a child uses a kin term, it signifies *màkù?* ‘respect, honour, deference’ towards a parent or someone of higher rank in the social hierarchy. Individuals with a higher social rank are not expected to show the same level of *màkù?* towards those of lower rank, including parents towards their children. Similarly, Gm is not obligated to use any address term when referring to Gd.

This principle is also evident in Extract 5, which I will now analyse. Extract 5 is an exchange of advice that took place during a 45-minute interaction in Bamendjou-Mboum in 2016, involving over 15 participants, including children. This specific excerpt features six individuals, three men (ST, ES, and JF), who provide advice to their three wives (MJ, KJ, and CV), who receive it.

Extract 5

- 35 ST: *pək təghə bhaʔa n-təghə pə-njwí*
 1PL.EXCL advise like.this CS-advise 2-woman
 ‘We are hereby advising the women.’
- 36 *pû shshé ŋə*
 2PL know.IMP QT
 ‘You (=the women), know that:’
- 37 *mə-njwí n-júʔnə ndum i n-tstó pe*
 2-woman.FREQ N-obey husband 3SG CS-eat profit
 ‘When a wife obeys her husband, she always profits.’
- 38 (...)
- 39 *kè pǔ hó n-júʔ lə=*
 ALT 2PL EXIST N-hear PART
 ‘I hope you are getting me!’
- 40 MJ: = *á kwàʔ bhúʔú [ndi]*
 3SG EMPH like.so HONO.male.address.term
 ‘It is exactly so (as you say), *ndi*.’
- 41 KJ: *[á úu pê]*
 3SG like.so pê
 ‘It is so (as you say), **Papa!**’
- 42 ES: ((turns towards CV, the youngest wife))
əəm
 ‘huhm? (what do you have to say?)’
- 43 CV: *pəgháə ŋ-cwəŋcə n-júʔú pê*
 1PL.EXCL.CONT CS-organize CS-hear pê
 ‘We (the women) are getting it very well, **Papa!**’

44 MJ: *áá ηgà pàgháá n-jú? le*
 yes QT 1PL.EXCL CS-hear PART
 ‘Yes, (we say) that we are getting you (how many times should we say it)!’

45 JF: *áá*
 ‘Yes!’

Upon careful examination of Extract 5, it becomes evident that there is an imbalance in the utilization of address terms. In Line 35, ST initiates his advice by referring to the advisees as ‘women’ rather than ‘our wives’, which would have been more respectful and inclusive. Yet the women perceive this as acceptable. However, in Lines 36 and 39, he transitions to using the plural pronoun *pû ~ pǔ* ‘you’ when addressing them. Notably, the women express their acknowledgment of the advice with the inclusion of *màkù?* markers. KJ (Line 41) and CV (Line 43) opt to use the kinship term *pê* ‘papa’ when addressing their husbands, not their parents, while MJ (Line 40), who is the eldest among them at approximately 56 years old, employs the honorific address term *ndì*, which signifies that ST holds nobility status. This one-sided marking of *màkù?* serves as a

means of affirming the existing power dynamic between the men, whom the women conceptualize in this scenario as GROWNUPS (through the use of “papa”), and the women, whom the men implicitly map as CHILDREN (through the absence of any kin term which denotes a hierarchical structure).

Conversely, the utilization or non-utilization of kin or address terms by both interactants in an exchange signifies an equality in social or traditional status. This will be demonstrated in the subsequent analysis of Extract 6, where ES and JF address each other using the honorific address term *ndì*, indicating their equal social standing. Extract 6 is a supportive advice interaction that occurs in the context of *nàŋcà*, where individuals express their condolences and provide emotional support to someone who has experienced a loss.

Extract 6

46 ES: *zhóô mbǎ ndì*
 see.IMP INTERJ HONO.address.term
 ‘See eh, *ndì*!’

47 (0.51)

48 JF: *áá*
 ‘Yes! ((honorific))’

49 ES: hmm

50 *ηe zhò mǎ? ηgá? mò? ndǎη ηgá?*
 person see other suffering other amount suffering
 ‘If a person experiences suffering, a certain degree of suffering.’

- 51 *tâk chû? mendù mbǎ mppà*
miss become grownup then.2SG mad.person
'and does not become a grownup, then you are a fool.'
- 52 JF: *mǎǎ n-jú?-ú*
1SG.CONT CS-hear.IPFV
'I understand (I am hearing).'
- 53 ES: *ndɔŋ má-ɲ̀nò m-è-ɔ́ zhó la*
amount 6-thing 6AGR-REL-2SG see DEF
'The number of things (=all the suffering) that you have experienced!'
- 54 *câ nda? ná khwímcy-ǎ bhɔ*
NEG only INF bring.to.memory-2SG NEG
'Apart from reminding you,'
- 55 *mbê ndà ghá ɲ̀gà nták ò tàghá bhó*
POT 1SG.NEG say QT 1SG.advise 2SG advise NEG
'I cannot say that (by the action I am performing), I am advising you.'
- 56 (.)
- 57 JF: *mǎǎ cwónɔ́ n-ju?-u*
1SG.CONT arrange CS-hear-IPFV
'I understand (I am hearing) very well.'
- 58 ES: *mbê nsù? lé?-à ták ɔ́ ɲ̀gà_kò*
POT 1SG.come day-PROX advise 2SG QT.what
'How can I come today and advise you?'
- 59 *câ nda? ná khwímcy-ǎ ɲ̀gà*
NEG only INF bring.to.memory-2SG QT
'Apart from reminding you that.'
- 60 *khwímɔ́ nwe [pɔ́k lá zhɔ tsǎ? kkhì lá bhó=*
bring.to.memory.IMP thing.REL DU.S.2+1P3 see place so.and.so DEF NEG
'Remember what you and I have been through at specific locations in the past,'
- 61 JF: *[ɲ̀gǎǎ n-jú?ú ndì*
1SG.CONT N-hear.IPFV HONO.address.term
'I understand (I am getting you), *ndì!*'
- 62 (...)

Both ES and JF are over the age of 60, meaning they have already taken part in the dance known as *ndak*, which marks the transition into becoming a *mɔ̀ndɔ̀* ‘adult’ and grants them the title *mbɔ̀ɔ̀*. Not only are they *mɔ̀sɔ̀* ‘age-mates’, or ‘friends’, in the Ngɔmba sense, but they also hold noble positions in the society. This is evident in their interaction during the advice exchange in Extract 6. The dynamics of an advice interaction involve a hierarchy based at least on ‘epistemic status’ (Heritage and Sefi 1992; Yang 2020, 290; Lindwall et al. 2016, 505), which entails knowledge disparity between the two parties. This creates an inherent asymmetry in the current exchange, which explains the explicit discomfort of ES throughout the conversation as he bluntly and consistently denies that he is actually advising JF (Lines 55, 58). Instead, he emphasizes that he is merely jogging his memory (Lines 54, 59–60) to help JF recall past experiences and remain resilient in his current situation. By so doing, ES shows that he is treating JF as an equal rather than as someone of lower status. Moreover, both interactants refrain from using address terms when speaking to each other, which signifies their equal standing in terms of age. They also display their mutual high status through the reciprocated use of the honorific address term *ndi*. In Line 46, ES begins his *nɔ̀ncɔ̀* activity by addressing JF as *ndi*. At some point in the interaction (Line 61), JF also addresses ES as *ndi*, when acknowledging the advice. Furthermore, JF’s use of *ɔ̀ɔ̀*, the honorific ‘yes’ in Line 48, serves as another linguistic and pragmatic indication of ES’s elevated position in society. Valuable insights into interactants’ respective roles and power dynamics can also be seen in the way they take turns in a conversation.

5.2 Turn-taking in advice interactions in Ngɔmba

From all the advice extracts previously examined, it is evident that there are discernible

interactional patterns regarding turn-taking. For instance, in Extract 5, ST initiates the advice event and continues speaking, while the advisees, who are women in this case, simply listen without offering any response. It is only from Line 39, when ST prompts their reactions with the utterance “I hope you are getting me!”, that the women begin to give their various advice responses. Asymmetrical interactions usually follow this format, and it is important to note that the absence of immediate reactions does not imply disrespect. This practice is deeply rooted in the Ngɔmba culture, where adults address children and the expected response from the child is to silently listen until prompted to react; the cross-cultural reality is that the one who has the power controls the floor and allocates speaking turns. By adhering to this cultural norm, children and women affirm their social roles as subordinate to adults and men. In other words, children share a similar status with women when engaged in conversation with men. When this format is not adhered to, both children and women may be perceived as lacking sociolinguistic competence or as disrespectful and ill-mannered. On the contrary, Extract 6 deviates from this structural pattern. In this scenario, JF, consistently acknowledges the advice as the interaction progresses, without waiting for ES, the advisor, to explicitly elicit a reaction. These two interactions exemplify how participants can navigate age differences and similarities in turn-taking within the context of advice-giving. Greetings form another type of interactional routine that inherently reflects hierarchical distinctions or similarities in its structure.

5.3 Conventional body postures

Ngɔmba culture emphasizes the importance of adhering to specific body postures and gestures when engaging in greeting and gift-receiving routines.



Figure 1: Three types of handshakes in hierarchical greeting rituals in Ngamba

5.3.1 Greeting rituals in Ngamba

In many cultures, there are certain customs and etiquette involved in greeting practices that depend on the social status of the people involved. One such practice is that a child should not be the first to initiate a handshake or extend their hand to greet an adult. Instead, it is expected that the adult, who holds a higher social status, should make the first move by extending their hand for a handshake. The child then responds by stretching out their hand, symbolizing their acknowledgement of the adult's authority and power. This practice serves to reinforce the existing hierarchical structure and is exemplified in the three images in Figure 1, which illustrate how individuals of lower social status, such as children, employ intentional hand positioning and body posture during greeting rituals.

In the image on the far right, the child extends her right hand in a welcoming gesture,

as she anticipates receiving her grandmother's hand. Additionally, she uses her left hand to hold her own elbow. As for the grandma, only her right hand is stretched, while her left hand remains positioned on her lap. In the middle image, the woman extends her right arm to grasp the hand of the father, while simultaneously placing her left hand on her chest. Notably, her left hand is positioned in such a way that only her index finger is directed towards her elbow, as if she intends to make contact with it. The father uses only his right hand, while continuing to use his left hand to hold the plate of food he was eating before the act of greeting. The left image depicts a man greeting a woman with both hands outstretched, firmly grasping her hands. The man adopts a submissive body posture by leaning forward, which signifies his respect and deference towards the woman. This two-hand-stretching posture holds the same cultural significance as



Figure 2: Two types of greeting postures in non-hierarchical interactions in Ngamba

the extending of the right hand while supporting the elbow with the left hand. Both of these body postures convey a sense of humility and recognition of the interlocutor's authority or higher social status. These bodily actions are typically observed in greeting rituals in hierarchical situations, where one party assumes the role of a 'child' or subordinate, while the other party accepts their position as an adult or superior. The postures would differ if the interactants were equal, as can be observed in Figure 2.

In the left image, there are two adults, a woman (about 80), who is older than the man (approximately 65), is sitting on her veranda. Upon seeing the man approaching, she extends both of her hands towards him. As the man reaches her, he reciprocates the gesture by also extending both of his hands. In Ngamba culture, the act of stretching out both hands simultaneously during a greeting signifies *m̀̀k̀̀*. In the case in point, both interactants express *m̀̀k̀̀* towards each other. Although the man clearly considers the woman to be his senior in terms of age, the woman, on her part, considers the man as deserving some respect. This is because he is not an ordinary person, but rather a *mb̀̀* who has partaken in the transitional dance called *nd̀̀k̀̀*, which granted him a nobility title. This means that equality among adult participants can be shown in their mutual use of respectful body postures during greeting interactions. In contrast, the image on the right portrays a pair

of young siblings exchanging greetings. Unlike the first three images in Figure 1, they extend only one hand towards each other, while keeping the other hand away and maintaining eye contact. In this case, both interactants refrain from displaying signs of *m̀̀k̀̀*, a behaviour typically observed among young peers during interactions.

5.3.2 Receiving gifts in Ngamba

The exchange of gifts, much like greetings, can also reveal power dynamics and the relationship between individuals, as illustrated with the three images in Figure 3.

In the left image, the recipient of the gift extends both hands but places the right hand on top of the left hand, symbolizing the difference in age and expressing *m̀̀k̀̀*. In the middle image, the child receives a biscuit from his grandmother with his hands lower than hers, indicating his subordinate status as a child. Like the receiver in the left image, he stretches out both hands, but unlike him, he joins the two together to emphasize his child status. After receiving the biscuit, he keeps some for himself and returns the rest to his grandmother. It is worth noting that the grandmother simply stretches out her right hand to receive the biscuit, while her left hand remains on her thigh. Additionally, the grandson's giving hands are slightly lower than the grandmother's receiving hand, symbolizing his humility and her authority.



Figure 3: Receiving gifts in different types of dyads

6 Conclusion

In Ngɛmba society, age sets range from *mèxxhí* ‘newborn’ to *méndù* ‘adult’, yet chronological age holds little relevance in the social and cultural aspects of daily life. Consequently, age remains a vague concept (Berman 2014, 126), with relative age being the most relevant determinant. The interactional patterns of Ngɛmba people reveal that individuals are primarily classified as *mé* ‘child’ or *méndù*, simplifying age groups into two distinct categories. This dichotomy holds great implications as it determines social roles and influences the dynamics of *màkù?* ‘respect, honour, deference’ within the community. On the one hand, it establishes who deserves respect and how it is

expressed, established, or renegotiated during various interactions and rituals. On the other hand, ‘agemates’, whose social connections go across age groups, have their own specific linguistic and bodily markers to signify their familiarity. Unlike in some contexts, where age may be associated with control over material resources (Berman 2014, 116) and inheritance, the Ngɛmba case demonstrates that community recognition and ceremonial significance can redefine statuses and social roles linked to age. Ultimately, age, in conjunction with gender, plays a crucial role in structuring intergenerational relationships and strengthening social bonds.

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