



RESEARCH ARTICLE **Section:** *Linguistics & Language Studies*

Naming Practices and Identity Construction in the Ghómálá' Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Cultural Meaning, Social Hierarchy, and Global Influences

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**African Journal of Linguistics,
Literary and Cultural Studies**

Volume 2, Issue 1, 2026

ARTICLE HISTORY

Submitted 09 March 2026

Accepted: 16 March 2026

Published: 28 May 2026

HOW TO CITE

WEGA, S. A. (2026). Naming Practices and Identity Construction in the Ghómálá' Community: A Sociolinguistic Analysis of Cultural Meaning, Social Hierarchy, and Global Influences. *African Journal of Linguistics, Literary and Cultural Studies*, 2(1). Retrieved from <https://journals.evonexpublishers.com/index.php/ajllcs/article/view/79>

ABSTRACT

This article examines the sociolinguistic implications of naming practices within the Ghómálá' community. It is guided by the following central research question: How do naming practices within the Ghómálá' community function as sociolinguistic mechanisms for constructing, negotiating, and maintaining cultural identity, social hierarchy, and historical consciousness in a context of multilingualism and globalization? The main objective of this study is to explore the intricate sociolinguistic landscape of Ghómálá' naming practices by illuminating the dynamic interactions between language, culture, and identity. Using a combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods, including observation, interviews, focus groups, and archival data, this study investigates how naming conventions reflect cultural values, social status, and historical influences. The analysis leans on anthropological theory (Durante 2003; Lévi-Strauss 1958-1973), Symbolic Interactionism (George Herbert Mead 1934, 1962), Social Identity Theory (Henri Tajfel and John Turner, 1979) and Postcolonial Theory (Frantz Fanon, 1967 and Edward Said, 1978), to demonstrate how names function as linguistic markers of social roles, kinship relations, and cultural heritage. The findings reveal that naming practices are embedded in complex systems of meaning that encode power relations, identity constructions, and cultural continuity. This study contributes to a broader understanding of the relationship between language and identity in multilingual and multicultural contexts by showing how naming practices serve as a key site for the negotiation of identity, power, and cultural belonging.

KEYWORDS: Naming Practices, Sociolinguistics, Identity, Culture, Ghómálá'



Published in Nairobi, Kenya by Evonex Global, an imprint of Evonex Publishers Limited

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0. Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the study of how language varies and changes in social contexts. It explores the relationship between language and society, looking at how social factors like class, gender, ethnicity, age, and religion influence language use and perception. It's a way to understand how language functions in social interactions and how it reflects and shapes social identities and relationships. Naming practices portray significant importance, names often reflect an individual's identity, including aspects like ethnicity, religion, and social class. Sociolinguists study how naming conventions signify social status and cultural identity, and how these practices can influence social interactions and perceptions. In the Ghòmálá' community, names aren't given haphazardly.

Names often play a role in how gender identities are expressed and perceived, naming conventions reflect and reinforce gender norms and social hierarchy, so that changes in these practices can challenge traditional gender roles and upset social and family orders. In light of the sociolinguistic importance of naming practices, this study is guided by the following central research question: *How do naming practices within the Ghòmálá' community function as sociolinguistic mechanisms for constructing, negotiating, and maintaining cultural identity, social hierarchy, and historical consciousness in a context of multilingualism and globalization?* To address this overarching question, the study is further structured around the following specific research questions:

- How do naming practices reflect and reinforce social hierarchies, familial ties, and cultural values?
- What role do naming conventions play in shaping individual and collective identities?
- To what extent do historical and colonial influences impact naming practices?
- How do naming practices intersect with sociolinguistic variables such as language attitudes, variation, and multilingualism?

Ghòmálá' is a Grassfields Bantu language spoken in five divisions of the West Region of Cameroon, namely Mifi, Koung-Khi, Hauts-Plateaux, Menoua, and Bamboutos. According to Joseph E. Grimes (2010), the number of native speakers is estimated at approximately 260,000, distributed over an area of about 1,170 km².

The Ghòmálá'-speaking area is composed of sixteen paramount chiefdoms (or kingdoms), including Bafoussam, Baleng, Bapi, Bandjoun, Baham, Bayangam, Bahouan, Batié, Bandenkop, Bapa, Bangam, Bamougoum, Bamendjou, Bameka, Bansa, and Bafounda.

Ghòmálá' is assigned the code 960 by Dieu Michel and Renaud Patrick (1983). It comprises four relatively homogeneous dialectal varieties: Southern Ghòmálá' (Batié, Bandenkop, Bapa, Bangam), Central Ghòmálá' (Bandjoun, Baham, Bayangam, Bahouan), Northern Ghòmálá' (Bafoussam, Baleng, Badeng, Bapi), and Western Ghòmálá', also known as Dgémba (Bamendjou, Bameka, Bansa, Bafounda).

From a genetic classification perspective, Joseph E. Grimes (2010) situates Ghòmálá' within the Niger–Congo language family, following this hierarchy: Niger–Kordofanian, Niger–Congo, Benue–Congo, Bantoid, Bantu, Grassfields Bantu, Eastern Grassfields, and Central Bamileke. This classification reflects the language's genetic affiliation as well as its morphological structure and internal linguistic organization.

This paper is organized as follows: section 1 discusses the literature, section 2 unveils the methodology of data collection and the theoretical framework, section 3 presents the findings, while section 4 focusses on discussion. We end the analysis with a conclusion.

1. Literature Review

A considerable body of scholarship has examined the intersections between sociolinguistics, naming practices, and cultural identity, highlighting the role of personal names as meaningful linguistic and social resources. Within African contexts in particular, naming has been widely recognized as a culturally embedded practice that reflects historical experiences, social organization, and identity construction.

In the Cameroonian context, several scholars have made important contributions to the study of naming practices. Ekanjume-Ilongo (2014) explores the cultural and identity dimensions of naming within the Bakossi community, emphasizing the influence of historical processes, including colonialism and globalization, on

indigenous naming systems. Her work demonstrates that naming practices are not static but evolve in response to sociopolitical and cultural transformations. Similarly, Nzali (1987) provides an anthropological account of naming in the Bandenkop dialect of Ghómálá', offering early insights into the cultural significance and structural characteristics of personal names in this linguistic area. Building on this foundation, Wega Simeu (2018) presents a morphosyntactic and lexical analysis of names in the Batié variety of Ghómálá', highlighting the internal linguistic structure and semantic richness of anthroponyms in the language.

Beyond Cameroon, broader sociolinguistic perspectives on naming have been developed in international scholarship. Ronald Macaulay (2007) examines naming as a sociolinguistic practice linked to identity construction and social interaction, arguing that names function as markers of both individual and group affiliation. Similarly, Smith (2004) and Parker (2010) explore how naming practices contribute to the construction of social identity, particularly in relation to issues such as class, gender, and cultural belonging. These studies collectively underscore the importance of names as tools for indexing social meaning within specific communities.

Theoretical insights from cultural and postcolonial studies further enrich the analysis of naming practices. Stuart Hall (1990) conceptualizes identity as a dynamic and continuously negotiated process shaped by representation and discourse. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding how names participate in the construction of cultural identity. Homi K. Bhabha (1994) introduces the notion of hybridity, which is useful for analyzing naming practices in postcolonial and globalized contexts where multiple cultural influences intersect. Likewise, Paul Gilroy (1993) emphasizes the transnational dimensions of identity, while Edward Said (1978) highlights how cultural narratives and power relations shape identity construction. Together, these perspectives provide a critical framework for examining naming practices as sites of ideological negotiation and cultural expression.

More recent research has increasingly emphasized the sociolinguistic and anthropological significance of African naming systems. Contemporary studies show that names function as repositories of cultural knowledge, encoding social values, historical memory, and cosmological beliefs. In many African societies, naming is a performative act that situates individuals within kinship networks and social hierarchies, while also reflecting broader societal changes such as urbanization, religious transformation, and globalization. These studies also point to the emergence of hybrid naming practices, combining indigenous and foreign elements as speakers sail multilingual and multicultural environments.

Despite these important contributions, relatively limited attention has been paid to the sociolinguistic implications of naming practices in Grassfields languages, including Ghómálá'. Existing studies tend to focus either on structural linguistic descriptions or on broader anthropological observations, with less emphasis on how naming practices function as dynamic mechanisms for negotiating identity, power, and social relations in contemporary contexts. Furthermore, the interaction between traditional naming systems and global influences remains insufficiently explored.

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a comprehensive sociolinguistic analysis of naming practices in the Ghómálá' community. It adopts a multidisciplinary approach grounded in sociolinguistics, anthropolinguistics, and postcolonial theory, and relies on recent empirical data to examine how names operate as key resources for identity construction, social positioning, and cultural continuity in a multilingual and globalized environment.

2. Methodology of Data Collection and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative techniques to provide a comprehensive analysis of naming practices within the Ghómálá' community. The qualitative dimension is central to the study and relies on participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. These methods are complemented by the analysis of cultural records and archival materials, which provide a diachronic perspective on naming practices and their evolution over time.

2.1. Participant Observation

Given the researcher's status as a native speaker and cultural insider, participant observation constituted a key methodological tool. Fieldwork was conducted primarily in Batié, within the Ghómálá' speech community.

The researcher engaged in prolonged immersion in everyday social settings and ritual contexts, including birth ceremonies, baby showers, twin-related traditional rites, family gatherings, and routine interpersonal interactions. This approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the social norms, symbolic meanings, and cultural values embedded in naming practices, as well as their performative and interactional dimensions.

2.2 Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse range of community members in order to capture individual perspectives on naming practices. An interview guide composed of open-ended questions was used to facilitate in-depth discussions while allowing participants the flexibility to express their experiences, beliefs, and interpretations. This method provided rich qualitative data on the motivations, meanings, and sociocultural implications associated with personal names.

2.3 Focus Group Discussions

Focus group discussions were organized to explore collective representations and shared meanings attached to naming practices. Participants were drawn from different social categories, including notables, elders, youth, and family members, ensuring a diversity of viewpoints. In addition to face-to-face discussions, data were also collected through interactions within the ‘Kě-ηgwōη’ WhatsApp forum, which offered insights into contemporary discursive practices and the role of digital spaces in shaping and negotiating naming conventions. This method facilitated the emergence of interactive and contextually grounded data.

2.4 Cultural Records and Archival Sources

To complement primary data, the study incorporated the analysis of cultural records and archival materials. These included historical documents, naming registries where available, oral literature such as folktales and riddles, as well as accessible personal documents (e.g., birth certificates and family genealogies). This corpus provided valuable information on naming patterns, their historical trajectories, and their sociocultural significance across generations.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were clearly informed about the objectives of the study, the use of the data, and their right to withdraw at any stage without any consequences. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity, all personal identifiers were removed from the dataset, and the information collected was securely stored and used solely for academic purposes.

2.6 Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that draws on sociolinguistics, anthropolinguistics, and cultural theory to account for the complex relationship between naming practices and identity construction.

First, the study draws on anthropolinguistic perspectives, particularly the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss, which emphasize the symbolic and structural dimensions of cultural practices, including naming. Within this framework, names are understood as part of broader systems of meaning that reflect social organization, kinship relations, and cultural logic.

Second, the study is informed by Symbolic Interactionism, as developed by George Herbert Mead. This perspective highlights the role of social interaction in the construction of meaning and identity, viewing names as symbolic resources through which individuals negotiate their social roles and relationships in everyday life.

Third, Social Identity Theory, associated with Henri Tajfel and John Turner, provides a useful framework for understanding how naming practices contribute to group membership, social categorization, and identity formation. Names, in this sense, function as markers of belonging and distinction within the community.

Finally, the study engages with postcolonial theory, drawing on the works of Frantz Fanon and Edward Said. These perspectives are particularly relevant for analyzing the impact of colonial history, globalization, and cultural hybridity on naming practices in African societies. They allow for a critical examination of how

power relations, cultural domination, and resistance are inscribed in naming systems. By integrating these theoretical approaches, the study provides a multidimensional understanding of naming practices as sociolinguistic phenomena that simultaneously encode cultural meaning, social hierarchy, and identity negotiation in a rapidly changing world.

3. Findings

3.1 The Role of Naming Practices in Social Hierarchies, Familial Ties, and Cultural Values within the Ghómálá' Community

Naming practices in the Ghómálá' community are deeply embedded in social organization and function as key mechanisms for expressing social hierarchy, kinship relations, and cultural values. Names are not arbitrarily assigned; rather, they are governed by culturally regulated conventions that reflect lineage, authority, and social obligations.

In cases where an unmarried young woman gives birth within her paternal household, the responsibility of naming the child falls to her father. In such situations, the child may receive the name of the maternal grandfather (if male) or that of the grandfather's mother (if female). This practice symbolically reasserts paternal authority and integrates the child into the maternal lineage under the guardianship of the grandfather.

Within marriage, naming conventions follow a structured pattern that reinforces patrilineal descent. The firstborn child typically bears the name of the husband's father if male, or the paternal grandmother if female. The second child is usually named after a member of the wife's family, thereby maintaining a balance between the two lineages. Beyond these conventions, naming may also serve as a form of social recognition: children may be named after relatives—such as uncles or aunts—who have played significant roles in the education or social advancement of the parents.

These practices demonstrate that naming functions as a symbolic system through which social hierarchy and kinship structures are reproduced. Names thus serve not only as identifiers but also as instruments of social continuity and cultural transmission.

3.2 The Importance of Naming Conventions in Shaping Individual and Collective Identities

Naming conventions among the Ghómálá' people play a central role in the construction of both individual and collective identities. Personal names function as immediate sociocultural markers, signaling gender, social background, spiritual orientation, and even the circumstances surrounding birth.

A fundamental distinction is made between masculine, feminine, neutral (or mixed), and circumstantial names. Masculine and feminine names are often identifiable through their phonological structure. For instance, *Wega* is recognized as a masculine name, whereas *fǎḡwà* is typically feminine. Such gendered distinctions contribute to the early social categorization of individuals within the community.

In addition to phonological cues, morphological markers also play a significant role in gender differentiation. Many feminine names are formed with prefixes such as *mé-* or *má-* (e.g., *Makamte*, *Makoudjou*, *Madjo*, *Mafo*, *Mamo*, *Magne*), while masculine names often take the prefix *tá-* (e.g., *Takamte*, *Takoudjou*, *Tayo*, *Tafo*, *Tamo*, *Tagne*). Interestingly, certain masculine names such as *Fotso*, *Fosso*, and *Kontchou* can be feminized through the addition of the prefix *má-*, yielding forms such as *Mafotso*, *Mafosso*, and *Makontchou*. In some cases, the reverse process is also possible, illustrating the morphological flexibility of the naming system.

Circumstantial names are assigned based on specific conditions of birth. For example, a child born in a breech position (feet first) is conventionally given the name *tǎmtǎwà*, regardless of gender. Such names encode lived experiences and transform biological events into socially meaningful and culturally interpretable markers.

Neutral or mixed names, on the other hand, often carry strong spiritual connotations. They are typically marked by the prefix *sǐ-* or the suffix *-sǐ*, where *sǐ* denotes "God" in Ghómálá'. Examples include *sǐmø* ("someone's God"), *sǐmbǎfó* ("God is king"), *nǐmmbǐsǐ* ("confession goes to God"), and *yù'mbǐsǐ* ("listen to God"). These forms reflect the centrality of spirituality in identity construction and highlight the integration of religious belief into everyday linguistic practices.

Particularly significant are naming conventions associated with twins. The first twin is typically given a name derived from the first syllable of the chief's name combined with the suffix *-mǎḡḡ* ("child of God"). For example, from the royal name *pwo'kám* (Pokam), the twin's name may be formed as *pwo' + mǎḡḡ* (*Pomegne*).

The second twin is then named after an important member of the paternal lineage. A child born immediately after twins receives a conventional name such as *ηκᾱῖηηᾱ* (*Nkengne*) or *ηκᾱῖημῶηηᾱ* (*Nkenmogne*). Notably, twin-related names are not inheritable, as they are strictly tied to specific birth circumstances. Overall, these naming conventions demonstrate that personal names function as powerful semiotic resources through which identity, social belonging, and cultural values are encoded and transmitted.

3.3 The Impact of Historical and Colonial Influences in the Context of Globalization

Contemporary naming practices in the Ghomálá’ community reveal significant transformations influenced by colonial history, Christianity, and globalization. One notable trend is the widespread adoption of Christian or European names alongside indigenous names.

In many cases, children are systematically assigned a Western or biblical name in addition to their native Ghomálá’ name, particularly in official documents such as birth certificates. For example, a name such as *Wega Simeu Abraham* illustrates the coexistence of indigenous identity markers with Christian naming conventions.

This practice reflects broader sociolinguistic dynamics, including the influence of missionary education, religious affiliation, and administrative systems inherited from colonial governance. Furthermore, there is an increasing tendency among Christian families to transmit personal or biblical names across generations, sometimes at the expense of traditional naming systems.

These developments point to processes of cultural hybridization, where local and global identities intersect. While indigenous naming practices remain resilient, they are increasingly reshaped by external cultural and ideological forces.

3.4 Naming Practices and Sociolinguistic Factors: Language Attitudes, Variation, and Multilingualism

Naming practices in the Ghomálá’ community are closely linked to broader sociolinguistic dynamics, including language attitudes, linguistic variation, and multilingualism. In a context characterized by the coexistence of local languages, English, French, and religious registers, personal names often reflect complex processes of identity negotiation.

Language attitudes play a crucial role in shaping naming preferences. Indigenous names are often associated with cultural authenticity, ancestry, and identity continuity. However, some speakers perceive them as markers of marginality or social exclusion. In contrast, European or Christian names are frequently associated with modernity, education, and social mobility. As a result, individuals often adopt multiple names, each corresponding to specific social contexts and communicative domains.

Linguistic variation further affects naming practices. Ghomálá’ is not a monolithic language but comprises several dialectal varieties. Consequently, the same name may be realized differently depending on the dialect. The table below illustrates some correspondences across major Ghomálá’ varieties:

Central Ghomálá’	Northern Ghomálá’	Southern Ghomálá’	Eastern Ghomálá’ (ngemba)
Fotso /Fotseu	Fotsen	Fozeu	Fotsing
Nkengne/ Nkenmogne	Nkoagne	Nkenmoe	Nkengne
Feugaing/ Fogue	Foguieng	Fongang	Fongang
Kamto	Kamto	Kamte	Kamte
Sikati /sikali	Sikati	Sikalie	Sikandi
Simo /Simeu	Suegni	Simeu	Signe
Kamgue /kamgaing	Kamgue	Kemgang	kamgang

It is important to note that some names are dialect-specific and may not have direct equivalents across all varieties.

Multilingualism also contributes to the coexistence of multiple identity markers within a single individual. A person may simultaneously bear a traditional Ghomálá’ name, a Christian name, and an administrative name, each activated in different social contexts.

These dynamics illustrate that naming practices function as flexible and adaptive sociolinguistic resources, enabling speakers to manage multiple cultural and linguistic spaces while maintaining connections to their heritage.

4. Discussion

The analysis of naming practices in the Ghómálá' community confirms that personal names function as powerful sociolinguistic resources through which identity, social organization, and cultural continuity are encoded and negotiated. This finding is consistent with earlier studies in African contexts, which have emphasized the cultural and symbolic significance of naming practices.

In particular, the results align with the work of Ekanjume-Ilongo (2014), who demonstrates that naming practices are deeply shaped by historical processes and sociocultural transformations. Similarly, the present study shows that naming in the Ghómálá' community is not static but evolves in response to factors such as globalization, religion, and multilingualism. At the same time, the findings extend the observations of Nzali (1987), whose anthropological study of naming in the Bandenkop variety highlighted the cultural importance of names, by providing a more detailed account of how these practices function in contemporary social interaction. Furthermore, while Wega Simeu (2018) focused primarily on the morphosyntactic and lexical structure of names, the present study complements this approach by demonstrating how these linguistic forms operate as sociolinguistic tools for identity construction and social positioning.

From a broader sociolinguistic perspective, the findings corroborate the argument advanced by Macaulay (2007) that names function as markers of both individual and group identity. This is evident in the Ghómálá' context, where naming conventions encode gender, lineage, and social status. In a similar vein, Smith (2004) and Parker (2010) have shown that naming practices contribute to the construction of social identity through the indexing of social categories. The present study confirms this claim by demonstrating that Ghómálá' names serve as immediate indicators of social belonging, while also reinforcing hierarchical relations within the community.

The findings can also be interpreted through the lens of Symbolic Interactionism, particularly the work of Mead (1934, 1962), which emphasizes that meaning is constructed through social interaction. In the Ghómálá' community, names are not merely assigned but socially interpreted and contextually mobilized, confirming that identity is continuously negotiated through linguistic practices. This interpretation is further supported by Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), as naming practices clearly function as markers of group membership and social differentiation.

From a cultural and postcolonial perspective, the study also resonates with the theoretical insights of Hall (1990), who conceptualizes identity as dynamic and constructed through representation. The coexistence of indigenous and Christian or European names in the Ghómálá' community reflects this dynamic process. In line with Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity, the data show that naming practices are shaped by the intersection of local traditions and global influences. Similarly, the influence of colonial history and religious institutions on naming conventions can be interpreted in light of Said's (1978) analysis of cultural power and representation, while Gilroy's (1993) work helps explain the broader transnational dimensions of identity formation reflected in contemporary naming practices.

Importantly, the study also highlights the role of naming practices in maintaining and reproducing social hierarchies. The authority to assign names, often reserved for elders or male figures, reflects broader power structures within the community. This observation reinforces the idea that language practices are deeply embedded in social organization and power relations.

Finally, the findings underscore the importance of multilingualism and language attitudes in shaping naming practices. As observed in many African sociolinguistic contexts, the coexistence of local languages with global languages such as English and French creates a complex system of identity negotiation. The adoption of multiple names—indigenous, Christian, and administrative—illustrates how individuals manage or negotiate different social spaces and cultural expectations.

Overall, this study confirms and extends existing research by demonstrating that naming practices in the Ghómálá' community are not only cultural or linguistic phenomena but also dynamic sociolinguistic mechanisms through which identity, power, and social relations are constructed and negotiated. By linking empirical data with both African-based studies and broader theoretical frameworks, the research provides a more integrated understanding of naming practices in a multilingual and globalized context.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored the sociolinguistic significance of naming practices within the Ghomálá' community, demonstrating that personal names are far more than simple identifiers. They function as complex cultural and linguistic resources through which individual and collective identities are constructed, expressed, and negotiated.

The findings show that naming practices play a central role in cultural preservation by encoding ancestral knowledge, social values, and historical memory. Through names, individuals are symbolically anchored within their lineage and community, reinforcing a strong sense of belonging and cultural continuity.

At the same time, naming conventions reflect and reproduce social structures. They encode kinship relations, gender distinctions, and hierarchical positions, thereby illustrating how personal identity is deeply embedded in broader social systems. In this regard, naming practices serve as both markers and instruments of social organization.

The study also highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of naming practices in response to external influences. The increasing incorporation of Christian and Western names alongside indigenous ones illustrates how the Ghomálá' community negotiates the pressures of globalization while maintaining its cultural foundations. This coexistence of naming systems reflects processes of hybridity, adaptation, and identity negotiation.

More broadly, the research contributes to ongoing debates in sociolinguistics, anthropolinguistics, and postcolonial studies by demonstrating how language practices operate at the intersection of culture, power, and identity. It underscores the importance of examining everyday linguistic phenomena, such as naming, as key sites for understanding wider social transformations.

In conclusion, naming practices in the Ghomálá' community offer a rich and insightful lens through which the interplay between language, identity, and society can be examined. By situating these practices within both local cultural frameworks and global dynamics, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how linguistic and cultural systems evolve in multilingual and postcolonial contexts. Future research could extend this work by exploring longitudinal changes in naming practices or by comparing similar phenomena across other African linguistic communities.

Author's Bio

Wega Simeu holds a Doctorate (PhD) in General Linguistics and african languages from the University of Yaoundé I and is specialized in the description and documentation of non-standardized languages. He is an Associate Professor and the Head of the Department of French Modern Letters at the École Normale Supérieure (Higher Teacher Training College) of the University of Bamenda, as well as a part-time instructor in the Department of Linguistics and African Languages, and the Department of Translation and Intercultural Studies and Mediation, at the Faculty of Arts at the same university. Wega Simeu's research interests include descriptive studies in phonology and morphosyntax, as well as literacy and the documentation of endangered languages. He is the author of three books and approximately nineteen publications in these fields.

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