

Lexical Field Analysis of Dogon Food in Sangha (Bandiagara Region)

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Abstract

This study examines the lexical field of food among the Dogon people of the Municipality of Sangha, Region of Bandiagara in Mali. To date, the nomenclature of food names in the Dogon culture had not been the subject of in-depth linguistic investigation. The Dogonland is currently experiencing significant transformations, driven by climate change and increased social interactions. In this circumstance, the study aims to identify, classify, and analyze the lexical fields of various Dogon foodstuffs in order to document, promote, and preserve them for future generations. A qualitative approach is adopted for both data collection and analysis. The findings highlight the diversity and specificity of food vocabulary in Dogon culture and underscore the importance of linguistic documentation in the face of cultural and environmental change. This research contributes to the preservation of intangible cultural heritage and may serve as a resource for education, literacy, and food security initiatives. Finally, the study advocates for the wider dissemination and promotion of the culinary and dietary practices of the various peoples of Mali.

Keywords: cereals, Dogon, food, lexical field, Municipality of Sangha
Analyse du champ lexical des aliments chez les Dogon du Cercle de Sangha, Région de Bandiagara

Résumé

Cette étude analyse le champ lexical des aliments chez les Dogon du Cercle de Sangha, Région de Bandiagara au Mali. À ce jour, les noms des aliments

chez les Dogon n'ont pas fait l'objet d'une étude approfondie. L'univers dogon connaît aujourd'hui des mutations profondes liées au changement climatique et aux contacts sociaux. Dans ce contexte de mutation, l'étude vise à recenser, classer et analyser le champ lexical des différents aliments chez les Dogon afin de les documenter, les valoriser et les sauver de la disparition pour les générations futures. L'approche qualitative a été adoptée pour la collecte et l'analyse des données. Les résultats mettent en évidence la diversité et la spécificité du vocabulaire alimentaire dans la culture dogon, et soulignent l'importance de la documentation linguistique pour faire face aux changements culturels et environnementaux. Cette recherche contribue à la préservation du patrimoine culturel immatériel et peut servir de ressource pour l'éducation, l'alphabétisation et les initiatives de sécurité alimentaire. Enfin, l'étude recommande une diffusion et une promotion plus larges des pratiques culinaires et alimentaires des différents peuples du Mali.

Mots-clés : *aliment, Cercle de Sangha, céréales, champ lexical, Dogon,*

Introduction

As a core attribute of culture, language serves as a privileged means through which the social and symbolic representations of a people can be understood. Among the Dogon people in Mali, the lexicon associated with food goes far beyond the simple designation of meals or foodstuffs. It expresses a deep bond with nature, traditions, agricultural seasons, and social organization. However, few linguistic studies had systematically examined the structure and symbolism of the lexical field of food within this culture. Thus, how does the lexical field of food among the Dogon express their worldview, social organization, and cultural practices? And how does analyzing this lexical field help us better understand the interplay between language, culture, and identity within this community?

From this perspective, the study examines the lexical field of food among the Dogon people of the Sangha Municipality in the Region of Bandiagara. It falls within the domain of descriptive linguistics, drawing on insights from lexicology, semantics, pragmatics, and stylistics. It is grounded in semantic field theory, which posits that the meaning of a word cannot be fully understood in isolation, but only in relation to other meanings within a structured network (R. Nordquist, 2017). According to J. Mei and Y. Hongxiang (1987), this theory involves analyzing the relationships between general and specific lexical concepts within a semantic field. From a semantic perspective, a word's meaning becomes clearer when examined in the context of the lexical fields it is part of. Another approach to understanding lexical meaning involves analyzing lexemes as a set of semantic features or components. For instance, the word *man* may be broken down into the features "adult," "human," and "male" (D. Crystal, 2000).

Vocabulary related to food constitutes a rich lexical field, revealing agricultural practices, dietary habits, social hierarchies, and symbolic representations. Yet, this lexical field remains poorly documented in linguistic and ethnolinguistic studies on the Dogon people, particularly in the Municipality of Sangha, known for its dialectal diversity and well-preserved traditions. How then is the lexical field of food among the Dogon of Sangha structured, and what does it reveal about the relationships between language, culture, and food in this society? And how can this approach interact with recent theories in anthropological linguistics, particularly those on cultural semantics (C. Goddard, 2006) or linguistic ecology (P. Mühlhäusler, 2003)? By using an approach combining lexicological analysis, ethnographic data, and fieldwork, this

study aims to fill a gap in the linguistic documentation of Dogon languages and practices, while showing how the food lexicon actively participates in the construction and transmission of local cultural knowledge.

A lexical field refers to a set of lexemes associated with a specific domain of human experience. As A. Lehrer (1974) illustrates through her extensive analysis of the semantic field related to cooking, lexical field analysis seeks to identify the vocabulary available for describing a particular conceptual area and to explore how these lexemes differ in meaning and usage. Such analysis contributes to an understanding of the internal structure of the lexicon and becomes especially insightful when relationships between different lexical fields are examined.

Notably, there is no universally accepted methodology for delineating a lexical field; researchers must define the scope and criteria based on their interpretive frameworks. Even so, research in lexical field of food among the Dogon people remains underexplored and continues to require further empirical and theoretical investigation. In this regard, J. Howard (2002) highlights the importance of lexical field theory, particularly in dictionaries organized thematically or topically. Therefore, as objectives, the study seeks to:

- list and classify the names of the different foods consumed in the Sangha Municipality;
- analyze the lexical field of food among the Dogon people.

An analysis of the above-stated objectives indicates that the following research questions are appropriate to guide the study:

- What are the different types of food consumed in the Sangha Municipality, and how can they be linguistically and culturally classified?
- How is the lexical field of food structured among the Dogon people, and what semantic or symbolic meanings does it reflect?

In Dogon society, the food lexicon serves as a powerful cultural marker. The names of foodstuffs and the expressions linked to their cultivation, preparation, consumption, or prohibition reveal a distinctive worldview in which ancestral knowledge, social taboos, and collective identity intersect. In addition, African languages possess a rich vocabulary that reflects the environmental, social, and cultural realities of the communities that speak them. Among the Dogon people of Mali, language functions not only as a medium of knowledge transmission but also it operates as a mirror of daily life—especially in relation to food. Far beyond its nutritional role, food embodies social, ritual, and symbolic significance. It shapes social hierarchies, marks the passage of time through seasonal cycles, and plays a key role in rites of passage and religious offerings.

In Mali, many Dogon inhabit the plateau, cliffs and plains. They are generally farmers, but also gardeners and arboriculturists (G.Calame-Griaule, 1976; J. Bouju, (1984). The tabular plateau features small streams, around which market gardening is practiced. Crops including onions, chillies,

tomatoes, and eggplants are cultivated extensively and serve as essential components in local culinary practices. Cereal crops such as millet (*Pennisetum spicatum*), sorghum (*Sorghum vulgaris*), fonio (*Digitaria exilis*), and beans (*Vigna unguiculata*) are staples in the Dogon diet. Rice (*Oryza sativa*), a more recent addition, has also become increasingly important. Other valued crops in the region include groundnuts (*Arachis hypogaea*), ground peas (*Voandzeia subterranea*), sorrel (*Hibiscus abelmoschus esculentus* and a Wu), and sesame (*Sesamum radiatum*). Ethnobotanical knowledge is rich and encompasses a wide variety of edible trees and herbs. Wild fruits such as tamarind, néré, jujube, monkey pine, native grapes, zaban (*Saba senegalensis*), bii, shea nuts, and eniye—fruits that ripen in September and are used to make cream—are commonly harvested to prepare beverages. The plant kingdom plays a central role in the nutritional and cultural life of the Dogon people.

Moreover, the Bandiagara cliffs, which stretch across a vast landscape, present a harsh, rocky environment where farming is difficult. Yet within this challenging terrain, the Dogon communities inhabiting the cliffside have developed innovative culinary traditions that reflect both resilience and deep knowledge of their surroundings. A notable component of Dogon gastronomy is bile, a category of food derived primarily from leafy vegetables and herbs. These plant materials are typically combined with cereal flours to create diverse preparations that contribute significantly to dietary variety and nutritional intake. Such a consumption of wild and cultivated vegetation is associated with good health and is also recommended for environmental sustainability (G. Kent et al., 2021). The selection of specific tree leaves and wild herbs

provides an insight into understanding of local flora and their culinary and medicinal properties.

In addition to their leaf-based dishes, the Dogon have established traditional methods for processing both cultivated cereals and wild fruits, ensuring food availability throughout seasonal cycles. The region's relatively diverse fauna, along with the practice of animal husbandry, further supplements the diet with essential proteins. Together, these food systems exemplify an integrated approach to subsistence, shaped by environmental constraints and enriched by cultural knowledge. Within the same scope, M. Arbonnier (2000, p. 12) describes the importance of vegetation in human nutrition in these terms:

The food¹ uses of all parts of the plant are specified. The fruit can be used fresh, dried or fermented, or the vegetables can be cooked, grilled or boiled, or eaten raw as a condiment, spice or beverage. Some plants are only eaten in times of famine. They can also be used as substitutes for widely marketed products that are locally expensive or temporarily unavailable due to stock shortages or poor preservation, such as salt or sugar.

This passage underlines the versatility of plants, both in everyday diets and as vital substitutes during food crises.

¹ Translation mine : Les utilisations en alimentation humaine sont précisées pour toutes les parties de la plante. Qu'elle soit utilisée pour ces fruits – frais, séchés, ou fermentés-, sous forme de légumes cuits, grillés, bouillis ou crus comme condiment, épice ou boisson pendant une partie de l'année. Il est signalé que certaines plantes ne sont consommées qu'en période de disette. Elles peuvent aussi avoir fonction de succédanés de produits qui sont maintenant largement commercialisés comme le sel, ou le sucre mais localement onéreux ou temporairement indisponibles en raison d'une rupture de stock ou d'une mauvaise conservation de la denrée. (Arbonnier, 2000, p.12).

Arbonnier's insight highlights the adaptability of local food knowledge and its contribution to community resilience, calling for renewed attention to the ecological, nutritional, and socio-economic value of plant resources.

In essence, food serves as a central marker of cultural identity. In Mali, specific dishes are closely associated with particular ethnic groups: *couscous* with the Soninké, *fakoye* with the Songhai, *tigueđeđe* with the Malinke, a dense millet-based dish with the Dogon, and milk with the Fulanis. These culinary traditions serve not only as markers of cultural heritage but also as means through which social groups assert and maintain their distinct identities. Among the Dogon, cooking is traditionally regarded as the primary responsibility of women. Upon marriage, a woman brings with her an assortment of essential kitchen tools, including cooking pots, gourds, ladles, mortars, pestles, and *canaris* (clay water jars), symbolizing her role in sustaining the household.

Cooking among the Dogon is a communal activity. Millet is pounded collectively, often, by women working side by side, while young girls assist by cleaning the cooking utensils. Meals are shared by all—men and women, grandfathers and grandsons, elderly women and granddaughters—highlighting the inclusive nature of mealtime. Group dining fosters healthy eating habits and reinforces social values. Respect for age and hierarchy is observed, as elders are the first to begin eating. Beyond food, meals serve a critical social function. They are integral to the process of socialization, providing a space where family members interact, observe communal norms, and internalize behavioral expectations. Children, in particular, learn table manners, respect for food, and the broader social

rules associated with communal living. Meals are typically open and accessible to all, reinforcing principles of hospitality, cohesion, and mutual respect within the community.

Like other dimensions of culture, cooking is shaped by intercultural exchange and influence. In the Dogon context, culinary traditions reflect familiarity with a range of "contact foods"—dishes introduced or shared through interaction with neighboring cultures. Examples include fakoye from the Songhai, zɔnkomu from the Mossi, and womi from the Bamanan, to name but a few. For the Dogon, cooking transcends routine and is regarded as a form of philosophy. A woman's ability to cook is one of her most valued attributes, often seen as central to her identity and role within the community. A common saying expresses this belief: "Cooking takes precedence over beauty and adornment." Women are widely recognized as the primary providers of food, a role that embodies both responsibility and cultural significance.

It is often said that a woman can cast a spell over a dish—an expression that underscores the cultural belief in the deep, almost mystical connection between women and cooking. For this reason, a woman is expected to be fully attentive while preparing food. Conversely, if she prepares a meal but is absent when it is time to eat, her food may be left untouched, reflecting the importance of her presence in the act of feeding. A woman's culinary skill is closely tied to her social standing; those who cook poorly may face social stigma.

The art of cooking is traditionally inherited. It is passed down from mother to daughter through daily practice and observation. Young girls assist their mothers in preparing meals, learning techniques, receiving advice, and absorbing the unspoken knowledge embedded in each step. This intergenerational transmission of culinary knowledge

reinforces the enduring association between women and food preparation—a core value in the Dogon cultural thought. As such, information on the Dogon diet is available in only a limited number of dispersed sources.

Previous ethnographic research has provided important groundwork for understanding the Dogon's food-related practices. In this culture, food-related vocabulary is not limited to utilitarian designations only; it also reflects local taxonomies, relationships to the environment, beliefs, taboos, and collective representations (Lüpke and Storch, 2013). Several ethnographic works have documented food practices in the Dogon context without proposing an in-depth lexical analysis. One of the earliest notable contributions is that of D. Paulme (1940), who takes a descriptive approach to agricultural cycles, modes of subsistence, and social structures linked to food production and consumption. Palau-Marti (1957) built on this work by providing a concise inventory of staple food the Sangha area and highlighting family diets and domestic organization around food. However, these studies have focused more on ritual language, cosmogonies, and symbolic systems. Another study by G. Dieterlen and G. Calame-Griaule (1960) provides fundamental contributions to our understanding of the Dogon dietary practices. In their article published in *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, the authors meticulously examine the relationship of the Dogon people of Mali with food, exploring its material, social, and symbolic dimensions.

Their analysis goes beyond a mere description of the foods consumed to include modes of preparation, preservation, and consumption. They also integrate the ritual and cultural structures that organize these practices. The authors highlight the profound interweaving of food with Dogon cosmology, agricultural cycles, and social relationships, particularly through

sharing rites, food taboos, and family hierarchies. From this perspective, food serves as a cultural marker, embodying meanings that reflect the beliefs and social structure unique to the Dogon community.

In this connection, D. Douyon (1995), in his doctoral dissertation, highlights the enduring role of Dogon women as cooks by examining culinary practices through the lens of the institution of *cathartic alliance*, a social mechanism aimed at reinforcing kinship ties through *manu* (*joking alliance*). Besides, in a separate study, Eric Jolly's doctoral research (1995) offers a comprehensive account of the preparation of various types of beer and the contexts of their consumption. His work situates these practices within the broader economic framework in the area of Konsogu, discussing agricultural and market gardening production, as well as the commercial activities of women, particularly in the manufacture and sale of consumer goods.

While previous work has focused primarily on the sociocultural dimensions of food, it also indirectly reveals the crucial role of language in the transmission of food knowledge. However, since the symbolic analyses of G. Calame-Griaule (1996), few studies have explored the food lexicon of the Dogon. This study therefore seeks to document and analyze the Dogon food lexicon in order to help preserve the preservation of a linguistic and cultural heritage that is currently under threat.

What follows presents the methodological approach adopted for this study, the results obtained, and a discussion of those results, with the aim of deepening our understanding of the lexical field of foodstuffs among the Dogon people of the Municipality of Sangha.

I. Methodology

This section presents a description of the research design, the area of investigation, the samples and sampling procedure, the data collection and methods of data analysis.

1.1. Research design

This study adopts a descriptive and analytical approach aiming to explore the lexical field of food within the Dogon community of the Sangha Municipality. The primary objective is to identify, classify, and analyze the lexemes related to food as used in this cultural area, with careful attention to the linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of the vocabulary. In order to understand how the lexical system of food is structured, the research employs a qualitative methodology based on fieldwork, including semi-structured interviews with native speakers and semantic analysis of the collected data. This approach is intended to highlight not only the lexical richness of the Dogon food-related terms, but also the cultural representations embedded in Dogon food practices.

1.2. Area of investigation

The research is carried out in the Municipality of Sangha, Bandiagara region, a culturally significant area for the Dogon people. The selection of this site is based on its linguistic richness, strong preservation of traditional practices, and the presence of knowledgeable native speakers.

1.3. Samples and sampling procedure

A sample of 100 people (70 women and 30 men) participated in the study. Participants were selected using

purposive sampling, with an emphasis on native Dogon speakers possessing extensive cultural and linguistic knowledge of local food systems and practices. Special attention was given to ensuring diversity across gender, age groups, and social roles—such as elders, women involved in food preparation, and farmers in order to capture a comprehensive and representative range of food-related vocabulary within the community. The participants were at least 30 years old. These age groups are both familiar with cooking and knowledgeable about food and agricultural activities.

1.4. Data collection and analysis method

Data collection was conducted during fieldwork in selected Dogon villages in the Sangha Municipality. The data were collected from multiple sources, including semi-structured interviews with elders, farmers, women involved in food preparation, and local healers, conducted in Dogon. Additional methods included participant observation—particularly during food preparation, agricultural activities, and communal meals—to contextualize the lexemes in use, as well as field notes documenting key items and practices, when culturally appropriate and permitted. The respondents' consent was sought before the interview. In addition, the researcher drew on his personal experiences with food. Participant data were recorded using a Sony IC recorder. They were recorded in Dogon and sorted, then transcribed into English.

2. Results and discussion

2.1. Results

This section discusses the lexical scope of food among the Dogon people of the Sangha Municipality. The lexical data were

transcribed and categorized into semantic fields such as: food items (grains, herbs, and dairy products), preparation methods, cooking tools, and culturally significant food expressions. Analysis focused on the name classification of the different foods consumed in the Sangha Municipality. The analysis was informed by semantic field theory (Lehrer, 1974), emphasizing how lexemes function within systems of meaning rather than in isolation.

Many factors influence food preparation and consumption practices. Through a combination of prior knowledge and field data, the researcher identified a rich and nuanced lexicon related to African gastronomy. Among the Dogon people of the Sangha Municipality, cereals form not only the basis of daily sustenance but also a central component of rituals, agricultural cycles, and social symbolism. The vocabulary surrounding cereals **thus** holds rich linguistic, cultural, and symbolic meaning. This analysis examines the terms related to cereals, their processing methods, the tools involved, culinary practices, and the social and ritual contexts in which they are consumed. The tables below present the main categories and subcategories of foods commonly used and recognized within the Dogon culinary system.

Table 1. Grain-based foods

Cereals	Hulling	Removal of husk	Powdering	Product obtained	Meal obtained	Type of sauce
Yu / millet	dəŋŋ/ remove the seed	Peje / remove the husk	Toro / pound to make flour	Punahu / millet flour	Sagu ja (to)	ɔɔníŋ / baobab leaf sauce
Yu/millet	to seed / remove the seed	-	Nawan / grind	Punahu / flour	ɛja (tô) with potash	ɔɔníŋ / baobab leaf sauce
ɛmɛ / sorghum	to seed / remove the seed	Peje / remove the husk	Toro / pound to make flour	Punahu / flour	ɛmɛ ja	ɔɔníŋ / baobab

						leaf sauce
εmε / sorghum	to seed / remove the seed	Kombo / remove sound	/ -	kombu	εmε kombuja	Jobori / peanut or sesame based sauce
Pɔɔn / fonio	Laga / remove the husk	Peje / remove the husk	-	Pɔɔnpeju	Panja	ɔɔnijɛ or Jobori
Pɔɔn nuhu (bean)	+ Pɔɔnlaga / Nuhu cɔɔs / to remove the seeds from the beans	pɔɔnpeje / Nuhupoojo / remove the husk	Nawan / grind	Pɔɔnpeju + nuhu punahu	sarukunu	ɔɔnijɛ / Jobori and or made from meat
Yu+nuhu	cɔɔc / cɔɔp	yupeje / Nuhupoojo / remove the husk	Nawan / grind	Yu punahu + nuhu punahu	Ja begerenhu	ɔɔnijɛ / Jobori and or made from meat
Yu /millet	cɔɔp	-	Nawan / grind	Yu punahu <i>Millet flour</i>	Yes puju	To be eaten with milk
Yu/millet	cɔɔp	-	Nawan / grind	Yu punahu <i>Millet flour</i>	Kurukuru	To be eaten with milk
Yu/millet	cɔɔp	Peje / remove the husk	Toro / pound to make flour	Yu punahu <i>Millet flour</i>	Yu maj / yamuyara	To be eaten alone or with milk
Nuhu / bean	Turo	cɔɔs	Nawan / grind	Nuhu punahu <i>Bean flour</i>	Tomujo	Bean donut
Yu/millet	cɔɔp	Peje / remove sound	-	Yu gunu <i>Grain of millet</i>	Yu gunu <i>Grain of millet</i>	-
Namu i / millet	Gono (to remove) / pede (to remove the husk)	toro / remove the husk	Nawan / grind	Namii punahu	Namii maj	-

Source : Field work

Analysis :

In the Dogon communities of the Sangha municipality (Bandiagara region, Mali), cereals represent not only the

foundation of everyday sustenance, but also a key component of ritual practices, agricultural cycles, and social representations. Accordingly, the lexical field related to cereals conveys rich linguistic, cultural, and symbolic significance. This study examines the vocabulary associated with cereals, with attention to modes of transformation, the tools involved, culinary techniques, and the social and ritual contexts in which these foods are consumed.

The lexicon associated with cereals comprises a wide array of terms, which may be classified into the following categories:

- Cereal crops: *yu* (millet), *ɛmɛ* (sorghum), *pɔɔn* (fonio), *sanrɛnmɛ* / *menɛrɛmɛ* *ɛmɛ* (maize);
- Processed products: *punahu* (flour), *sagu ja* / *ɛ ja* (dough or paste), *tɔru* (porridge);
- Culinary tools: *Kui na*, *dogoro* (mortar), *kui na i*, *dunwin* (pestle), *yu na* (grinding stone);
- Action verbs: *toro* (to pound), *yige* (to sift), *jaana* / *ilɛmɔ* (to cook).

This lexical system highlights the complex interplay between language, foodways, and cultural identity in the Dogon society. In this respect, millet (*Yu*) and sorghum (*ɛmɛ*) are the main staple foods of the Dogon people. They can be made into powder, flour (*punahu*), and paste (*ja*). Their meals can be eaten with baobab leaf sauce (*ɔɔ nijɛ*, sorrel leaf (*aju*)); millet or sorghum-based soup can be eaten with the addition of meat sauce (*nawan di*) or fish (*iju di*). Millet is used in the preparation of cream (*punu*) or porridge (*tɔru*). Both foods and drinks can be prepared with tamarind, grape juice, monkey bread or *enye*.

Millet and sorghum are also used to prepare kōnɔ (traditional beer).

Moreover, pɔɔn (fonio) can be combined with nuhu (bean) flour or millet (yu) flour to be eaten with jobri (sauce made from peanuts, sesame, puru kanwan (sumbala), containing meat or fish). Sorghum (ɛmɛ), millet (yu), and beans (nuhu) eaten with jobri are called ja piru. Crushed millet (punusaru) is the food of the shepherds: punusaru prepared with fresh or curdled milk or tamarind juice is in its natural state. The shepherds can eat it in the form of ja punju or in the form of Kuru kuru. Prepared in a common way, these meals are eaten with fresh or curdled milk.

The lexical analysis of food-related terms among the Dogon people reveals that vocabulary extends well beyond mere description, including significant cultural and symbolic functions. Cereals occupy a central place in Dogon cosmology and social life. They symbolize life, fertility. Millet, in particular, is referred to as “the food of the ancestors,” associated with reproductive vitality, communal stability, and the preservation of collective memory.

Certain cereals are also tied to ritual use. Fonio (pɔɔn), for instance, is often reserved for sacred occasions such as initiation ceremonies, spiritual offerings, and funerals, reflecting its elevated symbolic status. Beyond their ritual importance, cereals also function as markers of social identity. The choice of grain and its method of preparation can indicate ethnic origin, caste status, or generational affiliation. For instance, tô, a traditional thick millet paste, is viewed as emblematic in the Dogon culture, whereas maize porridge is sometimes perceived as a more modern. External influence besides regional variation in vocabulary was observed. Even within the Sangha municipality, different villages may use

distinct terms for the same cereal or dish, suggesting strong local linguistic diversity.

Table 2: Foods made from tree leaves, herbs and creeping plants

Type of tree, herbs and creeping plants	Leaf collection activity	Cooking	Pressing	Temperature control	Meal type
Kolukolu	tɔrɔ	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Kolukolu bile / lubɔ
Gangarun	tɔrɔ	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Gangarun bile / lubɔ
Kanwanto	tɔrɔ	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Kanwanto bile / lubɔ
Anawe	tɔrɔ	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Anawe bile / lubɔ
Keruwé liyé	kejé	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Keruwé bile / lubɔ
manron puyo	Kewé	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	manron bile / lubɔ
Nuhu liyé	Kewé	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	Nuhu bile / lubɔ
bilekununu	tɔrɔ	Jaana	Kanwan	Ugo	bilekununu
bəmo	tɔrɔ	Jaana	ɛnɛrɛ / sejé	-	bəmo punrun
ɔrɔliyé	tɔrɔ	Pige	-	Pige	ɔrɔja / saguja / ponja

Source : Field work

Analysis: In the Dogon sociolinguistic and cultural context, food vocabulary is deeply embedded in the daily life, ecology, and symbolic systems of the community. This section focuses on the lexical field of foods derived from tree leaves, herbs, and creeping plants, a category that is both nutritionally and culturally significant in the municipality of Sangha. The analysis

highlights the semantic structures, social meanings, and cultural functions. Commensurate with the terms associated with food typology, ethnobotany enters into the diet of the Dogon people.

Different verbs are used for the activity of collecting leaves from types of trees, herbs and creeping plants. The activity of collecting leaves from Kolukolu , gangarun , kanwanto , anawe , bilékunuŋu , bɔmɔ , ɔrɔliyɛ are called “tɔrɔ , bulk collection of leaves”. The leaves of nuhu (nuhu liyɛ) are cut one by one “Kewé ”. The young leaves of the tamarind tree are taken (tɔrɔ /pounded), dried and soaked (enɛrɛ), sɛjɛ (sift to remove residue): we obtain bɔmɔ punrun (cream made from baobab leaves) slightly sour. Baobab leaves (ɔrɔliyɛ) are used in the preparation of millet or early sorghum paste. These leaves are taken (tɔrɔ), fresh (ɔrɔliyɛ oru) or dried, (ɔrɔliyɛ maa) or pounded (toro). They are brought to temperature in the nijɛ tori (small canary used to prepare the sauce) then stirred with the giregire (stirrer). This sauce based on ɔrɔliyɛ is eaten with millet paste, sorghum or fonio meal.

The Dogon food lexicon of Sangha reflects more than just dietary habits; it encodes social hierarchies, ecological knowledge, and territorial identity. Terms like *lubo*, a leafy meal associated with the lean season, contrast with everyday foods like *ja*, revealing symbolic food distinctions. Intra-group variation—where different subgroups use distinct terms for the same plant—highlights how language reinforces cultural belonging. This study emphasizes the value of ethnolinguistic approaches in revealing how food vocabularies function as carriers of memory, resilience, and identity.

Table 3: Dairy products

Products	Kind	Activities
Iru / milk	Kolo / fresh	εmε /inwen to milk
Iru / milk	ilɛ / curd	iliyemu daanu / ferment
Iru ilɛ	Nanjate /Cow's milk butter	Maga/ stir to make butter
Iru pɔɔrɔ / postpartum milk (the first 3 days)	Iru bɔnu (cheese)	bɔnɔ / heat to obtain cheese

Source: Field work

Analysis: In agropastoral societies like that of the Dogon, dairy products play a distinctive role, both nutritionally and symbolically. While the Dogon food culture is predominantly cereal-based, milk and its derivatives form a significant lexical subfield tied to animal husbandry, ritual practices, and social relationships. This analysis aims to explore and interpret the vocabulary related to dairy products within the Dogon context, highlighting its linguistic, cultural, and sociological dimensions.

The milk (iru) consumed in the Dogon environment comes mainly from the cow (naa). The milk from the goat (εnren iru) or mutton (peju) iru is also consumed. There is fresh milk (iru kolo) and curdled milk (iru ilɛ). Curdled milk (iru ilɛ) is obtained by mixing fermented milk in a gourd (kɛmɛ / bolu) or calabash (kɔɔrɔ). In addition, nanjate (cow's milk butter) is obtained by the mixing technique. The milk from the first days of giving birth called Iru pɔɔrɔ (first day's milk) is used to prepare the iru bɔnu (cheese). It is a favorite food of shepherds. Milk (εmɛ) and ferment (iliyemu daanu) are two phases of milking and fermentation of milk. This means that milk holds strong

symbolic value among the Dogon. It is regarded as a symbol of purity and fertility. Fresh milk (iru kolo) is particularly associated with motherhood, regeneration, and the benevolence of the ancestors. Milk intervenes in Ritual use: in its curdled form, milk is used in libations, initiation rites, and certain funerary ceremonies. It is considered a liminal substance, mediating between the world of the living and that of the spirits. Exchange and hospitality is also performed with milk: Offering milk to a visitor is a gesture of respect and social openness. Fermented milk is often shared during major communal festivals, reinforcing social bonds and collective identity. The analysis of the lexical field of dairy products among the Dogon of Sangha reveals an unexpectedly rich semantic and cultural density. The dairy lexicon functions as an interface between agriculture and pastoralism, between femininity and the sacred, between nature and culture. Its study offers valuable insights into the complex interplay of food practices, language, and social organization in an oral tradition-based society.

2.2. Discussion

The lexical analysis of food among the Dogon of the Sangha Municipality reveals that food vocabulary is deeply embedded in cultural, social, symbolic, and ecological frameworks. Far from being limited to functional naming, the lexicon of food reflects the Dogon people's cosmology, gender roles, identity, and knowledge systems, offering a window into a society shaped by both oral tradition and agro-pastoral practices. Each term carries layers of meaning that connect daily subsistence to ancestral memory, ritual practices, and environmental knowledge. In this sense, food vocabulary

functions not only as a linguistic tool but also as a repository of collective heritage.

Three lexical subfields emerged: those relating to cereals, wild edible plants, dairy products, and specific culinary practices. The predominance of terms related to cereals, particularly millet, sorghum, and fonio, reflects their nutritional and symbolic importance as the foundation of the Dogon cosmogony. For instance, millet is associated with fertility, social stability, and ancestors' memory, which corroborates G. Calame-Griaule's (1965) work on the sacred dimension of food among the Dogon. Furthermore, food vocabulary is closely linked to religious, medicinal, and social spheres, illustrating the multifunctional role of food in daily and ritual life. Thus, this study emphasizes the role of language as a vehicle for the transmission of dietary knowledge, cultural practices and symbolic representations, while acting as an essential marker of the Dogon cultural identity, as well.

The analysis of dairy-related terms further confirms the symbolic density of food vocabulary. Milk (*iru*), for instance, symbolizes purity, motherhood, and regeneration, and is central to rituals such as libations, initiations, and funerals. Offering milk—especially fermented milk—is a key gesture of hospitality and social cohesion. This aspect of the lexicon demonstrates how food vocabulary is not only tied to nourishment but also to moral and spiritual values within Dogon culture.

The expressions used for food consumption are: eat (*kaya*), chew (*tewen*), drink (*nɔɔ*), taste (*newen*), crunch (*gogo*), and suck (*mine* / *ɔnɔɔ*), lick (*dɛgɛ*). The study reveals several types of food based on cereals, tree leaves, grasses, creeping plants, and milk, etc. There are terms to signify the types of food (*ja togu*) according to the resistance (*ja paŋa sɛ*, *ja inɛ*).

gériye) and energy (ja iné tāja jé). Dogon meals (ja) are made from cereals transformed into fine flour obtained by pounding techniques or by grinding. These cereals are millet, sorghum, fonio, and rice, a more recent crop. There are two variants of ja depending on whether the millet is ground or pounded. The ja meal made from millet ground with the addition of potash is called ejá and the one prepared with pounded millet flour (sagu ja / ja tolu) without potash. Bean can be simply boiled and eaten with shea or peanut butter. It can be ground into flour or crushed, mixed with millet or fonio flour to make nuhu ja ou pɔɔn ja.

Apala meal is a kind of stew prepared from cereals cooked with various seasonings that form the sauce. Bean flour is used to prepare the " tomujo " donut. Harvested bean leaves are used to prepare bili, the sauce with the addition of potash, and manju meal. Therefore, food is at the heart of all the Dogon's concerns. For their well-being, they carefully use the products of agriculture, livestock, market gardening and gathering. Using various techniques, they transform these products into foods that guarantee their health and survival despite their environment being affected by climate change. So, beyond their nutritional function, many of these plants are embedded in cultural and therapeutic practices. Specific herbs are used in postpartum diets, initiation feasts, or healing ceremonies. This convergence of food, medicine, and ritual underscores the role of food as a multifunctional cultural construct within the Dogon society.

As a matter of fact, the lexical and ethnobotanical analysis of foods derived from tree leaves, herbs, and creeping plants among the Dogon. It reveals a rich, often underexplored, dimension of local food systems and cultural knowledge. The lexicon associated with leafy and herbal foods reflects a

detailed knowledge of plant biodiversity in the Dogon landscape. Terms for edible leaves often differentiate between plants based on factors such as seasonality, medicinal value, and ritual use.

A striking observation in the analysis is the increasing vulnerability of this lexicon. Many terms related to less-used or endangered plants are being lost, especially among younger generations. The loss of this vocabulary parallels a broader decline in the use of wild plants, often due to land use changes, deforestation, and reduced transmission of oral knowledge. In this sense, the disappearance of these words is not only a linguistic issue but also an indicator of cultural and ecological erosion (UNESCO, 2003; L. Maffi, 2005).

The lexical study of foods derived from leaves, herbs, and creeping plants among the Dogon offers valuable insight into how language encodes ecological wisdom, cultural values, and social roles. It emphasizes the urgency of documenting and preserving this knowledge, which is increasingly at risk due to socio-environmental transformations. Future research should focus on integrating linguistic documentation with conservation efforts, supporting the transmission of ethnobotanical knowledge and ensuring its relevance for community resilience and food sovereignty.

Analysis of the lexical field of food among the Dogon of the Sangha Municipality reveals a lexical organization closely linked to agricultural practices, social structures, and religious representations. This observation is consistent, in several respects, with results obtained in other African contexts. For example, the work of B. Heine and D. Nurse (2000) on Nilo-Saharan and Bantu languages also highlights the richness of the food lexicon, reflecting the interactions between material culture, local environment, and social organization. However,

the study conducted in the Municipality of Sangha is distinguished by the importance given to the seasonal dimension of the vocabulary, particularly in the designation of cereals, wild edible plants, dairy products, and specific culinary practices, which have rarely been explored in previous studies.

Moreover, in his analysis of the culinary vocabulary of the Bantu of the Kasai region, M.E. Kashoki (1982) highlights a lexical hierarchy based on the status of the speakers and the type of meal (family, community, sacred), which presents interesting parallels with the structuring of the Dogon food lexicon, particularly in the distinctions between foods reserved for elders, initiated men, or religious ceremonies. However, the Dogon of Sangha go further by integrating cosmological notions into the lexicon, such as the sacralization of certain foods based on their color, shape, or maturation cycle. Compared with studies on the Dogon conducted by Griaule and Dieterlen (1951, 1965), our linguistic approach provides complementary insights: whereas previous authors focused on founding myths and religious classifications, our lexical analysis allows for detailed documentation of vernacular terminology in use today, revealing both the persistence of ancient symbolic structures and the emergence of new terms linked to the evolution of dietary practices.

This study is part of a broader perspective in anthropological linguistics, aligning with the theoretical approaches of A. Wierzbicka (1996) and C. Goddard (2006) on cultural semantics, which consider the lexicon as a mirror of the values and worldviews specific to each society. It also enters into dialogue with work on linguistic ecology (P. Mühlhäusler, 2003), showing how local languages encode ecological knowledge linked to food resources, their transformation, their consumption and their symbolization.

However, a critical reading of these results is necessary. Several methodological and interpretative limitations can indeed be noted. The composition of the corpus on which the analysis is based raises questions. Collected primarily in a limited number of villages around Sangha, the corpus reflects only a small portion of Dogon linguistic diversity. As a result, certain lexical fields less frequently used in everyday exchanges such as those relating to sacrificial foods and specialized botanical knowledge may have been underrepresented. The results, although informed and detailed, are not sufficiently linked to practical issues, such as lexicographic documentation, the development of educational programs in the national language. Their scope thus remains essentially descriptive, even though they could inform applied approaches related to national language policies or cultural preservation initiatives.

In brief, the Dogon food lexicon constitutes a dynamic and culturally embedded system that encodes a broad spectrum of knowledge, practices, and symbolic values. Not only does its study enrich our understanding of the Dogon society, but also it contributes to broader debates in ethnolinguistics, anthropology, and heritage preservation. Safeguarding this linguistic heritage is essential for maintaining cultural diversity and fostering intergenerational knowledge transmission in the Dogonland and beyond.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the lexical field of food among the Dogon people of the Sangha municipality is not merely a linguistic inventory but a cultural system deeply embedded in everyday life, social structures, and ecological knowledge. Through the examination of food-related

vocabulary—spanning cereals, dairy products, leafy plants, and ritual dishes—it becomes evident that language serves as a key medium for preserving and transmitting ancestral knowledge, cosmological beliefs, and identity markers within the Dogon society. The study identified categories of foods made from cereals, tree leaves, herbs, creeping plants, and dairy products.

The results obtained show that cereal-based foods are very diverse: *sagu ja*, *ε ja*, *apa*, *nuhu ja*, *pɔɔn ja*, etc. Foods made from tree leaves, herbs and creeping plants are used to prepare types of *bile* (*kolukolu bile* , *gangaru bile* , *kanwanto bilen* , *anawe bile* , etc. Foods made from dairy products are *iru kolo* (milk), *iru ile* (curdled milk), *enren iru* (goat's milk), *naa iru* (cow's milk), *iru bɔnu* (cheese), *nanjate* (cow butter), etc. The different types of food analyzed in the tables constitute a philosophy regarding food. In addition, the analysis of the Dogon food lexicon in the Sangha Municipality reveals a remarkable linguistic richness intricately connected to local livelihoods, agricultural practices, and cultural belief systems. Every term used to describe food, its preparation methods, or its ritual uses reflected a worldview deeply rooted in the local environment and social organization. The study underscored the significance of the food lexicon as both a communication tool and a reflection of cultural identity and traditional knowledge. Promoting this linguistic heritage contributes to preserving a collective memory and fostering a better understanding of the cultural dynamics specific to the Dogon people of the Sangha Municipality.

Beyond its contribution to linguistic documentation, this study on the lexical field of food among the Dogon in the Municipality of Sangha has a major social and utilitarian significance. Indeed, the food lexicon does not only reflect linguistic diversity; it also constitutes a central vector for the

transmission of knowledge, agricultural, culinary and medicinal practices, as well as cultural representations deeply rooted in community life. In a context marked by the promotion of local languages, this research contributes to the safeguarding of a valuable intangible heritage, while providing a useful empirical basis for the elaboration of bilingual education programs, the valorization of endogenous knowledge and sustainable local development. Thus, this study is fully in line with a dynamic of recognition of African languages and cultures as resources for the future, both in terms of identity and growth.

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