



Fig. 1

local people living in the northeastern corner of the Cameroon Grassfields. Administratively they are part of Nwa Subdivision in Donga-Mantung Division of the North-West-Province of Cameroon (Fig. 1).

The name "Yamba" is a linguistic term which can be translated as "I say" or "listen to me!" (Jikong 1979: 20, Scruggs 1980: 3). In 1960 the educated elite of the Yamba decided to change the name from Kaka or Mbem to Yamba. Yamba is now the official name for the people, their language, and the area. The Yamba language belongs to the Mbam-Nkam group of Grassfields Bantu languages (Nkwi and Warnier 1982: 18).²

According to the census of 1976, the Yamba, who live in seventeen independent villages, numbered 32,607. This census figure does not include

Yamba speakers outside their native area. It is estimated that over 30% of the Yamba population reside in other parts of Cameroon and in Nigeria. The reasons for this exodus are many but can be reduced, in the main, to a lack of infrastructure (the few motorable tracks are impassable for the greater part of the year, except for the main road to Nwa, the regional headquarters; several villages are still without any road connections); lack of employment and economic prospects; shortage of fertile farmland; search for an easier life especially by the young people; and, last but not least, fear of witchcraft, conduce to the pressures on an increasing population. Yet most Yamba abroad keep regular contact with their native villages and return there for the annual dances, for funerals, family and marriage matters, rituals, and because of sickness.

Geographically, the Yamba area is an extremely broken country with high hills, shallow depressions, and deep valleys alternating with monotonous regularity. Along every valley flows a stream which eventually finds its way to one or the other of the tributaries of the Donga River. Upper Yamba is high savanna with an average elevation of 1400 m which in the east meets the Mambila Plateau. Lower Yamba lies at an altitude of about 800 m. The extremely difficult terrain makes any attempt to build roads an almost impossible task and even trekking on foot is hazardous and exhausting. E. H. F. Gorges, a British administrator who visited the area in 1932, aptly remarked, "The size of Kaka bears no relation to the time the traveller must be prepared to spend in it" (1932: par. 16).

The Yamba area – size: 491 km² – can be divided into two unequal parts: the forested lower-lying western part, Lower Yamba, where palm trees abound, and Upper Yamba which is mainly grassland. The people of Lower Yamba, i.e., those living in the villages of Gom, Nkot, and Ngang (a sub-chieftdom of Rom) refer to themselves as *bwin nfu nte* (people of the palm tree area) and they call Upper Yamba *bwin nfu ka'* (people of the grass-burning area).

The Yamba live as cultivators growing coconuts (now the main staple crop), maize, groundnuts, plantains, bananas, beans, egusi (pumpkin seeds), and vegetables such as huckleberry, cowpeas, okra, etc. Agricultural duties are shared by men and women. In the villages of Lower Yamba palm trees grow which provide enough oil for domestic consumption and for sale in the markets of Upper Yamba and those of Wimbun bordering on western Yamba. Oil palms also provide the greatly valued palm wine (up-wine). In Upper Yamba there

2 The Yamba language has a number of different dialects. The degree of mutual intelligibility varies according to the distance between villages. When using Yamba terms in the text I follow Gom dialect for Lower Yamba and Mfe dialect for Upper Yamba where necessary. I use the approved orthography which has also been followed in the Yamba New Testament translation.