

Dogon nominal categories and number

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categories

Many Dogon languages have either a **human/nonhuman** or an **animate/inanimate** distinction. It can be expressed by suffixes on nouns and/or adjectives. For third person pronouns and determiners, especially demonstratives, it is expressed by suffixation or suppletion. Najamba, has a more complex noun-class system with multiple inanimate noun classes, and there appear to be vestiges of this in other north- and southwestern languages.

(1) indicates which languages have humanness or animacy oppositions marked in at least the singular, and those that have a noun-class system or traces thereof.

(1)		humanness	animacy	noun classes
	eastern			
	Toro Tegu	x		
	Jamsay	x		
	Ben Tey		x	
	Nanga		x	
	Togo Kan	x		
	Tommo So	x		
	Donno So	x		
	Yorno So	x		
	northwestern			
	Najamba			x
	Tiranige			(vestigial)
	Dogulu			(vestigial)
	Tebul Ure		x	(vestigial)
	Yanda Dom	[none]		
	southwestern			
	Bunoge			(vestigial)
	Mombo			(vestigial)
	Ampari	??		
	Penange			(vestigial)

(2) indicates which stem-classes make human/nonhuman or animate/inanimate distinctions. Kin terms often diverge from other nouns in omitting regular human or

animate suffixes. “Ppl” refers to verb-participles in relative clauses, which in some languages have adjective-like forms (agreeing with the head NP).

(2)	noun	Adj	Pron	Ppl	Dem	Def
eastern						
Toro Tegu	x	—	—	—	—	—
Jamsay	x	x ¹	x	x	x	—
Ben Tey	x	x ²	x	x	x	—
Nanga	—	—	x	—	x	x
Togo Kan	—	—	x	—	x	—
Tommo So	x	—	—	—	— ³	—
Donno So	x	—	— ⁴	x	—	—
Yorno So	x	—	—	—	—	—
northwestern						
Najamba	x	x ⁵	x	x	x	x
Tebul Ure	x	x	x	x	x	—
Yanda Dom	—	—	x	(x) ⁶	x	x
Tiranige	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dogulu	—	—	—	—	—	—
southwestern						
Bunoge	[none]					
Mombo	??					
Ampari	??					
Penange	[none]					

(3) presents the basic suffixes for animacy (or humanness) and number on nouns and/or adjectives. In several languages, human or animate nouns have a suffixally marked number distinction. Nonhuman or inanimate nouns are usually unmarked and do not indicate number by suffixation. Some languages make no animacy or humanness

¹ In N-Adj combinations, both words are suffixally marked in Jamsay.

² In N-Adj combinations, only the adjective is suffixally marked in Ben Tey.

³ Tommo So near-distant and discourse-definite demonstratives *kó* and *wó* correspond in form to nonhuman/inanimate and human/animate pronouns in other languages, such as Jamsay. However, the two Tommo So forms are in free variation.

⁴ Dialectally, Donno So has a 3Sg inanimate pronoun *kó*. The animacy distinction in third person pronouns in Dogon languages is more complex than is indicated here, since inanimate pronouns are generally discourse-definite and may specialize in this function.

⁵ In N-Adj combinations, both words are suffixally marked in Najamba.

⁶ Concord occurs in imperfective positive but not other participles in Yanda Dom.

distinction; they may or may not have a marked plural form (used most often with animates/humans). Many of the languages have a free plural particle that can be added later in the NP if there is no suffixal plural-marking. Capital *E* and *O* denote variation *e* ~ *ɛ* and *o* ~ *ɔ*, respectively, and *v* is a vowel of variable quality. The morphology of demonstratives is specialized and is not shown in (3).

(3)	human/animate		nonhuman/inanimate	
	Sg	Pl	Sg	Pl
eastern				
Toro Tegu (Hum)	<i>-rⁿu, -n(u)</i>	<i>-m</i>	-∅	—
Jamsay (Hum)	<i>-n</i>	<i>-m</i>	-∅	—
Ben Tey (An)				
noun:	<i>-m</i>	-∅	-∅	—
adj:	<i>-m</i>	<i>-yɛ</i>	<i>-w</i>	—
Nanga		[none] ⁷		
Togo Kan		[none] ⁸		
Tommo So (Hum)	<i>-nɛ</i>	<i>-m</i>	-∅	—
Donno So (Hum)	<i>-nv</i>	<i>-ŋ</i>	-∅	—
Yorno So (Hum)	<i>-nɛ</i>	<i>-m</i>	-∅	—
northwestern				
Najamba (An)				
suffixal:	-∅	<i>-mbo</i>	<i>-ŋgE, -ŋgO</i>	<i>-ŋgE</i>
mutated:	<i>-EE</i>	<i>-OO</i>	<i>-EE, -OO</i>	<i>-EE</i>
Tiranige	-∅	<i>-gè</i>	[= animate]	
Dogulu	-∅	<i>-yà</i> ⁹	[= animate]	
Tebul Ure (An) ¹⁰				
noun:	-∅	<i>-mbO</i>	<i>-(ŋ)gO, -(ŋ)gE</i>	<i>(-EE)</i>
adj:	<i>(-EE)</i>	<i>-mbO</i>	<i>-(ŋ)gO, -ŋgE</i>	<i>(-EE)</i>
Yanda Dom (An)	-∅	<i>-mu</i>	-∅	-∅

⁷ Nanga has a vestigial human/animate singular *-ŋ* in *yà-ŋ* ‘woman’ (plural *yǎ*).

⁸ Togo Kan has generally lost word-final nasals, or preserves them in the form of vowel nasalization. Some human nouns that end in nasalized vowels likely preserve a trace of an original suffix, human singular suffix **-n* and/or human plural **-m*, as in closely related Jamsay.

⁹ In Dogulu, *-wè* ~ *-wè* is the plural marker for kin terms and the core human nouns ‘person’, ‘woman’, and ‘man’.

¹⁰ In Tebul Ure the final *-EE* is less easily segmentable than in Najamba.

southwestern				
Bunoge	-∅	-gè	[= animate]	
Mombo	??			
Ampari	??			
Penange	-∅	-ge	[= animate]	

Nanga has no productive class-number suffixes on nouns or adjectives, but does have an vestigial *-ŋ* (velar nasal) singular suffix on the noun ‘woman’ (Sg *yǎ-ŋ*, Pl *yǎ:*).

Further variations on these endings occur in adjective-like verbal participles in relative clauses. In Jamsay the same forms shown above are used, after the MAN (mood-aspect-negation) morpheme. Beni in particular has several irregular participial endings, depending on the particular MAN (mood-aspect-negation) category, but these endings have a portmanteau character. In Toro Tegu and Nanga there is no class-number suffix on the verb of a relative clause.

Najamba and Tebul Ure noun classes

In Najamba, both nouns and adjectives divide into two morphonological types: suffixing and mutating. For nouns, this distinction is crosscut by a division into three concord classes. (Most adjectives have distinct forms for all of these classes.) The concord classes are those in (4).

- (4) Najamba concord classes for nouns
- “animate” or E/O class (humans, animals, and some inanimate objects)
 - inanimate O/E class (most inanimates)
 - inanimate E/E class (including liquids, places, dwellings, time)

Here the symbols O and E denote distinctions in vocalism, seen most clearly in modifying adjectives of the mutating type: “O” represents final *a:*, *ɔ:*, *o:*, or *u(:)*, i.e. back and low vowels, while “E” represents final *ɛ:*, *e(:)*, and *i(:)*, i.e. front unrounded vowels, depending on the stem. Most stems keep the vowel-height (or ATR) value constant, e.g. *o:* alternates with *e:* for some stems while *ɔ:* alternates with *ɛ:* for others, though there are some exceptions. If the noun is a mutating rather than a suffixing stem, it usually also has this final vocalism. However, there are some mismatches between the form of the noun and its grammatical class as brought out by adjectival concord. Compare Spanish *la mano*, *el problema*, etc. As in Spanish, the “real” lexical class is revealed by concord (with adjectives, demonstratives, and the like).

For “animate” nouns (including some objectively inanimate referents), the singular has E concord and the plural has O concord, hence “E/O” class. In the largest

inanimate class (O/E), the exact opposite is true. In the minority E/E inanimate class, both singular and plural have E concord. In other words, the two inanimate classes are distinguished in the singular but merged in the plural. Mutating adjectives have only two forms, O and E, but their distribution obeys this checkerboard distribution, so that the E form can be animate singular, inanimate plural, or E/E class inanimate singular. Similarly, the O form of an adjective can be animate plural or O/E class inanimate singular.

The O and E forms likely reflect original class-marking particles of the shape *CO and *CE that have contracted with stems. Similar particles are preserved as possessive classifiers (used with pronominal possessor, in an appositional construction of the type ‘X [my thing]’ = ‘my X’). The back versus front vocalism of these classifiers in Najamba—AnSg *ye*, AnPl *bo*, InanSg (O/E class) *go*, InanSg (E/E class) *ge*, InanPl *ye*—exactly matches the O/E division. Similar possessive classifiers occur in other Dogon languages, such as Nanga.

Examples of mutating stems are in (5). There are many variations on the precise vowel quality and length.

(5)	gloss	Sg	Pl	class
	‘goat’	<i>ínè</i>	<i>ínà:</i>	animate E/O class
	‘milk bucket’	<i>káràwà</i>	<i>kàréwè</i>	inanimate O/E
	‘place’	<i>kéŋgé</i>	<i>kéŋgé</i>	inanimate E/E class

Suffixing nouns and adjectives express the same class-number categories, but do so by addition of syllabic suffixes, versus an unmarked form. For animates, the singular is unmarked and the plural is expressed by suffix *-mbo*. For inanimates, the singular is expressed by a suffix *-ŋge* (E/E class) or *-ŋgo* (O/E) class, and the plural is unmarked. Examples of suffixing nouns are in (6).

(6)	gloss	Sg	Pl	class
	‘cat’	<i>gáŋà</i>	<i>gáŋà-mbò</i>	animate E/O class
	‘gizzard’	<i>kèkê:-ŋgò</i>	<i>kèkê:</i>	inanimate O/E
	‘pit (hole)’	<i>dúlé-ŋgé</i>	<i>dúlé</i>	inanimate E/E class

In theory, adjectives have five forms: animate singular, animate plural, O/E inanimate singular, E/E inanimate singular, and inanimate plural. However, mutating adjectives have just two forms, one for the “E” categories and the other for the “O” categories. Suffixing adjectives have four distinct forms, one unaffixed and one each with *-mbo*, *-ŋgo*, and *-ŋge*.

There is likely some connection between Najamba animate plural *-mbo* and such forms as Jamsay human plural *-m* and Toro Tegu human plural *-mu*. However, whether the Najamba form is older (and the other languages have undergone phonetic attrition), or whether the Najamba form is a rebuilt composite, is not immediately obvious.

Tebul Ure has a slightly reduced version of the Najamba suffixal system. Suffixes include animate plural *-mbO* and inanimate singular *-ŋgO* and *-ŋgE*. However, the form in *-ŋgE* is marginal in Tebul Ure.

frozen *-ge, *-go/-gu in other Dogon languages

Several northwestern and especially southwestern Dogon languages have numerous nouns that appear to contain more or less frozen suffixes related to those that are productive in Najamba and Tebul Ure. This was first noticed by Kirill Prokhorov, using Mombo data.

For example, Bunoge has *nù:ŋgè* ‘cow-peas’, *páí-gè* ‘sesame’, and *nùmégù* ‘handful’ (cf. *númè* ‘hand’). Etymologically these are segmentable as *nù:-ŋgè* (or *nù:ŋ-gè*), *páí-gè*, and *nùmé-gù*. However, synchronic segmentation is rather opaque since, in most cases, the old suffix is now an obligatory part of the stem, used for example when plural suffix *-gè* is added, as in plural *nù:ŋgè-gè* ‘cow-peas’. In those cases where the simplex without the suffix occurs separately, so that segmentation is synchronically possible, the suffix has a derivational function of one sort or another. For example, Penange *nènò:-ŋgè* ‘fatigue’ is a deverbal nominalization from *néné* ‘become tired’.

Representative forms of these (frozen) suffixes are in (7)

northwestern

Najamba	[see preceding section]
Tebul Ure	[see preceding section]
Dogulu	<i>-gù</i>
Tiranige	<i>-ŋge, -ge, -ŋgɔ</i>
Yanda Dom	

southwestern

Bunoge	<i>-ŋge, -ge, -gu</i>
Mombo	<i>-ŋgE, -gE, -ŋgO, -gO</i>
Ampari	??
Penange	<i>-ŋge, -ge</i>

frozen initial *an-* and *a-*

In some of the languages, a number of nouns begin with *aN-* and/or *a-* that is arguably segmentable synchronically, or at least historically, and may reflect one or two original noun-class prefixes. The forms with *aN-* might also be connected with a wider areal pattern also including montane Songhay languages.

The apparent initial element is *a-* or *an-* (depending on the stem) in Nanga, *an-* in Tabi-Sarinyere, and *a-* in Jamsay. There are a few cases of *a-* in Najamba and Ben Tey that may be recent borrowings.

free plural marker

As illustrated above, number (singular/plural) is often combined with humanness or animacy in the morphology of nouns, adjectives, and determiners. A typical system consists of the triad human (or animate) singular, human (or animate) plural, and nonhuman (or inanimate).

In a system like this, plurality is sometimes but not always expressible. Often nonhuman or inanimate nouns have no regular suffixal plural-marking. In addition, kin terms typically do not allow the regular suffixes. In any case where a suffixal plural is not possible, the free plural particle comes into play. This particle (e.g. Jamsay *bé*) follows adjectives and determiners, and is part of the postparticipial coda in relative clauses. In other words, it occurs in the same “slot” as the universal quantifier (‘all’).