Phonology

As comparative studies show, rather complex phonological and morphological changes must have taken place in the Jukunoid languages, for instance the loss of noun class prefixes and final syllables and/or final consonants in various languages (cf. Shimizu 1980a, Storch 1999a). In Mbembe, phenomena such as nasalized vowels can be attributed to these changes. Moreover, various phonological processes, most notably palatalization and labialization influenced the pronunciation of consonants. Thus, the following description of the phonology of Mbembe does not only include a synchronic description of the three dialects Kuta, Berabe and Ɓɔ Akɔ as exemplified by the varieties spoken in the villages of Mbande, Dumbo and Akwaja respectively, but also a discussion of exceptional structures and variation within and between dialects, and the processes that gave rise to these phenomena in a diachronic perspective. It must, however, be admitted that the phonological processes must have been far more complex than is suggested by the descriptions here.

First, the segmental phonology of Mbembe will be outlined, i.e. the inventories of vowels and consonants, phonological processes, possible syllable structures attested in the language, and the distribution of the phonemes. Then the suprasegmental phonology, i.e. tone, will be described.

2.1 Segmental Phonology

2.1.1 Vowels
The vowels in Mbembe contrast in height, and front or back position of the tongue in the mouth. The set of oral vowels is seven in all three dialects under study. In addition, five nasal vowels are attested in the Kuta dialect.

2.1.1.1 Oral Vowels
In phonetic realization, the number of oral vowels is ten. The three vowels [ɪ], [ʊ], and [ə], however, only occur in free variation with other vowels as will be outlined below.
### Phonetic Chart of Oral Vowels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>front</th>
<th>mid</th>
<th>back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>high</td>
<td>i</td>
<td>ɪ</td>
<td>u</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-high</td>
<td>e</td>
<td>ə</td>
<td>o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mid-low</td>
<td>ɛ</td>
<td>ɔ</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>low</td>
<td>a</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The oral vowels /e/ and /a/ can be found in initial, medial and final position, while the other oral vowels only occur in final or medial position.

/ɪ/ is realized as a high front vowel. In words with the structure CVrV or CrV, it varies freely with the vowel [i], for example njúr – njúr ‘tooth’, njúr – njúr ‘strength’. In similar contexts, the mid-high front vowel /e/ can be realized as [ɪ] as well, for example ndrē – ndrē ‘bag’, ndrē/zrē – ndrē/zrē ‘name’, thus making the two vowels sometimes sound alike in such words.1 Since [ɪ] occurs in restricted contexts and does not contrast with both front vowels in other contexts, it is not phonemic in the language. Moreover, initial /e/ can be realized in free variation (especially in the Berabe dialect) as the mid-low vowel [ɛ] whenever the following vowels are the mid-low vowels [ɛ] or [ɔ] or the following consonant is a nasal or the approximant /w/, for example ekɔ̀ ~ ekɔ̀ ‘navel’, ēɲī ~ ēɲī ‘sneeze’. In the Kuta dialect, the mid-low front vowel /ɛ/ is generally restricted to these same phonological environments (though there are a number of exceptions). In the Berabe and Pɔ Akɔ dialects, the distribution of the vowel /ɛ/ is a bit wider, since it corresponds to the nasal vowel /ɛ̃/ in the Kuta dialect (cf. below).

The low central vowel /a/ can be realized further back in the mouth as [ɑ] in certain environments. These include aspirated consonants, for example [mpʰɑ̃] ‘molar tooth’, or CyV or CvV sequences, which are often realized phonetically as cvv (cf. 2.1.4.), for example [pyɑ̂ ~ pɪɑ] ‘open’, [tʃwɑ̃ ~ tʃuɑ́] ‘ears’. It does not contrast in these contexts, however, with the central vowel /a/ and thus has no phonemic status.2 Moreover, /a/ can alternatively be realized a bit

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1 Cf. Kähler-Meyer: “Es ist zuweilen schwer, zwischen i und e, ɪ und ĩ bzw. ɛ̃ zu unterscheiden. […] Da der Wechsel von i und ɪ nicht bedeutungsmodifizierend zu sein scheint, wird im Folgenden für beide stets i geschrieben” (1952/53: 113). (It is sometimes difficult to distinguish between i and e, ɪ and ĩ respectively […] Since the variation between i and ɪ does not seem to be phonemic, i is used for both in the following.) [translation added by the present author]

2 The analysis differs from Eyoh (2007b: 26), who assigns /a/ phoneme status.