

## Reconstructing the Phonology of Proto-Yam

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The Yam Family (aka Morehead-Maró Family) comprises around twenty languages of Southern New Guinea, straddling the border between Indonesia and Papua New Guinea. Apart from possible remote connections to the Eastern Trans-Fly languages, they currently appear unrelated to any other Papuan family. Though little-known until the last few years, a number of recent studies have now raised our level of documentation to the point where a reconstruction of the language's phonology becomes possible: we now have reliable data for several languages in two of the family's branches (Tonda to the west and Nambu to the east) though material on the third branch, Yei, remains scanty.

In this paper we sketch the main phonological changes that have occurred at subgroup and language level, and reconstruct the phoneme inventory, syllable structure and basic lexicon of the family. We will particularly focus on the loss of initial /ŋ/ and its consequences in many languages of the group, loss of final vowels, palatalisation in the environment of front vowels, the very variable descent of one reconstructed fricative whose ancestral point of articulation remains problematic (descending variously as /s/, /h/, /ç/, /ɰ/, /ð/ and /d/), the development or extension of coarticulated labial-velar phonemes (/k̠p̠/, /g̠b̠/, /ŋ̠m̠g̠b̠/) by the absorption and loss of rounded vowels, the reduction of phonemic schwa in some languages so that it becomes a predictable epenthetic insert, the defricativisation of some languages under contact influence, and on denasalisation of prenasalised stops to create voiced stops in some languages.

We will also introduce the workings of an online lexical database, Yamfinder, which we are developing to study the historical phonology and lexicon of a number of language families in Southern New Guinea.