

West African Archaeology

New developments, new perspectives

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Cover illustration: Applied figurines on a fragmentary vessel from Janruwa, courtesy of Nicole Rupp

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The linguistic geography of Nigeria and its implications for prehistory

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Abstract

Nigeria is one of the most linguistically diverse regions of the world, with 500+ languages and three major language phyla represented, as well as isolate languages. The historical processes underlying this diversity remain poorly understood and a rapidly increasing research base makes continual updating essential. The paper outlines current understanding of the classification and geography of languages in Nigeria, and presents a model for their historical layering. Potential archaeological correlations remain highly speculative due to the low density of well-dated sites in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria, languages, archaeology, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, hippo

1. Introduction

West Africa is one of the most complex regions of the world linguistically speaking and one of the least known archaeologically. Three unrelated language phyla meet and interact there and there is also a language isolate, unrelated to any other languages presently spoken, presumably representing the speech of prior populations. The geographical fragmentation of these language groups suggests considerable movement and ‘layering’ in prehistory. In principle it should be possible to correlate these with archaeology, but in practice, the density of archaeological sites is too low to put forward more than speculations. However, it is reasonable to map out the sequence of movements that have resulted in the current ethnolinguistic map and to suggest their likely historical stratification.

It is also possible to link historical reconstructions of subsistence items with, for example, archaeological finds to establish whether a particular group was practising agriculture, pastoralism and fisheries. Ecological reconstruction makes it possible to draw up hypotheses about the homeland of a particular group. Genetics has so far made little or no contribution to West African prehistory but this may change in the future. The paper will focus on reconstructing the ethnolinguistic history of Nigeria, as representing the meeting place of three of Africa’s four language phyla.

2. Nigeria: meeting place of three of Africa’s language phyla

Nigeria is one of the regions of Africa where three of its four language phyla overlap and interact. **Table 1** shows the phyla and the families represented in Nigeria.

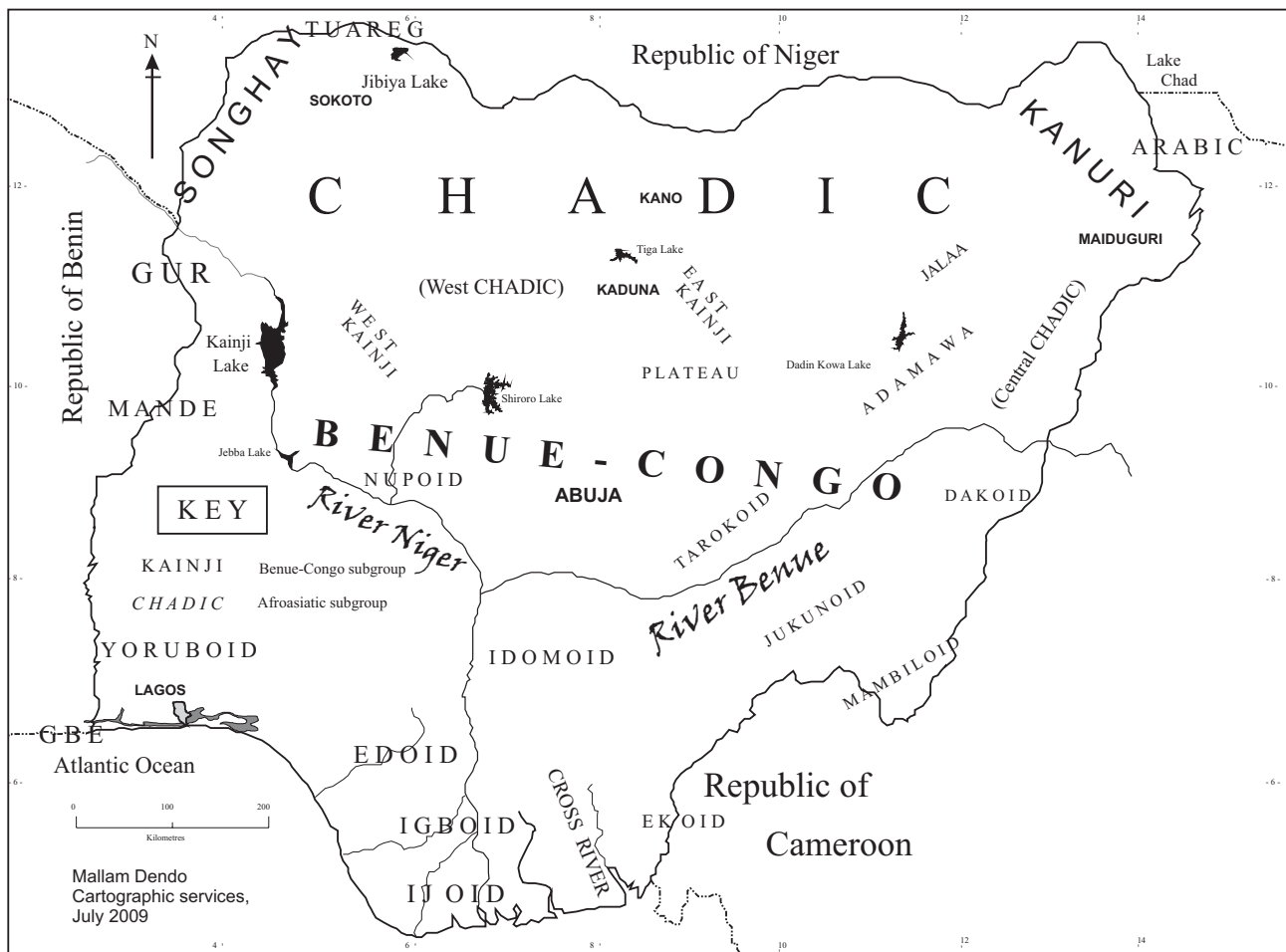
The Benue-Congo languages (which include Bantu) are the most complex and numerous family, including the branches Plateau, East and West Kainji, Cross River, Dakoid, Mambiloid and other Bantoid, as well as Bantu proper (Jarawan and Ekoid). **Map 1** shows a general overview of the location of the different language families.

3. Jalaa: a language isolate

Nigeria has a single language isolate, the Jalaa or Cen Tuum language, spoken among the Cham in the Gombe area of NE Nigeria (Kleinewillinghöfer 2001). Jalaa, like Laal in Chad, has a significant proportion of loanwords from a scatter of neighbouring languages, but a core of lexemes without etymologies. Analysis so far suggests that it is unrelated to any other language in the world and thus is probably a survival from the foraging period, when West Africa would have been occupied by small bands speaking a diverse range of now disappeared languages. Other comparable language isolates are Laal (Chad) and Bangi Me (Mali). The earliest occupation of what is now North-Central Nigeria must have been that of Pleistocene foragers, and the only trace of these is the Jalaa. This is

Phylum	Families
Nilo-Saharan	Songhay, Saharan
Afroasiatic	Chadic, Semitic, Berber
Niger-Congo	Mande, Gur, Atlantic, Volta-Niger, Ijoid, Benue-Congo, Adamawa, Ubangian

Table 1. African language phyla represented in Nigeria



Map 1: Language families of Nigeria

represented as 'Jalaic' on the map, as a representative of a now-vanished language family.

4. Nilo-Saharan

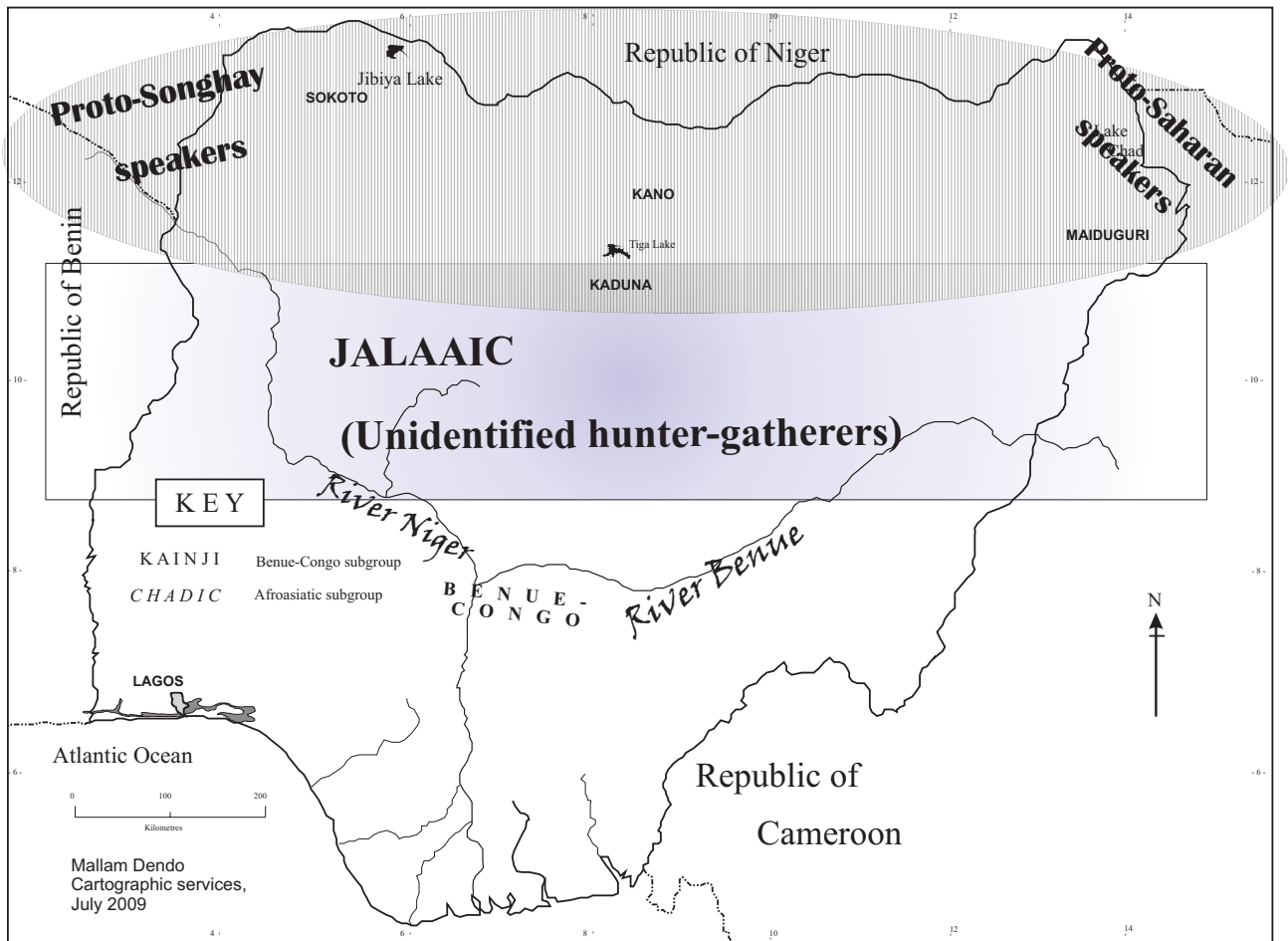
The Nilo-Saharan languages are found across semi-arid Africa today, from the Ethio-Sudan borderlands to eastern Senegal, although fragmented by the subsequent expansion of Berber. In Nigeria, Nilo-Saharan is represented by two branches, Saharan and Songhay, at the geographical extremes of the country and separated by Hausa and other Chadic languages (Map 2).

The two principal sources for the subclassification of Nilo-Saharan are Bender (1997) and Ehret (2001). The internal structure of the phylum is disputed, though not its internal diversity nor the location of that diversity. In the Ethio-Sudan borderlands, Nilo-Saharan speakers may have existed as foragers for a long period prior to their expansion in the Holocene. Both the linguistic geography and the internal classification of Nilo-Saharan point to a spread from the southeast westwards across the Sahara. Drake and Bristow (2006) and Armitage et al (2007) have provided evidence for a 'green Sahara' during the Holocene, suggesting the whole region was filled with rivers and lakes which allowed a major expansion of aquatic resources. This would have attracted fisher-foragers westward and

created a corridor for water-dependent species to cross the desert to North Africa. Nilo-Saharan speakers, probably fishing people to judge by their distinctive harpoon points, expanded across these green corridors in pursuit of fish and other aquatic fauna. The notion that there is a general connection between seriated bone harpoons and Nilo-Saharan goes back to the Aqualithic of John Sutton (1974, 1977), although the connection with the introduction of pottery is unlikely since this spread rapidly between the Nile Valley and the Sahara some 10,000 years ago (Close 1995) rather than being co-distributed with harpoons. It would therefore not be unreasonable to associate the dispersal of the western branches of Nilo-Saharan with the opening up of new aquatic resource opportunities some 11,000 years ago.

An intriguing piece of evidence for this aquatic specialisation is the existence of widespread cognates in Nilo-Saharan for major hunted species. Table 2 shows a cognate for 'hippo' that covers the entire range of Nilo-Saharan, while Table 3 shows that the words for crocodile divide into two groups, linking together eastern and western branches.

As if to provide confirmation for this scenario, Breunig et al. (2008) report finds of terracotta animals around



Map 2: Nilo-Saharan languages

the margins of Lake Chad, some 2000 years old. **Photo 1** shows a remarkably well-preserved hippo from these excavations.

Family	Subgroup	Language	Attestation
Gumuz		Kokit	baŋa
Maba		Aiki	bùngùr
CS	Sara	Nar	àbà
Songhay		Kaado	bàŋà
Songhay		Koyra Chiini	baŋa

Table 2. A cognate for 'hippo' in Nilo-Saharan languages



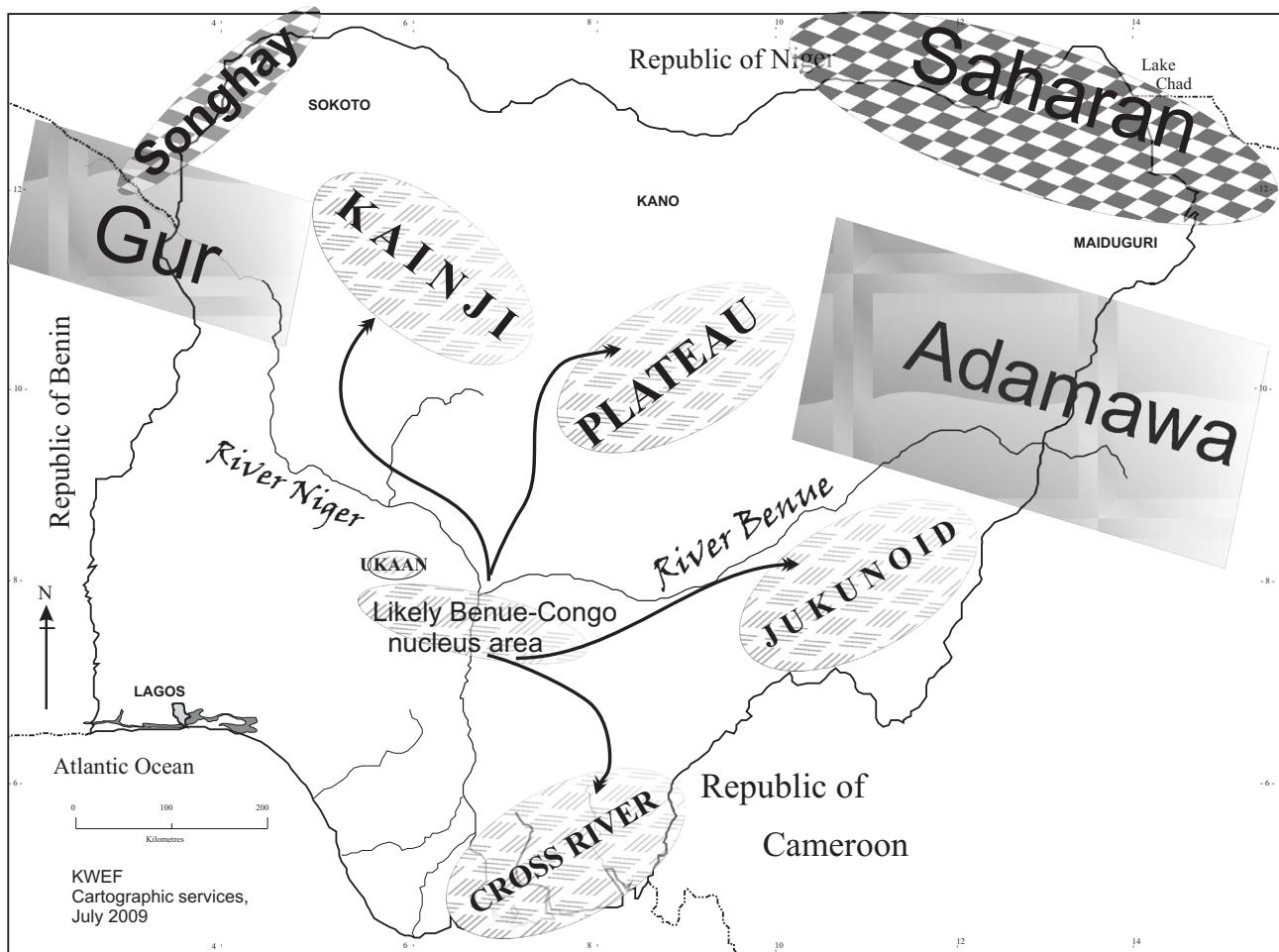
Photo 1: Terracotta hippo from Lake Chad (courtesy of Peter Breunig)

Family	Language	Attestation	Attestation
Koman	Uduk	ànàŋà	
Kuliak	Ik	nyeti-nyánj	
Eastern Sudanic	Proto-Nilotic	ŋaən	
Eastern Sudanic	Gaam	ŋaən	
Maba	Aiki		gòrndí
Saharan	Kanuri		káráám
Songhay	Zarma		kààrày

Table 3. Cognates for 'crocodile' in Nilo-Saharan languages

5. Gur-Adamawa

Gur-Adamawa speakers stretch from Burkina Faso to central Chad, and the Ubangian branch of Adamawa reaches into southern Sudan (Kleinewillinghöfer 1996). Gur-Adamawa is highly internally divided and there are no convincing proposals for reconstructions of agriculture to its proto-language. The languages are not distributed along rivers, so this presumably represents an expansion of foragers across open savannah, perhaps 6-8000 years ago.



Map 3: Gur-Adamawa and Benue-Congo expansions

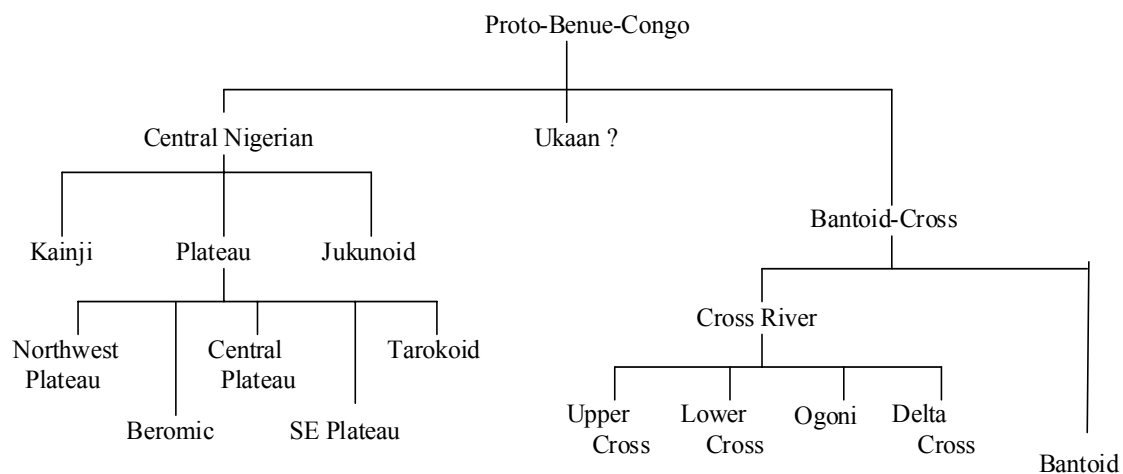


Figure 1: Revised subclassification of Benue-Congo languages

The Gur-Adamawa speakers are likely to have had bows and arrows and an array of microlithic technology. What would once have been a continuous band of settlement across present-day Northern Nigeria was broken up by the northwards expansion of Benue-Congo and the later southward movement of Chadic languages. **Map 3** shows the movement of Gur-Adamawa across northern Nigeria and the likely nucleus of Benue-Congo expansion (§6).

6. Benue-Congo

The Benue-Congo languages, including Plateau, Cross River, Kainji, Jukunoid and other smaller groups predominate in the centre and east of Nigeria and one branch of them also gave rise to Bantoid (the languages such as Grassfields which show Bantu-like features but cannot be treated as Bantu proper) and Bantu (the large family of



Photo 2: Archaic bronze knife, Hausaland

closely related languages that covers most of Eastern and Southern Africa). **Figure 1** shows a major reclassification of the Benue-Congo languages, incorporating recent research that updates and sometimes radically revises the classification given in Blench (2006).

Key aspects of this reclassification are;

- a) The classification of Jarawan Bantu as a Narrow Bantu language (see §10)
- b) The treatment of West Benue-Congo as a wholly distinct family, now called 'Volta-Niger' (§8)
- c) The classification of the Furu cluster as a mainstream Bantoid language close to Bantu
- d) The placing of Ndemli as a branch of Grassfields
- e) The promotion of Ukaan to a single branch of Benue-Congo

To account for their present distribution, the most likely initial point of dispersal is the Niger-Benue confluence. Reading back into the past from the probable dates of the Bantu expansion this dispersal must have been 6-7000 kya. As with Gur-Adamawa, this is primarily a land-based expansion, although on reaching the Cross River, fisheries began to play a major role in subsistence. We know from palynological records that West Africa underwent a dry phase from about 7.8-6.5 kya (Gasse and Van Campo 1994; Jousse 2006:64) and it is conceivable that a shortage of game to hunt caused the original dispersal of Benue-Congo.

7. Chadic

The Chadic languages are spread between the Sudan border and western Nigeria. Chadic is a branch of Afroasiatic, which also includes Arabic, the Berber languages, Ancient Egyptian and the languages of Ethiopia. The exact placing of Chadic within Afroasiatic is controversial, but various phonological and lexical elements make a connection with the Cushitic languages of Ethiopia credible (Blench in press). If so, then proto-Chadic speakers may have migrated westwards along the now dry Wadi Hawar, reaching Lake Chad 3-4000 years ago (Blench 1999). Their likely subsistence strategies were a combination of pastoralism and fishing, rather like the Dinka and Nuer today. Upon reaching Lake Chad, they then apparently dispersed east, west and south, to account for the branches

of Chadic today. The two branches of Chadic in Nigeria are West (dominated by Hausa) and Central (largely in Cameroon and Chad) shown in **Map 4**. The expansion of West Chadic was probably some 3000 years ago, but certainly later than Benue-Congo. The driving force of this is unclear, although possibly the expanding Chadic pastoralists had larger, more productive cattle than the resident trypanotolerant taurine breeds kept by sedentary populations (Blench 1998).

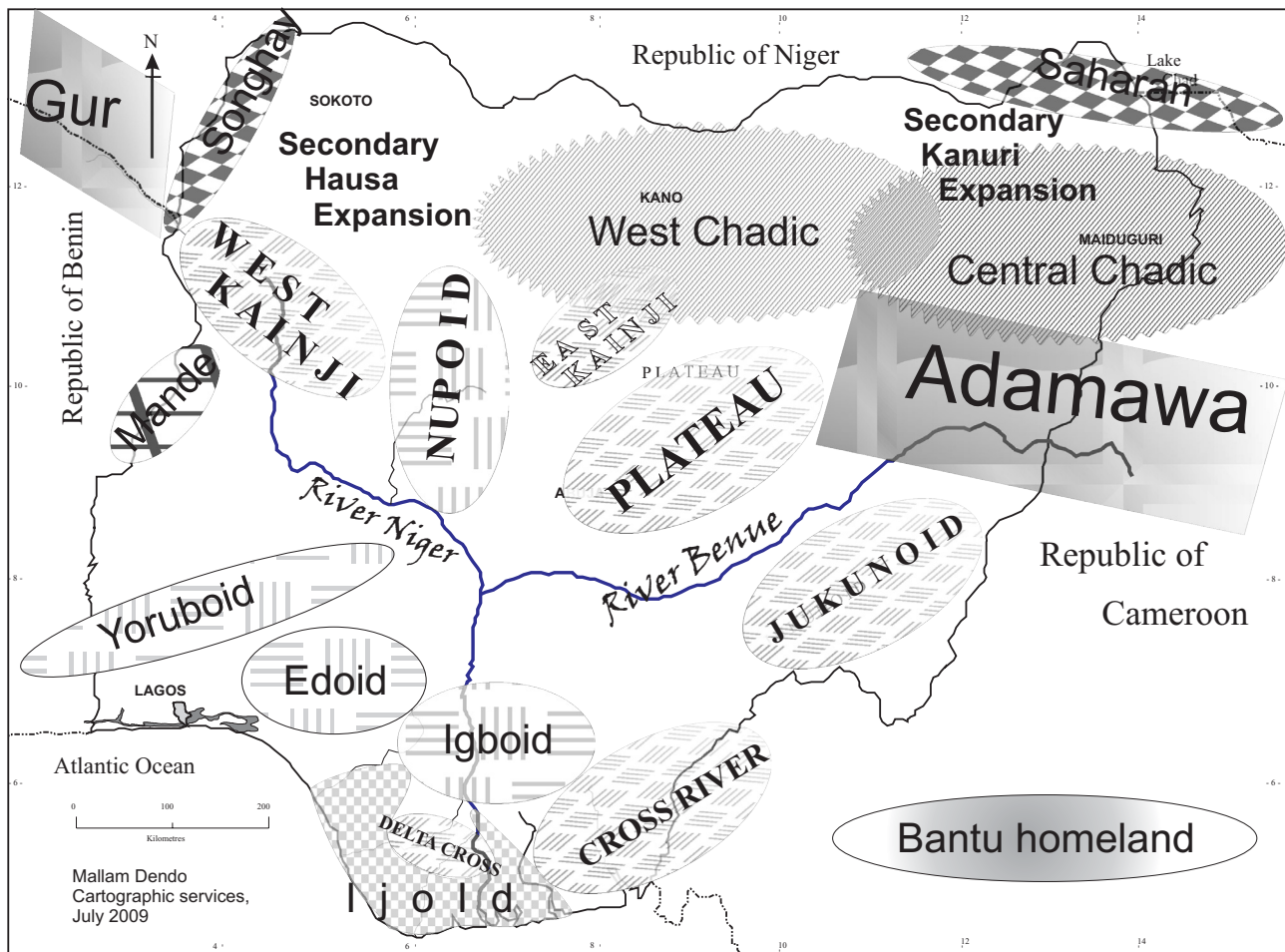
Hausa underwent a secondary expansion, beginning about 1000 years ago, further breaking up the Kainji and Plateau populations and pressing Adamawa languages southwards. This expansion was probably driven by the gradual evolution of centralised kingdoms, which included access both to new systems of military organisation and craft specialisation (**Photo 2**). At a similar time there would have been a secondary expansion of Kanuri cluster languages from north of Lake Chad associated with the evolution of the kingdom of Kanem. It is at this point that language expansions begin to enter the historical record. Shuwa Arabs are likely to have begun incursions into NE Nigeria in the 13th century and Tuareg herders began moving into the Nigerian borderlands in the twentieth century.

8. Volta-Niger (also 'Eastern Kwa' or 'West Benue-Congo')

The language subgroup known as 'Volta-Niger' or formerly 'Eastern Kwa' or 'West Benue-Congo' consists of Yoruboid, Nupoid, Igboid, Ewe etc. On the principle of 'least moves', its likely homeland was west of the Niger-Benue confluence. The Nupoid languages expanded northwards and have broken apart the two branches of Kainji. **Figure 2** shows the subclassification of Volta-Niger languages and **Map 4** the likely pattern of dispersal.

Why Volta-Niger broke up and when remain unanswered questions, but it is observable that all these languages have words for 'market', 'trade', 'profit' etc. suggesting that the evolution of long-distance trade may have played a role.

Table 4 shows a reconstructible term for 'profit' in Volta-Niger languages which points to this possible commercial orientation.



Map 4: Expansion of Chadic and Volta-Niger

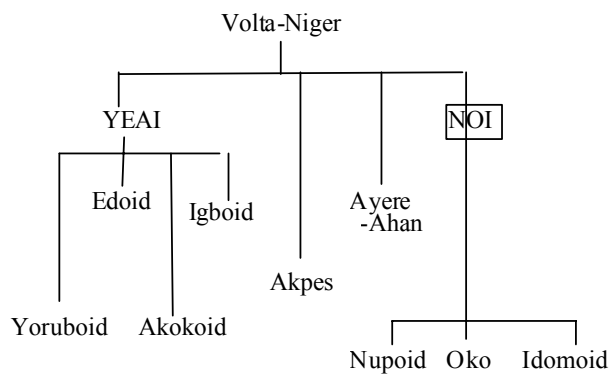


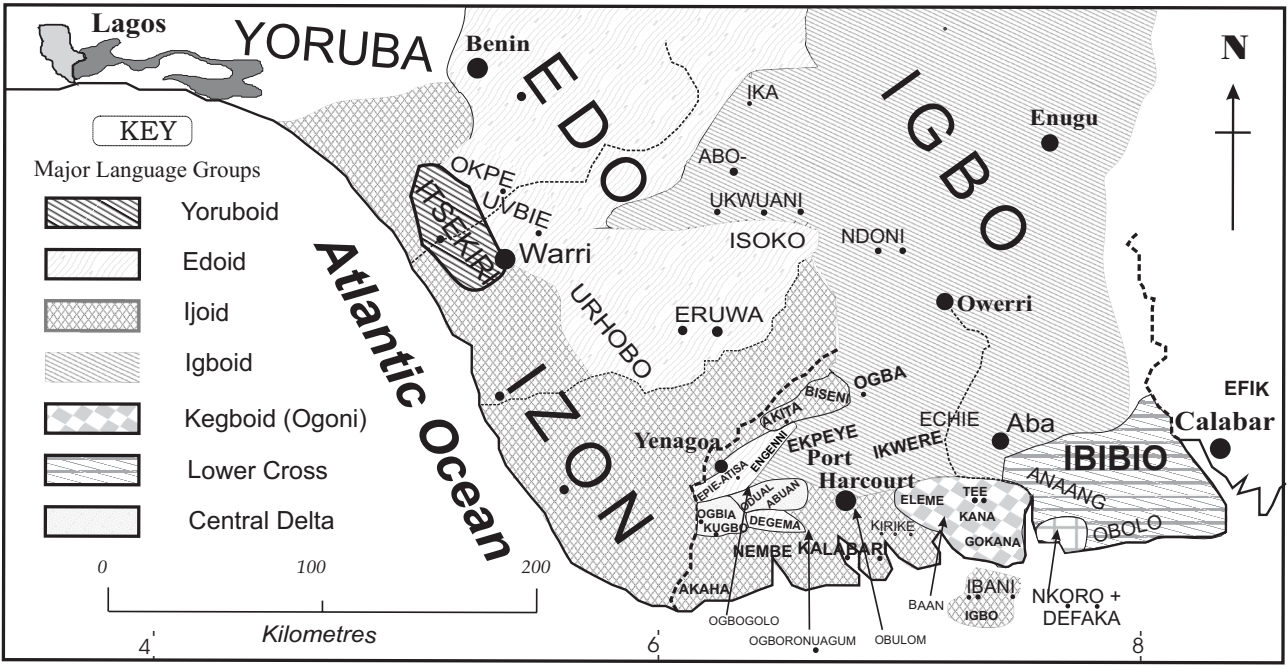
Figure 2: Volta-Niger languages

Group	Language				
Edoid	Emai	è		è	
Igbooid	Igbo	è	l	è	lè
Akokoid	Uro	e	r	e	
Ayere	Ayere	ε	l	é	
Nupoid	Nupe	è	l	è	
Idomoid	Idoma	i	l	è	

Table 4. The reconstructible term #ile for 'profit' in Volta-Niger languages

9. Ijoid

The Ijoid languages (**Map 5**), spoken in the Niger Delta of Nigeria, also represent a puzzle (Alagoa *et al.* 1988). The languages are all extremely close to one another, except for one small language, Defaka (Jenewari 1983; Williamson 1998), but they are very remote from the other branches of Niger-Congo, both formally (i.e. in terms of syntax and morphology) and lexically. This rather suggests the speakers were resident elsewhere for a long time, and reached the Niger Delta quite recently, fanning out from a nodal point. This does not entirely explain Defaka, which is markedly different from the rest of Ijoid and has some features reminiscent of the reconstructed Ijoid proto-language. There must once have been more languages related to Defaka which have since disappeared, perhaps reflecting an early wave of migrants to the Delta, almost erased by the expansion of Ijō proper or the incoming Lower Cross and Ogonic groups. Their fishing skills suggest that their origin may have been a mobile fishing people from the Upper Niger, somewhat like today's Sorko people (Ligers 1964-1969). As **Map 5** shows, there are Central Delta (Cross River) languages encapsulated *within* Ijoid. Central Delta communities are primarily farmers and hence could easily co-exist with the primarily fishing Ijō.



Map 5: Ijoid and surrounding languages

An intriguing piece of supporting evidence is the name of the manatee, *Trichechus senegalensis*, which has a common root shared between Bamana, a Mande language spoken in Mali, and proto-Ijò as well as a possible Bantu cognate (Table 5).

Family	Language	Attestation
Ijoid	P-Ijò	imēĩ
Mande	Bamana	māĩ
Bantu	Proto-Bantu	*manga

Table 5. A scattered root for ‘manatee’

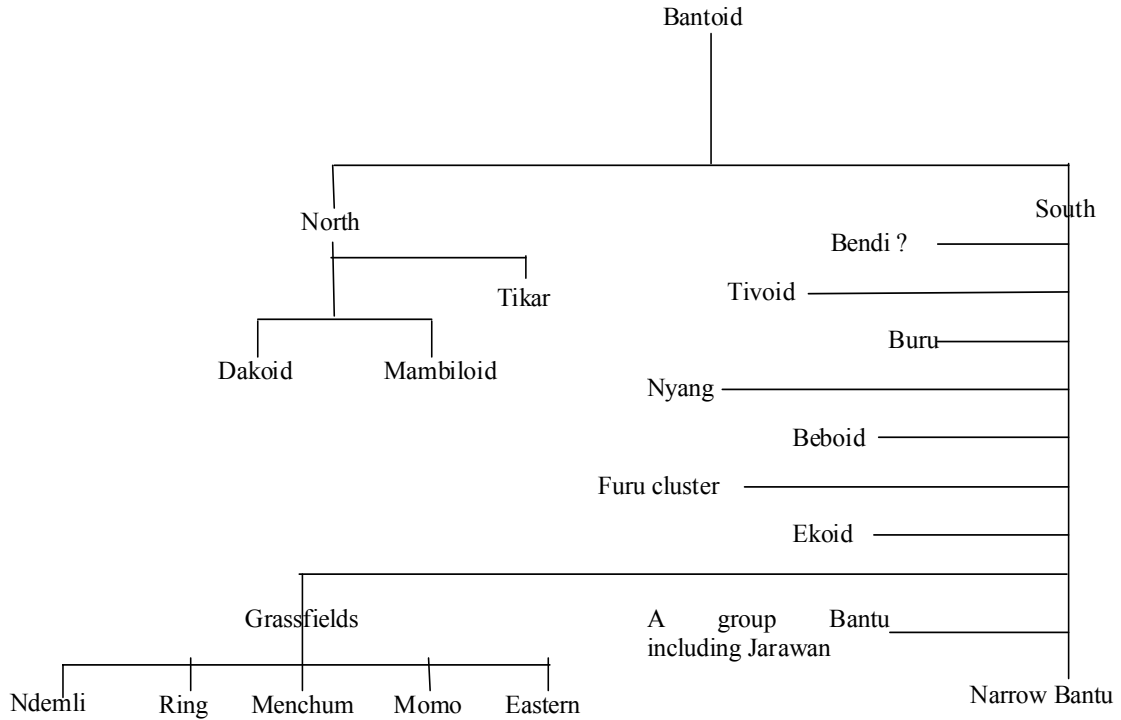
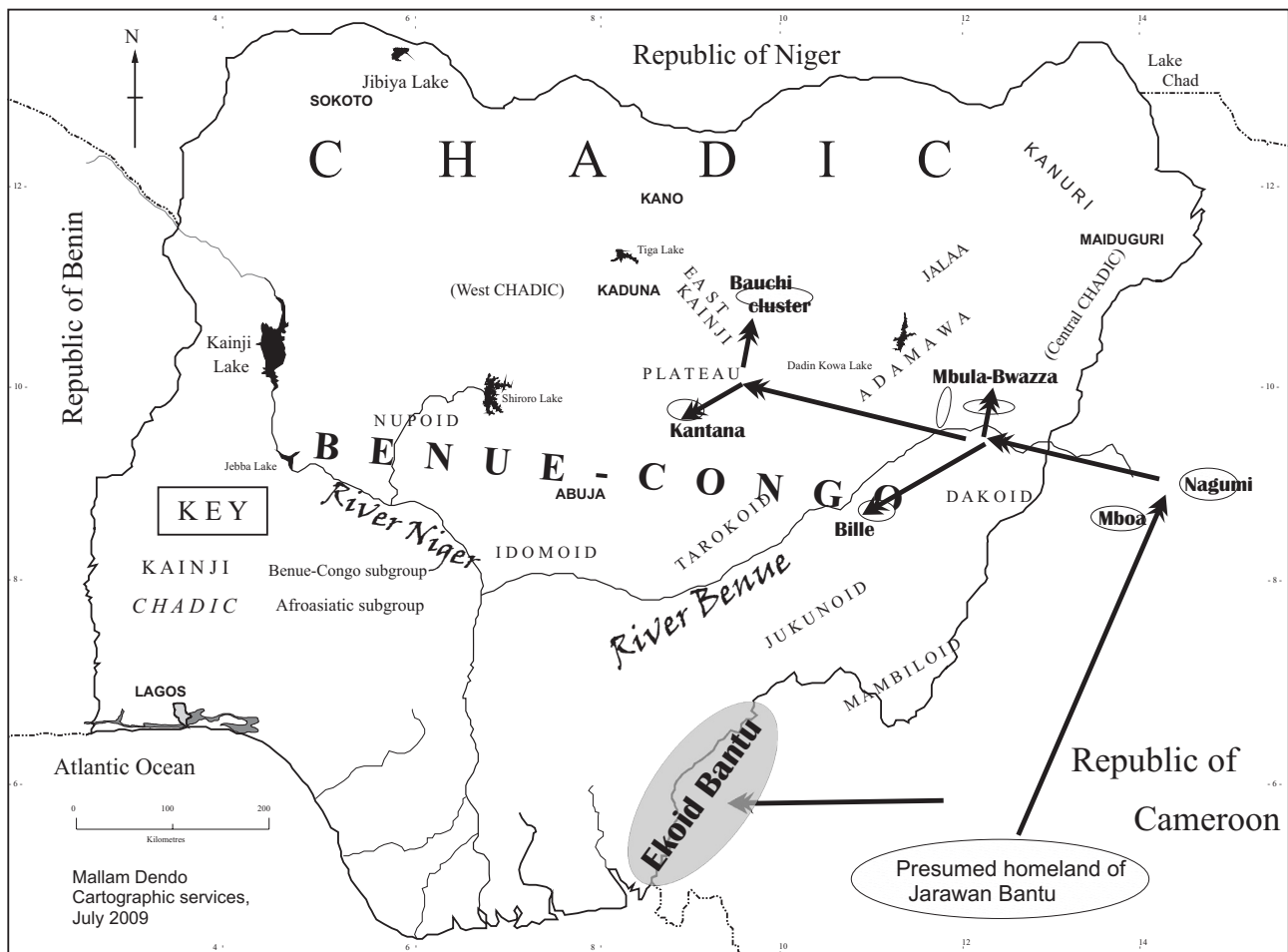


Figure 3: Genetic tree of Bantoid languages



Map 6: The expansion of Jarawan and Ekoid Bantu

Manatees were extensively hunted until recent times all along the Niger and this common root may well be evidence for the more remote origin of the Ijò-speaking peoples.

10. Bantu

The Bantu expansion is outside the general area of this paper. However, Bantoid and Bantu languages are part of the pattern of Benue-Congo. The Bantoid languages, which occupy the Grassfields of Cameroon and areas along the Nigeria-Cameroon borderland are highly internally diversified compared with Bantu and must thus be older. The Bantu expansion is probably to be dated around 3500 BP, to judge by the early appearance of pottery along rivers in Cameroon/Gabon (Wotzka 1995; Clist 2005). Recent excavations (and finds of millet etc.) in Southern Cameroon suggest we do not understand this environment as well as we had imagined (Eggert *et al.* 2006).

Figure 3 shows a speculative summary including all the language groups that have been described which are as it were ‘standing between’ Eastern Benue-Congo and Narrow Bantu. These languages are very numerous (>200) and also highly diverse morphologically. It seems likely that new languages are yet to be discovered and more work

in historical reconstruction will improve our understanding of how these languages relate to one another.

A quirky aspect of the Bantu expansion usually excluded from textbook accounts is the ‘Bantu who turned North’. The Jarawan Bantu languages form a closely related cluster, scattered across north-central Cameroon and west into Nigeria, on the Benue River and south of Bauchi (Thomas 1927; Gerhardt 1982). Although these are perfectly standard Bantu languages, they are typically not represented on maps of ‘The Bantu’ because of the unevenness they would introduce into the graphic representation. They are very closely related to the Bantu A60 languages (i.e. those spoken in the extreme northwest of the Bantu area around the Sanaga river) and they have only not been treated as Bantu because their nominal prefixes are now ‘frozen’, possibly due to contact with Chadich (for example, they are excluded from the standard reference text, Nurse and Philippson 2003). On lexical grounds they should be treated as Bantu proper since their exclusion is typological rather than genetic. That said, there is no explanation for their curious distribution and no archaeological or genetic work to explain such a migration so contrary to the general flow. A similar, although slightly less striking migration is represented by the Ekoid languages which

are distributed along the Nigeria/Cameroun borderland in the extreme southeast. As Bantu languages, they must also have migrated from the Bantu region and pushed back the Lower Cross speakers around the Cross River. **Map 6** shows the distribution of Ekoid and of the existing Jarawan Bantu languages with arrows representing their presumed migrations from Cameroun.

11. Conclusions

Archaeology in Nigeria may fairly be said to be developing at 'snail-speed'. Few new sites are being developed, except within the framework of the recent University of Frankfurt project, and even fewer are reliably dated. By contrast, there has been considerable progress recently in language survey, partly because of a general awareness of language loss in the Middle Belt. Civil insecurity, for example in the Niger Delta, has effectively brought research to a halt in many southern areas. Our general knowledge of the linguistic picture is unlikely to bring many new surprises, although many details wait to be refined, but the potential correlations with other aspects of prehistory are likely to remain 'frozen'. The challenge then is to get archaeology moving and to suggest that interdisciplinary research is likely to bring out many new facets of national and regional prehistory.

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