

Advances in Minority Language Research in Nigeria

Edited by
Roger Blench and Stuart McGill



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Part I

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Part II: General issues

Chapter 2 – Understanding Nigerian prehistory through its linguistic geography

Roger Blench, Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

Keywords: Nigeria, language diversity, archaeology, history, Niger-Congo

1 Introduction

Nigeria 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 stratification in prehistory. In principle it should be possible to correlate the pattern of language families 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.

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

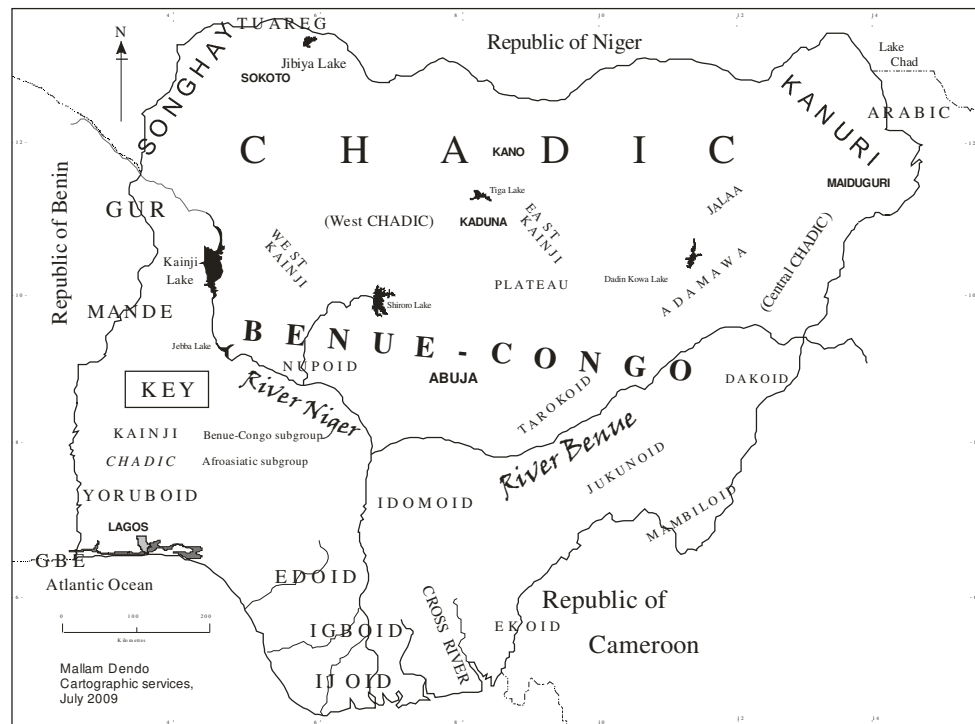
Table 1: African language phyla represented in Nigeria

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

Benue-Congo (which includes Bantu) is the most complex family with numerous branches, including 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.

Map 1: Language families of Nigeria



It is also possible to link historical reconstructions of subsistence items with, for example, archaeobotanical or archaeozoological results 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 paper¹ will focus on reconstructing the ethnolinguistic history of Nigeria.

¹ This paper was first presented as a Powerpoint to the Jos Linguistic Circle on July 25th, 2007. A different version emphasising the archaeological context, was presented at the Nigerian Field Society Conference, in Sheffield, June 27th, 2009. I am grateful to the audience in both presentations for their comments. The Sheffield paper has now been

2 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 may be a survival from the pre-agricultural period, when West Africa would have been occupied by small bands of foragers speaking a diverse range of now disappeared languages. Other comparable language isolates in West Africa are Laal (Chad) and Bangi Me (Mali) (Blench 2008). It is assumed that there was once a family of languages related to Jalaa, named ‘Jalaaic’ on Map 2, and that this is now the last remaining representative of a putative now-vanished language family. Evidence from Mali (Onjougou), Birimi (Ghana) and Shum Laka (Cameroun) puts the settlement of West Africa by modern humans to at least ca. 40,000 BP.

3 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 and Arabic. 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).

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.

Table 2: A cognate for ‘hippo’ in Nilo-Saharan languages

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

Map 2: Jalaalic and Nilo-Saharan languages in Nigeria

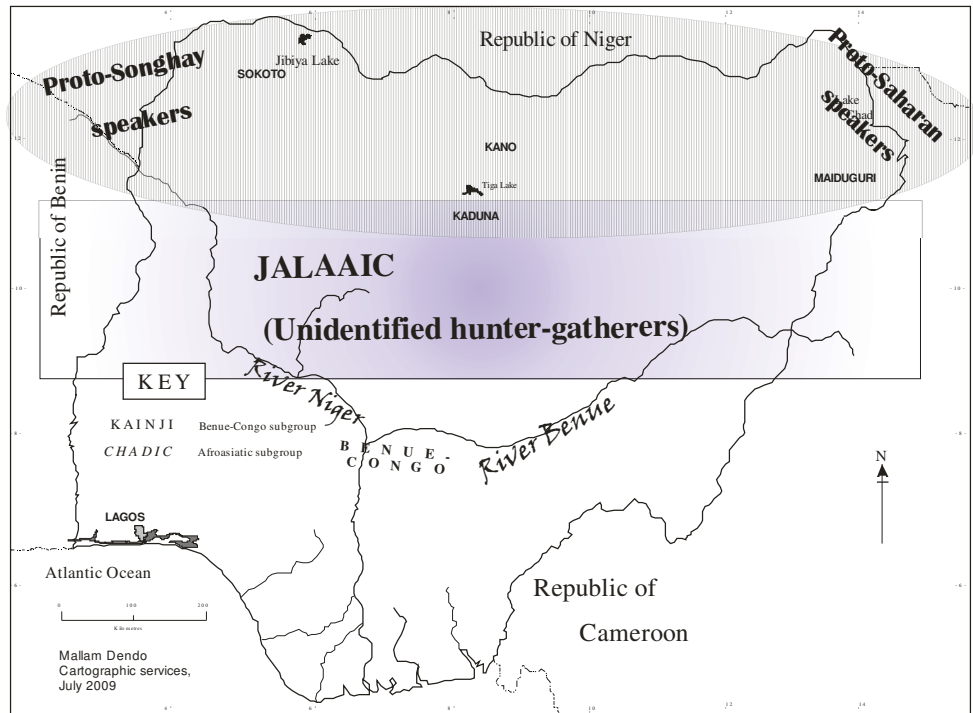


Table 3: Cognates for 'crocodile' in Nilo-Saharan languages

Family	Language	Attestation	Attestation
Koman	Uduk	àràṅà	
Kuliak	Ik	nyeti-nyáŋ	
Eastern Sudanic	Proto-Nilotic	ṛaṅ	
Eastern Sudanic	Gaam	ṛaṅ	
Eastern Sudanic	Afitti		arəm
Eastern Sudanic	Nubian		elim
Central Sudanic	Sara-Bagirmi		*màrà
Saharan	Kanuri		káráṃ
Songhay	Zarma		kààrà̀y

The absence of the k- prefix in Eastern Sudanic is a typical morphological process for Nilo-Saharan, as is the metathesis in Central Sudanic.

As if to provide confirmation for this scenario, Breunig et al. (2008) report finds of terracotta animals around the margins of Lake Chad, some 2000 years old. Photo 1 shows a remarkably well-preserved hippo from these excavations.

Photo 1: Terracotta hippo from Lake Chad (photo by Roger Blench)



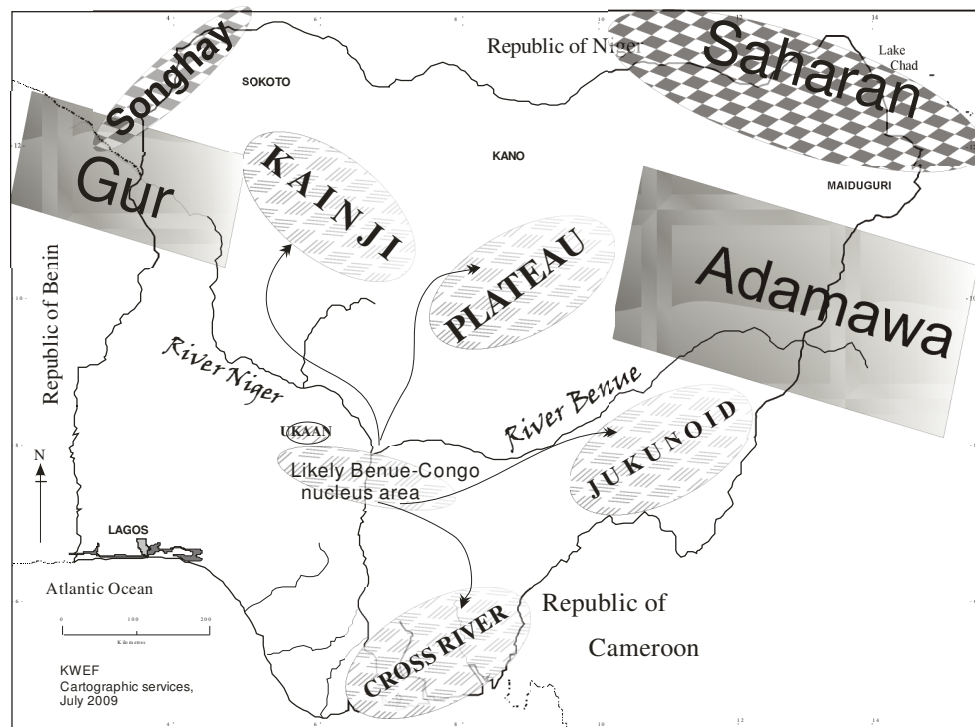
The subsequent history of the Lake Chad Basin reflects the gradual growth of pastoralism and the adoption of agriculture, which may well be relatively late, during the second millennium BC (Breunig, Neumann and Van Neer 1996; Klee and Zach 1999; Breunig 2001).

4 Gur-Adamawa

Speakers of Gur-Adamawa languages 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 agricultural terminology 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. Speakers of Gur-Adamawa 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 illustrates the probable location of a zone of Gur-Adamawa

speakers formerly spread across northern Nigeria and how the expansion of a nucleus of Benue-Congo expansion must have fragmented this branch of Niger-Congo (§5).

Map 3: Gur-Adamawa and Benue-Congo expansions



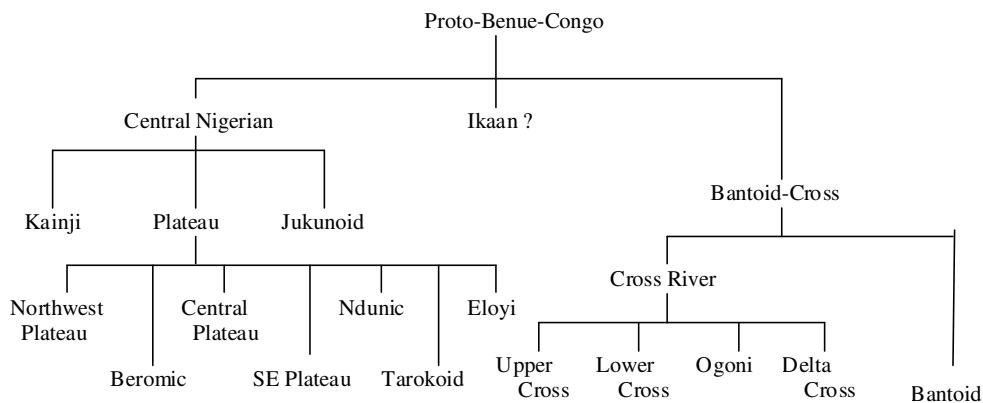
5 Benue-Congo

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 and Bantu. Figure 2 shows a reclassification of the Benue-Congo languages given in Blench (2006). Key aspects of this reclassification are the treatment of West Benue-Congo as a wholly distinct family, now called ‘Volta-Niger’ (§8) and the promotion of Ukaan to a single branch of Benue-Congo.

To account for the present distribution of Benue-Congo, the most likely initial point of dispersal is the Niger-Benue confluence. The Bantu expansion is usually

dated to around four thousand years ago (kya) (Clist 2005). If so, Benue-Congo must be several thousand years older to account for its much greater internal diversity.

Figure 2: Revised subclassification of Benue-Congo languages



As with Gur-Adamawa, this was primarily a land-based expansion, although on reaching the Cross River, fisheries began to play a major role in subsistence. The probable dates of this dispersal would then be 6-7 kya. Archaeology in Central Nigeria is still poorly developed, although excavations at the Nok sites (which are ca. 2500 BP) point to well-developed agriculture and ritual complexity by this date. However, well-dated sites that reach further back to the period of the dispersal of Benue-Congo are still elusive.

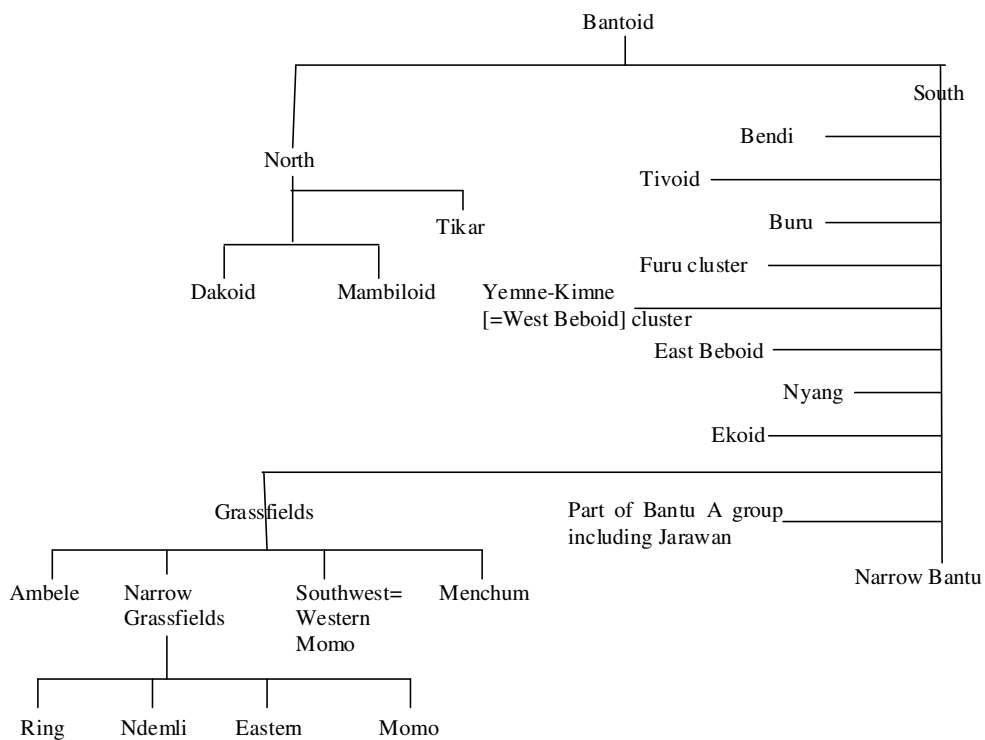
6 Bantoid

Bantoid languages are those which bear a strong resemblance to the Bantu languages, both lexically and morphologically. The latter cover most of Eastern and Southern Africa, with their nearest representatives in Southern Cameroun. The various families that make up Bantoid are distributed along the Nigeria-Cameroun borderland, and some, such as Jarawan Bantu, have moved back into Central Nigeria (see §10). The classification of this large and complex set of languages has generally been given substantially less attention than the Bantu languages. There are two main reasons for this; the lack of descriptive material on many of these languages and their extreme phonological and morphological diversity. It was pointed out as early as Johnston (1886) that a wide range of West African languages exhibited noun-class features analogous to those classified as 'Bantu'. Johnston later went on to produce an extensive study of Bantu and 'Semi-Bantu'

pointing out these connections without clarifying the implications for genetic relationships or otherwise (Johnston 1919, 1922). Westermann (1927) mentioned but did not explore the links between ‘Western Sudanic’ [Niger-Congo] and Bantu.

The classification of Bantoid is thus controversial and no definitive version of the groups that constitute it can be given. Figure 3 shows a recent version of the classification of Bantoid (Blench 2011).

Figure 3: Genetic tree of Bantoid languages



The important point to draw from this tree is that Bantoid does not constitute a genetic grouping but rather a series of individual families that presumably migrated away from a core population and developed distinctive linguistic features as a consequence of contact with quite different language groups. Some features of the tree deserve particular notice:

- a) The classification of Jarawan Bantu as a Narrow Bantu language (see §10)
- b) The classification of the Furu cluster as mainstream Bantoid languages close to Bantu
- c) The placing of Ndemli as a branch of Grassfields

Much of the Bantoid-speaking area remains inaccessible today and archaeological records are almost non-existent. Given the estimates for Benue-Congo in Central Nigeria and Bantu in Southern Cameroun, it is reasonable to propose that the Bantoid languages were diversifying in the Nigeria-Cameroun borderland over the period 6-4000 BP. This is too early for seed agriculture, but it is quite possible that these populations were exploiting vegetative species, such as yams (*Dioscorea* spp.), and managing wild species such as the Bambara groundnut (*Vigna subterranea*) and the bush-candle (*Canarium schweinfurthii*), which are abundant in the region. Further linguistic work on the reconstruction of food species may provide more concrete insights into early subsistence patterns in this region.

7 Chadic

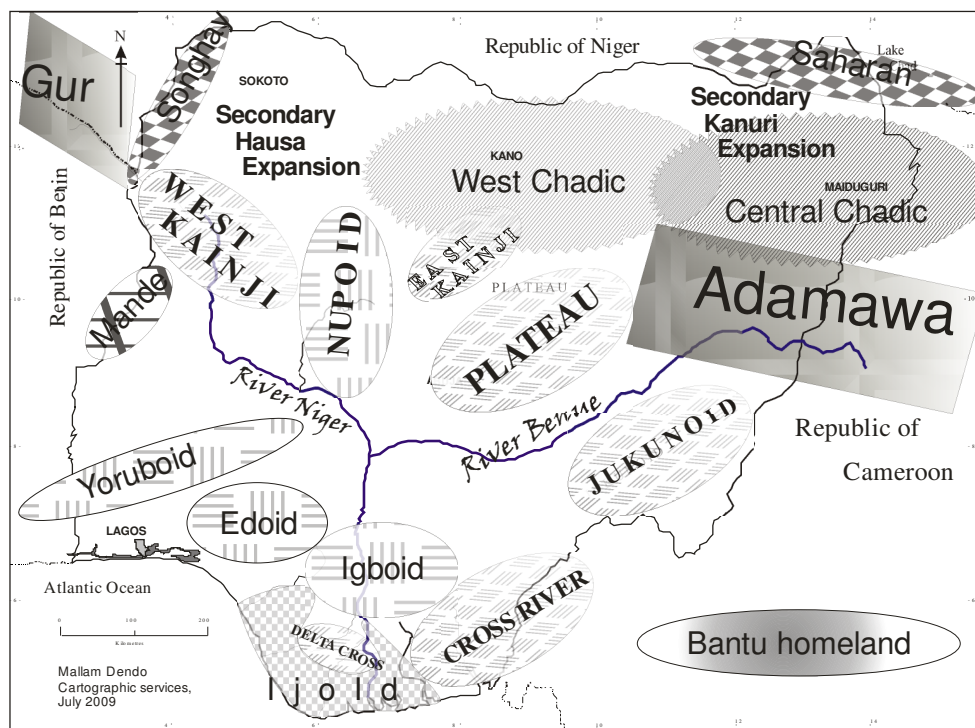
The Chadic languages are spread between the Sudan border and western Nigeria. Chadic is a branch of Afroasiatic, which also includes Arabic, the Berber languages, Ancient Egyptian and the languages of Ethiopia. The exact placing of Chadic within Afroasiatic is controversial, but various phonological and lexical elements make a connection with the Cushitic languages of Ethiopia credible (Blench 1999; in press). If so, then proto-Chadic speakers may have migrated westwards along the now dry Wadi Hawar, which runs from almost the confluence of the Blue and White Niles to the borders of eastern Chad (Keding 2002; Keding and Eisenhauer 2007). These early migrants would have been both cattle-keepers and fishermen², rather like the Dinka and Nuer today. They must have reached Lake Chad 3-4000 years ago, since the Wadi Hawar subsequently dried up. Archaeology in the Lake Chad Basin has revealed a striking development of proto-urbanism in the region from about 3800 BP onwards (Kottusch 1999; Magnavita 2004; Magnavita and Magnavita 2001). This almost certainly reflects incoming Chadic populations; either they are building these themselves, or else the resident populations begin to form concentrated settlements to protect themselves against mobile and possibly militarised pastoralists.

Upon reaching Lake Chad, Chadic speakers 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

² Richard Gravina (p.c.) notes that both 'fish' and 'cattle' can be reconstructed for Central Chadic but there is no certain evidence for cereal crops.

Cameroun 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 taurine breeds.

Map 4: Expansion of Chadic and Volta-Niger



West and Central Chadic attest a form for ‘cow’ something like *la-* with likely cognates in East Chadic, and these are also reflected in other branches of Afroasiatic. Table 4 shows attestations of the *#la* root in Afroasiatic.

Table 4: #la cow, cattle

Family	Branch	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Cushitic	Agaw	Bilin	ləwi	cow
Cushitic	East	Gedeo	lali	cattle
Cushitic		Oromo	loon	cattle
Cushitic	West Rift	Iraqw	lee	cow
Chadic	West	Ngizim	là	cow
Chadic	Central	Ga'anda	là	cow
Semitic	Central	Akkadian	luu	bull
Semitic		Arabic	laʔan	bull
Semitic		Jibbāli	léʔ/lhóti	cow

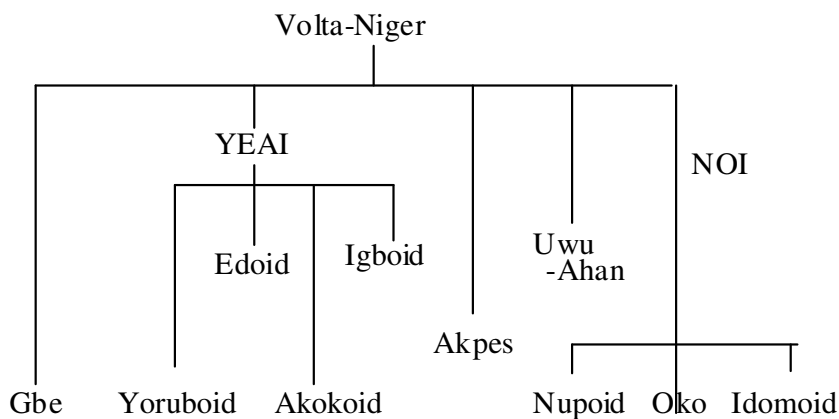
Hausa must have undergone a secondary expansion about 1000 years ago, coinciding with the first tentative steps towards centralised political authority in Gobir and Rano (see essays in Haour and Rossi 2010). By the fourteenth century, all the major polities had Muslim rulers and began to develop effective military systems, embarking on an expansion which further fragmented up the Kainji and Plateau populations and pressed Adamawa languages south and east. This expansion was probably driven by the gradual evolution of centralised kingdoms, which included access to both new systems of military organisation and craft specialisation. *Photo 2* shows an archaic type of bronze knife from Hausaland, presumably from an era before iron became widespread. At a similar era 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 north-east Nigeria in the thirteenth century and Tuareg herders began moving into the Nigerian borderlands in the early twentieth century.

Photo 2: Archaic bronze knife, Hausaland (source: author's collection)

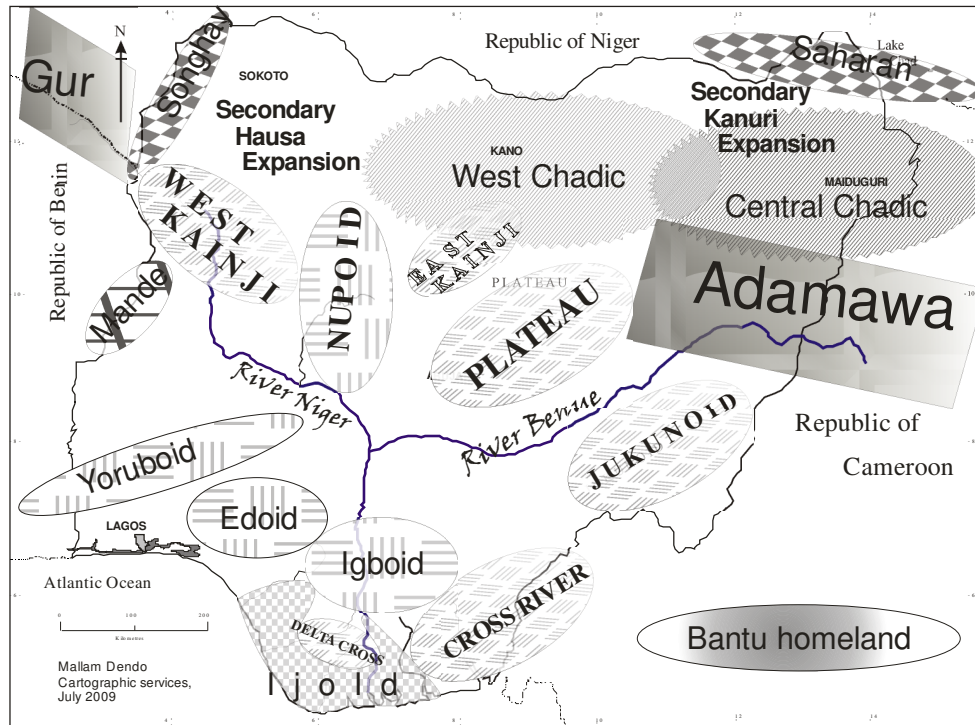
8 Volta-Niger (also 'Eastern Kwa' or 'West Benue-Congo')

The language subgroup known as 'Volta-Niger' or formerly 'Eastern Kwa' or 'West Benue-Congo' consists of Yoruboid, Nupoid, Igboid and the Gbe languages which include Ewe and Fon outside Nigeria. 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 4 shows the subclassification of Volta-Niger languages and Map 5 the likely pattern of dispersal.

Figure 4: Volta-Niger languages

Map 5. Expansion of Chadic and Volta-Niger



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

Table 5: The reconstructible term #ile, ‘profit’ in Volta-Niger languages

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

9 Ijoid

The Ijoid languages (Map 6), 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 a small language, Defaka (Jenewari 1983; Williamson 1998), but they are very remote from the other branches of Niger-Congo, both in terms of syntax and morphology as well as their lexicon. 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 Ijò proto-language. There must once have been more languages related to Defaka which have since disappeared, reflecting an early wave of migrants to the Delta almost erased by the expansion of Ijò proper or the incoming Lower Cross and Ogonic groups. Their fishing skills suggest that their origin may be a mobile fishing people from the Upper Niger, somewhat like today’s Sorko people (Ligers 1964-1969). As Map 6 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 Ijò.

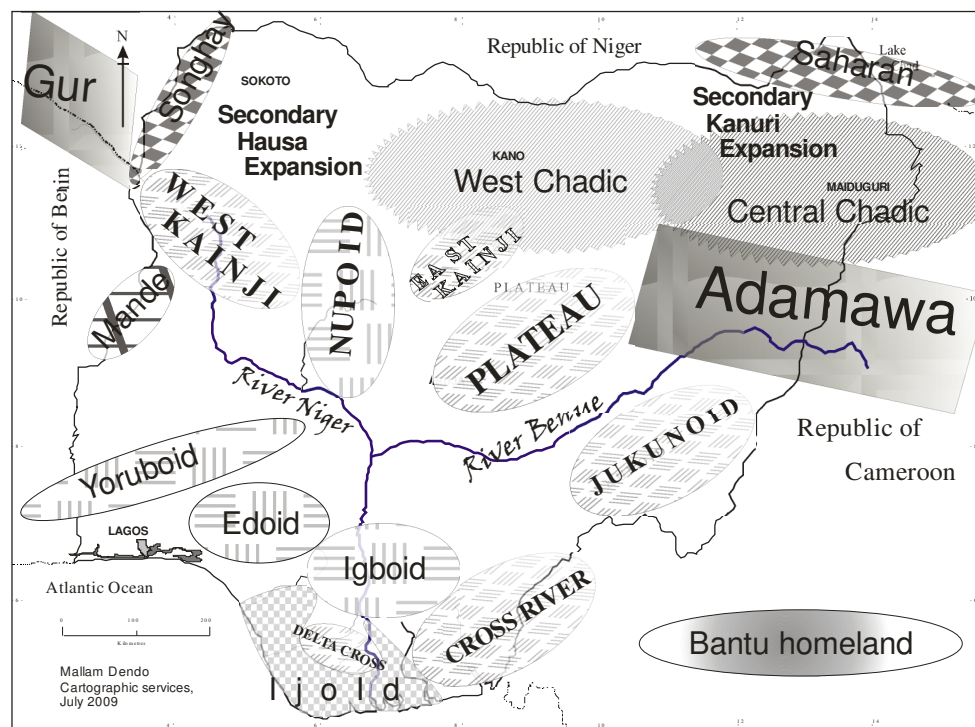
An intriguing piece of supporting evidence is the name of the manatee (i.e. sea cow), *Trichechus senegalensis*, which has a common root shared between Bamana, a Mande language spoken in Mali, and proto-Ijò as well as a possible Bantu cognate (Table 6).

Table 6: A scattered root for ‘manatee’

Family	Language	Attestation
Ijoid	P-Ijò	iměĩ
Mande	Bamana	măĩ
Bantu	Proto-Bantu	*manga

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.

Map 6: Ijoid and surrounding languages



10 Bantu

The Bantu expansion is outside the general area of this paper, but 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 State (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 introduced into the graphic representation. They are closely related to the Bantu A60 languages and they have only not been treated as Bantu because their nominal prefixes are now 'frozen', possibly due to contact with Chadic (for example, they are excluded from

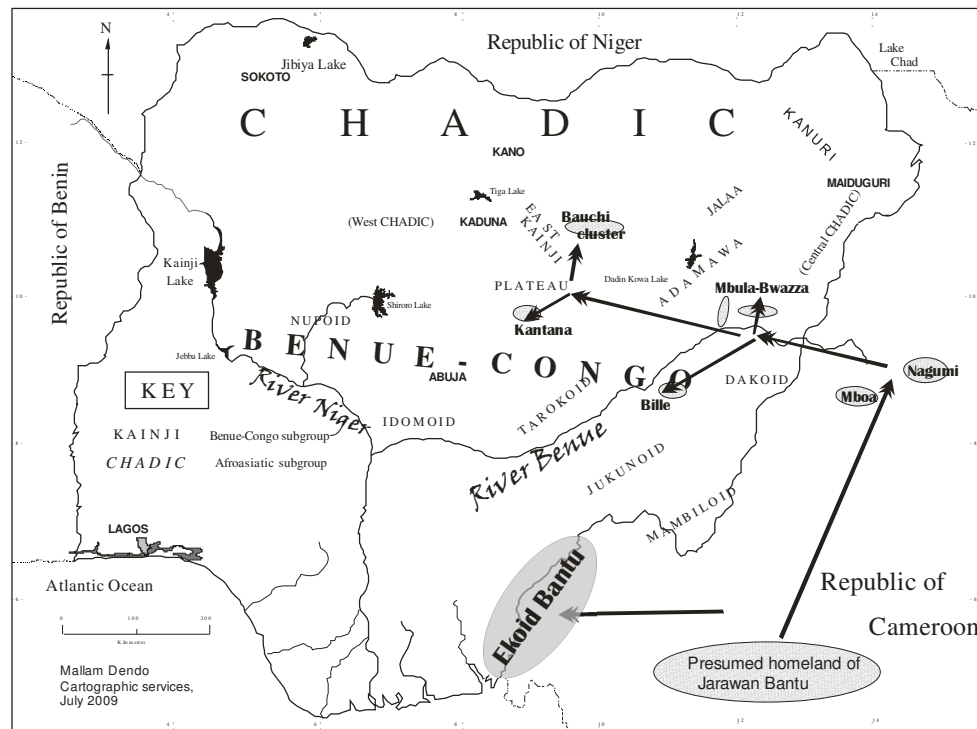
the standard reference text, Nurse and Philippson 2003). On lexical grounds they should be treated as Bantu proper as their exclusion is typological rather than genetic. That said, there is no explanation for their curious distribution and no archaeological or genetic work to explain such a migration 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 7 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. However, civil insecurity, for example in the Niger Delta, has effectively brought all types of 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.

Map 7: The expansion of the Jarawan and Ekoid Bantu



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