

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

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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, 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

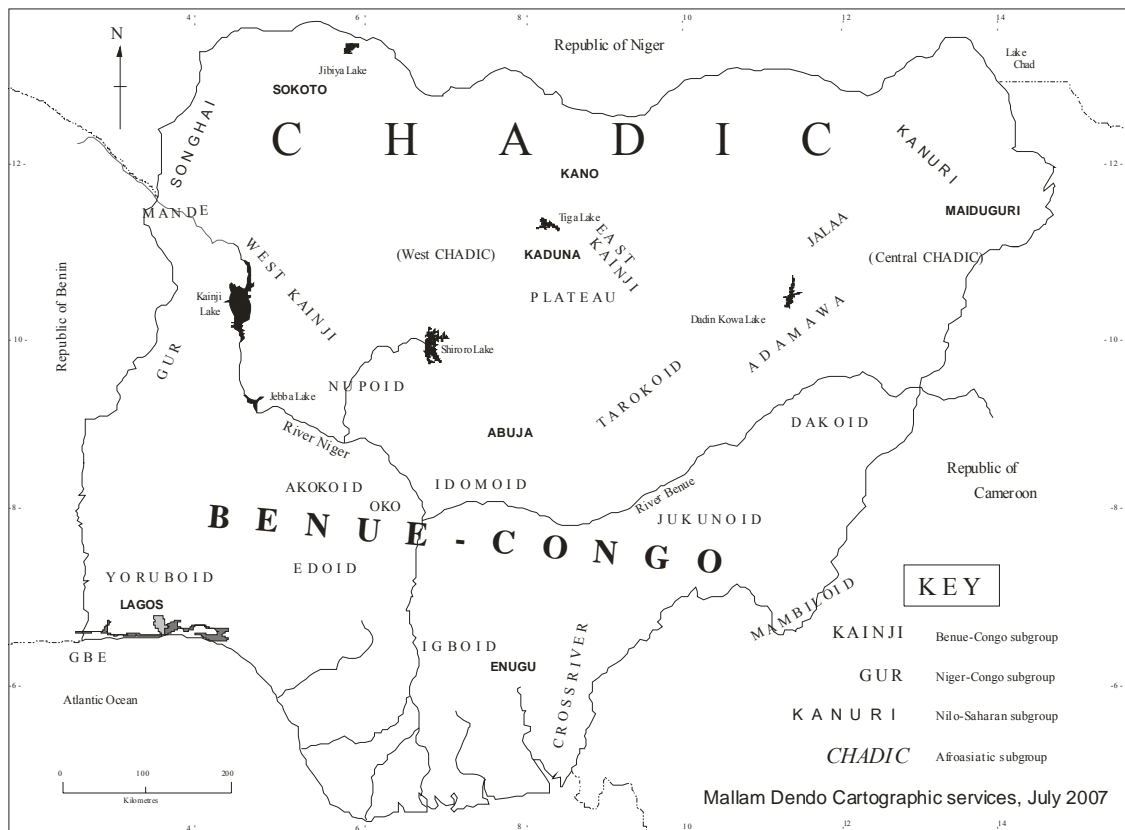
Nigeria is one of the regions of Africa where three of its four language phyla overlap and interact. Table 1 shows the phyla and the families represented in Nigeria.

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

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.

Map 1. Language families of Nigeria



3. Jalaa: a language isolate

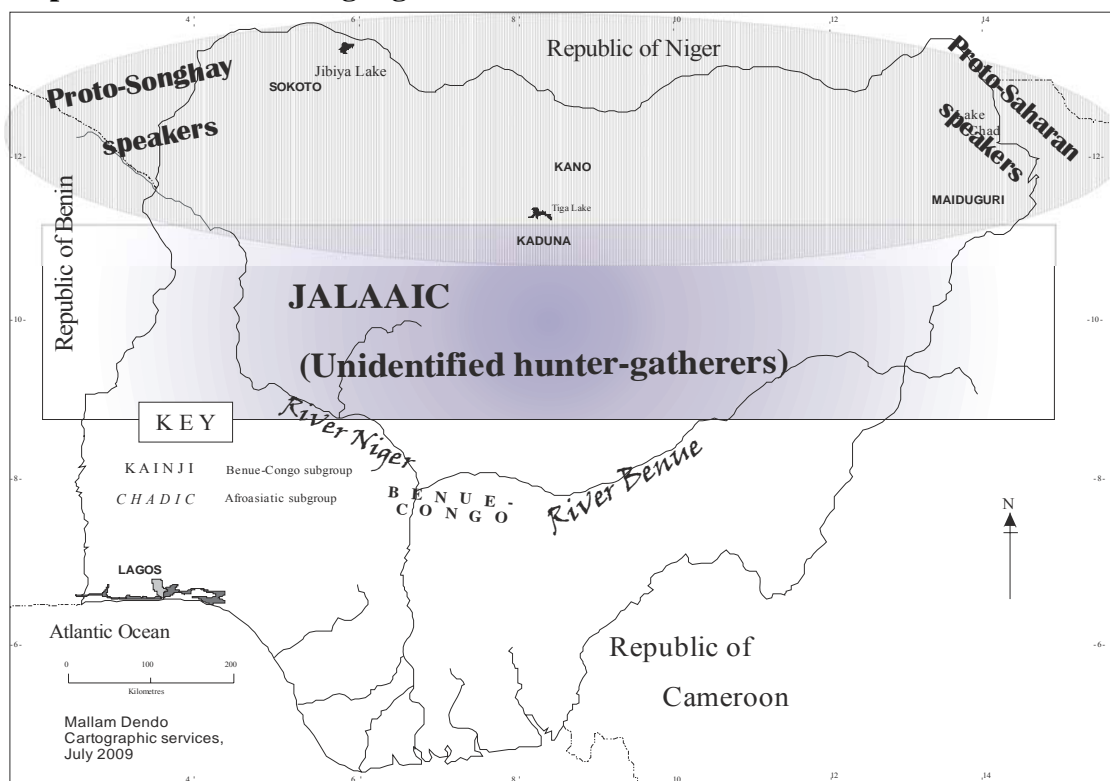
Nigeria has a single language isolate, the Jalaa or Cen Tuum language, spoken among the Cham in the Gombe area of NE Nigeria (Kleinwillinghöfer 2001). Jalaa, like Laal in Chad, has a significant proportion of loanwords from a scatter of neighbouring

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 Jalaal. This is represented as ‘Jalaalic’ on the map, as a representative of a now-vanished language family. Evidence from Mali (Onjougou), Birimi (Ghana) and Shum Laka (Cameroun) puts the settlement of West Africa by modern humans at least ca. 40,000 BP.

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).

Map 2. Nilo-Saharan languages



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 & 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 as this spreads 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.

Photo 1. Terracotta hippo from Lake Chad



Courtesy Peter Breunig

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		Kokit	baŋa
Maba		Aiki	bùngùr
CS	Sara	Nar	àbà
Songhay		Kaado	bàŋà
Songhay		Koyra Chiini	baŋa

Table 3. Cognates for ‘crocodile’ in Nilo-Saharan languages

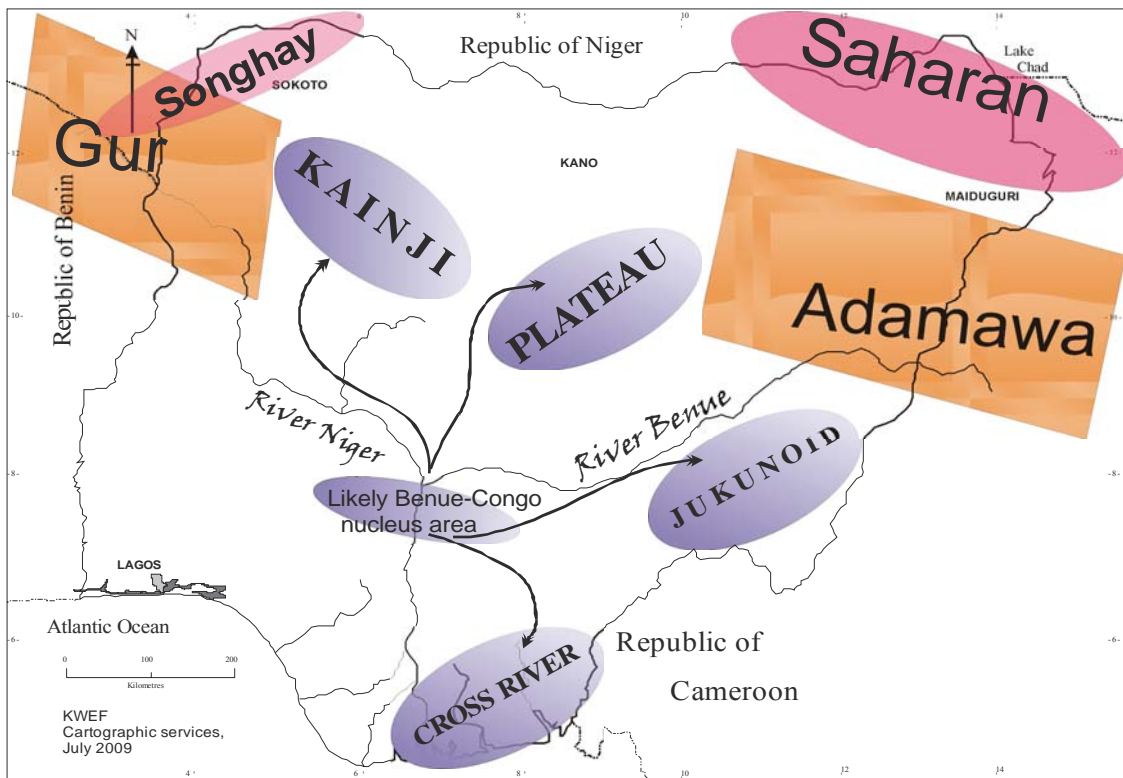
Family	Language	Attestation	Attestation
Koman	Uduk	ànàŋà	
Kuliak	Ik	nyeti-nyáŋ	
Eastern Sudanic	Proto-Nilotic	ŋaŋ	
Eastern Sudanic	Gaam	ŋaŋ	
Maba	Aiki		gòrndí
Saharan	Kanuri		kárám
Songhay	Zarma		kààrà̀y

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.

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. 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.).

Map 3. Gur-Adamawa and Benue-Congo expansions



6. Benue-Congo

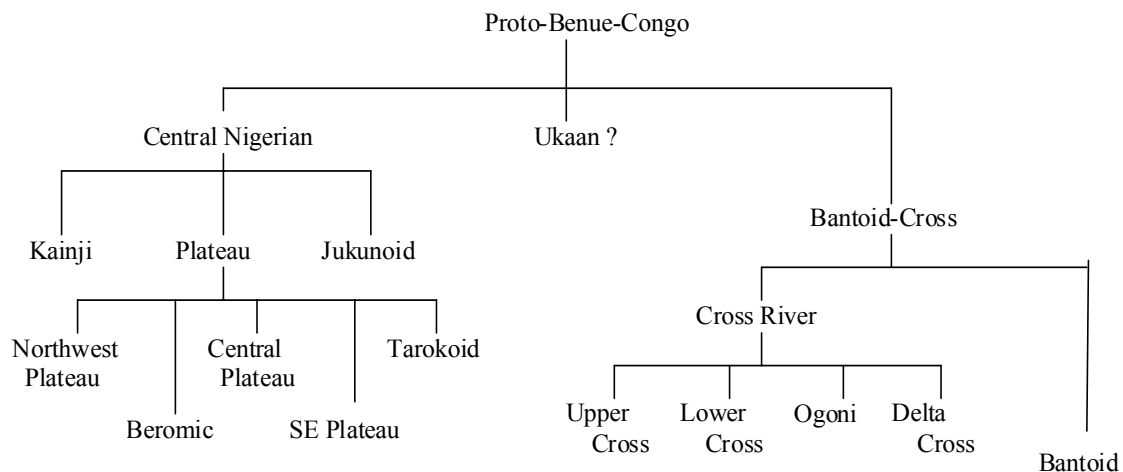
The Benue-Congo languages, including Plateau, Cross River, Kainji, Jukunoid and other smaller groups predominate in the centre and east of Nigeria and one branch of them also gave rise to Bantoid and Bantu. Figure 1 shows a major reclassification of the Benue-Congo languages, incorporating recent research 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 7.4-6.7 kya and it is conceivable that a shortage of game to hunt caused the original dispersal of Benue-Congo.

Figure 1. Revised subclassification of Benue-Congo languages



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 taurine breeds.

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 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 begin incursions into NE Nigeria in the 13th century and Tuareg herders began moving the Nigerian borderlands in the twentieth century.

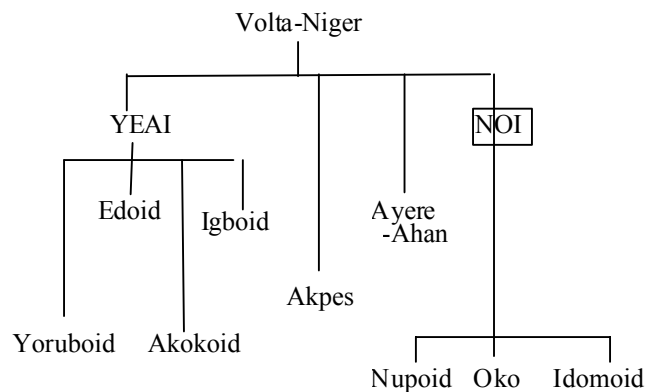
Photo 2. Archaic bronze knife, Hausaland



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

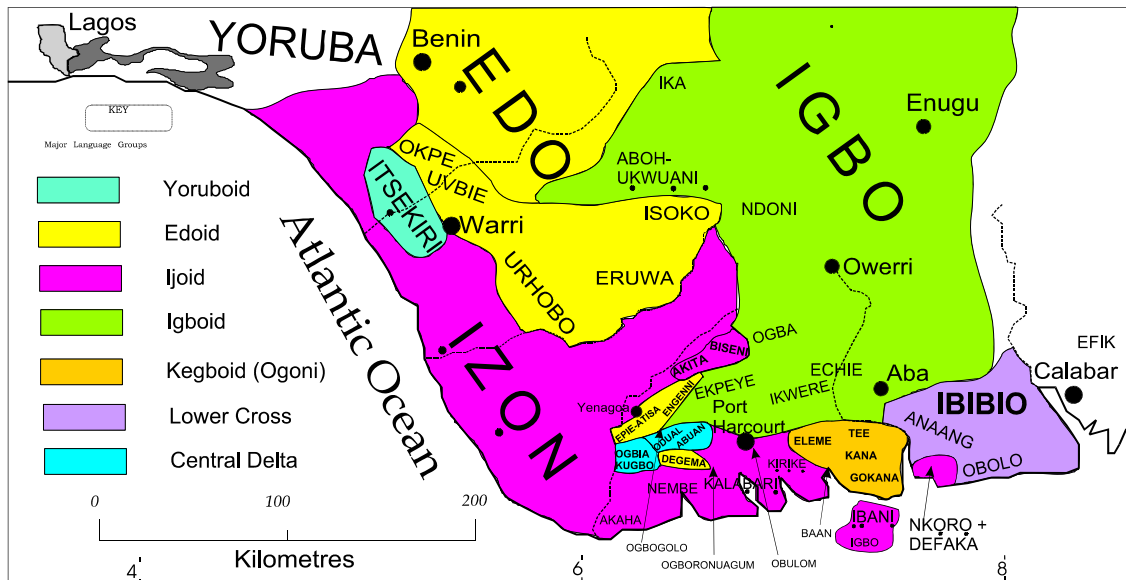
The language subgroup known as ‘Volta-Niger’ or formerly ‘Eastern Kwa’ or ‘West Benue-Congo’ consists of Yoruboid, Nupoid, Igboid, Ewe etc. On the principle of ‘least moves’, its likely homeland was west of the Niger-Benue confluence. The Nupoid languages expanded northwards and have broken apart the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

Figure 2. Volta-Niger languages



the expansion of Ijọ 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 I iger, 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 Ijọ.

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-Ijọ as well as a possible Bantu cognate (Table 5).

Table 5. A scattered root for 'manatee'

Family	Language	Attestation
Ijoid	P-Ijọ	iměĩ
Mande	Bamana	mãĩ
Bantu	Proto-Bantu	*manga

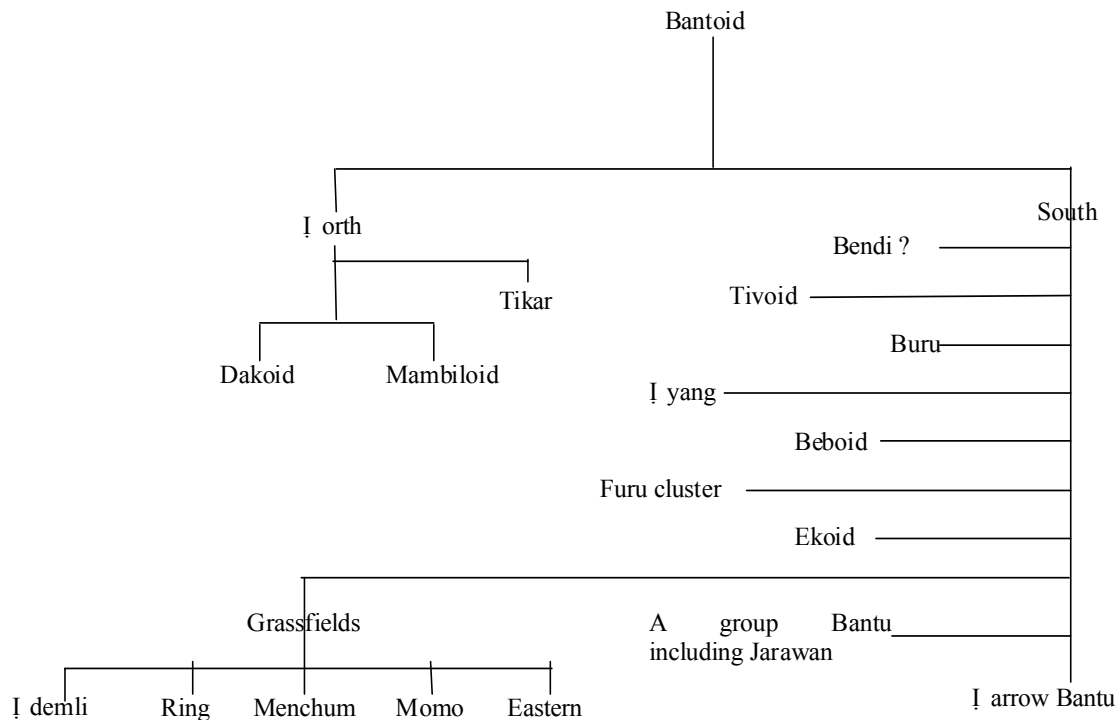
Manatees were extensively hunted until recent times all along the I iger and this common root may well be evidence for the more remote origin of the Ijọ-speaking peoples.

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 I igeria-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 Cameroun/Gabon. Recent excavations (and finds of millet etc.) in Southern Cameroun suggest we do not understand this environment as well as we had imagined.

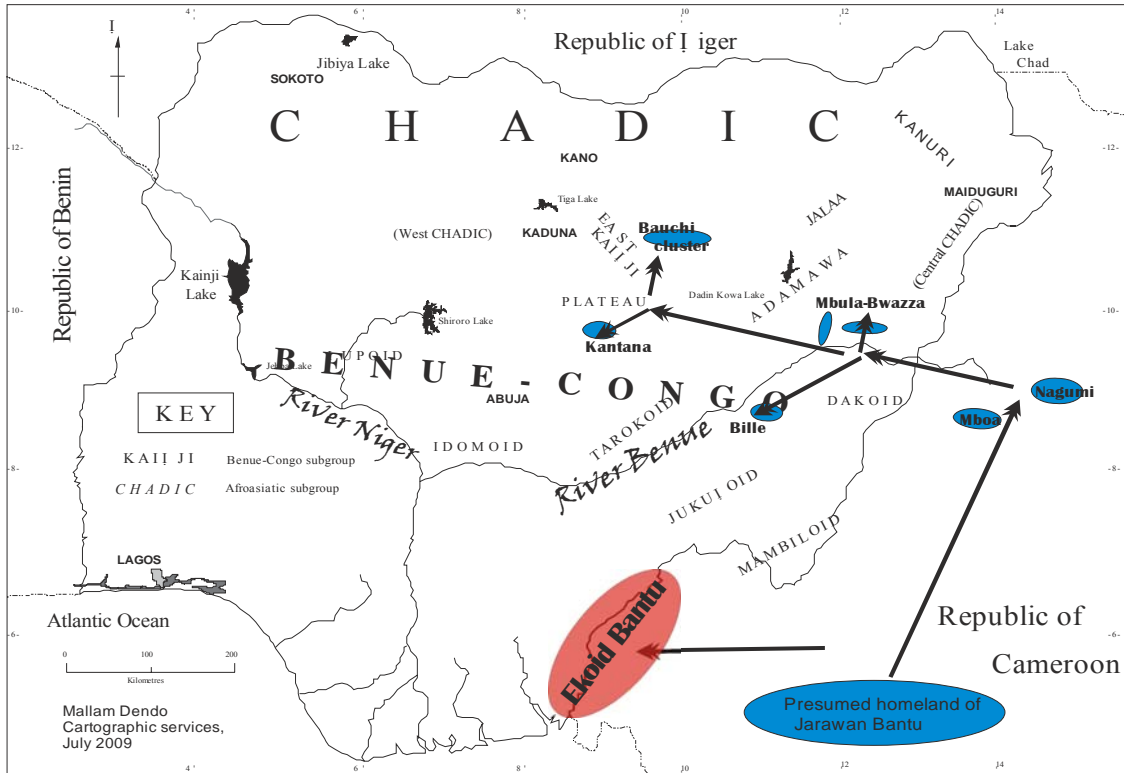
Figure 3 shows a speculative summary that includes all the language groups that have been described that as it were ‘stand between’ Eastern Benue-Congo and I arrow Bantu. These languages are very numerous (>200) and also highly diverse morphologically. It seems likely that new languages are yet to be discovered and more work in historical reconstruction will improve our understanding of how these languages relate to one another.

Figure 3. Genetic tree of Bantoid languages



A quirky aspect of the Bantu expansion usually excluded from textbook accounts is the ‘Bantu who turned I orth’. The Jarawan Bantu languages form a closely related cluster, scattered across north-central Cameroun and west into I igeria, 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 introduced into the graphic representation. They are very 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, I urse & 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 I igeria/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.

Map 6. The expansion of the Jarawan and Ekoid Bantu



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 Nigeria 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 others 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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