

Weeping over the disappearance of Nigeria's minority languages: how to get more reliable information and what to do about it

Jos Linguistic Circle

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Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

Clichés about Nigerian languages

- A now-standard media item is panic over the loss of Nigerian languages
- According to these pronouncements, Nigeria has xx languages (fill in random figure), yy of them are endangered/no longer spoken by young people
- In zz years, a random percentage will be dead
- This is leading to ‘irreparable loss of cultural heritage’ and other grievous occurrences
- A National Consultative Forum on Nigerian Endangered Languages on the theme, “Creating Strategies for Preventing Endangered Languages,” organized by the Federal Ministry of Information and Culture, took place recently at the Galaxy Hall of the Reiz Continental Hotel, Abuja, the Federal Capital Territory.

Clichés about Nigerian languages

- The Honourable Minister of Information and Culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, said, “it is no longer news that nearly 80% of Nigerian youths, especially those between the age bracket (2-18) years, find it difficult to speak their mother tongue fluently or do not speak them at all and that language as a means of communication holds the key to the processes that lead to national and global integration and harmony among peoples.”
- Welcoming guest at the event, the Director of Cultural Industries and Heritage, Mr. Seyi Womiloju, stated that more than 400 Nigerian indigenous languages are endangered; and that, if care is not taken, these languages will go extinct in next 50 years.
- The lists of invitees suggest this is really the elite talking to one another

Panic!

Help, Nigerian languages are disappearing!

Posted By: ADEKUNLE YUSUF on: November 13, 2013 In: News 4 Comments

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•Yoruba masquerades: The young generations are losing touch with the language and culture

Panic!

The Need To Save Our Nigerian Languages

Posted by alhazai | Date: December 15, 2014 | in: REVIEWS



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A recent research by UNESCO showed that 25 per cent of children below the age 11 years are not able to speak their parents' indigenous language in Nigeria, and noted that if the trend continued unchecked, Nigerian languages would be on the extinction slope in two to three generations. Last week, the Head of Languages of Federal Ministry of Education, Rev Anota Ademola, said that Nigeria may lose 152 local languages that are currently hardly spoken but need some form of preservation.

Speaking in Lagos at the launch of a multimedia product created to teach indigenous languages, he pointed out that if attention was not paid to the estimated 400 languages spoken in Nigeria, many would disappear. He said local languages are not being taught to children in their homes. This was not however the first time concerns would be raised to draw attention to the threat faced by indigenous languages that may lead to their extinction.

Panic!

Indigenous Languages On Brink Of Extinction

Chika Okeke

— Nov 27, 2015 2:53 am | [Leave a comment](#)

Nigeria is blessed with 520 languages out of the 7,000 languages worldwide. It is a notable fact that languages are lost every five minutes which attests to the fact that more than 400 Nigerian languages are endangered.

Loss of language is not peculiar to Nigeria but without precautionary measures, the languages may be extinct in the next 50 years but in a bid to salvage the situation, the Ministry of Information and Culture organised a Consultative Forum on Endangered Indigenous Languages involving experts in the industry such as ethnographers, sociologists, and linguists.

In his address, the minister of information and culture, Alhaji Lai Mohammed, said that western education and globalisation, with its attendant effect on African languages, have set Africa back significantly in the area of linguists which he described as the cornerstone of every nations development.

He recalled that 80 per cent of Nigerians, especially those between the ages of 2 to 18 years, find it difficult to speak their mother tongue, stressing that language as a means of communication leads to national and global integration as well as harmony among the people. He revealed that the erosion of any language can be likened to the burning down of a library, noting that languages also embody the norms, values, traditions, ethos, and the artistic creations of the people thereby shaping their cultures and civilisations.

Don't panic!

Globalization, dying languages and the futility of saving them

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Abstract

Globalization is the process of interdependent connection across societies. As a result of globalization, the prior minimalist-interactionist relationship between cultures and societies has been replaced with increased linkage of societies in economics, technology, politics, culture, and language, to mention a few. In this view, it is practically difficult for any society to claim to have its own cultural domain where its language alone holds sway in the conduct of its affairs. The ever increasing linguistic interactions between what has come to be known as the developed(1) world (with mainstream languages) on the one hand and the developing world (with weak languages) on the other do not occur in a neutral fashion. Rather, globalization creates a sociolinguistic behavior that favors the expansion and acquisition of mainstream languages at the expense of the less empowered languages that have increasingly become endangered. On the basis of this, one of the main concerns of linguists is to save so-called endangered languages. Some of the good reasons warranting the activity of saving endangered language include: documenting human heritage; undertaking language typology, particularly in the absence of writing; conserving human history; satisfying intellectual curiosity as well as folkloristic pleasure, etc. In this paper, I argue that this activity is pointless and futile because of a whole gamut of constraints. Part of which is that a saved language is not a language indeed. Also, I argue that if a language dies, i.e., is abandoned by its speakers because it cannot aid them on the global stage, there is no basis for the preservation of such a language.

What do all these have in common?

- ❖ The surnames tell you that these pieces are written by the dominant majority ethnic groups, whose knowledge of the actual status of Nigerian minority languages may be rather slight
- ❖ The contradictions between all the figures suggest rather strongly that the 'research' underlying them may be limited
- ❖ And that all this talk is just sentimentalism, since where is the evidence that there is any serious expenditure on the promotion of survey, study and teaching of minority languages?
- ❖ Don't get me wrong, it is better the elites are talking about this than not, but rational evaluation of the situation, in particular assessing what we don't know and why is more productive than endless pronouncements not grounded in reality

Why prefer vague data to precise data?

- Because tracking down, evaluating and reading all that stuff, not all written in English, is a drag
- And anyway, there is much that can only be found out by talking to people
- Does it matter, if we take away the message that the situation is serious?
- Yes it does, because we need to set priorities both globally and locally for the utilisation of scarce resources.
- Despite the vast amount of hot air, actual useful research into minority languages remains low level and often unreliable
- Or focused on strange topics, rather than baseline description
- This is partly the problem of Euro-American universities, whose priorities are certainly not with the speakers but with the seminar room

So what can we use for figures?

- Accurate figures help us prioritise. If a language is said to have 2000 speakers, but actually has 10, then our approach will clearly be different
- There are three main resources; Ethnologue, Glottolog and my updated 'Atlas of Nigerian Languages' which tries to make fresh field data available
- Each of these have their advantages and disadvantages
- **Ethnologue** is valuable because it has more complete information on alternative names and gives a wider range of data
- However, it is updated slowly, it is hard to get rid of bad information, and it strongly privileges information supplied by SIL members.
- Ethnologue has regular map updates which is valuable
- It omits data on (probably) extinct languages
- And now costs money to consult

Ethnologue stats

Nigeria total 527

520 living 7 extinct.

Of the living languages,

510 indigenous 10 are non-indigenous

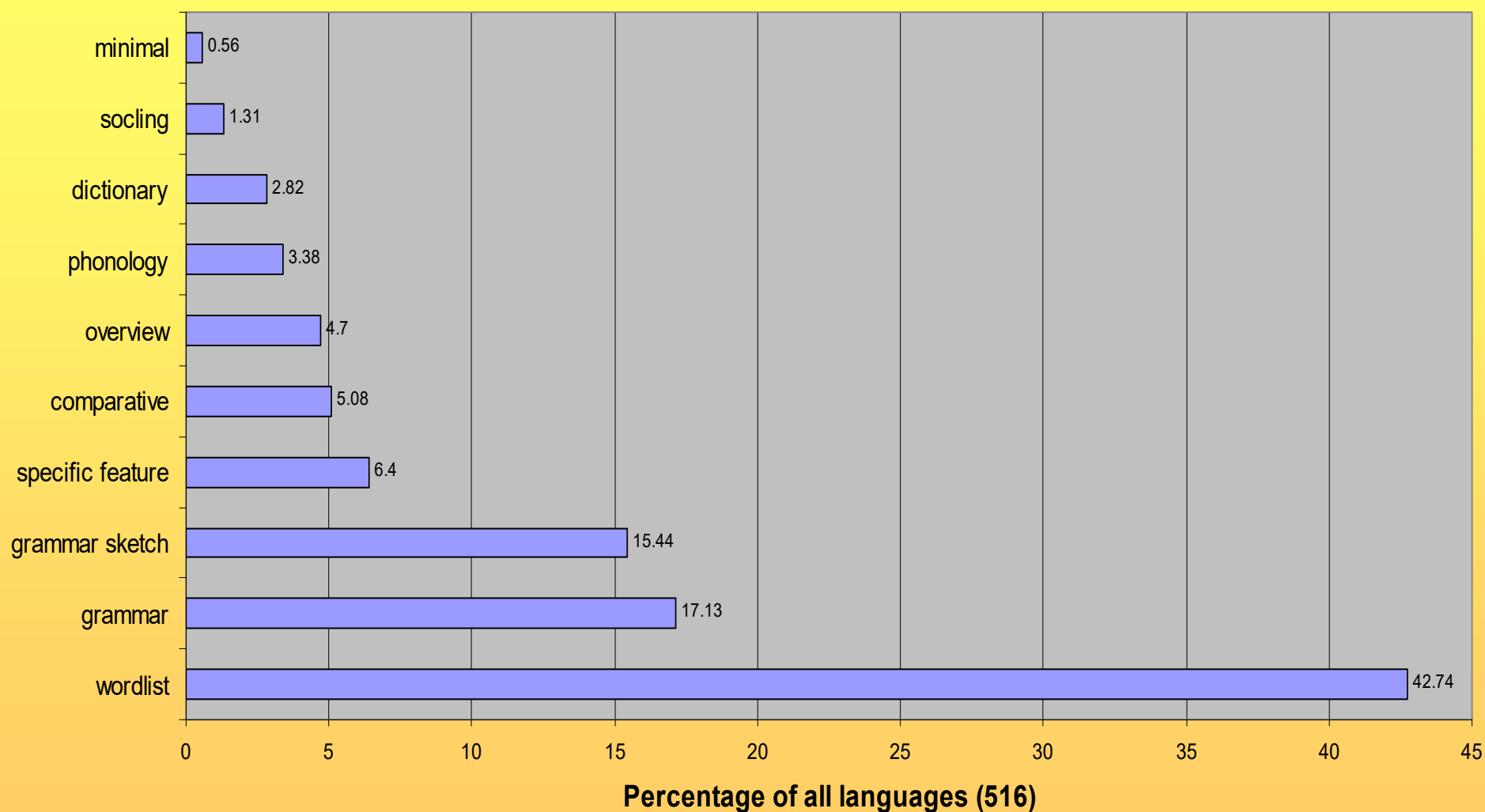
20 institutional 78 developing,

351 vigorous 27 in trouble 44 dying

So what can we use for figures? II

- Glottolog is a resource supported by the late MPI, Leipzig and curated by Harald Hammarstrom
- It is more comprehensive than Ethnologue but the data sheets on each language are far more scanty
- However, it does not privilege data from a particular source and has a much richer bibliographic resource
- So you can make more realistic estimates of the coverage of individual languages. And;
 - It is free
- The Atlas of Nigerian Languages is free, comprehensive and regularly updated with field data
- The bibliographic side is weak, and has deteriorated since Glottolog has improved
- It is the most comprehensive on the weakness of documentation

What information do we have?



Courtesy Harald Hammarstrom

Why do the totals for languages differ? I

- Different resources give different totals for the number of languages in Nigeria. Why should this be so?
 - Elm House noticeboard 537
 - Ethnologue (17th ed.) 527 (520 living)
 - Glottolog 2.7 529 (516 living)
 - Atlas 485
- This revolves around two issues, the inclusion of extinct languages and whether distinct ethnolinguistic groups are treated as language clusters.
- The Atlas has historically been a 'lumper' treating all the Igbo and Ijò languages under a single head. This is satisfying linguistically, but as each group develops its distinct history may be less so in practice.

Why do the totals for languages differ? II

- Elm House noticeboard includes some languages known to be extinct
- Ethnologue includes recently extinct languages, but not those which disappeared earlier in the century.
- Ethnologue is a splitter, dividing languages like Fuldulde under different subheads.
- So it is unlikely we will come to an agreed total, and probably need to accept the figure is dynamic.

Bible translation and scripture

- Bible translation is the most important engine of literacy and text creation.
- Current figures are;

❖ Entire Bible	23
❖ New Testament	82
❖ Translation Project	141
❖ Total	246
- Note that this number exceeds the number of languages which have dictionaries and grammars by far
- This suggests that the analytic base for some projects must be very weak
- Newly adopted policies will try to ensure that orthographies hastily devised have stronger linguistic support

Quality analysis depends on reading the literature

- By now, the volume of publication on Nigerian languages is quite extensive. However, except for major languages, individual languages remain sparsely described
- So a basic principle of developing descriptions is to read what has already been written
- This might seem obvious, but in fact many literacy projects begin with no consultation of previous publications and frequently either re-invent the wheel or worse, get it wrong
- Almost everything except the most obscure publications has now been scanned by somebody somewhere, you just have to search it out

What are the other things we might now want to know? I

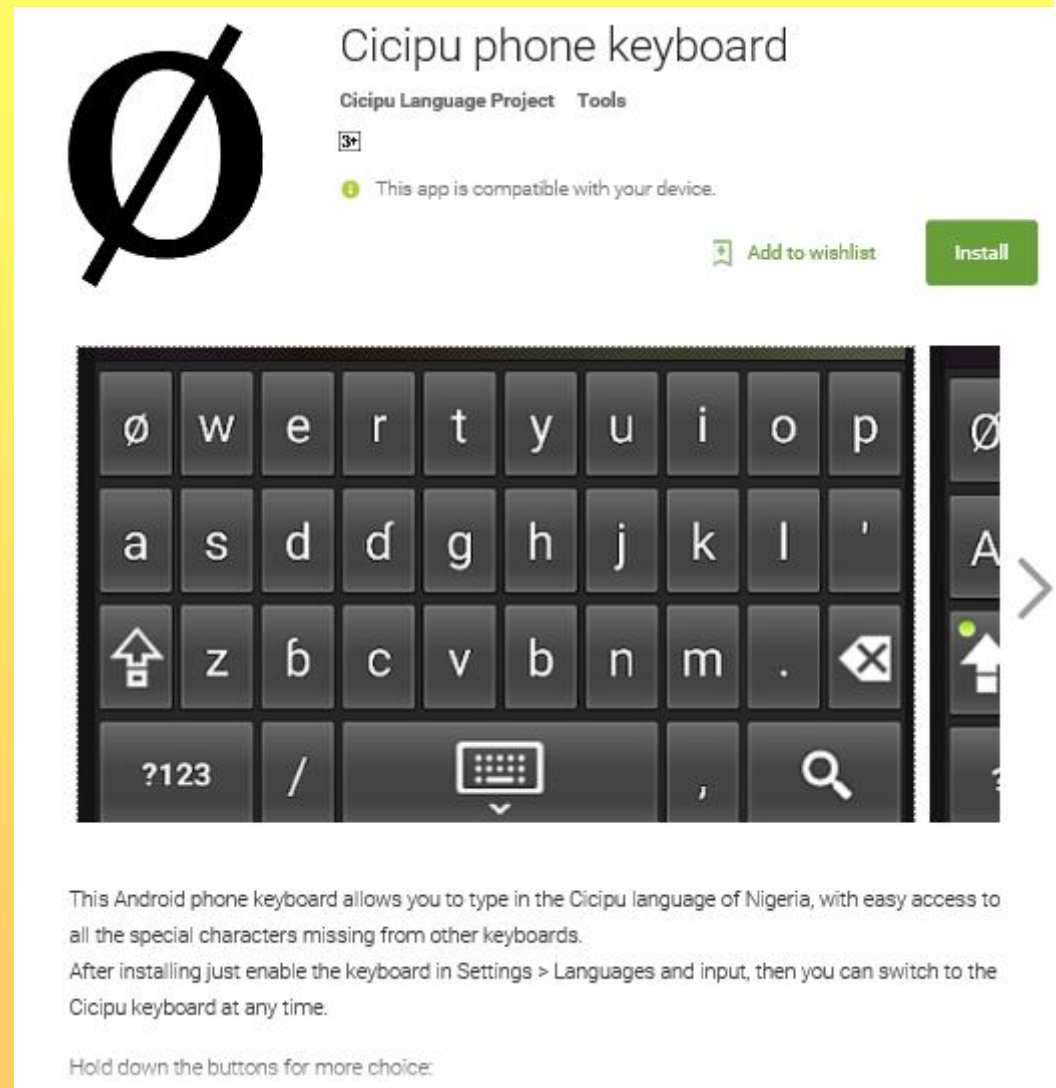
- Since the first edition of the Index (Hansford et al. 1976) technology has moved on and the listing of printed literature is only a small part of what we might want to know
- Something now covered by Ethnologue is sign language and we know that there are indigenous sign languages among the Hausa and the Bura.
- Probably there are more, but this has been little covered in survey work
- Scripts. The main indigenous script is Arabic, mostly in the form of Ajami. This is quite widespread for Hausa, and is certainly used for Fulfulde and Kanuri
- It was used for Nupe and other minority languages, but seems to have died out

What are the other things we might now want to know? II

- There are also 'dream-scripts' among the Hausa which have had short-lived followings
- And symbolic systems such as the Nsibidi among the Igbo which have sometimes been described as writing
- There are poorly catalogued collections of manuscripts in Arabic script which may represent other Nigerian languages
- The last decade has seen a major expansion in the numbers of languages broadcast on radio and television, partly because of the growth of private stations.
- Benue State, for example, broadcasts in eight languages
- There is no single source to refer to for information on this
- But clearly it affects language vitality, dialect choice, strongly

What are the other things we might now want to know? III

- Since 2005, social media has begun to affect how Nigerians communicate.
- Texting in particular has become popular and informal solutions to orthographic problems develop which are at variance with the established orthography
- The Cicipu Android keyboard (Stuart McGill) is surely the first of wave of adaptations



What are the other things we might now want to know? IV

- FB (which is terrible for special characters) is also in use, though quite how widely is as yet undocumented.
- And new 'apps' such as the ability to see a text scroll by on smartphone and hear it read simultaneously are working for Mwaghavul and maybe other languages.
- This has enormous potential for electronic dictionaries, for example.
- Larger languages, such as Hausa, Yoruba etc. have a thriving film industry, which supports dedicated television channels
- Generally speaking, we have to begin documenting languages in new ways appropriate to the 21st century

What is the problem?

- Ethnologue in particular suggests we have reliable information about the status of all languages which are placed on an EGIDS scale
- We don't. Apart from the fact that the situation is constantly changing, we probably have reliable data on well under half and even that may be many years out date.
- Quite often I am unable to track down even a wordlist of some languages, and there is no basis for their classification at all, except proximity
- Jorto (17,000 speakers in Ethnologue), but quite unknown to their neighbours, the Tal, is one example
- Many classifications are daughters of Carl Hoffmann's original mimeo and have been repeated without verification.

But how reliable is the information?

- This suggests that much of the information about smaller languages is very unreliable
- Something I can confirm after a great deal of survey work
- Most remarkable is the fact there are quite a few languages for which we have not a single scrap of data, not even a short wordlist
- There is a good argument for regarding these as ‘unclassifiable’ or a similar label
- If we don’t it is because we think we trust the source (often the late Carl Hoffmann)
- Hence my personal strategy of putting all data collected on the internet, so at least its basis can be ascertained
- But this does suggest that trying to establish the basic facts about individual languages should be a priority

Even documented languages are dynamic

- Information about the status of many languages remains static and is requoted from one document to another
- Often when rechecked it turns out to be highly inaccurate
- The situation of individual languages is constantly changing in response to non-linguistic factors
- If we are concerned with language revitalisation it is important to capture this dynamism
- Fulfulde, the language of Nigerian pastoralists is relatively well-documented, although the standard ethnographic descriptions are more than half a century old and of only historical value today
- By using non-linguistic information combined with published linguistic material we can build up a picture of the changing status of the language

The changing dynamics of Fulfulde

- The Fulfulde language is spoken mainly by nomadic pastoralists, with also some urban use in Adamawa and some status as an LWC
- The first data on it was collected in Cairo in 1808 and published in 1811. These were probably Adamawa speakers who had reached the Fezzan
- Seetzen refers to them as 'Arabs' but gives some samples of their language

XXVII. *Seetzens Reise - Nachrichten.* 225

XXVII.

Über die Phelláta-Araber südwärts von Fe-
fán, und deren Sprache; nebst einigen
Nachrichten von unterschiedlichen um-
herliegenden afrikanischen Ländern. Von
U. J. Seetzen in Kahira (Oct. 1808.)

The earliest phases of Fulfulde in Nigeria

- The FulBe probably entered Nigeria around the 15th century, coming from Senegambia and speaking an Atlantic language related to Sereer and thus very different from those in Nigeria.
- As the FulBe herded non-trypanotolerant cattle, they were confined to the Sahelian Belt for centuries due to high livestock mortality
- The process of urbanisation led to the evolution of city-dwelling Fulfulde speakers, Islamisation and eventually the Jihad of 1804.
- This led to a spread of Fulfulde in the urban centres of Hausaland and the Middle Belt, for example Nupe.
- In northern Nigeria it expanded in the 19th century with political dominance, and then collapsed as it gave way to Hausa
- Only in the Lamidate of Yola and adjacent polities in CAmeroun did it become established

Fulfulde: 16th century



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Fulfulde: 1820



Fulfulde expands following the Jihad and in the colonial era

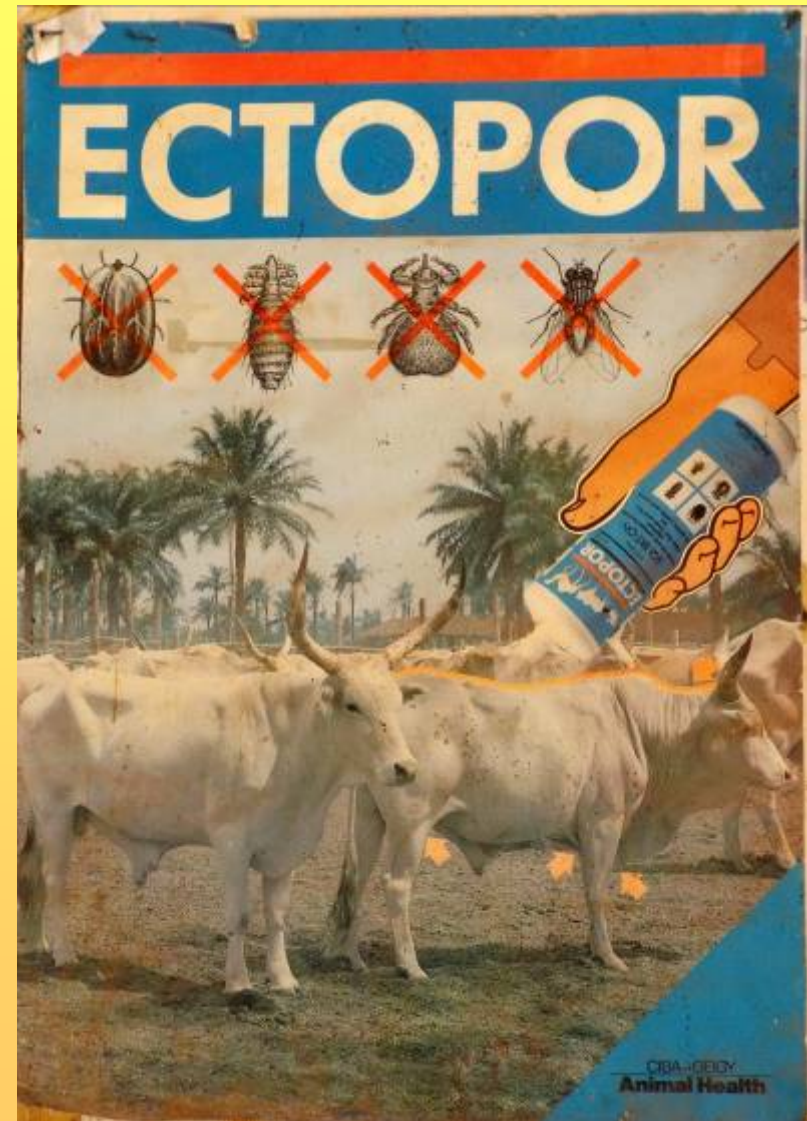
- The consolidation of political power of the Hausa Emirates in the nineteenth century and the expansion of slaving in the Middle Belt created new zones which pastoral FulBe could enter
- As a consequence, the herds gradually began to push further south
- This was encouraged in the colonial era, partly because the pastoral herds were seen as a potential source of meat and milk
- Hence the authorities began the process of tsetse spraying, opening up the subhumid areas.

Fulfulde: 1920

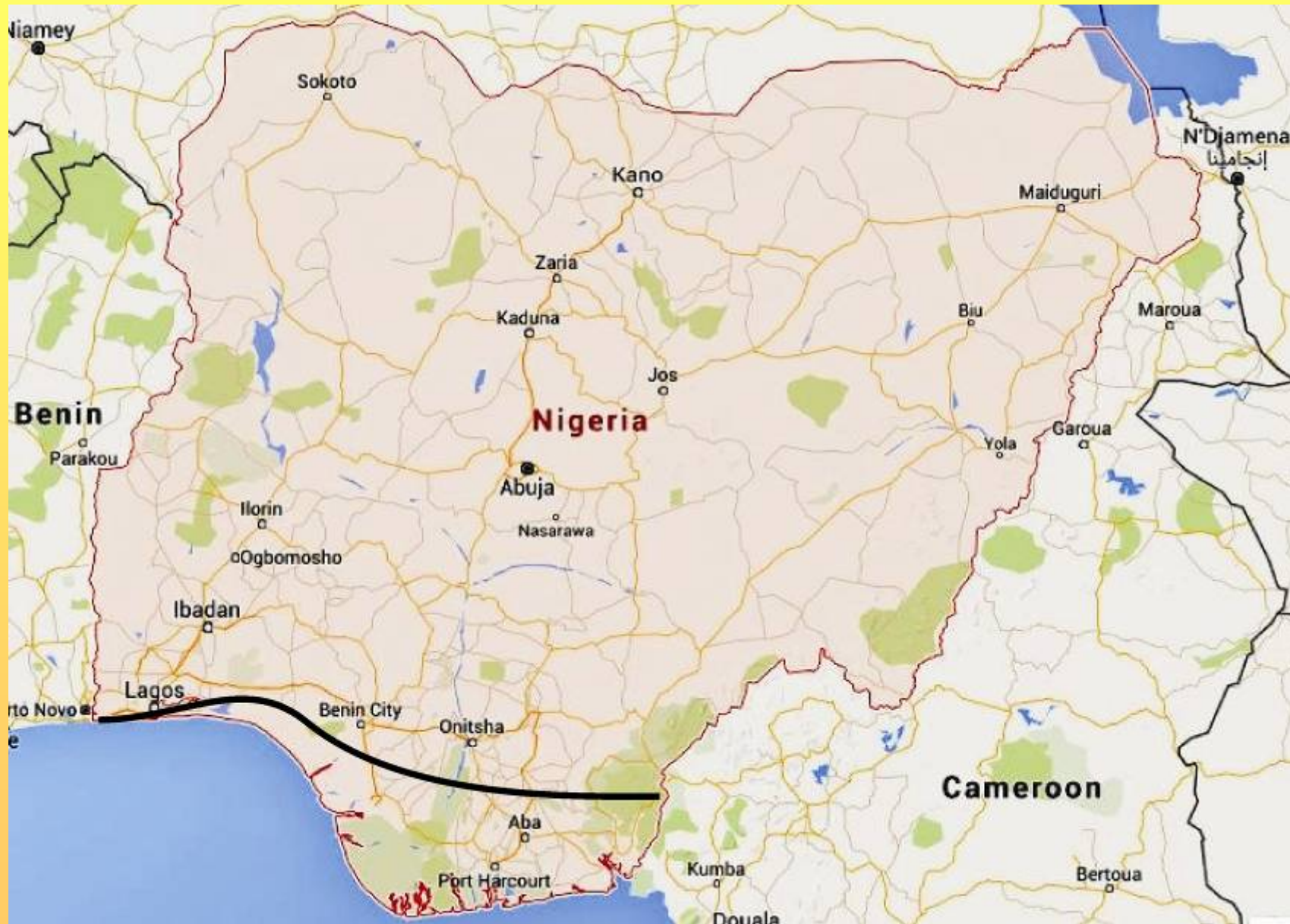


Fulfulde in 1950: the veterinary revolution

- New veterinary drugs made it increasingly possible for herders' animals to survive in hostile humid environments
- Increased forest clearance, urban demand for meat and milk all encouraged herders to press ever further south, even reaching the coast in the Lagos area (taking advantage of the 'Dahomey Gap')
- So-called 'pour-ons' have expanded the distribution of the language dramatically



Fulfulde: 1950



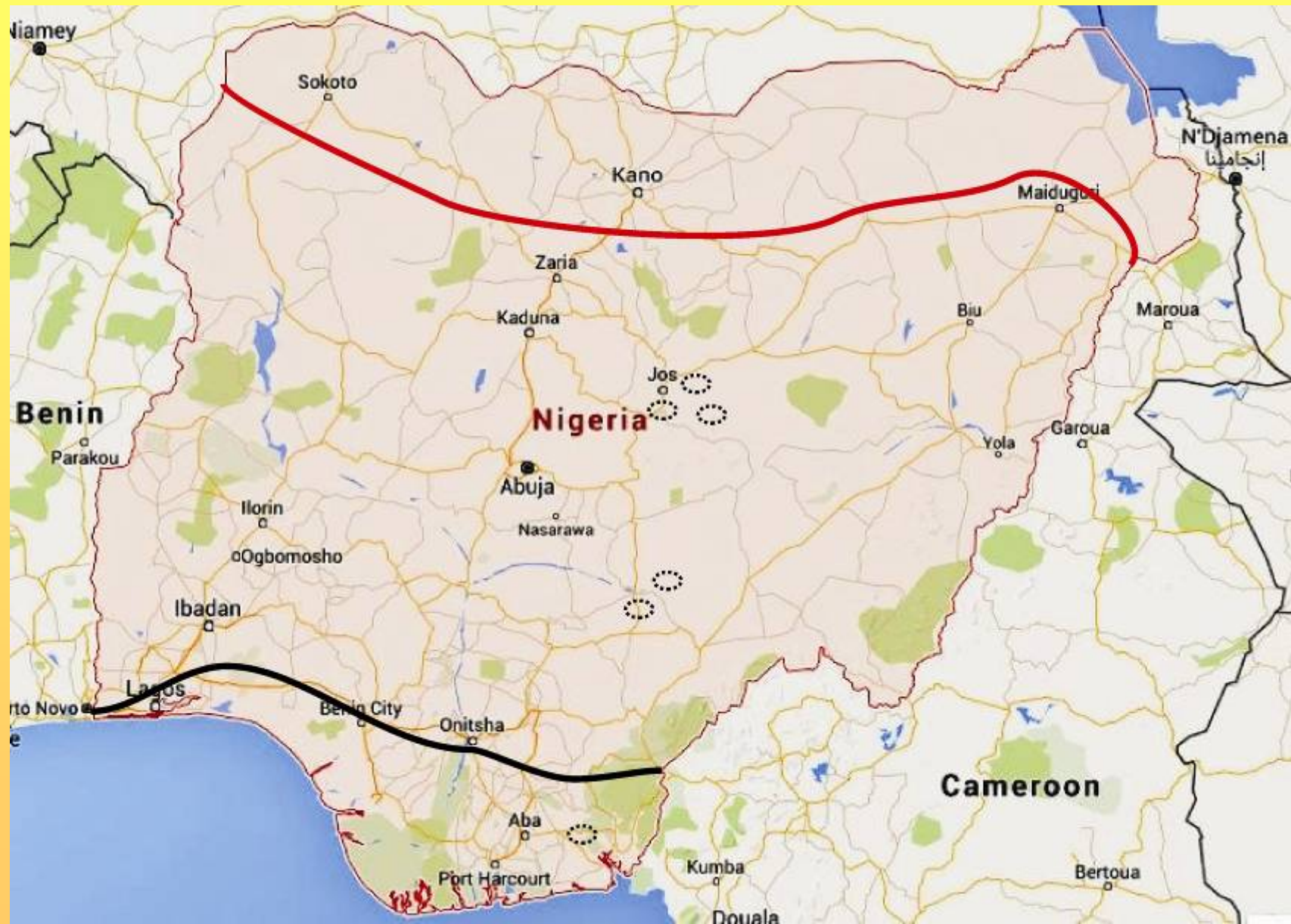
Fulfulde in 2016

- Interviews in February/March 2016 suggest some dramatic changes
- Many FulBe have fled the northeast because of the threat to their cattle and have appeared in Plateau/Taraba/Nassarawa and probably elsewhere
- Their villages are deserted, so we can conclude Fulfulfe has disappeared in much of this area.
- Meanwhile, Hausa has overtaken Fulfulde in much of the north, especially around Kano and Sokoto, and is effectively not spoken by the younger generation (2010 survey)
- The recent troubles have caused consolidation of FulBe into defensive communities in the Middle Belt, especially in Plateau, and it is now spoken in 'islands'. The lowered need to communicate with other peoples is strengthening the language
- Mahanga, near Gashish, is a striking example

The republic of Mahanga



Fulfulde: 21st century



General conclusions

- Nigeria remains one of the most linguistically diverse nations on earth; the comparisons are with Brazil and New Guinea
- Its languages are one of the least researched (as a percentage of total living languages). Coverage of the Amazon is comprehensive by comparison with Nigeria
- Its languages are some of the most threatened (by predator languages, globalisation etc.)
- It is one of the highest global producers of sentimental hot air about the status of its languages, unsupported by research and not followed up by resources and publication
- **So what is to be done?**

So what is to be done?

- Develop a profile backed by intensive reading of literature, reports, supported by actual references
- Be honest about what we don't know
- Put a much higher profile on collecting literature, finishing and circulating reports, contributing findings to major online databases, such as Ethnologue and Glottolog
- Subject data/studies/orthography proposals to professional scrutiny by publishing in international journals
- Develop consistent policies. It is no use having one policy in favour of small languages, and another ignoring them if they are deemed unsuitable for literacy development

Support survey. Every time I or anyone else does a survey, the results are usually different from published resources. You do not know what you are going to find out there.

THANKS

Thanks to many, many people over many, many years but esp. thanks to Harald Hammarstrom, Umaru Hassan and the late Barau Kato

To Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for support over the years

