

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND THE EVOLUTION OF LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES
NIGERIA

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It is a common observation that the colonial administration in Africa had a hand in the 'creation' of corporate ethnolinguistic units - 'tribes'. As a matter of convenience, they found it useful to assume that individuals could be assigned to particular ethnic groups, whose terrain could be localised. Their internal authority structures could then be manipulated to shore up the shaky foundations of relatively weak forms of government, like the 'Indirect Rule' practised in Nigeria after the British conquest. This frequently led to absurdities such as the assignment of the role 'chief' to individuals whose principal qualification was that they were regarded as expendable by the village community. Apart from this, the broader governmental structures into whose framework dispersed, acephalous peoples had to be fitted demanded a much higher degree of linguistic and ethnic self-definition than had previously been necessary.

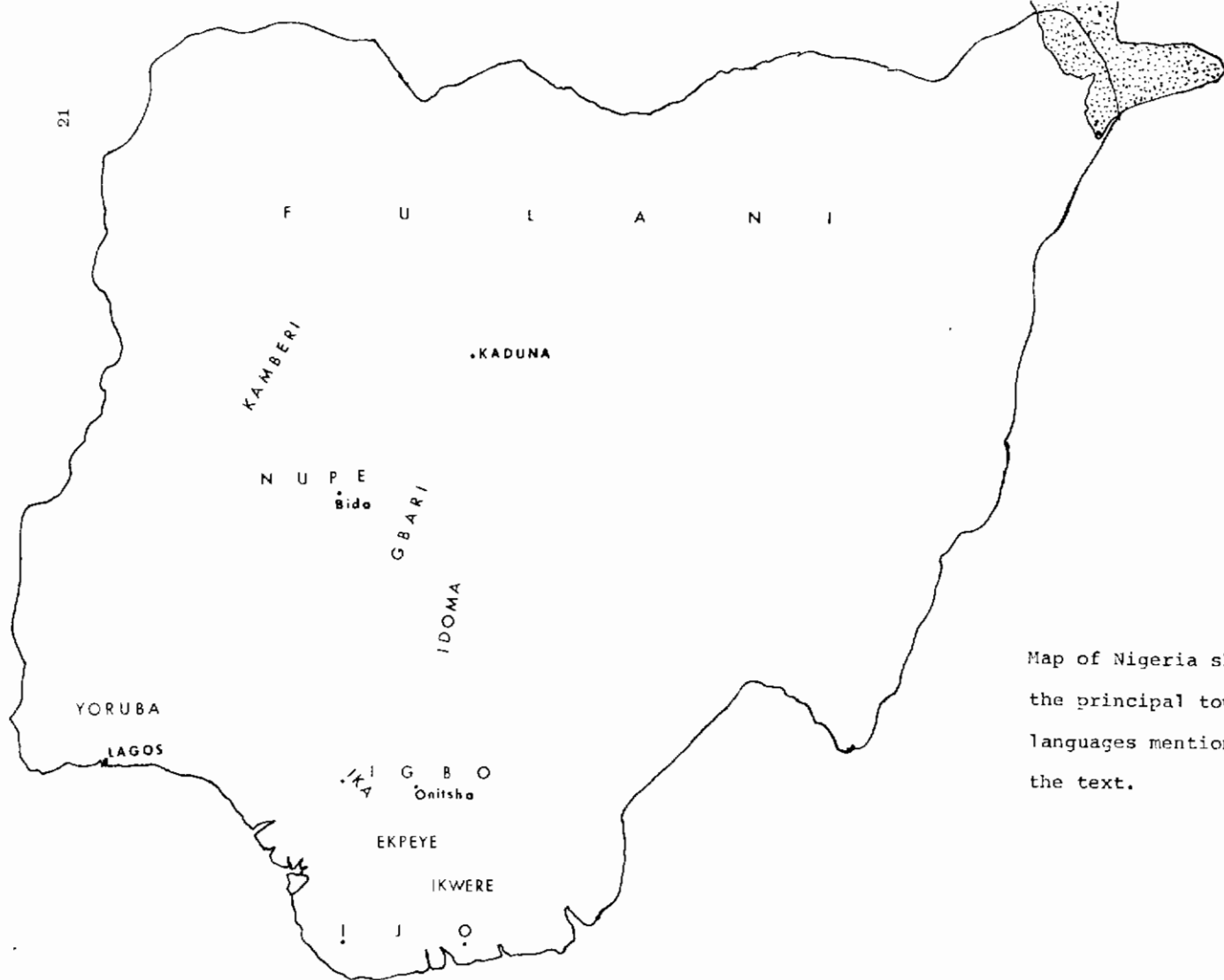
An example of how this worked is recounted by Abraham (1967:intro.) in his discussion of the setting-up of a school system in Idoma-land. The Idoma were traditionally composed of a cluster of languages whose members were sufficiently disparate that they were not normally inter-comprehensible. When the first secondary school was set up in Oturkpo in 1930, it was found that the pupils formed small fragmented groups consisting of those who could easily communicate with one another. The school authorities decided that this was unsatisfactory, and declared that the dialect spoken in Oturkpo was 'central' Idoma. This would henceforth be the lingua franca of the Idoma (and incidentally the dialect of the vernacular Bible published shortly afterwards). 'In a few months' says Abraham, 'all the boys were able freely to converse together' (Op.cit.:intro.) The effect of this somewhat arbitrary decision has been very real, as today Oturkpo Idoma is the lingua franca of Idoma-land, and more importantly the vehicle of Idoma nationalist aspirations, that presume an 'Idoma' identity that was present only in an extremely restricted area in pre-colonial times.

The Idoma are small enough and their area of settlement sufficiently coherent for this type of policy to be imposed without

serious friction. However, in the more numerous, widespread and diverse groups such as the Fulani or the Igbo the results of such policies are more ambiguous. Fulfulde is one of the most widespread languages in Nigeria, spoken both by settled and pastoralist Fulani in the North, and as a lingua franca in the region of the Eastern Emirates, set up along what is now the Nigeria-Cameroun border in the last century. Respected by the colonial authorities (perhaps because of the perceived economic significance of their herds), Fulfulde was given support, inasmuch as primers and grammars were prepared, and dictionaries and books of proverbs appeared. In principle, then, there was a good case for the evolution of a standard Fulfulde, both as a focus for ethnic unity and as a form for use in written and spoken media. In practice, however, projects for dictionaries, primers and handbooks that would act to codify such a standard have been shipwrecked for years by the demands of different groups that their dialect be taken as standard, and at present, still no decision has been made.

Fulfulde dialects are not generally so varied within Nigeria that they are mutually incomprehensible. This is not the case with Igbo, however, where the dialects are arranged in long chains spreading out through a broad area of South-Central Nigeria without reference to any discernible centre. At the fringes of this are groups who certainly define themselves as ethnically separate from the Igbo, such as the Ekpeye, the Ikwere or the Ika, and whose languages are sufficiently remote that they cannot be understood without some attempt to learn them. In practice, speakers of these languages normally learn one of the forms of central Igbo, so speakers of central Igbo are likely to be unaware of the distinctness of a language such as Ekpeye.

The first scholars to try and resolve the problems of Igbo dialects were missionaries, since mission stations had been set up throughout this area of Nigeria from the 1700s onwards. Rivalry between the churches meant that they initially failed to communicate with one another, and the result was a multiplicity of orthographies representing the different dialects of the areas where the particular missions were situated. Early Igbo texts are those in the dialects of Owerri, Onitsha and Enugu and this diversity contributed not at all



Map of Nigeria showing the principal towns and languages mentioned in the text.

to the development of a standard Igbo, although, ironically, it more nearly reflected the reality of the language situation at that period. After 1900, increased mobility within Nigeria and the persistent rationalising tendencies of the British combined to generate a whole series of proposals for making the orthography uniform. Various solutions were tried, a particularly odd one being the language used for Catholic texts, that combined dialectal features from a host of different areas.

The conflict is by no means entirely resolved, precisely because of the articulacy of the people for whose supposed benefit this is intended. However, the Igbo nationalism, born, as it were in the prelude to the Biafran war, now propels orthography, rather than the reverse. It has been shown that there is strong correlation between the traditional subdivisions of the Igbo and the patterns whereby they have colonised the other parts of Nigeria economically. Certain clans specialise in modern trades such as bicycle repair, and then spread out to form a network of repairmen across the country. The war in Biafra, essentially a bid to concentrate the income generated by oil into a smaller geographical area, suddenly made these dispersed groups, who had managed to conserve their particular identity as a subset of the more general identity attributed to them by their neighbours, aware that they formed part of the 'Igbo nation', and that they were under attack.

Although the Igbo nation lost the Biafran war, they gained immensely in coherence and unity. Phrases like 'the Igbo people' are enshrined in newspaper columns, on the television, and in academic textbooks prepared for Universities. Archaeological discoveries such as the Igbo-Ukwu materials (Shaw, 1970) are vaunted as demonstrations of the genius of the Igbo. A persistent rumour claims that the Biafran war will be waged more effectively a second time. In practice this is a purely romantic nationalist myth, as the wealthy and entrenched elites among the Igbo would no longer allow anything so quixotic to come to fruition. But the need for the 'Igbo nation' to speak a language that is recognizably 'Igbo' has in fact acted to enforce the use of a nearly uniform tongue, both for written and spoken materials, in a way that seemed unrealisable in the early 1960s.

The function of this long prelude has been to suggest, on the basis of documented examples taken from recent history, some of the ways that political structures and ideologies can affect languages and the boundaries between them. I want now to use these ideas to look at some undocumented examples, where we have only the present-day ethnographic situation to guide us, to propose some models for the interpretation of particular language configurations.

Before I undertake this, however, it is important to establish some preliminary definitions. In the data to be examined, there is a distinction between distinct language boundary and clinal change. Clinal change is the gradual transformation of language from one area to another, both phonologically and lexically. This can be tested linguistically by demonstrating that no two adjacent settlements show a significant discontinuity of cognacy ratios when standard wordlists of the two languages spoken there are compared. This, incidentally, has nothing to do with ethnic or language ideologies. For example, it is clear that linguistically, there is no distinct boundary separating the Yagba from the Yoruba in North-West Yoruba-land. The ethnic division however, is very precise, and this leads to Yagba claims to speak 'Yagba' a different language that just is 'somehow the same' as Yoruba. Similarly, there can be many reasons for people to deny that they speak the language of their neighbours, even if they are very close indeed, as this is an obvious correlate of strong ethnic self-definition.

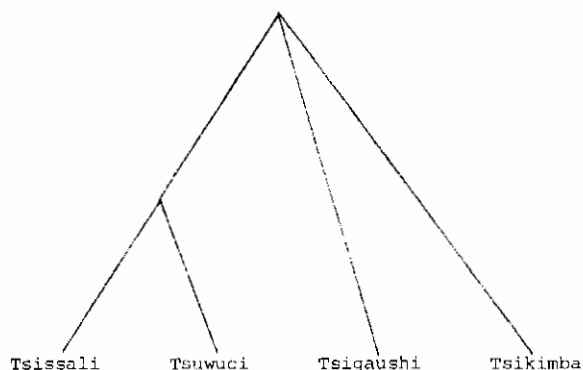
A true linguistic frontier, by contrast, is marked by a measurable lexical or phonological discontinuity between the language of one community and its neighbour. It is important to emphasize that this can be established by taking appropriate wordlists, and is independent of informants' statements. With languages of different families no problems arise, but when they are closely related, this distinction may well be blurred. For example, Ashe and Begbere, two languages of the Nigerian Middle Belt, show only a 66% cognacy ratio, and the boundary between them is clearly demarcated between two adjacent towns. However, virtually all speakers of these languages are bilingual in the 'other' language. As a result, speakers of these languages classify them as 'nearly the same' and are generally unaware of the location of the boundary between them.

In order to explore the social correlates of these types of language situation, I am going to look at three adjacent societies in central Nigeria, the Kamperi, Nupe and Gbari. Nupe and Gbari are closely related members of the Niger-Kaduna sub-branch of the Kwa language family (Blench, 1982), while Kamperi is a noun-class language forming part of the Northwestern branch of the Benue-Congo group (Hansford et al., 1976). Kamperi and Nupe have this in common, that they both constitute language-clusters divided into a number of discrete linguistic sub-groups. Gbari, by contrast, is ultimately divided into two larger units, known in the literature as Gbari-Yama and Gbari-Matai. These in turn are normally subdivided into a number of 'dialects'. My Gbari friends normally said that Gbari changed little by little the further you went from any given point, and I found by dint of making appropriate wordlists that this was true. At their most remote, the cognacy between the two principal Gbari sub-groups was ca.60%, but within either group, it was ca.85% at the points of maximum separation. It is therefore likely that after a significant split at an unknown time in the past Gbari sub-groups have differentiated internally at a stable rate.

This is a significant contrast with the Kamperi, who are divided into a number of closely related, but distinct dialects. The Kamperi have not fared well in the colonial literature but a short account summarizing previous colonial sources can be found in Gunn & Conant (1960). They are divided into two major subgroups, linguistically, but as these have no overall names, they are here referred to as Kamperi East and Kamperi West, corresponding to the Kamperi I and II of the Index of Nigerian languages (Hansford et al., 1976:102). The Kamperi are further divided into a number of sub-groups or sections, and these are sufficiently localised to correspond to 'dialects'.

The geography of Kamperi dialects was further confused by the construction of Kainji dam in 1974, as the lake created by the dam drove a wedge through the centre of the Western Kamperi, so that a number of dialect groups were split in two, both by the water itself and the Northward expansion of the Reshe who had previously been inhabiting the land and islands in the place where the flood-plain formed. As the divided groups now hardly communicate, it may be that their two halves will form new sections, but this remains to be

seen. The groups that compose Western Kamberi are the Assali, the Ngwuci, the Agaushi and the Akimba. According to work by David Crozier, the genetic relations between them can be represented by a tree diagram, thus:



As the maximum degree of separation between them is of the order of 85% lexical cognates, it is reasonable to treat them as dialects of one another and mutually comprehensible.

The best interpretation of the sections is that they are overgrown exogamous clans. The Kamberi are acephalous patrilineal and patrilocal in organization, and to judge by their neighbours such as the Bassa or the Lela, a segmentary lineage system or a clan organization would logically correlate with this. Today, however, the sections of Western Kamberi contain many thousands of individuals, whose only bond is their language and to a certain extent localised residence. Presently the only marriage rule that obtains is to marry outside the compound, a rule that leads to a high degree of section endogamy in practice. However, I persistently had stories related to me about rules enforcing section exogamy at some unspecified past era. My enquiries into ritual practice also turned up the memory of sacrifices that seemed to suggest practices designed to enforce the solidarity of clans. Like the exogamy rules, these seem to have disappeared outside the

memory of living informants. The failure to cite apical ancestors and the apparent inability of sections to 'split' in response to increasing numbers suggests clans rather than a segmentary lineage system operating.

Today, among the Western Kamberi, section and dialect are co-ordinate features, and clearly the endogamous tendencies act to maintain dialect boundaries. Possession of a distinct dialect in a clan based society helps maintain group solidarity, but not at the expense of a complete breakdown in communications, as has happened between the two larger Kamberi languages, which are no longer inter-comprehensible.

An example of how this can operate on a much larger scale is provided by the Ijo of the Niger Delta. Ijo essentially forms a chain of dialects from one end of the Delta to the other, and most Ijo can understand the language spoken by two or three groups to either side of them. However, as they move further in any direction the difficulty increases considerably, until at either end of the chain, the two are entirely different languages. These Ijo dialects are closely linked with the clan system characteristic of the whole Delta. Originally, presumably the clans were small, dispersed exogamous units. However, within the last few centuries, the turmoil in the political history of the Delta has led to a broad spectrum of social systems, ranging from the 'house' systems of Nembe and Ibani⁽¹⁾ to the city-state of Kalabari (Horton, 1967). Most Ijo groups however, retain the small residential units important for the exploitation of riverine resources. The languages, however, still act to maintain group boundaries, and linguistically, they form the long chain characteristic of localised clans spanning a broad territory.

In a more speculative vein, this may suggest an interpretation of the curious situation in Northern Ghana, where a chain of very closely related Moore⁽²⁾ languages cover a broad stretch of the North of the country, including Birifor, Tale, Mamprusi and Dagbane. These peoples now exhibit a very broad range of social and political organization, and this has an effect on the characterization of the dialect spoken by other groups. In a joking situation this is described as 'incomprehensible' or so badly spoken that the speaker, who only speaks a pure form, can hardly understand it. A chain like

this suggests an overextended clan system, that has failed to break down into smaller units, but instead inflated into 'ethnic groups'.

The Nupe, by contrast, are also divided into a number of discrete dialects and languages, but are, like their Gbari neighbours entirely lacking in clan or lineage systems. I have dealt with the subclassification of the Nupe languages in detail elsewhere (Blench, 1982) but suffice it to say here that Nupe central, (the dialect spoken in Bida) has a single dialect, Ebe, while Dibo, its neighbouring language (erroneously classified as a dialect of Nupe in earlier sources) is divided into Dibo proper, Kami and Gupa. Further South are three other related languages, Kupa, Kakanda and Bassa-Nge, that form an independent group co-ordinate with Nupe in the Niger-Kaduna language branch. The linguistic boundaries in Nupe are very sharply defined, and can normally be tied down to specific villages. The discontinuities between languages are both lexical and phonological, and can normally be cited by informants. Language here corresponds with ethnic identity, and peoples like the Dibo define themselves strongly as a corporate unit distinct from the Gupa, Kami and other neighbours, and indeed use the linguistic differences to emphasize these points.

The interpretation of the difference between this and the Gbari is definitely in terms of the political system of the Nupe. Ever since the Nupe appear on the historical stage, they seem to have been a pluralistic militaristic society aggressively pursuing their interests at the expense of their neighbours. There is no doubt that the broad area where 'central' Nupe is spoken reflects the centralising tendencies of the kingdom. Dialects and variant speech have been eliminated, some, such as Gbedegi (a dialect reported by Clapperton and later Nadel, spoken in the Jebba area) disappearing in this century. Any group that survives is forced to assume a coherent ethnic identity or be swallowed up. Various identifiable immigrant groups in the Nupe area have been absorbed so completely that now only their name remains. The town of Kutigi, some 45 km. West of Bida was found by 'beriberi' in 1721. These seem to have been wandering Kanuri traders, who for reasons unrecorded underwent a broad diaspora through Nigeria at this period. They have become so completely Nupe-ized that no apparent cultural patterns from this era remain,

except perhaps facial scars. The same has happened to groups of Yoruba, Gbari and Yagba, all of whom pitched up in Nupe at one period or another.

The alternative solution, is of course to define ethnic identity in opposition to 'being Nupe'. The reasons that allowed various groups to do this are presumably diverse, but for example, the Kakanda, who controlled the river trade up from the Confluence until this century.⁽³⁾ Although the Fulani rulers of the Nupe sporadically engaged in piracy against Kakanda traders in the nineteenth century, in practice, they could not do without their trade goods.

As the Kakanda clearly did not see it in their interest to submit to Nupe domination, this situation must have led to an increased emphasis on ethnic self-definition. The same explanation obviously does not hold for the Dibo, however, and in this case may be connected with their low settlement densities and lack of access to significant economic resources.

Finally, Gbari, whose language exhibits clinal change, resembling in this respect the Kofyar (Netting, 1968:35). Like the Kofyar, beyond such broad categories as 'Gbari', there is only a weak sense of internal differentiation. They classify other Gbari by where they live rather than by who they are, and there is a correspondingly vague feeling for the differences between one Gbari area and another. This seems to be a direct consequence of the lack of clans or other cross-cutting 'horizontal' features of social organization and a consequent system of out marriage. The rule is the same as the Kamberi, all marriages are permissible except within a specific compound. In practice, since there are no sections, this most commonly leads to village exogamy. Since each village can speak the language of the villages that surround it and since there is no 'investment' in keeping a language tied to an ethnic unit, gradual change evolves over a broad area.

This paper presents some broadly worked out models about the evolution of language boundaries. We are so far lacking in detailed statistical accounts of particular language areas that would allow for a closer correlation between ethnic definition and language boundaries. Earlier accounts of the arrangement of languages were

normally befogged by informants' stereotypes about them and tell more about those informants' social reality than the linguistic situation. However as more comprehensive data becomes available these hypotheses can be subjected to more rigorous tests and refined in the process. Recent work by Shimizu (1979) on Mumuye in Northeastern Nigeria suggests remarkable patterns of language differentiation, but so far no ethnographic data is available to make substantive testing possible. In particular, clearly more work needs to be done on the correlation of state-systems and language uniformity. Nupe presents a neat example of centralised state eliminating variant speech, but there are numerous examples of polyglot states in Africa, and it would clearly be important to determine the organizational features these possessed that allowed them to remain polyglot without this being perceived as the inception of structural breakdown.

Footnotes

1. 'Bonny' in the old sources.
2. 'Mole-Dagbane' in older texts.
3. One of the curious aspects of the discussion by Nadel (1940) of the role of the Kyadya in the river economy is that he never mentions the Kakanda. Yet economically, the Kakanda seem to have played a far more crucial role and unlike the Kyadya, (who are central Nupe speakers), spoke a language incomprehensible to Nupe speakers.

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