

Recent research on the Plateau languages of Central Nigeria



Submitted for proceedings of the Hamburg meeting to mark the retirement of Professor Ludwig Gerhardt,
March 2004

Revision VI

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Jos, Wednesday, 27 May 2009

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1. Introduction

Among the many language groups represented in Nigeria, one of the largest and most complex is the Plateau languages (Gerhardt 1989; Blench 2000a). Plateau languages dominate the centre of Nigeria, spreading from Lake Kainji to the region south of Bauchi. Excluding Kainji and Jukunoid, there are some 40 languages at last count, with a few more to be discovered. Although most Plateau populations are small (2-10,000 speakers), there are ca. 1 million speakers of Plateau languages, with the bulk of the numbers made up from large groups such as Berom and Eggon. Some Plateau languages, such as Sambe and Yangkam, are moribund and others are severely threatened, such as Ayu. Hausaisation and urbanisation are the main forces leading to this decline but there are countervailing trends such as increased pride in cultural heritage and desire for literacy (Blench 1998). Research is far from vibrant; regrettably, the Nigerian (and indeed international) university system has largely failed the Plateau languages.

It seems never to have been in doubt that Plateau languages form part of the broader unit represented by Benue-Congo (Williamson 1989; Williamson & Blench 2000). Westermann (1927) assigned the few languages for which he had data to a 'Benue-Cross' family, corresponding to present-day East Benue-Congo, although later in Westermann & Bryan (1952) these were classified in 'isolated units'. The first record of Plateau is Castelnau (1851) who gives a wordlist of Hyam in the rather unfortunate context of '*une nation d'hommes à queue*'. Koelle (1854) gives wordlists of Ham (Hyam), Koro of Lafía (Migili) and Yasgua (Yeskwa). Gowers' (1907) unpublished but widely circulated wordlists include Fyem, Kibyen (=Berom) and Jos (=Izere). A more extensive listing of language names is in Meek (1925, II:137), where the classification (contributed by N.W. Thomas) lists them under 'Nigerian Semi-Bantu' along with Kainji and Jukunoid. Meek (1931, II: 1-128) published wordlists of the Tyap cluster and Hyam. However, the modern subclassification of Plateau derives principally from the work of Joseph Greenberg (1963) who proposed dividing Westermann's 'Benue-Cross' languages into seven co-ordinate groups (including modern-day Kainji and Jukunoid). Shimizu (1975b) who surveyed the languages of the Jos area, was the first to report numerous languages and to propose a tentative classification for them. With numerous emendations and additions these have been reprised in almost all subsequent works (notably Williamson and Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1971; Maddieson 1972; Williamson 1972; Hansford *et al.* 1976; Gerhardt 1989; Crozier and Blench 1992; Blench 1998, 2000a).

This paper² is an overview of the Plateau languages, incorporating recent findings and presenting a tentative classification. The Map shows the locations of the different subgroups of Plateau in Central Nigeria, using the names of subgroups established in this paper, set out in §2. It covers the sources of data, the media profile of Plateau and the issue of the decline in research. The second section presents the subgroups of Plateau, following the sequence of the overall classification adopted in this paper, reporting on newly available data.

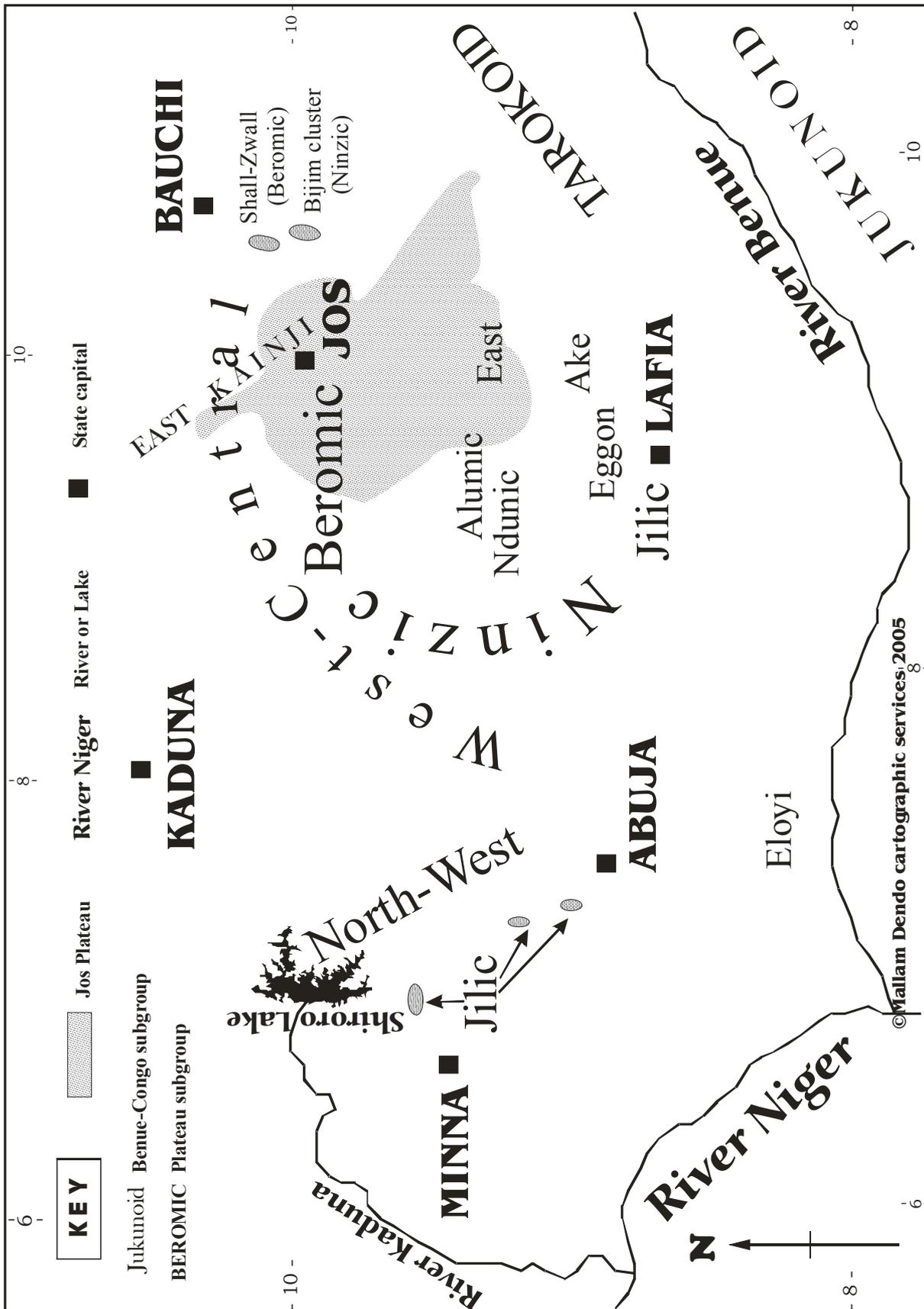
1.2 Data sources

Publications on Plateau languages has largely been descriptive material on individual languages (e.g. Lukas & Willms 1961; Wolff 1963; Mackay 1964; Bouquiaux 1964, 1967, 1970, 2001; Gerhardt 1969, 1971, 1972/3a, 1972/3b, 1973/4, 1974, 1980, 1983a,b,c, 1987, 1988a,b, 1989, 1992, 1994a,b, 2005; Dihoff 1976; Robinson 1976; Stoffberg 1978; Wolff & Meyer-Bahlburg 1979; McKinney 1979, 1983, 1984, 1990; Jockers 1982; Hyuwa 1982, 1986; Maddieson 1982, n.d. a,b; Adwiraah & Hagen 1983; Hagen 1988; Price 1989; Adwiraah 1989; Sibomana 1980, 1981a,b, 1985; Longtau 1993; Shimizu 1996; Blench 2002b; Wilson 2003; Longtau 2008). With the exception of the material in Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist (BCCW) (Williamson & Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1972), comparative materials on Plateau languages are limited.

¹ I would like to record my thanks to Professor Gerhardt for both drawing my attention to this intriguing document and providing me with a photocopy of it.

² It would be impossible to list all those who have acted as informants, but Barau Kato and Selbut Longtau have been my principal assistants on field data collection. Bitrus Kaze, Deme Dang, Ruth Adiwu, Gideon Asuku, Alex Maikarfi and Daniel Gya and have been crucial to the development of dictionary materials in their languages. Staff members at NBTT and SIL Jos have been always helpful in giving me access to unpublished materials and to discuss issues relating to particular languages. I would particularly like to thank Mark Gaddis for arranging workshops on the Koro cluster languages. The present revision (VI) includes all data collected up to August 2009.

Despite its sometimes eccentric choice of items and the often defective entries, the BCCW remains the only large published compilation of data.



Often the source of wordlists is ‘Nigerian government files’ which generally means an orthographic list filled in by an administrator. Other classifications have relied on unpublished wordlists, also usually orthographic, from a variety of sources, notably University of Ibadan students. The SIL, based in Zaria and then Jos, collected a large number of Swadesh lists in the 1960s and 1970s and these were the basis of some parts of the first edition of the Index of Nigerian Languages (Hansford *et al.* 1976) although the classification of Nigerian languages used there was contributed by Carl Hoffmann. During the 1980s and 1990s there was virtually no survey work³, although quite large lexical, and in some cases grammatical, databases have been collected in relation to Bible translation.

The Comparative Plateau Project was begun in the early 1990s, starting from a perception that although linguistic field research into Plateau was largely moribund, there was substantial interest from communities in the study, and in particular the writing, of these languages. As a consequence, yearly field trips since 1993 have been undertaken to create primary documentation on the status, location and classification of all languages usually treated as Plateau. In conjunction with this, more extensive documentation, particularly the creation of dictionaries, is underway where the phonology and orthography of a language has been established. To date, primary documentation on some twenty-seven languages is available as well as much additional material on specific languages⁴. Dictionary work is under way in Tarok, Izere, Mada, Berom, Iten, Eggon, Rigwe and Tyap (Appendix I).

1.3 Internal and external classifications of Plateau

None of the authors who have classified Plateau languages have presented evidence for their classifications. This is not a criticism; faced with large arrays of data it is easier to set out what appears to be the case impressionistically than to write a monograph demonstrating it. Shimizu (1975a) and Gerhardt and Jockers (1981) constitute partial exceptions, presenting lexicostatistical classifications of sample languages together with Kainji and Jukunoid. Their calculations, however, do not include many of the languages under discussion here. However, this neither demonstrates the unity of Plateau nor even the coherence of its usually accepted subgroups. The series of publications on Plateau subgroups, especially Plateau II and IV, by Gerhardt (1972/3a, 1972/3b, 1974, 1980, 1983a, 1983b, 1989, 1994a,b) assume the boundaries of these groups, they do not demonstrate it.

A particular issue in the internal classification of Plateau and Jukunoid is the notion of a ‘Benue’ grouping. Shimizu (1975a:415) proposed that some branches of Plateau should be classified with Jukunoid. In particular, he argued that Eggon (and by implication the other Plateau V languages, including Nungu and Yeskwa) and Tarokoid (at that time consisting only of Yergam (=Tarok) and Basherawa (=Yankam)) formed a group together with Jukunoid. This emerged from his lexicostatistic tables and was further supported by five isoglosses, the words for ‘drink’, ‘tail’, ‘meat’, ‘fire’, and ‘four’. This expanded group he christened ‘Benue’. Gerhardt (1983b) questioned Shimizu’s hypothesis noting both that his own lexicostatistical work (Gerhardt & Jockers 1981) did not support this, and casting doubt on the five isoglosses proposed by Shimizu. The ‘Benue’ group continued in a sort of half-life, appearing in Gerhardt (1989) as a subgrouping of Jukunoid and Tarokoid against the rest of Plateau. Blench (2005) has presented evidence that there is a genuine boundary between Plateau and Jukunoid, drawing on lexical and morphological evidence.

This uncertainty is a reflection of a more general problem, the evidence for a bounded group ‘Plateau’ in opposition to Kainji, Jukunoid, Dakoid or Mambiloid, other members of the Benue-Congo complex. The relationships between Plateau languages, their coherence as a grouping and their links with Jukunoid and Kainji remain undetermined. Rowlands (1962) was the first to suggest that there was a dichotomy between the languages of the Jos area, which he linked to West Kainji, and the remainder, but his short wordlists were far from constituting linguistic proof. Comparative analysis has produced some tentative evidence for isoglosses defining Plateau (see Appendix II), but so far no phonological or morphological innovations that would define the group have been proposed. Some of this diversity is undoubtedly due to long-term

³ Survey work began again in 2006 under the auspices of SIL

⁴ Further information and some of the datasheets can be downloaded at the author’s website, URL <http://www.rogerblench.info/Language%20data/Niger-Congo/Benue-Congo/Plateau/Plateau%20page.htm>

interactions with the mosaic of Chadic languages also occurring on the Jos Plateau (Blench 2003; Longtau this volume).

1.4 Language status and language endangerment

Plateau languages have always been spoken by relatively small populations. No group of Plateau speakers has formed large centralised political structures resulting in the consequent spread of a language of intercommunication. In the earliest colonial censuses, numbers assigned to particular ethnic groups were often in the hundreds (e.g. Temple 1922; Gunn 1953, 1956). Generally speaking, the overall demographic increase in Nigeria has led to the expansion of human populations and thus numbers of speakers. Few Plateau languages today have less than several thousand speakers unless they are moribund or undergoing language shift. Groups with a larger underlying population, such as the Berom and Tarok, now have more than a hundred thousand speakers⁵.

Two Plateau languages are definitely moribund, Sambe (Alumic §2.5) and Yanƙam (Tarokoid §2.1). Sambe had six speakers in 2001, all over eighty years old, and just 2 in 2005. In 1991, Yangkam probably had ca. 400 speakers, the youngest around fifty. Sambe speakers have turned to Ninzo, whereas Hausa is gradually eliminating Yangkam. Other languages, such as Ayu, still have several thousand speakers but the children are no longer speaking Ayu and it is thus highly endangered.

1.5 Plateau languages in education and the media

Plateau languages have almost no profile in education or the media. The main development of orthography has been by missionaries, especially SIL, in relation to bible translation. In some ways this has been problematic, as literacy is seen as only important for Christians. There were also secular attempts at literacy under the NORLA programme (Wolff 1954), although these never had a major impact. The Nigerian Government has been publishing a series entitled ‘Orthographies of Nigerian languages’ since the late 1970s and some Plateau languages have been detailed in these publications (Kuhn & Dusu 1985 for Berom; Hyuwa 1986 for Kaje; Longtau 2000 for Tarok; Goro 2000 for Koro Ashe). However, these are not necessarily linked with a literacy programme except where individual authors are part of such programmes (e.g. Hanni Kuhn and Barnabas Dusu) and there has been no necessary language development as a consequence. Broadly speaking, the languages with the greatest number of speakers have seen most work, but sometimes literacy programmes seem to be initiated for political or personal reasons.

Table 1 lists the Plateau languages, noting whether literacy materials exist in the language, whether work towards a bible translation exists and whether there is any broadcasting or other electronic media. The marking of a + sign does not necessarily mean the literacy programme is viable or the Bible translation is read (see paper by Kato, this volume). Jili [=Migili] has literacy materials and a bible but it is virtually unread, in part because of problematic orthography decisions.

Table 1. Literacy and broadcast media in Plateau

	Language	Literacy	Bible	Media
Northern Group	<u>E</u> da	+	—	—
	<u>E</u> dra	—	—	—
	Kuturmi	—	—	—
	Kulu	—	—	—
	Idon	—	—	—
	Doka	—	—	—
	Iku-Gora-Ankwe	—	—	—
Beromic	Berom	+	+	+
	Cara	—	—	—
	Iten	+	+	—

⁵ Numbers are politics in Nigeria today and I deliberately allow these figures to remain vague.

	Language	Literacy	Bible	Media
	Shall-Zwall	—	—	—
Central				
Koro cluster	Ashe	+	—	—
	Tinor (Waci-Myamya)	+	—	—
	Idū	+	—	—
	Gwara	—	—	—
	Nyankpa-Bade	+	—	—
Jaba cluster	Shamang	—	—	—
	Cori	—	—	—
	Hyam cluster (incl. Kwyeny, Yaat, Sait, Dzar, Hyam of Nok)	+	—	—
	Zhire	—	—	—
	Shang	—	—	—
Izere cluster	Izere of Fobur	+	+	+
	Icèn	+	+	—
	Ganàng	—	—	—
	Fəràn	—	—	—
Rigwe	Rigwe	+	+	+
Southern Zaria	Jju	+	+	—
Tyap cluster	Tyap	+	+	+
	Gworok	—	—	—
	Atakar	—	—	—
	Kacicere	—	—	—
	Sholyo	—	—	—
	Kafancan	—	—	—
Gyongic	Gyong (=Kagoma)	+	—	—
	Kamanton	—	—	—
Ninzic	Ninzo	+	+	—
	Ce	+	—	—
	Bu-Niṅkada	—	—	—
	Mada	+	+	—
	Numana-Nunku-Gwantu-Numbu	—	—	—
	Ningye-Ninka	—	—	—
	Anib	—	—	—
	Ninkyob	+	—	—
	Nindem	—	—	—
	Nungu	—	—	—
	Ayu?	—	—	—
Ndunic	Ndun-Nyeng-Shakara [=Tari]	—	—	—
Alumic	Toro	—	—	—
	Alumu-Təsu	—	—	—
	Hasha	—	—	—
	Sambe (†)	—	—	—

	Language	Literacy	Bible	Media	
Southern					
	Eggonic	Eggon	+	+	—
		Ake	—	—	—
	Jilic	Jili	+	+	—
		Jijili	—	—	—
Southeastern					
		Fyem	—	—	—
		Horom	—	—	—
		Bo-Rukul	—	—	—
Eloyi		Eloyi	—	—	—
Tarokoid		Tarok	+	+	+
		Pe [=Pai]	—	—	—
		Vaghat-Ya-Bijim-Legeri	—	—	—
		Yaŋkam [=Bashar]	—	—	—
		Sur [=Tapshin]	—	—	—

The existence of a literacy programme does not imply that vernacular literacy is used outside the restricted context of Christianity. Indeed, many ‘literacy’ programmes, including those sponsored by churches, exist to teach reading in either Hausa or English. To teach people to read their own language is to face considerable obstacles, not the least of which is orthography.

Radio

The use of radio in broadcasting Plateau languages probably dates back to the 1970s⁶. Plateau State Radio and Television (PRTV) broadcasts in Berom, Tarok and Izere. Nassarawa State Radio and Television (NRTV) broadcasts in Mada, Eggon and Jili [=Migili] as well as Alago (Idomoid) and Gwandara (Chadic). Broadcasts are mostly news but there are also some magazine programmes. Content is tightly controlled; it consists primarily of existing news broadcasts translated into local languages. No FM licenses have been granted for broadcast in local languages.

Audio recordings

In recent times, missionary organisations have been much engaged in the production of audio recordings in vernacular languages. Many languages which have complete or partial bible translations also now have audio cassettes of religious stories. Highly local cassettes of music in Plateau languages are also available in markets in Jos and Kaduna.

Television

The first television broadcasts in Plateau began in 1974 although they were halted several times under the various military governments. The content is usually translated Soviet-style government propaganda; even so the Federal government remains highly suspicious of television in minority languages. Broadcasts are currently transmitted in Izere, Berom, Tarok, Rigwe and KiCe [Rukuba]. These last two languages were added following the Jos crisis in 2001, which reflects the pressure that minorities are beginning to exert in the state. More languages are likely to be added in the coming years. There appear to be no television broadcasts in Plateau languages of Nasarawa State.

Film and video

Christian groups have been active in promoting the ‘Jesus film’, a film with a core script that is translated into many languages that need not have a literacy programme. This is a film about the life of Jesus, of generally Protestant persuasion, that has been promoted by missionary groups around the world and is available on video. The film exists in Tarok, Berom, Izere and Mada and many more languages are in

⁶ Thanks to Selbut Longtau and Barau Kato for information included in the media section and to Andy Warren-Rothlin for illuminating discussions on the politics of Bible translation and information on current projects.

preparation. Pop music videos have begun to appear sung in some Plateau languages; for example, Hyam songs are now available as commercial VCDs. Even more ambitious, a secular feature film in the Berom language has been made for issue on DVD.

1.6 The research agenda

It would be pleasant to report, especially in the context of this publication, that Plateau languages were the focus of a lively research community. But this is far from the case; indeed the opposite is true. Academic research on Plateau has reached point zero. Little new work has been undertaken since the mid-1990s except that reported here. Why should this be so?

First and foremost because of the moribund Nigerian research establishment. Nigerian universities are in decay and staff morale is very low, in part because of uncertain pay and conditions, but also because of a lack of support for research. The other bodies with a record of interest in Plateau languages, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and its sister-body, the Nigerian Bible Translation Trust, now regard academic publication as a very low priority and little has appeared in recent years. The Euro-American research establishment has also been virtually eliminated for different reasons. What research is now done uses expatriate and out-of-context informants, despite the oft-publicised danger of this approach. The economic slowdown in Nigeria has meant that many fewer speakers of minority languages are visiting or studying in Europe and America, and thus opportunities for new insights into optimality theory or WH-drop in Plateau languages are significantly less. This illustrates all too starkly the neo-colonial nature of fashionable linguistics, which takes no interest in the languages for themselves, merely for their contribution to passing seminar-room fashion. Despite much talk, Endangered Languages research has made a very limited contribution, to judge by its profile in Nigeria, which has by far the largest number of endangered languages in Africa⁷. Although fieldwork in Africa *is* still supported, the negative image of Nigeria deters many fieldworkers and for a country that has more than one-quarter of all African languages, research is at vanishingly low levels.

By contrast, there has been a significant expansion of interest in literacy and Bible translation across the Nigerian Middle Belt since 2004. Projects that were previously moribund or inactive have been revived by a new generation of enthusiastic young speakers. A good example is Rigwe (see anon. 2006) and Eda [=Kadara]. NBTT is initiating workshops for locally funded groups as is the 'Luke Partnership' a twice-annual workshop for Bible translation and literacy. Local publishing in Nigeria is gradually expanding, but mostly in the popular arena, focusing on proverbs, oral literature and reading and writing. Publications include Gochal (1994) on Ngas, Mamfa (1998) and Lar & Dandam (2002) on Tarok and Nyako (2000) on Izere. This type of publishing will probably continue to increase and take in more ethnolinguistic groups. Also encouraging is the revival of survey work; a survey team active since 2006 linked to NBTT and SIL has circulated a number of studies of poorly-known language areas, although none concern Plateau.

2. Plateau languages by subgroup

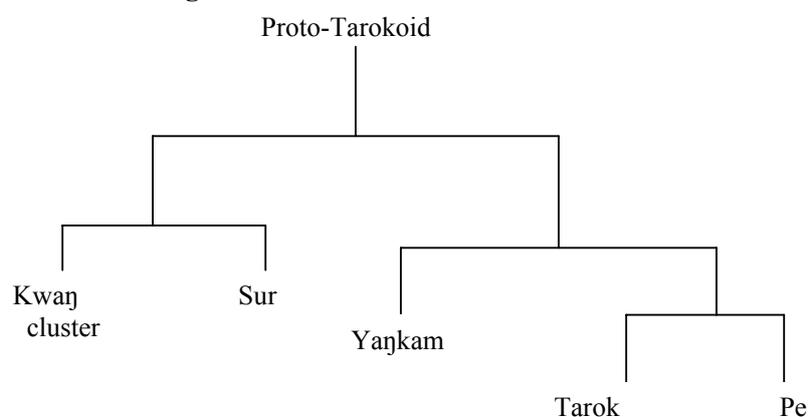
2.1 Tarokoid

In Greenberg (1963), Yergam (Tarok) and Basherawa [=Yankam] were considered to be Plateau 7 languages. These two languages have been put together in most subsequent publications, notably in the Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist (Williamson & Shimizu 1968; Williamson 1972) and Hansford *et al.* (1976). In Gerhardt (1989), Plateau 7 is rechristened Tarokoid in keeping with the terminological style of the volume. Two other languages, Turkwam and Arum-Chessu, assigned to Benue in Hansford *et al.* (1976), were added to Tarokoid. In a more recent classification (Crozier and Blench 1992) another language, Pai, is added, harking back to Maddieson (1972) who had already put it in Plateau 7, while confining Turkwam and Arum-Chessu to their own subgroup (Plateau 10 in Maddieson). Pai had previously led a somewhat nomadic existence, classified as Plateau 6 by Greenberg, as Plateau 4 in Williamson (1971) and as a separate coordinate branch of Plateau in Hansford *et al.* (1976).

⁷ To be fair, there has been a recent expansion of doctoral students working on minority languages since 2004, but this amount to some 3-4 individuals, none working on Plateau languages.

Turkwam and Arum-Chessu are not included in the BCCW, while in most cases the data-slot for Pai and Basherawa is unfilled. Preliminary analysis of the lexical data suggests that the assignment of Toro [=Turkwam] and Alumu [=Arum-Chessu] to Tarokoid is completely erroneous. Longtau (1991) tried to make sense of this grouping in historical terms and came out with no very convincing result. Toro and Alumu are clearly related to one another and are tentatively assigned to an ‘Alumic’ subgroup of Plateau (see §2.7 below). Tarokoid should be restricted to Tarok, Pe, Yanƙam, Kwanka cluster and Sur. Sur is Tapshin, a language referred to in Hansford *et al.* (1976) with the mysterious annotation ? Eloyi. Despite this, Sur is undoubtedly part of Tarokoid. In 2006, extended work on Kwaŋ [=Vaghat, Kwanka] showed that, far from being part of Ninzic as suggested by earlier classifications, it is related to Sur and thus part of Tarokoid. This implies that the other languages with which it is closely related, Boi, Bijim and Legeri, are also Tarokoid. A dictionary of Tarok and substantial wordlists of the other Tarokoid languages have been collected, which form the basis of its classification (Blench *ined*). Figure 1 shows the internal structure of Tarokoid, based on this new evidence.

Figure 1. Internal structure of Tarokoid



Source: Blench (*ined*)

Of the Tarokoid languages, only Tarok itself is beginning to have an acceptable level of documentation (Longtau 2008). Yanƙam is severely threatened and should be subject to an intensive investigation while speakers are still fluent.

2.2 Central

2.2.1 Northwest Plateau

Northwest Plateau consists of Eda/Edra, Kuturmi, (i)Kulu, Idon, Doka and Iku-Gora-Ankwe. No new data has been published since this group was set up, although a wordlist of Ikulu has been circulated (Moser 1982 and analysed in Seitz 1993) and Shimizu (1996) has posted a grammar sketch on the Internet. Recent interest in Eda [=Kadara] language has resulted in an unpublished dialect survey (Maikarfi 2004), a preliminary alphabet book and the launching of an alphabet chart in 2009 (Photo 1). Kadara is correctly known as ‘Eda’ and there is a closely related lect, Edra (which is presumably the source of the common Hausa name)⁸. Two other lects for which information is recorded, Ejeḡha and Ehwa, correspond to Idon and the Iku-Gora-Ankwe clusters. They are so different from each other and from Eda and clearly deserve separate language status. Clearly, Northwest Plateau remains a high priority for further research.

Photo 1. Launching the Eda alphabet chart, April 2009



⁸ Thanks to Alex Maikarfi for making this data available.

2.2.2 West-Central Plateau

West-Central Plateau consists of what used to be known as the ‘Southern Zaria’ languages. Published and manuscript sources include (Castelnau 1851; Koelle 1854; Gerhardt 1971, 1972/3b, 1984, 1988b, 1992; Dihoff 1976; Adwiraah & Hagen 1983; Adwiraah 1989; Jockers 1982; Price 1989; McKinney, Carol 1979, 1983; McKinney, Norris 1984, 1990; Joy Follingstad 1991; Goroh 2000; Carl Follingstad, n.d.; Blench & Kaze, in progress). Although these languages are clearly linked, no published evidence has supported their coherence as a group. Gerhardt (1994a) argued for a specific linkage between North (as represented by (i)Kulu) and West Plateau (excluding the Eggon cluster). The languages Nandu [=Ndun] and Tari [=Shakara] are listed in Crozier & Blench (1992) as part of this group. This is erroneous; Ndun-Shakara, together with the newly discovered Nyeng, form their own group, Ndunic (§2.6). The Central Plateau languages are a coherent geographical clustering and undoubtedly show numerous links with one another, but their genetic unity is unproven. Membership is as follows;

Rigwe (=Irigwe)

Izere cluster (Northwest Izere, northeast Izere, Cèn, Ganàng) Fəràn

Tyap cluster (Tyap, Gworok, Atakar, Kacicere, Sholyo, and Kafancan) Jju⁹

Hyamic: the present published classification (Crozier & Blench 1992) lists members of Hyamic as follows;

Cori

Hyam cluster (incl. Kwyeny, Yaate, Sait, Dzar, Hyam of Nok)

Shamang

Zhire

To these should be added the Shang language, spoken in the village of Kushemfa, south of Kurmin Jibrin on the Kubacha road. This language appears to be a migrant group of Zhire who have come under heavy Koro cultural influences so that their language, while lexically Hyamic, has a nominal affix system resembling Tinor and similar languages.

It now seems likely that the Hyam cluster consists of only Hyam of Nok, Sait, Dzar, while Yaate and the language of Ankun are also probably distinct. However, proof for such statements is not available. Hyam of Nok is widely understood as a lingua franca in the larger Ham community. James (1997) is a political and cultural history of the Ham communities that makes use of language data, although his survey materials are too incomplete to draw any final conclusions.

Koro cluster (Ashe, Waci-Myamya) with Idū [=Lungu]

Nyankpa [=Yeskwa]

The Koro cluster has only been intensively researched in 2008-2009 and all previous statements have been based on speculation. Its membership appears to be as follows;

Za (Ashe and Tinor [=Waci-Myamya])

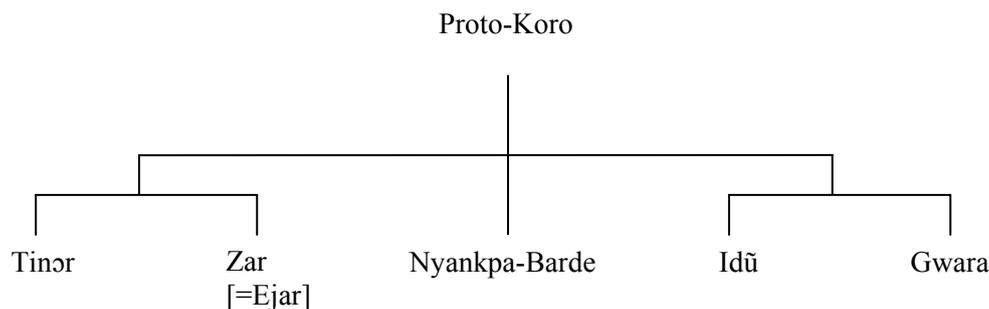
Idū-Gwara

Nyankpa-Barde

This is represented in Figure 2;

⁹ It is usual to list Jju separately from the Tyap cluster but this seems increasingly to reflect ethnic separation rather than linguistic reality.

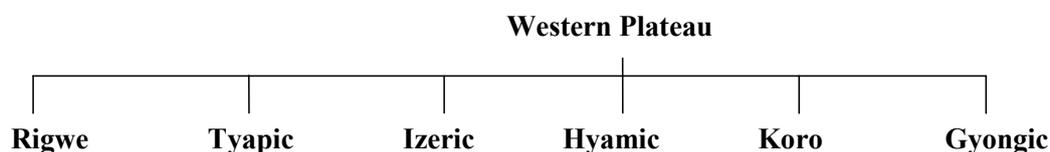
Figure 2. Classification of the Koro languages



Gyongic (Gyong, Kamanton)

Figure 3 shows a tentative structure for Western Plateau, but this simply presents the known groups as a flat array.

Figure 3. Tentative structure for Western Plateau



2.3 Beromic

The term ‘Beromic’ has been adopted here to cover former Plateau 2 languages. Beromic now consists of Berom, Iten and two other languages, Cara and Shall-Zwall. The principal publications on Berom are Bouquiaux (1970, 2001), and on Iten, Bouquiaux (1964). Recent unpublished or in press materials on Berom are (Blench *et al.* in progress) and on Iten, Blench & Dang (in progress). Cara (Teriya) was reported in a mimeo paper by Shimizu (1975b) who first proposed a link with Berom. Hoffman (1978) expressed doubts about hypothesised affiliation of Iten to Berom and noted that it seemed to be closer to the Central Plateau languages with which it has borders (especially Sholyo). However, much expanded datasets on these languages confirm the links between Berom and Iten. Shall and Zwall, two small, closely related languages in Bauchi State, were previously classified with the Ninzic languages (Plateau 4), but are better placed with Beromic. Blench (2007) describes Dyarim, a previously unreported Chadic language that is part of the South Bauchi group. Although Dyarim is not in touch with any Beromic language today, clear evidence for borrowings suggests that Beromic languages were once present in the region between Berom proper and Shall-Zwall.

Berom itself has a complex internal structure. Bouquiaux (1970) essentially describes the Du dialect, part of Central Berom, which is centred on Vwang (Vom) and Ryom (Riyom). However, the main dialect used for literacy and bible translation is the Eastern dialect, roughly centred on Foron, spoken by only a minority. The other minority dialect is Rim, south and east of the main centres. There are two other languages within Berom, Tahos and Nincut. Tahos(s) is a single village close to the Iten on the southern

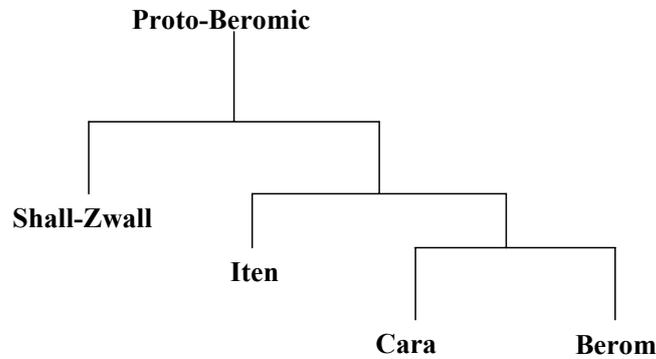
Photo 2. Berom dictionary workshop, Jos, April 2009



limits of Berom, and although regarded as a Berom dialect, is sufficiently lexically divergent to be treated as a distinct language. Nincut, known as Aboro, is geographically separate from the other Berom languages, and is spoken in several settlements along the road west of Fadan Karshi.

The likely internal structure of Beromic is shown in Figure 4;

Figure 4. Internal structure of Beromic



2.4 Ninzic

Ninzic, formerly Plateau IV, is probably the most difficult group to characterise and weak data on several groups has made it unclear whether certain peripheral languages are really part of it. The name Ninzic is introduced here, reflecting the element nin-, which is part of many ethnonyms. The membership of Ninzic has changed quite significantly between various publications (Table 2).

Table 2. Changing composition of the Ninzic language group

Author	Greenberg (1963)	Hansford et al. (1976)	Gerhardt (1989)	Crozier & Blench (1992)	This paper
Name in Source	Plateau IV	Eastern Plateau g.	Southwestern subgroup cluster a	Southwestern subgroup cluster 1	Ninzic
Ce [=Rukuba]	+	+	+	+	+
Ninzo [=Ninzam]	+	+	+	+	+
Mada	+	+	+	+	+
Nko					?
Katanza					?
Bu-Niṅkada		-	-	-	+
Ayu	+	+	+	?	?
Nungu		-	-	-	+
Ninkyob [=Kaninkwom]	+	+	+	+	+
Anib = Kanufi		+	+	+	+
Nindem		+	+	+	+
Gwantu cluster		+	+	+	+
Ningye					+
Ninka					+
Kwanka-Boi- Bijim-Legeri		+	+	+	-
Shall-Zwall		+		?	-
Pe[=Pai]		-	+	-	-

Key: Blank = not listed + = assigned to group - = assigned to another group ? thus in source

The most difficult language to classify is Ayu, because it has clearly come under influence from many language groups, notably Berom and Rindre. Even though a substantial wordlist is now available, its exact affiliation is unclear. The Kwāṅ cluster is now known to be a member of Tarokoid (§2.1).

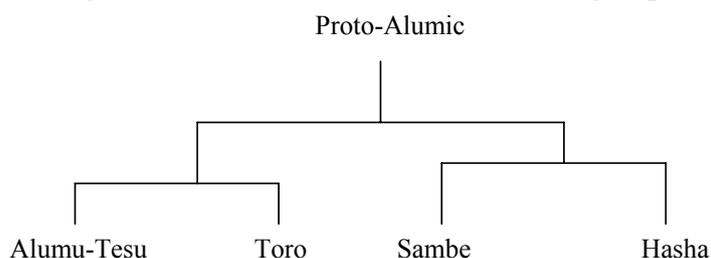
Descriptive materials on Ninzic are sparse. General overviews can be found in Gerhardt (1972/3a, 1883a) and materials on specific languages in Hoffmann (1976), Hörner (1980), Price (1989), Ninzo Language Project Committee (1999), Wilson (2003) and Blench & Kato (in progress).

2.5 Alumic

One group of Plateau languages spoken in Central Nigeria has effectively no published data. These languages are; Hasha [=Yashi], Sambe, Alumu and Toro [=Turkwam]. Except for Sambe, they have apparently been classified in previous lists on the basis of geographical proximity. Sambe is moribund, with only two speakers over 90 in 2005, while the rest have at most a few hundred speakers. A language called Akpondu, with only a couple ‘rememberers’ in 2005 seems to have been closely related to Alumu. The group is here named Alumic, after the language with the most speakers, but this term can be regarded as provisional. The Alumic languages are now scattered geographically, and isolated among the Ninzic (=Plateau IV) languages.

Their very different sociolinguistic histories may explain their striking morphological diversity. There is considerable variation, with Alumu and Toro having completely lost their nominal affix system and Hasha having developed a highly idiosyncratic system of reduplicating the first syllable of the stem to mark plurality in both nouns and verbs. Hasha appears to have developed this under the influence of a neighbouring Chadic language, Sha. Sambe no longer has a functioning prefix system, but its nouns all have transparent fossil prefixes. The internal structure for the group is shown in Figure 5;

Figure 5. Internal structure of the Alumeric group



The relation between Alumu and Toro is far from certain, since Toro has a number of words identical to Alumu, as well as cognates that are significantly different. This suggests that the languages are related at a deeper level but that Toro came under influence from Alumu in the more recent past.

2.6 Ndunic

Ndunic is a new name proposed here for the languages previously called ‘Nandu-Tari’. Existing sources list two languages, but a third language, Ningon, was first recorded in 2003. These languages were previously listed under West-Central Plateau (see §2.2), although on what basis is hard to determine. Maddieson (1972) had access to orthographic lists of these languages and his unpublished classification lists them as an independent branch of Plateau. The nomenclature of the three languages are shown in Table 3;

Table 3. Ndunic languages: nomenclature

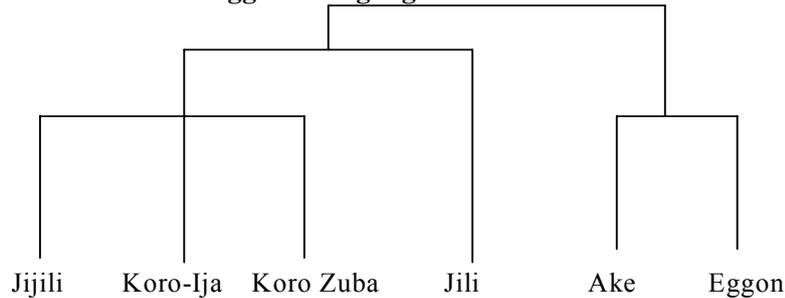
Common name	one person	many people	language	Proposed name	Comment
Nandu	aner andùn	bener andùn	indùn	Ndun	The common element to these is –ndun and it is therefore proposed that the reference name ‘Ndun’ be introduced.
Ningon	anyen	banyen	hanyen	Nyeng	Ningon does not appear in any reference book although it is in local use. It is therefore proposed that the reference name ‘Nyeng’ be introduced.
Tari	kùfákára	úfákára	ìfákára	Shakara	The common element to these is –fákára and it is therefore proposed that the reference name ‘Shakara’ be introduced.

Ndun is the largest language of the group, hence the proposed name, but the three groups are independent of one another. The Ndunic peoples have recently adopted the name ‘Ahwai’ as a cover term for all three languages (Rueck p.c.).

2.7 South Plateau

South Plateau is named for two language groups, Jilic and Eggonic, which are here put together for the first time. Southern was applied to Jilic alone in Crozier & Blench (1992). Figure 6 shows this new proposal;

Figure 6. Classification of the Jilic-Eggonic languages



2.2.7.1 Jilic

Jilic consists of at least two languages, Mijili [=Koro of Lafia] and Ujjili [=Koro Huntu] now separated by a considerable geographic distance, but clearly related. There is a microfiched grammar and phonology of Mijili by Stofberg (1978a,b), while Ujjili is known from an unpublished wordlist. Koro Ija and Koro Zuba, two languages spoken northwest of Abuja, are said to be nearly intelligible with Ujjili, although no language data exists to demonstrate this.

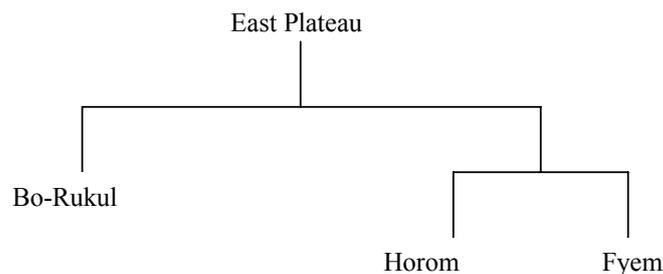
2.2.7.2 Eggonic

Eggonic consists of just two languages, Eggon and Ake. These have previously been put together with Ninzic, although this is more a supposition from geography than relatedness proper. The Eggon people are numerous and the Eggon language is divided into numerous dialects, while Ake (=Aike) is spoken in only three villages. In contrast to Eggon, which has full nominal morphology, Ake has lost its noun class system. Although the languages share enough common glosses to be put together, they are not close.

2.8 East Plateau

The three languages within SE Plateau (=Greenberg's Plateau 6), Fyem, Bo-Rukul [=Mabo-Barkul] and Horom were placed together in the BCCW. This group has previously been named Southeastern (e.g. in Crozier & Blench 1992) but is here named 'East' as a better reflect of its direction in relation to the Plateau centre of gravity. Nettle (1998a) is a sketch grammar of Fyem, and Nettle (1998b) short wordlists of all three languages, but Bo-Rukul and Horom remain virtually unknown (although see Blench 2003 for their relation with the Ron (Chadic) languages). Fyem and Horom are closely related, but the position of Bo-Rukul is more problematic. Figure 7 shows this structure;

Figure 7. Structure of East Plateau



2.9 Eloyi

The Eloyi or Afo language is spoken in about twenty villages in Nassarawa State, Nigeria. The principle sources on the language are Mackay (1964) and Armstrong (1964, 1983, 1984¹⁰). The classification of Eloyi has been disputed, all the more so because the lexical database for comparison is been so weak. All the preliminary sources classified Eloyi as Plateau 2, i.e. together Izere, Tyap etc. (e.g. Greenberg 1963; Williamson & Shimizu 1968; De Wolf 1971). Although Armstrong (1955) first suggested a link with Idomoid it was not until Armstrong (1983) that he set out the case for this classification. However, in Armstrong's (1984:29) final published discussion of the subject he expresses some doubts, concluding

¹⁰ Despite its title, this section is about Eloyi.

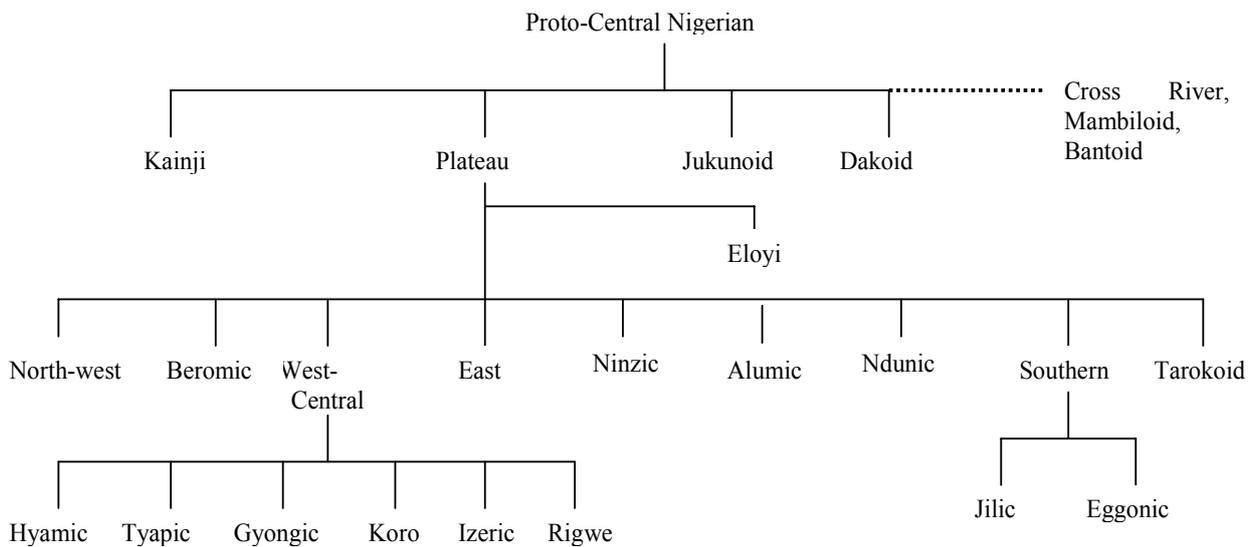
‘Eloyi does not now seem as close to Idoma as it did when only Varvil’s list was available’. Eloyi has many lexical items that do not seem to relate to either Plateau or Idomoid, but it is most likely that the Idomoid cognates are loans reflecting long proximity to languages such as Alago.

3. Conclusion: a revised classification of Plateau

The subheadings in §2. implicitly present a view of Plateau that is significantly different from earlier publications. However, some groups are much better defined than others; Northwest and West-Central are still in disarray. There is no new data for many languages, whereas some other subgroups are now supported by lengthy wordlists. As a consequence, the status of these groups is highly variable. This will be amended as the Comparative Plateau Project continues.

Subgrouping at present is nearly all lexical and morphological. The affix systems of Plateau and Kainji have eroded and been rebuilt many times; hence the difficulties of finding regular correspondences with Bantu noun class prefixes. Verbs and their extensions can be borrowed as a package, resulting, for example, in spurious similarities between Izere and Berom. Convincing phonological innovations defining groups are difficult to establish and indeed the apparent widespread borrowing of distinctive sounds, such as the retroflex /ɾ/ of many languages in the Akwanga area, may make this problematic. The syntax of Plateau languages is still poorly known and few generalisations can be made.

Figure 8. Central Nigerian languages: proposed classification



With these caveats, Figure 8 presents a new view of Plateau. This is clearly not final, as there are too many co-ordinate branches and too little internal structure. But until further analysis is undertaken, provisional versions of Plateau which do not promote too many unwarranted assumptions are the best that can be produced.

Plateau languages are a major grouping in world terms that seems to have been ignored for reasons that have little to do with their importance or accessibility. Whether this observation will do anything to stimulate new research in the current climate is doubtful, it should be possible to leave some sort of record for future generations.

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Appendix I. Dictionaries in progress;

Berom	Blench, Roger, Yusufu Pwol (†), Hanni Kuhn and Barnabas Dusu (†)
Eggon	Roger Blench
Iten	Blench, Roger & Deme Dang
Izere	Blench, Roger. & Bitrus Kaze
Mada	Blench, Roger & Barau Kato
Rigwe	Daniel Gya & Roger Blench
Tarok	Longtau, Selbut and Roger Blench

Appendix II: Two examples of roots common to Plateau languages

Smoke Language	#ntɛŋ s.
Kulu	ìnci
Berom	(se) kyéŋ
Iten	̀nkòy
Cara	imveŋ
Shall	ki
Iregwe	̀ncú
Izere	̀itsiŋ
Firan	̀intsìŋ
Ganang	i-nsɛŋ
Yeskwa	újò
Hyam	jòŋ
Ce	̀incI
Mada	ntsə̀ntsē
Ị ingye	ntɛŋ
Gbantu	ntsəŋ
Ị umana	ntsìŋ
Bu	ɛntɛ
Təsu	̀n-zò
Toro	muŋzu
Hasha	ifwe
Sambe	cucwá
Ị dun	mesan
Shakara	manfu
Eggon	odzo
Bo	ifé
Horom	ʃifeŋ
Sur	nziŋ
Pe	ntsəŋ
cLela	d-hyón

Commentary: Unless the cLela form is cognate, this may well be an innovation that defines Plateau. Shimizu's (1980) Jukunoid protoforms are *kyáŋ, *fu and *vin, none of which appear to be related.

Hunger	#igbyoŋ		
Language	s.	pl.	Gloss
Kulu	iyonŋ		
Berom	onŋ		
Cara	kivɔŋ		
Rigwe	ɲ [↓] -zò		
Izere	izòŋ		
Gwot	jòŋ		
Tyap	ddzòŋ		
Ataka	jjòŋ		
Jju	dzwoŋ		
Ayu	iyonŋ		
Mada	gyòŋ		starvation
Bu	iyɔ̄		
Ce	ì-wyo		
I umana	gyòn		
Hasha	i-yuŋ		
T«su	nyu		
I dun	ugórí		
Shakara	ugorí	igori	
Fyem	yóŋ		
Horom	yaŋɔ		
Sur	yyɔŋ		
Tarok	ayáŋ		
Mangar	yuŋ		Chadic
Hausa	yunwa		Chadic

Commentary: This is an old Plateau root that has probably been loaned independently into various Chadic languages. The forms with **g-** in C₁ position probably point to a velar in this position, widely weakened in Plateau to labial palatal. If we assume the **gb-** sometimes weakened to initial **b-** this may then have been fricativised to **v-**. Cara may then have lost palatalisation giving **v-** in C₁ position. The table below imagines some pathways that could have allowed the diverse surface forms of C₁ to develop;

