The structure of Bantoid: new evidence and better models

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Roger Blench

Kay Williamson Educational Foundation

- This PowerPoint can be found on my website

- www.roger.blench.info

- Individual papers covering branches of Bantoid are also posted as well as considerable amounts of raw data

- Among the prodigious mass of narratives, from which has been formed the general history of *Voyages and Travels*, and an infinity of others published every day, no mention is made of the languages which are spoken in the different countries, the manners and usages of which are described to us; and if the authors did not from time to time put into the mouths of the inhabitants of those distant regions, some words of which they know the meaning, we should be tempted to believe that only dumb people had travelled among those nations. All will agree at least that whatever relates to the language, its genius, its relation to other known languages, even its mechanism and flow, are not traits which would look misplaced in the historical picture of a nation.

L'Abbé Proyart
History of Loango.. (1776)I

BANTOID: SOME BACKGROUND

- The Bantoid languages are a body of some 150 languages positioned geographically between Nigeria and Cameroun and 'between' Benue-Congo and Bantu in terms of their position within Niger-Congo.

- Often referred to as Bantu, for example in the term 'Ekoid Bantu', their classificatory position remains uncertain.

- Their noun morphology is not that of classic Bantu, although their prefixes are often ascribed its class numbers in a misleading way.

- Krause introduced the term 'Bantoid' in 1895, but it was dropped. Bantoid appears in Guthrie (1948) to describe these transitional languages, replacing the 'Semi-Bantu' of (Johnston 1919-1922) who applied it in a scattershot style to any language outside the Bantu area with traces of nominal classification. In this sense Assirelli (1950) uses it to refer to the *Togorestsprachen*.

- The modern sense of the term may first appear in Richardson (1957) which includes summary sketches of Nyang, Ekoid, Tikar and Grassfields languages.

BANTOID: BACKGROUND II

- Guthrie (1971,2:107-111) considered the problem briefly in his excursus 'Bantuisms in non-Bantu languages'. In typically convoluted form, he acknowledges the striking morphological parallels even with geographically remote languages such as Temne, but considers that the reduced numbers of cognates with Bantu exclude them from consideration.

- As Hal Fleming once memorably said, 'I always find more cognates after a good lunch'

- With Efik (i.e. Lower Cross) and Nkonya (Guan) Guthrie says 'the Bantu material in the lexicons looks as though it may have to be correlated with 'Proto-Bantu' (Guthrie 1971,2:111). However, if there are links with Proto-Bantu, 'it would be necessary to postulate some means by which speakers of the proto-dialect could have travelled from where it was spoken in the direction of West Africa'. In other words Guthrie appeared to think that if these languages were related to Bantu it was because the speakers migrated from the Bantu area.

Bantoid = Bantu round ?!!

- Sigismund Koelle (1854) was the first to present a major comparative vocabulary of the languages of West-Central Africa, based on the languages spoken by freed slaves in Sierra Leone.

- Koelle clearly recognised the unity of Bantu and the vocabularies he collected are grouped together. He also collected a significant number of Bantoid languages, for which this is the first record in many cases. The Bantoid languages are split between the Mókō languages (IX) and Unclassified South African (XII.E).

- Since Johnston (1919-1922) there have been very few attempts to justify Bantu subgrouping; more typically, authors complain about Guthrie's alphanumeric coding but use it anyway. Guthrie's numbers began life as a 'referential' coding but somehow slipped into being quasi-genetic.

BANTOID: BACKGROUND IV

- Gradually, through a series of papers by Greenberg, Kay Williamson, John Watters and the present author, it has been recognised that;
  - There are a large number of languages that somehow stand between Benue-Congo i.e. Plateau, Kainji etc., and Bantu proper (i.e. A group languages) and that these fall into a number of discrete groups
  - Over time, more of these have been recognised; for example, Dakoid moved from being Adamawa in Greenberg to a distinct group which most people regard as somehow within Bantoid
  - The Furu languages, for which RK has recently provided some actual data, are also clearly part of this mystery zone (and not extreme outliers as Breton's publications implied)
  - Languages such as Buru and Ndemli are generally recognised as part of Bantoid although their exact affinities are doubtful
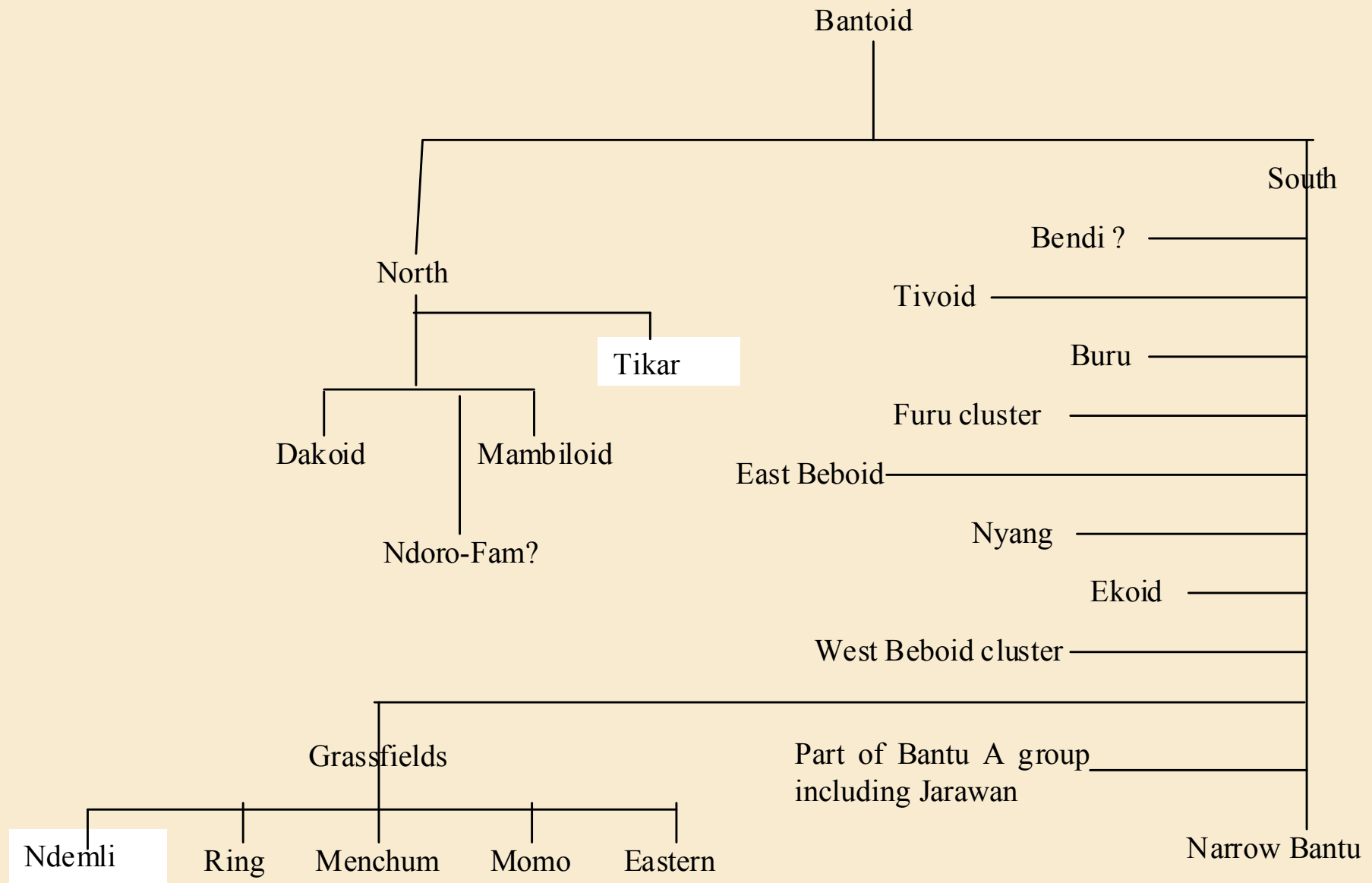
BANTOID: BACKGROUND V

- However, almost all classifications suffer from;
  - A lack of justifications for the subgroups that are endlessly published and repeated (for example, is Grassfields a genuine genetic group?)
  - A lack of published comparative data that could in principle underlie these claims
  - A lack of justification for the sequencing of different Bantoid groups. Each author has a different tree, and these trees are, frankly, impressionistic at best.
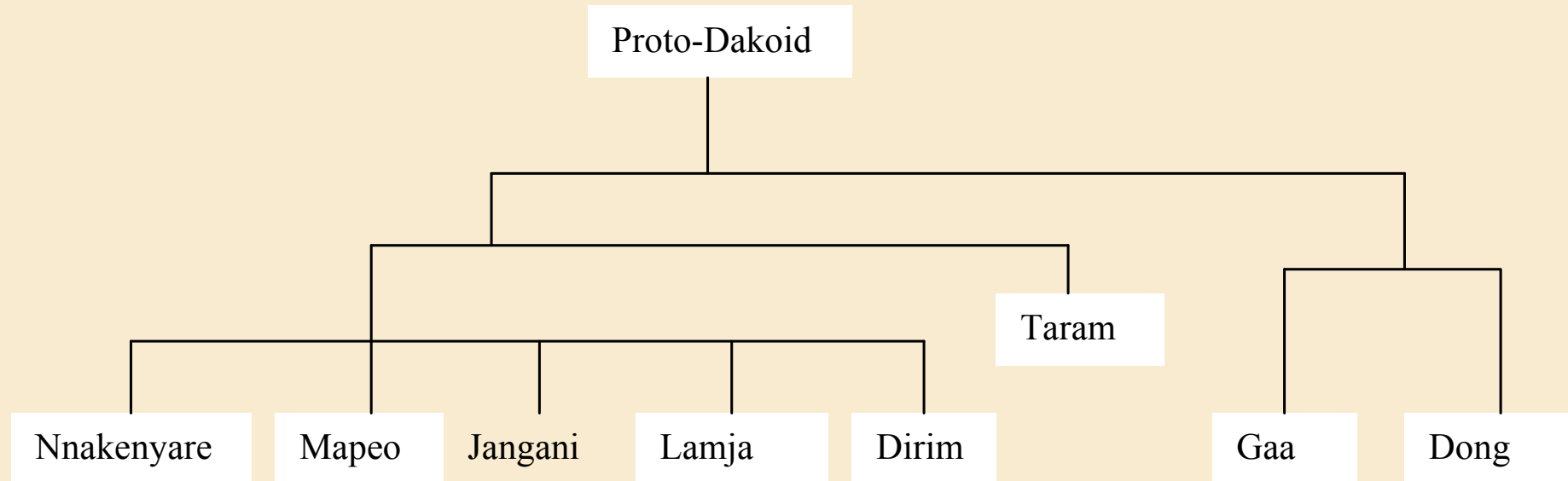
BANTOID: BACKGROUND VI

- Piron (1996, 1997) and Bastin & Piron (1999) represent both the most recent attempt to classify Bantoid, and a major body of data that underlies both her lexicostatistical analyses and shared innovations. Bantoid tree according to Piron (1997: 628)
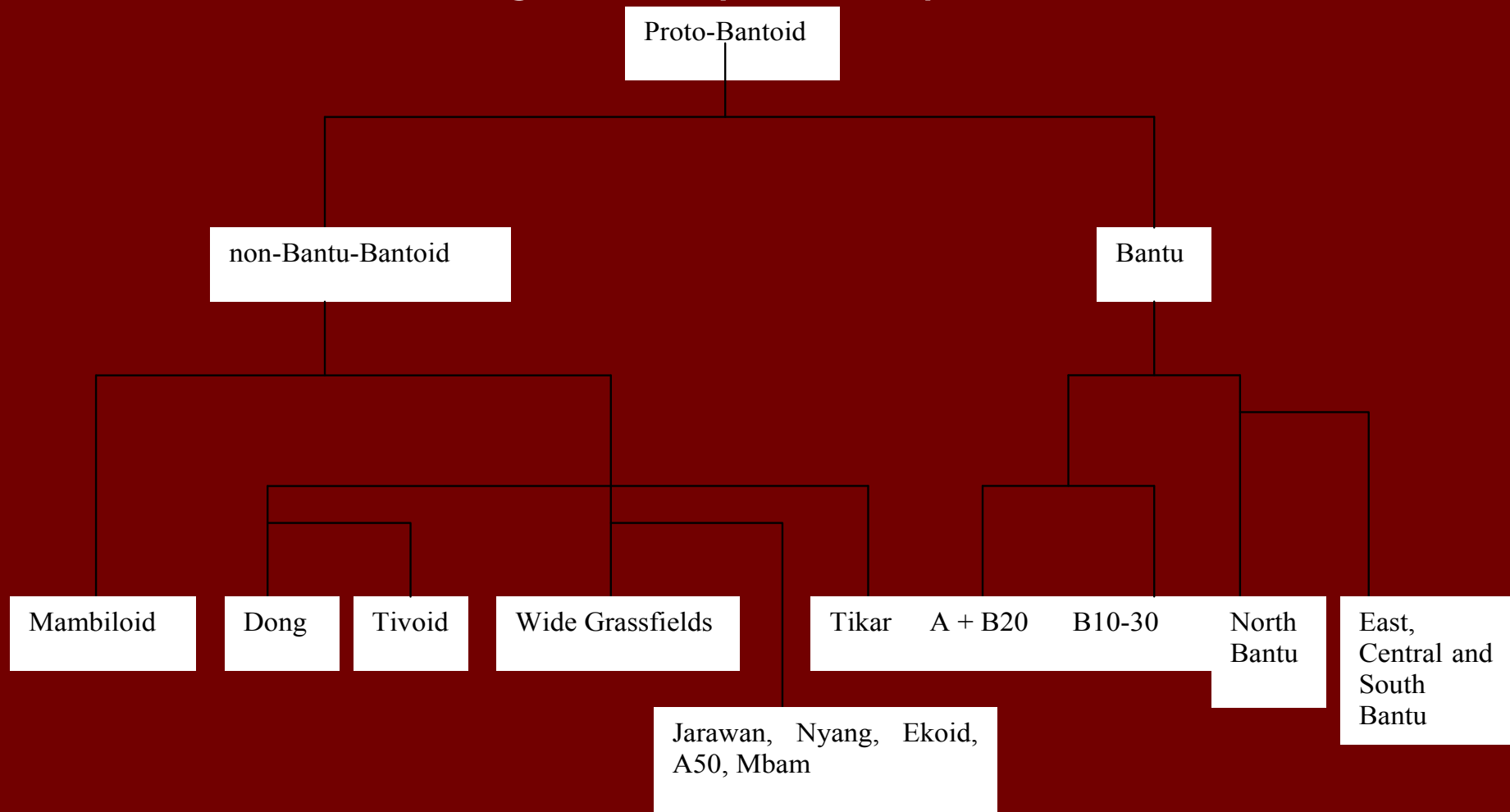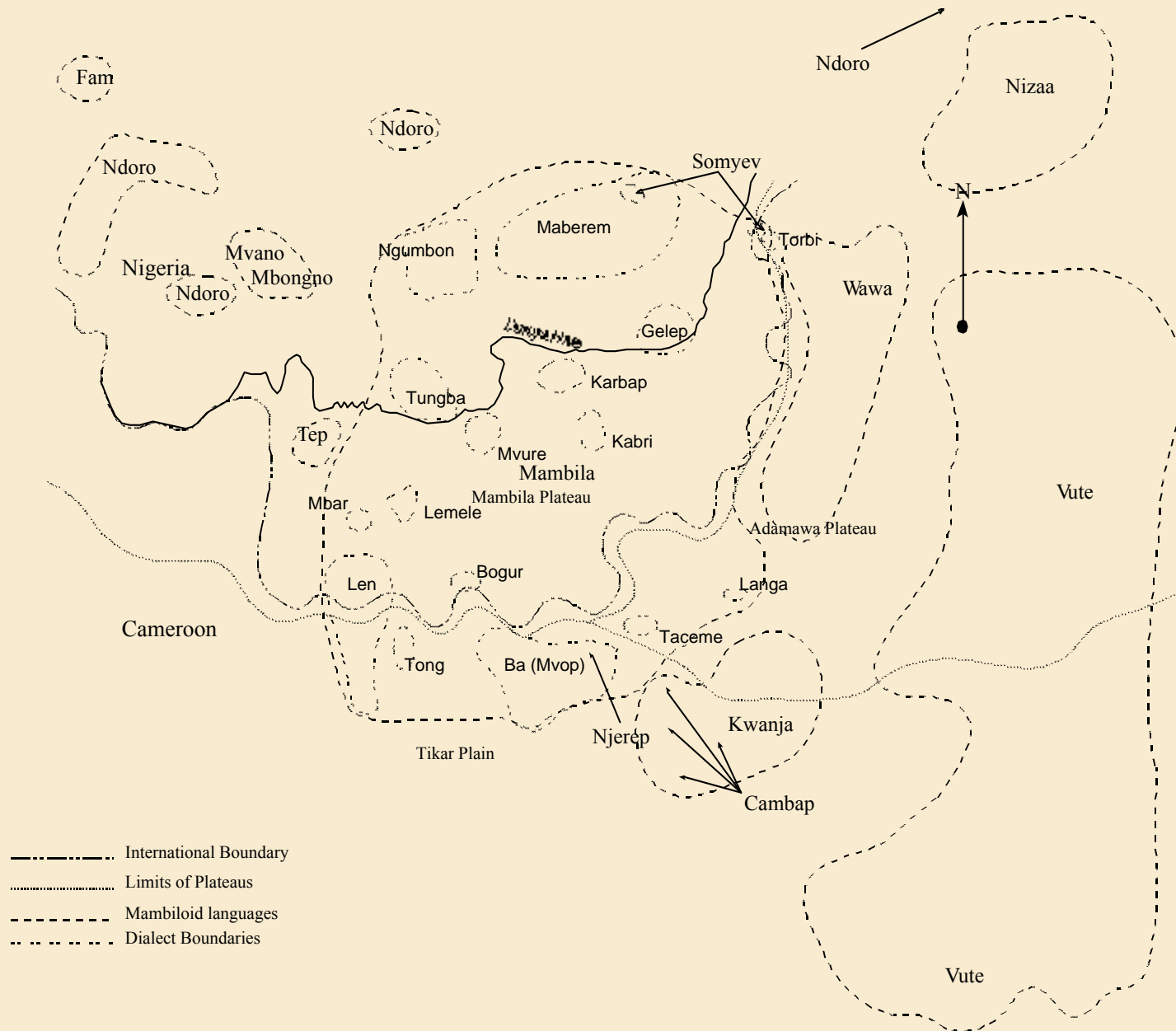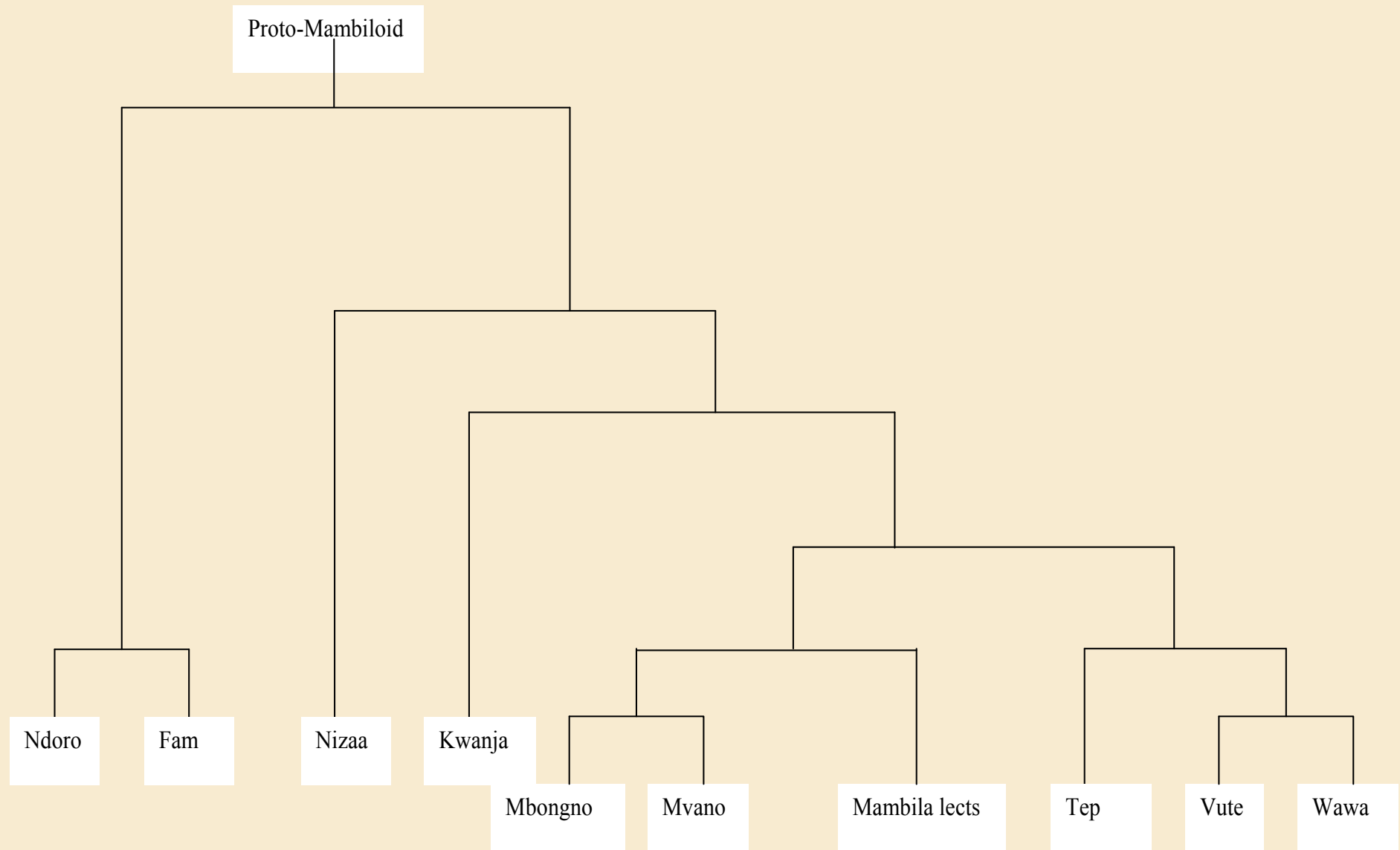
Proposed genetic tree of Bantoid languages

Genetic tree of Dakoid languages

Map of Mambiloid languages

Fam

Ndoro

Ndoro

Ndoro

Nigeria

Mvano

Mbongno

Ndoro

Ngumbon

Maberem

Somyev

Torbi

Wawa

Nizaa

N

Gelep

Karbap

Tungba

Kabri

Tep

Mvure

Mambila

Mbar

Mambila Plateau

Lemele

Adamawa Plateau

Vute

Len

Bogur

Langa

Cameroon

Taceme

Tong

Ba (Mvop)

Kwanja

Njerep

Cambap

Tikar Plain

Vute

⋯ ⋯ ⋯ ⋯ ⋯ ⋯ International Boundary

⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯⋯ Limits of Plateaus

- - - - - - - Mambiloid languages

⋯ - ⋯ - ⋯ - ⋯ Dialect Boundaries

Genetic tree of Mambiloid languages

BANTOID: TIKAR

- Tikar is a cover term for three relatively similar dialects spoken in the Cameroun Grassfields, Tikari, Tige and Tumu. Tikar is spoken on the Tikar plain, south and south-east of Mambiloid proper.

- The Tikar language has always been somewhat problematic in terms of its classification. Dieu & Renaud (1983) placed it together with Ndemli, another language that is hard to classify. Piron (1996, III:628) assigns it a co-ordinate branch with Dakoid, Tivoid, Grassfields and the other branches of Bantoid (her 'South Bantoid') in opposition to Mambiloid.

- Primary comparisons suggest that Tikar is North Bantoid and it is tentatively assigned a co-ordinate position against Dakoid-Mambiloid.

- The structure of Tikar is very remote from a classical Bantu noun-class system and of indeed affixes have been lost, this process has been much more pervasive than in Mambiloid.

BANTOID: Bendi

- Following Greenberg's assignation to Cross River I, various classificatory hypotheses have been put forward.
- Crabb (1967) considered the Bendi languages 'close' to Bantu, but excluded them on the basis of the absence of nasal prefixes.
- Williamson (1971:361) follows Greenberg, making Bennett & Sterk (1977) the first to break away from this consensus, arguing for a Bantoid link. They proposed a 'Wel' grouping which placed Bendi with Bantoid after the splitting-off of Mambiloid.
- Williamson (1989:264-265) reinstated Bendi within Cross River. In the same publication, Faraclas (1989) lists the Bendi languages with Cross River without further comment and Watters (1989) excludes them from South Bantoid.
- Connell (1998) provides a useful history of these debates and also shows that Williamson's evidence is of doubtful validity.
- Bendi has one or two isoglosses with Bantoid, such as ʃaŋ 'tooth' which would normally be taken to exclude it from Cross River but the evidence remains ambiguous
- The datasets are too poor to propose an internal structure for Bendi

tivoid

- The Tivoid languages represent one of the least-known and most poorly characterised of the larger Bantoid groups.

- Greenberg (1963) included Tiv, Bitare and Batu, languages now considered to be Tivoid, as three of the seven co-ordinate branches of Bantu but did not argue for any special relationship between them.

- Williamson (1971:276) lists Tiv, Ceve, Balegete, Bitare, Abɔ̃ and Batu as part of the Tiv-Batu group, which she places within 'non-Bantu Bantoid' alongside Mambila-Wute [i.e. Mambiloid]. Balegete is an Upper Cross language very remote from Tivoid and indeed a footnote admits that no data was available.

- The recognition that there is a whole group of languages related to Tiv may first appear in Dieu & Renaud (1983) reprised in Watters & Leroy (1989). Piron (1997) recognises a Tivoid group although she only sampled a very small number of languages. Her lexicostatistic counts link it with 'Noni', i.e. Beboid. The situation is thus of the same data being recycled from one author to another with no real advances in analysis.

Internal structure of Tivoid
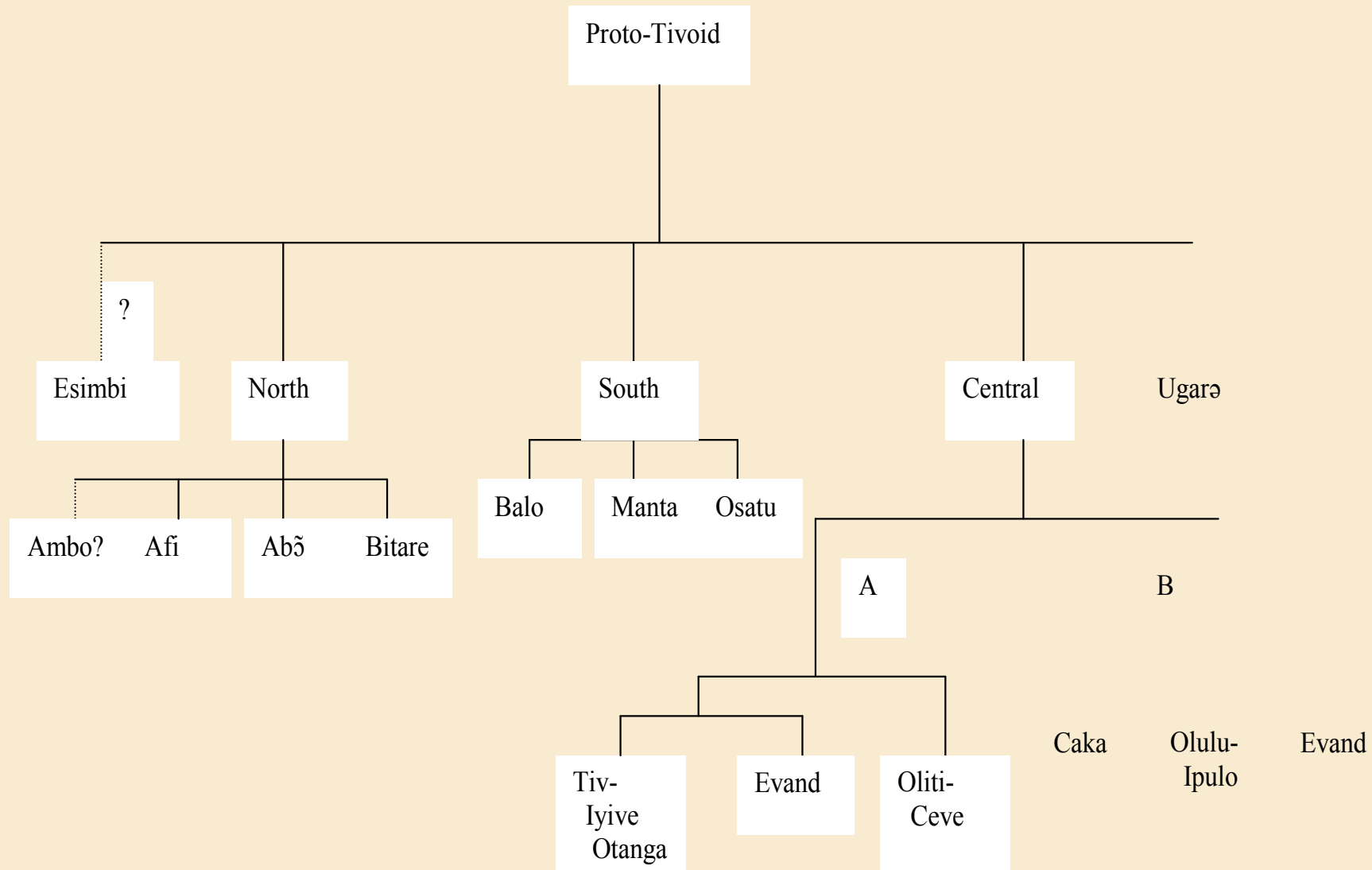
Buru

- The Buru language is spoken in a single village east of Baissa, below the Mambila escarpment Sardauna LGA,Taraba State, Nigeria.

- The only data on Buru is a manuscript wordlist collected by Robert Koops in the 1970s. He also collected data on the nearby Batu languages, which show some similarities, but which are more obviously Tivoid.

- The only published discussion of the classification of Buru is Piron (1998) which assumes it is Tivoid, but without any very conclusive evidence.

NYANG

- Nyang [=Mamfe] consists of three languages, Kenyang, Denya and Kendem, spoken in Manyu & Kitwii divisions of Southwest Province in Cameroun.

- Due to intensive literacy programmes in this area these languages are relatively well-known.

- Although the Nyang languages clearly form a group, they are very different from one another. In the survey by Tyhurst (1983) the lowest lexicostatistic percentage between Nyang lects was 47%. Attempts to classify these languages (principally Kenyang) begin with its assignation to Ekoid (Johnston 1919-1922) under 'Manyang'

- Voorhoeve (1980) who is still unclear about a Nyang group, demonstrates the mixed character of these languages with some prefixes that closely resemble Bantu and others that seem to have undergone mergers characteristic of Ekoid.
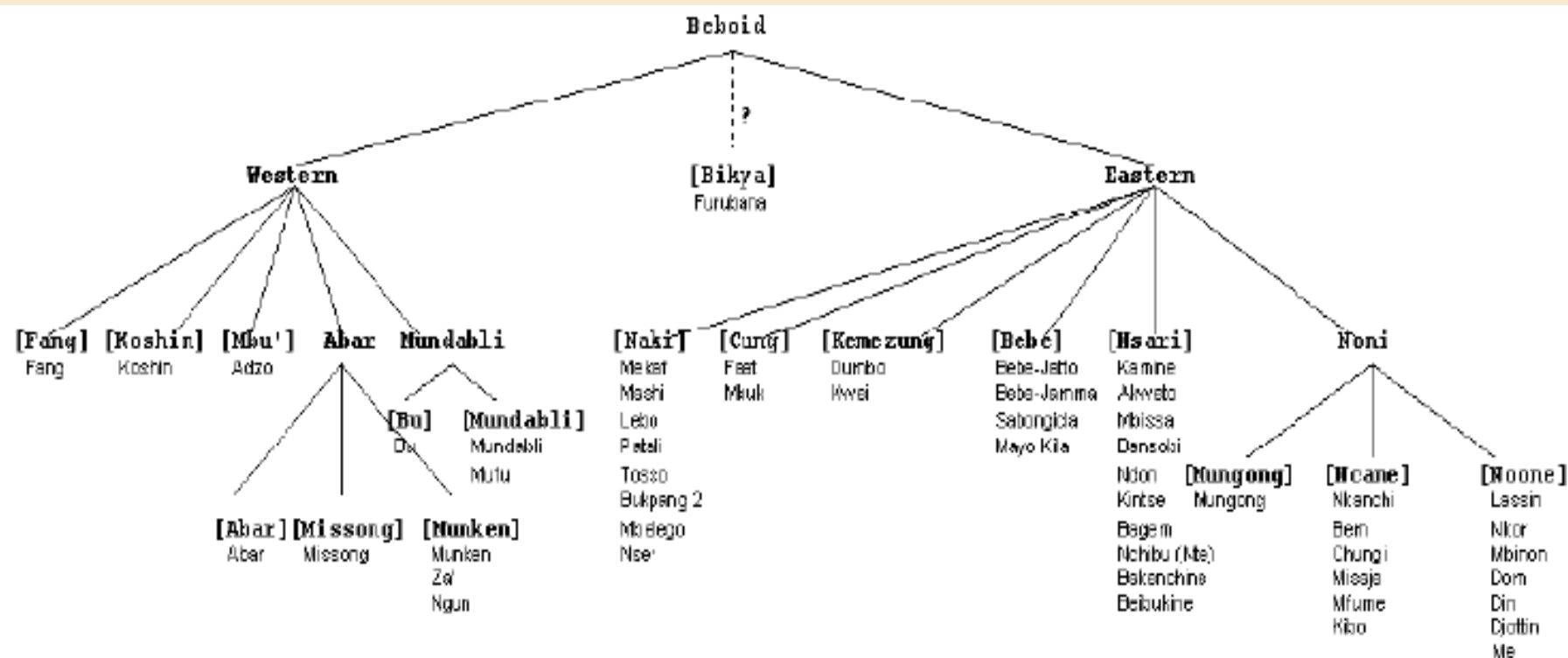
BEBOID

- Beboid languages are spoken in principally in Southwest Cameroun although two languages are also spoken over the border in Nigeria.

- Eastern Beboid is clearly a unit, Western Beboid is more doubtful, and Jeff Good has proposed that some languages are misclassified

BEBOID SPEECH FORMS
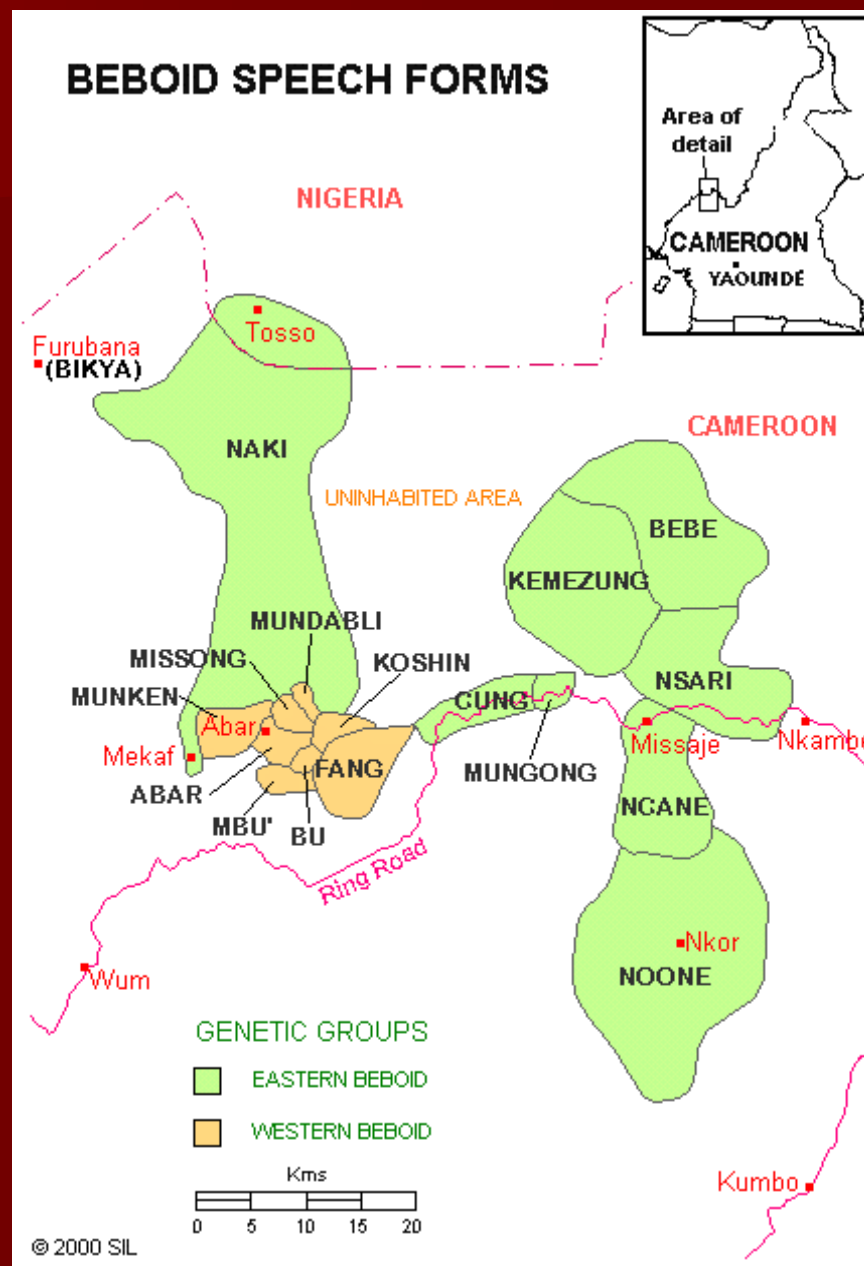
Continuing work in Noni…

Genetic tree of Beboid languages

FURU

- Until recently the Furu languages have remained the one exotic and unknown branch of Bantoid. Extremely inaccessible, they can be reached only via a two days' trek from the road or via helicopter.

- They are also down to the last few speakers or are moribund, and have been cited by the endangered languages lobby in their literature.

- Spoken on the Nigeria-Cameroun borderland in Furu-Awa division, there appear to have been four languages, Bishuo, Busu, Bikyak and Lubu. The linguist Michel Dieu was the first to report the existence of these languages, and he appears to have collected primary wordlists. However, after his death the data was apparently lost, and only his lexicostatistical calculations survived, published in Breton (1993, 1995). However, these calculations are very misleading, since they appear to show that Furu languages are extremely remote from their neighbours.

- In 2007, Roland Kiessling was able to revisit Furu-Awa and has reported on the current status of these languages with a particular focus on Bikyak which still retains the most fluent speakers. This suggests that the Furu languages are reasonably well-behaved Bantoid languages, with eroded noun-class prefixes and numerous cognates with neighbouring languages.
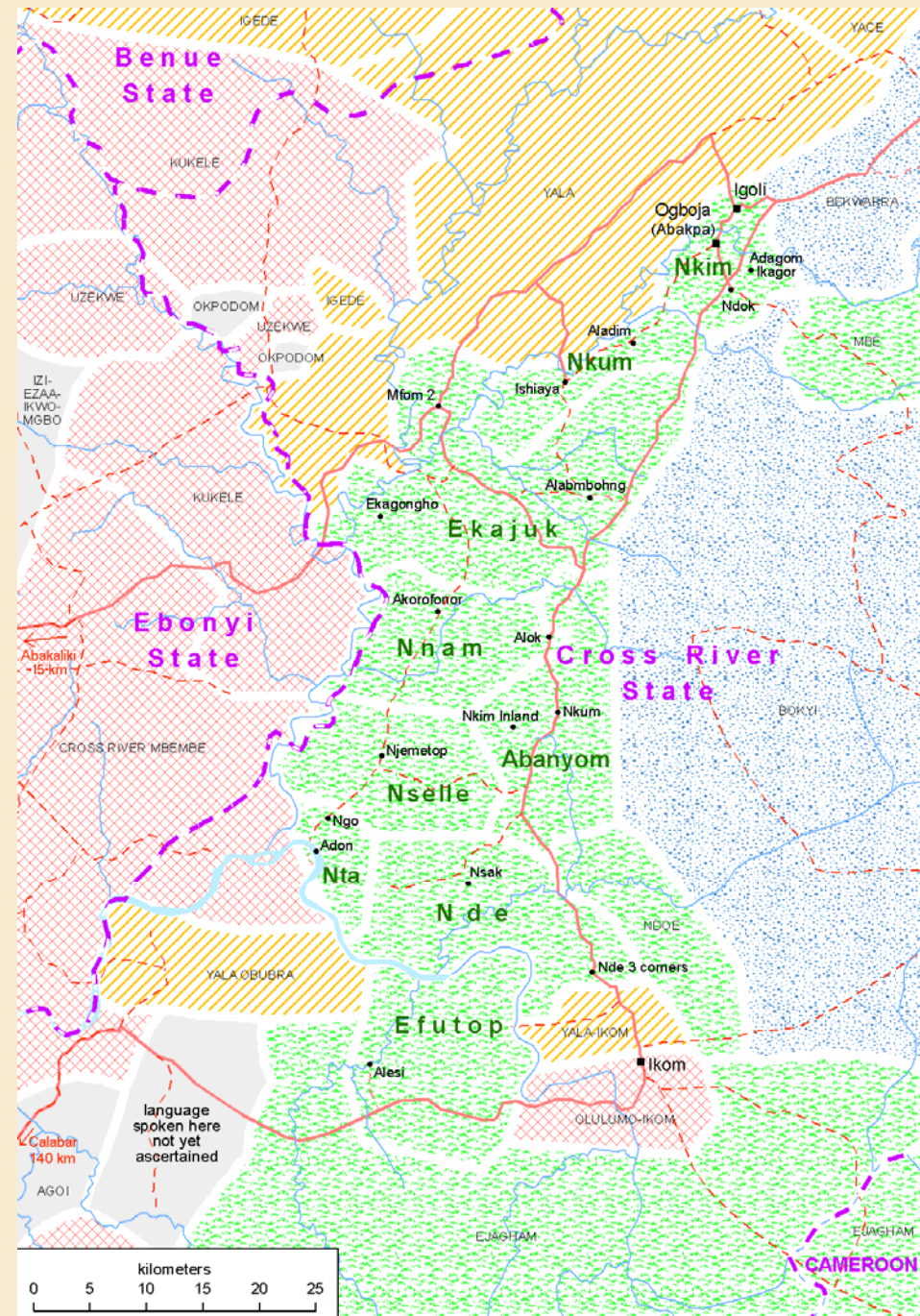
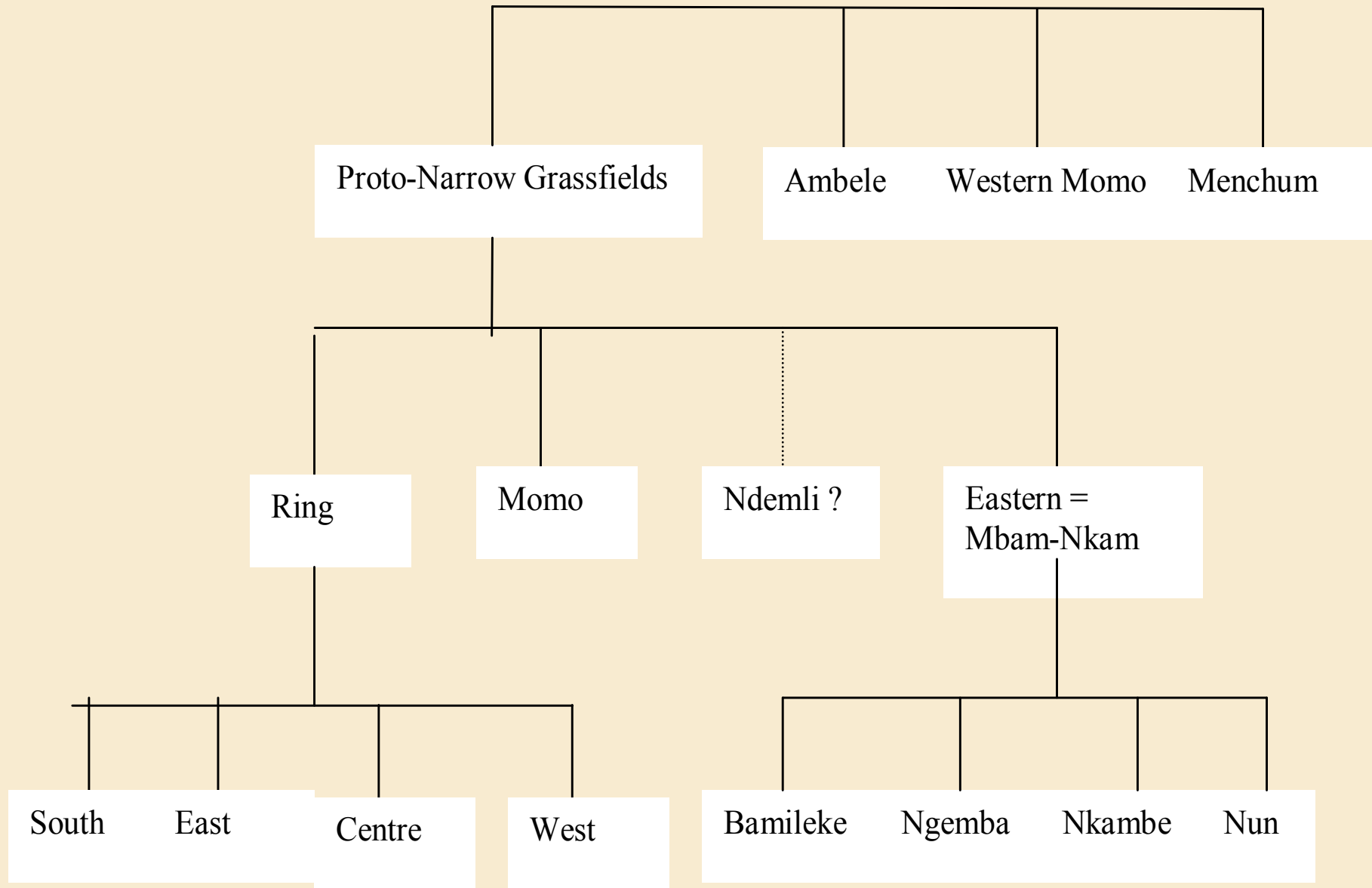# Genetic classification of Ekoid-Mbe languages

Adapted from Watters (ined.)
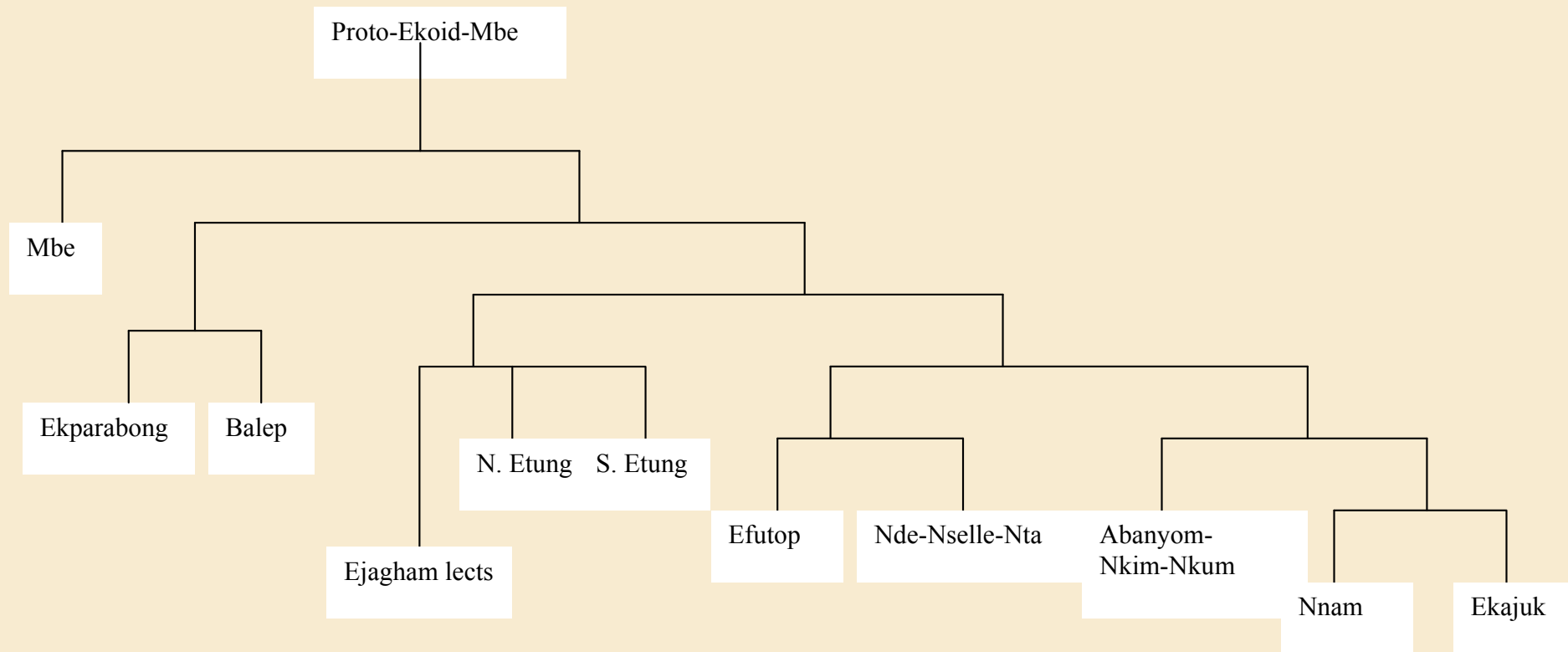
Location of Ekoid-Mbe languages
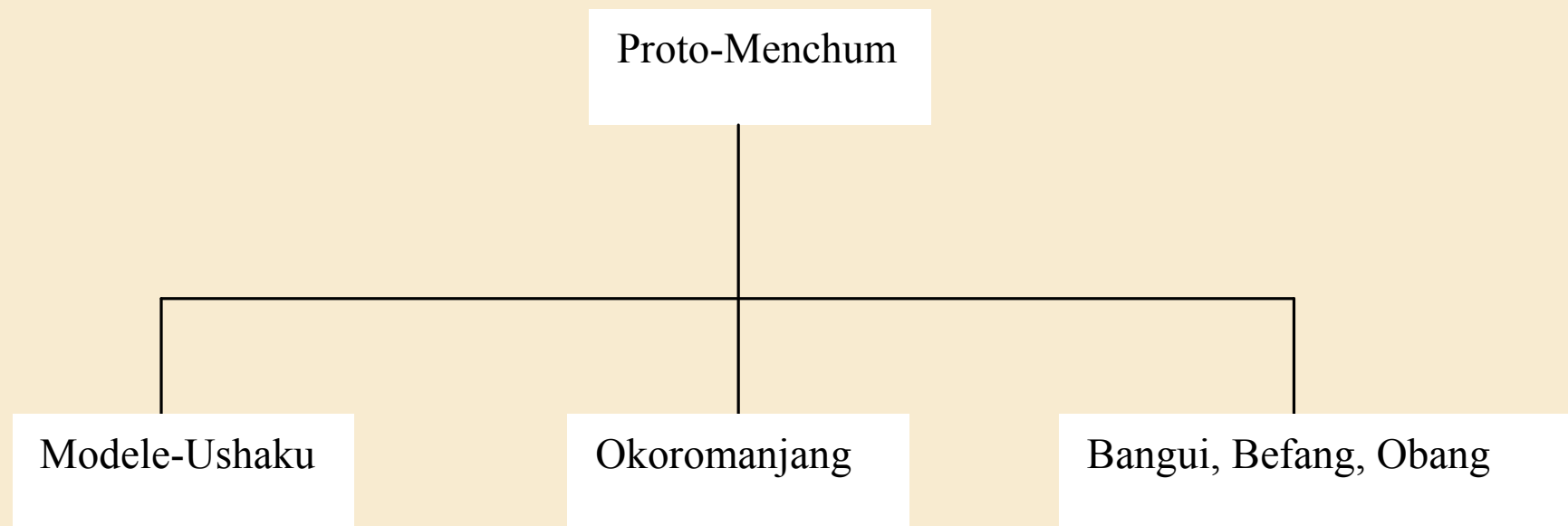
Adapted from Yoder et al. (ined.)

Grassfields languages

Menchum cluster

- It is conceivable that the Menchum cluster is wrongly placed and that this is better considered a co-ordinate branch of Tivoid

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                        ┌─────────────────┐
                        │  Proto-Menchum  │
                        └────────┬────────┘
          ┌──────────────────────┼──────────────────────┐
┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────┐
│  Modele-Ushaku   │   │  Okoromanjang    │   │ Bangui, Befang, Obang │
└──────────────────┘   └──────────────────┘   └──────────────────────┘
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Jarawan Bantu

- The Jarawan Bantu languages have always been something of a poor relation to Bantu proper. Scattered across northern Cameroun and east-central Nigeria,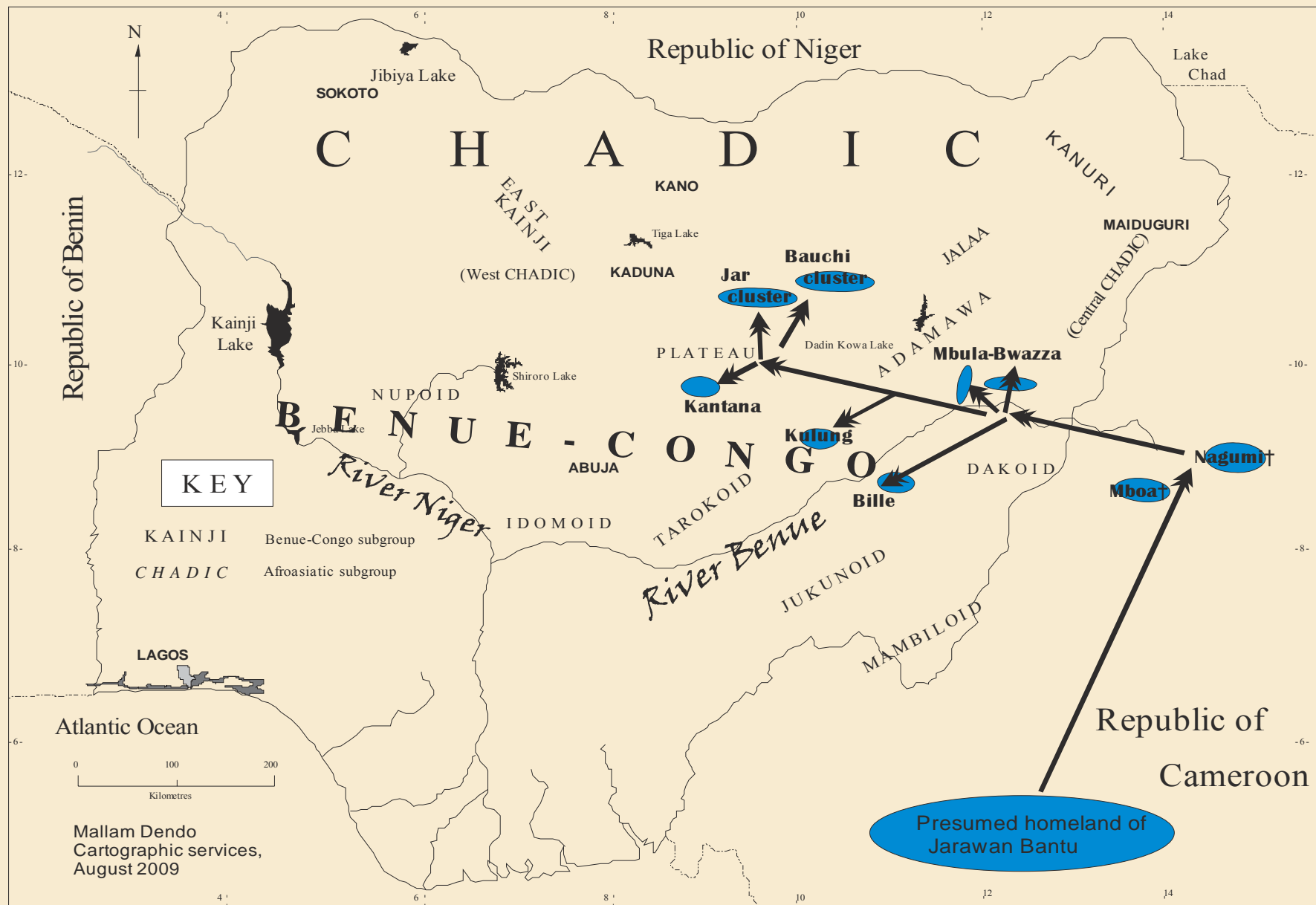 they remain poorly documented and poorly characterised. Recent research suggests that Mboa and Nagumi in Cameroun are both extinct.

- Jarawan has historically been placed outside Bantu proper, apparently for typological reasons. The non-productive noun-class system and the borrowings form Chadic make it seem 'not Bantu'

- But lexically, its links are all with A60 languages and it seems almost certain this is where it should be placed.

- Plus, fascinatingly, it has retained pharyngealised vowels, in a region, Central Nigeria, where these are otherwise unknown. Of which, more anon.

Jarawan Bantu

Proto-Jarawan Bantu
- Mboa
- Nagumi
- Nigerian Jarawan Bantu
  - Numan — Mama — Lame
    - ʼBile
      - Bwazza
        - Mbula · Tambo · Konu · Gwamba
    - Rùhû · Mbárù · Rùhû
  - Kulung — Jaku-Gubi
    - Shiki · Dulbu · Lábɨr
  - Jarawa
    - Zhár · Zugur · Gwak · Ndaŋshi · Dòòrì · Mbat · Mùùn · Kantana · Dàmùl
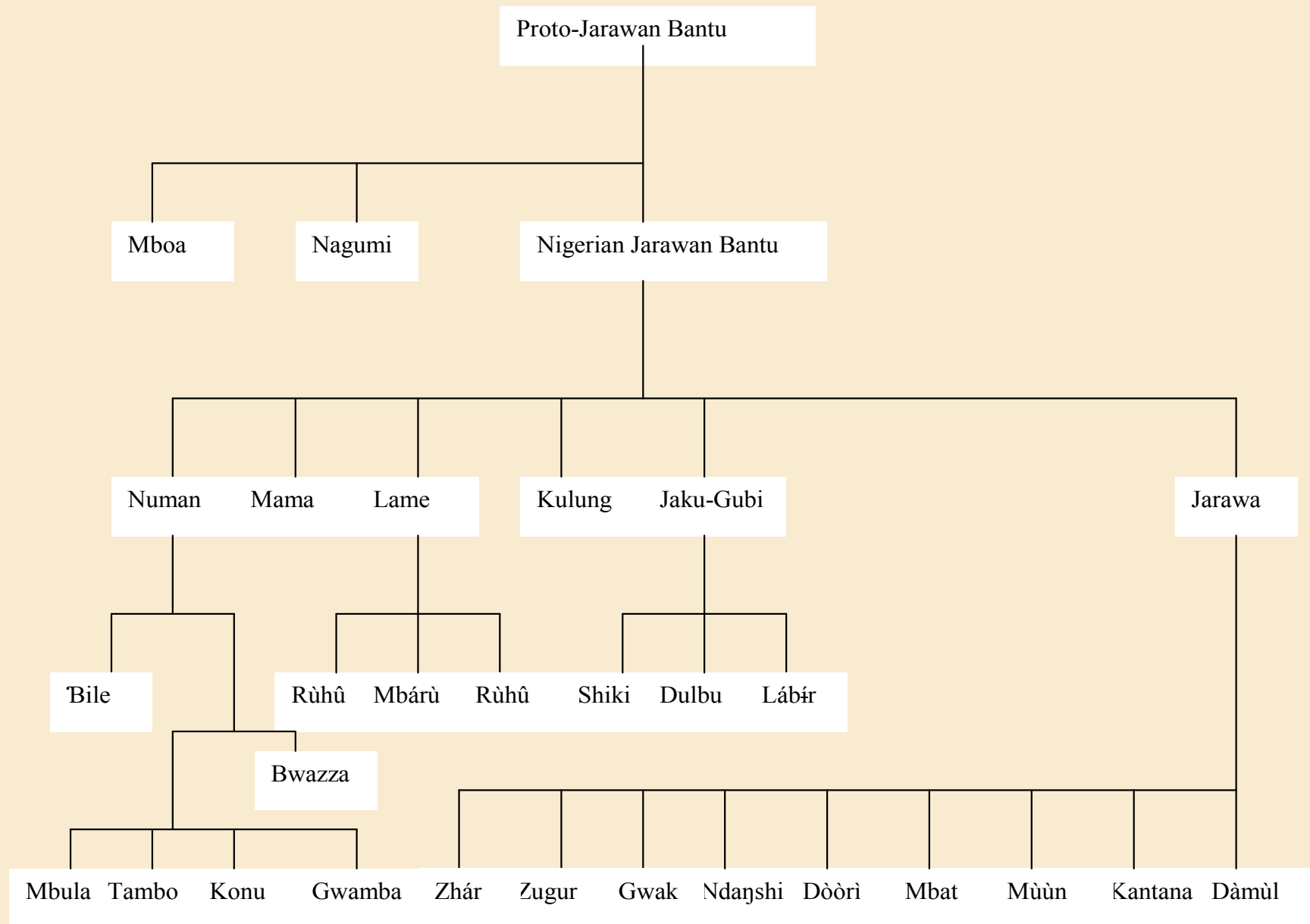
Jarawan Bantu languages

Mbula-Bwazza languages

Key:

Ung: Ungwar
• Interview Village/Town
■ Town/City
⬟ Lg. Isolate

Areas shown are approximate

Niger Congo, Benue-Congo
Jarawan Bantoid
Jukunoid

Niger Congo, Adamawa
Mumuye
Yandang
Other
Waja-Jen Yungur
Waja-Jen Bikwin
Waja-Jen, other

Afro-Asiatic, Chadic
Biu-Mandara
Tangale
Bole

Sources: www.ethnologue.com, GPS data, and other maps
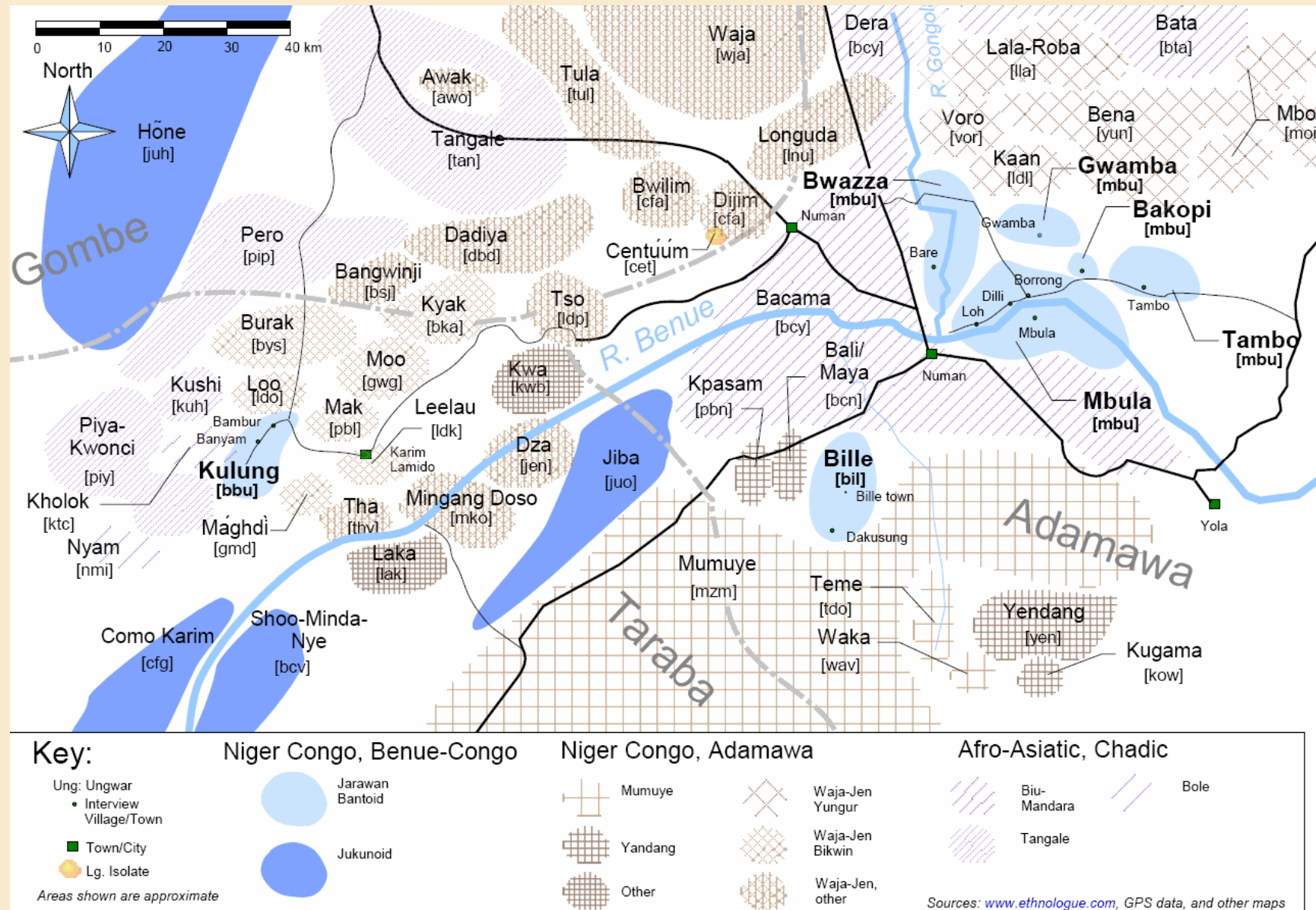
Zhar cluster and Jaku languages
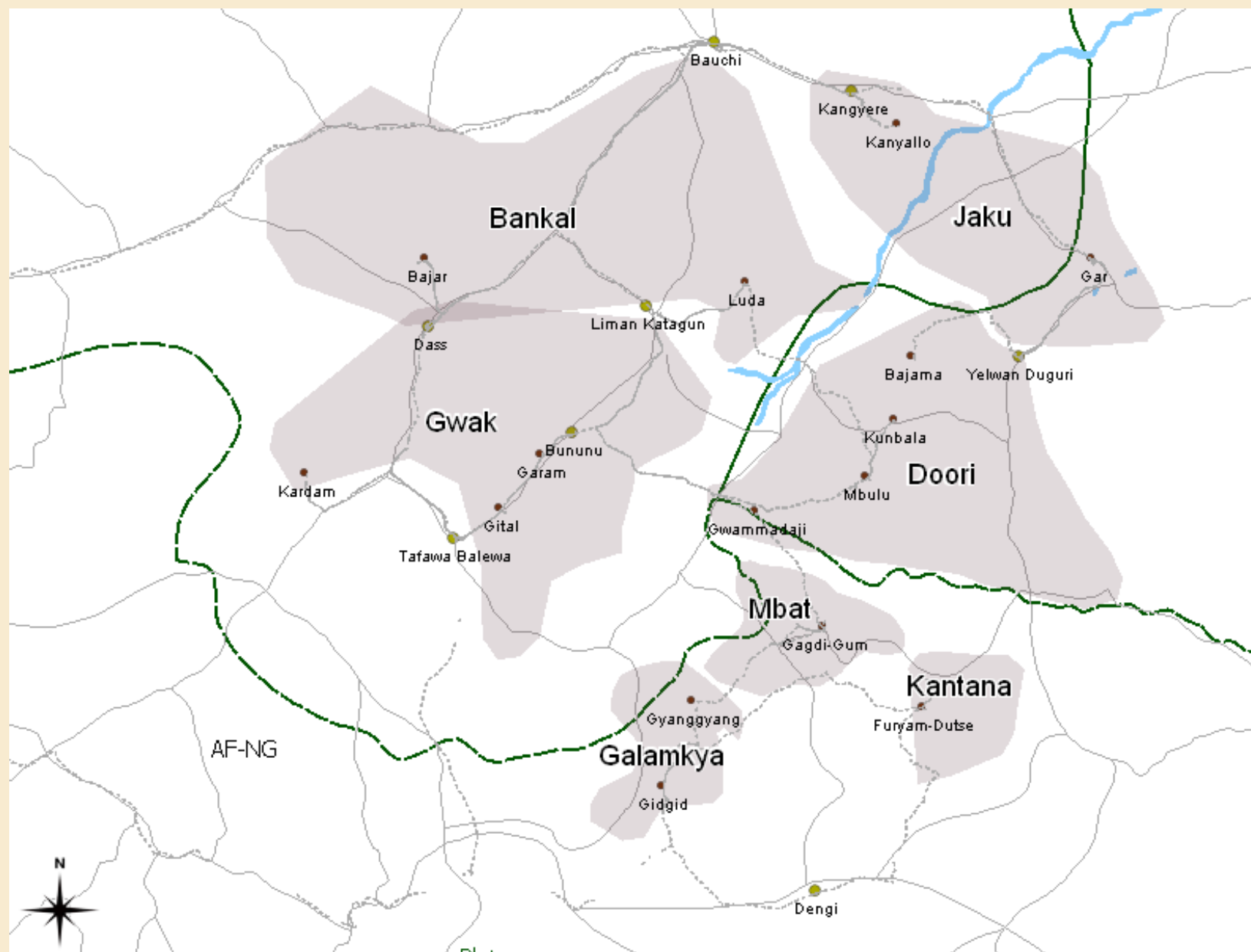
Is the concept of Bantu on life-support?

- Bantuists have long been distressed by the difficulties of finding any unambiguous criteria for marking off Bantu languages from other Niger-Congo

- Despite this they continue to work both with the referential/quasi-genetic groupings of Guthrie and to cite his CB forms and to link synchronic forms with CB (commonly confused with PB)

- But the phonology and morphology of many A group languages as well as increasing evidence for commonalties between Bantoid and Bantu suggests that;

Is the concept of 'Bantu' on life-support II?

- Some not fully defined group of northwestern languages must simply be excised from 'Bantu' if the standard views of phonology, tone, etc. are to be maintained. This idea may have first surfaced with Bennett & Sterk (1977)

- These north-western languages do not seem to have much in common with each other and may be an innovation-linked aray rather than a genetic group

- Even so, proto-Bantu must have had features not usually ascribed to it, if we assume that features common to A group languages and Bantoid are evidence for the nature of PB

- Which would be methodologically strange to deny, although it is regularly done

Proposed features of proto-Bantu

A. Pharyngealised vowels. Widespread in Bantoid, in Jarawan Bantu, in A group Bantu (Kwasio) and apparently Fang

B. 9/10 vowels with $\pm$ ATR harmony. Scattered in Bantoid, widespread in Niger-Congo, present in some A group Bantu (e.g. Mbam languages).

C. Three tone levels (again common in Bantoid and ins some A group languages)

D. Labial velars. kp/gb/ ?ŋm   Present virtually throughout Niger-Congo, in Bantu A,B,C and in some East African Bantu

E. Probably a more chaotic noun-class affix system than appears in usual presentations. The present system was restructured subsequently

Was there a proto-Bantu word for 'whale' ?

- Some of the most poorly described Bantu languages are those along the western seaboard. There are no large dictionaries and no comprehensive studies of maritime and aquatic terminology

- To judge by some recent fieldwork in Cameroun, these areas of vocabulary are well-developed

- There is also evidence for early Ịjọ-Bantu contact, which combined with the settlement of Bioko points to an important maritime element in Bantu expansion

- Archaeological evidence for an expansion down the west coast of Africa is quite well-developed; linguists just have to collect the evidence…

Conclusion

- Bantoid languages have until recently been impossible to sort out, simply for lack of data on so many of them. Which hasn't stopped many (including the present author) confidently publishing trees of their relationships

- Reference books are remarkably confused about what does and doesn't belong to Bantu.

- Even now, the situation for published data remains extremely weak. But there is a great deal of informally circulated data.

- Attempt to revive the framework on the Benue-Congo Comparative-Wordlist to remedy this

- Watch this space..

THANKS

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❖ to Stephen Anderson and Robert Hedinger, Mike Rueck and Zachariah Yoder for discussions and making available unpublished data.