

The Kainji languages

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1 Background

The Kainji languages of north-central Nigeria are a major branch of Benue-Congo. The group includes approximately 60 languages divided geographically into three main areas:

- the Eastern Kainji languages, which are spoken north and west of Jos in central Nigeria
- the Basa subgroup found further to the south at the Niger-Benue confluence
- the remainder (called the ‘Western’ languages here), which are spread across northwest Nigeria, around Lake Kainji

It has previously been thought that the Eastern Kainji languages constituted a primary division of Kainji, but the linguistic evidence for this is uncertain and its place within the overall group remains unclear. The Eastern Kainji group, which has perhaps about 20-30 languages, is severely endangered and underdocumented. An exception is Amo (autonym Timap) which is described in Di Luzio (1972) and Anderson (1980). Compared to their Western Kainji relatives, the Eastern languages are fairly homogeneous both lexically and morphologically (e.g. Longtau 2012: 69-71). Recent fieldwork has concentrated on the Western languages and this report does the same.

1.1 Endangerment status

Kainji languages vary in size from Tsvadi with perhaps 150,000-200,000 speakers and virtually extinct languages such as Damakawa with only a few rememberers. The three groups identified above differ from each other in their endangerment status. The Eastern Kainji and Basa languages are mostly moribund or declining due to shift to Hausa, but the Western languages are remarkably robust, at least in rural areas, and recent language development efforts have been met with enthusiasm from both Muslims and Christians. See McGill and Blench (in press) for more details.

1.2 Level of documentation

A ‘state-of-the-art’ review of available Kainji language documentation and description is set out in McGill and Blench (in press). Suffice to say that there is very little published descriptive material considering the size of the group, and articles and academic theses focus on a single subgroup (Kambari). More recently a number of unpublished electronic phonological and grammatical sketches have come into circulation, based on research carried out by members of Wycliffe Bible Translators. A 50,000 word Cicipu corpus has been submitted to the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS and is in the process of being curated.

Finally, as mentioned in §2, on three fieldtrips from 2010-2012 Roger Blench and Stuart McGill have recorded 700-item wordlists in the least-known (Western) Kainji languages. These fieldtrips have been funded by the Kay Williamson Educational Foundation, the Hans Rausing Endangered Languages Programme, and most recently the Foundation of Fundamental Linguistic Research.

1.3 Linguistic features

The phonemic inventories of most Kainji languages have the mid-high central vowel ə as part of a symmetrical 6 or 8 vowel system (/i, e, ə, a, o, u/ or /i, e, ε, ə, a, o, ɔ, u/), but 5-, 7-, and 9-vowel

systems can all be found. There are a variety of systems of vowel harmony: harmony in height, in backness, ‘total’ harmony (Aoki 1968) in the Kambari subgroup, and none at all. Implosives and labiovelars are found, but not in all languages. Rarer consonants include the interdental approximants of Bauchi Nguda (Harley 2012) and the post-nasalised plosives (e.g. /tⁿ/) found in Sengwe [=Laru], which have presumably been borrowed from Busa (cf. Jones 1998: 31). Syllable structure ranges from the Kambari group with arguably CV only, to the Northwest languages such as C’Lela where complex clusters are common (e.g. *batksa* [bɪtk.sɪ] ‘expose’ (Steve Dettweiler n.d.)). Noun words in the Kambari languages are usually trisyllabic, whereas in Sengwe they are more often monosyllabic with a correspondingly more complex tonal inventory. Lexical roots in the Kambari group are predominantly CVCV, while in the Northwest CVC is common. Words in the Kamuku and Shiro languages are very often devoiced utterance-finally, which explains why earlier wordlists list a larger number of CVC roots.

As for morphology, most languages have Bantu-style¹ robust prefixing noun class systems with ubiquitous agreement, although the individual systems are quite diverse. In Sengwe², however, most plurals are formed by the addition of an enclitic to the noun phrase. The complexity of the verbal morphology in some branches of Kainji stands out in Nigeria, and is presumably ancestral to Benue-Congo (see Hyman 2011). See Crozier (2012) for a recent description of verbal morphology in Central Kambari.

Other morphosyntactic peculiarities which are known about include class-marker ‘flipping’ in the Northwest languages (where individual nouns occur with either prefixes or suffixes depending on their grammatical function, e.g. Smith 2007) and the co-existence of both a sex-based gender system and a typical Niger-Congo noun class system in Hungwəryə (Davey 2009).

1.4 Previous subclassification

Kainji languages are very diverse both in their lexicon and morphology, and consequently the genetic unity of the Kainji languages was not recognised until Bertho (1952), who used ‘Kambéri’ as a cover term for the group. Greenberg’s (1955) Plateau 1a grouped together the Western Kainji languages. Plateau 1a and 1b (Eastern Kainji) were then promoted to a separate Kainji group on the same level as Platoid by Gerhardt (1989). The most recent published sub-classification of Kainji can be found in Williamson and Blench (2000) (see Figure 1), and is based largely on isoglosses delimiting the various subgroups. It should be noted that to date very little evidence has ever been provided for any Kainji subclassification.

¹The similarities were observed by Johnston (1919), who included three Kainji languages in his ‘semi-Bantu’.

² Sengwe is very much a Kainji outlier, having been apparently heavily-influenced by the Mande language Busa spoken to the east of Lake Kainji.

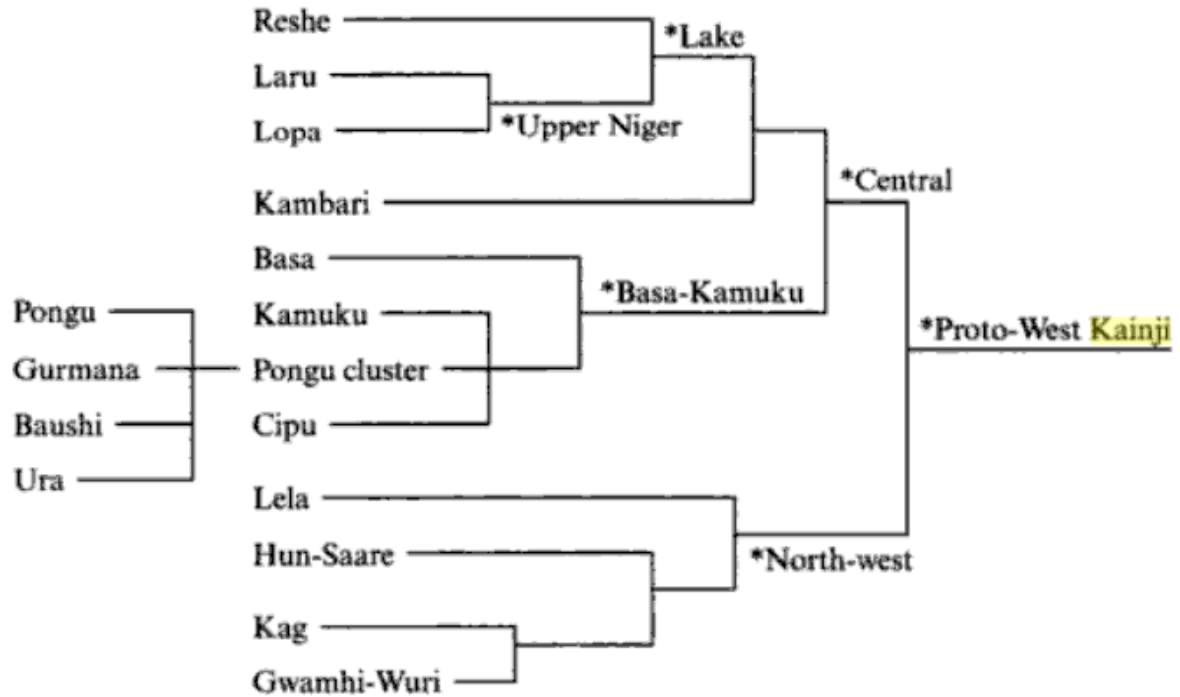


Figure 1 - Western Kainji classification taken from Williamson and Blench (2000: 32)

2 Recent developments

2.1 Wordlist collection

As mentioned above, recent fieldtrips have resulted in the recording of a 700-item wordlist in a number of Western Kainji languages, with two main purposes. Firstly, to fill in the missing gaps in languages that would make a reconstruction of Proto-Kainji at least feasible, and secondly to collect a large enough sample of words to permit a reasonable phonological sketch. Words were elicited through Hausa with the help of a number of research assistants, all of whom were native speakers of a Kainji language (in particular Apollos Agamalafiya, Mohammed Risky, Felix Usman, Jibrin Usman, and Markus Yabani).

The languages included are listed in the table below. On certain occasions adverse circumstances prevented the collection of the whole list, and instead we collected the 228-item wordlist used by Steve and Sonia Dettweiler in their 1990s Kainji survey (e.g. Dettweiler and Dettweiler 2002).

Hausa name	ISO code	Autonym	Subgroup	Date collected	Material collected
Eastern Acipa/Sagamuk	acp	[tùságámùkù]/ [tuzubazubą]	Kamuku	2011	700-item list
Ura	ula	[tʃífung ^w à]	Kamuku	2010, 2012	700-item list
Shama	sqa	[t ^w ějám(ą)]	Kamuku	2012	700-item list
Rogo/Rubaruba	rod	[tùrúógò]	Kamuku	2012	228- item list

Kambari Tsuvadfi	tvd	[tsùváfí]	Kambari	2012	Approx. 400 words
Kambari Bangi	bqx	[tʃìbáŋgí]	Kambari	2012	228- item list
Bauchi Supana	bsf	[tìhèpǎnǎ]	Shiroro	2010, 2011	700-item list
Bauchi Rubo	bsf	[tùrúbó]	Shiroro	2010, 2011	700-item list
Bauchi Wayam	bsf	[ttwájá]	Shiroro	2010, 2011	700-item list
Gurmana	gvm	[túgúr ^o máná]	Shiroro	2012	700-item list
Waga	<i>png?</i>	[tùwégó]	Shiroro	2011	Approx. 100 words
Laru	lan	[j'ě:g ^w è]	Lake	2011	700-item list
Lopa	lop	[òl:óp]	Lake	2011	700-item list
	[lop/new?]	[tsùtjúbá]	Lake	2012	700-item list
Wuri	bga	[èdwéřì]	Northwest	2011	700-item list
Mba	bga	?	Northwest	2011	Approx. 100 words
Gwamhi	bga	[èdg ^w àmh'íó?]	Northwest	2011	700-item list

Figure 2: 700-item Kainji wordlists

All elicitation sessions were recorded and have been submitted to the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS where they are currently being curated. In the meantime transcriptions time-aligned to the audio recordings will be available from the author on request.

2.2 Damakawa

Damakawa (McGill 2008) is a moribund language spoken only by a few rememberers. Neither the language nor ethnic group were known to linguists until they were discovered in 2008 by Israel Wade, an MA student at the Theological College of Northern Nigeria in Jos. The ethnic group numbers perhaps 500-1000, and they have switched to C'Lela, another Kainji language.

Only a very little could be remembered by the elders we spoke to, and even then it was mixed with C'Lela, Tsuvadfi, and Cicipu. The language can be tentatively classified as having belonged to the Northwest subgroup of Kainji.

2.3 Cuba [tsùtjúbá]

On visiting Lopa town in 2011 to record a wordlist in the Lopa language (autonym òl:óp), we were informed that there was another dialect of Lopa spoken in Cifamini town, to the south. From the wordlist recorded there in 2012, there is evidence to suggest that this 'dialect' (autonym tsùtjúbá) should really be considered a separate language. Not only are there clear lexical differences between the two varieties throughout the wordlist, the noun class prefixes are also very different. Speakers of the two varieties have to use Hausa to communicate when they meet. Unlike Damakawa, Cuba appears to be relatively vital.

2.4 Current sub-classification

No serious reconstruction work has been done as yet and the internal classification set out in Figure 2 is thus provisional, based on preliminary inspection of cognates. The major differences from Figure 1 above are:

- the demotion of ‘East Kainji’ to a branch parallel to Basa
- individual languages added to the Kambari and Bauchi nodes
- the addition of Damakawa and Cuba
- the switching of Cicipu (Cipu) from the Kamuku branch to the Kambari branch (see McGill n.d. for a detailed discussion)
- the renaming of the ‘Pongu cluster’ to ‘Shiroro’, after the lake found to the east of these languages.

It should be noted that Kainji peoples are ‘splitters’ rather than ‘lumpers’ and make many more distinctions than are shown in the chart below. In some cases (e.g. Regi-Cinda-Kuki, ut-Ma’in, Duka, Gwamhi-Wuri-Mba, and the two Bauchi languages) there is no autonym large enough to cover what linguists might want to call a language. Hyphens indicate multiple ethnic groups have been combined here into a single language. Terms after a backslash / indicate either Hausa or Ethnologue names.

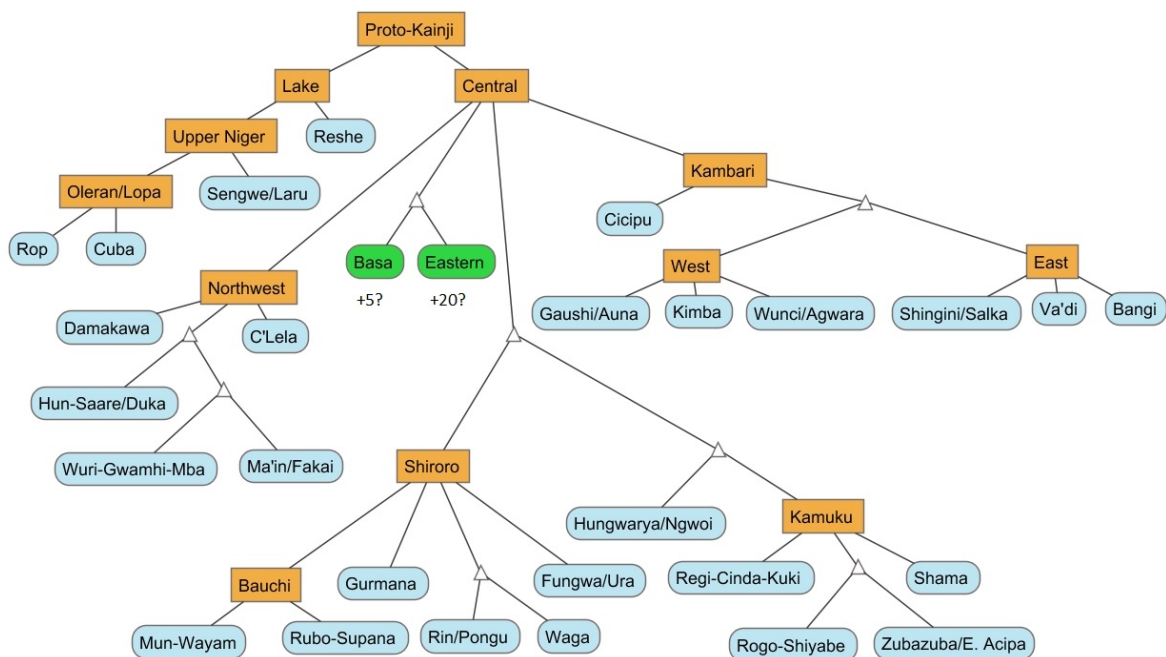


Figure 3 - revised sub-classification of Kainji

Reconstruction has not yet been started due to work commitments and the completion of other linguistic projects (the author has been working full-time as a software consultant since September 2011). However the prospects are better from the autumn of 2012 onwards, and it will gradually be possible to start offering detailed supporting evidence for this classification.

3 Conclusion

Recent fieldwork on the western Kainji languages has brought us to the point where linguistic reconstruction of the family is feasible. In the past four years dozens of wordlists have been recorded and there are no longer any major gaps. In particular, Blench and McGill have recorded a long wordlist (700 items) in seventeen varieties. This data has been submitted to the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS and is currently being processed (albeit slowly, due to the researchers' work commitments).

The situation in the east is much bleaker. The Eastern Kainji languages are severely endangered in comparison to the western languages, and despite being in easy reach of Jos very little documentation has been carried out.

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