

# LANGUAGE DEATH IN WEST AFRICA

Paper given at the Round Table on Language Endangerment

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and now revised for publication

[N.B. This paper has been in press for three years and I am beginning to despair of seeing it in print. I hesitate to add comment on dilatory editors but no wonder little is halting the process of language endangerment]

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## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Status of West African languages**

Although the 1990s saw a substantial growth in concern for language endangerment, most notably in Asia and the Pacific, the African literature has been marked more by an expansion of concerned comment than new descriptive materials. Wurm (1996) purportedly includes a map of endangered languages in West Africa, but since these are not identified by name, this is of limited value. Brenzinger (1998) represents a step towards identifying the gaps in the African literature and papers in that volume, such as Connell (1998) and Kastenholz (1998) provide case studies of threatened or moribund languages of West Africa.

Blench (1998) presents a summary of the status of the languages of the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The present paper follows a similar format, but expands the canvas to cover the whole of West Africa, both listing endangered languages and speculating on the sources of endangerment. Dealing with a much larger database had made it necessary to extend and expand some of the categories used in the previous paper. The main changes are as follows;

1. The categories of language size have been extended at the upper end so that there is a category of 50,000-1,000,000 and then greater than 1,000,000.
2. Additional status categories of 'moribund' and 'declining' have been added
3. Because a large number of languages are found in several countries, the database has been adapted to count the language when a national count is made, but to treat an individual language as a single record when other types of analysis are conducted.

### **1.2 The Linguistic Geography of West Africa**

The area covered here and considered to be West Africa is essentially all countries up to the border of Cameroon, including Mauretania but excluding North African countries. The broad pattern of language distribution suggests the closer to the desert, the lower the absolute number of languages and the numbers of their speakers. This cannot be entirely substantiated from the present data as languages such as Berber and Arabic are spoken principally outside West Africa. Unlike East Africa, where substantial numbers of pastoralists and hunter-gatherers persisted into recent times, there is a single group of hunter-gatherers in West Africa (the Nemadi) and essentially only two groups of pastoralists, the Fulbe and the Tamajeq. In addition, there are some nomadic fishing peoples in the sea Delta of the Niger river. Language distribution is thus overwhelmingly dominated by large and small farming groups. A consequence of this is that the constant shifting of subsistence strategy and thereby ethnic identity that is characteristic of small East African groups is largely absent in West Africa (see Tosco 1998 for a theoretical argument on this point). The most common causes of language endangerment are thus cultural and economic dominance.

The last decades have seen almost continuous warfare in some part of the region, for example in the Casamance of Senegal, Sierra Leone and spilling over sporadically into Liberia and Guinea-Bissau. Even minor skirmishes such as that between Senegal and Mauretania have the permanent consequence of the departure of some ethnolinguistic groups and their replacement by others. Certain countries, such as Guinea, which has been relatively stable since the fall of the Sekou Touré government have unwillingly become the semi-permanent home of refugees fleeing combat in neighbouring countries. The consequence is that numbers and locations are far from stable and survey data is best regarded as a timebound snapshot in unstable regions.

### 1.3 Data sources

The most important source of data is Ethnologue 2000 (Grimes 2000) supplemented by the author's own fieldwork data in Ghana and Nigeria and by discussions with in-country scholars<sup>1</sup>. The Ethnologue is regularly updated and draws extensively on unpublished field reports. However, it tends to accumulate spurious languages through individuals submitting unchecked or tendentious entries which once ensconced, become like persistent weeds, hard to eradicate. For example, the 1992 edition of Ethnologue attributed numerous languages to Nigeria which were in reality only spoken by small migrant communities. I have thus tried to cross-check the data and eliminate uncertain entries as well as adding materials from other sources.

Table 1 shows the main non-Ethnologue sources drawn on for the data tables in this paper.

**Table 1. Selected sources for additional data on West African languages**

Country	References	Personal communications
Benin	Ceccaldi (1979)	Debbie Hatfield
Côte d'Ivoire	Ceccaldi (1978)	Bruce Connell, Jacques Rongier
Ghana		Tony Naden, Mary-Esther Kropp-Dakubu
Guinée		Tucker Childs
Mali		Robert Carlson
Nigeria	Temple (1922), Shimizu (1983), Crozier & Blench (1992) Kleinewillinghöfer (1996)	Bruce Connell, Kay Williamson, Barau Kato
Togo	Takassi (1983)	Hanni Kuhn

Since the data analysed in Blench (1998) was collected, I have undertaken substantial new fieldwork in Central Nigeria, focussing on Plateau languages. In almost every case where a community was visited, published data on the population numbers, location and relative health of the language was found to be inaccurate. This rather suggests that standard references must be treated with a good deal of caution.

## 2. Language endangerment

### 2.1 The status of West African languages

Extracting sociolinguistic information from published sources is a problematic exercise; in some cases, where fieldwork is undertaken, it is possible to gain a sense of the reliability of the documentation. Thus the information in this paper for Ghana and Nigeria is probably more reliable than for the other countries, simply because I have conducted fieldwork in these countries and also talked to other researchers.

With this in mind, a status was assigned to each language in the database, as shown in Table 2. The Ethnologue rarely provides enough information to assign a status unambiguously, and I have been forced to make a number of assumptions. These are;

- a. Any language with over 50,000 speakers is 'not threatened'
- b. Any language with under 400 speakers is 'definitely threatened'
- c. Any language with under 3000 speakers with no status data has been assigned to 'no information' on the grounds that it might well be threatened and should be made a priority for research.

'Declining' and 'moribund' are categories introduced since my previous paper on Nigerian languages to try and capture languages that are apparently in decline despite having a viable number of speakers. The assumption is that there are many more languages of this type.

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this paper was submitted prior to the Bad Godesborg meeting but has been amended in September 2001 to include two additional years' data from subsequent field trips. My thanks to all those in listed in Table 1 for unpublished field data

**Table 2. Status of West African Languages**

Status	Number
No information	317
Not threatened	672
Definitely threatened	37
Moribund	4
Probably extinct	14
Declining	6
Total	1050

Perhaps the most depressing figure in this table is the large number of languages for which no reliable information is available. These are mostly small languages and therefore more likely to be threatened.

The availability of information is extremely uneven, so the data was further analysed by country, as shown in Table 3. This illustrates yet again Nigeria's exceptional situation; its languages are less-known than any other country even in percentage terms.

**Table 3. Distribution of languages with no status data by country**

Country	Total languages	No Data	% No data
Niger	11	0	0.0
Togo	39	0	0.0
Sierra Leone	21	1	4.8
Mali	26	2	7.7
Senegal	35	4	11.4
Guinea-Bissau	21	3	14.3
Ghana	66	10	15.2
Liberia	32	5	15.6
Mauretania	5	1	20.0
Burkina Faso	68	16	23.5
Côte d'Ivoire	76	18	23.7
Gambia	19	5	26.3
Guinea	27	8	29.6
Benin	50	16	32.0
Nigeria	550	231	42.0
<b>Total and Mean</b>	<b>1050</b>	<b>320</b>	<b>30.5</b>

The explanation for this is actually quite simple; all other West African countries have had a fairly active programme of language survey conducted either by the French research establishment or by the SIL. In Nigeria, since the virtual cessation of SIL activities in 1976, very limited further survey work has been conducted<sup>2</sup>.

## 2.2 Pattern of language endangerment

In general, West African languages are in a healthy state. Compared to Eastern and Southern Africa, only a few languages are disappearing. The clear contrast with East Africa which almost certainly reflects the dominance of smallholder farming systems. A lack of mobility and a relative inflexibility in reinventing subsistence strategies tends to conserve language and maintain classic patterns of diversification such as areal spread and dialect chains. Language endangerment in West Africa generally through language shift, which usually reflects the rise of a dominant culture, formerly military, but often nowadays commercial or religious. This is particularly the case with Islam; conversion to Islam was historically associated with the rise of highly militarised cultures and indeed the slave trade. Thus, Hausa, Arabic, Mandinka, Bambara, Fulfulde and Kanuri have all been associated with aggressive expansionism and the forcible conversion of

<sup>2</sup> Regrettably an attempt to restart survey work in Nigeria in 2001 has been stalled by policy problems in the relevant institutions.

enslaved peoples. In the colonial era, the convenience of these languages was such that they were frequently adopted as secondary languages of communication. Promoted by the administration they became ever more the vehicle of assimilatory forces pressing on minority languages.

Box 1 illustrates the case of Yangkam, a language of Central Nigeria that is severely endangered because the association of its people with Islamic expansion during the nineteenth century.

### **Box 1. The case of Yangkam**

The Yangkam people live in a region west of Bashar town, on the Amper-Bashar road, in Plateau State, Central Nigeria. They are known as 'Bashar' or 'Basherawa' (the Hausaised name for the people) in almost all the literature (Greenberg 1963; Crozier & Blench 1992). The correct name of the Bashar language and people is Yànkàm, plural aYànkàm. Crozier and Blench (1992) give a figure of 20,000 speakers of the language located in and around Bashar town, some 50 km east of Amper on the Muri road. This estimate turned out to be entirely erroneous. The Yangkam people were heavily affected by nineteenth century slave raids, perhaps by the Jukun as well as the Hausa. They converted to Islam and a relatively powerful centre was established at Bashar. At the same time they began to switch to speaking Hausa, while still retaining strongly their Bashar identity. In the region of Bashar town in 1997, there were just two old men who remain reasonably fluent in the language, in the village of Yuli, some 15 km northwest of Bashar. However, it turns out that at the time of the raids, the population split into two and another group sought refuge in Tukur. Yangkam is spoken in some four villages, Tukur, Bayar, Pyaksam and Kiram. However, even here Yangkam is only spoken by people over fifty and all the young people speak Hausa. There seems to be no likelihood that Yangkam will be maintained as speakers are quite content with the switch to Hausa. The local estimate of the number of fluent speakers is 400, and falling every year. There are many hamlets around Bashar town in Wase local Government whose populations are ethnically Yangkam but who no longer speak the language.

Yangkam is something of a paradox; members of the ethnic group are very proud of their history and identity, but do not associate that with retention of the language. Hausa is not spoken as a first language by any populations nearby and Bashar is today well-off major routes for long-distance trade. A typescript of the history of Bashar circulates in the district, larded with non-Hausa names and words but Yangkam do not draw the conclusion that there is any link between this identity and the language they formerly spoke. Although Yangkam has nearly disappeared as a language, the populations who formerly spoke it are likely to retain Basherawa and Basheranci as their name for the people and language as long as they retain a separate identity.

Source: Author's unpublished fieldwork

Not all large vehicular languages were the products of Islamisation; Moore, Yoruba, Efik/Ibibio, Akan and Wolof seem to have expanded, often in a military context, but prior to or unrelated to Islam. Interestingly, these languages have been less successful in the post-colonial phase of cultural expansion, suggesting that the transition to a trade language was less successful than, say, Hausa or Bambara. Islam, as also Christianity, has always had long-distance trade as a second arrow in its quiver, when the impetus for military conquest was exhausted. This made languages with a prior embedded trade vocabulary highly suitable to the colonial administrators. Less commerce-oriented languages made more limited inroads in an era of relative peace.

Interestingly, the apparent preconditions for language death set up negative expectations that turn out to be unnecessarily pessimistic. Surveys of Plateau languages 1993-1999 showed that in almost every case, even languages with relatively small numbers of speakers appeared to be flourishing, rather against expectation. Box 2 gives an example of two related languages from the Mambiloid family which might appear prime candidates for endangerment which appear to be thriving.

## **Box 2. Mvanip and Ndunda**

Meek (1931) gives a short wordlist of a language he calls Magu, spoken at Zongo Ajiya in the northwest of the Mambila Plateau in southeastern Nigeria. While undoubtedly a Mambiloid language, it seems to be distinct from Mambila proper. In Crozier & Blench (1992) the population is given as 'less than 10,000' and called 'Mvano'. Following a field visit in 1999 we ascertained how incorrect this information was. The Mvanip people are only 100 (chief's estimate) consisting of a few households in one quarter of Zongo Ajiya. Almost all individuals seemed to be fluent in the other languages of Zongo Ajiya, Fulfulde, Mambila and Ndoro. Despite this, the language seems to be alive –the Jauro assured us that all the children still speak it, and we observed this to be true. A long wordlist was taped and there is no doubt this is the same language given in Meek as Magu.

When we asked for the language closest to Mvanip, to our surprise, we were given the name of the Ndunda people. Ndunda is a village some 5km. from Yerimaru, past Kakara on the tea estate road south of Zongo Ajiya. And indeed, there are a people and language of this name whose existence seems so far to have entirely eluded the reference books. Their language resembles Mvanip but the two are sufficiently distinct as to be regarded as separate languages. There are probably 3-400 speakers of Ndunda. The language is also alive and well although the Ndunda settlement is much more ethnically homogeneous than Zongo Ajiya.

Mvanip and Ndunda would appear to be prime candidates for language loss. Their numbers are very small, and the populations live in close proximity to prestigious and numerically dominant languages associated with Islam. However, they seem to have developed a situation of stable multilingualism and religious synthesis that allows them to conserve their traditions without seeming anomalous to outsiders. In contrast to the Yangkam (see Box 1) the Mambila Plateau is off major trade routes and remains highly inaccessible even in modern Nigeria.

Blench & Connell, survey notes 1999

The definition of the unit of endangerment in language survey is often problematic and it is difficult to assess whether resources should be allocated to languages that are relatively close to vigorous speech-forms. The case of Tchumbuli in Benin is a case in point (Box 3);

### **Box 3. Tchumbuli**

A report on the Tchumbuli language of Benin provides some information on a little-known and endangered speech-form (Schoch & Wolf 2001). Tchumbuli is a Northern Guang language spoken in three villages in the *Departement de Collines* between Savé and Ouessé. These villages are Okounfo, Gbede and Edaningbe and their total population is 3500 individuals.

The origin of the Tchumbuli is complex; they are closely related to the Chumburung of NE Ghana and oral tradition suggests that they migrated to their present site in the mid eighteenth century. However, while in Ghana they absorbed the 'Cobecha', mercenaries from Benin (the precolonial state in Nigeria) who had come to fight in the Ashanti wars and halted on their way home. This ethnic distinction is maintained in the Tchumbuli communities in Benin Republic today, despite the homogeneity of the spoken language. To add to the confusion, in the 1950s an expedition led by their Paramount Chief returned with a number of families back to Ghana and settled in Anyinamæ, near the present-day Chumburung community. Their language has effectively been relexified and absorbed back into Chumburung.

Tchumbuli is slowly dying as a result of contact with two major neighbouring languages, Maxi and Cabe. Maxi is related to the Fon group while Cabe is a type of Yoruba, closely related to that spoken across the border in Nigeria. In Okounfo village, the switch to Cabe has occurred, with pervasive bilingualism and Tchumbuli only known to the older generation. In Edaningbe, Maxi is replacing Tchumbuli although a more complex ethnic mixture in the village means that the process of replacement is less straightforward. In Gbede, Tchumbuli remains widely spoken although Cabe is used to communicate with outsiders and appears to be spreading among younger children.

The total number of speakers of Tchumbuli was estimated at 1838, and although this is relatively high compared with many other threatened languages in West Africa, it conceals the fact that the language is largely confined to the older generation. Paradoxically, the Tchumbuli are proud of their historical traditions and their links with Ghana. Tchumbuli illustrates the problem of how much weight should be given to languages close to those that are not threatened. Tchumbuli is sufficiently close to Chumburung for linguists to classify it as a dialect. However, the results of complex interactions with Maxi and Cabe and the very different cultural traditions of the Tchumbuli have made the language quite distinct above the level of fundamental vocabulary.

### **3. Affiliation and distribution of West African Languages**

#### **3.1 How many languages are spoken in each country?**

Assessing the number of languages spoken in each country for analytical purposes is not quite the same as simply taking the Ethnologue figures. Ethnologue tends to 'split' languages; in other words, language chains with high degrees of inter-intelligibility tend to appear as separate head entries. This is particularly the case with widespread languages such as Arabic and Fulfulde, which have two, three or more entries for each country in which they are spoken. Similarly, the Ethnologue includes sign or deaf languages and also colonial languages now used for national administrative purposes<sup>3</sup>. Table 4 shows total language numbers for West African countries, but;

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that French, English or Portuguese should be excluded, especially as they are clearly the first language of a large number of resident expatriates and are increasingly becoming the 'home' language of city families.

- Excludes languages spoken in most countries (English, French, Arabic, Fulfulde) but treats Portuguese as part of the inventory of the country where it is spoken
- Includes creoles as Indo-European languages the countries where they are spoken<sup>4</sup>
- Registers cross-border languages for each country where they are spoken (the overall total thus includes significant double-counting)

**Table 4. Total of languages spoken in each country (for analytic purposes)**

Country	Number	Country	Number	Country	Number
Throughout	4	Mali	26	Ghana	66
Mauretania	5	Guinea	27	Burkina Faso	68
Niger	11	Liberia	32	Côte d'Ivoire	76
Gambia	19	Senegal	35	Nigeria	550
Guinea-Bissau	21	Togo	39	<b>Total</b>	<b>1050</b>
Sierra Leone	21	Benin	50		

Eliminating multiple counts gives a total number of languages for West Africa of ca. 990. The predominance of Nigeria as a percentage of all languages will continue to be a feature of this analysis. It is worth noting that were the survey to include Cameroun with 282 languages and Chad with 124, the distribution would look more balanced. In analysing this type of data much depends on where the boundaries are drawn.

On the basis of this, it seems useful to calculate approximately how many speakers a typical West African language has. Human population statistics are always highly controversial; some countries have only highly politicised speculative estimates while others have reasonably careful counts. The population figures in Table 5 are United Nations estimates for 1998.

**Table 5. Mean no. speakers per language in West African countries**

Country	Population	Language Density
Niger	10,078,000	755727
Mauretania	2,529,000	465800
Mali	10,694,000	418385
Guinea	7,337,000	289148
Ghana	19,162,000	265803
Senegal	9,003,000	241371
Sierra Leone	4,568,000	225048
<b>Total and Mean</b>	<b>198610000</b>	<b>189152</b>
Nigeria	106,409,000	182873
Côte d'Ivoire	14,292,000	169737
Burkina Faso	11,305,000	152676
Benin	5,781,000	111460
Togo	4,397,000	103538
Liberia	2,666,000	93906
Guinea-Bissau	1,161,000	52619
Gambia	1,229,000	51737

For comparison, the figures for Cameroun and Chad are;

Cameroun	14,305,000	45656
Chad	7,270,000	51992

There is little doubt that we can identify broad ecological determinants for these differing language densities; desert countries such as Niger, Mauretania and Mali have the highest number of speakers per

<sup>4</sup> This is highly controversial linguistically, since many standard creoles are considered to be better analysed as African languages heavily relexified from the external (usually I-E) language. However, for the purposes of this analysis this is a way of excluding them from the count of African languages assigned to specific phyla.

language while countries dominated by humid coastal forest, the lowest. Nonetheless, nation-states are not generally divided into neat ecological units; countries such as Nigeria encompass tropical rain-forest and sand-dunes, and even Togo and Benin have a wide range of environmental conditions within their borders.

### 3.2 How many speakers do West African languages have?

West African languages were divided into a number of size classes, based on the most recent estimates available. Given the uncertainty as to the verisimilitude of these estimates it seemed appropriate to make the boundaries of each size-class quite generous. Table 6 show the numbers and percentages assigned to each size class;

**Table 6. Size classes of West African languages**

<b>Size Class</b>	<b>Number</b>
<400	66
400-3000	157
3000-50000	418
50000-1m	263
1,000,000+	81
Unknown	65
<b>Total</b>	<b>1050</b>

Without detailed sociolinguistic information it is hard to make an overall estimate of the numbers of endangered languages, but clearly any language with less than 3000 speakers (i.e. 223) is potentially threatened.

### 3.3 Genetic affiliation of West African languages

Despite the linguistic diversity of West Africa, at the phyletic level it is quite uniform. Niger-Congo languages dominate most countries and constitute 85% of all languages spoken there. Only Nigeria has a substantial element of another phylum, Afroasiatic. Table 7 presents a broad outline of the phyla and language families present in the West African region, with examples of specific languages;

**Table 7. Genetic Classification of the languages of West Africa**

<b>Phylum</b>	<b>Family</b>	<b>Examples</b>
<b>NIGER-CONGO</b>	Mande	Mandinka, Busa
	West Atlantic	Fulfulde, Wolof, Bijogo, Kissi
	Dogonic	Donno So, Tomo So
	Ijoid	Kalabari, Kolokuma
	Kru	Dan, Wobe, Seme
	Gur	Moore, Dagbane, Gulmancema, Bariba
	Adamawa	Chamba Leeko, Mumuye, [Kim, Mundang]
	Ubangian	Gbaya, [Zande, Ngbandi]
	Kwa	Akan, Ewe, Akebu, Gun
	Benue-Congo W.	Yoruba, Nupe, Igbo, Idoma, Bini
	Benue-Congo E.	Kamberi, Tyap, Birom, Jukun, Efik
	Bantoid N.	Mambila, Samba Daka
	Bantoid S.	Tivoid, Beboid
	Bantu	Jarawan, Ekoid
	<b>AFROASIATIC</b>	W. Chadic
Central Chadic		Bacama, Huba
Semitic		Shuwa Arabic
Berber		Tamachek
<b>NILO-SAHARAN</b>	Saharan	Kanuri, Teda
	Songhai	Zarma
<b>UNCLASSIFIED</b>		Jalaa

Languages in [] are not spoken in the sampled region

The label ‘Dogonic’ may be unfamiliar from standard reference works. It is now widely recognised that the Dogon languages are a separate branch of Niger-Congo and further themselves contain considerable internal diversity (Bertho 1953; Williamson and Blench 2000; Durieux *pro manuscripto*). The term Dogonic has been adopted to cover this group.

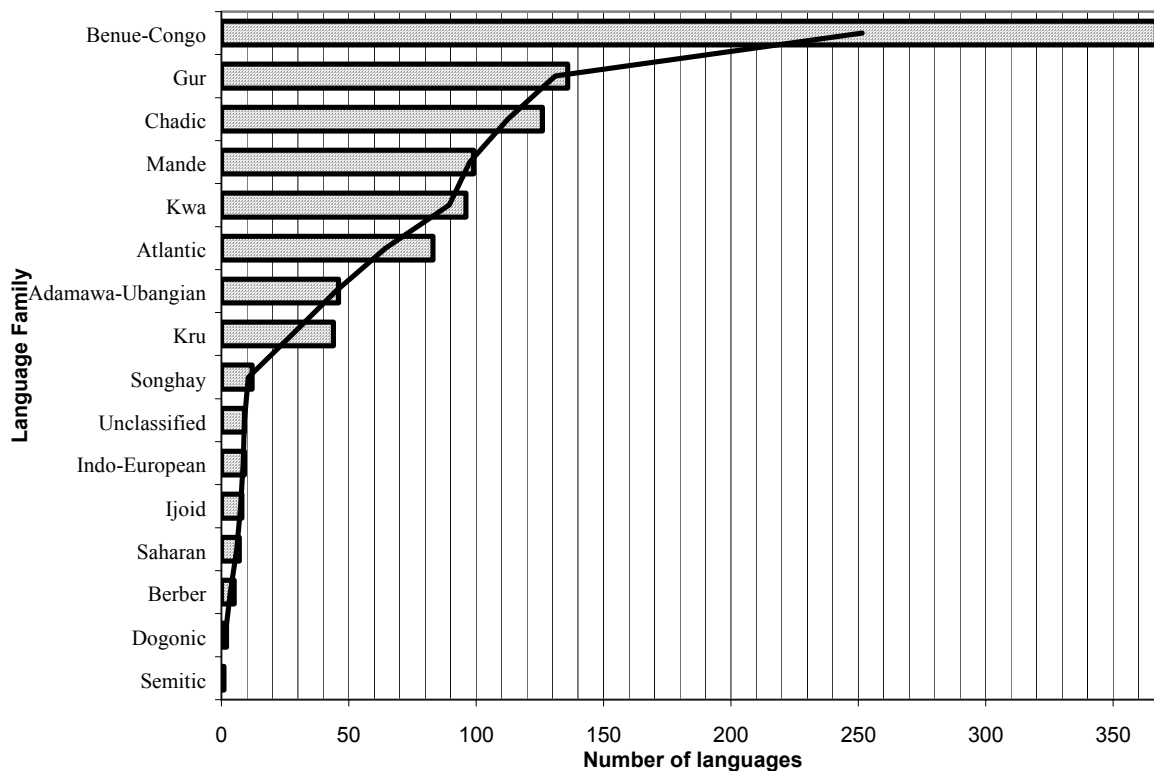
Table 8 and Figure 1 show the numbers of languages in each major language family and then aggregated by phylum.

**Table 8. Genetic affiliation of West African languages**

Language Family	Number	Phylum	n=1050
			Number
Semitic	1	Unclassified	8
Dogonic	2 <sup>5</sup>	Indo-European	9
Berber	5	Nilo-Saharan	19
Saharan	7	Afroasiatic	132
Unclassified	8	Niger-Congo	882
Ijoid	8		
Indo-European	9		
Songhay	12		
Kru	44		
Adamawa-Ubangian	46		
Atlantic	83		
Kwa	96		
Mande	100		
Chadic	126		
Gur	138		
Benue-Congo	365		
<b>Total</b>	<b>1050</b>		<b>1050</b>

Afroasiatic consists almost entirely of Chadic languages, including otherwise only Arabic and Berber. The category ‘unclassified’ usually implies simply a lack of data for a language known to exist. Data exists for one language, Jalaa, which appears to be truly unclassifiable.

**Figure 1. Genetic affiliation of West African Languages**



<sup>5</sup> There are manifestly more Dogon languages than this, but without a finalised version of the recent Dogon language survey (Durieux, forthcoming), the exact number remains unclear.

#### 4. Broadcasting, literacy programmes and their impact

One of the guilty parties usually identified by morbilinguophiles is urbanisation; as individuals and households move to the cities, they lose their languages and switch to dominant speech-systems<sup>6</sup>. There is no doubt that this is partly true, especially in the period of the great afflux to cities in the third part of the twentieth century. However, city culture also has interesting countervailing tendencies. It provides access to communications technology, most recently FM radio, which can sometimes act to support language maintenance. In Mali and Northern Ghana, commercial broadcasting in minority languages has become a major growth area and has acted dramatically to increase the prestige of indigenous languages<sup>7</sup>. If it is possible for a language to be adapted to 'modern' life it paradoxically gains more prestige in rural areas. Broadcasts then become a major channel for neologisms and syntax changes to reach rural areas. A consequence, as in Western Europe, is that broadcast media tend to eliminate local dialect variation<sup>8</sup>, but the experiment is too new in West Africa for any results to be measured.

Between overt government policy and ground reality huge chasms yawn invitingly. No government these days can be seen to be against minority languages, but few governments have the political will to actively support languages with small numbers of speakers. Most governments have some type of literacy bureau, proffering a few dusty pamphlets in major languages. One exception to this is Mali, which through its agency DNAFLA has tried to make use of a spectrum of funding sources to print primers, grammars, dictionaries for a wide variety of languages over several decades.

The reality is that literacy in minority languages is most likely to be driven by the resources of literacy organisations, notably the SIL and its affiliates. For example, in Ghana, SIL runs literacy programmes in some thirty-two languages and is actively researching the potential of the relatively few remaining minority languages. The Ghana Bureau of Languages, by contrast, offers one or two pamphlets in about ten languages, which were printed many years ago in now-discarded orthographies.

Whether literacy programmes really do assist language maintenance is a moot point. Literacy programmes certainly run into the sand with threatened languages. Almost by definition it is hardly worthwhile to spend limited resources on languages whose speakers seem to be deserting them; and most programmes of subsidy thus focus on 'medium-scale' languages with a viable number of speakers. This notion does vary between continents, as has been observed before. A language with less than 1000 speakers in Africa looks seriously endangered and is unlikely to get literacy materials; such languages in New Guinea are regularly the subject of literacy programmes.

Many of the features that cause language endangerment are contingent; they cannot necessarily be predicted from sociological variables nor prevented by well-meaning programmes. War and social disruption have been key forces causing displacement of populations, fragmenting speech communities and prematurely ending the life of speech communities. But refugees are refugees, it would hardly be appropriate to suggest specialised assistance for those speaking threatened languages. The forces of globalisation similarly depend on political stability and also the macro-economic order. It is hard to listen to the government radio station if you can't afford batteries.

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<sup>6</sup> I use this term advisedly; in Nigeria at least, the would-be urban migrant usually has to contend with at least two 'duelling' languages, for example Hausa or Yoruba and English. Effective communication skills usually involve rapid code-switching between these.

<sup>7</sup> Nigeria has long had government broadcasts in numerous languages, especially from state capitals. However, these seem to have had much less impact than commercial stations, presumably because the desire of government to control content has made them much less interesting for listeners.

<sup>8</sup> At the same time, broadcast media may well act to spread new speech-styles, for example, 'Estuary English' which has undoubtedly been diffused by its dominance in English media.

## 5. Conclusion

The situation of minority languages in West Africa can be summarised as follows;

- ✘ The information base remains extremely weak for many countries
- ✘ Survey work is not a high priority for governments or academics within West African countries, while research by outside scholars is apparently declining
- ✘ SIL surveys are useful but certainly do not focus directly on language endangerment issues, although policy is changing in this area.
- ✘ Government policy usually has little to say about endangered languages although what policies exist are generally in favour of indigenous languages
- ✘ However, government action in this area tends to be weak or non-existent
- ✘ Nonetheless, what evidence there is suggests that West African languages are generally holding their own in the face of globalisation and the homogenising forces of the twenty-first century

## APPENDIX: ENDANGERED LANGUAGES IN WEST AFRICA

The following table does not include languages that are probably extinct.

**Table 9. Annotated list of severely threatened languages in West Africa**

Country	Name	Comment
Nigeria	Bade	Still a large number of speakers but giving way rapidly to Hausa. Probably also Duwai.
	Bakpinka	
	Defaka	About 200 speakers. Those in direct contact with Nkoroo are losing their language
	Dugusa	Giving way to Hausa
	Dulbu	Giving way to Hausa
	Fyem	Giving way to Hausa
	Gera	Giving way to Hausa
	Gura	Giving way to Hausa
	Gurduŋ-Mbaaru	Giving way to Hausa
	Gyem	Giving way to Hausa
	Ilue	Giving way to Efik/Oron
	Jilbe	A single village (Tourneux p.c.)
	Kiong	Giving way to Efik. Moribund
	Kona	
	Kudu-Camo	42 speakers in early 1990s (Bross p.c.) Giving way to Hausa
	Luri	No information but <200 speakers
	Mvanip	About 100 speakers in 1999.
	Ndunda	<400 speakers in 1999
	Ngwaba	Two villages in 1991
	Odut	Only about 20 speakers in early 1980s
	Polci cluster	Giving way to Hausa
	Reshe	Still a vigorous speech community at present but giving way to Hausa
	Sambe	6 very elderly speakers in February 2001. The language is giving way to Ninzo
Somyev	About 20 elderly speakers in 1995 (Connell, p.c.)	
Yangkam	About 2-300 older speakers in 1993 (author)	
Cote d'Ivoire	Ega	est. 1000 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Dida.
	Eotile	200 speakers in 1999. The population is switching to Anyi.
	Jeri Kuo	According to Kastenzholz (1998:259) there are 1500 speakers from an ethnic population of 20,000. The Muslims are switching to Manding, the non-Muslim to Sienare Senufo. See also Kastenzholz (1992).
Mali	Banka	5,085 ethnic population in 1995, but the population is switching to Bambara.
	Nemadi	The Nemadi migrate between Mauretania and Mali. There were 200 in 1977. Their language is reported to be Hassaniya Arabic with only some technical terms of unknown source and is probably not 'endangered'
Sierra Leone	Bom	250 speakers out of an ethnic group of 5,000 in 1991. The population is switching to Mende.
	Mmani	Only a few speakers out of 6,800 in the ethnic group in 1988. The population is switching to Temne.
	Krim	500 speakers or fewer out of an ethnic group of 10,000 in 1990. The population is switching to Sherbro and Temne.
Mauretania	Imeraguen	120 speakers in 1967. No recent information

**Table 10. Unclassified languages in West Africa**

Country	Name	Classification
Burkina Faso	Korobore	KOROBORÉ Sanmatenga Province 2 or 3 villages northwest of Barsalogo. Unclassified. Little is known about this. May be the same as Koroboro, an alternate name for Songhai. Apparently not the same as Karaboro. Survey needed.
Burkina Faso	Sininkere	SININKERE (SILINKERE, SILANKE) 1,000 Sanmatenga Province, near Pensa. Unclassified. Second language is Moore. Traditional religion. Survey needed.
Côte d'Ivoire	Mbre	A Niger-Congo language of unknown affiliation
Mauretania	Imeraguen	120 (1967 Gerteiny). Near Nouakchott, the region stretching from Cape Timiris to Nouadhibou. Unclassified. The language is reported to be a variety of Hassaniyya structured on an Azer (Soninke) base. Vassals to important Hassan tribes, especially the Oulad Bou Sba. Reported to be remnants of the Bafours. They use nets for fishing. Coastal. Fishermen, hunters. Survey needed.
Nigeria	Kofa	Unknown but possibly Chadic language spoken north of Yola.
Nigeria	Bete	Unknown but possibly Jukunoid language spoken south of Wukari.
Togo	Anlo	Anlo 2,019 (1981 census). Unknown region. Unclassified. Survey needed.

Sources: either quoted directly from Ethnologue 2000 or personal observation in West Africa

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