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1. See chapter on international migration of the Atlas on Regional Integration.
2. A language family is made up of a group of genetically related languages said to have descended from a common language.

LANGUAGES

Introduction

Should national languages (in comparison to international languages such as English, French and Portuguese) be taken into account while carrying out strategic thinking and activities relating to regional integration? This chapter of the Atlas on Regional Integration in West Africa intends to contribute to the debate on this issue.

To that end, we have collected the best available data in order to provide a picture of the major language areas. The limitations of this exercise lie in the fact that West Africa is a region of extreme mobility. Due to old and contemporary migration¹, rapid urbanisation, as well as movements from vulnerable rural areas to other rural areas with greater potential, this region is constantly recomposing itself and thus it is difficult to present all the local subtleties at the macro-regional level.

The key issue we are addressing is that of areas within which population groups are able to understand each other (intercomprehension).

The first step in this approach consists of identifying, within *language families*², the *language groups*, and then the *languages*; each *language* being composed of several *dialects*. A *dialect* is a local variety of the same language. When a language is geographically widespread, dialects at the opposite extremes of its geographical area can vary considerably. In such cases, we speak of a *language continuum*. The second step consists of identifying *the lingua franca or common languages* known to be used as second language outside their homes. While this definition is clear, the list of *lingua franca* is always a subject of debate. Subsequent editions of this chapter of the Atlas will include additional information or aspects for discussion on this issue.

Regarding the classification and number of speakers, we refer to the works of Raymond Gordon of the *Summer Institute of Linguistics* of the University of Dallas (USA). The *Department of African Studies* of the University of Vienna (Austria) has contributed to studies on West African languages, under the supervision of Mr. Georg Ziegelmeyer, with the support of Messrs. Erwin Ebermann and Habiboulah Bakhoum.

I. West Africa in the African Linguistic Landscape

Linguists have identified 2,000 living languages on the African continent, grouped into four large families, excluding languages of non-African origin³ (see Map 1).

The Afro-Asiatic family (353 living languages of which 299 are spoken in Africa, with a total of 340 million speakers) is not exclusively African. It also extends to the Arabic Peninsula, and covers only the northern part of West Africa. It includes Hausa which is the leading African language in terms of number of speakers.

The Nilo-Saharan family (197 living languages with 35 million speakers) covers part of the Sahara, the Upper Nile Basin and some East African highlands. It is made up of twelve language groups with only two of them located in West Africa: Songhai (Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Benin) and Kanuri (Niger, Nigeria, Cameroon and Chad around Lake Chad).

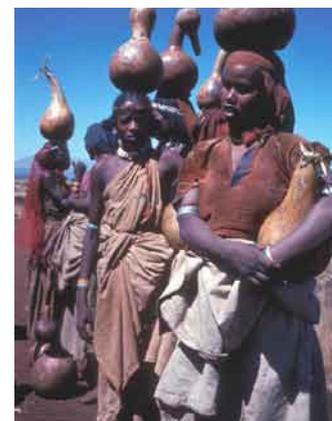
The Khoisan family (22 living languages with 360,000 speakers) is the smallest language family in Africa. It is concentrated in Namibia and extends to Angola, Botswana and South Africa. *"In the past, Khoisan languages were spoken in most parts of Southern and Eastern Africa. They were progressively replaced in many places by Bantu and European languages"*⁴.

The Niger-Congo family has nearly 1,500 living languages, which makes it the largest language family in the world (22% of languages on earth and 71% of African languages). It covers the largest part of West African territory, and concerns the immense majority of the population of the region. This language family is comprised of one group - the Bantu - which alone covers virtually all of Sub-equatorial Africa, excluding the Khoisan area.

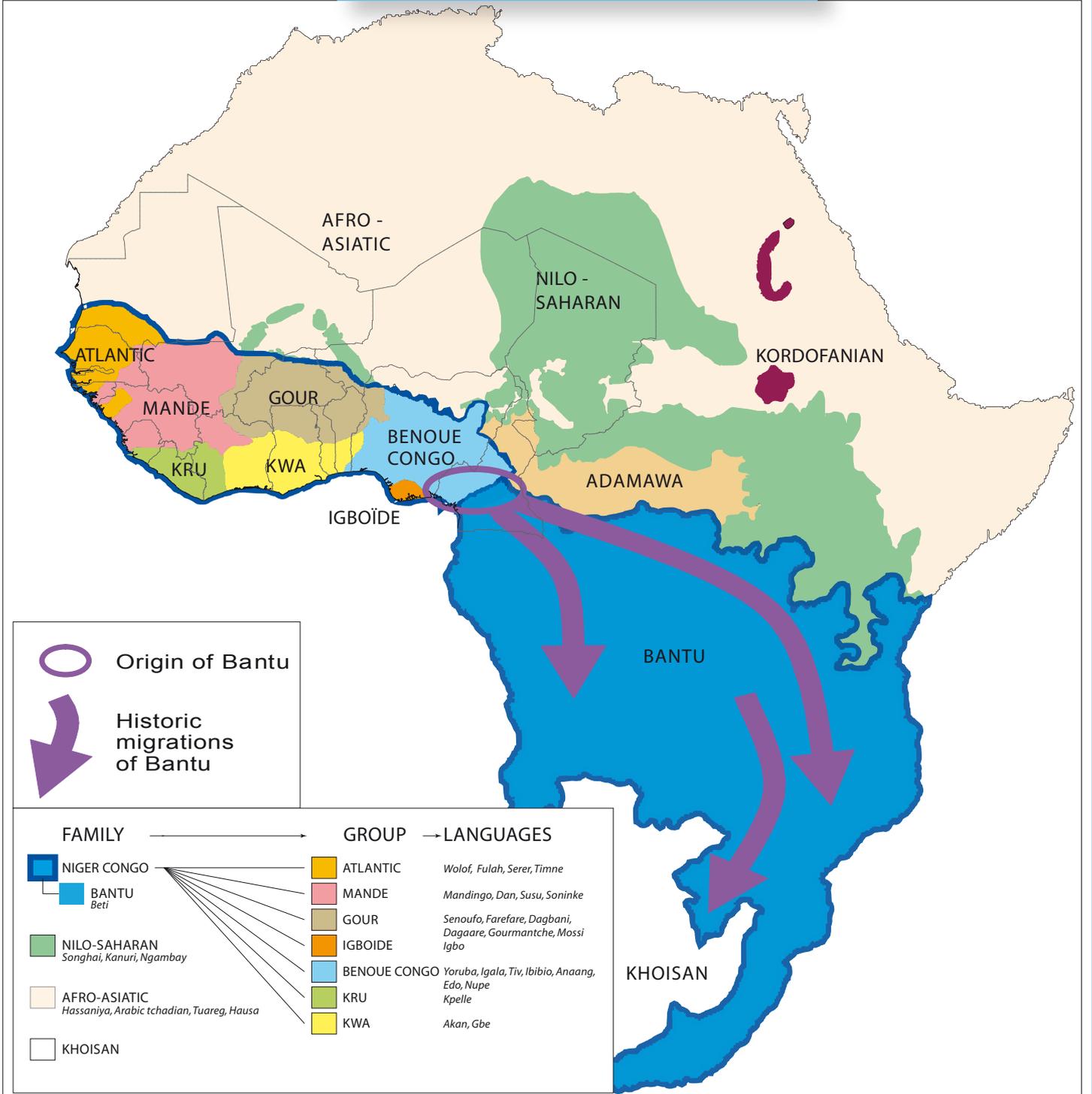
Many experts believe that the birthplace of the Bantus is located south of the Benue (at the border between Cameroon and Nigeria). Four thousand years ago, the Bantus began a long migration toward Central Africa, certainly forced by climatic aridification and development of agriculture and livestock which they rejected. This colonisation took nearly three thousand years. The Bantus reached the South of the continent only in the 16th and 17th centuries while fleeing the Masais coming from the Upper Nile Valley. The numerous similarities between the Bantu languages, as well as their remarkable geographical extension make them a specific language area very often distinguished from the rest of the Niger-Congo family.



3. In alphabetical order: Afrikaans, Arabic, Creole, English, French, Malagasy, Pidgin and Spanish
4. Atlas historique de l'Afrique. Under the supervision of Catherine Coquery-Vidovitch and Georges Laclavère. Ed. du Jaguar, 2000



Map 1. The Major African Language Families



Source: SWAC/OECD

Created by: Frédéric Ocrisse-Aka

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II. West African Diversity

Out of the 2,000 living languages⁵ identified in Africa, 1,200 are spoken in West Africa. These languages are of very unequal importance. The 130 languages most spoken (with more than 200,000 speakers) represent more than 80% of the regional population i.e. 240 million people. And the first five languages alone are spoken by 120 million people (see Figure 1).

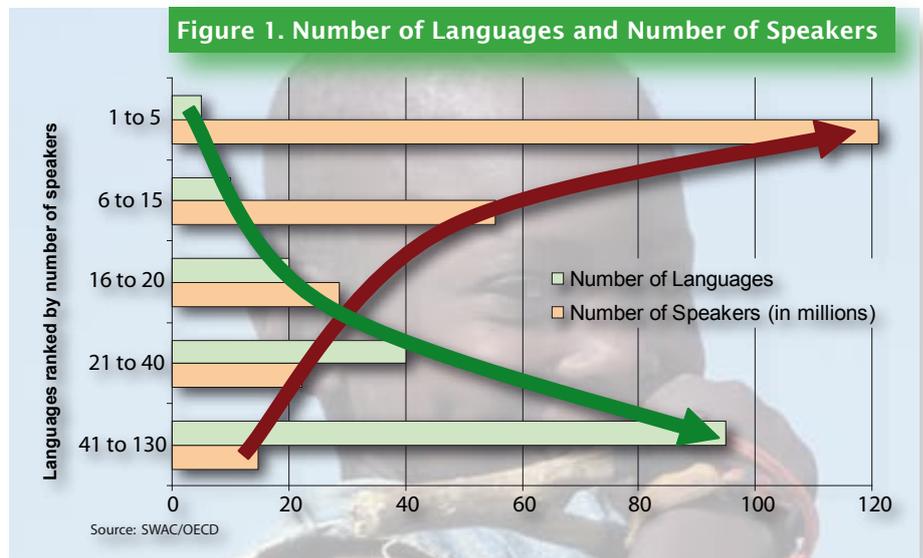
Map 2 illustrates the 35 languages estimated to be spoken by more than one million people in 2005. In some cases, linguists and ethnologists recommend that several idioms, sometimes perceived as distinct languages but considered from the scientific point of view as dialects, should be grouped together under the label of one language; this is particularly the case with:

5. A language is considered as living when it is spoken by at least one person.
6. The word Akan originally refers to the inhabitants of Akwapem, Akem, Akwamu and Asante in Ghana.
7. On the map, the Ashanti and Fanti dialects are combined. In terms of origin, the Fantis are mostly on the coast and the Ashantis farther inland.
8. This language is also known as "Ewe," which can be confusing being that one of the dialects also bears this name. In 1980, the 14th West African Languages Congress in Cotonou recommended the use of the word "Gbe" which means "language" in all the dialects concerned.

■ Akan⁶ whose geographical area is located between Lake Volta in Ghana and River Bandama in Côte d'Ivoire. This language is divided into two groups of dialects: to the West, all of Agni - Baule, to the East all of Ashanti - Fanti⁷ - Abron. The total number of native speakers of the Akan language is estimated at more than 8 million people, including nearly 5 million for Ashanti - Fanti, a little more than two million for Baule, nearly one and a half million for Agni dialects, and one million for Abron.

■ Gbe⁸ covers South-East Ghana (left bank of the Volta) and southern parts of Togo and Benin; the number of speakers is estimated at less than 10 million people. For linguists, Gbe is a language of the Kwa group of which the main dialects are Ewe (about 3 million mainly in Togo and Ghana) followed by Fon (a little less than 2 million mainly in Benin) and Aja (1 million mainly in Benin). However, the speakers of these different dialects often perceive them as distinct languages. Here, it is difficult to define the limits of a language continuum.

■ Mandingo (literally: the language of Mali) is the fruit of the Mali Empire created in the 13th century by Sundjata Keita at the convergence of the Niger and the Bani rivers. Its empire and language subsequently extended to the west of Senegal, the Gambia and the North-East quarter of Guinea. The Mandingo area has 12 million speakers, with the main dialects being Bambara, Malinke, and Dyula.



- Fulah forms an ethnolinguistic arc stretching from the borders of Guinea to Cameroon. In French, the language and speakers are known as “Peul”. The distinction between Fulah and Pula(a)r is sometimes maintained to differentiate the varieties in the West from those in the East. It seems that the Fulahs originally came from an area located between East Senegal and West Mali. At the beginning of the 15th century, they reached Guinea and Massina (Inner Niger Delta) and then migrated towards the East, and particularly towards Nigeria where many of them settled. At the beginning of the 19th century, Usman dan Fodio led, in the name of Islam, the revolt of the Fulahs against the Hausa kings and established Sokoto Caliphate that brought together the Hausa cities and the Adamawa Emirates. However, *“the Hausa culture remained dominant; the Fulah chiefs who became urbanites soon joined them. The Hausa language became the language of administration”*⁹. Today, out of the 25 million native speakers of Fulah, 10 million are in Nigeria, mainly in the Hausa North. The Fulahs are the majority in only one country: Guinea, where they account for 40% of the population.

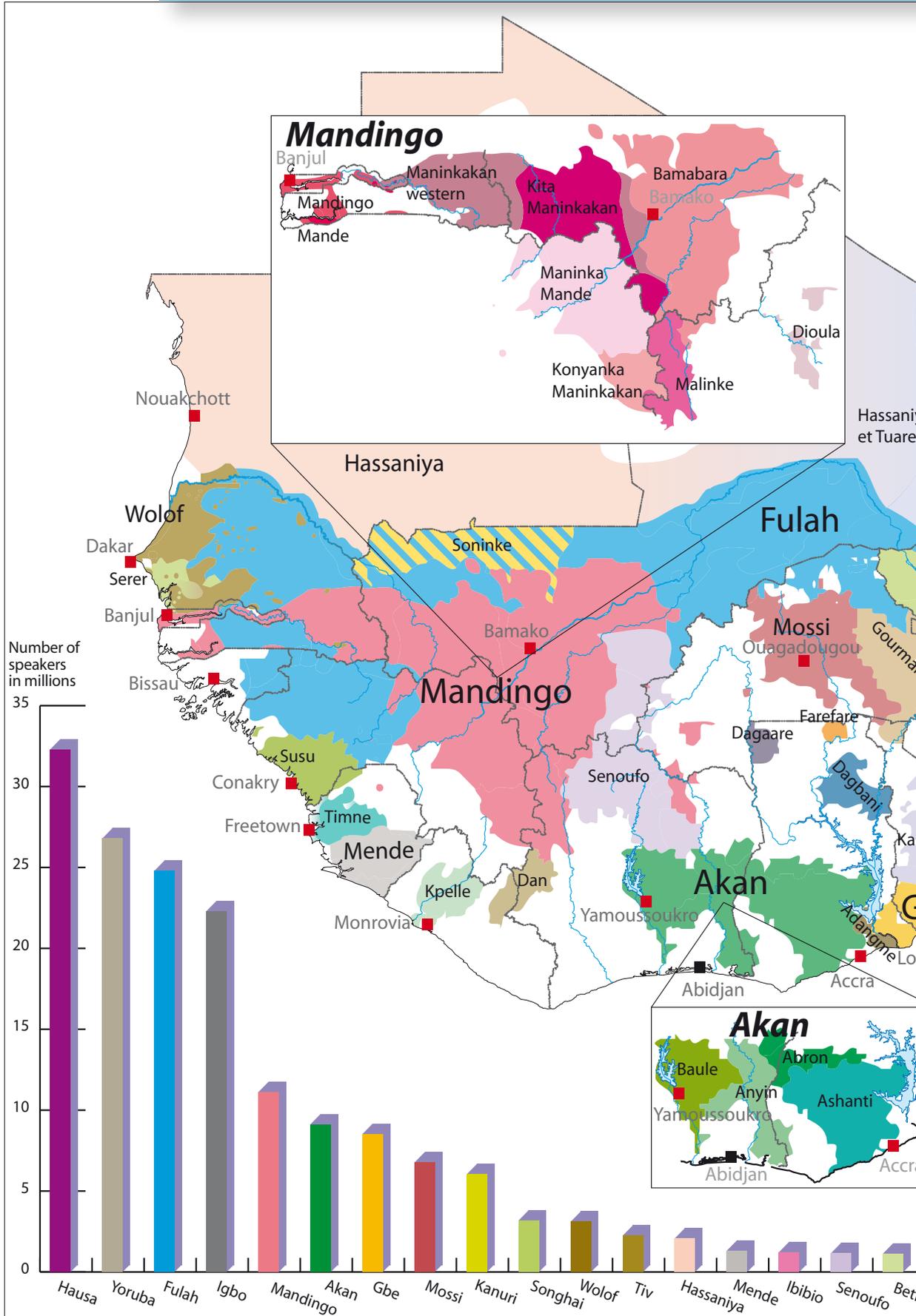
In addition to the groups described above, Map 2 should be examined taking into account the following remarks:

- The spatial extent of the original source of a language can be misleading if it is not linked to the number of speakers. Accordingly, Hassaniya¹⁰, which covers virtually all of Mauritania and a large part of Mali, has 3 million speakers; while Mossi has 8 million speakers concentrated on a geographical area 8 to 10 times smaller.
- The figures are in ascending order. An evaluation of the population of speakers of a language concerns the *prime speakers* or “native speakers” (mother tongue). Statistical data are collected at different times. Estimates of the actual number of speakers have been adjusted simply on the basis of the natural population growth of West Africa. The figure of 35 languages spoken by more than one million people is therefore relatively arbitrary since a number of languages below this level do not appear on the map.
- The official borders and administrative division introduce a visual bias: in a number of cases, the international borders coincide with the boundaries of the language areas, whereas such is never the case in reality. For example, the northern boundary of Soninke seems to be perfectly determined by the border between Mali and Mauritania. Obviously, there are a number of Soninke speakers in Mauritania (estimated at 30,000), but they are statistically hidden by Hassaniya speakers (2.9 million).
- Lastly, it is a picture at the macro-regional level, which cannot portray the extraordinary spatial overlapping of languages at the local level.

9. Jean Sellier; Atlas des peuples d'Afrique ; Ed. La Découverte ; Paris, 2003.
10. Hassaniya is a language influenced by Arabic and highly tinged with Berber.



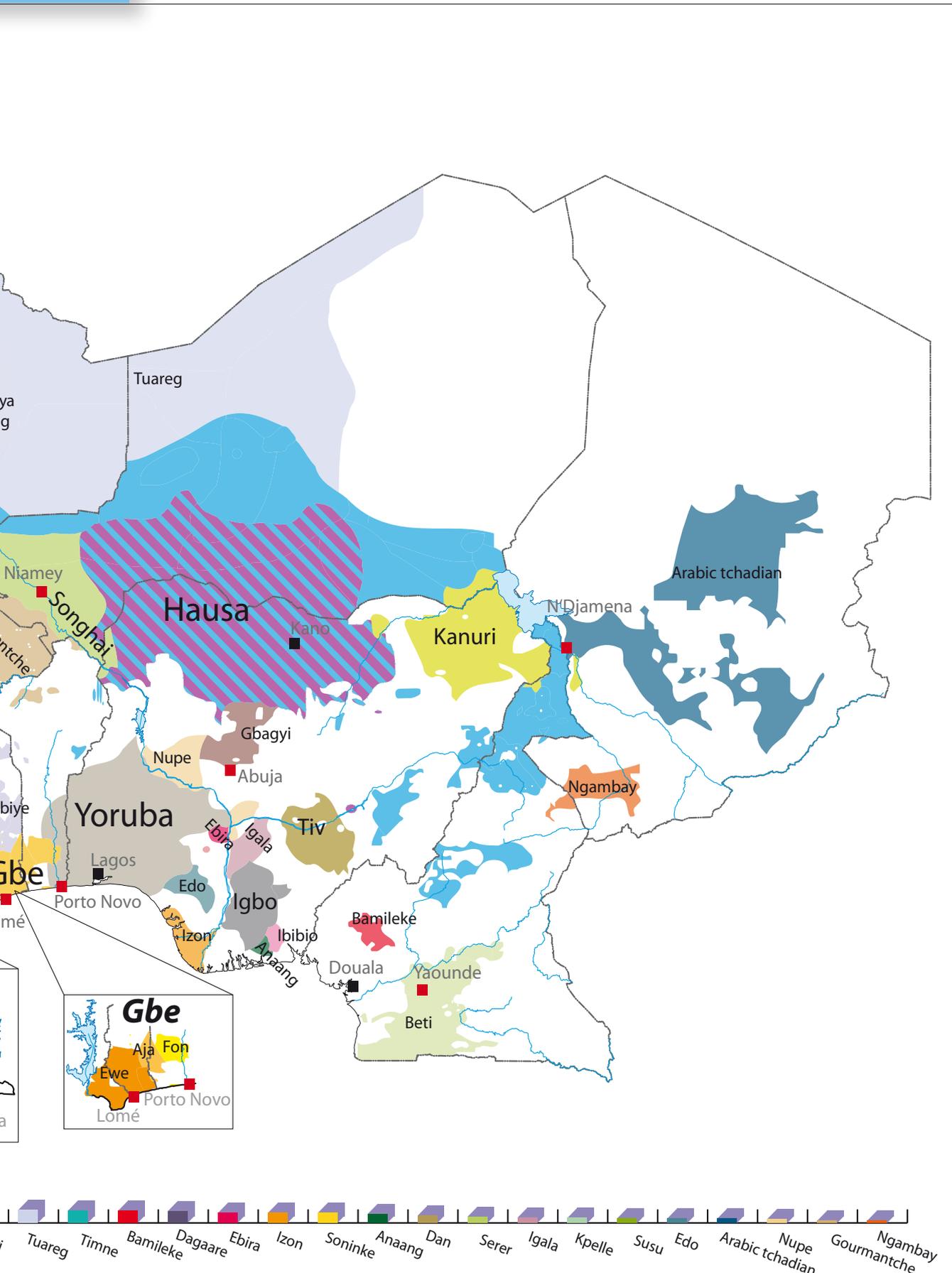
Map 2. West African Languages Spoken by More than One Million Native Speakers



Sources: SWAC/OECD - Vienna University - S.I.L. 2005

Created by: Frédéric Ocrisse-Aka

makers in 2005



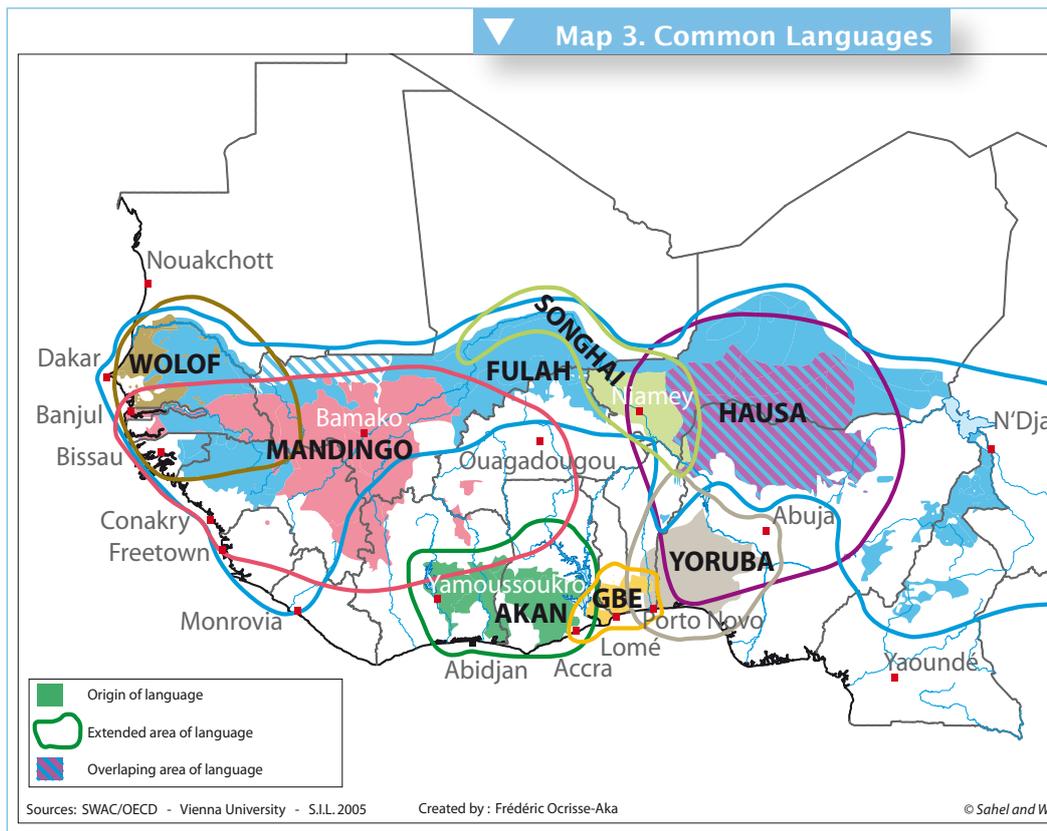
III. Common Languages

In the ethnolinguistic landscape presented in Map 2, most of the languages are spoken exclusively, or in the vast majority of cases, in one country. The most important include Igbo, Yoruba and Kanuri in Nigeria, Mossi in Burkina Faso, Wolof in Senegal, Hassaniya in Mauritania, Beti in Cameroon, and Songhai in Niger. This is also the case with most of the smaller languages in terms of number of speakers: Susu in Guinea, Mende and Timne in Sierra Leone, Ibibio, Tiv, Anaang, Epira, Gbayi, Igala and Izon in Nigeria.

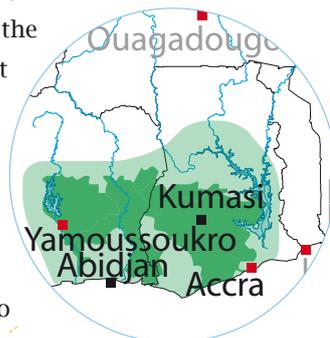
There are few West African languages with regional geographical scope. Fulah is spoken in 15 countries, while the Mandingo area covers five countries. Akan is the perennial link between Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire, just as Hausa and Kanuri link Nigeria and Niger, and Yoruba between Nigeria and Benin. Linguists consider these six languages as lingua franca or common languages¹¹, in addition to Wolof and Songhai (cf. Map 3).

A number of important languages in terms of number of speakers do not appear on the list of common languages. This refers to Mossi, in particular, which is considered by the Burkinabes as a communication tool used beyond the Mossi group. Many testimonies show, for example, that it is easy to speak Mossi and be understood throughout Northern Ghana and even in Kumasi. Igbo poses the same type of problem. It is spoken as a second language by a large number of Nigerians, particularly in the Yoruba area in the western part of the country. The eight common languages selected here are described below in alphabetical order.

Akan originates from Ghana (Ashanti Kingdom) where it is today the mother tongue of about 45% of the population. It is largely used throughout the rest of the country, especially in the western part. Its geographical expansion started at the end of the 17th century when Ashanti tribes (the Agnis) immigrated to Côte d'Ivoire to flee the slave hunters. At the beginning of the 18th century, it was the turn of another tribe - the Baules - to migrate to the West following a political split. The Baule Kingdom created by Queen Abla Pokou then extended Akan to Côte d'Ivoire.

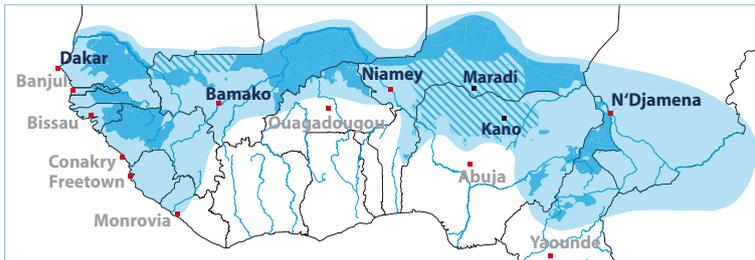


11. Most African languages are learned as a first language, and consequently used as a means of communication within a group (vernacular languages). To communicate with a different ethnolinguistic group, another language must be learned (common language)



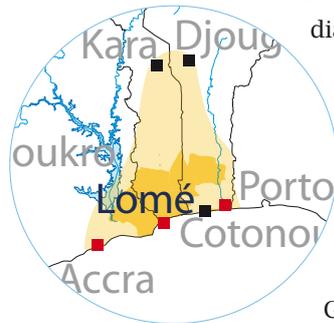


Fulah is a language of nomads, of which the speakers were subjects, then vectors, of the Islamisation of West Africa. It is a very particular common language. On the one hand, it has “hubs” of native speakers in 15 of West African countries. On the other hand, the Fulahs are known for learning the language of the populations in the areas in which they settle. In Nigeria, Fulah cannot be considered as a “conquering” language, particularly in comparison to Hausa. The

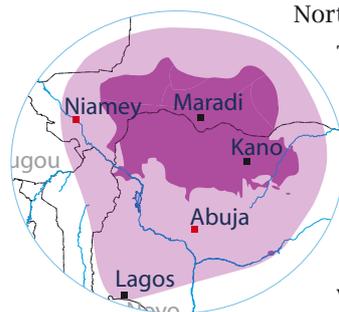


situation is reversed with the Adamawa language in Cameroon, where it is used by other ethnic groups. It is in the western part of West Africa that its vehicular nature is most evident. It is spoken in all parts of Guinea, and more marginally in the area bordering Guinea Bissau, Liberia, Senegal and Sierra Leone.

Gbe is a language continuum, in which the most geographically distant dialects are fairly different and can therefore make understanding difficult among themselves. The Ewe dialect is used as a language of communication within the continuum, as well as outside the area. Fon, which can be understood by speakers of Ewe bordering the East, is spoken as a second language up to the town of Djougou in Benin, located more than 400 kilometres from the coast. It is therefore through the mechanism of continuum that the entire Gbe is considered as a common language.

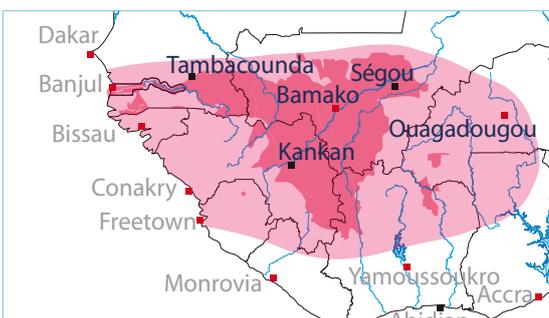


Hausa is today spoken throughout Northern Nigeria, where it has more speakers than Kanuri in Maiduguri and Fulah in Yola. Hausa is frequently spoken in Niamey, the stronghold of Songhai; as well as in North Benin and, of course, in large city centres in South Nigeria.



Today, it is estimated that 50 to 60 million people know this language to various degrees. Several newspapers and many books are written in Hausa and many radio stations (African and international) broadcast in this language (BBC World Service, Voice of America, Deutsche Welle, China Radio International, Radio Moscow and RFI). Furthermore, the Hausa video industry is flourishing. It produces more than 1,000 films annually, and Hausa film stars generate a lot of excitement from Kano to Niamey, and from Maiduguri to Lagos.

Mandingo is one of the largest common languages in West Africa, as it is spoken by more than 30 million people. A comparison with English fully illustrates its role as a regional reference language. The majority of the Malian population is fluent in Bambara (compared here to standard English). 40% of the population of Burkina Faso is fluent in Dyula, which also corresponds to standard English. Not less than 60% of the population of Côte d'Ivoire speaks, as a second language “Ivorian Dyula” (compared to American English). Nearly half of the population of Guinea and 15% of Liberia and Sierra Leone speak Maninka, which could be compared

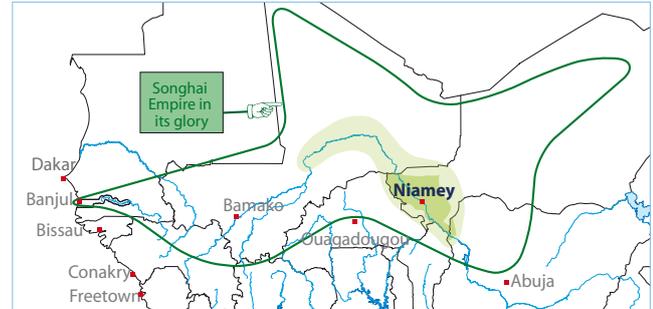


to Caribbean English. About half of the Gambian population and one-fifth of the population of Guinea Bissau speak Mandinka, which could be compared to Nigerian English. One-fifth of the population of Senegal is also fluent in Mandingo dialects, which include varieties of Bambara (in Tambacounda region) and most of the varieties of Mandingo of the West (especially Mandinka and Malinke of the West).

Songhai plays an important vehicular role in West Niger, although it faces competition from Hausa, even in the capital, Niamey. Although it is a minority language in Mali, it is present on both sides of the Niger River, and more particularly in the Gao region. The Niger River is the backbone of this ethnolinguistic area, which takes its roots in the great Songhai Empire that, in its glory, covered an immense area extending up to Senegal. Zarma, the main dialect of Songhai, is mainly spoken in Niger, but it is also found as first or second language in Nigeria and Burkina Faso. Another important dialect, Dendi, is concentrated in the northern part of Benin and south of Niger.

Wolof is the de facto national language of Senegal. It is also spoken by the majority of Gambians and used on a smaller scale in Mauritania, Mali and Guinea Bissau. Its expansion stems from its commercial dynamism and spiritual influence of Muslim Brotherhoods¹². The rapid urbanisation of regions in Cape Verde and Thiès - in the heart of Wolof country - plays an important role in the spreading of the language. An urban Wolof culture is developing, and a Wolof pidgin has been created and is widely used, especially among the youth. The increasing use of this urban Wolof in the economy, media, and publicity reflects and strengthens the emergence of a new legitimacy to the language.

Yoruba is the common language of the South-East quadrant of Nigeria. Its historic centre is the City-State of Ife, which until the 12th century was the flourishing capital of the Yorubas. Subsequently, the language spread, through expansion of the Kingdom of Benin, whose capital was the present day Benin City. In Benin, about one and a half million people speak a variety of this language.



12. More particularly that of the Mourides whose founder, Cheick Ahmadou Bamba, is considered as the spiritual son of Lawyer Majaxate Kala, translator of the Koran into Wolof.



IV. Conclusions with Respect to the Regional Integration Process

The official languages used in the ECOWAS Commission are English, French and Portuguese, which are also the official languages - by law or in practice - in the member countries. The only exception to this rule was Mauritania, which was an ECOWAS member until 2002 and where Arabic has been the official language since 1991.

Table 1. The Status of Languages in ECOWAS Member Countries

| | Official Languages | | National Languages | |
|---------------|--------------------|------------|---|-------------------|
| | De jure | De facto | De jure | De facto |
| Benin | French | | All the indigenous languages | |
| Burkina Faso | French | | Mossi, Dyula, Fulah | Mossi |
| Cape Verde | Portuguese | | Cape Verdean Creole | |
| Côte d'Ivoire | French | | | |
| The Gambia | | English | All the indigenous languages | |
| Ghana | | English | | |
| Guinea | French | | | Fulah, Mandingo |
| Guinea Bissau | | Portuguese | | Portuguese Creole |
| Liberia | | English | | |
| Mali | French | | | Bambara |
| Niger | French | | All the indigenous languages | Hausa |
| Nigeria | | English* | | |
| Senegal | French | | Wolof, Serer, Dyula, Mandingo, Soninke, Fulah | Wolof |
| Sierra Leone | | English | | |
| Togo | French | | Kabiye, Ewe | |

* The status of English in Nigeria is particular. In the 1999 Constitution, English was not proclaimed as the official language, but only as that of the National Assembly along with Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. In practice, English is the official language and the laws continue to be written in English.

West Africa therefore seems to have an advantage over other regional zones which must manage the integration process with a great number of languages. For example, the European Union officially recognizes twenty-one languages which are used in high-level meetings (Ministers, Heads of Government), in all sessions of Parliament and, on the whole, all official texts must be translated. Even though European staff members work every day mainly in English and French, European multilingualism generates huge costs and makes procedures cumbersome.

However, this comparison is not sufficient. The twenty-one European languages are mother tongues for all the citizens of the Union; and any citizen or representative of the people has the right to express himself or communicate with the European institutions in his mother tongue. In West Africa, English, French and Portuguese are used as mother tongues only by an elite. The regional level therefore fully reflects the national practices in which the colonial language is considered, *de facto* or *de jure*, as an official language.

Nevertheless, all West African countries have adopted policies and attitudes that are favourable to national languages. Irrespective of whether they are adopted or not by the law, these languages are very frequently used, at least orally, in courts, political bodies and governments (see Table 1). In other words, national construction is not to the detriment of local specificities.

Taking into account West African languages in the regional integration process is not a problem at the institutional level; evidently keeping to the current three official languages is preferred. On the other hand, the issue needs to be considered from a more concrete and operational angle.

«It is high time for our continent to make African languages the working languages in all aspects of public life. It is only by doing this that we will make our Regional Economic Communities real instruments of African integration, and the African Union a reality experienced by the people, who will be rehabilitated and re-established in their identity and in the historical and cultural continuity of their areas. Consequently, common cross-border languages will strengthen exchange relations between the populations, beyond political borders, which should be considered, as we have always said, not as points of rupture but rather as suture points and lines of the African socio-cultural fabric, ripped and torn only 116 years ago, the suture lines of these border countries and villages of our continent in quest of unity¹³.»

13. Alpha Oumar KONARE, former President of the Republic of Mali (Extract of Speech by the President of the Republic of Mali delivered on the occasion of the launching of the activities of the African Academy of Languages on 8 September 2001).

This exhortation by President Konaré of Mali, current Chairperson of the Commission of the African Union, reminds us that transnational ethnolinguistic areas are tangible realities which could fearlessly support the West African regional integration process. The Senoufo area on the border of Mali and Côte d'Ivoire, is also the home of the largest West African cotton basin, whose interests could be better defended through concerted management¹⁴. The Hausa-Fulani area has a powerful urban network in Nigeria and considerable livestock development potentials in Niger. The Soninkes, be they of Malian, Senegalese or Mauritanian nationality, constitute a united group, particularly through specific migratory practices to France. The Fulah, Mandingo, Yoruba and other areas are zones of free movement, which need to be taken into account in the definition and implementation of regional policies. Lastly, on a smaller scale, West Africa proposes a multitude of small "cross-border areas" united by embedded social and linguistic links which could serve as basis for the development of local regional cooperation.



14. See Chapter on "Cotton" of the Atlas on Regional Integration in West Africa.

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| Shippensburg University | http://www.ship.edu |
| Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) | http://www.sil.org |
| The Linguist List | http://linguistlist.org/ |
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