

Reconstructing Proto-NW Kainji
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The Kainji languages are the northwestern most of all East Benue-Congo languages. Their lexical, phonological and morphological diversity is reminiscent of the complexity across Benue-Congo, including the entire Bantu domain stretching into Southern Africa (see McGill 2009; McGill & Blench 2012; Harley 2012; Mort 2012; Paterson 2019 & 2020; Blench 2018). However, Kainji languages are wholly contained within Nigeria and surrounded by languages of other stock. The currently available data show that Kainji displays great internal diversity; their lexical similarity is as low as 20% based on cognates from a 200 wordlist (McGill & Blench 2012). In this talk I present developing work on a historical-comparative reconstruction of the sound system and noun class affixes of Northwest Kainji (NWK), a low-level group within Kainji, with data from fieldwork conducted since 2005.

The NWK languages, currently identified as əd-Gwamhyə [bga], əd-Wuri [bga], d-Mba [bga], and Tidama'un [dam, moribund], C'Lela [four varieties under the ISO 639-3, dri], Ut-Ma'in [seven varieties with internal diversity under the ISO 639-3, gel], ʊs-Saare [uss], and ʊt-Hun [uth], are unified by their characteristic use of consonant (only) noun class prefixes, featuring a transitional central vowel to ease pronunciation (Blench 2020). For example, as shown in (1), all extant NWK languages have a noun class prefix likely cognate with the Proto-Benue-Congo **li-* (de Wolf 1971) and the Proto-Bantu agreement marker **di* (Meeussen 1967).

(1)	ISO 639-3	Autonym	Class 5 reflex	Example	Gloss
	gel	Ut-Ma'in (Ror)	ɣr ^o -	ṣr ^o -hí	'CM-head'
	dri	C'Lela (Dabai/Zuru)	d ^o -	d ^o -dèbè	'CM-liver'
	uth	ut-Hun (Rijau)	ir-	ər ^o -gɛks	'CM-neck'
	uss	ʊs-Saare (Dukku)	ir-	ṣr ^o -wúr	'CM-bodies'
	bga	əd-Gwamhyə	əl-	əl-ifi	'CM-eye'

Several researchers have approached Kainji languages from a comparative or historical-comparative perspective (e.g., Regnier 1992/2003; McGill 2009; McGill 2012; Bacon & Bird 2016; Bacon 2016). However, these preliminary results have not been systematically published and they do not include data from all Kainji languages for which data now exists. The most comprehensive and ongoing effort to date is Blench's (2020) unpublished manuscript (437 pages) which organizes lexical data (from mostly unpublished sources) from across all Kainji subgroups for the purpose of reconstruction and includes many terms for flora and fauna in the region with data from distributed sources. Despite poor knowledge and unpublished state of most data, some assertions have been made about how Kainji fits into our collective understanding of Benue-Congo, particularly regarding noun classification systems. De Wolf (1971) reconstructs Proto-Benue-Congo noun classes but only includes data from two Kainji languages; Hepburn-Gray (2020) reconstructs Proto-Niger-Congo noun classes but only discusses Kainji data from two other Kainji languages. Making claims based on such limited amounts of data from a key subgroup within Benue-Congo might have even hindered our understanding of Niger-Congo's internal structure (which is at present (a) still largely unknown and/or (b) groups are not supported by hard historical-comparative evidence).

Given Kainji's key genealogical position as an early branch within Benue-Congo, a more in-depth knowledge of the history of Kainji is crucial to our historical understanding of Benue-Congo in particular, and Niger-Congo in general. However, to reach this higher-node-knowledge of the entire Kainji branch with any measure of certainty, we must start bottom-up.

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