

The Saharan-Songhay subgroup of Nilo-Saharan

**Universität Köln,
1st June, 2012**

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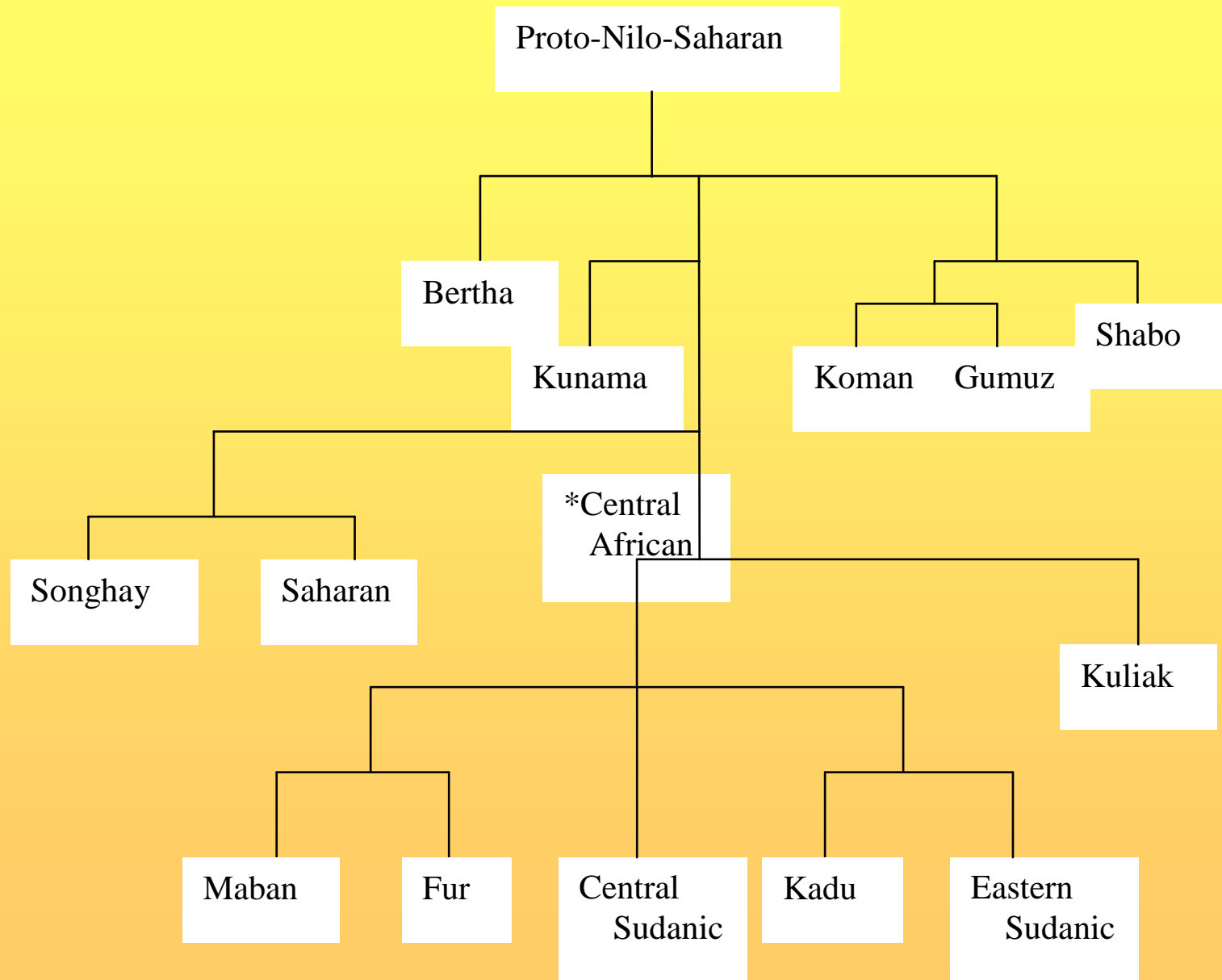
Does Nilo-Saharan exist?

- Nilo-Saharan first defined by Greenberg (1963)
- Despite conferences, edited series, and two major overviews, the perception outside the field is that Nilo-Saharan does not really exist (Dixon, Campbell) or that some languages held to be part of it are not related (Dimmendaal)
- And Bender and Ehret are not the best examples to convince such sceptics
- Nilo-Saharan is certainly very old and fragmented, and probably goes back the pre-Holocene (green Sahara hypothesis)
- Moreover, it has a morphology expressly designed to defeat historical linguistics
- Nonetheless, the compilation of large data tables convinces me that;
 - A) it is a reality
 - B) the thirteen branches accepted by Bender are indeed present

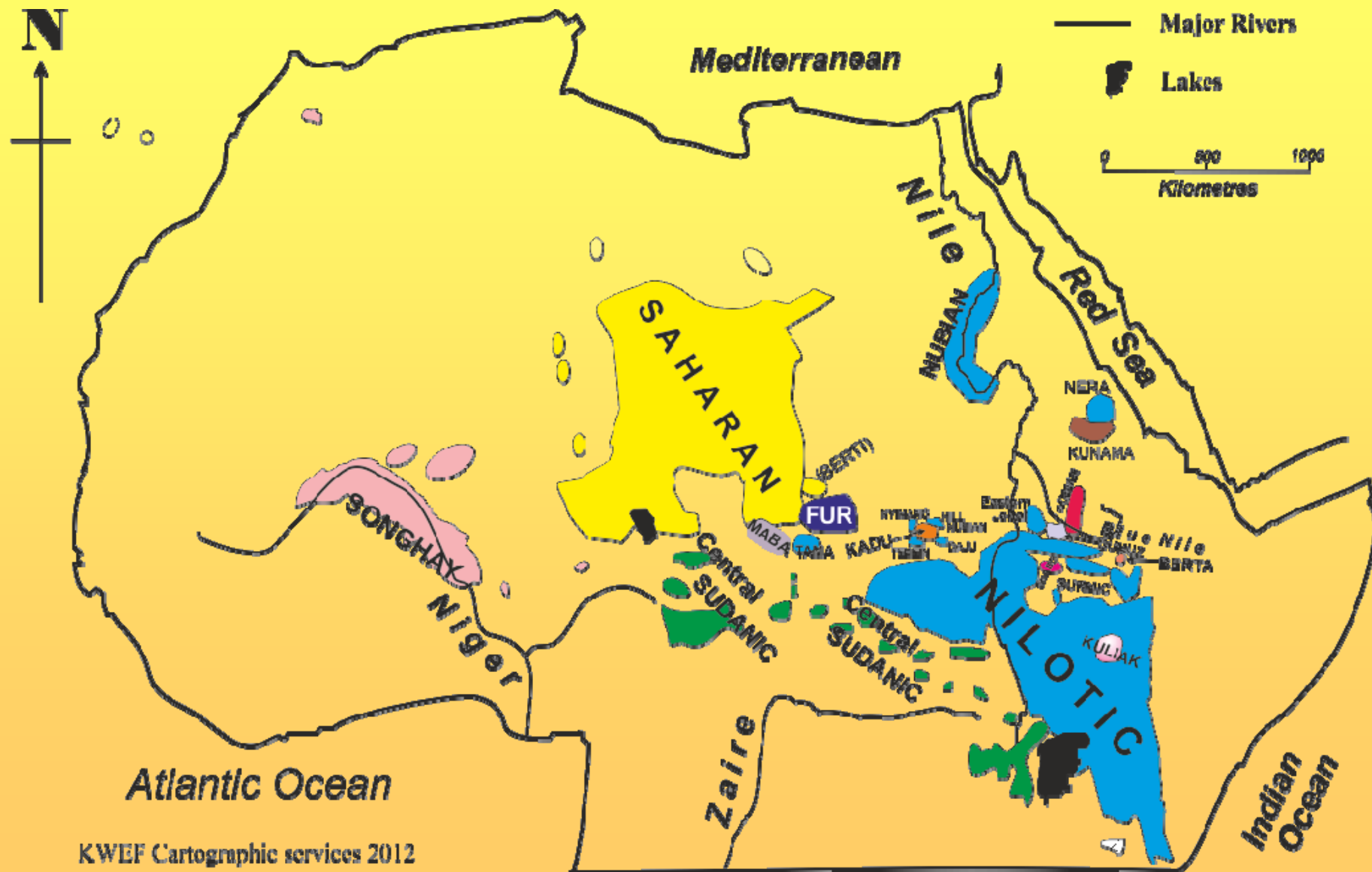
Does Nilo-Saharan exist? II

- Data is beginning to be less of a problem than analysis; relatively few researchers are willing to put in the time to unpick the morphology
- The figure shows a tentative outline of a new proposal for the internal structure of Nilo-Saharan, with the usual caveats

Internal structure of Nilo-Saharan



Nilo-Saharan map



Where do Saharan and Songhay go?

- ❖ People have often said informally that the Songhay languages and Saharan share lexical items that are either exclusive to the group or only found outside in scattered attestations.
- ❖ Nonetheless, none of the published classifications put them together as a branch of Nilo-Saharan.
- ❖ In Bender (1997) they are both 'Satellite' branches, parallel but not related.
- ❖ Ehret (2001) places Songhay as co-ordinate with Maban in his West Sahelian group.
- ❖ But recent work on comparative Songhay and Saharan gives us a larger working database and there is a strong a priori case for this being a distinctive branch of Nilo-Saharan

What's the explanation?

🌐 It has been suggested that the lexical similarities are simply due to borrowing, although the two families are not in geographical contact today.

🌐 Some of the common lexical items are also shared with Hausa which has led some authors to suppose that both borrowed from Hausa. This is unlikely; it is more credible that the Hausa attestations are borrowed.

🌐 Kossmann (2005), in a wide-ranging study of Berber-Hausa loanwords, also notes the presence of certain items in Songhay and to a lesser extent, Kanuri. The origin and direction of borrowing of some of these words remains uncertain, though some of them such as 'silver', 'sword', 'spoon' clearly belong to a later period than the material discussed in this paper.

What's proposed here?

- That Saharan and Songhay together form a branch of Nilo-Saharan
- And that possibly Western Saharan languages are closer to Songhay than Beria [Zaghawa]
- That some of the lexical similarities are due to borrowing, mostly connected with the trans-Saharan trade
- But the similarities of fundamental items, pronouns etc are otherwise difficult to explain

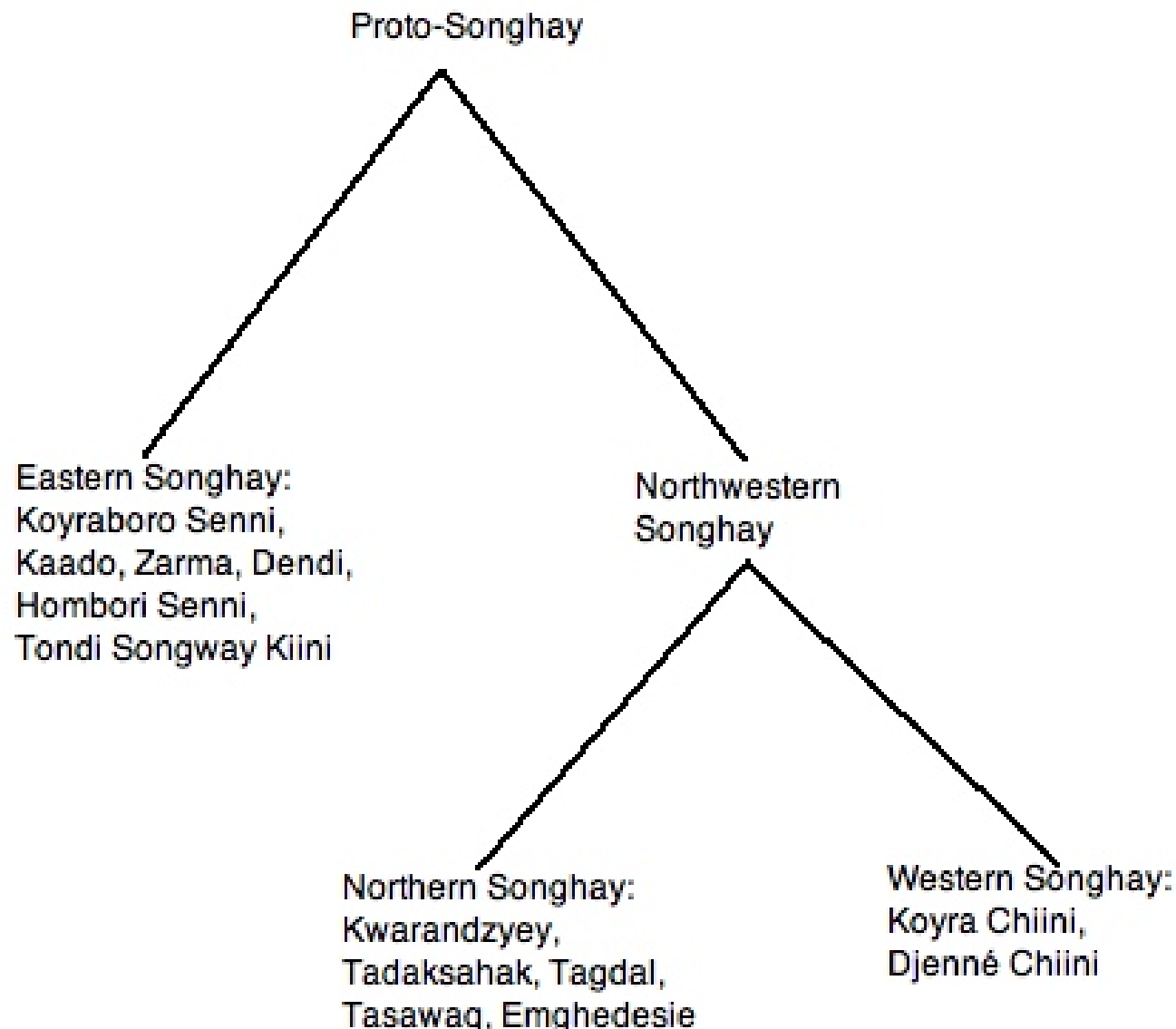
Songhay

- ❖ The Songhay languages are spoken principally along the Niger river in Mali, but have substantial diaspora in the region, and increasingly in remote areas such as NE Nigeria and Sudan
- ❖ They are divided into two major subgroups, north and south, and these have a remote outlier in Tabelbala on the Moroccan border
- ❖ The major difference between these two subgroups is the degree of interaction with Berber; all the northern Songhay languages have intensive borrowing of grammar and lexicon
- ❖ Songhay studies have been seriously confused by the truly terrible work of Robert Nicolai, who has propagated completely worthless hypotheses about mixed languages in one publication after another
- ❖ This presentation adapts the findings of Lameen Souag

Distribution of Songhay



Songhay internal structure



Songhay II

- ❖ Songhay was classified by Westermann within his *Sudansprachen*, and there is a literature linking it with Mande. Undoubtedly, it is very remote from other Nilo-Saharan and has undergone major restructuring
- ❖ It also forms a very tight-knit group of languages, although with low lexicostatistical counts due to relexification from Berber
- ❖ And a number of items associated with early urbanism along the Niger bend reconstruct to proto-Songhay, including 'city' 'door' 'lock'.
- ❖ This suggests an expansion only when proto-cities appear in this region, which is after 200 AD
- ❖ So under all circumstances, the Songhay must have been a small, isolated group for millennia, undergoing a sudden, recent expansion

Songhay and the trans-Saharan trade routes



Plate 5 Burial with Carnelian Beads from Kissi Cemetery 13, courtesy of Sonja Magnavita



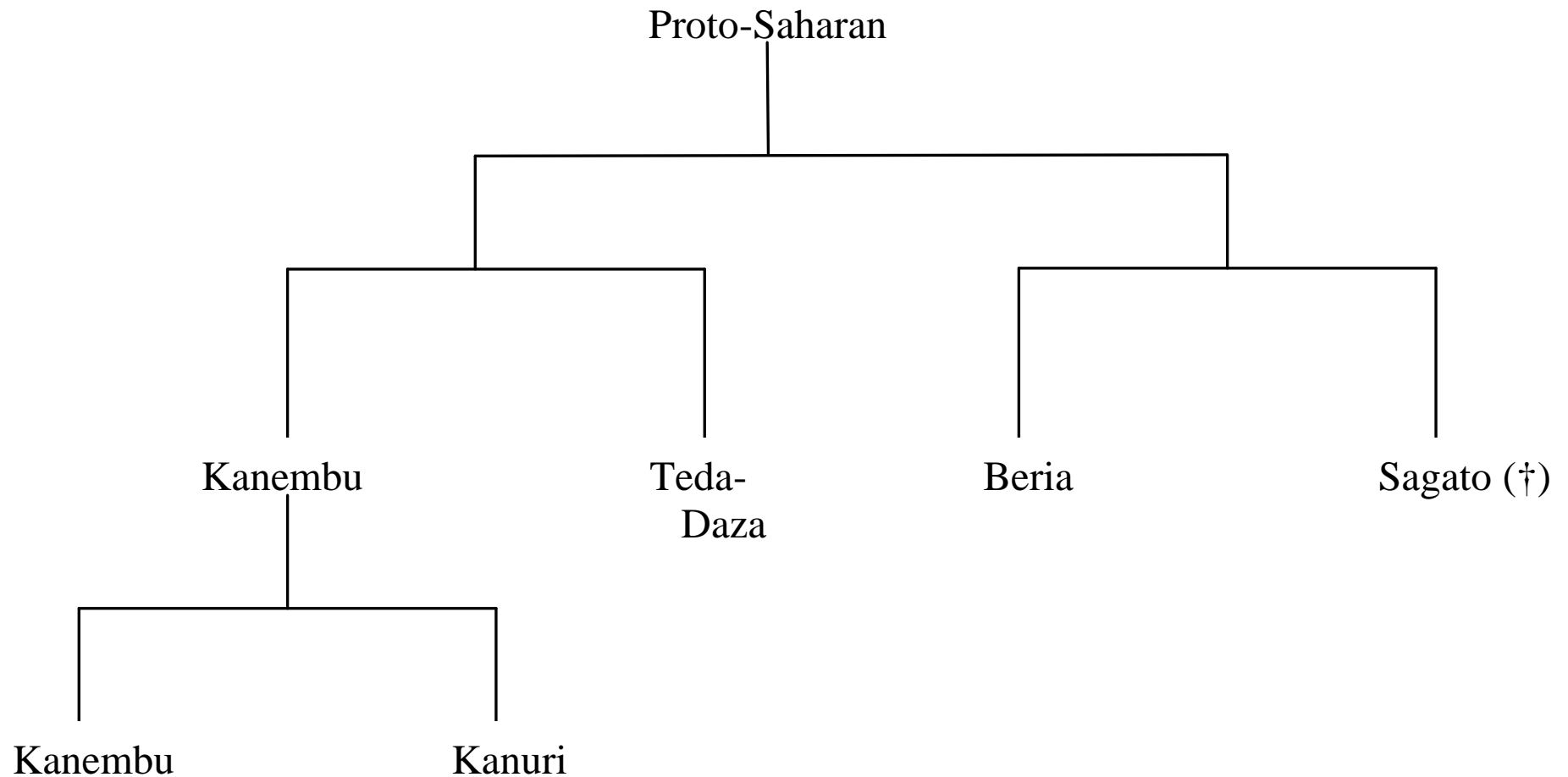
Songhay III

- ❖ So if it is Nilo-Saharan it has undergone long-term morphological loss in the areas of
 - ❖ vowel systems
 - ❖ tripartite number marking
 - ❖ 'Stage III articles' as Greenberg called them; moveable t/k/n

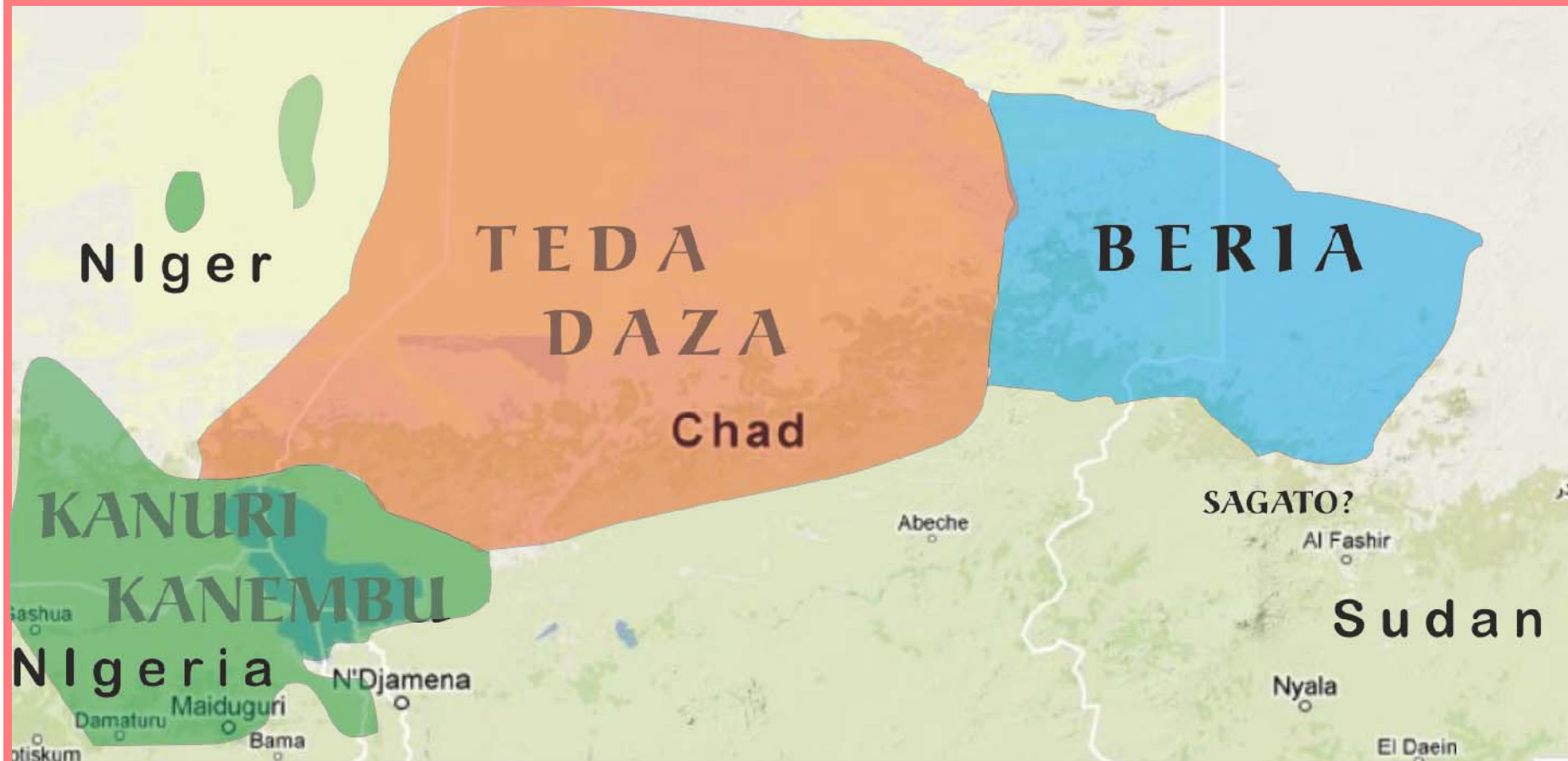
Saharan

- ❖ The Saharan languages consist of a group of four languages, Kanuri-Kanembu, Teda-Daza, Beria (=Zaghawa) and Sagato (=Berti), which appears to be extinct (Petráček 1987).
- ❖ All of these are spoken in the region between Lake Chad and the Sudanese border, with former outliers in some desert oases in the Sahara (Fuchs 1967).
- ❖ Barth (1854) first noted the connection between Kanuri and Teda and shortly after Nachtigal (1980) added Beria.
- ❖ Saharan is first outlined as a group by Lukas (1951-2) and integrated into Nilo-Saharan by Greenberg (1963).
- ❖ The membership of Saharan within Nilo-Saharan has not been seriously questioned since Greenberg (1963) although the relationships with Afroasiatic have excited some comment.
- ❖ Cyffer (1996, 2007) observes, despite considerable lexical diversity, all the extant languages have a very similar verbal system.

Usual internal structure of Saharan



Saharan language map



Common glosses

man, male

Family	Language		Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Sagato	baru	man	
Saharan	Beria	bòrũ	<i>homme, mari</i>	
Songhay	Tadaksahak	borá		
Songhay	Timbuktu	boro	person, native	
Songhay	Gao	boro	person, native African	
Songhay	Zarma	bòró	<i>personne</i>	
Songhay	Kaado	bòrò	<i>personne</i>	
Songhay	Djougou	bòró	person	
Songhay	Kandi	bòró	person	

Common glosses

to farm

Family	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Daza	bérè	<i>labour</i>
Saharan	Kanuri	báre	farming, hoeing
Songhay	Gao	beerì	work in rice field
Songhay	Zarma	béérí	<i>piocher</i>

sing, song

Family	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Daza	doon	<i>chanson</i>
Songhay	Timbuktu	doon	sing; song
Songhay	Gao	don	sing
Songhay	Gao	dooni	song
Songhay	Zarma	dòònù	<i>chanter</i>

Common glosses

#ai I, me

Family	Language		Gloss
Saharan	Beria	áɪ̃	<i>je, moi</i>
Songhay	Hombori	ây, ey	I, me
Songhay	Zarma	áy	<i>je, moi</i>

you sg.,

Family	Subgroup	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	West	Kanuri	ɲi	you
Songhay	South	Zarma	ní	<i>tu, toi</i>

? A sound correspondence

Saharan
Songhay

Kanembu
Zarma

kə̀ndàú
hàndú

lune
lune

Saharan
Songhay

Kanuri
Hombori

kúttu
hóttó

bitter
bitter

Daju
Songhay

Nyala
Zarma

kore
hárí

rain
eau

Morphology?

A feature of Nilo-Saharan described by Bryan (1966) are n-affixes, found widely in several Nilo-Saharan branches. There are some cases where Songhay appears to retain or lose an N- prefix not found in Saharan.

buttocks, anus

Family	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Kanuri	kùlí	anus
Saharan	Teda	kuli	<i>hanche</i>
Songhay	Humburi	ʔánkóráá	<i>hanche</i>
Songhay	Gao	nkoro	<i>fesses</i>

Saharan	Kanuri	ngéí	year
Songhay	*Proto-S	*gí:rí	year

Morphology?

Frog, toad

Family	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Sagato	kaka	frog
Saharan	Kanuri	kókó	frog
Saharan	Daza	koko	<i>crapaud</i>
Songhay	Hombori	ʔàŋkòòr-ò	frog

year

Family	Language	Attestation	Gloss
Saharan	Kanuri	ngéí	year
Saharan	Daza	ɲele	<i>année</i>
Songhay	*Proto-S	*gí:rí	year

Metathesis?

Saharan
Songhay

Beria
* Proto-S

sòbū
bó:sú

cendres
ashes

Work in progress

- This is part of a longer piece which in turn will fit into a new view of Nilo-Saharan
- This powerpoint and the full paper are available for download at;
- <http://www.rogerblench.info/Language/Nilo-Saharan/General>

THANKS

To the Kay Williamson
Educational
Foundation for
supporting the
fieldwork

To Lameen Souag
and Kevin
Macdonald

