

Kam as an isolate within Niger- Congo?

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Comparative Niger-Congo (Villejuif, May 23,
2025)

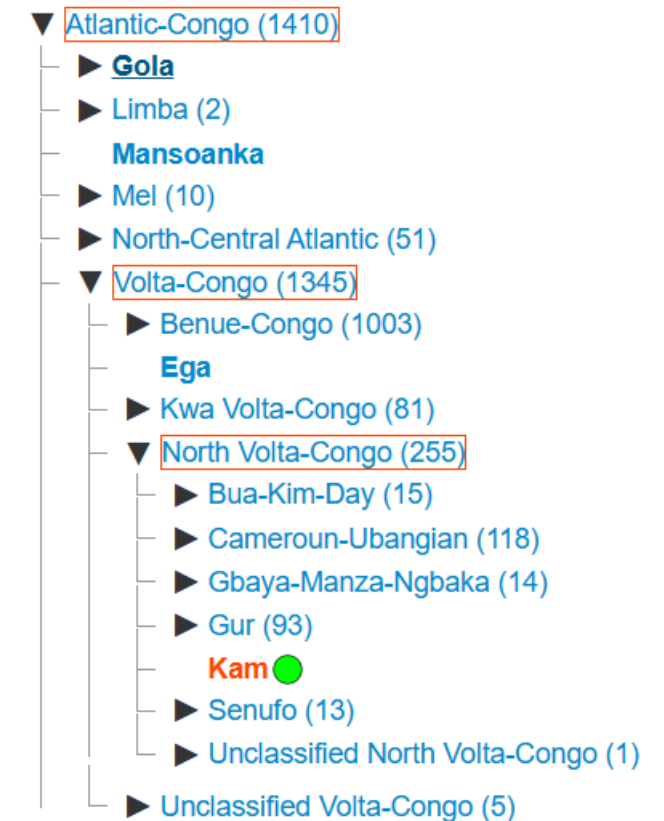
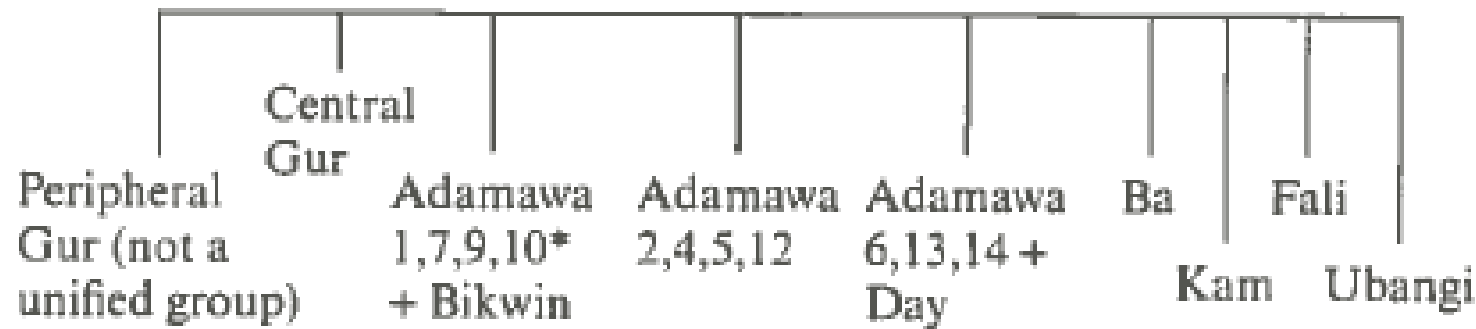


A very short introduction to Kam

- Traditionally classified as an outlier in Adamawa (Greenberg 1963; Boyd 1989)
- Small language (~ 10,000 speakers)
- Surrounded by Jukunoid, Mumuye, other 'Adamawa', ...
- Minimal segmental morphology
 - No noun classes
 - A few verbal extensions (but mostly SVC-strategies)

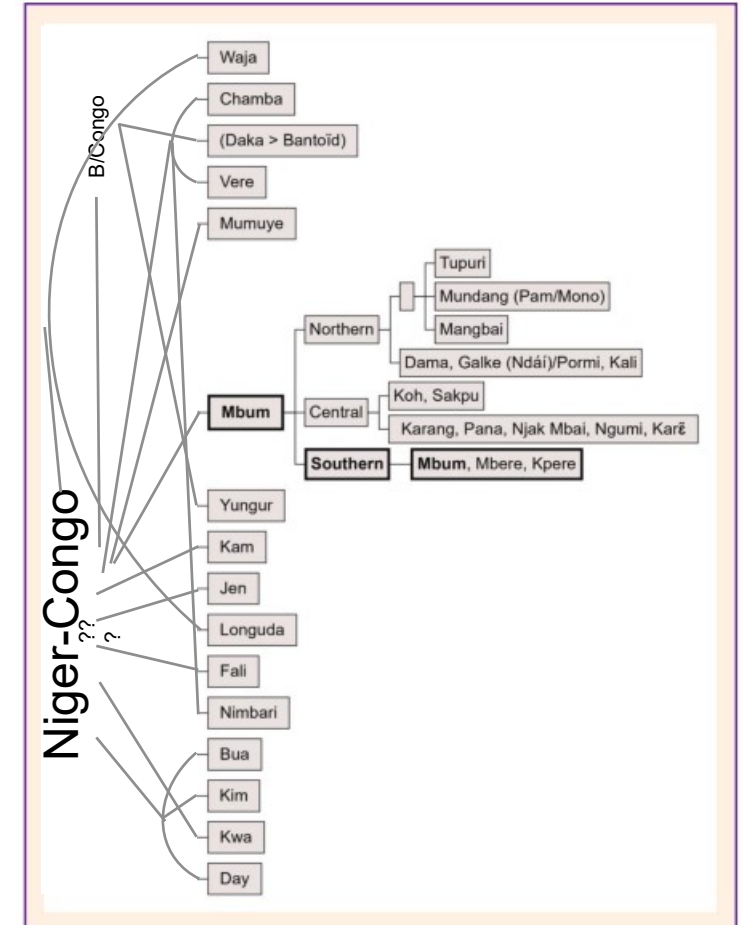
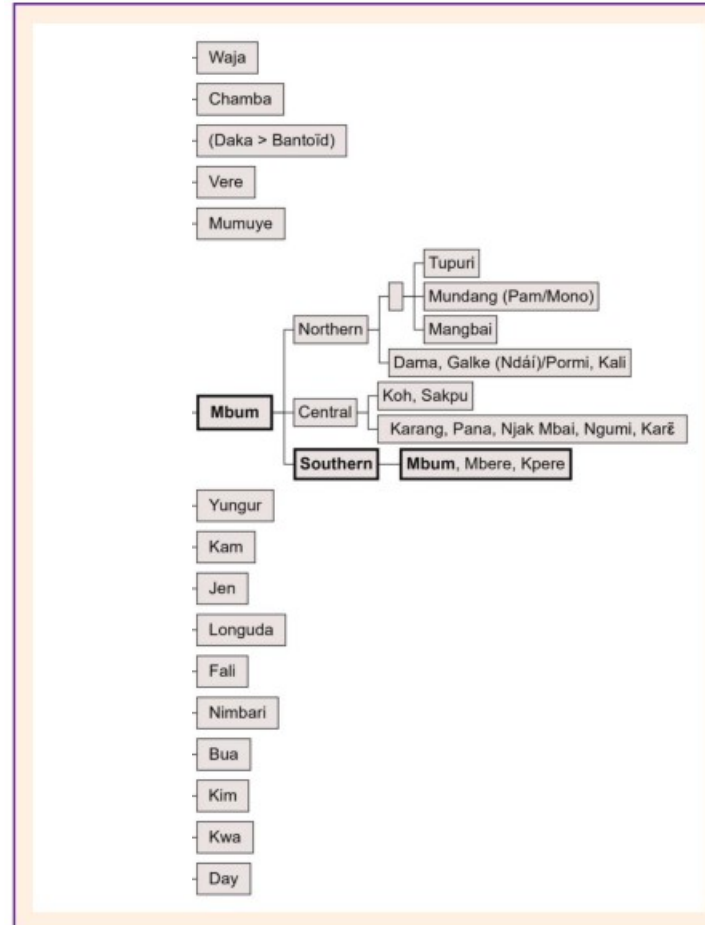
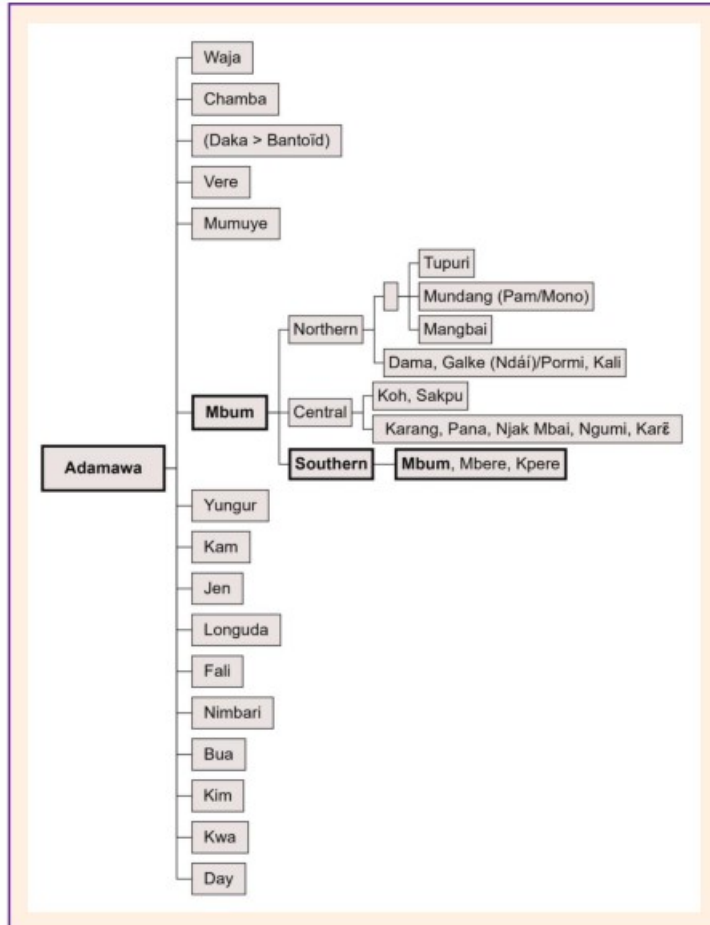


Kam resists neat classification



Williamson & Blench 1989; Hammarström et al.
2024

Adamawa classification



Introduction

Pronouns

Numerals

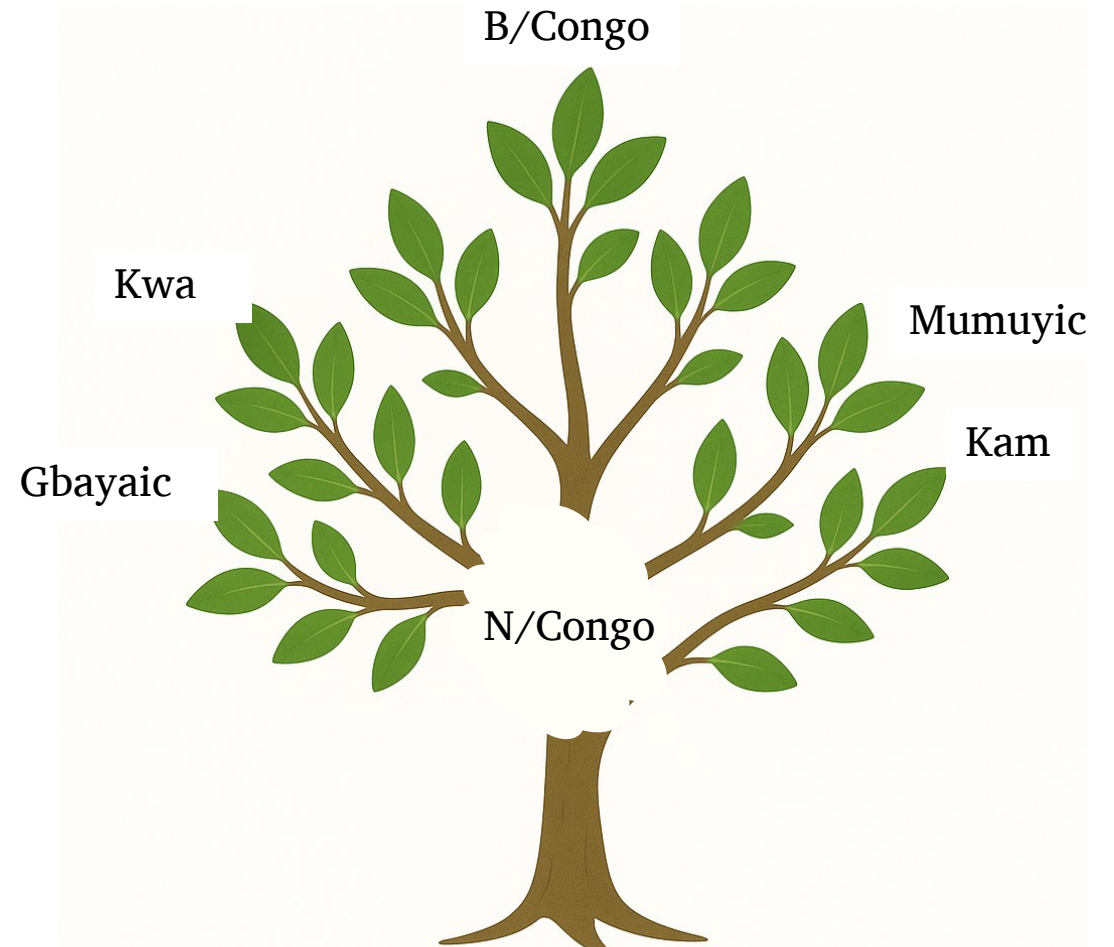
Lexicon

Isolation?

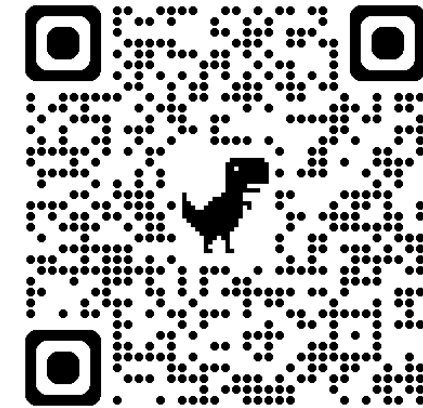
Next steps

Claims of this talk

- Kam is a member of Niger-Congo
- But, for now, it can be considered an isolate (or separate branch) within the family



Framework and method



- First: focus on morphology and paradigms
- Second: look for shared lexical innovations
- Sources
 - Proto-NC Pronouns and numerals: Güldemann 2017, 2018, Babaev 2012 (replicated)
 - Intermediate reconstructions: RefLex + my own pseudo-reconstructions
 - Leipzig-Jakarta comparative wordlist: RefLex + my own pseudo-reconstructions
 - Data published as Lesage 2024 on Zenodo

	Semantic domain	Kam	Niger-Congo	Benue-Congo	BC-Proto-Bantu	BC-Jukunoid	BC-Proto-Eoid	BC-Delta-Cross	BC-DC-Proto-Upper-Cross	BC-DC-Proto-Lower-Cross	BC-Proto-Ukuan	BC-Proto-Ring	Proto-Gbe	Potou-Akan	Mabia	Mumuyic	Proto-Gbaya	Proto-Fula-Sereer	
ant	animals	miré, kángáir; ájàgbír; ájàg, kácír			cádáku, cíci, póká, pàdì	dan (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo), tüm (Yukuben-Kutep)											bérá, mǐl, dǐnà, ò, hájà, hòò, gbiyá	r_n	
arm/hand	body parts	ànyé	ba	bók, kón	bókò, kónò, nàma	bu	ghU-bɔ / A	bók	bók	ù-bók / a-		kɛn	bá		ba (Kurumfe-OtiVo-na-V			bàà, bàkà, kǵ	r_n
ash	surroundings	shé	bu(k)	bú(C), tón	bú, tó	tón	A-mhya	tón	tón	ń-tón		búd, òmè			tom (Kurumfe-Gur-pung			búk, bók	ndow
back	body parts	ngkùm	tvN		jùma, bǒndá, cǎná, gǒngò, tàkò	sírì (Yukuben-Kutep)	u-ka	dím	dímá	é-dém	èhǵhǵ	dumé		tò			dón, kír		
big	properties	bór			néné	kò, kyòm (Yukuben-Kutep), kón-a (Central-Jukunoid)	bhe			í-dém							gásá, gbà, pési, pésá	magw, yaaj	
bite	animals	núng	nú(n)	núN	dókù	núg (Yukuben-Kutep), nín (Central-Jukunoid)	A-pi / i	nún	nóná	í-núgèn	éCékáyány	núni	dí				bang, bòrò		
bird	basic actions	kím	dóm(V)		cóm, dóm, tó	dámw		dóm	dómá	í-mún	dómú	dómú			dum		ja-v-nung	ngat	
bitter	properties	zǎrí	pít		báb, cǎngó, dód, kád	nún (Yukuben-Kutep), dǒm (Central-Jukunoid)					yǐmV		vé				yon, yil, kon	zaad	
black	properties	á' á'ǵǵírí	pID		jíd, pí, pínd	b'ed, p'et (Jukun-Mbembe)	bi	bit	biná	bit	éCíCí	píná, dípe	vé		bid ~ bin	vi-ri, vi-V/-ng-ri	pán, pǎnjá	baí	
blood	body parts	wò		yín	conde, dǒpá, nyíngà	yín, sà (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo)	U-ɲ-ɲa / A	YIC	dé, ní, yín	jíp	únǵ	dúngá, kǎnǵ	U-ŷ		nam ~ nim (Kurumi	kpa-V, zing	ták	yel	
blow	basic actions	bír, kéb	pup	pup(V)	póóp, púng, pèpè, pép, púd					fúút, fúm		póóp, tǎj, dúé		pu	fu		ɲúfí		
bone	body parts	ákùb	KV(p)	kúp	kúpá, píndí	kup, fu (Kpan-icen)		k(ù)p(V)	kúpá	ò-kpó	òy*ó	gúpé	x*ú		zób ~ zo	ka, kak-V	gbàjà	gǵy ~ gí?	
breast	body parts	áví	bVD	baND	bambo, bédéd, kódo, tómbò	byan		báy	báy	é-bá / a-	ly*ǵhǵ	gíné, dǒón	dq		ngd	mín	bérre		
burn (intr.)	surroundings	cém			báb, bábòd, bák, pí, túbm	ton-a, vò (Jukun-Mbembe)	tochu					núkò, túbǎ, pómí, kú	bi	pt	so (Kurumfe-OtiVo-caa		belé, dǵ	sum	
carry	basic actions	búsi, yág, cùg	tO	caG(V)	cénd, jàngát, tót	tom-a, yab	coaGí		ttódi	bén		bòákí	kpé, eè	to	zi (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)		tóǵ	biwax, gad ~ gad	
child (kin term)	people	àci	BI(m)		jána	nyu (Central-Jukunoid), su (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo)	O-mo		gwáán / bá	ó-jén / e-	òyí	bààní	vi		bi		bém		
come	basic actions	pé	ba	bUy, duV	bóǵ, bú, dǒ, gád, jí, púm	ba			di	dí	wáǵV	gúú, bǎin, dúé	bá, bá, vá, wá		ba	e	té	gar	
crush/grind	basic actions	súr, nám		ku(a)	cé, cíd, kǒj, kíd, péd		ls		kók	kók		gúú, búá	tú		nam ~ nem			moop, sox	
cry/weep/shout	basic actions	yé, cò		TaN	jàn, kóǵ, díǵ, jám, kém, pám	s'ǵǵ (Jukun-Mbembe)	vie, vǵ		ttó	túá		déí, gáki			wi (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)		héǵí, hé	ɲaax	
do/make	basic actions	cùg, sín			ǵíd, kít, tá, dém, páng, tènd	te	bu		nám	nám		náí, gínó	wá, wási		na (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)		dé		
dog	animals	wó	B(u)a	búa	bóá	bu	A-bhoa / i	búa	byá	é-búa / i-	búa	búa	ávǵ		ba	za-V, zaa	tóǵ	box ~ bos	
drink	basic actions	núng	NU	núN	nyó, tóm	ngwam (Yukuben-Kutep), v*ta (Central-Jukunoid)	g*ád		g*ád	g*ón	ttǵhV	nú, mú	dq	nó	bo	boo	nó	yer	
ear	body parts	ákár	tó(n)	tón	tót	tón	ghU-choGí / A	tón	ttóǵ	ú-tonǵ / a-	òrògV	túndé	tó	tó	dung (Kurumfe-Gur-co	vi, coo	zérá	nof	
eat	basic actions	ním	dí	dí	ttí	dýí	ghU-choGí / A	já	ttóǵ	yé		dúé, dúá, kúúé, tám	dú		Ca		ɲón	naam, mud	
egg	animals	àbǎǎ		ǵí	ǵí	kýí	ghU-choGí / A	kǎǵ	kǎǵ	ghU-choGí / A	ghU-choGí / A	gúú, búá	àǵ		ce (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)	angka	kúú	boof	
eye	body parts	àñung		ji	jicó	gP	ghU-choGí / A	jén	jéná	é-jén / a-	ghU-choGí / A	túú					nung, gǵng	gbà-jí	
fall	basic actions	tǎr	KU(D), TuD	kú	bàdád, gò, pón, dǎ	déí	ttD	ttǵ	dúwó	nǵ		búa, gú, péná			cud (Kurumfe-Gurunsi)		tekk	yool ~ yoor, babb, sam,	
far	properties	dáb			dái	dwan							dí				ki, híj	god	
fire	surroundings	àlè			dídó, jǵá	da (Yukuben-Kutep), pit (Central-Jukunoid)		kwǎǵ	k*ʁn	ú-kán	ǵhǵ	búf	dzo		ya-V, yaa		wèè	daay	
fish	animals	átábé			cómbs, cú, gòdà, kóngá, kéké	gyá	E-chí(ǵ)anh / i		tèn mání	é-ják / i-	ákpá	túa	ákpá		ɲɲn (Kurumfe-Guru ya-V-zing, zing		zbró	li(ǵ)	
flesh/meat	body parts	áfam	n(y)am	nyam	nyámá, cúná, nòkú	byi	E-nhamh / i		tèn	ú-nám, ó-bók	énǵmɣ	dúa	lǎ		nam ~ nem	yop-V, yopó	múr		
fly	animals	jǒ		kyi	ǵí	k'ín, fú (Central-Jukunoid)	A-khja / i		ttitje	ú-sún / n-	lǵǵ	día			jo (Kurumfe-OtiVolta)		zi	coow	
give, share	basic actions	má, gáb			gáb, jínk, pá, túp	na, ndá (Yukuben-Kutep), dwe (Central-Jukunoid), ya / yí (Ju na	ni		kyǎǵ, ní	ní, nò		púa, kúé	bǵ, dǵ		pa ~ pan	a	ké, há	Kay, Coox, Dox ~ Tox	
go	basic actions	sáng, nyéb			ǵí, gènd, pít, púm	yǎǵ (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo)	khja		káuwá	húnǵgV	ófs	dúú, ǵsí	yí		to (Gurunsi-OtiVolí daa, ra, kih, ya		né	jag	
good	properties	lém		jUAm	joám, jǵá	síP, saǵ (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo), kyo (Mbembe)	chiamhi			dúpá, bǎnǵ	éwúrV	dúú, ǵsí	yǵ		nan	tnób, dí	de	bel	
hair	body parts	sirá		TID	búdi, cókí, cingá, cití, júúdt, kót, kac, kóó	dzin	U-tg		tina, dǵja	i-dét		núgè	dǵ	Wí~	yu (Gurunsi-OtiVol cèh-ti, sung		búms, mǐl, mǐl, mǐl-jú-zú		
hard	properties	kpángí			jǵú, pódík	pwog	wo			clón		dúa	sé		tráá		zélí		
hear/listen	basic actions	lǵg			dém, díto	dab-á	chuanha		kóbá, kóm	kpá		dúú	kpé		dulu		dí	nan, yegg	
heavy	properties	kpíngkpángí			bómb, bímb, cók, pí	tám	kho	dób		lóp		dúú	bé, y*íá				húsí	med, tadd	
hit/beat/fight	basic actions	wǵí, láb	kóN	kóN	dómb, bímb, cók, pí	gu, daP (Jukun-Mbembe)	ghedhí, ca, gbeGi		kàn, kpá, timi	í*áná, jòp	kómɣ	dúú	x*ó		kpíót	so (Gurunsi-OtiVolta), sog (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)	zélí	bur	
house	body parts	hóm			kóm, póná	yt (Central-Jukunoid)	U-aphamh / A		ppá	ó-bók, n-	kómɣ	búta, kúiné, túú, bóká, gǵk			po (Kurumfe-OtiVolta), pom (Kurumfe-OtiVolta)	mber, sóm, gó, kón			
in	locations	àngwǵ			kàngá, céngó, jǵá, jóbó, jómá	tam, pwu (Central-Jukunoid), dun (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo)	U-bhaGi ~ U-baGi		ttǵ, dón	ú-fók / a-	lókɲ	dáú, gǵnǵ			ge-V	dan (Kurumfe-Gurunsi), dt (Gurunsi-OtiVolta)	tuá	lu?	
knee	body parts	álúú			dá, tí					tínǵ, númè		dúfí					sén, kǎn, kǵ		
know	basic actions	mási	duD	dúD	bóngó, dúú, keto	yi (Central-Jukunoid)	ihòrmɣ	dúǵ	dúnǵ	é-lón / n-		kúédi	yǵ		dum ~ dun	gbí-ng-ti	zú-gúr	Kob ~ Kuf	
laugh	basic actions	jǵjǵ, mǎny			jǵjǵ, mǎny	swǎǵ, yyen (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo)	nhič* ~ nhič*ch	jónV	jóná	dípnó	bá	kúédi	yǵ		jam (Gurunsi-OtiVc		7ín	7and	
leaf	plants	móm	mam	g(y)AK, mam	cék, cép, jód	gbia ~ gbaí	ghia ~ gbaí	kyak	kyák, mǎm	cák	mǎhɣ	túká	kó		mo (Kurumfe-Gurunsi)		mám	jai	
leg/foot	body parts	àbirag	BV		báde, jáni, kǵá	tin (Yukuben-Kuteb), gí (Central-Jukunoid)	U-bú / i		k*àn	ú-fǎǵ / i / m-	ófǎny	pókó, ǵǎǵ			pa ~ van ~ vo ~ vor	bál-V, gáp-V	wǎǵ		
liver	body parts	ábǵ			cákú, gòdó, kónò, nàma, píndí, téné	pwán, baT (Jukun-Mbembe),	U-bú / i		pón	ú-kót / a-	òwéhi	póní, kúú	át*á, fǵ		na (Kurumfe-OtiVo do-V, doo		Qoos		
long	properties	púpwbá			bádt, tímá		U-dia / A					dúú			co (Gurunsi-OtiVol síng, búr-V, búr-V		seǵá	keep	
louse	animals	búmbóm			dá, tádt	b*ǵ (Central-Jukunoid), ǵun (Central-Jukunoid)	dedhi	ttani	dán	ó-lǎǵ / i-	òdǵmɣ						dúr, dúró		
mouth	body parts	ngwé	nú(n)	nuA	dómó, nòá	ndut	E-nu* / i	dán	má	í-núá	òǵ*ǵ	dúú					nú		
name	body parts	ǵán	YID	gíd	jíná, kómbó	gɣin	dhi-ní / A	dín	díná, kóm	é-jén	òǵ*ǵ	dúú			nan ~ no	nya-V, nyaa	lín		
navel	body parts	sú		kóp	kóbú, tòtò	kóm	U-khǵi / i	kóp	kób	é-kóp / a-	òkpódú	tǵn			yǵd ~ yǵd (Gurunsi-ríng		kón		
neck, throat	body parts	ǵgbér, ǵǵkúrǵ			kóbá, tòtò	tu			kódá, méná	ú-tonǵ	òdǵpǵV	tǵnǵ, mǎǵ, dǵǵ	kó	kóni	do	tur-V, kor-V	Kwad, (b)woq		
new	properties	àngwí			pía (?)	pi	pha	pá(y)	páy, kómi	-fá	òdǵpǵV	píkè			fad ~ fid	pol-i-V-ng, so-V	mbé	xas	
night, darkness	surroundings	ábǵǵ, ntáb	ZA	túkU	ttók, tták, pí	pup, tuk	A-cga / i		dúnǵ	ádháhó, óǵndí	zǵǵ	túǵ	zǵ		nen	zing/-V	zé, túm	yeng	
nose	body parts	àmíng			bómbó, jódó, pódá	wín	i-chuǵi ~ i-chuǵel / A	jóná	jóná	í-bókó	3kǵǵ	dúí, tǵj			Wíli	me (Gurunsi-OtiVo sung	zǵp		
not	properties	á* súmír							témá	ákaná		dúin	xóǵó		kpem		sǵk, gbérá	ngɣy, hid ~ hidd	
one	numerals	bí			kóng	yín, ndo			g*á-ní	cèbè	ji	mók	dé, ǵkpók, lòkpók		do	do (Kurumfe-Guru gbét-i, gor-V	kpók, kpóm		
rain	surroundings	ɲipóm			mò, ókó	tú, fwín (Central-Jukunoid), byín (Yukuben-Kutep)			bod	é-dím	érǵ	gúdt	do		mi-Y~dapa		kóró	jab ~ jaf ~ pab ~ naf, def	
red	properties	dóm			búdá	ban, gbá (Jukun-Mbembe), kpú (Mbembe)	bha		kódá		òwǎwǎr	báǵ			som (Kurumfe-Gur maa, nweg, bme		gbé		
root	plants	lókóm, àlǵsírǵ, díráǵ bér	DID	tid	béd, gbòdà, koco, kòdà, kóndó, kubá, pt, tǵ	kwáP, dén (Central-Jukunoid)	díǵ	díǵ	tina, dǵja	ó-lón	òyímɣ	ǵáǵ			ding-ri		ɲín, (ín	daad	
rope	tools	hún			dá, tádt	dít, dík	U-dhǵi ~ U-dhǵi / A	dík	díkí, kídó	ó-lók	ókú	bak, kúde			ɲme (Kurumfe-Gurunsi)		pér	baak	
run	basic actions	tég			dá	tèt			núnǵ	ó-nún	ókú	nínǵ					dog		
salt	surroundings	súnsǵ, hǵǵ			jíný	ɲ*á, ban (Central-Jukunoid)	bu	ɲun	núnǵ	ó-búmb	ókáɣ~	gúáɣ, túkè	dýé, gýé	kíli	ya (Kurumfe-OtiVolta), yas (Kurumfe-OtiVolta)		tǵn	lees	
sand/dust	surroundings	álásiné, gúú			céké, céngá, bú, budu, gúmbi, kóngó, todé	búnǵ, sa (Yukuben-Kutep), but (Central-Jukunoid)	U-thimh / A	bum	bó, búmb, pókí		ókáɣ~	tuté, bin, búde			seng-li		jéme, kése, mbúto, gbúto		
say/tell	basic actions	bén, càr		ta	ǵíd, tí, tét, bíd, bóód, càpód, cím, ǵán	ta, dúǵ-a (Central-Jukunoid), dǵá (Mbembe), tǵe (Wurbo)	ta, wǎGi		ttǎǵá	kút, cé	hǵ	dáí, móá, pókí, dǎǵí	dǵ, ís	te	bu	cáh, kób	bá	maf, xot ~ xoy,	
see, watch	basic actions	dǵǵ, jéri			bón	sá, di (Central-Jukunoid), vvé (Jukun-Mbembe)	munhu		bóná, yén			kókó, píé	kpó		na (Kurumfe-Gurur zi, di		zǵk	Teng ~ Tekk	
shade/shadow	surroundings	zúúráǵ			dúdt, tóndí	wúwín													
skin/hide/bark/cover	body parts	là, kpá	ko	ku(a)	ttídt, coco, gbòb, kókó, kótó, kándá, kóbá, pò, pòcò, pápá, gowa	kda, foP, kók	U-pha / i	kpá(y)	kpáy	í-kpá, í-kpók	éy*é, íkó	gúú			ton (Kurumfe-Guru koo, kong		gúú	mbel, d_kw	
small	properties	ánté			kéé, níó, tób	fiy, dj (Jukun-Mbembe-Wurbo), ba (Mbembe)			kima, kpudi		éy*é, ví (vú)				wú dóót, tókólóng, petel, ja-V		bé, sǵr, gèdték	moi	
soil/ground/earth/land	surroundings	mǵ		díki	jǵé, níó, tób	kyǎǵ (Yukuben-Kuteb), fu (Kpan-icen), vin (Jukun-Mbembe)	U-ghamh / A		ttǵn	í-sún úkǎn	érídhV	dúké			tan (Gurunsi-OtiVol zǵh-ri		zǵ		
stand, rise up	basic actions	àbú, àbú, àyí	ti(n)	ku	ghò, dóbá, cí	nen	í-kǵ, U-tǵ / A		ttáǵ	é-són	éridhV	ttá, gèdt, dákú			tan ~ tun		mú	dok ~ dog, lees	
star	surroundings	hǵá	soD	ku	jím	fen, ku, nín			bádt	láká	ókókóni	dúú, kók			ji (Gurunsi-OtiVolta cí, yuu		yór, báǵ, kúr	7ín-ox ~ 7ín-ox, baf	
stone/rock	surroundings	átár			conda, jótá, tete, tóndòá	tut (Central-Jukunoid)			kókóni		áǵǵǵgV	gúá, díné, bídtá			gmad (Kurumfe-Ot sèh		zǵá	xoor ~ xood	
suck	basic actions	fár			jámú, jónk, pí	twom, pǵ (Mbembe)	U-doGi / i; U-dio / i		tǎn	g-tíkát	kpé	túá, gbókó, tíá	kpé	bo		tar-i	tá		
sweet	properties	sǵǵí, áshén							g*óp, fip		gbó	núná					nzǵbí, lí		
tail	body parts	ásé	Dòm	Dúm(V)	ce, kídá	nam, taK (Jukun-Mbembe), ɲag (Yukuben-Kutep), twa (Kpan-icen), vya (Jukun-Mbembe), man (Wurb	U-thimh / A		dómá	ó-sím / n-	òdhúmɣ	ní, kóni			jud	dèh	yífá, ǵkǵ, 7ifá	bel	
take	basic actions	yǎǵ			jàngát, kóó, pók, támb	túm, kín	da		kkéná, kkéǵ			pié, dúé	tsó						

Pronouns – a morphological anchor

	Kam	Niger-Congo
1sg	m	°mV (front)
2sg	a	°mV (back)
1pl	yùrù	°TV (close)
2pl	nyò	°NV (close)
3sg	ú	°O
3pl	í	°ba

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Pronouns – a morphological anchor

	Kam	N/Congo	Mumuyic	C/Mabia	(P/)Akanic	Gbe	B/Congo	Gbayaic
1sg	m	°mV (front)	°mì	*mV	*mE	mV, NE	°w(U)	*mí
2sg	a	°mV (back)	°mò	*bV, *(f)V	*wO, *fO	*o	°w(U)	*mé
1pl	yùrù	°TV (close)	°wO, °rO	*tV	*yε	*mì	°DI	*ḷé
2pl	nyò	°NV (close)	°noO	*(n)yV	*mO	*mi	°NI	*né
3sg	ú	°O	°wú	*u, *a	*O		°O	*ʔà
3pl	í	°ba	°rí, °yí	*ba	*bA		°ba	*wà

Pronouns – a morphological anchor

	Kam	N/Congo	Mumuyic	C/Mabia	(P/)Akanic	Gbe	B/Congo	Gbayaic
1sg	m	°mV (front)	°mì	*mV	*mE	mV, NE	°w(U)	*mí
2sg	a	°mV (back)	°mò	*bV, *(f)V	*wO, *fO	*o	°w(U)	*mé
1pl	yùrù	°TV (close)	°wO, °rO	*tV	*yε	*mì	°DI	*l̥é
2pl	nyò	°NV (close)	°noO	*(n)yV	*mO	*mi	°NI	*né
3sg	ú	°O	°wú	*u, *a	*O		°O	*ʔà
3pl	í	°ba	°rí, °yí	*ba	*bA		°ba	*wà

Lower numerals – conservatively Niger-Congo

	Kam	Niger-Congo
Two	yīrāg	°Ri
Three	càr	°ta(C)
Four	nnár	°na(C)
Five	ngwún	°nU

Lower numerals – conservatively Niger-Congo

	Kam	N/Congo	Mumuyic	C/Mabia	(P/)Akanic	Gbe	B/Congo	Gbayaic
Two	yīrāg	°Ri	*ziti	*yi, *ɗe	*(-)nyɔ̃	*ɓè, *vè, *wè	°Bà	*lítò
Three	càr	°ta(C)	*tati	*ta ~ tan	*-tã	*o	°tátV	*tàr(à)
Four	nnár	°na(C)	*dneeti	*na, *naasi	*-nã	*mì	°naD	*nár(á)
Five	ngwún	°nU	*màáni (?)	*nom, *nu		*àtɔ̃ (?)	°tán(V)	*mòòró, *mòr-kɔ̃ (?)

Lower numerals – conservatively Niger-Congo

	Kam	N/Congo	Mumuyic	C/Mabia	(P/)Akanic	Gbe	B/Congo	Gbayaic
Two	yīrāg	°Ri	*ziti	*yi, *ɗe	*(-)nyɔ̃	*ɓè, *vè, *wè	°Bà	*[íitò
Three	càr	°ta(C)	*tati	*ta ~ tan	*-tã	*o	°tátV	*tàr(à)
Four	nnár	°na(C)	*dneeti	*na, *naasi	*-nã	*mì	°naD	*nár(á)
Five	ngwún	°nU	*màáni (?)	*nom, *nu		*àtɔ̃ (?)	°tán(V)	*mòòró, *mòr-kɔ̃ (?)

Kam retains some key NC reflexes (cf. Segerer 2008)

Table 4 – Diagnostic Niger-Congo vocabulary in Kam and elsewhere: nouns						
	person	wood/tree	tongue	tooth	ear	Source
Kam	nyí	bër	àlímíní	àshàg	àkàr	Leage 2020
Proto-NC	^o nI	^o ti	^o dIm	^o nyiN	^o tó(n)	Myself
Mumuyic	*cɔ-ng, ^o ze-ng	*la-V	^o dè-V-ng-ti	*tná-li/-ri	*co-V, *coo	Shimizu 1979
Central Mabilia	*nt ~ nu ~ non	*tl	*dedm	*ye	*dIng	Matsasy 1979
Gbe	*bè	*tí	*dɛ	*àdú	*tó	Capo 1991
Potou-Akanic					*-tũ	Stewart 2002
Benue-Congo	^o nI(D)	^o tí(C)	^o dIm		^o tón	Myself
< Proto-Bantu	*ntu	*tí	*dɪmì	*jínò	*tòl	Bazin et al. 2002
< Jukunoid	*ngiT	*kun	*ri-/a-déma	*gʸín	*ku-/a-tón	Shimizu 1971a
< Edoid		*U-thaj / I	*U-dhamh / A	*dhI-kʸ / A	*ghU-choGi / A	Elugbe 1989
< Delta-Cross		^o té			^o tón	Myself
< < Upper	*nèd, *nòd	*tté	*mèná	*ttàn	*ttónì	Dimmendaal 1978
< < Lower		*í-fíá, é-tíé	*é-lémè / a-	*é-dèt / a-	*ú-ton / a-	Connell 1991
< Ukaan	*ðní	*ðhúnv	*ènyŭ	*ŭnyŭgV	*ŭrŭgV	Abiodun 1999
< Ring	*gúdò	*túák	*dánl, dómi	*dídè, túgò	*túndè	Paulin 1995
Gbayaic	*wí	tè	*lébé, lémbè	*nyín	*zèrà	Mofino 1995
Proto-Fula-Sereer	*ʔiin		*de(le)m	*nyiny	*nof	Pordniakov 2022

Kam retains some key NC reflexes (cf. Sengerer 2008)

Table 5 – Diagnostic Niger-Congo vocabulary in Kam and elsewhere: verbs					
	<u>bite</u>	<u>swallow</u>	<u>eat</u>	<u>drink</u>	<u>spit</u>
Kam	kìm, nìm	<u>mèr</u>	<u>nìm</u>	<u>núng</u>	<u>tògí</u>
Proto-NC	°dOM	°mID	°di	°no	°tu(t)
Mumuyic	*yɔn		*caa	*boo	
Central Mabilia	*dum		*di	*nyo	*tu
Gbe	*dò	*bɛ	*dù	*dò	
Potou-Akanic		*-mɛlɛ		*-nɔ	
Benue-Congo	°dóm(V)	°mèd	°di	°NU	°tú
< Proto-Bantu	*cùm (?), *dúm	*mìd	*dɪ	*nyó	*tú
< Jukunoid	*dwàm	*mèn	*dvi	*ɲgwam	
< Edoid		*dhɔ	*dɪ	*yɔ	
< Delta-Cross	°dóm	°mèn	°já		
< < Upper Cross	*dómà	*mèn	*já	*gʷád	*tú
< < Lower Cross	*lóm	*mèn	*líá	*ngʷóng	
< Ukaan	*yóm	*mɛ	*yé	*tòdhV	*cúfə
< Ring	*dómù	*mìé	*dúè	*nú, *mú	*túò
Gbayaic		*gúr	*nyóng	*nɔ	
Proto-Fula-Sereer	<u>nat</u>	*mɔf	*nyaam (?)	*yer	* Tuɗ

Basic lexical similarity

Table 6 – Lexical distances between Kam and Niger-Congo groups			
Likely cognates overlap order	Likely cog overlap %	Possible cognates overlap order	Possible cog overlap %
Proto-Niger-Congo	45% (17/39)	Proto-Niger-Congo	54% (21/39)
Proto-Benue-Congo	24% (13/55)	Proto-Potou-Akanic	40% (8/20)
Mumuyic	22% (12/54)	Proto-Benue-Congo	38% (21/55)
Proto-Central-Mabia	20% (13/64)	Mumuyic	30% (16/54)
Proto-Potou-Akanic	20% (4/20)	Proto-Central-Mabia	29% (18/64)
Proto-Gbe	15% (8/54)	Proto-Gbaya	17% (15/86)
Proto-Gbaya	12% (10/86)	Proto-Gbe	17% (9/54)
Proto-Fula-Sereer	3% (2/68)	Proto-Fula-Sereer	7% (5/68)

Overlaps reflect retentions, not innovations

- Kam *wó* ‘dog’ matches Benue-Congo *°búà* → shared retention
- Likely inherited from Proto-Niger-Congo *°B(u|a)*
- Mumuyic has *°zaa* → innovated form, not shared with Kam
- Very few candidates for shared innovations:
 - ànùng* ‘eye’ ~ Mumuyic *°nung*
 - bòr* ‘grow’ ~ Mumuyic *°bòrò* ‘big’
 - jồ* ‘fly’ ~ Mabilia (some) **jo*
 - nàm* ‘grind’ ~ Mabilia **nam* ‘crush’

Potential regular sound correspondences: only shared retentions and Kam-specific innovations

- Shared retentions

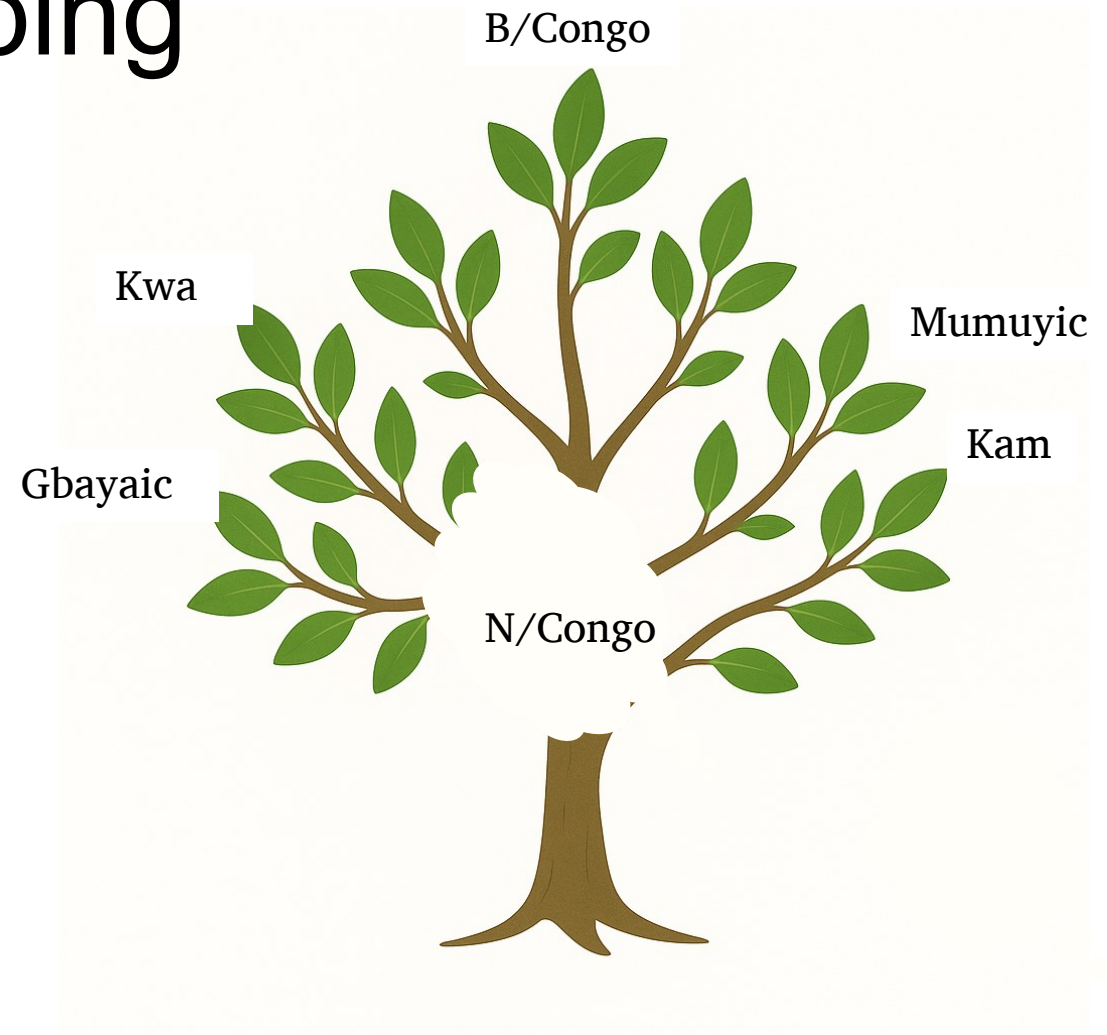
- **n ~ n**: Kam *núng* ‘bird’ ~ BC °*nùN*, Mumuyic *jaV-nung*, Gbaya *nóí*; Kam *núng* ‘drink’ ~ Potou-Akanic -*nũ*, Gbaya *nó*
- **k ~ k**: Kam *àkùb* ‘bone’ ~ °*kúp*, Mumuyic °*ka*; Kam *ngkùròg* ‘throat’ ~ BC °(*k*)*Udòg*, Gbe *kò*, Potou-Akanic -*kɔnĩ*

- Kam-specific innovations

- **l ~ d**: Kam *àlúlù* ‘knee’ ~ BC °*dúD*, Mabilia *dun*; Kam *àlímíní* ‘tongue’ ~ BC °*dIm*, Mabilia *dedm*
- **Bilabial + a → ɔ / o**: Kam *wó* ‘dog’ ~ BC °*búà*, Mabilia *ba*; Kam *mòm* ‘laugh’ ~ BC °*mam*, Mabilia °*mo*, Gbaya *mám*
- **Merger of u, ʊ, o → u**: Kam *núng* ‘bird/drink’ ~ BC °*nùN*, Potou-Akanic -*nũ*, Mabilia *nyo*, Gbaya *nó*; Kam *ú* ‘3sg’ ~ Mumuyic °*wú*, Mabilia *ʊ*, Ukaan *ò*, Delta-Cross °*o*

Indications for subgrouping

- 3pl pronoun *í* ~ Mumuyic °*yí*
- Lexical innovations?
 - ànùng* ‘eye’ ~ Mumuyic °*nung*
 - bòr* ‘grow’ ~ Mumuyic
 - °*bòrò* ‘big’
 - jò* ‘fly’ ~ Mabilia (some) **jo*
 - nàm* ‘grind’ ~ Mabilia **nam* ‘crush’
- (Prosodic prefixes in Jukunoid: *à.nùng*, *à.límíní*, *à.shàg*, *ng.wún*, *ng.kùròg*, *à.kàr*)





Sayizuwari Garba Tabo et al. discuss Kam-Mumuye history (2021)

Introduction

Pronouns

Numerals

Lexicon

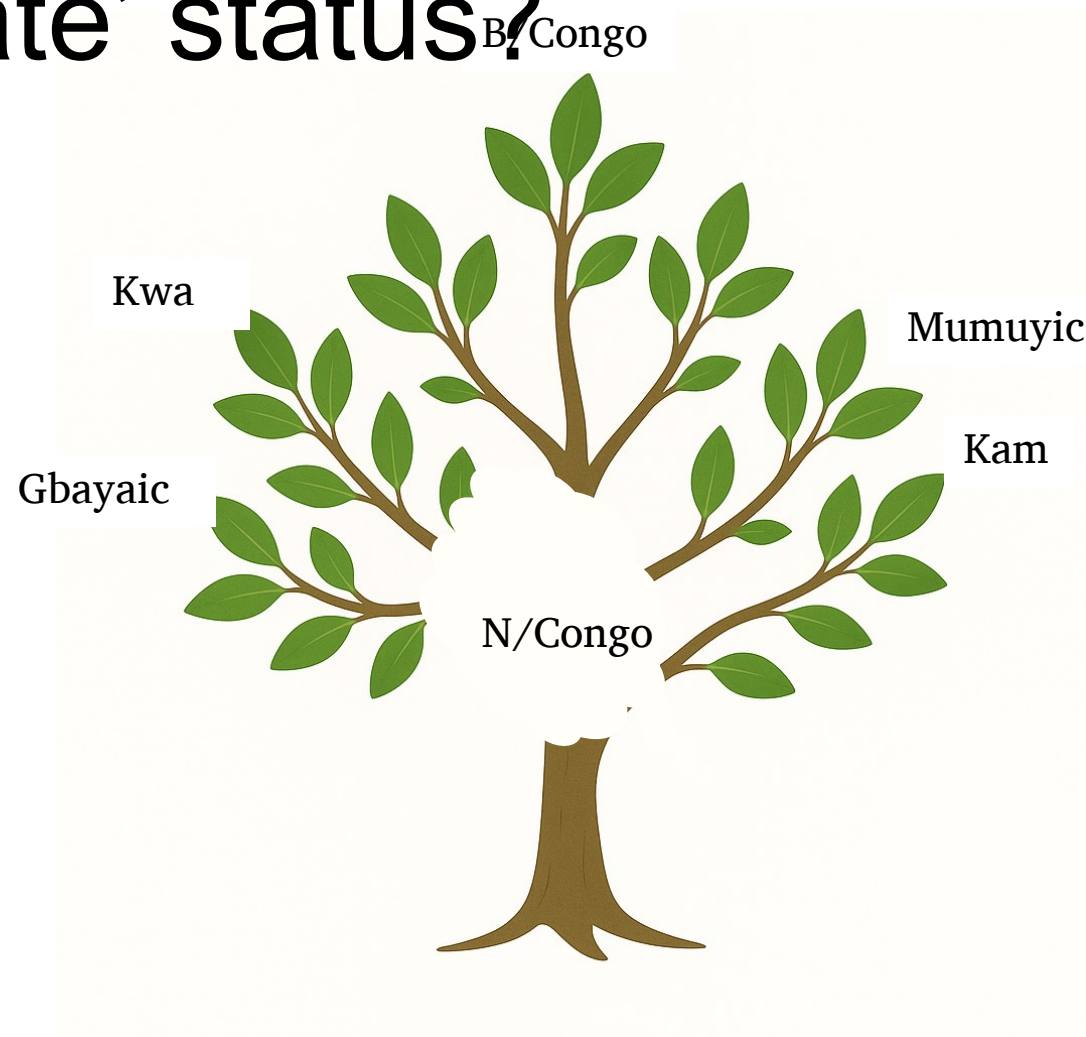
Isolation?

Next steps

Is there a case for 'isolate' status?

No clear subgroup affiliation + strong NC alignment means that Kam should be considered an **internal isolate**.

(And if it isn't, let's consider this the 0-hypothesis to encourage more discussion.)



Why is it so hard to classify Kam?

The grammar and lexicon of Kam combine early **genealogical divergence** with **centuries of intense contact** – with other Niger-Congo languages and possibly with unrelated languages.

(+ very little morphology)



What do the contact layers hide?



- More clues for **subgrouping**?
- An 'actual' **isolate** remnant of an early split-off group?

Takeaways

- Kam = Niger-Congo
- For now: Kam $\neq$ Benue-Congo, Mabilia, Mumuyic ... (yet)
- Possibly: an ungrouped lineage with layers of contact





How do we move forward?

- Expand the sample
 - Of words (e.g. other reconstructions, semantic shifts)
 - Of languages (e.g. other 'Adamawa' + sub-groups)
- We need more sub-NC reconstruction
- Teasing apart contact layers



Building G/Alkali bridge (filmed by Gambo Musa & Safiya Hamidu for Kam Documentation in May 2025)

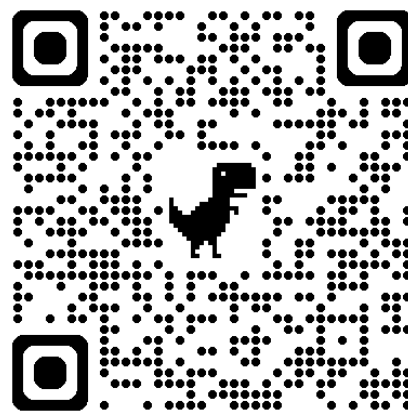


Building G/Alkali bridge (filmed by Gambo Musa & Safiya Hamidu for Kam documentation in May 2025)

Help us move forward!

Comments, comparisons,
collaboration?

jakob.lesage@gmail.com



Data!