



1. Villagers vs. Hunter-gatherers ('People of the Forest')

1.1 Looking for (synchronic) linguistic patterns

According to Bastin's *et al.* (1999) lexicostatistically based classification (*fig. 1*), Bantu can be subdivided into **four major groups of unequal size**: **MBAM-BUBI** (yellow), **NORTH-WESTERN** Bantu (green), **WESTERN** Bantu (orange) and **EASTERN** Bantu (no color). Similar patterns arise from Holden & Gray (2006; *added signs ours*) who experimentally apply methods used in phylogenetic analysis to linguistic data (*fig. 2*).

Due to the difficulty to disentangle the complex linguistic networks, no satisfactory complete sub-classification has been achieved so far for Bantu as a whole. Simple traditional dendrograms are clearly insufficient. A broad picture has to be assumed, where **Forest Bantu** (roughly A, B and C) opposes to **Savannah Bantu** (the rest). Smaller regional studies may contribute to elaborate a more and more comprehensive internal classification.

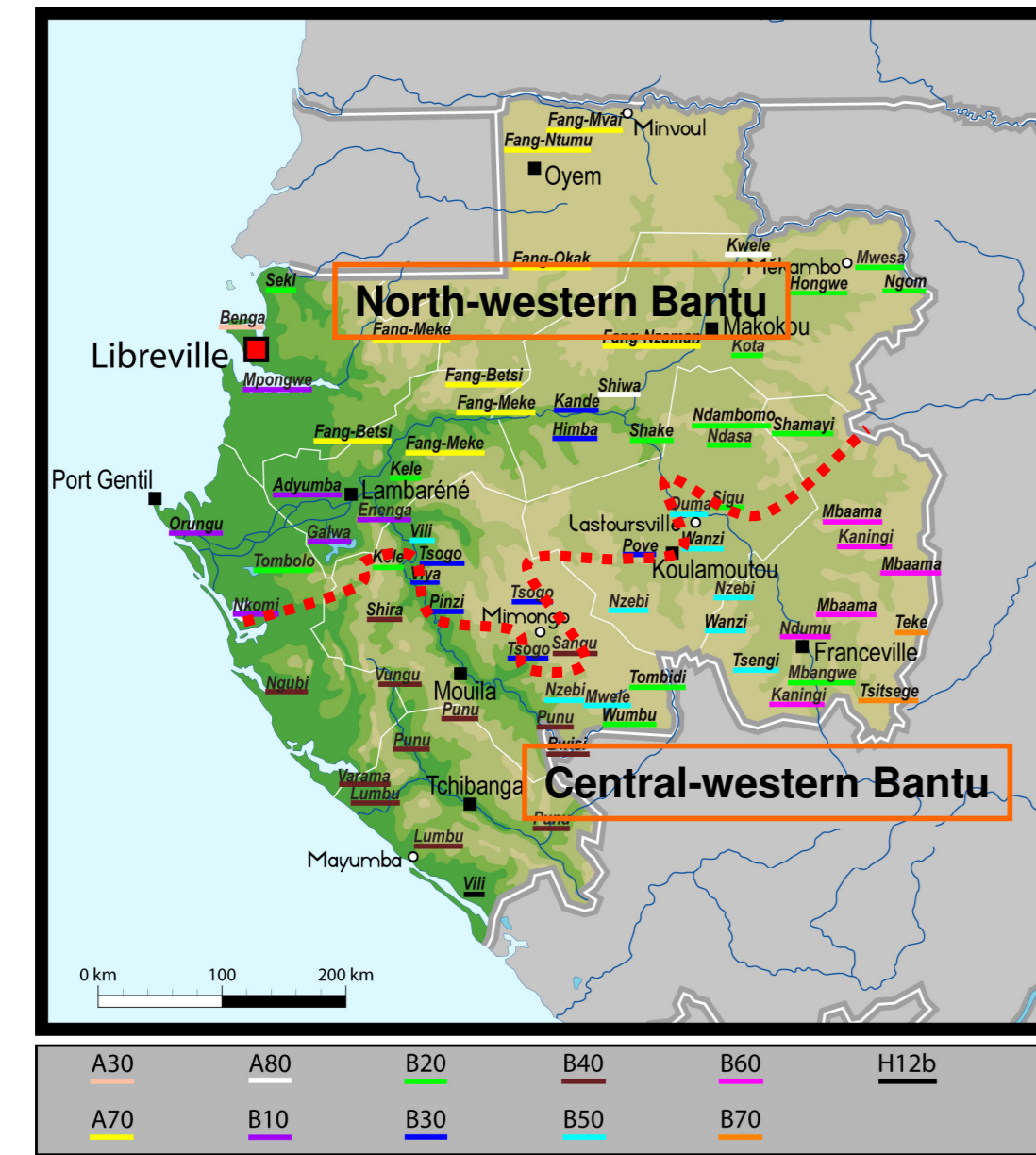


Fig. 3. Gabon area: Languages spoken by the villagers. Major linguistic barrier. Map by DDL.

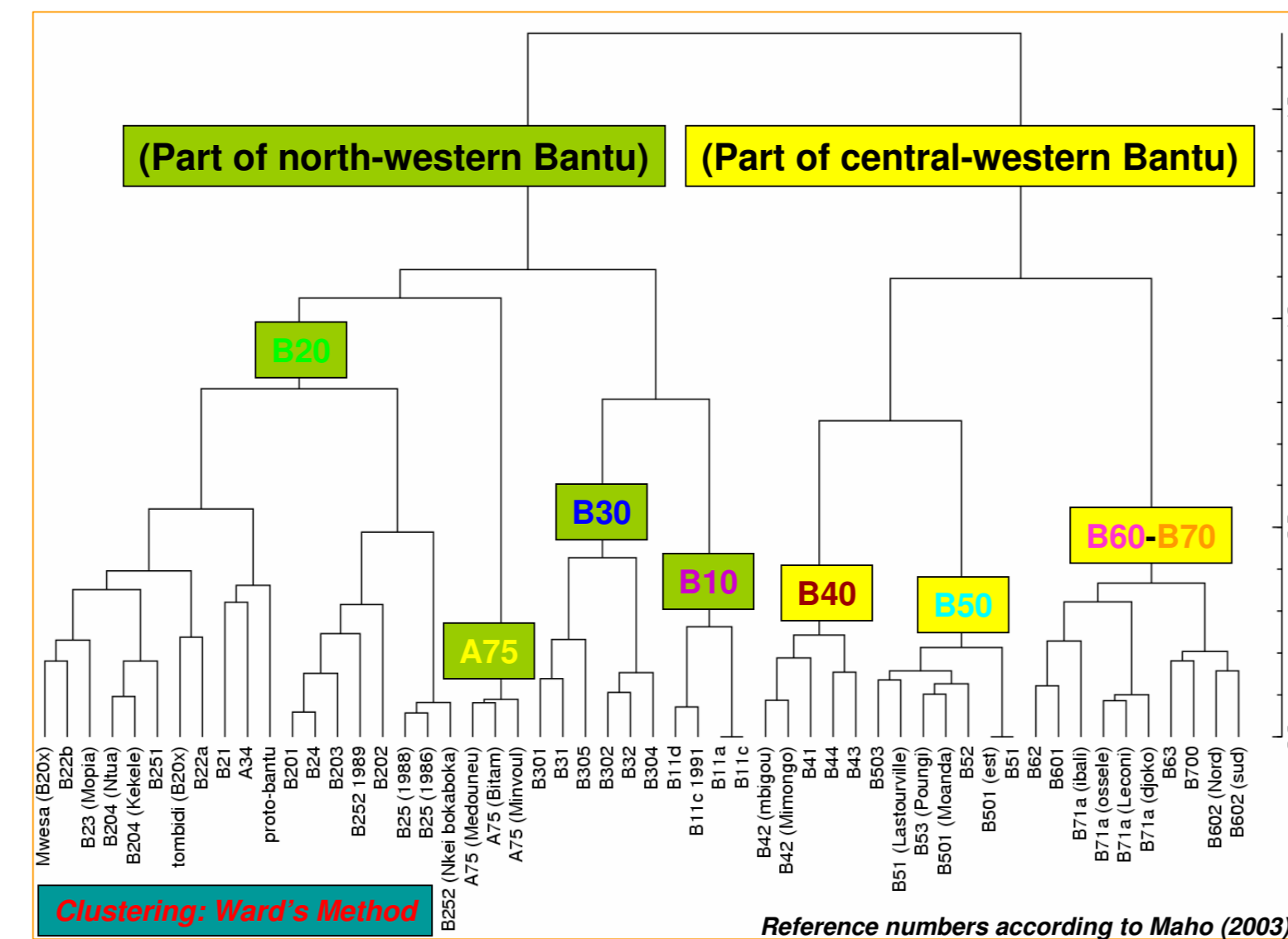


Fig. 4. Gabon area: Example of linguistic dendrogram. Manni, Van der Veen & Nerbonne (forthcoming).

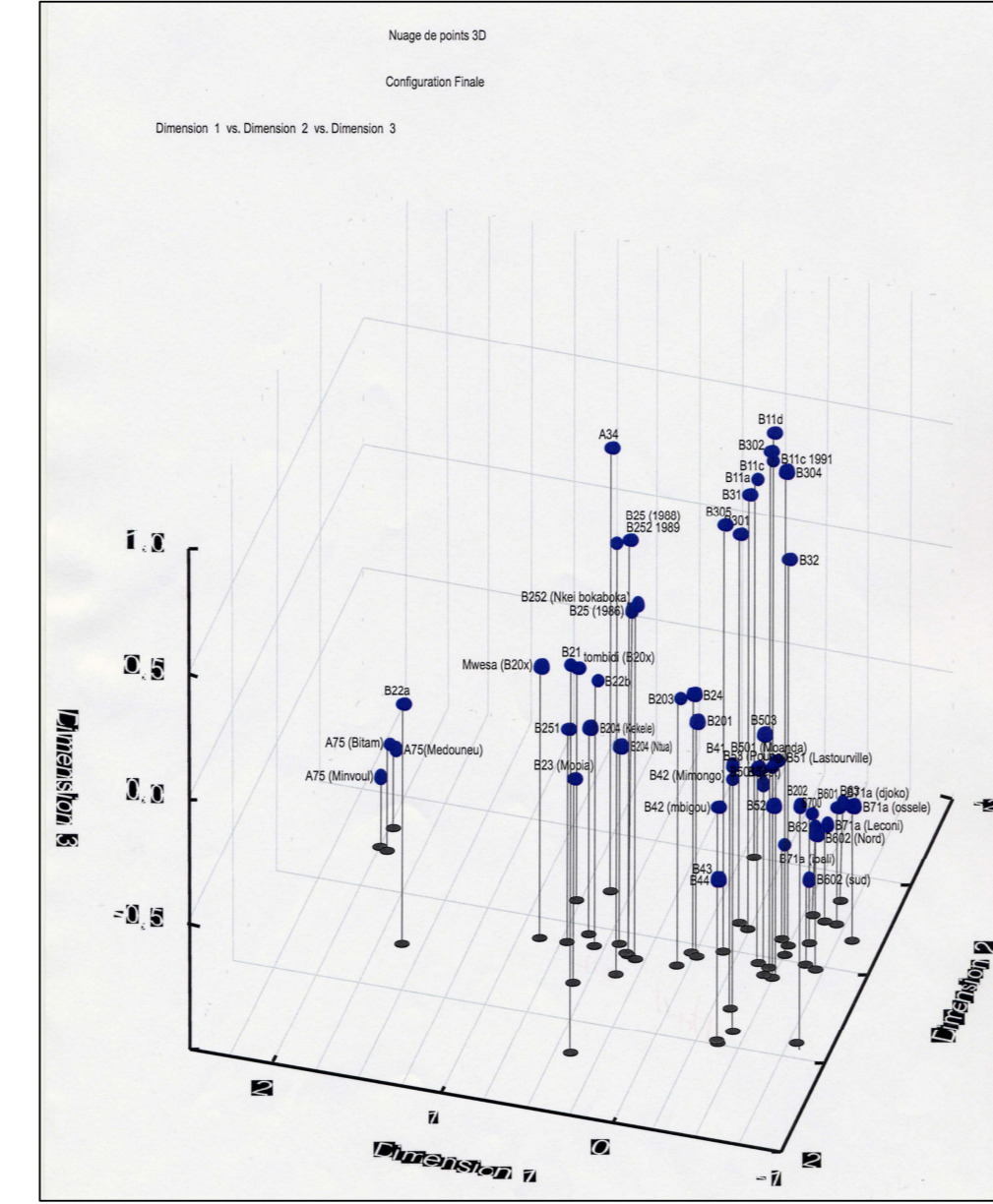


Fig. 5. Gabon area: Example of a tentative Multiple Scaling Plot (3D) for the Bantu language varieties. Manni, Van der Veen & Nerbonne (forthcoming).

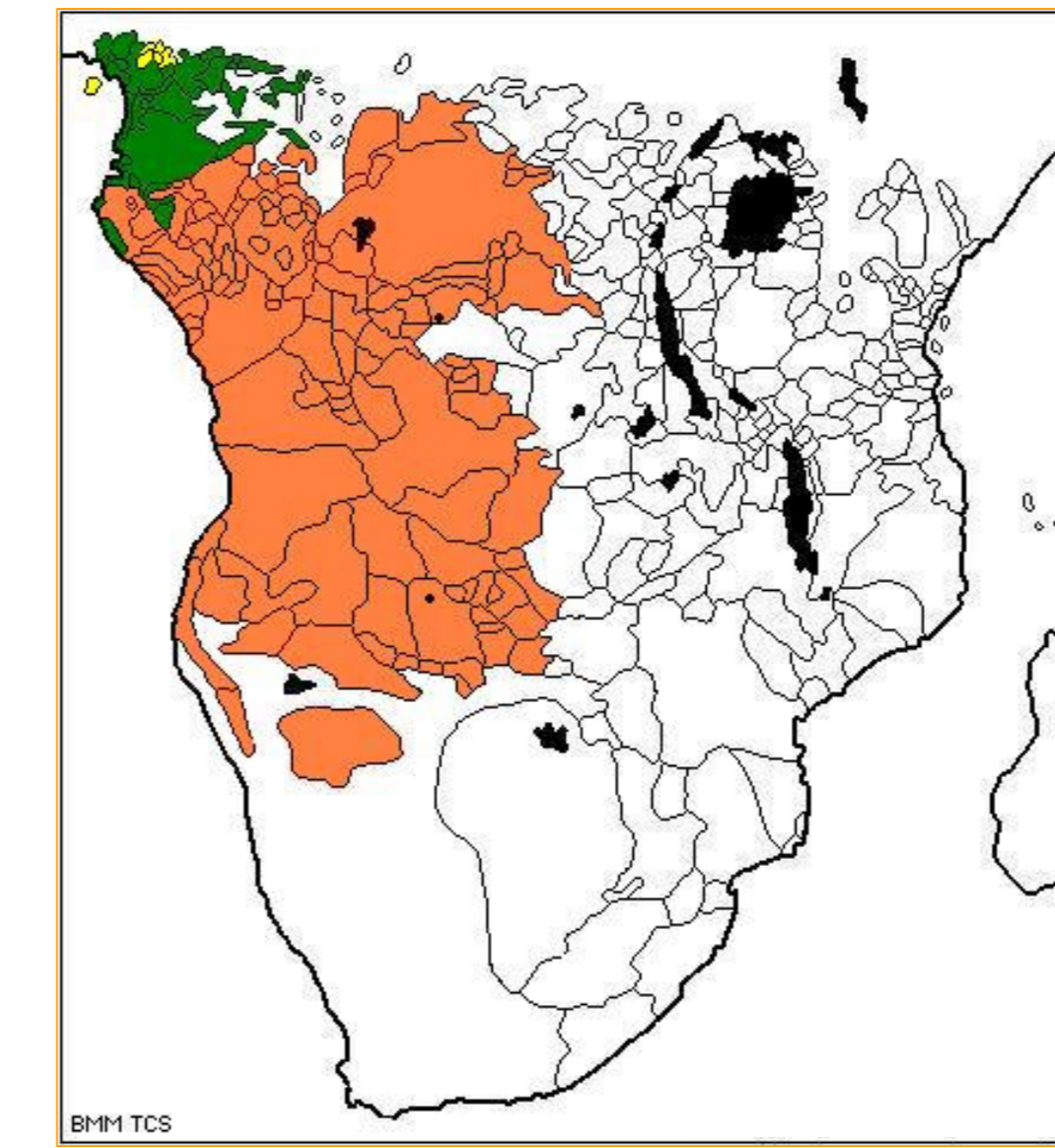


Fig. 1. Bastin & al. 1999: Major groups of Bantu. Mbam-Bubi (yellow), north-western (green), central-western (orange), eastern (no color).

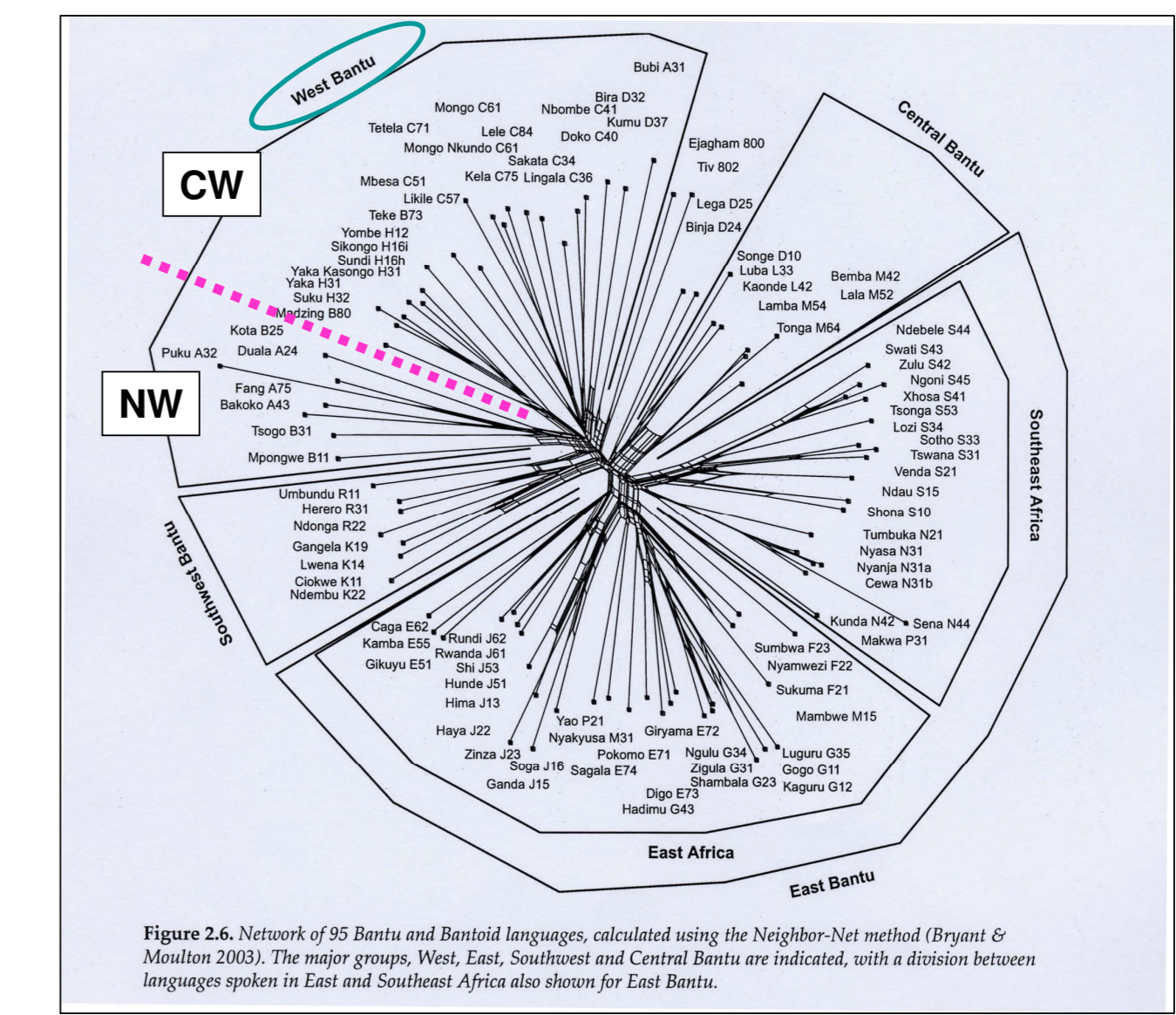


Fig. 2. Holden & Gray 2006: Major clusters of Bantu (fig. 2.6). Use of Neighbor-Net method. [Added signs ours.]

The Gabon-DRC-Congo area also attests a highly complex situation (Van der Veen 2006). **Figures 3 and 6** only show the centers of gravity for each language variety! Within this mosaic of isoglosses a **major linguistic barrier** appears between north-western and central-western Bantu (*fig. 3, 4 and 5*), in several places more or less blurred by convergence phenomena. In Gabon, north-western Bantu comprises the A zone languages (A34, A75, A83 and A85b) as well as the MYENE (B10), part of KELE (B20) and TSOGO (B30) groups. B10 and B30 form a subgroup (cf. Mougouma-Daouda & Van der Veen 2005), sharing several, mainly lexical traits: inheritance or convergence by prolonged contact? The exact status of the fairly complex and geographically shattered KELE group needs further investigation (Bastin & al. 1999: floating group). Central-western Bantu in Gabon is represented by the B40–H12a (SHIRA–Vili) and the B50–B60–B70 (NJABI–MBETE–TEKE) clusters. Respectively, these groups are clearly related to H zone and C zone languages. The proximity between B50 and the B60–B70 cluster may also be due to extensive convergence.

1.2 Working out processes capable of accounting for the nowadays linguistic patterns

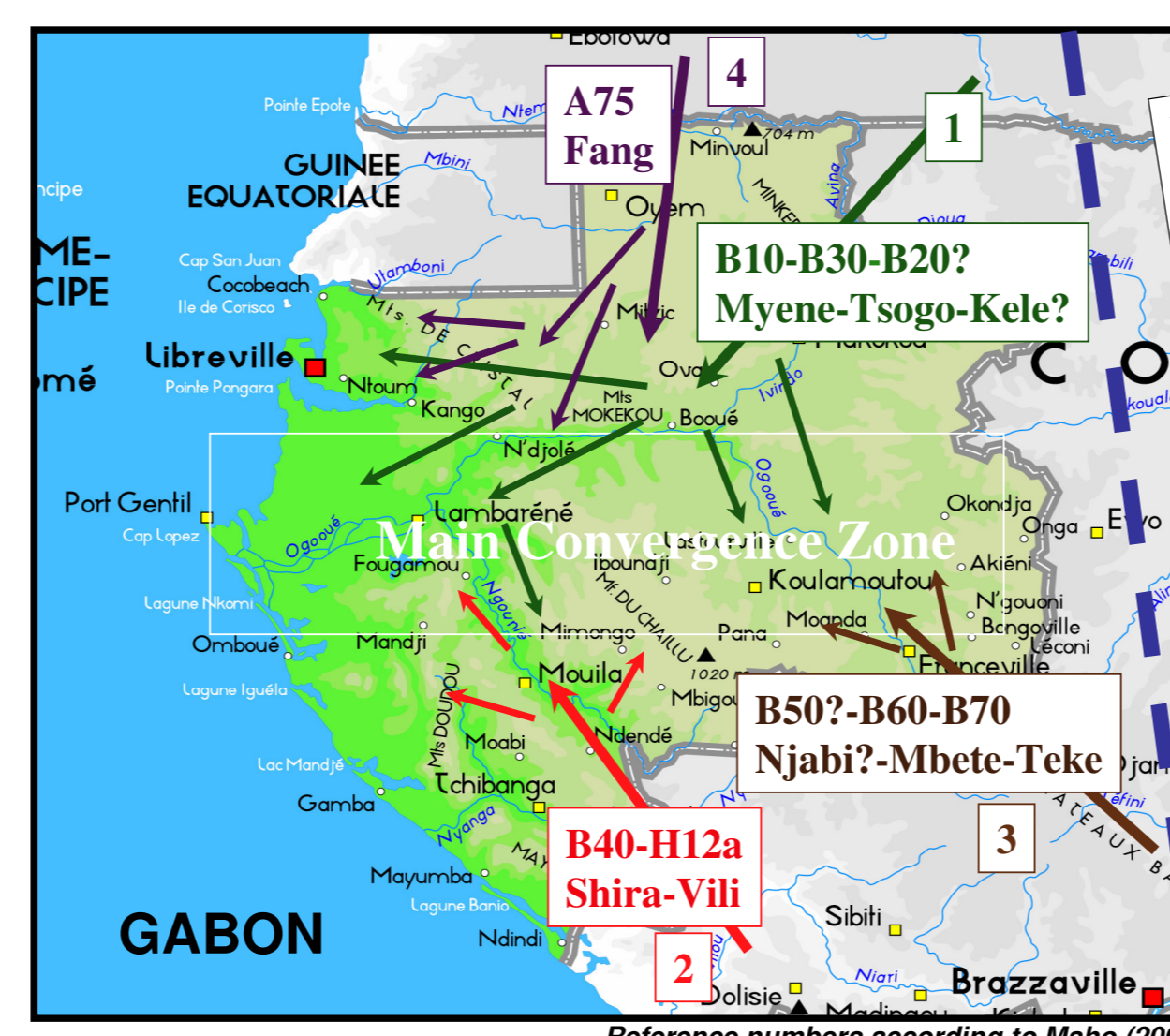


Fig. 7. Broad scenario of spread of Bantu languages within the Gabon area. Major dispersal waves and routes inferred from diachronic language studies and oral literature. Numbers indicate relative chronology.

As for Bantu-speaking Africa, western Central Africa attests the highest degree of linguistic diversity. This region is also located near the closest relatives of Bantu. Therefore, scholars nowadays agree the **Bantu homeland** was located in the northwestern part of this area [i.e. the Bamenda Highlands of Cameroon, in the vicinity of Mount Cameroon]. The expansion must have been gradual and wave-like, following an initial period of dialectal fragmentation. Glottochronology suggests a relative time depth of some 5,000 years for the beginning of the diversification process. However, recent evidence from archeology rather pleads for an approximate time depth of 4,000 years. The north-western languages are nowadays considered to be the descendants of the earliest spit-offs from the Bantu "tree". Western Central Africa must have been the scene of the gradual spread of Bantu, in particular the **western, southbound expansion**. The present, often extremely complex, linguistic situations (multilingual continua) can be accounted for by gradual fragmentation and extensive linguistic convergence (admixture) due to prolonged contact and multilingualism.

Fig. 7 proposes a broad and necessarily oversimplified **scenario** for the Gabon area, based on extensive and careful study of both the distribution of linguistic traits within the area and oral literature, and also on archeological data and/or the limited available historical data. Data suggest the area was occupied by **successive waves of Bantu-speakers coming from the north, the south and the east**. Convergence by contact seems widespread, especially in the center. [Probably, several languages and/or populations have disappeared in the course of time. The extent of language replacement may have been considerable, but remains to be determined more precisely.]

The issue concerning the **primitive language(s) of the hunter-gatherers communities** is currently being examined: Niger-Congo or non Niger-Congo? [Archeological evidence shows that when the Neolithic villagers and farmers (most probably Bantu-speakers) arrived in the area, the hunter-gatherer populations had already been *in situ* for a long time. There are relatively few signs of (genetic) admixture between the two types of populations that seem to have been living in peaceful coexistence for more than 2 millennia at least. Exchanges have been mainly economic.]

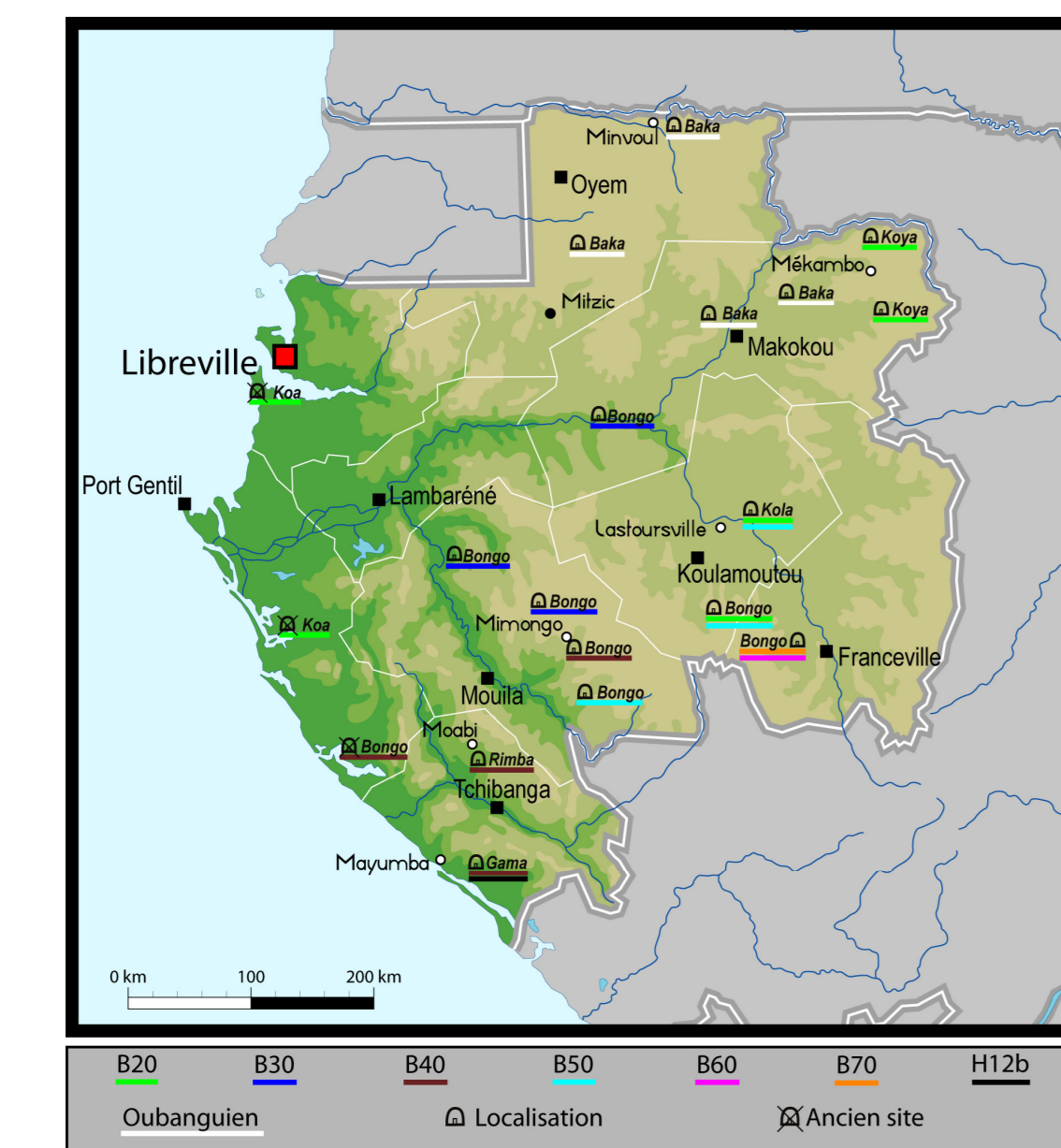


Fig. 6. Gabon area: Languages spoken by the hunter-gatherers communities.

In western Central Africa, the **villagers**, who practise some rudimentary form of agriculturalism, all speak Bantu language varieties (*fig. 3*) However, the linguistic situation of the small groups of nomadic or semi-nomadic **hunter-gatherers** — traditionally called "Pygmies"— is more heterogeneous (*fig. 6*).

Three different linguistic situations (or strategies) can be distinguished as for the 'People of the Forest' (cf. Mayer 1987):

- (1) Most groups of hunter-gatherers have adopted a nearby Bantu language and (presumably) abandoned their earlier language (language swift). This strategy appears to be the most common and may well be the price to pay in order to preserve their cultural identity. Sometimes these non-villagers varieties preserve archaic traits no longer found in the neighboring language(s).
- (2) Some groups of semi-nomads use mixed Bantu language varieties made up of elements taken from several surrounding Bantu languages.
- (3) Finally, several groups of hunter-gatherers speak non-Bantu languages, which may have been adopted at some earlier stage or not. (E.g. in Gabon, the Bakao speak Baka, an Ubanguian language.)

2. The Fang enigma: the origin of Fang

The Fang expansion is an example of a fairly well documented **demographic expansion** within the Cameroon-Gabon area. The precise geographic origin of this migration is still a matter of debate (Adamaoua Plateaux in the north of Cameroon?). Some 1000 YBP, a group of Bantu-speakers left the Yaunde region (most probably not the starting point of this migration) moving southwards. Part of them, the Proto-Fang, also invaded the Gabon area. Their wave-like expansion, perhaps triggered or catalyzed by incessant invasions by non-Bantu speakers arriving from more northern regions (Dja, Ivindo, Woleu-Ntem), intensified during the 17th century A.D. and came to an end only in the first half of the last century. The slave trade as well as the increase of economic exchange must have motivated, at least partially, the final stage of the expansion.

Fang is an **A zone language** (A75; A70 FANG-BULU cluster) spoken in Cameroon and most of northern Gabon. As for Gabon, it comprises northern and southern dialects, as well as some intermediate varieties (Medjo Mvé, 1997). In this area, Fang (as a dominant language) has an increasing impact on the surrounding languages and is currently replacing several of them (e.g. the Shiwa language (A83) spoken by the Makina). It is spoken by almost 30 percent of the Gabonese population.

A theory elaborated by Rev. Henri Trilles (1912a/b, 1931) in the early 20th century claims an **Egyptian origin** for the Fang population, its language and its culture, on the basis of aspects of part of its oral tradition (the 'Mvet') and several arguments referring to linguistic, cultural and physical (i.e. phenotypical) traits. According to the adherents of this theory, the **plateaux of Bahr-el-Ghazal** (Upper-Nile; Kenya/Uganda/Sudan area) should be regarded as the most probable cradle of the ancestral community of Fang. Some have even claimed that the ancestors of the (anthropophagic?) Fang "Conquerors" were a group of Germanic individuals living in Africa. This theory, which is built on a series of speculative and often random parallels drawn by 19th century explorers (Paul du Chaillu, Marquis de Compiegne), anthropologists and Christian missionaries, and suffers from serious methodological and theoretical weaknesses, has become very popular, especially among Black African scholars, but also amongst non-scholars: in Gabon, it is a commonly shared belief that the Fang, as well as their language, are not Bantu. The theory often takes a **strong ideological dimension** as it accuses (white) Egyptologists of falsifying ancient History ("Why should the white man have all the good History?"). Cheikh Anta Diop (1979, 1981, 1993) and Théophile Obenga (1985, 1993) are the main representatives of this school of thought. (Also see Ropivia 1981 and Biyogo 2000, 2002.)

Similar claims have been made for **other Bantu-speaking populations** (cf. Basaá, A43a, Mboshi C25). As for the linguistic aspect, the theory in its strongest version claims that all Black African languages descend from the ancient Egyptian, whereas according to a weaker version, only a few of them actually do, Fang being one of these languages.

Guthrie (1948, 1967-71), Hombert & al. (1989) and, more recently, Medjo Mvé (1997) have unambiguously shown that the Fang dialect cluster, in spite of several rather unusual features at the surface (e.g. 8V + 3 diphthongs, labiovelars, predominantly closed syllables, palatal nasals in word-final position), presents **all the traits of a regular Bantu language**. There is absolutely no evidence of a non-Bantu substratum. Fang lexicon can be directly and straightforwardly related to the Proto-Bantu reconstructions (Guthrie 1967-71), through regular sound correspondences (vowels, consonants, tones). The language also possesses a regular Bantu noun class system, a regular Bantu verb system, etc. (Hombert & al. 1989; Medjo Mvé 1997; Mba-Nkoghe 2001). The alleged structural parallels (essentially, sound correspondences) between ancient Egyptian and Black African languages such as Fang and Basaá have no scientific basis at all. They are merely **non systematic, randomly chosen, chance similarities**. Moreover, typological similarities do not prove affiliation.

Nowadays, many outstanding **cultural anthropologists** (e.g. Bekombo-Priso & Laburthe-Tolra 1981) also consider the "Out-of-Egypt" theory to be untenable. None of the alleged cultural traits can be considered to be specifically (ancient) Egyptian or Hamitic. Analysis of the mtDNA variation in Gabonese and Cameroonian populations does not seem to support a non-Bantu origin for Fang either. Some claim the Fang are not a unified population, but some kind of confederation.

Therefore, the "Out-of-Egypt" theory can so far only be qualified as the **"Egyptian dream"**. Nevertheless, it is a fascinating example of how a **modern founder myth** has come to life. So consider (cf. Bernault 2003) this myth was created and used by the French in order to justify their colonialist policy.

For a **substantial critical overview** of the linguistic, anthropological and historical weaknesses of this theory, see Mougouma-Daouda (2005). This major publication also presents evidence drawn from the study of cultural lexicon related to the realms of flora and fauna.