

At a Crossroads of Bantu Expansions

The Language and Settlement History of the
Eastern Congo Basin Revisited

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# The Eastern Congo Basin: A Multilingualistic and Multi- cultural Crossroads



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Map from Jacky Maniacky, RMCA

“Boa”

“C50”

“Forest  
Central”

“Lebonya”

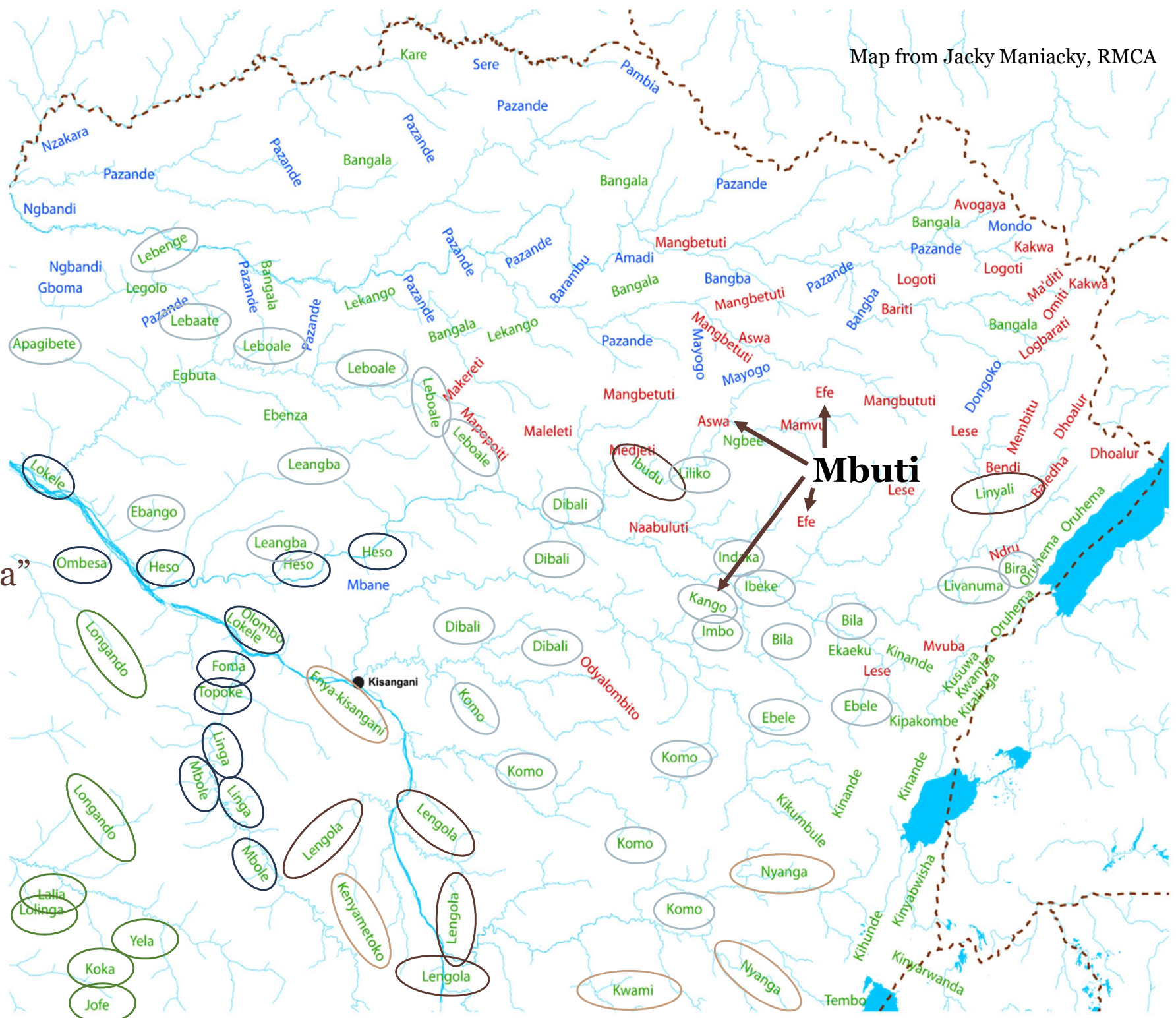
“Congo  
Basin”

Language  
families:

Ubangi

Central-  
Sudanic

Bantu





# Previous Bantu Classifications and Migration Scenarios



# Bantu Classifications: A History

20th century: 50 years at Tervuren, historical interpretations in the USA

- Earliest Bantu subclassifications: Johnston, Greenberg, Guthrie
- Tervuren:
  - start of lexicostatistical work from 1956 (Meeussen, Coupez, Vansina)
  - Bastin 1979: grammatical features
  - Bastin, Coupez & de Halleux 1983: preliminary lexicostatistical study
  - Bastin et al. 1999: major lexicostatistical work⇒ historical interpretations in Vansina 1990 and 1995
- McMaster 1988: independent lexicostatistical classification of the languages of the « lower Uele region »

# Bantu Classifications: A History

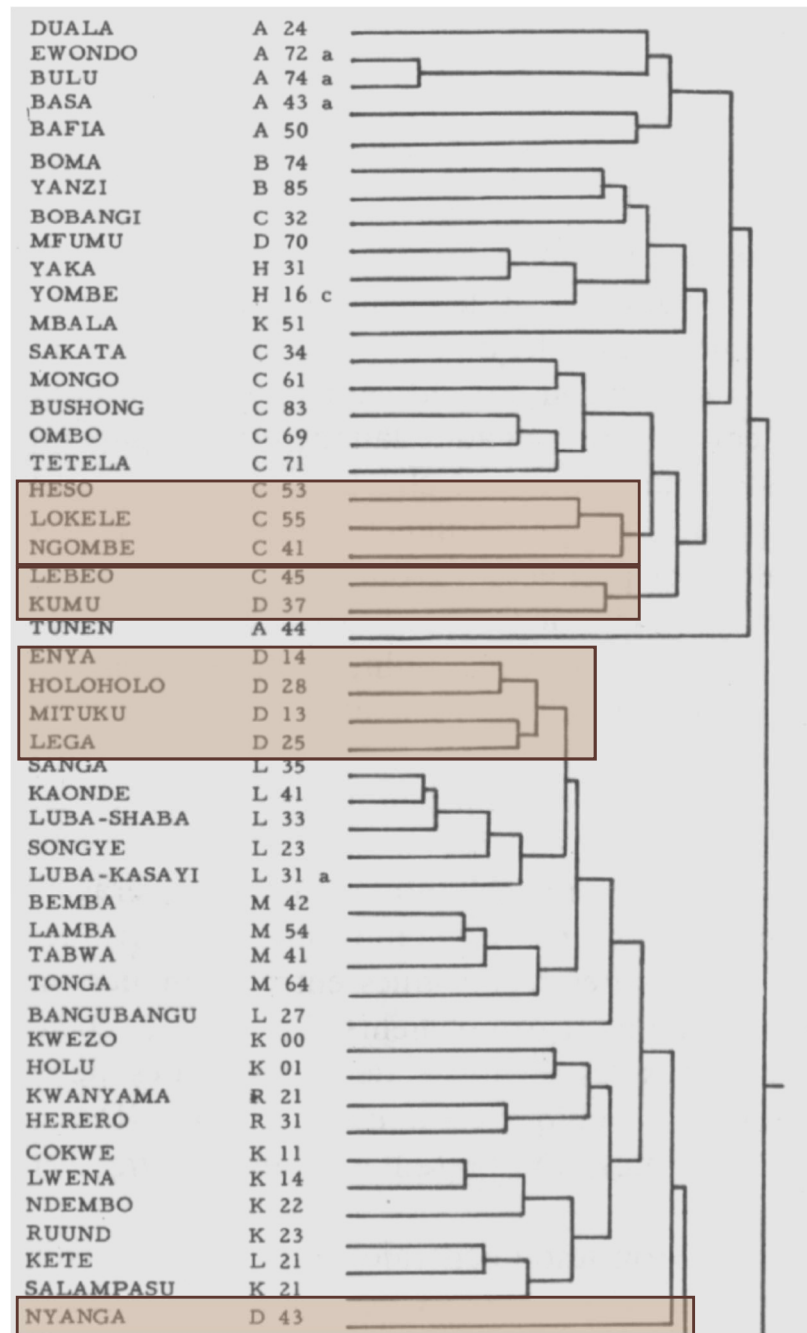
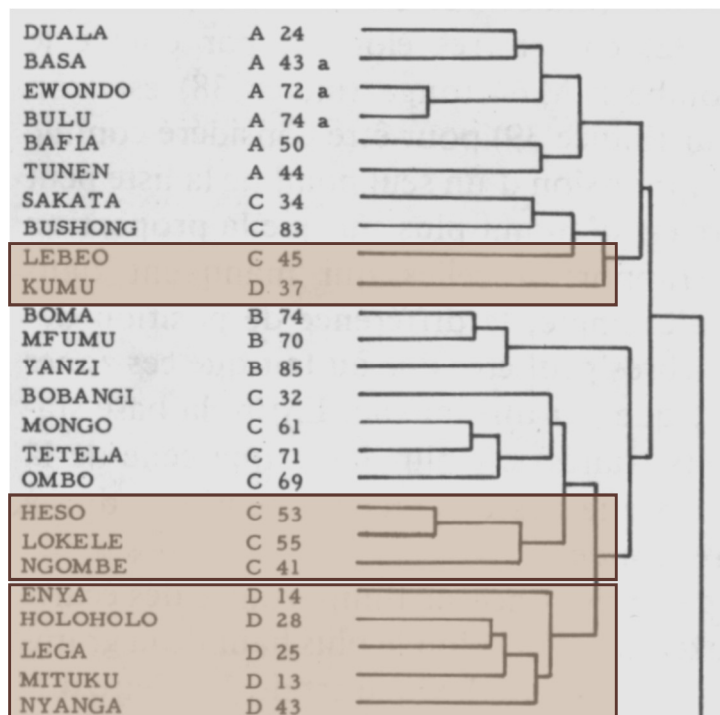
21st century: various computer models, new insights?

- 2003: Nurse & Philippson: phonological and morphological features, combined and compared to existing classifications
- Different reinterpretations of the data from Bastin *et al.* (e.g. Ehret 2001), mostly phylogenetic models (e.g. Rexova *et al.* 2006)
- 2015: Grollemund *et al.* => second/new main reference work
- 2018: Whiteley *et al.*, basic vocabulary as sound sequences

# Tervuren: Bastin *et al.* 1979

Opposing the lexical and grammatical classification

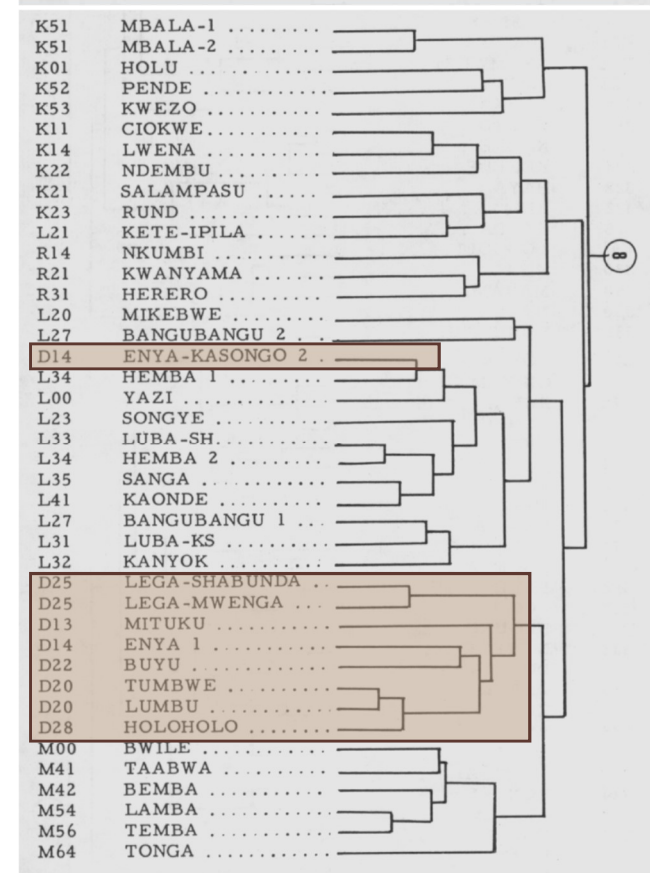
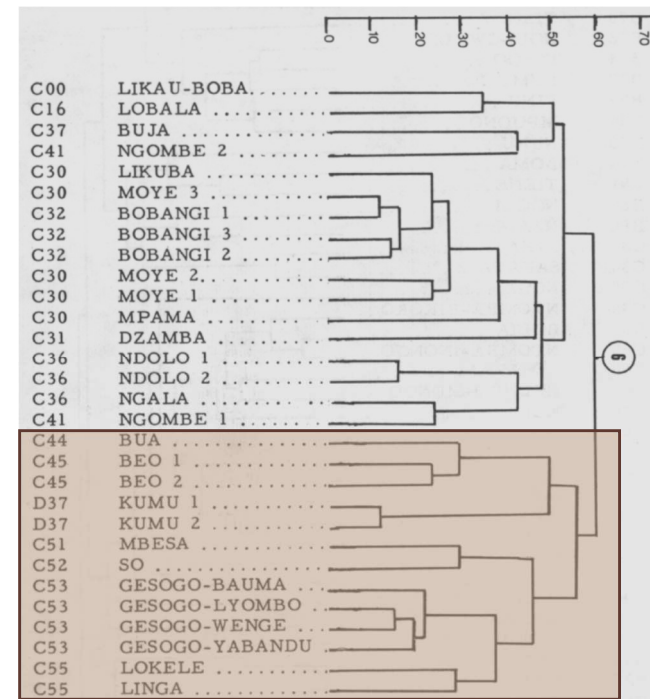
A distinct  
 northwestern  
 group (ABC)  
 with D and H as  
 transition zones,  
 hence Forest-  
 Savanna.  
 Zone D shares  
 morphological  
 features with C  
 languages, which  
 may indicate a  
 longer period of  
 cohabitation





# Bastin, Coupez & de Halleux 1983

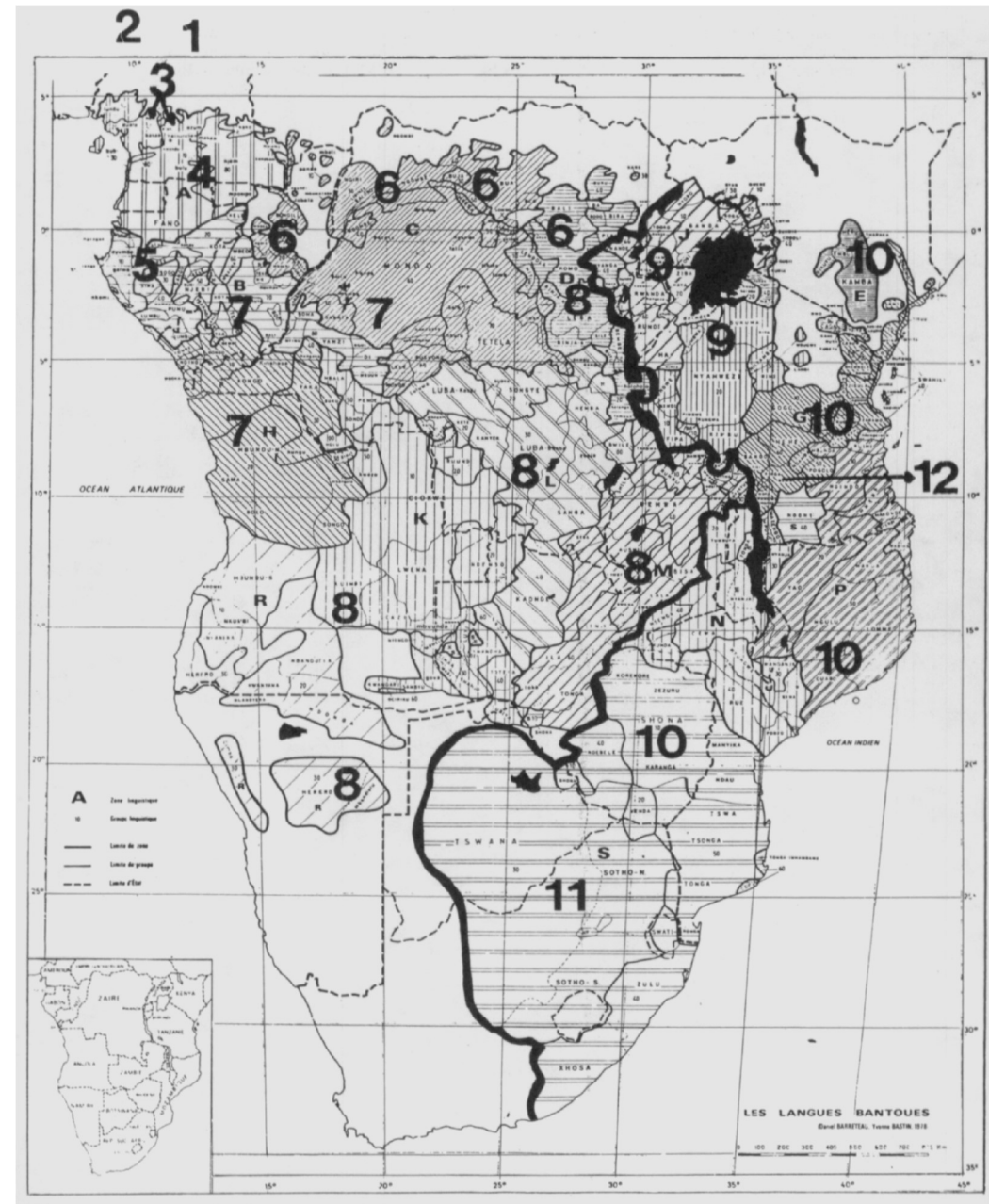
Buan and “Soan” as a subgroup of  
 “Northern Zaire”, Ngombe with  
 C30 languages, firm “Forest  
 Central” subgroup of East Bantu





# Bastin, Coupez & de Halleux 1983: map

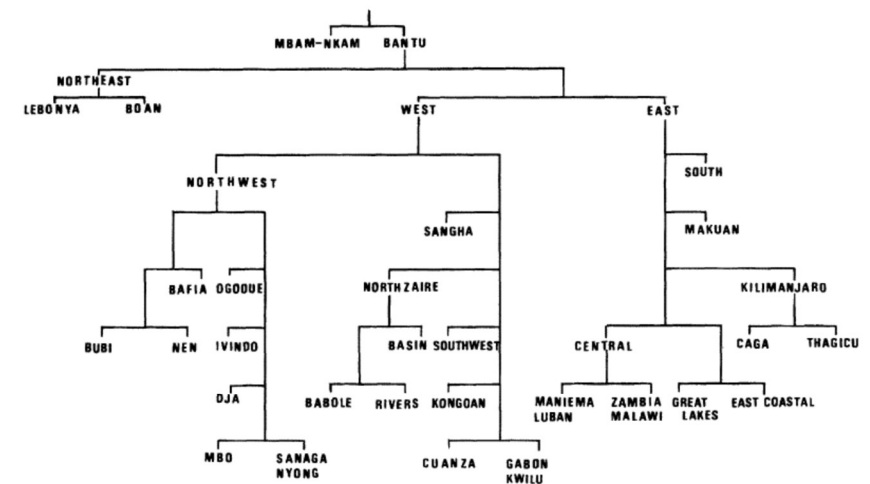
Following the Congo River bend



# Bastin, Coupez & Mann 1999, Vansina 1995

“The Tervuren Classification”, a  
lexicostatistical study based on 92  
glosses in 542 lects

The “Tervuren Classification” forwards an early  
split between peripheral, Northwest, West and East.  
“Boan” and “Lebonya” are considered peripheral.  
Still, two trees have D12 and/or Lebonya with East  
Bantu and one tree groups Boan with West Bantu.  
Relevant West-Bantu subgroups are Congo Rivers  
(C3 – some C4) and Congo Basin (C5-C9). All  
relevant East-Bantu languages belong to the Central  
subgroup, but in two trees some are grouped with  
Lakes.



## I The main subdivisions of Bantu

- 1 Lebonya (Lengola, Bodo, Nyali)
- 2 Boan
- 3 Buneya (Bubi, Nen, Yambasan)
- 4 North-west [NW]
- 5 West [W]: subdivided into W1–W4
  - W1 – Sangha
  - W2 – South-west
  - W3 – North Zaire: (a) Inner Basin; (b) Rivers
  - W4 – West Coastal (Kongoan, Congo, Kwilu)
- 6 East [E]: subdivided into E1–E6
  - E1 – South
  - E2 – South-east
  - E3 – Kilimanjaro: (a) Cagan; (b) Thagicu
  - E4 – Central
  - E5 – Great Lakes
  - E6 – East Coastal

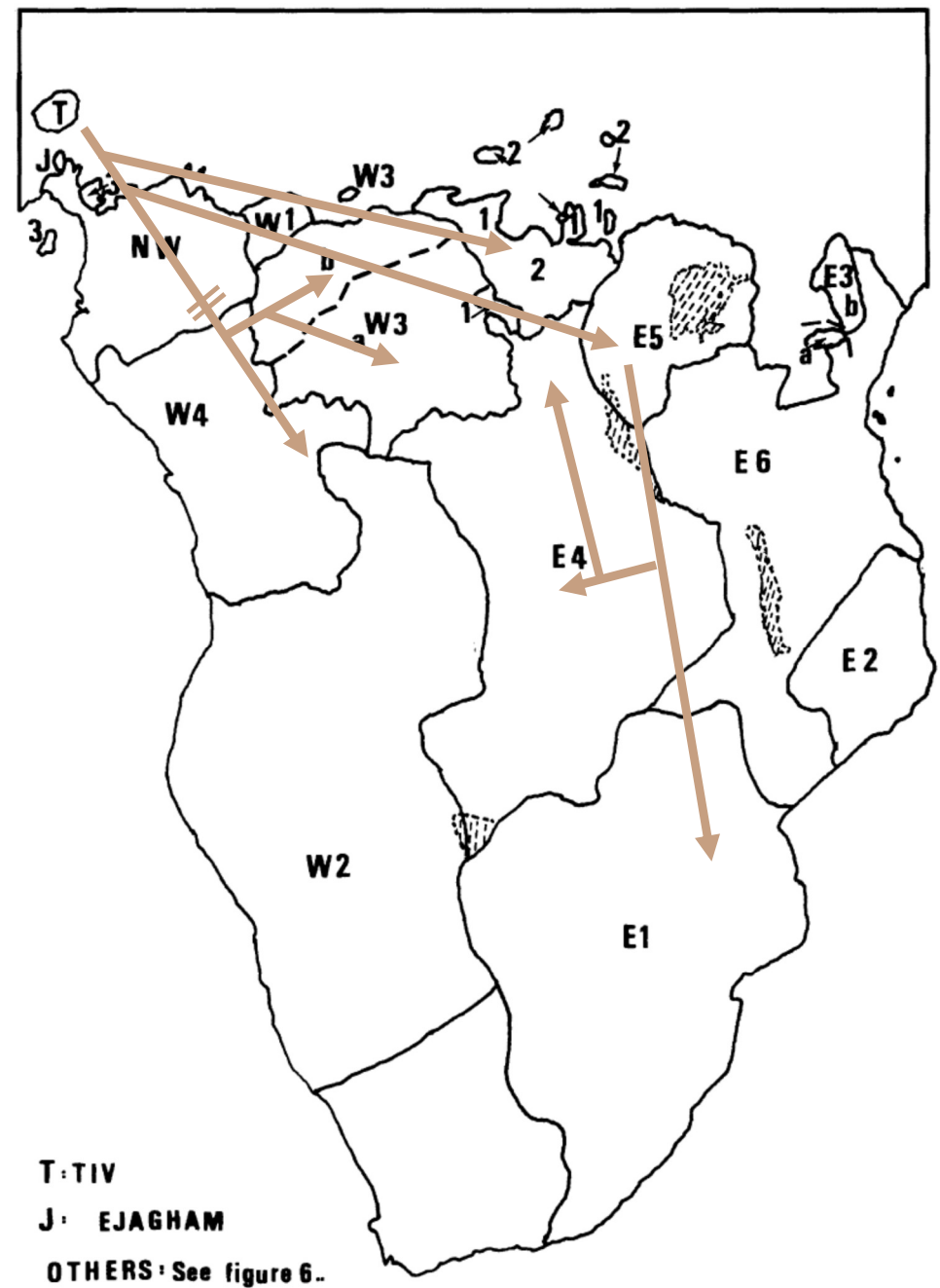
*Note:* This nomenclature is provisional. A commonly accepted standard remains to be developed.

## II Correspondences between 1-E6 and Bantu zones (Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*, and adjusted by the Tervuren group)

- 1 D12 (Lengola), D33 (Nyali), D35 (Bodo)
- 2 C42–45 (Boa group), D32 (Bira), D23 (Komo)
- 3 A31 (Bubi), A44 (Nen), A60 (Yambasan) and in some trees A50
- 4 A minus preceding, B10–B30; in some trees some B20 languages also in W4
- 5 W1 – No agreement on languages: some trees have C11 (Ngondi) – C12 (Pande), others C10 (Babole), C18 (Aka). Some of the latter place (C10, C18 in North Bantu
  - W2 – K and R, L10, L22, L50, H41 but not K41, K42
  - W3a – C33–C35, C50–C80, B82
  - W3b – C31, C32, C36, C37, C41, C42; in some trees C11, C12
  - W4 – B40–80, H, except for H41
- 6 E1 – S
  - E2 – P30
  - E3a – E60 (Chaga)
  - E3b – E50 (Thagicu)
  - E4 – D12–14, D20, L, M, K41, K42, M31 excepted; in some trees D25 (Lega) excepted; in some trees also N and D43
  - E5 – Tervuren’s J; Guthrie’s D40–D60, E10–E40. In some trees also D25; in others D43 excepted
  - E6 – E70, F, G, P10, P20, M31; in some trees N

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# Bastin, Coupez & Mann 1999, Vansina 1995: map

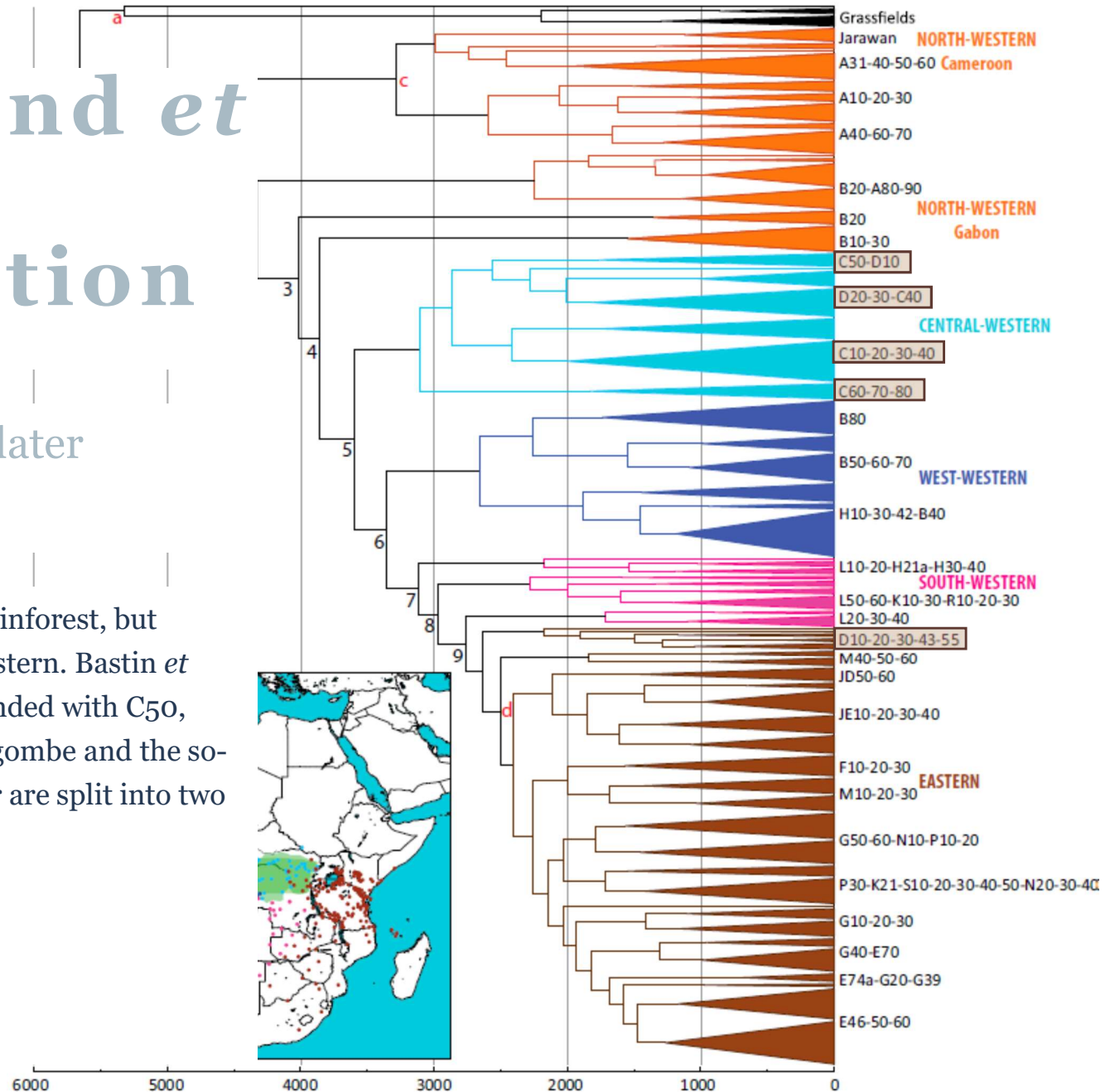




# Grollemund *et al.* 2015: classification

Lebonya and Boan as later branches

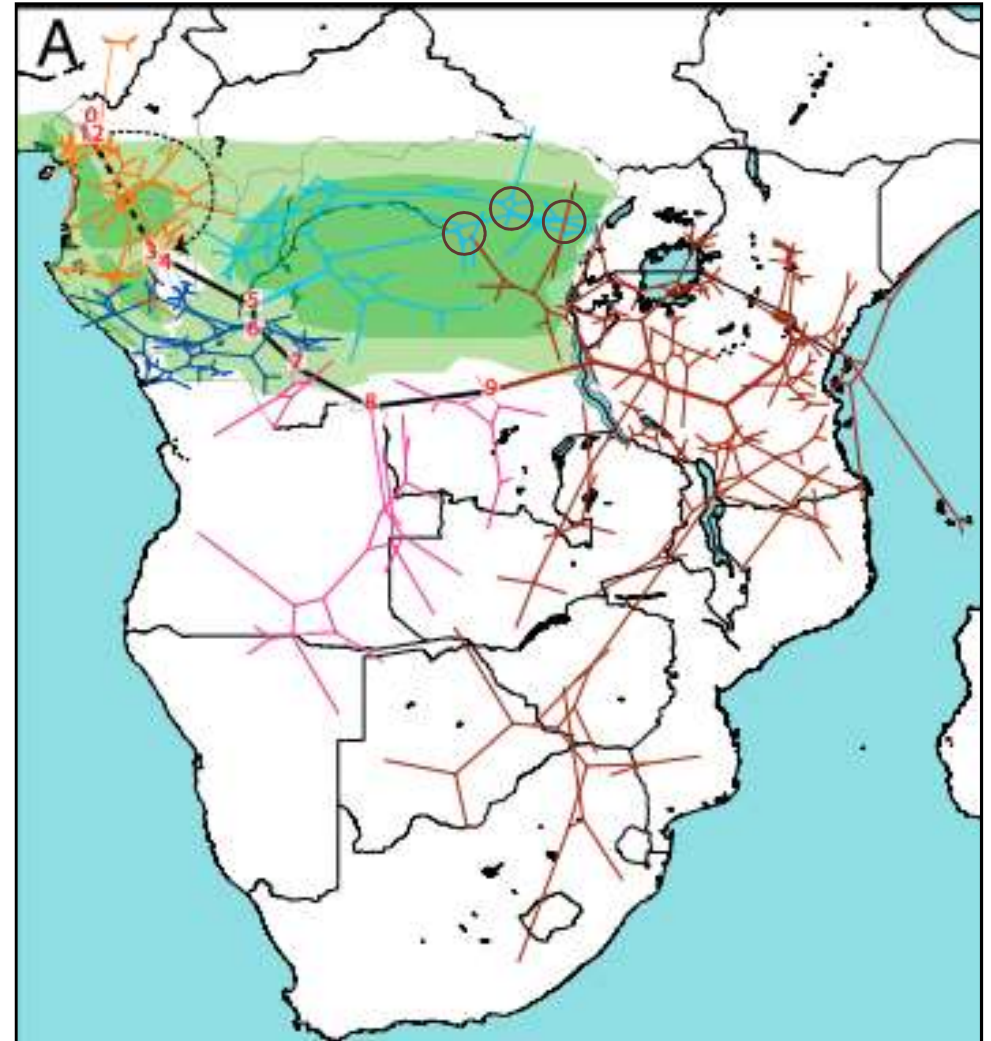
No peripheral languages in the rainforest, but instead subgroups of Central-Western. Bastin *et al.*'s Lebonya languages are expanded with C50, and are grouped together with Ngombe and the so-called Boan languages. The latter are split into two groups.



# Grollemund *et al.* 2015: map

Central-West meets East in the  
rainforest

Even though such is feasible, Grollemund *et al.* do not link the migration routes in the Congo Basin to rivers. The lines converge in the eastern Congo Basin at several places, and indicate contact between different subgroups of Central-Western as well as with Eastern Bantu languages. The map would have benefited from placing directions on the routes, since some may have returned from East to West





# More migrations





# Central-Sudanic and Ubangi

Who arrived first in the eastern Congo Basin, and what happened next?

## Central-Sudanic:

- Central-Sudanic languages are believed to have been present in the region by the time Bantuphone peoples arrived, McMaster (1988) dates this encounter to the mid-first millennium BC

## Ubangi:

- main reference is to Bouquiaux & Thomas 1980: expansion eastward north of the rainforest before Bantu Expansion (3500 – 4000 BP), which broke up Central Sudanic
- McMaster dates first encounters Boan-Ubangi to the turn of the era, when a subgroup of Boans moved towards the Bomokandi River

# Recent migrations and language shift

Language shift appears to characterize the eastern Congo Basin

- Bawenza (subgroup of Bua, hence *Boan*) were recorded early in the colonial era to be of Makere (*Central Sudanic*) origin, but had shifted by then
- Ngbele: still *Boan* in early colonial times, Mangbetu (*Central Sudanic*) by 1980s
- some western Bua (*Boan*) originally spoke Ngbandi (*Ubangi*)
- Ngenda: spoke a *Boan* language in the beginning of the colonial period but shifted to Zande (*Ubangi*) by the 1980s
- ...

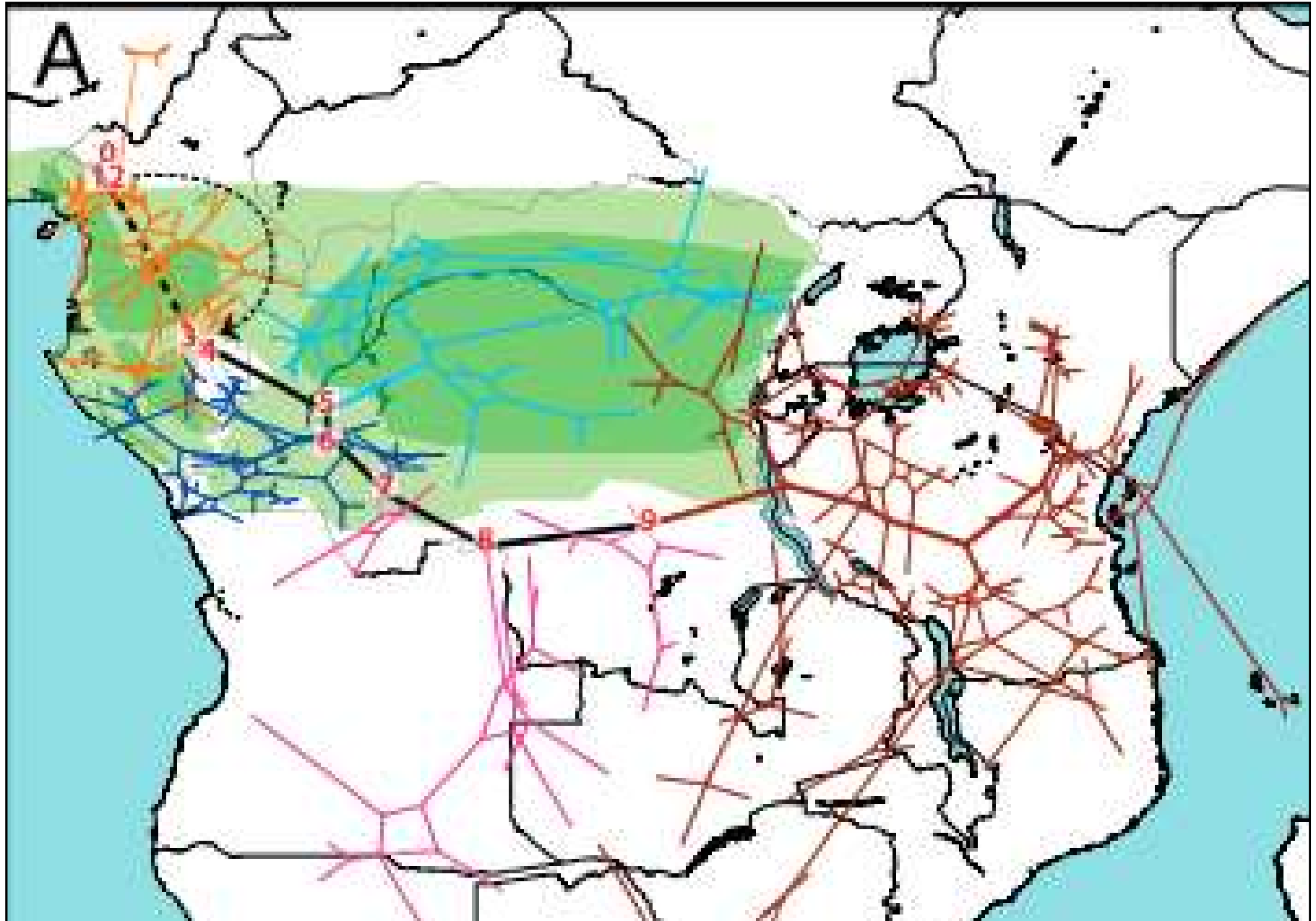
(McMaster 1988:42-43)

# The River Hypothesis



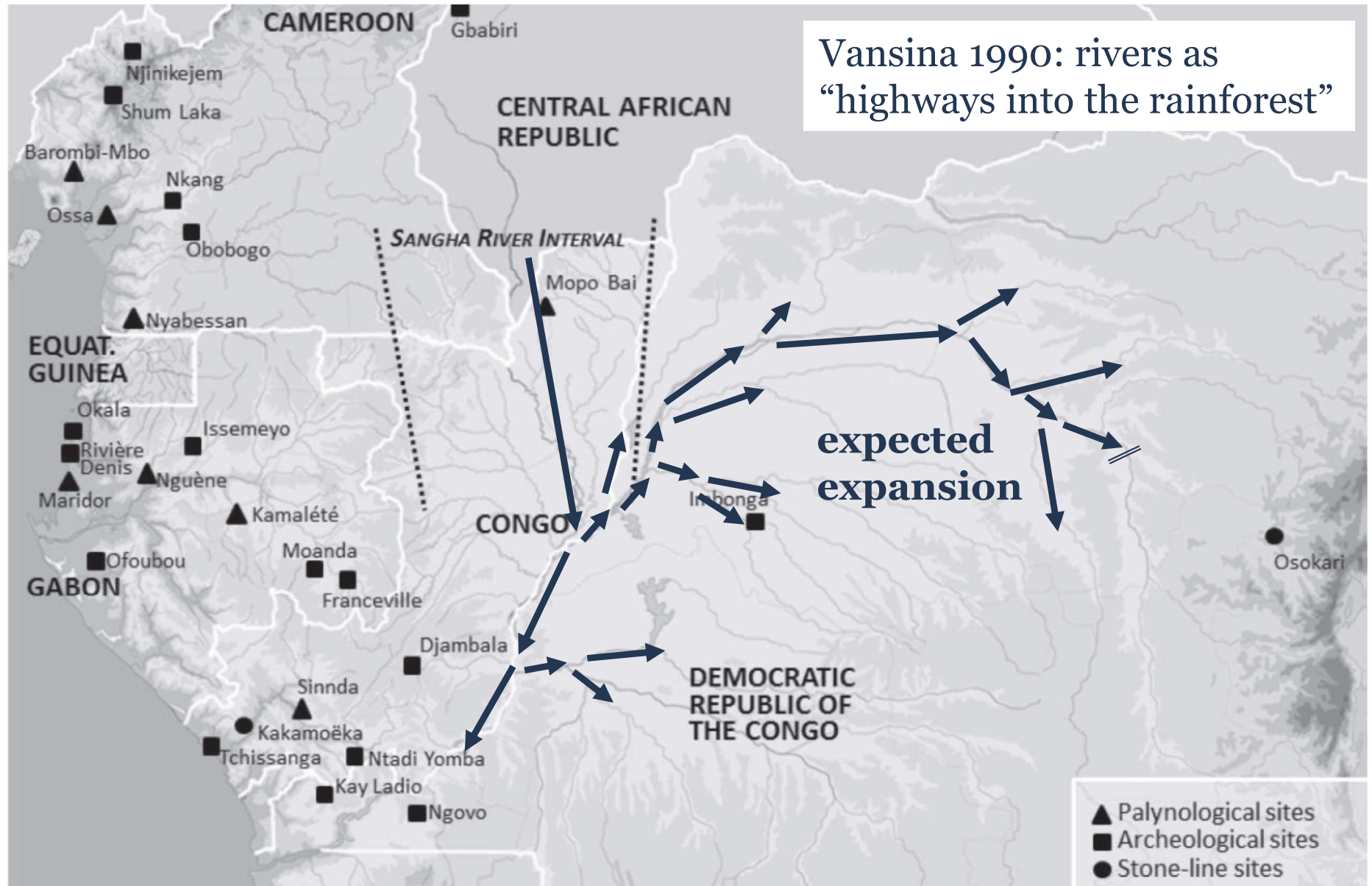


# Farmers in the rainforest?

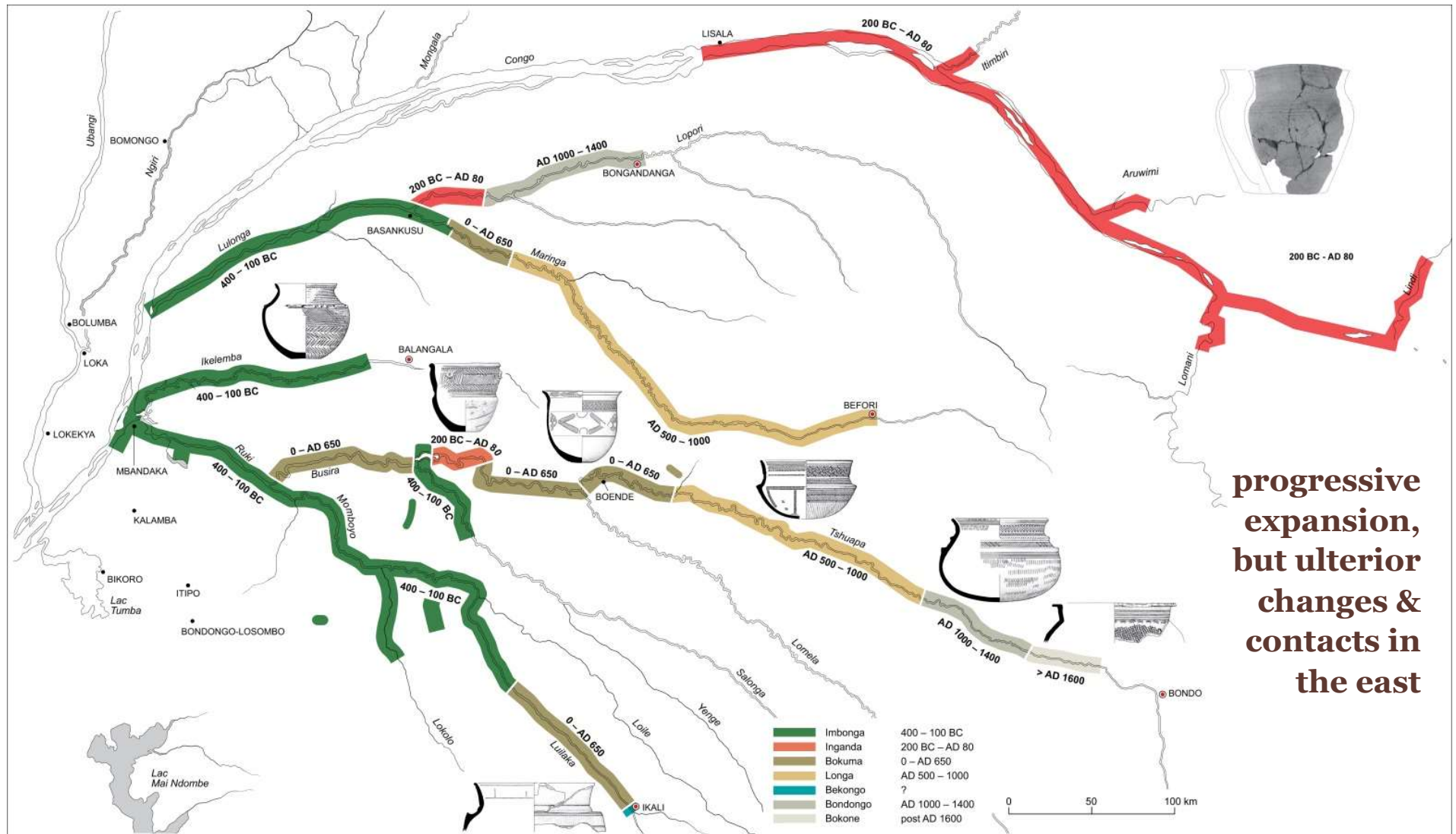


Map from  
Grollemund  
*et al.* 2015

# Following Rivers

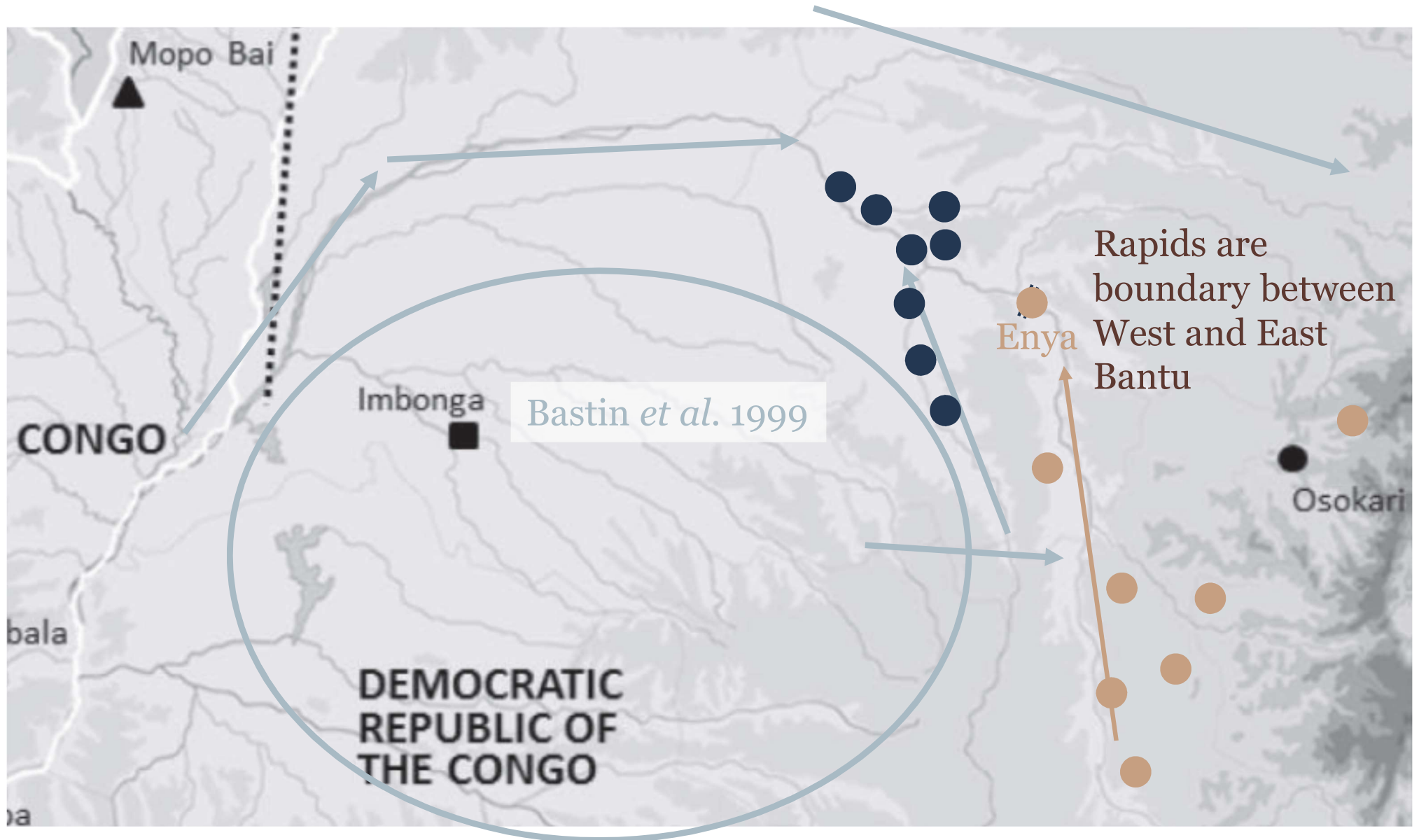


# Preliminary archaeological evidence

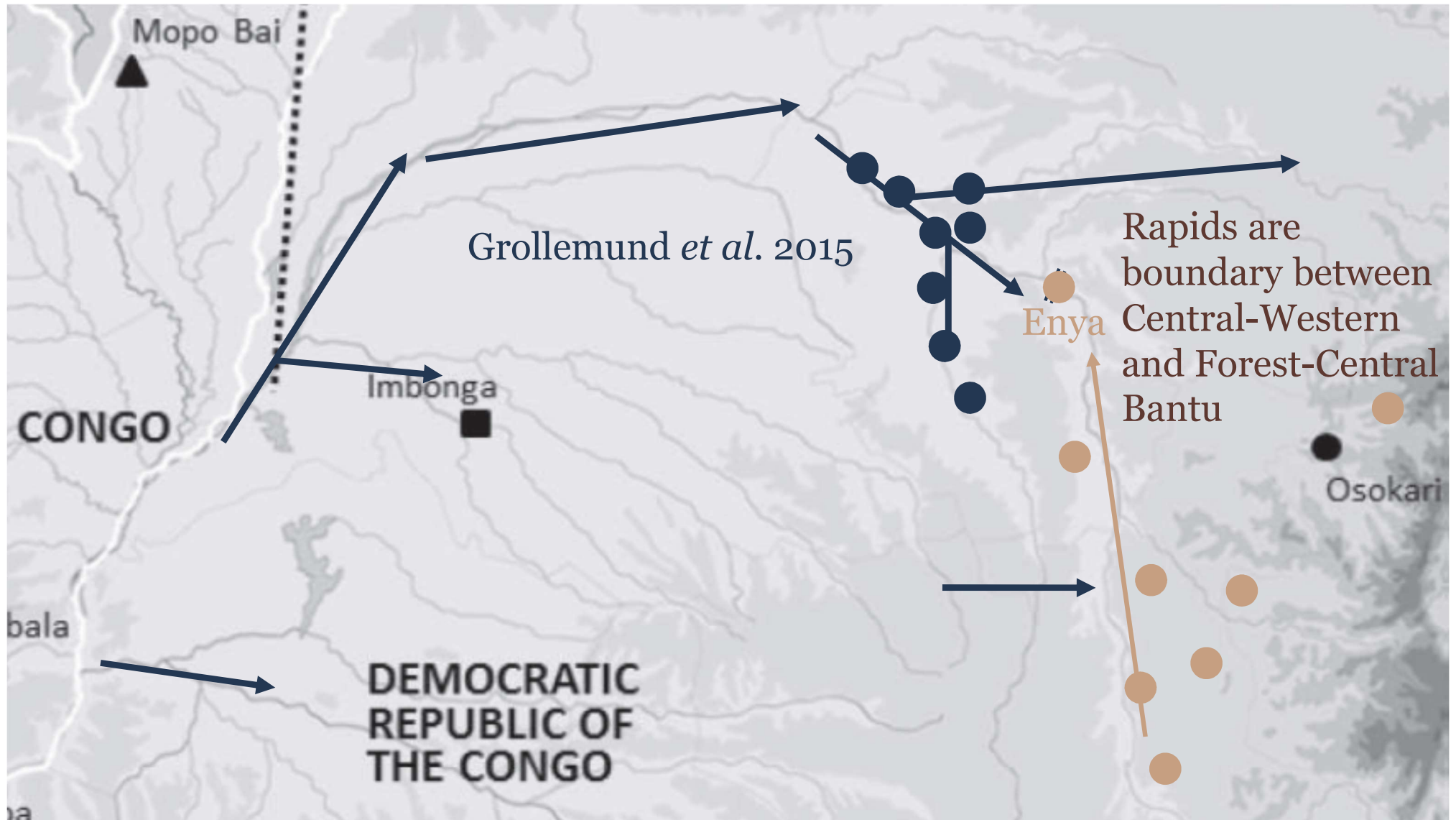




# Linguistic Correlations?



# Linguistic Correlations?



# Refining the research hypotheses

Possible riverine expansions, contact in the eastern Congo Basin and adaptation to life at the riverside

- Classification and contact: position of C50 languages:  
“Boan” + “Rivers” and influenced by “Basin”? *or* “Basin” and influenced by “Boan”? *and* what, if any, is the link with “Lebonya”?  
⇒ what itinerary into the eastern Congo Basin?
- Subclassification of “Forest Central Bantu”: certain subgroups linked to riverine migrations? Contacts with other Bantu ~ who arrived first at the Lualaba?
- Traces of contact with other Bantu, Ubangi and Central-Sudanic



# Linguistic palaeontology (Words and Things)

Towards a history of the Bantu river repertoire

- What river-related knowledge enabled early Bantu speakers to travel and live along the rivers?
- What river-related knowledge developed *in situ*?
- What river-related knowledge was exchanged?

⇒ river-related knowledge = navigation, fishing, river geography, etc.

# Multiple disciplines on board to study riverine history

BANTURIVERS is historical linguistics, anthropology and archaeology

- Anthropology:
  - e.g. role of rivers for communities today, labour division (fishermen's wives as potters and engaging in trade), commercial networks, geographical organization of subsistence activities, etc.
- Anthropology of technology:
  - e.g. Ngelima (Boan) pottery is distinct from the neighboring Soko (C50) vessels and rather resembles Kango and Bua (both Boan) pottery further afield; certain Zande pottery also displays "Boan" characteristics (McMaster 1988:40-42)
- Archaeology
  - e.g. may indicate past communities non-ancestral to the present communities of the area, and past contact

# We'll be back!

with new linguistic and  
multidisciplinary data, new  
classifications, reconstructions  
of river-related vocabulary, etc.





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# Thanks!

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To Jacky Maniacky for the linguistic map

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