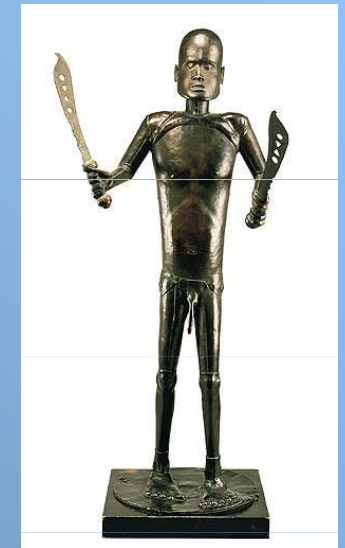


West-African Religions



2008

1. Introduction to the history of the Study of African religions
2. Overview on West-Africa.
 - 2.1. West-African (Niger-Kongo) languages within the groups of African languages
 - 2.2. A short history of West-Africa
3. The traditional Religion of the Yorùbá:
 - 3.1. The high-God Olódùmarè
 - 3.2. The Orisha
 - 3.3. Ifá: the divination system
 - 3.4. The cult of the ancestors: Egungun and Gèlèdé

4. Traditional religion of the Ewe and Fon-speaking people:
 - 4.1. The cult of the Vodun (tro)
 - 4.1.1. The Vodun of the Mamy Wata-group
 - 4.1.2. The Gorovodu
 - 4.1.3. Fa-divination compared to Yorùbá divination system
 - 4.1.4. Cult of the ancestors
 - 4.1.5. The concept of “bo” (“gris-gris”).

5. The world-view of the Dogon
6. African-derived Christianity: the example of “Christianisme Celeste”
7. Discussing concepts of a general history of religion for labelling african religions:
 - 7.1. Animism
 - 7.2. Totemism
 - 7.3. Fetishism
 - 7.4. Main features of African religions according to Dianne Stewart

Early Sources for the History of (West) African Religions



- Early arabic sources:
No information on traditional religion

Early 16th century:
Reports on „Gold-Coast“

- Duarte Pacheco Pereira
- Valentim Fernandes

- Wooden Idols
- Main Deity: Kru
- Cult of the Dead
- Figurines, Sacrifice

Early Sources for the History of (West) African Religions



1591: Relazione del reame di Congo Filippo Pigafella

*1687: Angelo Giovanni Antonio Cavazzi storica
descrizione de tre regni Congo Matamba Angola*

1881: Giovanni Beltrame: Il fiume bianco e i Denka

**1914: John H. Weeks: Among the Primitive Bakongo. A
Record of Thirty Years Close Intercourse with the Bakongo
and Other Tribes of Equatorial Africa, with a Description of
Their Habits, Customs & Religious Beliefs.**

(West) AR within „General History of Religions“

DU CULTE
DES DIEUX
FÉTICHES,
OU

Parallèle de l'ancienne Religion
de l'Égypte avec la Religion
actuelle de Nigritie.

par Charles de Brosses

Respicit angues
Omnigenūmq; Deū monstrā & latrator Anubis.
VIRGIL. ÆN. VIII. 697.



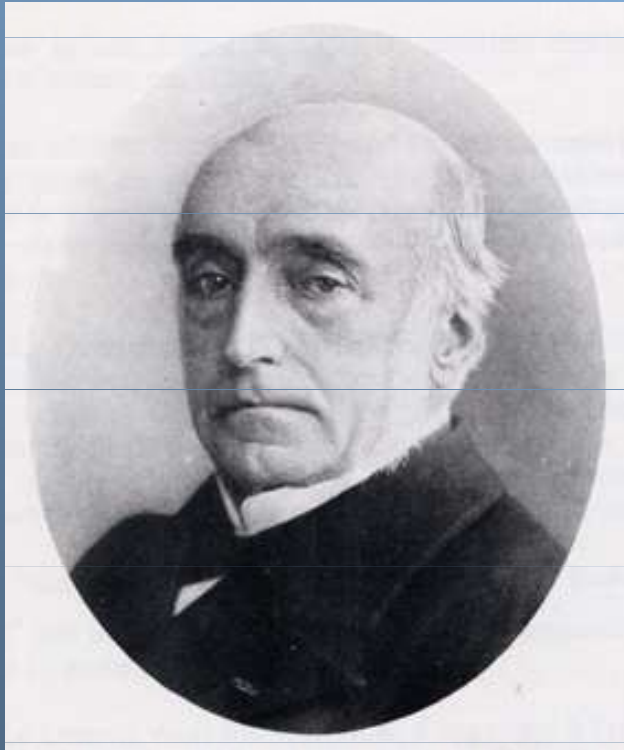
M D C C L X.

Charles de Brosses

(West) AR within „General History of Religions“

- John Lubbock, *Origin of Civilization* London 1870
- Grant Allen, *The Evolution of the Idea of God* London 1897
- R.R. Marrett *The Treshold of Religion* London 1909
- *Theodor Waitz, Anthropologie der Naturvölker*
(Leipzig 1859-72)
- *Gustav Roskoff; Das Religionswesen der rohesten Naturvölker.* Leipzig 1880

(West) AR within „General History of Religions“



Albert Réville
Les religions des peuples non-
civilisés, Paris 1883

(West) AR within „General History of Religions“



The Viennese school of Anthropology of Religion

Wilhelm Schmidt, Der Ursprung der Gottesidee, 12 Bde., 1912-1955

Paul Schebesta, Die Bambuti-Pygmäen von Ituri
Brüssel 1938-50, 3 Bde.

Martin Gusinde, Die Twiden Wien-Stuttgart 1956

Anton Vorbichler, Das Opfer auf den uns heute noch erreichbaren ältesten Stufen der Menschheitsgeschichte. Eine Begriffsstudie. Mödling 1956.

Sources for the History of (West) African Religions

Colonial Descriptions of single peoples/ethnic groups

- *Collection de Monographies Ethnographiques (1907-1913)* hrsg. von Cyrill von Overbergh
- R. S. Rattray
- Edward E. Evans-Pritchard

Sources for the History of (West) African Religions



Colonial descriptions of single peoples/ethnic groups

Rattray:

„before our civilisations began to break down pure native customs, Ashanti religion guaranteed very similar standards to those set by the higher form of Christian ethical teaching“

Sources for the History of (West) African Religions



The professoriate [...] was exhilarated by the prospect of pursuing its own agendas again, armed with the real-world experience it had gained serving the nation. The emergence of the United States as a world power [...] seemed to suggest that the headquarters of learning and research had moved here as well. And of course we were rich then [...] If you could think at anything at all plausible to do, you could get the money someplace [...]"

Clifford Geertz, *After the Fact*

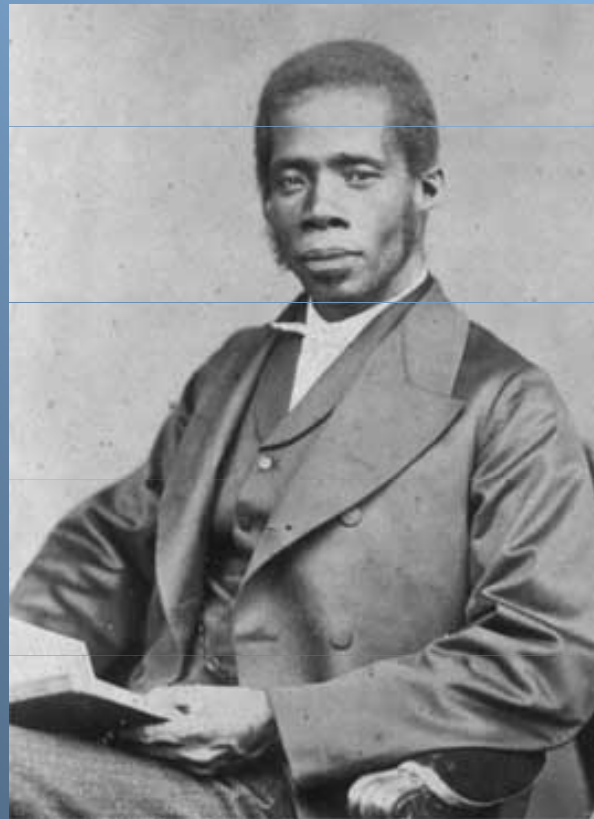
Sources for the History of (West) African Religions



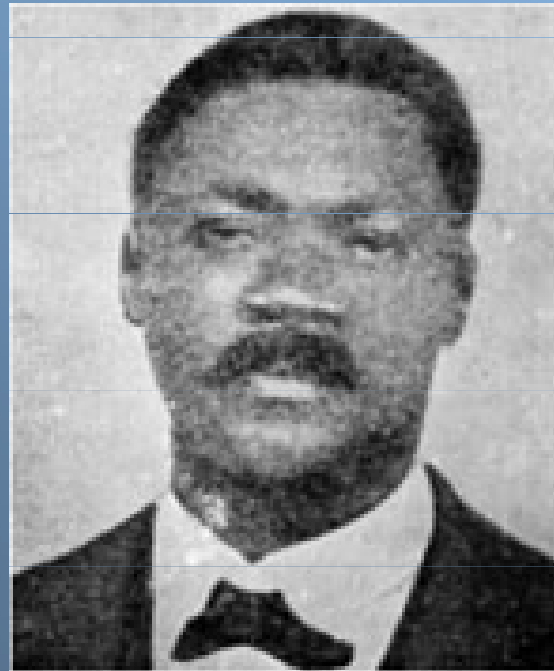
African Religion as described by African scholars

- Early nationalistic authors
- Authors within the context of anti-colonialistic struggle
- African Christians and theologians, that have written on African Traditional Religion

Edward Wilmot Blyden (1832-1912)



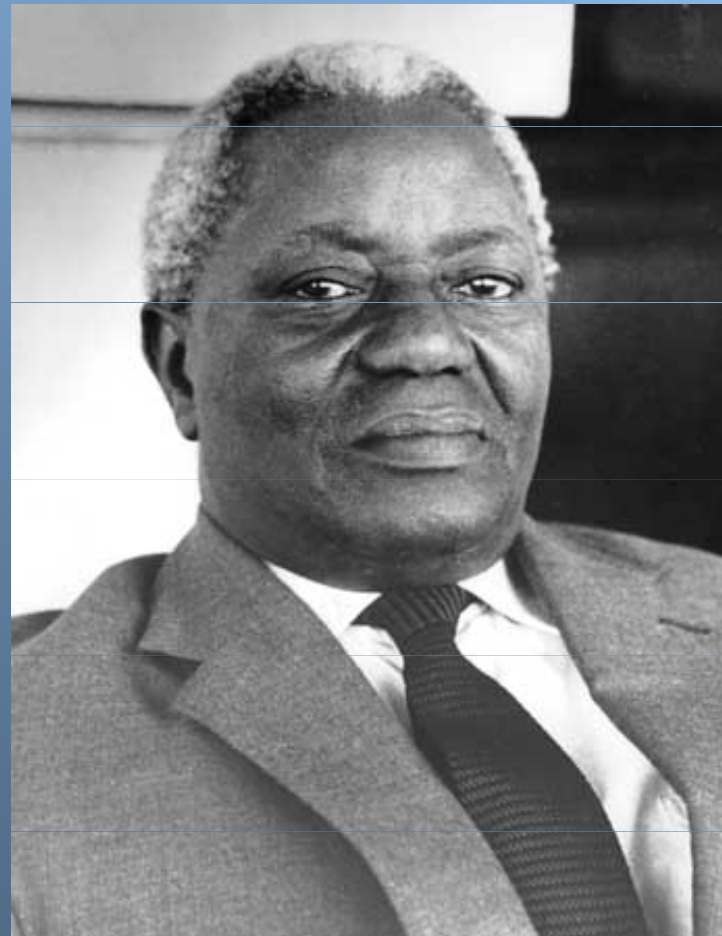
John Mensah Sarbah (1864-1910)



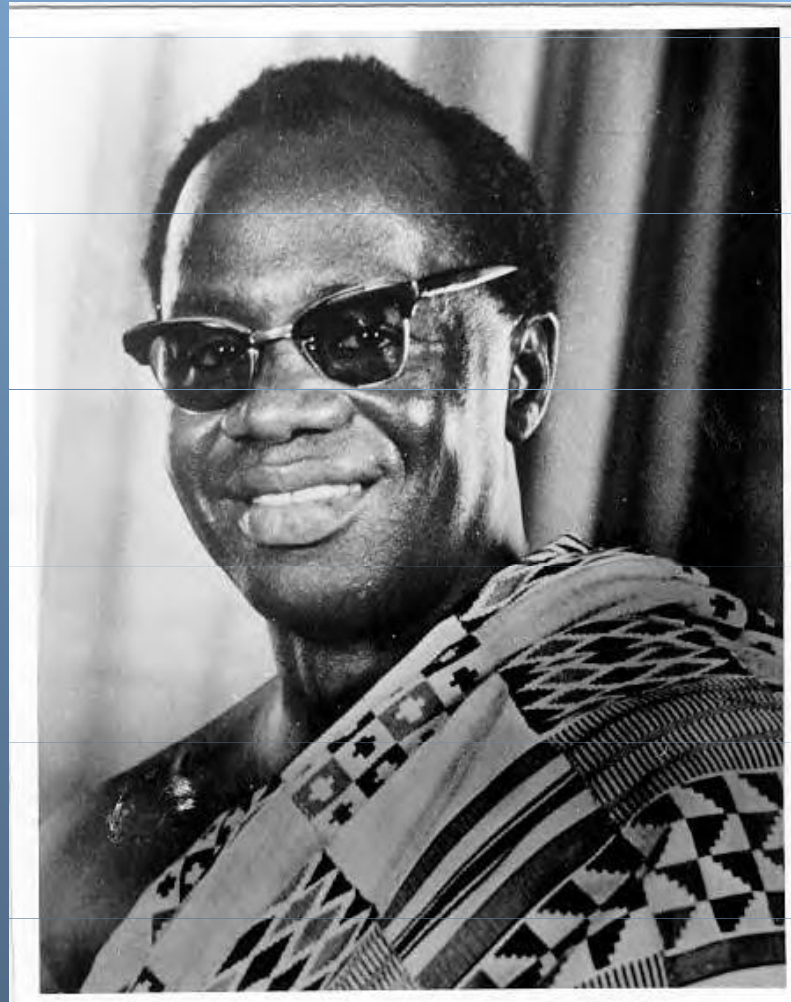
Joseph Ephraim Casely-Hayford
1866-1930



Joseph Kwame Kyeretwi Boakye Danquah (1895-1965)



Kofi Abrefa Busia (1913-1978)



Sources for the History of (West) African Religions

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN AUTHORS

- ***Canon Edmund Ilogu (Anglican priest)***
 - Christianity and Igbo Culture, 1974
 - Igbo Life and Thought, 1985
- E. Bolaji Idowu :
 - African Traditional Religion- London 1974
 - Olodumare, God in Yoruba Belief 1962

Sources for the History of (West) African Religions

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN AUTHORS

Cardinal F. A. Arinze:
Sacrifice in Igbo Religion
(1970)

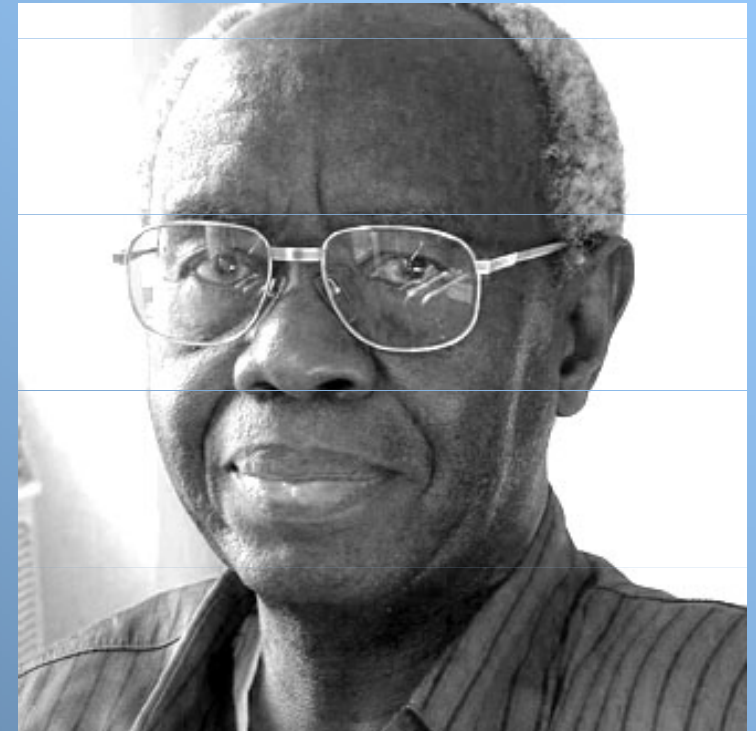


Sources for the History of (West) African Religions

AFRICAN CHRISTIAN AUTHORS

Canon John Samuel Mbiti (Anglican Priest)

- African Religions and Philosophy.
New York 1969
- *Introduction to African Religion*,
London 1975)
- *Concepts of God in Africa*
(London 1982)



Interpretation of ATR



Robin Horton, Judaeo-Christian Spectacles: Boon or Bane to the Study of African Religions? In: RH., Patterns of Thought in Africa and the West. Essays on Magic, Religion and Science. Cambridge 1997, 161-193; 409-420 (notes)

Interpretation of ATR

The approach of study of religions to African religions according to Robin Horton



Translational
Understanding



Further
Explanation

The approach of study of religions to African religions according to Robin Horton

Translational Understanding

„[...] I am not just talking of the provision of dictionary equivalents for individual words or sentences. I am talking about finding a ‚world-language‘ - equivalent for a whole realm of discourse, and of showing, in ‚world-language‘-terms, what the point of that realm of discourse is in the life of the people who use it.“

Interpretation of ATR

The approach of study of religions to African religions according to Robin Horton

Further Explanation

The comparative part: bringing the data found in description and explained by translational understanding into the context of similar phenomena in other cultures, and relating them to other areas within the culture (social, political, economical, technological level).

The approach of study of religions to African religions according to Robin Horton

Further Explanation

Functionalist:

Religion can be reduced to its function for other realms of society



„Devout school“:

Religions share a common „core essence“ and are something like „the universal response to the divine“

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

Three main fields of „translational understanding“

- Central object of religious practice
- Attitude towards this object
- Main aims and goals of religious activity

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

1. Central object of religious practice according to „DS“

„ ,Devout‘ scholars recognize African belief in and commerce with a multiplicity of lesser spritual forces; but they tend to emphasize that the African worshipper regards such forces as mere intermediaries between himself and the supreme being [...] whose powers [...] depend [...] on the will of that being.

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

2. Attitude towards this object according to „DS“

DS „tend [to stress] a unique religious attitude or emotion in which awed fascination with the mysterious and uncanny bulks large [...] more obvious in [people's] relations with greater divinities and most obvious in their relations with the supreme being itself.“

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

3. Main aims and goals of religious activity acc. to „DS“

DS „assume that, for the African worshipper, the attainment of communion with God is the overriding aim of life“ & „they seem to be hinting at the presence [...] of the idea of a flawed temporal world from which the individual yearns to escape into the perfection of eternity.“

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

Three main fields of „translational understanding“

1. The central object of religious activity is not always a High-God or central deity conceived in a „monotheistic“ or „monistic“ way.

Examples: Lugbara (John Middleton)
 Fon: Mawu/Lisa; Dan; Nana Buluku
 Yorùbá: òrìṣà / Olódùmarè
 Nyakyusa (Monica Wilson)

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

Three main fields of „translational understanding“

2. The attitude towards the central objects of religious activity does not necessarily differ from the attitude towards agents of everyday life.

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

Three main fields of „translational understanding“

3. Main aims and goals of religious activity

3.1. Not communion, but

- explanation
- prediction
- control

Hortons Critique of the „Devout-School-Approach“

Three main fields of „translational understanding“

3. Main aims and goals of religious activity

3.2. In ATR, concepts of the afterlife resemble each other in one point: „the ideal situation involves return to the world of the living [...] the worst [...] being debarred from return“.

- Difference to Christian concept of „otherworldly perfection“
- Difference to concepts of rebirth within Eastern religions (religions of the law of karma)

Interpretation of ATR

Robin Hortons critique of „devout school“

According to Horton, the main presupposition of the DS consists in the idea, that the concept of a supreme being can be found everywhere.

„[...] many [...] world views have indeed focussed on a supreme being. But the sheer variety of attributes imputed to this being [...] casts doubt on the claim that we are dealing [...] with [...] responses to a single unchanging entity“.

Interpretation of ATR

- Sometimes we find a primordial pair of supreme beings
- Sometimes there is no supreme being at all to be found

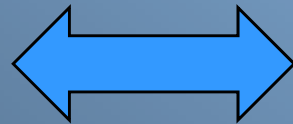
Horton finds the reason for the „christian interpretation“ of ATR in a „double bind“ resulting out of the conviction, that Christian faith is the only true one, and the struggle for accepting ATR as showing „equal mental and cultural capacities“ of African people. Therefore they stress the continuity between ATR and Christianity.

Interpretation of ATR

Is there a „philosophy“ behind African Traditional World-View?

Henry Odera Oruka:

Pre-philosophy



- Ethnophilosophy
- Nationalistic- Ideological Ph.
- Philosophical Sagacity
- Professional Ph.

Placide Tempels: Bantu Philosophy

Ch. 1.: In Search of a Bantu Philosophy.	17-38
Ch.2: Bantu Ontology	39-70
Ch.3: Bantu Wisdom or Criteriology	71-94
Ch.4: The Theory of "Muntu" or Bantu Psychology	95-114
Ch.5: Bantu Ethics	115-138
Ch.6: Restoration of Life	139-166
Ch.7: Bantu Philosophy and our Mission to Civilize	167-189

Placide Tempels: Bantu Philosophy

„We do not claim of course, that the Bantu are capable of formulating a philosophical treatise, complete with an adequate vocabulary. It is our job to proceed to such systematic development. It is we who will be able to tell them, in precise terms, what their inmost concept of being is. They will recognise themselves in our words, saying: You understand us: you now know us completely [...].” (36)

Interpretation of ATR

Kwasi Wiredu: „blunt paternalism“

Eboussi Boulaga: Bantu as „Monsieur Jourdain d. Philosophie“

Critique of the idea, that the shared world-view of a people or ethnic group is considered as being „philosophy“

John S. Mbiti: It is wrong to draw conclusions about all Bantu-speaking peoples from research among the Baluba (one group)

The luba-speaking ethnic groups (Baluba)

- Lualuba: The inhabitants of the territory of the old kingdom of the Luba at the upper Congo (“central Luba”).
- Luba-Hemba
- The western Luba
- Luba Songyie (Northern Luba): the only group that believes in some kind of reincarnation (which is central for Tempels’ concept of the person among the Bantu)

History of Research

First records stem from the 15th century

First translations of the bible from 17th century

1650: Gianfranco Bruscioto, a capuchin father

Peter Simon Pallas (1741-1811):

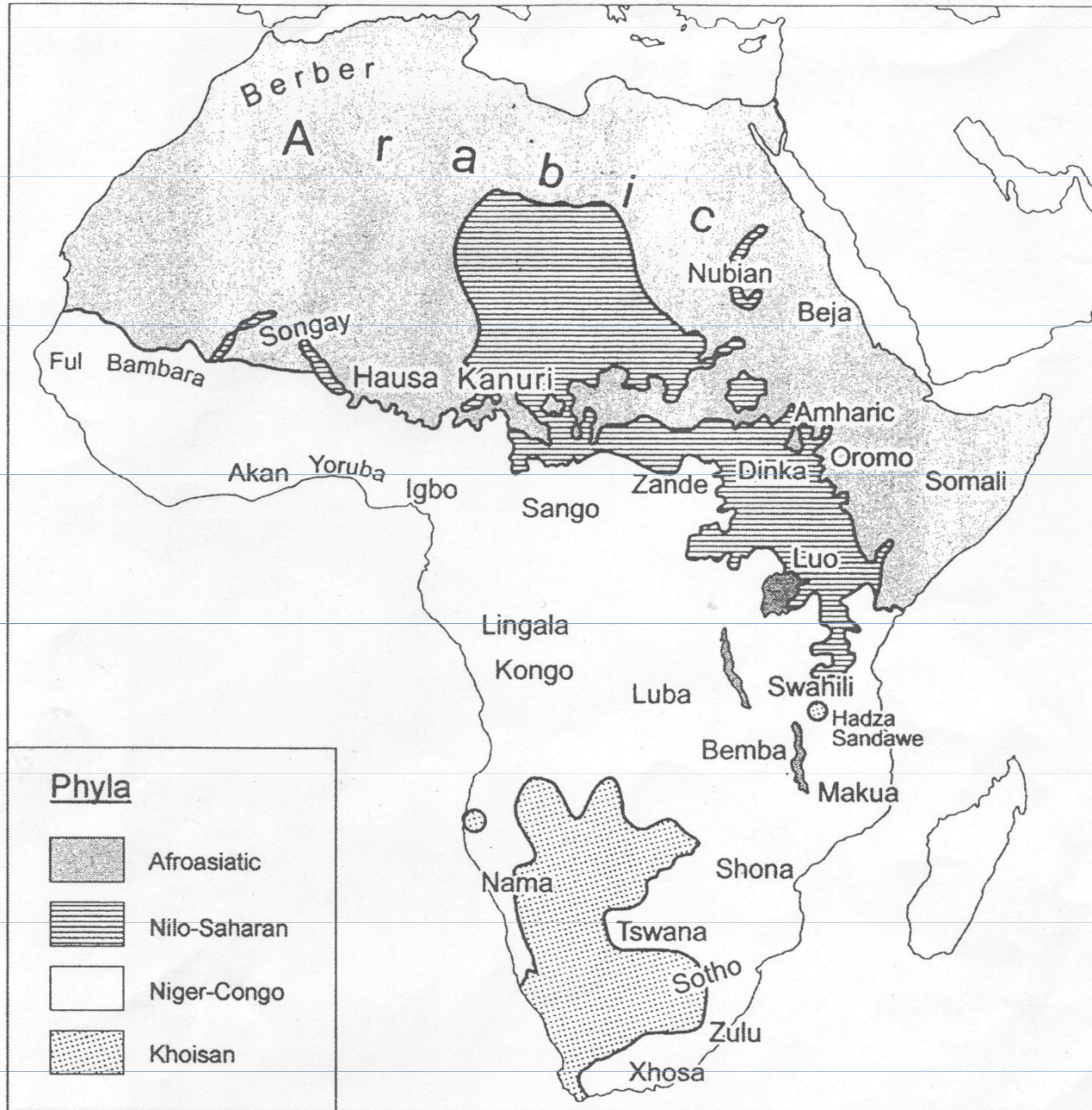
Linguarum totius orbis vocabularia Augustissimae
(Catharina II) cura collecta

Missionaries during the 19th and early 20th century

- S. W. Koelle: „Polyglotta“
- Carl Meinhof
- Diedrich Westermann

First „governmental official“:

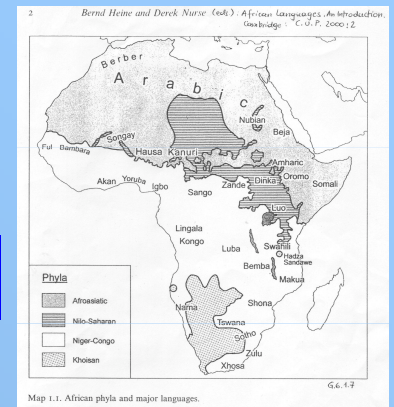
- Heinrich Barth:
„Central African Vocabularies“ (1865)



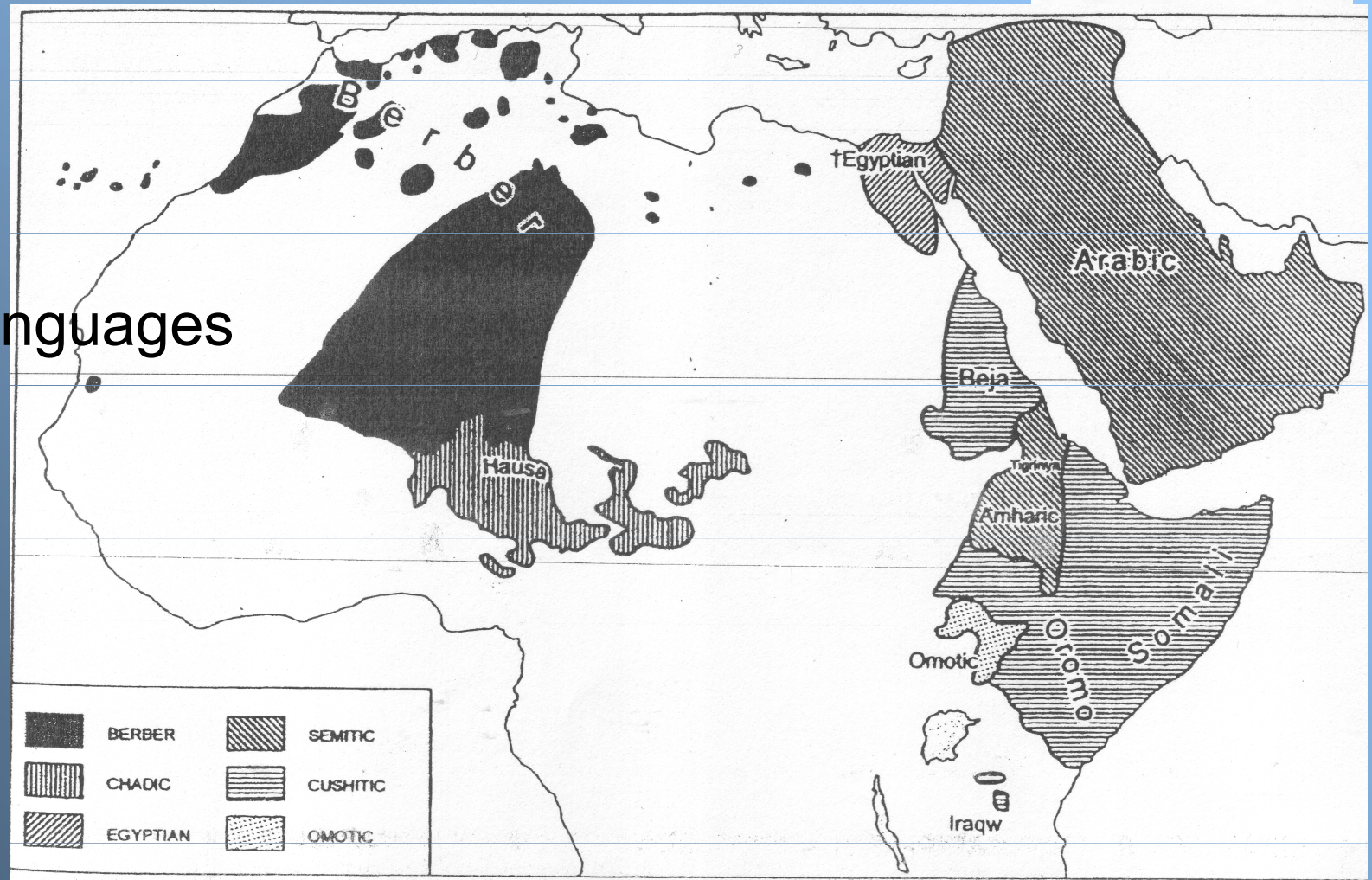
G.6.1.7

Map 1.1. African phyla and major languages.

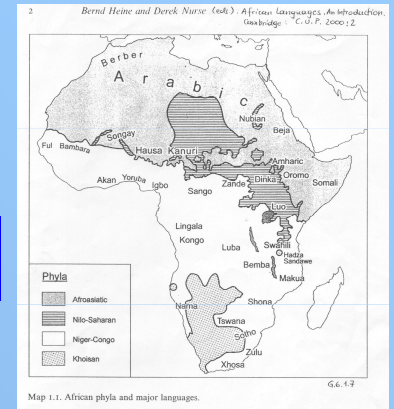
Groups of African Languages according to Greenberg: Afroasiatic Languages



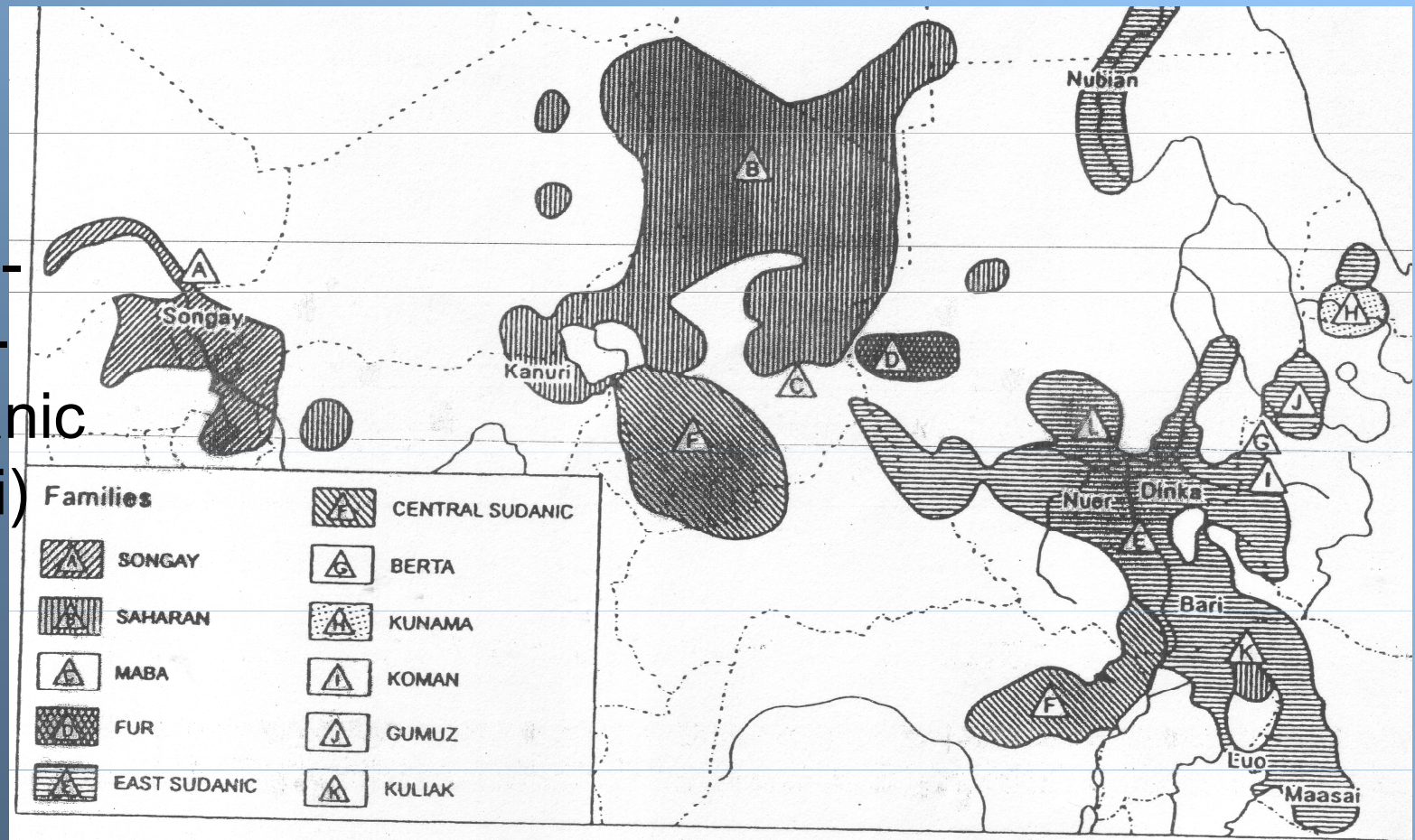
- Egyptian
- Semitic Languages
- Berber
- Cushitic
- Chadic



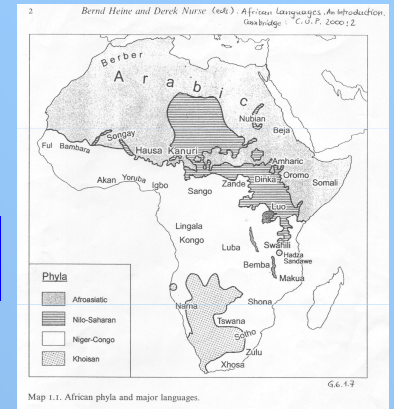
Groups of African Languages according to Greenberg: Nilo-Saharan Languages



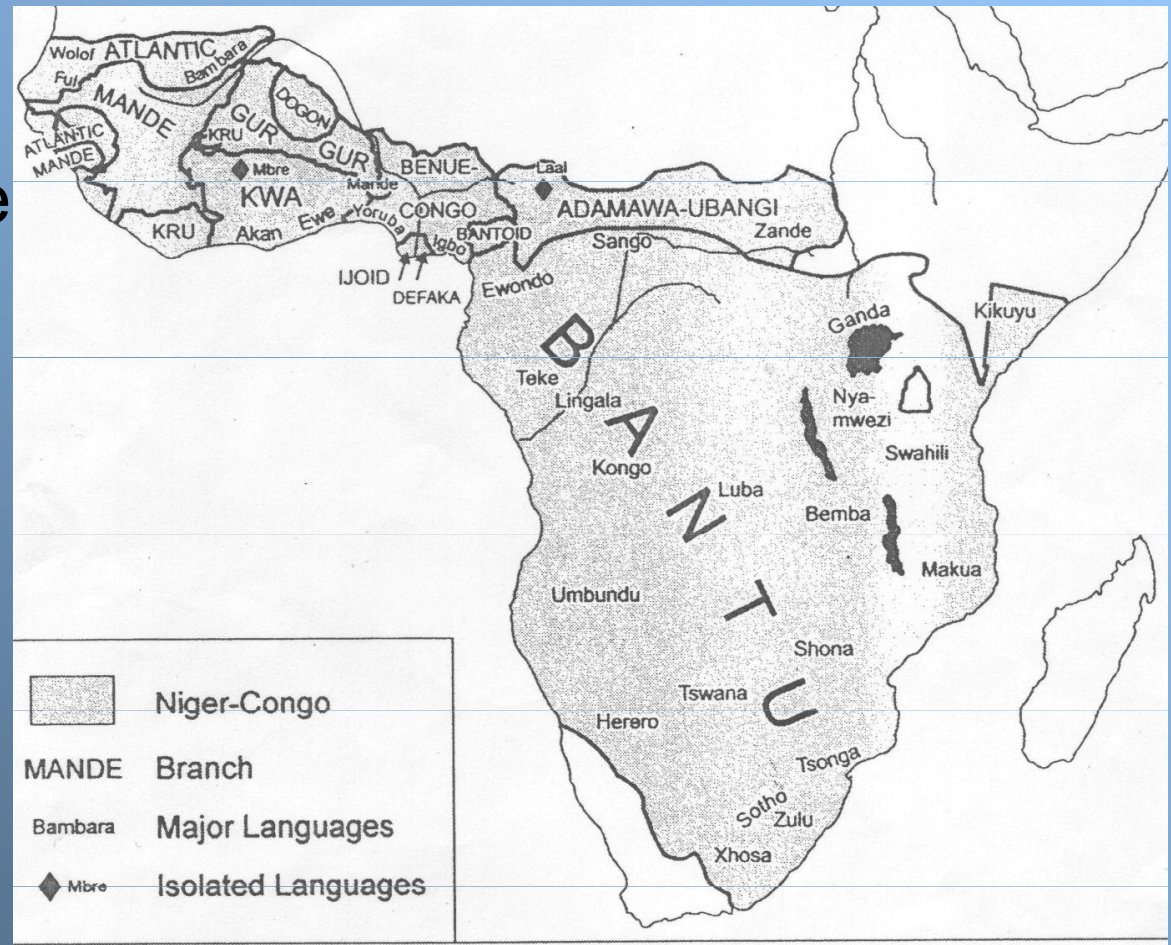
- Saharan
- Songhay
- Mahan
- Fur
- Shari-Nil:
 - Eastern-
 - Central-
 - Sudanic (Shari)

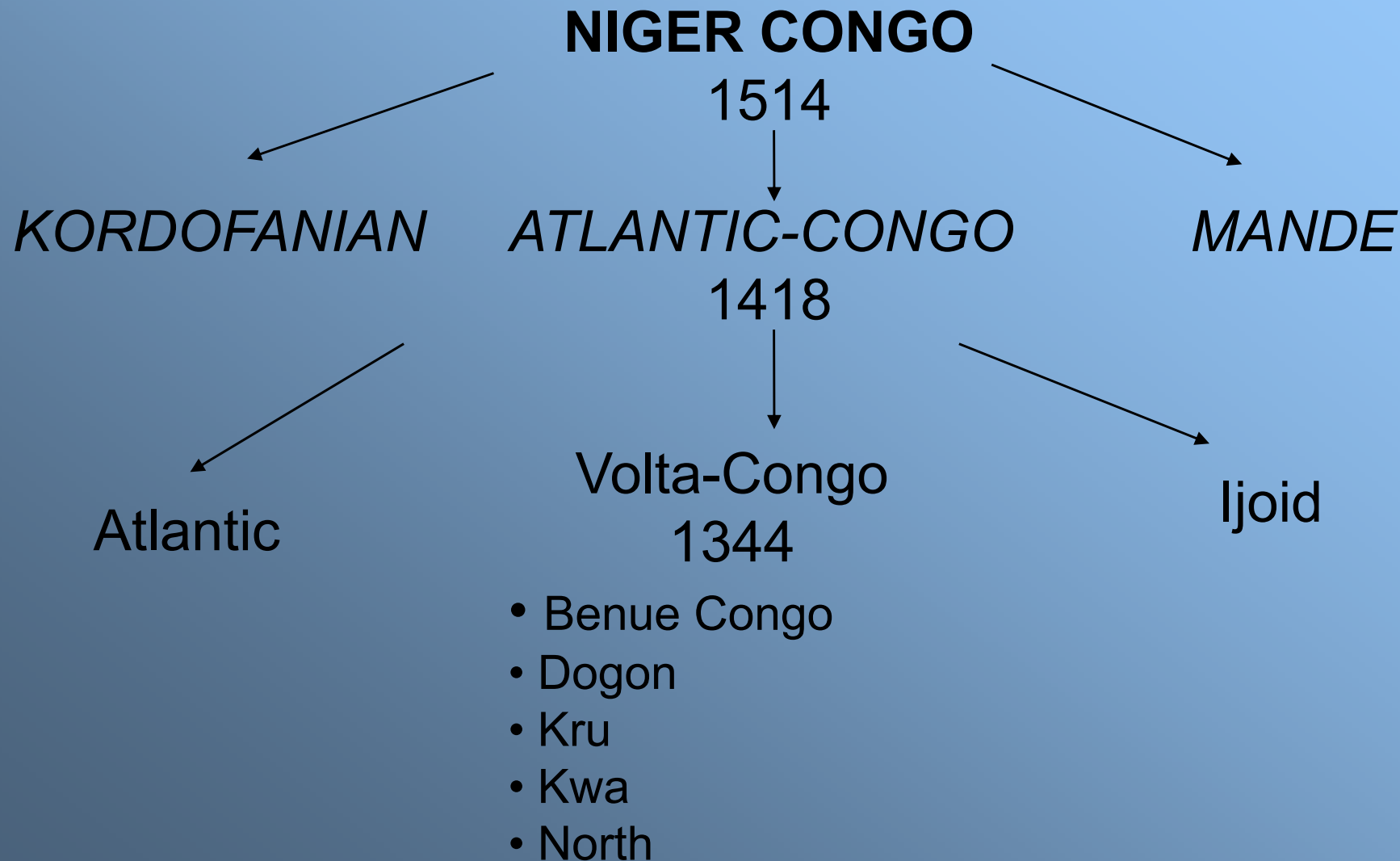


Groups of African Languages according to Greenberg: Niger-Congo Languages



- Kordofan (?)
- Western Atlantic Mande
- Voltaic Group
- Kwa Group
- Benue-Congo
- Adamawa-Ubangi





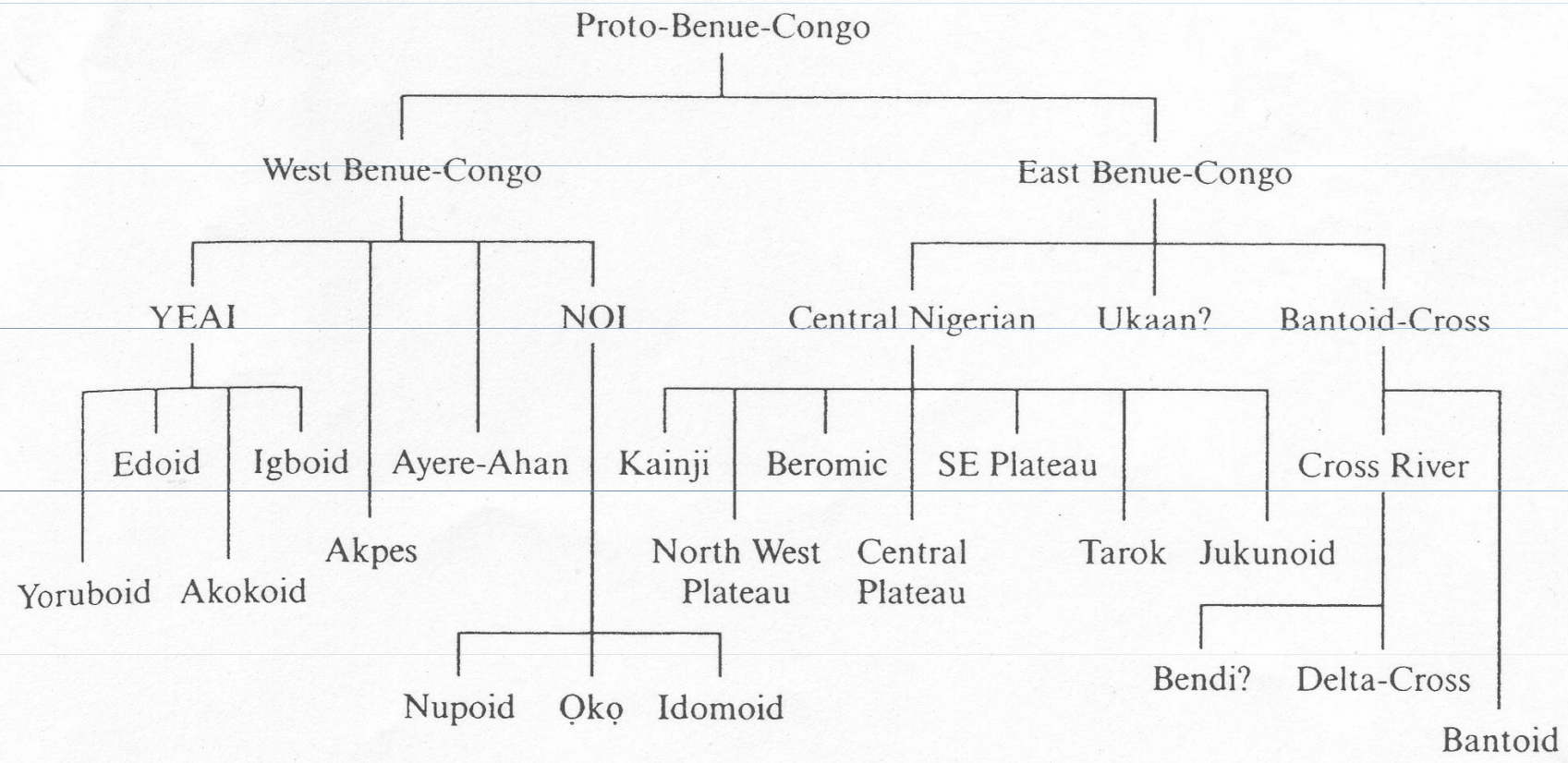
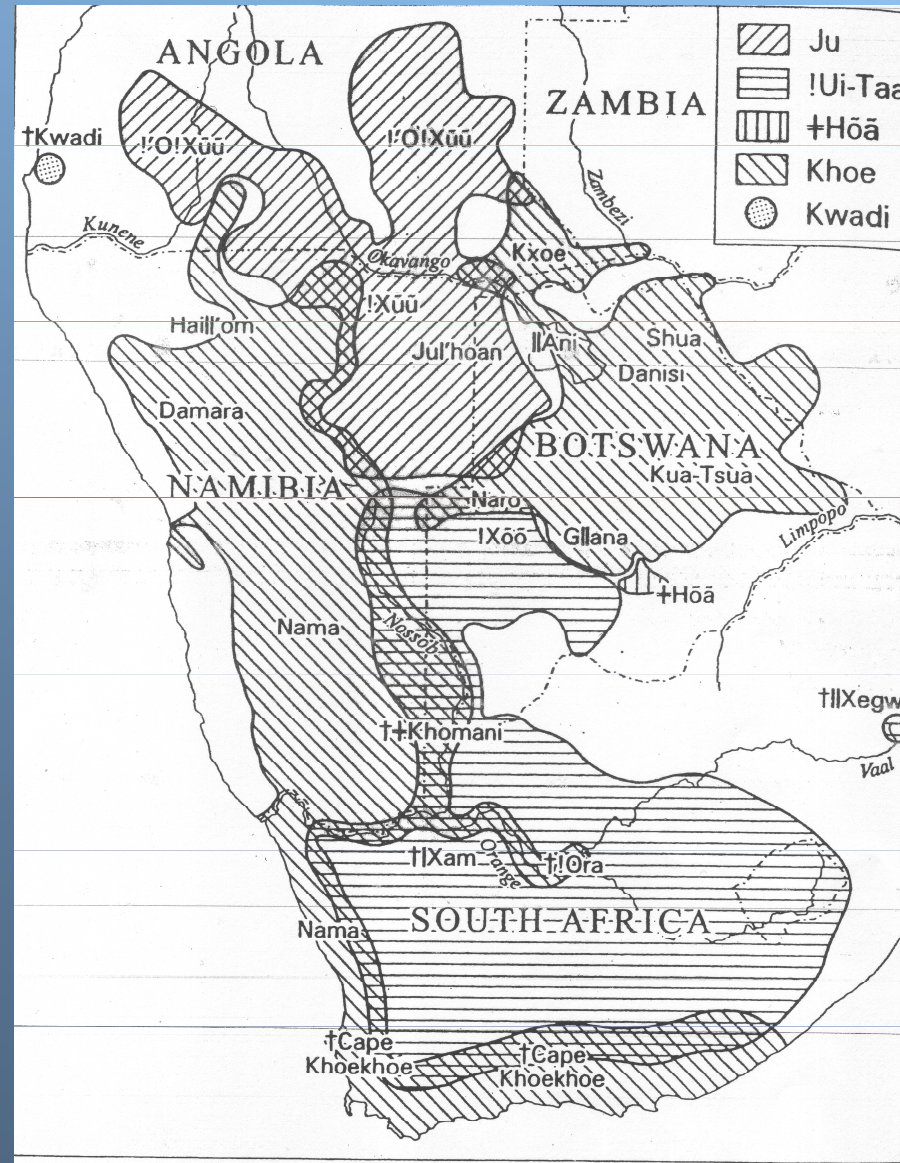
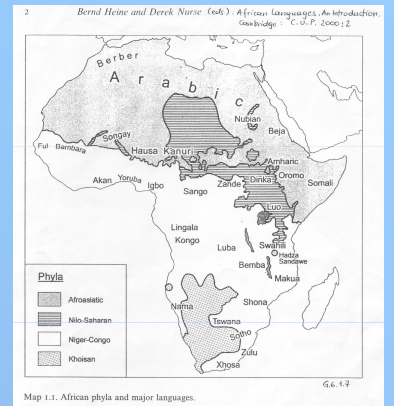


Fig. 2.II. Classification of Benue-Congo languages. (G. 6. 1. 7)

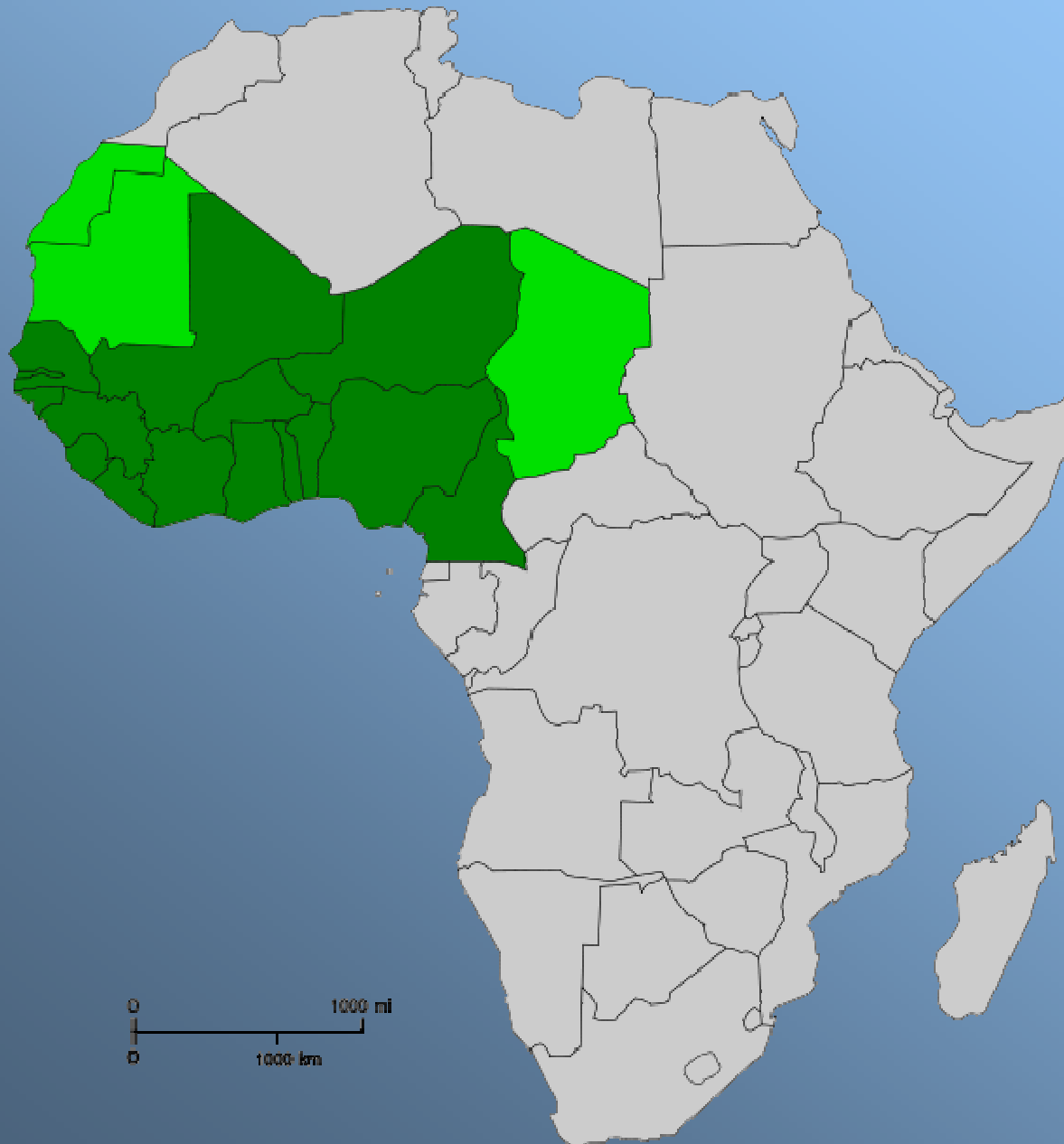
HEINE, Bernd; NURSE, Derek (eds.): African Languages. An Introduction. Cambridge: C.U.P. 2000: 31

2.5.7.2.2 West Benue-Congo West Benue-Congo, corresponding to the former

Khoi-San Languages



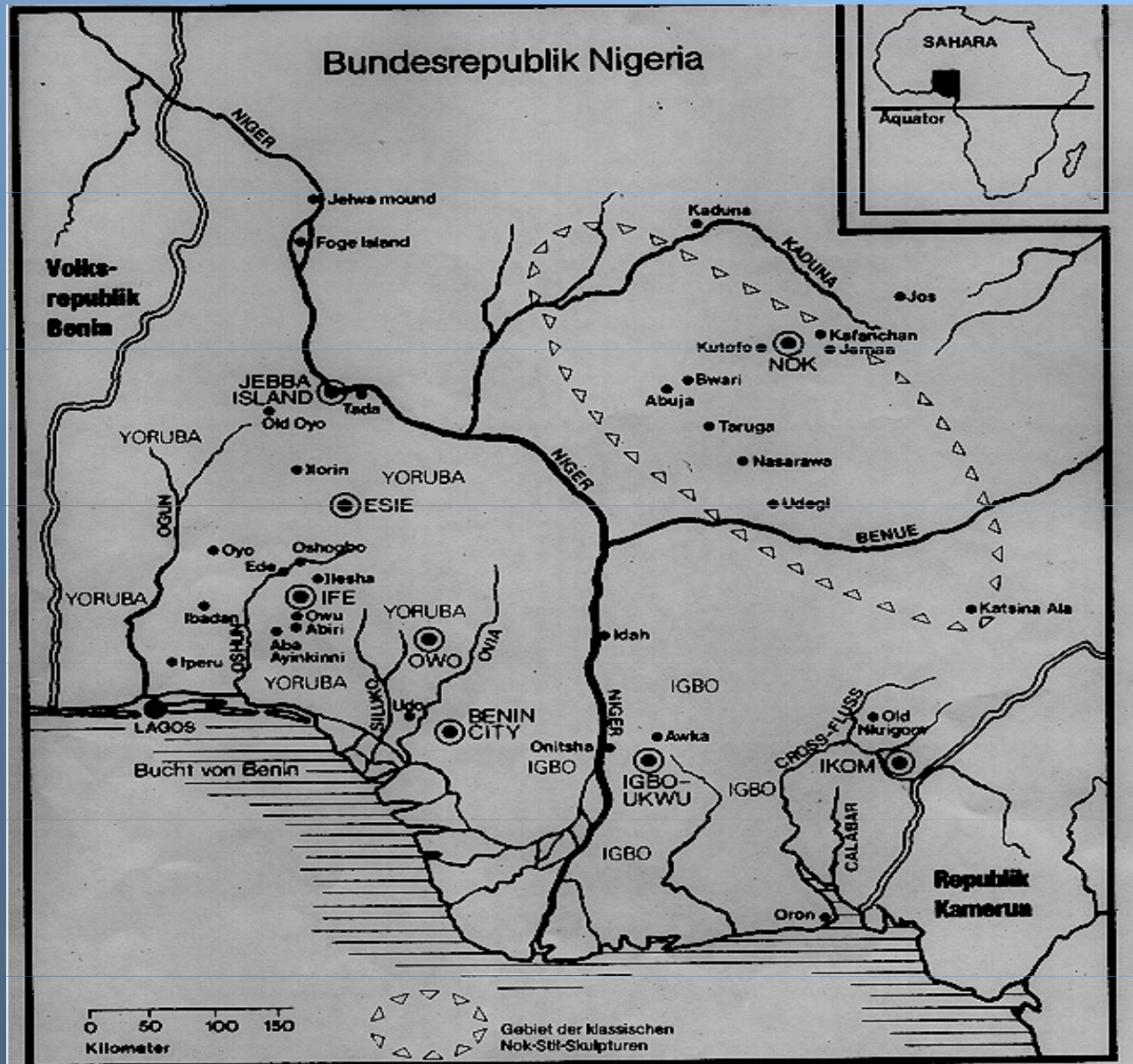
Map of West-Africa



Centers of primary urban generation according to Paul Wheatly

- China
- Mesopotamia
- Egypt
- Indus Valley
- West-Africa
- Mesoamerica
- Andes

Short History of West-Africa



Nok-culture
Terracotta
Figurine

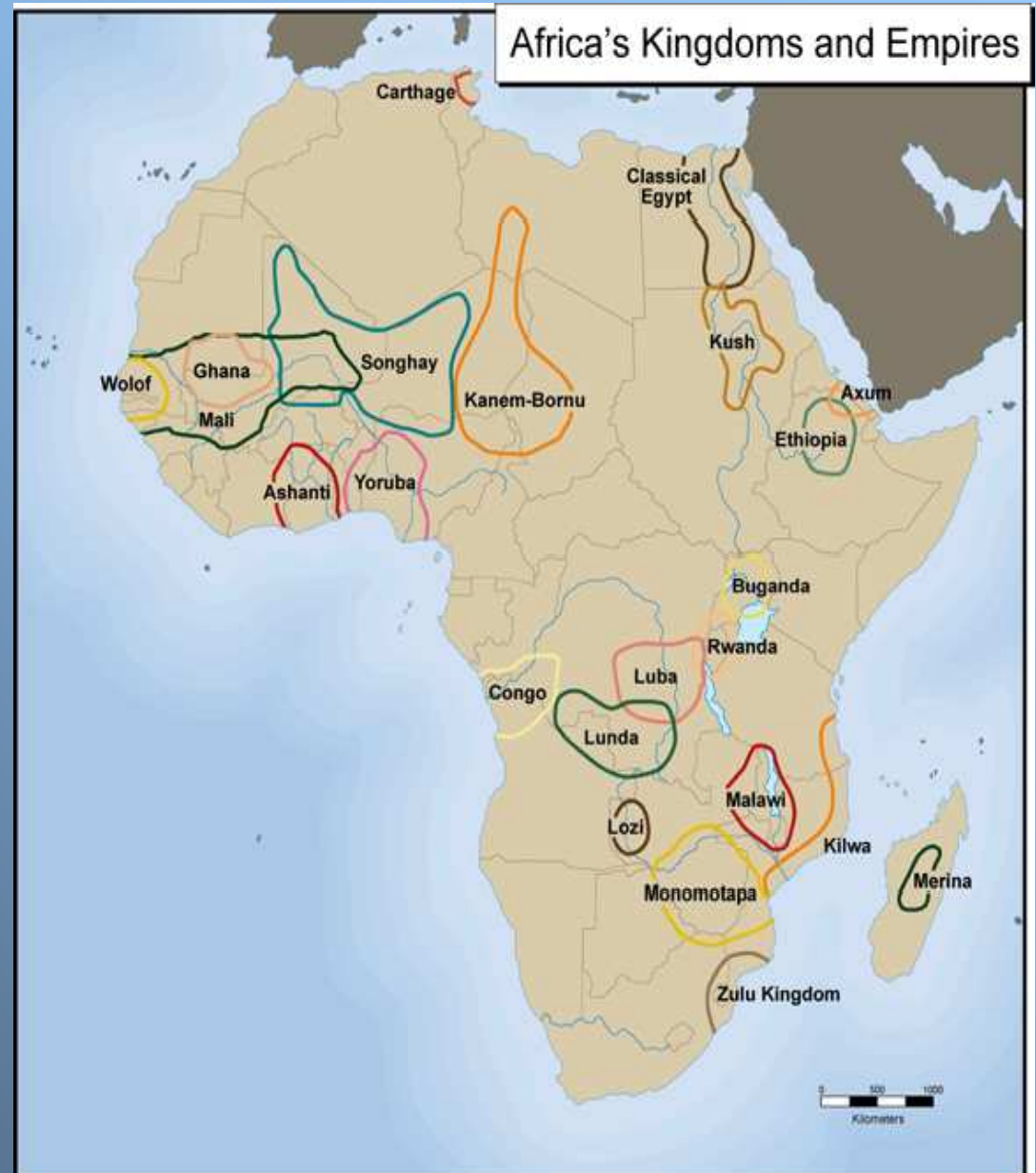


Early West-African
Kingdoms:

Ghana
(~300 - ~1240)

Mali
(~1050 - ~1400)

Songhay
(~1000 - ~1600)



The Kingdom of Gana (Wagadu)

- Gana= Title of the emperor
- 773: First mentioning of Gana: „The land of gold“; founded by the Soninke
- ~800: Important center of trade
- 1076: The Almoravids take Kumbi Saleh (?)
- 1203: Sumabguru, emperor of the Fulani takes Kumbi Saleh
- ~1240: Fall of the kingdom of Gana

The Kingdom of Mali

- ~1050: Emperor Barmandana, 1st king of Mali, undertakes pilgrimage to Mekka
- 1235-60: Reign of the „founder of the kingdom“, Sundiata
- Mansa= Title („Master“ in Mandinka)
- 1298-1308: Mansa Sakuru
- ~1312-37: Mansa Kankan Musa: hejira, takes egyptian scholars to Mali
- ~1400: Decline of the kingdom begins

Songhay

- ~11th c.: Gao reigned by muslim kings, trade with North-Africa and Spain
- ~1300: Gao has to pay tribute to Mali
- ~1375: Gao independent again
- 1464-92: Sunni Ali
- 1493-1528: Askia the Great
- 1591-? Askia Muhammad Gao
- ~1590: Spanish Muslims take Timbuktu and Gao

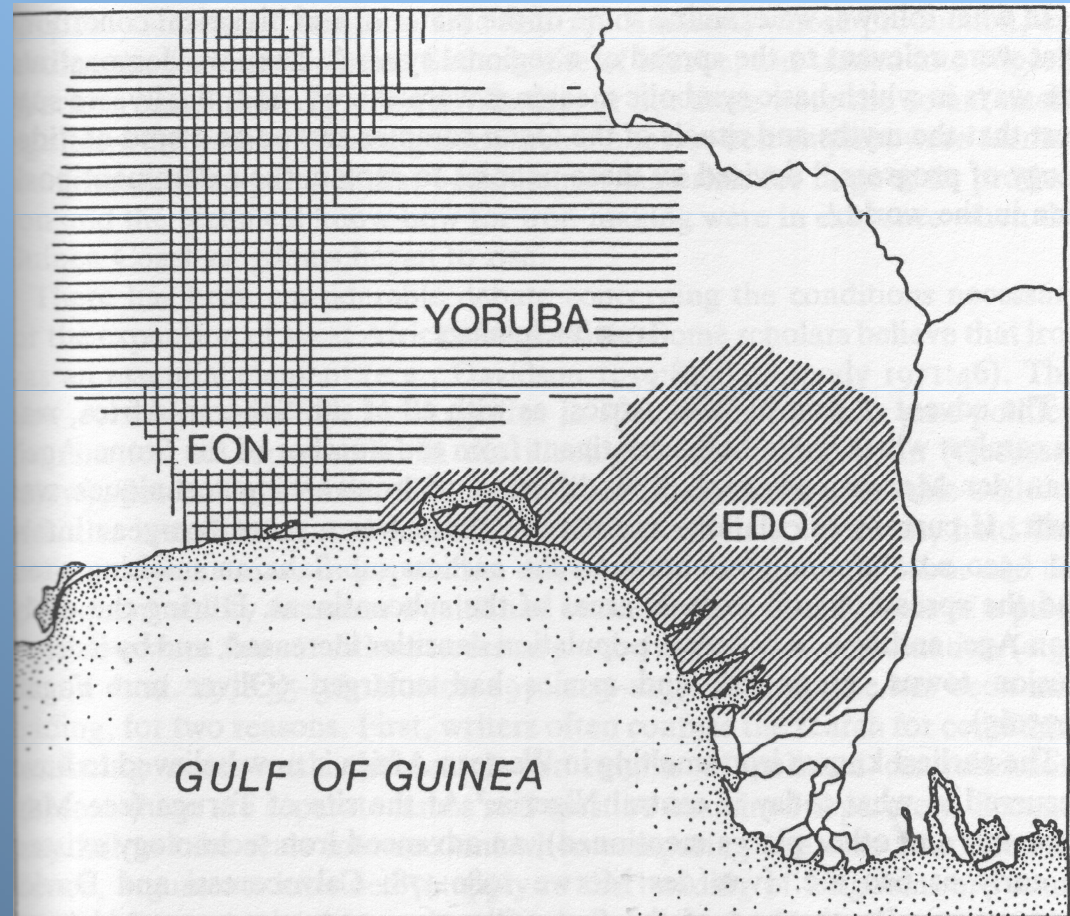
Short History of the Yorùbá

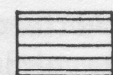


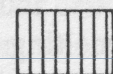



- ~1000: Starting point of Yorùbá urban culture
- Ifé: Place of origin of Yorùbá culture, according to myth place of creation.
- Odùdùwa: First Òóni (oba = king) of Ifé
- ~1300: Ifé at the height of its political power
- ~1650: Supremacy of Oyo
- ~1800: Decline of the kingdom of Oyo.

Guinea Empires 15th to 18th century



 Oyo Empire, 18th century

 Kingdom of Dahomey,
19th century

 Kingdom of Benin,
c. 15th-16th centuries

Copper figurine,
found at Tada
(Nupe-village)
Origin: Ifé



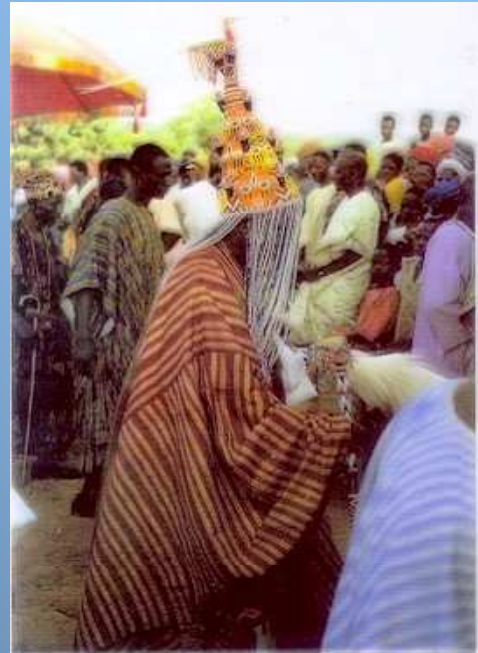
One out of 16
bronze castings of
king's heads found
in Ifé (11th-12th c. ce)
The holes on the
forehead and above
the upper lip were
used to detach the
beaded strings that
cover the king's
face.
Technique of „lost
wax“



Terracotta-
figurine
from Ifé



Traditional conically
shaped
crown of Yorùbá-
Kings

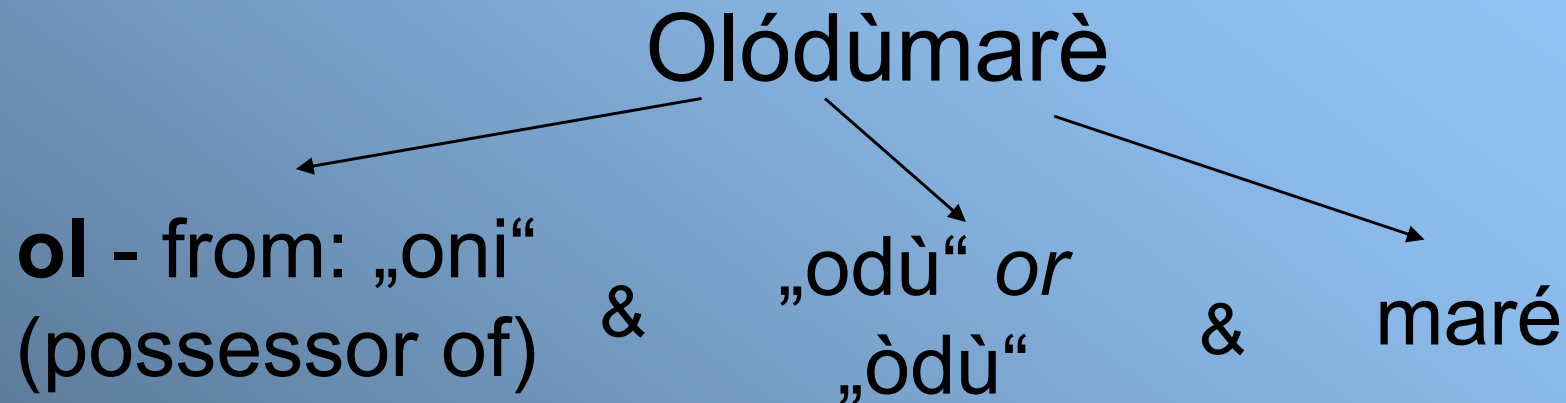


Religion of the Yorùbá

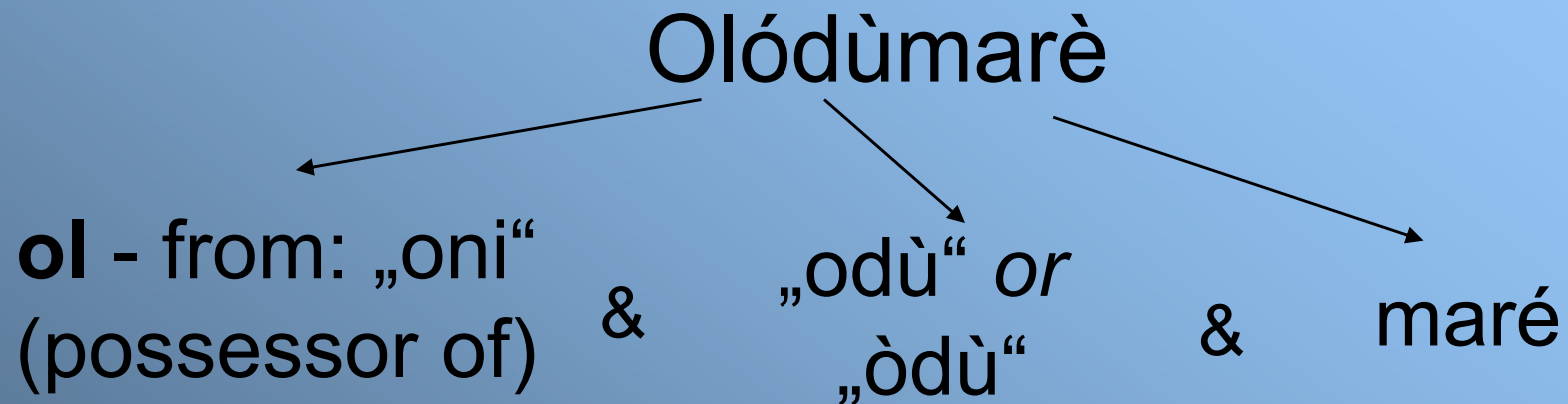
- Òrun and aye: Heaven/Earth: Two halves of a Calabash
- Aṣẹ: „power“
- Olódùmarè: High-God, Creator of the world, „Deus otiosus“
- Òrìṣà: Spiritual beings
- Ifá-Oracle: System of divination
- Merindilogun: System of divination
- Obi: Simple oracle
- Egungun: Ancestor-worship
- Gèlèdé: Masking Society

The calabash is
a symbol of the
cosmos:
òrun & aye,
Heaven & Earth
fitting closely
together

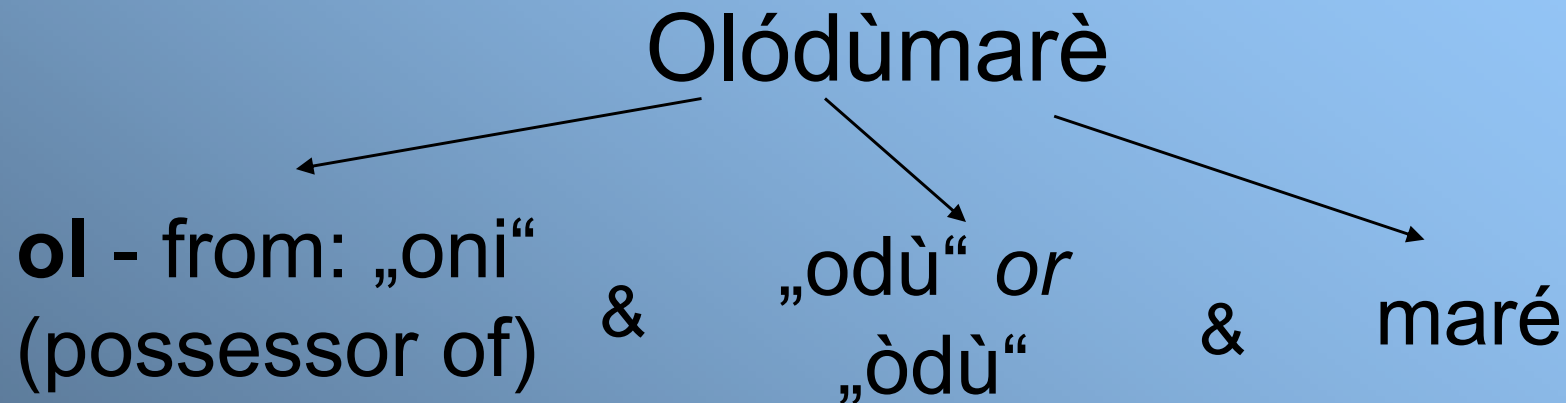




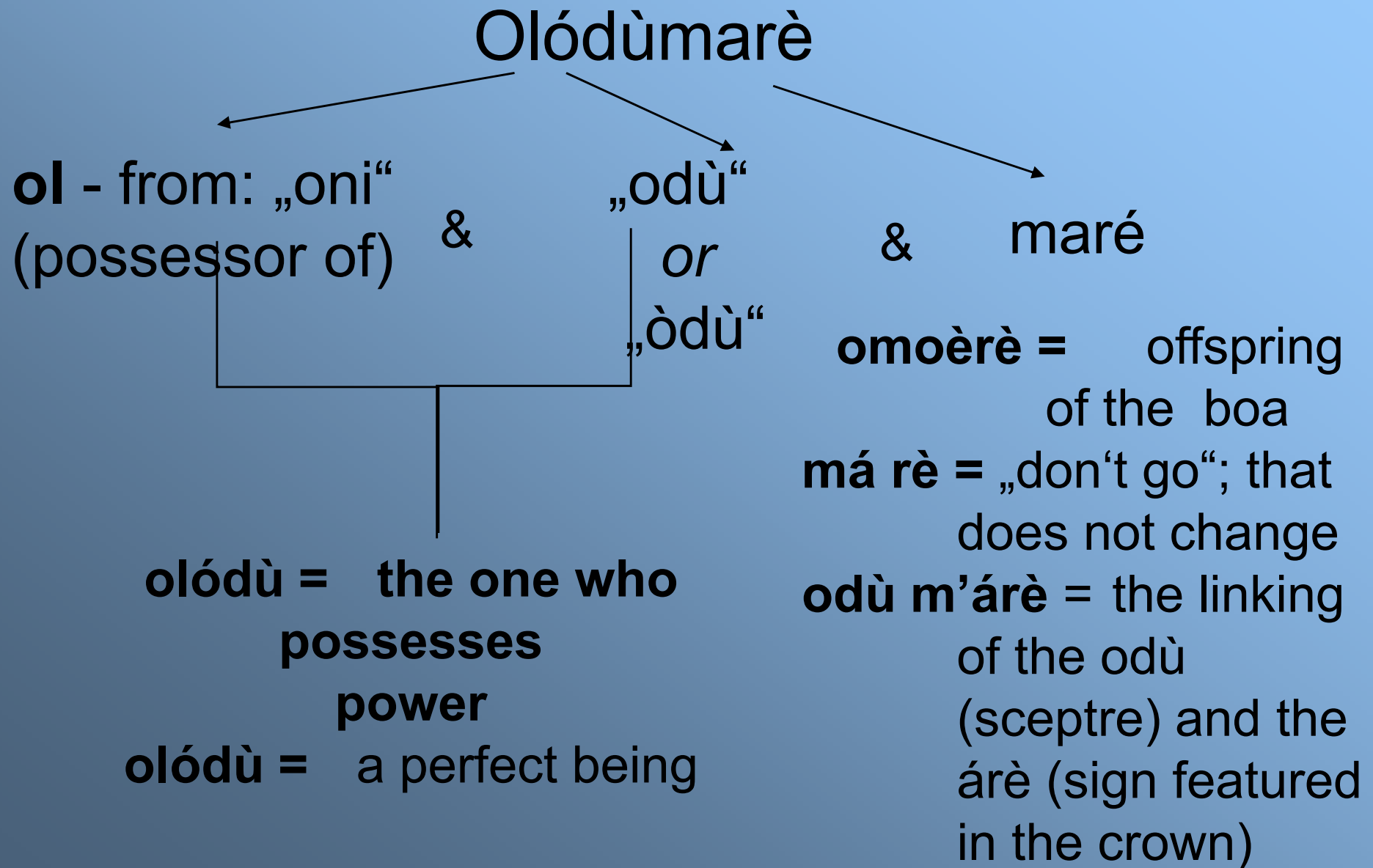
- **oni**= denotes possessor
- **odù** (middle-pitched o) = a chapter (of Ifá); sovereign, authority, sceptre
- **òdù** (low-pitched o) = a big, deep pot;
- **òdù-kàrì** = an òdù, that is perfectly filled



- **olódù** = the one who possesses the reign, the sovereign /emperor
or
- **olódù** = a perfect being



- **omoèrè** = the offspring of the primordial Boa
- **má rè** = „do not go!"; That, which does not move, does not change
- **odù m'árè** = linking of odù (sceptre) and árè (a symbol in the king's crown)
- oni & odù-kàrì: the one that possesses perfection



Olódùmarè

1. Olódù, the offspring of the boa
2. Olódù, who does not go or change, the one that remains.
3. The one combining the sceptre & the crown.
4. The one that possesses ultimate perfection.

Olódùmarè: other names

1. Olórun: the one that owns órun
2. Eléda: the creator, progenitor
3. Elémi: the one that gives the émi, the breath of life.

Religion of the Yorùbá

- Cult of the òrìṣà
- Ifá-divination
- Ancestor-worship

Cult of the òrìṣà

ohun-tí-a-ríṣà =

*that which has been
found and collected*

orí (“head”) & *ṣẹ̀* (“begin”) = *the source of orí*

òrìṣà funfun (cool òrìṣà)

- **Obàtálá (Òrìsànlá)** =
The king in white dress,
the great òrìṣà (Ifé)
- **Òrunmilà** the founder
of the Ifá divination-
system (oracle)

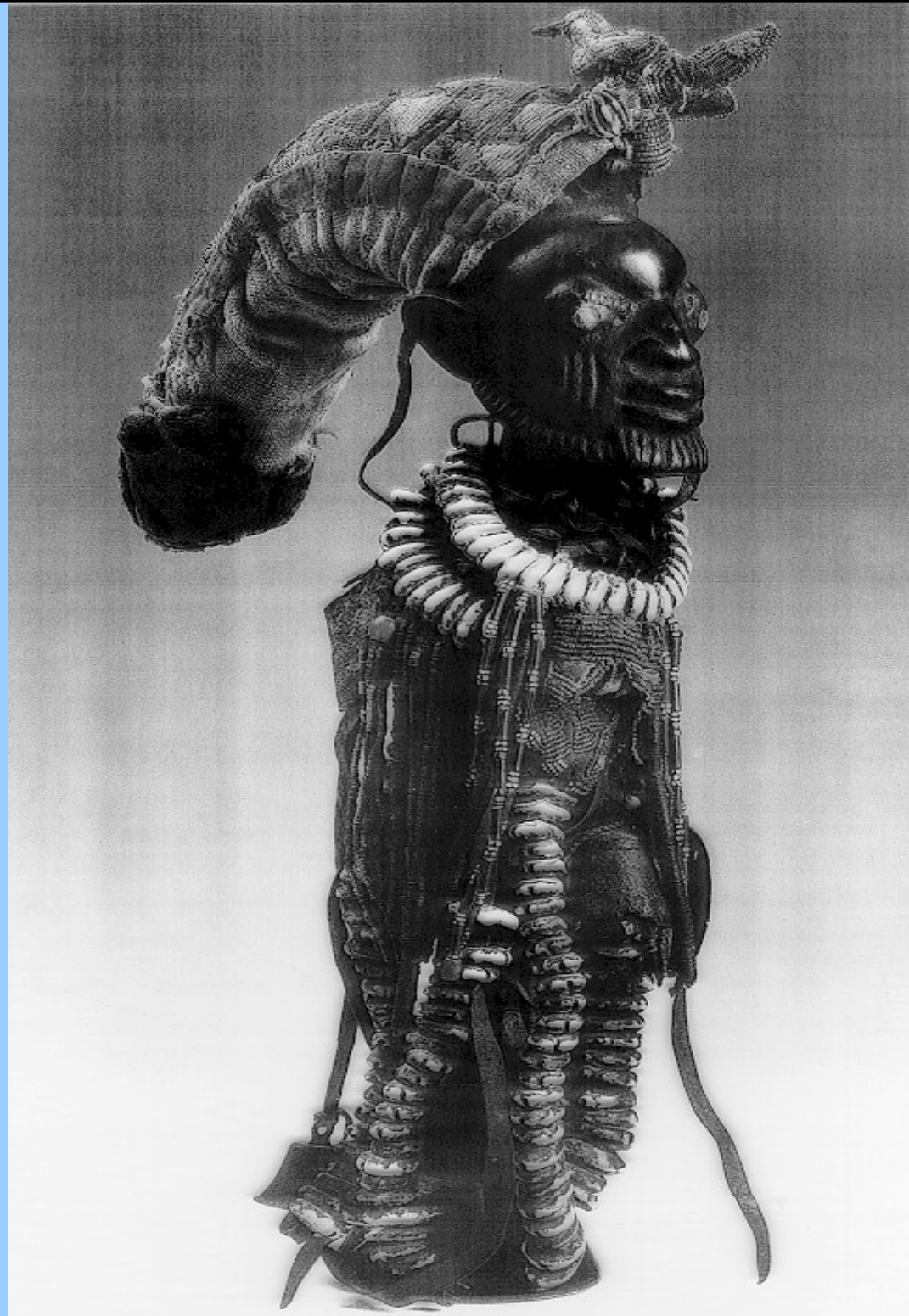
òrìṣà gbigbona (hot òrìṣà)

- **Eṣu (Eleggua)**: Trickster,
the universal translator
- **Şangó** (Oyo): Thunder &
Lightning, Electricity
- **Ogun** : God of Iron & war,
„7 Ogun“

Some female òrìṣà

- **Yemòó, Yemoja** The wife of Obàtálá (in Ifé), goddess of salty water, of the oceans, goddess of love
- **Oya** (One of the) wife (wives) of Şàngó, Goddess of wind and storm
- **Oşun** Goddess of the river Oşun, goddess of water, goddess of fertility, the only female òrìṣà engaged in creation, patron of merindilogun divination





A figurine of Eṣu,
with phallic elonged
head, cowrie shells
& a bird (like on the
crowns of kings?)































































Die 16 Hauptodu des Ifá-Orakels

Eji Ogbe	Oyeku Meji	Iwori Meji	Edi Meji	Irosun Meji	Oworin Meji	Obara Meji	Okanran Meji
I I	II II	II II	I I	I I	II II	I I	II II
I I	II II	I I	II II	I I	II II	II II	II II
I I	II II	I I	II II	II II	I I	II II	II II
I I	II II	II II	I I	II II	I I	II II	I I
Ogunda Meji	Osa Meji	Ika Meji	Oturupon Meji	Otura Meji	Irete Meji	Oşe Meji	Ofun Meji
I I	II II	II II	II II	I I	I I	I I	II II
I I	I I	I I	II II	II II	I I	II II	I I
I I	I I	II II	I I	I I	II II	I I	II II
II II	I I	II II	II II	I I	I I	II II	I I

Mérindílógún









