

Jarawan Bantu: a new look at an orphan group

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The name Jarawan Bantu suggests that this group of languages is part of Bantu, but it is excluded from maps and overviews of Bantu and generally, if rarely, discussed under Bantoid. It has a remarkable distribution, with relic and presumed extinct populations in Cameroun and lively communities in eastern and central Nigeria. Recent years have seen significant amount of new data on these languages, almost all of it unpublished or semi-published. Various authors have argued for the position of Jarawan in different places in the Bantu/Bantoid continuum, often with limited evidence. The purpose of the paper is to set out the material that now exists and to contribute to situating it.

One reason Jarawan Bantu is not usually listed with Bantu is the absence of functioning noun classes. All the languages known lack alternating affixes. Combined with actual borrowings from Chadic, this suggests that the family came under strong influence from Chadic at an early stage in its migrations. However, relic morphology does indicate the loss of these affix systems. Some languages within Jarawan Bantu also have vowels variously described as breathy or with friction, which links it to languages in the Mambiloid group as well as Bantu A. The paper discusses whether these features can contribute to the solution of its classification.