

Was there a proto-Bantu word for ‘whale’ and other mischievous questions



Whale off the Gabonese coast

[DRAFT CIRCULATED FOR COMMENT]

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1. Introduction

It is safe to say that there is no listed proto-Bantu form for ‘whale’ and that indeed marine life of all forms has been almost entirely excluded from the set of canonical forms. Guthrie’s rather eccentric views created the typical discourse of proto-Bantu, and despite many minor changes, the set of forms he established remain dominant. Guthrie seems to have believed the proto-Bantu originated somewhere in Zambia, despite a complete lack of evidence, either linguistic or cultural, in support of such a view. The Johnston/Greenberg view of an origin somewhere in Southern Cameroun is generally accepted by linguists at present, despite dissent from some archaeologists (e.g. Eggert 2008). The conceptual framework of items reconstructed by Guthrie has yet to be expanded. The model, such as it is, has the Bantu expanding east and south, possibly along the rivers or due east along the northern edge of the forest, around 4000 years ago. In support of this, there are reconstructions of forest species such as the pangolin, elephant and monkey. Despite valiant attempts with names of river fish (e.g. Mougiamma-Dauda 2004 and Ankei 1986, 1989) the conclusion can be little more than some Bantu expanded along rivers and caught fish, which is rather self-evident. The potential to reconstruct agriculture for these early communities is strong, with ‘banana’, Bambara groundnut, okra and possibly a species of yam as potential cultigens.

But another possibility, geographically at least, is that the early Bantu had a coastal culture, and were fishing down the east coast. We know that the island of Fernando Po was regularly visited in the pre-Iron Age and that its rocks were in particular demand for stone axes (Sheppherd 1983). We know that the ancestors of the Bubi reached the island prior to the diffusion of iron smelting and presumably fishing represented a major aspect of their subsistence. From Cameroun southwards, surf conditions are such that pelagic fishing is virtually unknown. Nonetheless, this still leaves access to a rich variety of marine species, and indeed many open water species enter the numerous estuaries around the Bight of Biafra, which can be brackish in certain seasons. Despite this, there has been virtually no work on the lexicon of marine life specific to the Bantu of the west coast of Africa. The possibility should be considered that one strand of Bantu expansion was a rapid coastal movement southwards and that this would be reflected in a reconstructible terminology relating to the sea.

This speculation was suggested by the results from some ethnoscience workshops in southwest Cameroun in March and April 2009. Work among the Londo and Kwasio peoples revealed a rich vocabulary of marine life with a large number of apparently underived forms, including a term for ‘whale’. This suggests that some of the A group Bantu may well have early developed a terminology for such a biota and that if it were possible to compile a well-identified list of such terms, this early coastal expansion could be tracked.

The other aspect of such an expansion would be archaeological. If there was a west coast expansion, it should also be reflected in the patterns of pottery and settlement. Unfortunately, coastal archaeology in this region remains poorly developed. The main source is the excavations of Clist in Gabon (1991, 1995, 1998, 2005) also Van Neer & Clist (1991). The coastal Iron Age site of Oveng, 12 km. north of Libreville, dates to 1700 BP, and a detailed analysis of the faunal remains indicates that its occupants lived largely by collection of marine species, such as the shells *Anadara senilis*, *Tympanotus fuscatus*, *T. radula* and the oyster *Ostrea tulipa* (Van Neer & Clist 1991) and a variety of fish species adapted to brackish or seawater. There is additional evidence for a smaller component of gathered forest produce and hunting of small mammals. The authors point to the significance of this subsistence strategy and its relevance for the Bantu expansion, contradicting the ‘across the forest’ model of authors such as Vansina (1990, 1995).

Older work at Pointe-Noire and in Angola is reported in scattered sources (Clist et Lanfranchi 1991). Pais Pinto (1988) describes the Cachama sites near Benguela where the collection of marine resources predominate. The site of Benfica, near Luanda, dating to ca. 1800 BP also suggests a subsistence strategy where marine resources were highly significant.

Sites with published faunal analyses are few and far between, but descriptions of ceramic traditions are more common and point to movement down the coast earlier than 1800 BP. Denbow (1986, 1990) describes the ceramics of Tchissanga, near the mouth of the Congo, which consistently date to around the 6th century BC, and are related to the Okala traditions in Gabon and those of Ngovo in the DRC. He links these to a major

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movement of Western Bantu-speakers towards the Kalahari, where they encountered Khoesan speakers. Herbert & Huffman (1993) proposed that the other major ceramic tradition south of the rainforest, the so-called 'Kalundu' tradition, is linked with the Western Bantu. In their version, the bearers of the Kalundu tradition emerge from the rainforest and migrate both eastward and southeast, eventually interlocking with the Urewe tradition somewhere in Zambia. Evidence for a rapid expansion down the west coast remains fragmentary, but what sites there are provide intriguing hints of such a movement.

This hypothesis may explain another problem in African historical linguistics, the long list of apparent cognates between Ijò and proto-Bantu. Ijoid languages are spoken in the I iger Delta, by the Ijò, a nexus of fishing peoples, and are typologically extremely unlike Bantu. They are related to it only at a very high node on the tree of I iger-Congo since they appear never to have noun-classes. Kay Williamson (†) in compiling a list of Ijoid reconstructions, noticed numerous lookalikes with Bantu. In her view, languages rarely borrowed fundamental vocabulary, and she thus attributed them to a very ancient period of shared lexicon. However, from a more recent perspective, such borrowing is perfectly feasible and it may be that these apparent cognates are borrowing in one or both directions, dating from an epoch when there was intensive contact between the Bantu and the Ijò as part of a flourishing coastal maritime culture. Even today, there is some contact, with Ijò fishing boats making their way into the relatively rich waters off Cameroun, but political problems in recent years have reduced this type informal interconnection.

We might also expect contact with peoples speaking Lower Cross languages. The Cross River is dominated by languages such as Efik and Ibibio, for which dictionaries exist, but which are not rich in maritime terms. But languages such as Efai and Usaghade, whose speakers have significant marine fisheries, remain little-known. Lower Cross languages are much more closely related to Bantu than Ijò and formal similarities would have to be closely examined to clarify whether they represent loans and if so in what direction and through what process.

2. Which Bantu languages are found along the west coast?

Between Cameroun and I amibia, Bantu languages are the only languages spoken on the western seaboard of Africa, bounded by Cross River languages in the north (Usaghade) and the Khoisan languages in I amibia. Table 1 presents these languages, drawn from the maps of the Ethnologue, listing them from north to south in individual countries.

Table 1. Bantu languages along the western seaboard of Africa

Country	Languages North to South
Cameroun	Londo [=Balundu-Bima], Bakole, Mokpe, Abo, Duala, Bubia, Isu, Malimba, Batanga, I gumba, Yasa
Equatorial Guinea	Bubi, Yasa, I gumbi, Benga
Gabon	Seki, Fang, Benga, Myene, Lumbu
Congo-Brazzaville	Vili
DRC	Yombe
Angola	Mbundu, Sama, Umbundu, I dombe
I amibia	I o Bantu languages are spoken along the coast today, but may have been in the past. The nearest group to the coast, the Himba, are cattle people who presumably have had no interest in marine life in historic times.

I have not yet had a chance to investigate the lexical data for all these languages, but it is fairly clear that no long lists of well-identified and reliably transcribed sea fauna are to be found among the scant materials. Vivien (1991) represents a reliable source of identifications, and he includes substantial numbers of indigenous names. However, his transcriptions leave much to be desired, and not all could be clarified by speakers. Seret & Opic (1997) give names loosely ascribed to the 'Congo'.

3. The great white whale

This section will present lexical arguments, but these have yet to be marshalled, so it is presently only a virtual section.

4. The Ijoid connection

If it is the case that that there was a far more active maritime connection across the Bight of Biafra than now exists, then one aspect of this could have been lexical interchange. Table 2 sets out the more convincing Bantu-Ijō lexical parallels identified by Kay Williamson. I ot included are those which I find doubtful, and those where it is likely they do indeed go back to a more ancient I iger-Congo root. I have excluded the data on Defaka, which Kay used to construct proto-Ijoid forms, because Defaka is often different, and because its true status as Ijoid remains questionable. I do not expect all the parallels to stand; this table is presently a list of suggestions to be investigated. Also, no hypothesis is advanced about the direction of spread; indeed words may have travelled in both directions. Regrettably there are few words concerned with the sea and fisheries, but then the Ijoid forms were not reconstructed and they are absent in typical Bantu lists.

Table 2. Bantu-Ijo lexical parallels

Gloss	P-Ijō	BLR3
all	sɛ	?BLR ce L 499 <i>all</i>
beat, flog, hit	fɜmũ	LR pam H 2382 <i>hit</i>
bind, tie (bundle)	fɛnã	BLR pind H 2578 <i>tie knot</i>
blood	asĩ	BLR cii LH 6453 <i>blood</i>
burn (as house) vi	ijokĩ	BLR jokĩ L 3532 <i>roast; burn</i> BLR jonki L 3578 <i>roast; burn; tr.</i>
catch, hold	kɔrɪ	?BLR kod H 6999 <i>take; touch</i>
chest, width (of chest)	kuɓu	BLR kuba HL 2106 <i>chest</i>
cloth, raffia	okuru (KOIɪ)	?BLR kɔto HL 2077 <i>garment</i>
create = mould	tɛmẽ	?BLR dem L 7451 <i>create, make sp.</i>
faint vi	fɔmɔ	BLR pɔɔm H 2647 <i>breathe; rest</i>
feather	ɪpĩkɔ̃ɔ̃	BLR piko LL 2515 <i>wing</i>
front	ɓɛlɛɔ	BLR bede LL 121 <i>front; before</i>
good, become	ɛfi	?BLR boi 7060 <i>good</i>
hard = strong	kɔrɔ	BLR kɔt H 5215 <i>be dry; hard</i> BLR kod H 1874 <i>be strong; be hard; be difficult</i>
intestines	ɪla EI	BLR da L 773 <i>abdomen, intestines; pregnancy; inside</i>
kite (bird)	ekulɛĩ ?	?BLR kodi HL 1883 <i>bird of prey spp., hawk spp.</i>
love	tari	?BLR tand 8568 <i>love; like; wish</i>
melt vt	sanĩ	?BLR caanɔdɔd L__ 9267 <i>melt, tr.</i>
mix (blend) vi	koɓu-i	?BLR kib L <i>mix clay</i>
I ile monitor	ɛbɔdi	?BLR bɔdɔ HH 308 <i>reptile: monitor lizard; lizard</i>
obstruct = prevent	kiki	BLR kik H 1796 <i>put across; obstruct</i>
paddle (canoe)	jɔgɔ	BLR dug H 1248 <i>paddle</i>
pierce = stab	tɛmĩ	BLR tum H 3108 <i>stab</i>
pound vt	tɛmĩ	?BLR tɪmp 5999 <i>pound</i>
set (trap)	pɪta	?BLR pɪa LL I 116 <i>trap</i>
shadow = spirit	tɛmẽ	?BLR dima HH 3820 <i>spirit</i>
slice vt	sɛ̃gɪ	BLR ceng L 545 <i>cut</i>
snore	ɔ̃gɔrɪ	BLR gon L 1440 <i>snore; sleep; lie down</i>
song	dũmɔũ ?	BLR dɪmb H V 5554 <i>sing</i> BLR jimbo HL 3364 <i>song; dance</i>
spear (fishing)	dũmɔũ/dũmɔũ	?BLR tumo HL 3109 <i>spear</i>
strong = hard	kɔrɔ	BLR kɔt H 5215 <i>be dry; hard</i> BLR kod H 1874 <i>be strong; be hard; be difficult</i>
tie (rope)	kakarɪ	BLR kak L 1682 <i>tie up</i>

Gloss	P-Ijò	BLR3
throat = voice	pək̄ʂ ?	BLR kaak L_ 9294 <i>tie up</i>
wide, become	finĩ-ĩ	BLR pogo 7107 <i>throat</i> ?BLR pana 8280 <i>wide</i>

5. Conclusions

The standard literature on the Bantu expansion and the standard list of PB reconstructions is based around an assumption of a land-based expansion across the equatorial rainforest. But there is nothing inherently impossible about an active Bantu maritime culture spreading rapidly down the western seaboard of Africa after 4000 bp and indeed this has some support from archaeology. Lexical links with fishing populations north and west of the coastal Bantu suggest active sea-based interchanges in prehistory. But a more convincing demonstration will only be forthcoming when we have access to more reliable lexical data in the appropriate semantic domains.

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