

Bantu maritime vocabulary and its implications for reconstruction and early Bantu dispersal

BANTU IV

7-9th April, 2011

HUMBOLDT UNIVERSITY, BERLIN

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The Bantu in linguistics and archaeology

'Bantu' is a linguistic construct dating back to seventeenth century observations of the similarities between numerous languages in Southern and Central Africa

Its linguistic relationship to the languages of West Africa was first set out by Johnston (1919-1922) and later by Greenberg (1963)

However, the exact boundary between 'Bantu' and 'Bantoid' languages remains disputed

It was early perceived to represent a demographic migration although no evidence was presented for this

In the 1960s, archaeologists began to take an interest in the concept, and now the archaeology of the Bantu expansion is a fairly well established topic

More recently, geneticists have also been making claims about correlations with linguistics etc.

The Bantu in linguistics and archaeology II

- ❖ However, the reality of these proposed correlations remains weak.
- ❖ It is generally considered that the jumping-off point for these migrations is Southern Cameroun
- ❖ But we have very few archaeological sites in Southern Cameroun. Most dates are not as early that most linguists would like, i.e. around 4000 BP. However, some recent pits excavated for the pipeline project by Scott McEachern do have these sort of dates
- ❖ Although to outsiders there would appear to be long lists of reconstructions of proto-Bantu forms, few of these are well-founded in the lexicography of Bantu A, which is the most problematic and diverse of the whole family
- ❖ Exactly who, how, when and where still remains very much up for grabs

Models of the Bantu expansion

The conventional model of the Bantu expansion is dominated by the conceptual world that Bantu lexical reconstructions appear to indicate.

These focus above all on farming, river fisheries, and forest mammals. Hence the characteristic model of an overland expansion south and east of the Cameroun rainforest, a view apparently supported by finds of pottery along the major river systems.

The possibility that there was also a maritime expansion down the west coast of Africa has hardly been considered, in part because marine vocabulary has not been reconstructed.

Vansina in a little-noticed observation in his 1995 publication says 'First, the original Bantu language became different from the Mbam-Nkam cluster of Bantoid languages in westernmost Cameroun. It then expanded as a single language, mostly eastwards towards the Great Lakes area with a secondary movement towards the lower Ogooué area, achieved in part by seagoing people.'

Models of the Bantu expansion

The archaeologist Bernard Clist has excavated shell mounds in coastal Gabon and suggested that seagoing populations may well have played a greater role in early movements down to Angola

This has not been taken up by the archaeological community for lack of further work in this region.

To explore this hypothesis from an ethnographic and linguistic point of view, extensive surveys of coastal Bantu populations with a maritime orientation in Cameroun were undertaken in early 2010.

Models of the Bantu expansion

As a result it is now possible to say that there *is* an extensive range of proto-Bantu vocabulary relating to sea-fish, boats, weather and ocean conditions, which has hitherto been unrecorded and effectively ignored.

One thread of the early period of Bantu prehistory may thus have been based on complex exploitation of pelagic resources

The southern extent of this migration is unknown, in the absence of research in the relevant locations, but it is most likely the severe surf conditions in Angola would have precluded further expansion, which may explain the predominance of coastal foragers below a certain latitude.

Some relevant archaeology

Complementary evidence for such an expansion would be archaeological. If this was indeed southwards along the west coast, it should be reflected in patterns of pottery and settlement.

Unfortunately, coastal archaeology in this region remains poorly developed. The main source is the excavations of Bernard Clist in Gabon (Clist 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, expanding the perspective of more simplistic 'across the forest' models in authors such as Vansina (1990, 1995).

Some relevant archaeology

- ❖ Earlier work at Pointe-Noire and in Angola is reported in scattered sources (Clist & 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, this meeting) describes the ceramics of Tchissanga, near the mouth of the Congo, which are related to the Okala traditions in Gabon and those of Ngovo in the DRC.
- ❖ Some of the sites have dates ca. 3000 BP which would fit very well with a primary push of Bantu with lithics and a maritime adaptation, managing but not growing *Elaeis*, perhaps transplanting yams.

Conclusion of Clist (in press)

- ❖ 'La diversité constatée des productions de poteries pour des groupes grossièrement synchrones permet de suggérer qu'au Cameroun et au Gabon, entre –3000 et –2500 ans, les artisans, tout en respectant dans les grandes lignes une tradition héritée de leurs aînés, ont très tôt imaginer leur propre grammaire.
- ❖ A l'intérieur de cette diversité, il est saisissant d'y constater dans la production des haches et des houes en pierre recueillies en fouille, d'une part une chaîne opératoire aboutissant à des haches et houes simples au tranchant soigneusement poli sur l'ensemble des sites de l'intérieur des terres (Traditions d'Obobogo et d'Okala notamment), et, d'autre part, des haches et houes à gorge, polies ou simplement taillées, pour l'instant toujours sur le littoral Atlantique (Eboundja 3 et Bwambé au Cameroun; Rivière Denis et Lycée Léon Mba au Gabon).
- ❖ Cette répartition géographique est fortement suggestive de deux axes d'expansion nord-sud, du Cameroun vers le Gabon, d'une part par l'intérieur des terres au travers de la forêt, d'autre part au long du littoral en utilisant les premières savanes côtières héritées de la phase sèche mi-Holocène (Clist, 2005).

Geography of the coast

From the extreme southeast of Nigeria to central Angola, the coast is dominated by dense tropical forest with the shore fringed by mangroves and palms, typically coconut and raffia. Numerous rivers reach the coast, some very large and many places, the coast is broken up by small deltas and estuaries.

Rainfall is heavy and can occur throughout the year, although there is still a marked dry season in most places. South from Luanda, the climate becomes significantly drier, eventually becoming the notorious Skeleton Coast and the hyper-arid deserts of Namibia.

The aridity seems to have deterred Bantu settlement and until the colonial era, the coast remained largely the preserve of seashore foragers. Estermann (1956) has described the subsistence of some of these non-Bantu foragers.

Which Bantu languages are found along the west coast?

- **Country Languages North to South**
- Cameroun(A10) Londo [=Balundu-Bima]
- (A20) Abo, Isu, Duala, Mokpe, Wumboko
- (A30) Batanga, Yasa, Wuvia
- (A40) Yasuku [Bakoko dialect]
- (A80) Mabi
- Equatorial Guinea (A30) Bubi, Yasa, Ngumbi,
- Benga,(A80) Bisio
- Gabon Seki, Fang, Benga, Myene,
- Lumbu
- Congo-Brazzaville Vili
- DRC Yombe
- Angola Mbundu, Sama, Umbundu, Ndombe

Can the present be read back into the past?

- Although the first image of sea fisheries is very 'traditional' in fact numerous introductions in the post-European era have changed the dynamics of subsistence fisheries considerably since the sixteenth century.
- A significant problem is the extent to which modern techniques are simply updating of former practices as opposed to introductions. For example, the anchor is almost certainly a European introduction, yet it appears to have an embedded local name.
- Plank boats may well also be post-European, although there is no evidence for this. If pre-Iron Age sailors could cross the surf to Bioco on a regular basis, they must surely have had large boats, and not just the small monoxylous canoes made today.
- Sails are not much used on the open sea, but are found in more sheltered lagoons and estuarine areas and are certainly post sixteenth century. More difficult to determine is net-fishing.
- Although nets are certainly pre-European, it is less clear whether the floats and sinkers characteristic of European nets are later developments. All the parts of the net today are manufactured industrial materials, plastic and other synthetics. Some types of net-fishing, such as shore dragnets, have names that point to European origin, in this case *tire-tire*.

Proto-Bantu maritime terminology

- The languages along the coast of Cameroun include those of groups A10-A30 and A80. I therefore assume that words attested widely in these languages must be reconstructible to proto-Bantu.
- As it happens, there are no Bantoid languages with a coastal presence, therefore any innovative roots are unlikely to be traceable beyond the proto-Bantu level.
- Where it seems reasonable, I have included a quasi-reconstruction for proto-Bantu; this is not a form worked out by strict historical correspondences, merely an indication of the existence of a likely form of approximately this shape.
- From the data gathered so far, it seems likely that the coastal peoples consist of two quite different groups, those who have long been on the coast and demonstrate a rich, apparently indigenous terminology and those groups which arrived quite recently and either borrowed terms or adapted them from river fish names. Typically, such groups have a much less detailed lexicon for marine species, for example having a single term covering all crabs or marine shells.

Fish names: sharks

Language	Attestation
Mokpe	ndomi
Isu	̀ndò mí
Wumboko	̀ndó mɛ̀
Wuvia	̀ndò mí
Pungu	̀ndóm
Malimba	ndómɛ́
Yasuku	̀ndó mí
Mabi	̀ntú má/bì- large shark sp.
Tanga	̀ndó mé
Yasa	̀ndò mí

Names of 'bonga shad' in northwest Bantu

Language	Attestation
#Proto-Bantu	epaka
Londo	epara
Isu	è-yàáká / β è-
Pungu	é-pà /bé-
Malimba	é-pà /bé-
Duala	epa
Yasuku	è-pàgà /bì-
Mabi	páyà /bì-
Tanga Bapuku	épákà
Tanga Bano'o	épaà
Yasa	è-pàkà /bè-



Ethmalosa fimbriata

Names of 'whale' in northwest Bantu



Names of 'whale' in northwest Bantu

Language

Londo

Isu

Wumboko

Wuvia

Yasuku

Tanga

Yasa

Attestation

ndʒónɖʒì

ndʒónɖʒì

nʒónʒì

nʒónʒì

ndónɖʒì

ndʒónʒì

ndónɖʒì

Fish capture techniques used along the coast of Cameroun

Category	Types	Comment
Harpoon guns		recent?
Hooks		probably recent
Nets	double clap-nets sweep-net	
Plunge-basket		
Seines	hand-seine circular seine	
Gill-nets	floating gill-net bottom-set gill-net	
Valve-traps	cylindrical valve-traps conical valve-traps set in fish-fences valveless non-return traps for shrimps	
Long-lines	baited long-lines foul-hook long-lines	

Terms for 'cast-net' in northwest Bantu

Language

Londo

Isu

Wumboko

Wuvia

Malimba

Tanga

Yasa

Attestation

mbunja

m̀bùndʒà

mbúnʒá

m̀búnʒá

mbúndʒà

mbụndʒà

mbúɖʒá

Boats

- ❖ The principal method of boat construction along the west coast is the canoe made from a single tree-trunk. Fire is used to split the canoe and open up the interior and adzes shape the outside of the canoe. However, today only small canoes are made in this way and all larger boats are made from planks.
- ❖ Ssentongo & Njock (1987) suggest that all the plank boats are of Ghanaian or Nigerian origin and are thus not very old. They refer to very large canoes with up to fourteen paddlers used with large purse seines used for *Sardinella* and bonga; no such canoes were seen today. One study exists of terms for 'canoe' in Bantu languages, the still unpublished Bulkens (n.d.).
- ❖ This identifies several widespread roots for 'canoe' including **(n)yato* which occurs along river systems through much of the Bantu world and indeed beyond. However, Bulkens assumes the characteristic term for 'boat' along the coast of Cameroun is cognate with the **ato* root.
- ❖ However, while $t \rightarrow l$ is a possible sound-shift, the Cameroun root always has an initial **b*, which makes it fairly certain it is a regional innovation with a distinctive coastal distribution.

Boats



Canoes at Lonji Beach

Oral tradition: the legend of the red-gilled fish

A Mabi oral tradition runs as follows;

‘Quand l'homme Mabi atteignit la cote, le groupe Bogieli y avait déjà installé des huttes pour leur campement. Au cours d'une pêche, ils avaient pris un poisson bizarre dont ils ne connaissaient pas le nom; ils l'ont emballé dans des feuilles et placé au feu, au moment du repas, ils constatèrent que les branchies du poisson étaient toujours rouges aussi bien que les alentours de ses yeux qui n'avaient pas changé. Ils remirent le paquet au feu, toujours le fait était le même, alors nos fidèles compagnons décidèrent que le cours d'eau pouvait disposer des choses porteuses de malheurs, et que ce poisson pouvait tuer, ils ne pouvaient pas vivre au bord de cette eau il fallait rentrer en brousse’.

In several forms this turns up among several of the coastal Bantu groups, recording the prior presence of pygmies and the fish that would not cook (a grouper?)

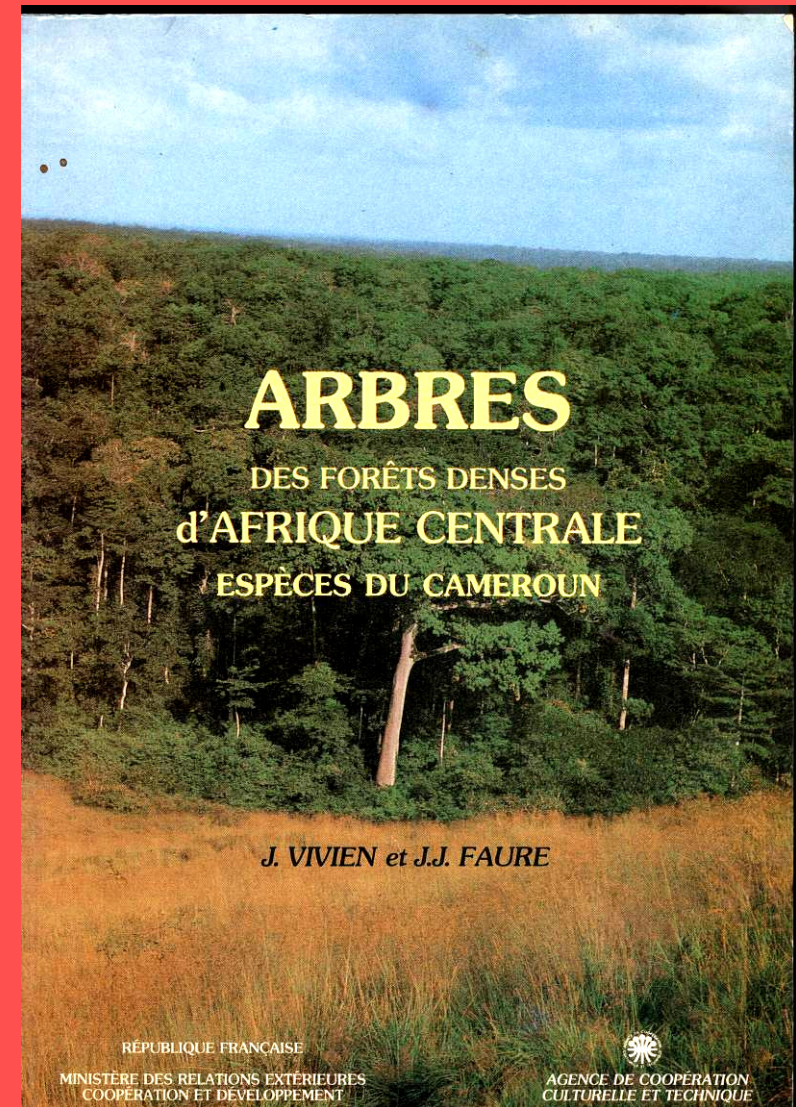
This is interesting because the pygmies today have no interest in maritime resources. Does this record an encounter with non-Pygmies?

Conclusions

- The literature on the Bantu expansion and the standard list of PB reconstructions assumes a land-based expansion across the equatorial rainforest following the rivers.
- The collection and synthesis of maritime vocabulary in the languages of coastal Cameroun points to a rich lexicon which has previously gone unrecorded. This suggests an active Bantu maritime culture spreading rapidly down the western seaboard of Africa after 4000 bp which has some support from archaeology.
- Early traffic with the island of Bioco, perhaps connected with the stone axe trade, has shown that pelagic fishing techniques and a knowledge of the open ocean must have been a significant element in Bantu subsistence in this region.

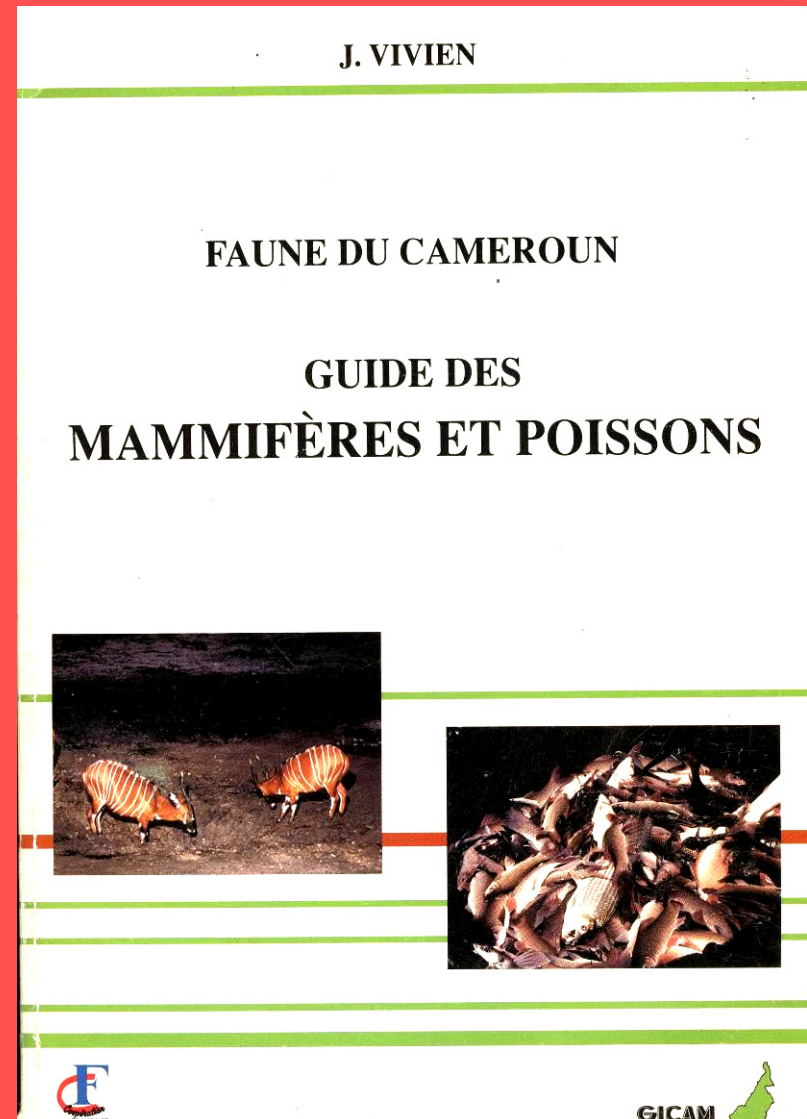
Other possibilities

- However, the reconstruction of proto-Bantu has slowed down in other ways
- There must be a large number of specific trees that reconstruct to proto-Bantu
- The vernacular names in Vivien & Faure give us hints as to what these might be
- The trees *Trichoscypha acuminata*, *Polyalthia suaveolens*, *Xylopia staudtii*, *Ceiba pentandra*, *Santiria trimera*, *Aucoumea klaineana* all look as if they may be proto-Bantu



Other possibilities

- Similarly with fish and mammal names
- There are many attested in Bantu A which are also in Bantoid, including the flying squirrels, ground squirrels, Gambian rat, cane-rat, brush-tailed porcupine, servaline genet, spotted hyena, tree hyrax, red river hog, water chevrotain and others
- With a more sophisticated collection of data on ethnoscience, the reconstruction of proto-Bantu can be greatly expanded





**Map showing
possible
migration and
interaction
zone**

Difficulties of doing fieldwork



The Titanic sails at dawn



A parallel lost maritime culture

- It may seem strange that a maritime culture can disappear so completely, but in fact there are many examples of this in prehistory
- A parallel case is the diffusion of cultural traits from Peru and Ecuador to West Mexico from as early as 1000 BC
- We know that basic urbanism, shaft-graves and associated ceramics, significant numbers of crop plants, copper-working and many other cultural traits went this way and clearly by sea as they 'jump' the intervening land corridor
- Yet we really have no idea what sort of boats were in use, how trade was organised etc. No iconography or archaeology remains have yet been uncovered

THANKS

- To Kay Williamson Educational Foundation for supporting my fieldwork
- To Stephen Anderson for setting up the contacts and Dan Duke and Marieke Martin for assistance in the field
- To Bernard Clist and Koen Bostoen for comments
- And to the many fishermen who gave their time (and fish)

