

The Reconstruction of Proto-Bantu Culture from the Lexicon*

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1. Introduction

Though the close kinship of the Bantu languages has long been recognized since the work of W. H. J. Bleek (1862-1869), the systematic reconstruction of the Proto-Bantu lexicon was only started several decades later when Carl Meinhof (1899, 1910, 1932), applying the methods of Schleicher and the Neogrammarians, tried to reconstruct the phonological system of Proto-Bantu. His reconstructions, based on a limited number of languages, did not serve as a basis for a hypothesis on Proto-Bantu culture, because Meinhof was at that time the main promotor of the hypothesis of the Hamitic pastoral expansion as a major civilizing element in Africa south of the equator (Meinhof 1912, 1936). Other German linguists added progressively numerous new comparisons to those of Meinhof, on the basis of the steadily increasing available linguistic information, mainly as a result of the study of the languages of the interior, first by missionaries, later by linguists. Especially important were the collections of O. Dempwolff (1916-1917) and W. Bourquin (1923), to which the contributions of Belgian linguists like A. Coupez (1954) and A. De Rop (1958) may be added. In 1969, the accumulated material was sufficient for A. E. Meeussen to compile an extensive repertory of Proto-Bantu roots under the title *Bantu Lexical Reconstructions*. The following year, the first volume of Malcolm Guthrie's comparative Bantu vocabulary appeared, soon followed by the second volume, both constituting parts 3 and 4 of his monumental *Comparative Bantu* (1967-1971). This contained a systematic synthesis of twenty years of research, compilation and checking of materials in about two hundred languages, presented under the form of some 2,300 lexical correspondences based on a shared semantic content and phonologically closely related forms. The total number of Proto-Bantu roots was much smaller, however, since the lemmas of the dictionary include a considerable number of derivations, e.g. verbs, nouns of agent, nouns of action, reversives and causatives, based on the same root. Moreover, every significant semantic difference leads to positing homonymous, but separate 'roots'. Thus, the term *cimbà is listed under three lemmas: (a) 'wild-cat; (leopard)'; (b) 'genet'; (c) 'lion', whose reflexes cover extensive areas of the Bantu territory, whereas the meaning occurring in the various regions seems to depend on the ecology of the habitat of the relevant animal. On the other hand, when reconstructing Proto-Bantu, Guthrie establishes at a very early date a dialectal contrast between a western area (Proto-Bantu A) and an eastern area (Proto-Bantu B).

When a 'root' has valid reflexes in both areas, it is assigned to original Proto-Bantu (Proto-Bantu X), but this does not necessarily imply that terms which do not appear all over the Bantu territory have to be excluded from the Proto-Bantu vocabulary: the absence of reflexes in a given region may be due to lack of information (in particular as regards the zones A, B, and C of Guthrie in the north-west). The occurrence of different terms in the two areas (P.B.A. and P.B.B.) does not necessarily exclude the existence of a common concept at an early date: thus, the fact that the term for 'door' is *bédò in the west and *yìbì (*yìgì) in the east may simply reflect a difference in construction technique. And should one doubt the existence of terms for 'scorpion' or 'chameleon' at an early date because only very localized terms are found for the former, whereas no set of comparable terms is attested for the latter? When one thinks of the magical power ascribed to the chameleon, it is not surprising that its original name may have been made tabu: hence, the absence of a common term! Nevertheless, the abundance of terms occurring mostly in the southern and eastern part of the Bantu territory and the frequent absence of correspondences in Guthrie's zones A, B, C, have led a number of scholars to wonder about the possibility of an early split of the languages of these zones from the rest of Proto-Bantu. Though this question must, for the time being remain open, it is obvious that Guthrie's work, in spite of some of its methodological weaknesses, provides us with a rich and valuable picture of the culture of the early Bantu world.

2. The reconstructed lexicon and its cultural implications

Detailed in certain respects, the reconstructed lexicon remains, however, fragmentary in others. As regards the environment, the vocabulary rather points to a landscape of wooded savanna than to tropical forest: wide stretches of bush, with various kinds of palm trees, baobabs, thorn trees, etc. The fauna is essentially that of the savanna: lion, genet, jackal, hyena, elephant, numerous varieties of antelopes, from the kudu to the impala, warthog, leopard, and so many others. Some terms indicate different varieties of ecological environment, e.g. dense thickets in which the rhinoceros wanders or rivers in which crocodiles swarm and hippopotamuses bathe leisurely. There is a very extensive and precise nomenclature of animal names, including among others, the monkey, the rat, the bat, the monitor lizard, the ant, the termite, the spider, the millipede, the cricket, the locust, the grasshopper, the fly, the mosquito, the cockroach, the turtle, the frog, the porcupine, etc. Living in close contact with nature, the Bantu has an adequate and specific set of terms at his disposal to describe it. This applies, however, to a lesser degree to the birds and the fish: merely a few species of birds are specifically designated in the common vocabulary, except for the birds of prey. There is no linguistic evidence of direct contact with the sea: terms like 'crab' apply to the terrestrial varieties that abound among the palm-trees, the only specific fish-name is that of the 'eel' which could be caught in fresh-water. A more precise terminology applies to cultivated plants and domestic animals.

There is no doubt that the Proto-Bantus were agriculturists and grew cereals, esp. millet. They also seem to have been familiar, at a very early date, with the sugar cane and the banana. As vegetables, they appear to have grown mainly pumpkins and beans. Important were also the oil-yielding plants, esp. the palm-nut and the peanut. As for the agricultural techniques, the vocabulary points out that the Bantus cleared the land with axes and cultivated it with hoes. The cereals were threshed and winnowed; they were stored in safe places. When they wanted to obtain flour, they used two techniques: (a) grinding between two stones; (b) stamping in a mortar.

The Proto-Bantus must also have been picking fruit, but the only known name of fruit tree in their lexicon (except for the palm trees) is the fig tree. Among the techniques connected with agriculture, it should also be mentioned that they had developed a method for brewing beer. On the other hand, they also practiced cattle-breeding on a large scale: beside cows and bulls, which were penned up in kraals for their protection, they also kept goats, sheep, pigs, chickens, and, of course, dogs. As regards their livestock, they may already have had castrated steers. As for preparing food, cooking seems to have been the common practice: a set of verbs indicates the various techniques--'frying', 'roasting', 'boiling', 'baking in hot ashes'; there is a term to indicate that the food is getting cooked enough, and one of the words for vegetables applies specifically to 'cooked vegetables'. They prepared broth, and, with millet, a rather thick mush. Fish was also part of their usual diet. The Proto-Bantus fished with hook and line or caught the fish in basket-traps, like the waGenia still use nowadays in the rapids of Zaïre.

Pottery and basketry were very popular crafts: there are terms for 'moulding the clay'; a distinction is made between pots to cook food in and jars to preserve drinking water in. There were baskets of all sizes and shapes, from the hamper to the small box. Nothing, however, indicates any knowledge of spinning and weaving, though, besides the sheep, a kind of wild cotton was abundantly available as a source for spinning thread. Clothing was presumably limited to a strict minimum to cover the genitals, but animal skins must have been used in particular circumstances. Several terms also indicate the use of feathers, especially as headdress. For the ladies, beauty care must already have included intricate methods of plaiting the hair. It is more difficult to ascertain if the practice of shaving had been generalized for men. Many other activities contributed to the well-being of the community: hunting had been practiced for centuries and was still very much in favor; the techniques used were trapping, throwing the javeline and shooting with bow and arrow. The lexicon also indicates that the Proto-Bantus caught birds with lime and that, in the east zone, at least, they built traps that fell down on their prey. There are several words for 'arrow', and the homonymy of some of them with the term for the midrib of the palm frond indicates that the latter was used at an early date to make arrows. We do not have any indication as to the wood used for bows (the only specific name of

wood mentioned in Proto-Bantu is 'ebony'). Sinews may have been used as bowstrings, but the occurrence of specific words for 'string, rope' points to the existence of a technique for turning fibres into strings and ropes. Another activity practiced by the Proto-Bantus was the gathering of honey. They also used the beeswax, though we do not know specifically for what purpose.

As for housing, they built huts--presumably of rather different shapes--thatched with palm or banana leaves and divided inside by screens. A special roomier hut was reserved for the chief. The huts were provided with a door, which could be barred during the night. The furniture was rather minimal: wooden stools and headrests; bedstead with bedding consisting presumably of animal skins. The building techniques were still very unsophisticated, e.g. to put a bridge over a small river, a tree trunk was simply laid across it.

The main cultural feature of the Proto-Bantus was presumably their knowledge of the metallurgy of iron. This is amply evidenced by the lexicon: common terms for 'iron', 'hammer', 'bellows', 'charcoal', 'iron ore', etc. There is even a technical term for 'beat with a hammer', 'sharpen the edge', etc.

In the field of social life, activities were regulated by the rhythm of the seasons: dry season following upon rainy season; the day of the last rain seemed to be particularly important, as well as the day on which the first fruit of the new crop were eaten. There must have been feasts with music, songs, and dances. They already knew the drum and the marimba. Religious life also played an important part in social activities: witchcraft was practiced on a large scale; the witch doctor protected the crops with spells. He presumably controlled the tabus and acted as a go-between with the spirits. Several terms point to an extensive use of fetishes and charms. There was even a regional term for a special type of skin eruption ascribed to the breaking of a tabu. There is a Proto-Bantu word indicating the 'deity': it is found essentially in the west, but its etymology remains obscure and it is not possible to derive any clue concerning its cult.

Society was apparently organized according to the clanic system: there is a special term for 'clan brother' distinct from natural 'brother', but unfortunately, the lexicon does not throw any light on the kinship system. Parents, grandparents, brothers and sisters, maternal uncles, in-laws are all indicated by specific terms, but without any clue as to patrilinear or matrilinear features of kinship.

Interesting facts are the following:

(a) marriage appears to imply the payment of a sizable bride-price to the parents of the bride;

(b) mothers carry their child on the back with a kind of sling; the terms designating this baby-sling and this way to carry a child are homonymous with the words for 'skin' and 'bear a child (in pregnancy)', so that apparently this behavior was considered as the normal continuation of the development of the fetus outside the mother's womb.

(c) Polygamy was common practice, and there is a specific term for 'taking a second wife'.

As for economic activity, there must have been a certain amount of bartering between neighboring groups. The system of numerals is well attested in Proto-Bantu from 'one' to 'five', but there are no common terms for the numerals 'six' to 'nine'; for 'ten', there is again a common Proto-Bantu term, whereas 'hundred' is expressed by different words in the west and in the east. The concept of 'measure' and 'measuring' seems quite widespread, but one does not know what particular entities it applies to (time was measured in lunar months, and the same term is used regularly for 'moon' and 'month').

The Bantus were in contact with the former populations of their territory, especially the pygmies (*túá) whose name was also derogatory. The contacts between tribes were sometimes violent, as is shown by the various words for 'war'. There were different types of arms: bows and arrows, javelins, spears, matchets, shields, etc. Prisoners captured in combat were presumably the source of the 'slaves' existing in the Proto-Bantu community.

Internal strife was settled according to customary law: an indication of it is given by the terms designating a 'fault', a 'punishment', or meaning to 'settle a dispute'. Swearing an oath also seems to play an important part in the practice of tribal law.

Such is the society which the Proto-Bantu lexicon describes to us.

3. Archaeological corroboration of the reconstructed lexicon

In how far can these lexical data be correlated with the archaeological data?

The studies of paleobotanists, like Raymond Postères (1970:47, 51, 53), have indicated that several varieties of millet, sorghum and even rice were known in Subsaharan Africa prior to the development of the Bantu world. It appears, accordingly, that upon their arrival in central, southern, and eastern Africa, the Bantus found populations practicing agriculture and that their contribution consisted of an expansion of that activity owing to the technical progress made possible by the use of iron, which also determined their superiority at war as well as in hunting. This, at least, is the conclusion reached by Christopher Wrigley (1970:66-69, 71) in his analysis of the prehistoric economy of Africa. It agrees rather well with the views of J. H. Greenberg (1963:38), who considers the central valley of the Benue as the original homeland of the Bantus. There, the Nok culture was one of the earliest to use iron in Subsaharan Africa. Though M. Guthrie rejects this area as the Proto-Bantu homeland for rather unconvincing reasons and tries to make them come from the Chad region, the matter is of secondary importance for the subject under discussion. The main thesis is that a population nucleus coming from the northern savanna area has, at a definite moment of prehistory, crossed the tropical forest to come and settle in the southern savanna area. On the basis of radiocarbon datings, this migration must presumably have taken place during the first centuries of our era. Settling down in Katanga, in the present-day Luba territory, the newcomers would have progressively expanded and strengthened their grip over

wider territories. This is confirmed by a number of linguistic and archeological facts:

(a) As the extensive study of linguistic geography undertaken by M. Guthrie has shown, the Luba-Bemba area of Katanga shows the highest percentage of retention (Guthrie, 1970a:135).

(b) The technique of iron-making improving agricultural tools, was accompanied by the introduction of better varieties of sorghum and millet. At a very early date, contact was established with the Indian Ocean, entailing the introduction of the banana and the coconut, originally imported to Madagascar from South-East Asia by the Indonesian conquerors. It is even possible to date this contact: the Periplus of the Erythrean Sea (1st century A.D.), describing the coast of the Indian Ocean as far south as the Rufiji, does not show any knowledge of Bantu type people living in this region. However, a 4th century compilation of Ptolemy's Geography mentions them as 'man-eating Ethiopians' (Oliver 1970:148). At that time, the Bantu nucleus had expanded from Katanga along the savanna belt from the mouth of the Congo to the south of Tanzania, facing Madagascar, where Indonesian colonization had taken place in the first five centuries of our era.

The banana will supply an opportunity for further expansion: the region of the great lakes and the coast of the Indian Ocean offers an ideal climate for its cultivation, and during the second half of the first millenium A.D., Bantu will spread over these territories. The expansion towards the northwest and the south of the presently Bantu territory will, however, occur only in the second millenium A.D., but during this last stage Bantu appears to be already deeply differentiated dialectally.

The Proto-Bantu vocabulary on which Gunthrie's study is based is essentially that of the first and second stages in this diachronic development of the Bantu linguistic territory, i.e. (1) the settling of the central nucleus by the Proto-Bantus; (2) the expansion along the savanna belt from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean. At the second stage, already a western group and an eastern group are getting progressively more sharply differentiated. At the third stage, at the time of the expansion from the central area to the great lakes, several dialectal changes like Dahl's Law start occurring. However, Swahili, developing from the groups settling at that time along the east coast of Africa, still appears to be very conservative in its vocabulary. At the fourth stage, the degree of retention of the Proto-Bantu lexicon becomes weaker, especially as one moves farther off to the northwest. Besides, Bantuization has never been complete during stages 3 and 4 and many remnants of former populations survive until nowadays in the territories newly occupied by the Bantus, whose oral traditional history often confirms with remarkable accuracy the migrations and their chronology (Oliver 1970:150).

The views of Malcolm Guthrie and their confirmation by historians like Roland Oliver (1970) have, however, been considerably challenged in recent years. The archaeologist J. Desmond Clark (1970:9), indicating that the introduction of the metallurgy of iron in the Congo basin took place about 0 A.D., wonders whether or not the Proto-Bantus had a knowledge of iron-working when they

migrated: their movement to Katanga could have been earlier, but by a people with knowledge of cultivation and water transport. "The archaeological evidence, slight as it is, lends some support to the belief that iron-working may have been diffused to an already sedentary and cultivating Proto-Bantu in a somewhat more extended region than Professor Guthrie's 'nuclear area'." He also notices that cultivation of the sorghums and millets was presumably confined to the drier and more drained areas on the periphery of the Congo basin, so that it is unlikely that these plants were carried from the north across the basin by the ancestors of the Proto-Bantus. "It seems more probable that these cereals, together with iron, reached the Proto-Bantus at a later date than the initial migration, by the way of the northwestern route, on the one hand, and down the high country east of the forest, on the other." (Clark 1970:13). This latter route, probably country free of tsetse, must have favored cattle-raising: pastoral stone-using people were occupying the high grassland of the eastern Rift and the Victoria basin in the first millenium B.C. and continuing at least in the first few centuries A.D. Further complexity is added to the archaeological problem by the connections between Guthrie's eastern zone of Proto-Bantu and the Dimple Based and Channel Ware (Clark 1970:15; cf. also Posnansky, 1968; Sutton 1971: 159-161): these would imply that the western dialect separated before about 200 A.D., and that the ancestors of the Proto-Bantus settled in Katanga even earlier still.

This hypothesis remains quite disputable. If all ancestors of the Proto-Bantus crossed the equatorial forest, this movement may have stretched over a longer period than M. Guthrie and R. Oliver surmise (Posnansky, 1968:11). If such is the case, the linguistic arguments of J. Greenberg (1972:193-195) against the archaism of the central area, and in favor of the northwest region of the Bantu territory as the original area of differentiation, deserve special attention. As we already pointed out, the solution may be found in a different dichotomy of Proto-Bantu: this is the conclusion reached by Bernd Heine (1973) after a detailed lexicostatistical study of the Bantu languages. According to Heine, there must have been three waves of expansion: the first started from the region between the Benue and the Sanaga, moving partly to the east, across the watershed of the Ubangi-Mbomu-Uele up to the foothills of the East African plateau and to Lake Albert (this group included essentially the peoples of Bengue-Baali, Bira and Nyali branches in zones C and D of Guthrie); the bulk of the migrants, however, occupied the territory between central Cameroon and the Ogove (zones A and partly B of Guthrie), but a splinter group seemed to have moved further south to the shores of the river Congo. There, they constituted the nucleus of a coherent group from which the second wave will later originate: this migration covered the whole Congo basin and the highlands of Southwest Africa, including zones H, K, R and the Lunda branch of zone L of Guthrie, besides the remainder of his zones B and C. Their point of departure would have been the Lower Congo, and one group branching off to the southeast of the equatorial forest would later have

become the nucleus from which the third and last migration originated, which took the Bantus from Mount Kenya to the deep south of Africa.

These views contrast, in turn, with those of J. C. Sharman (1974:119-120), who believes in a migration from the Cameroon highlands to the east as far as Lake Albert, then southwards along the watersheds from the Semliki to the Rukwa, always essentially in savanna regions down to Guthrie's 'central nuclear area'. This would imply a relatively early occupation of the northwest, which the percentage of reflexes of Proto-Bantu terms identified by Sharman (1974:125) there seems to confirm. The problem of the eastern zone is further complicated by the possibilities of Sudanic and Cushitic influences studied by the historian Christian Ehret (1967, 1968, 1972, 1973, 1974) on the basis of lexical comparisons. If his views according to which the practice of agriculture and cattle raising was, to a large extent, borrowed by the Proto-Bantus from the Central Sudanese of the interlacustrine zone, the whole linguistic pre-history of East Africa would have to be revised.¹

4. Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we may say that Guthrie's work has undoubtedly opened new fields of research in Proto-Bantu, but by offering an abundance of lexical data illustrating the culture of the speakers of Proto-Bantu, he has faced us with new more complex problems as to the origin of the Bantus, their oldest migrations and routes of penetration to their present territories, their level of culture in prehistory in correlation with the too scanty and incomplete data available in African archaeology.

Footnotes

*This paper was presented in two preliminary versions at the following linguistic meetings: (a) the Proto-Bantu cultural vocabulary was discussed at the 6th International Meeting of Linguists sponsored by the Istituto Lombardo (Accademia di Scienze e Lettere) and the Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese, in Milan (Italy), on September 6, 1974; (b) the recent discussion of Guthrie's views was summarized in a paper read at the Symposium on African Language, Culture, and Society at the 6th Conference on African Linguistics sponsored by The Ohio State University on April 11, 1975.

An extensive French version, with critical apparatus (30 pages) is to appear in the Proceedings of the Milan convention.

¹With all due regard for the stimulating pioneering work done by C. Ehret, one cannot help noticing that the linguistic argumentation is often rather weak: too many semantic changes remain undocumented (e.g. why does P.B. *gânà mean '100', while its assumed Mangbetu cognate (ka)na mean '1'?); too much use is made of 'mobile' prefixes *t- or *k- with 'characteristic' vowels; some phonological rules appear to be rather ad hoc; etc.

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