



The Spread of Farming in Sub-Saharan Africa: Bantu Migration

By Tony Maccarella

Humans perfected foraging in Africa, but many turned to farming when the right tools, and the right crops, became available.

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Connections across a wide region

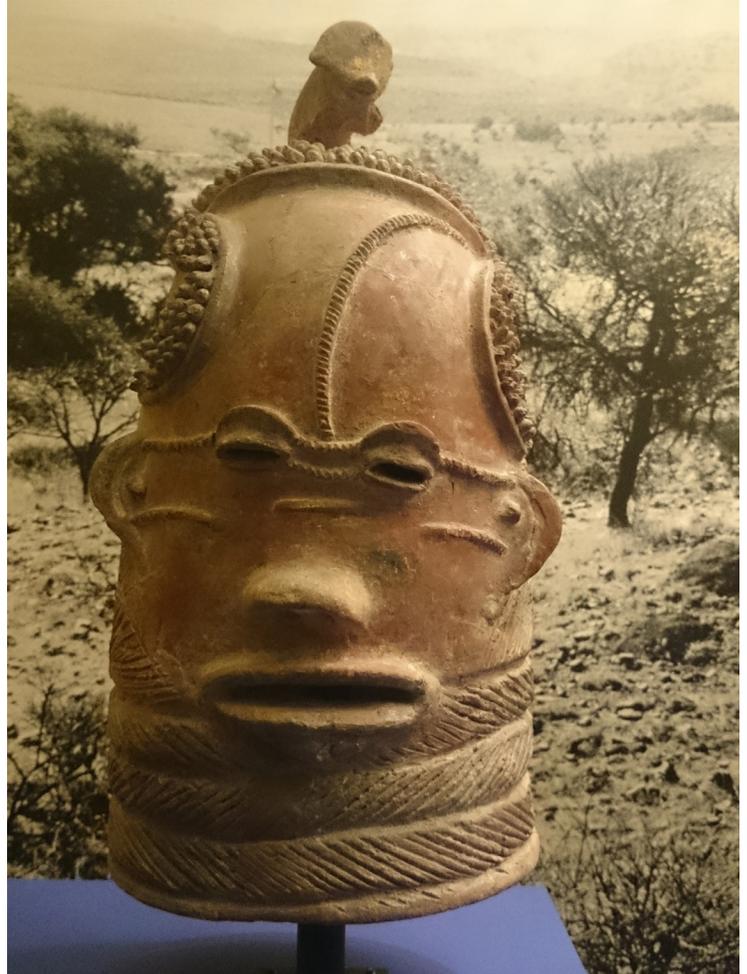
The migration of the Bantu people is an interesting story. It is part of the history of agriculture. The Bantu moved across the sub-Saharan regions of Africa.

Early Bantu history was passed through oral tradition. Researchers have found other ways to learn about the Bantu. They have also found that the Bantu moved across Africa. This migration began possibly as early as 2000 BCE.

There was a large Bantu network by 1200 CE. It cut across the trunk (middle) of Africa. Bantu expansion reached almost all the way to the southern tip of the continent. The expansion led to trade and shared technology.

The agricultural revolution in much of Afro-Eurasia began around 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. Sub-Saharan Africa was later in adopting agriculture. It may have begun in modern-day Cameroon in 7000 BCE. Originally this was home to Bantu-speaking people. However, foraging was the main food source in the rest of sub-Saharan Africa until 2000 BCE.

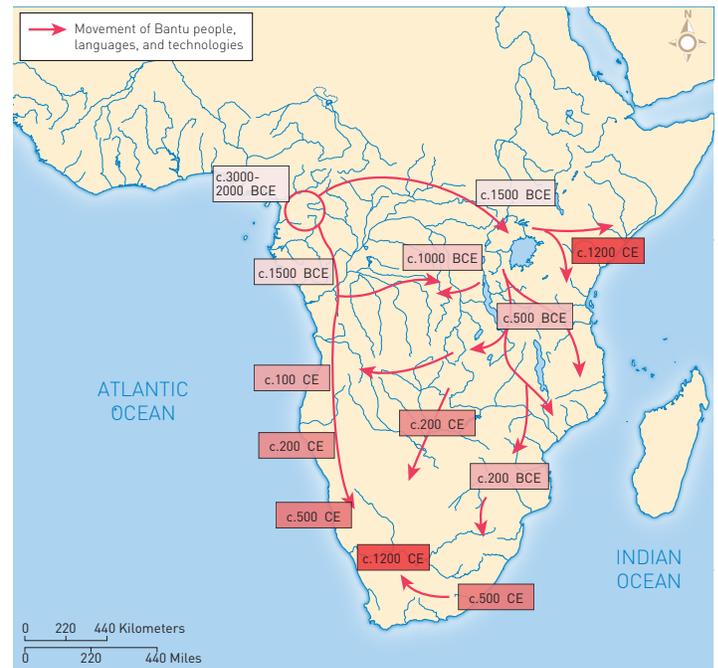
Archaeologists have unearthed pottery, iron tools, and settlements in Bantu homelands. These are all evidence of agriculture. These artifacts date to between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE. Iron and pottery spread in the same areas the Bantu did. How did these technologies move across the continent?



The Lynderburg head, one of several sculptures from early Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa. The decorative motifs show a great continuity with Bantu figures and decorations across large areas of Africa. By Rexford Nkansah, African Center, Cape Town, CC BY 3.0.



The Bantu language group is made up of about 500 related languages. It stretches across much of central and southern Africa today. By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.



The spread of Bantu languages, people, and technology, according to DNA, linguistic, and archaeological evidence. But how did this package spread? Migration, diffusion, or adoption? By WHP, CC BY-NC 4.0.

Evidence from different academic disciplines

There are many maps of the Bantu migrations. They mostly look similar to the one above. Some show different migration patterns. It is hard to know which is correct. There are different types of evidence showing where the Bantu went. This evidence comes from different types of sources.

Archaeology is one source of evidence. Archaeologists have discovered *potsherds* (bits of broken pottery) in Cameroon. Ancient pottery is a major source of evidence about agricultural societies. It proves the idea that sub-Saharan farming started there. Pottery in other places shows where the Bantu spread.

Another source is the study of languages. Linguists (language experts) look at modern Bantu-based languages. They trace the development of Bantu languages. This shows where the Bantu people moved.

DNA evidence is also used. Scientists collect the DNA of modern Bantu language speakers. They compare it to the DNA of original Bantus.

These three types of sources all reached the same conclusions. The Bantu began in west Africa. They moved south and east across Africa. They moved between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE.

Theories about the Bantu migration

How did the Bantu network come into being? There are different theories. It could have been formed by the Bantu people physically moving (migration). It could also have been that their ideas spread to other peoples through diffusion or adoption. There are disputes about which is correct. Different types of evidence may say different things.

| Migration theory | Diffusion theory | Adoption theory |
|--|---|---|
| Large groups of people moved, in waves, from the Bantu homeland in West Africa. They brought with them technologies that allowed them to open up and cultivate land that had been forest, rocky soil, or swamp—iron, crops, pottery, and cattle being chief among them. That allowed them to claim this territory and displace or assimilate with the foragers who lived there beforehand. | Bantu-speakers in West Africa moved into new areas in very small groups, usually just families. But they brought with them the Bantu technology and language package—iron, crops, cattle, pottery, and more. These pioneers then shared their more advanced technologies (and, in the process, their languages) with the locals. These locals as a result began speaking their languages as well as living lifestyles that were more like the Bantu-speakers. | Bantu language and technology moved while the people largely stayed put. Neighbors of Bantu-speakers adopted some of their technologies such as iron, pottery, cattle, and crops, but rejected others. The next group of people then saw their neighbors had adopted some of these technologies, and they chose the ones that suited them as well. Their languages changed in the process because they adopted the words for these technologies. But the people making the change were generally not migrants, but rather locals! |

Table 1: Theories about the Bantu migration

More questions to answer

There is still more to learn about the agricultural revolution in sub-Saharan Africa. Why did the Bantu move? They must have had a reason. It could have been because they needed better resources. There could have been a change in climate.

Some facts seem certain. Farming began near Cameroon between 5000 and 2000 BCE. Beyond that, researchers can only debate. Perhaps they will one day reach a single conclusion. It could explain the spread of agriculture and language across Africa.

Sources

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Image credits

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The Lydenburg head, one of several sculptures from early Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa. The decorative motifs show a great continuity with Bantu figures and decorations across large areas of Africa. By Rexford Nkansah, African Center, Cape Town, CC BY 3.0. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iziko_Lydenburg_Heads_2.JPG

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