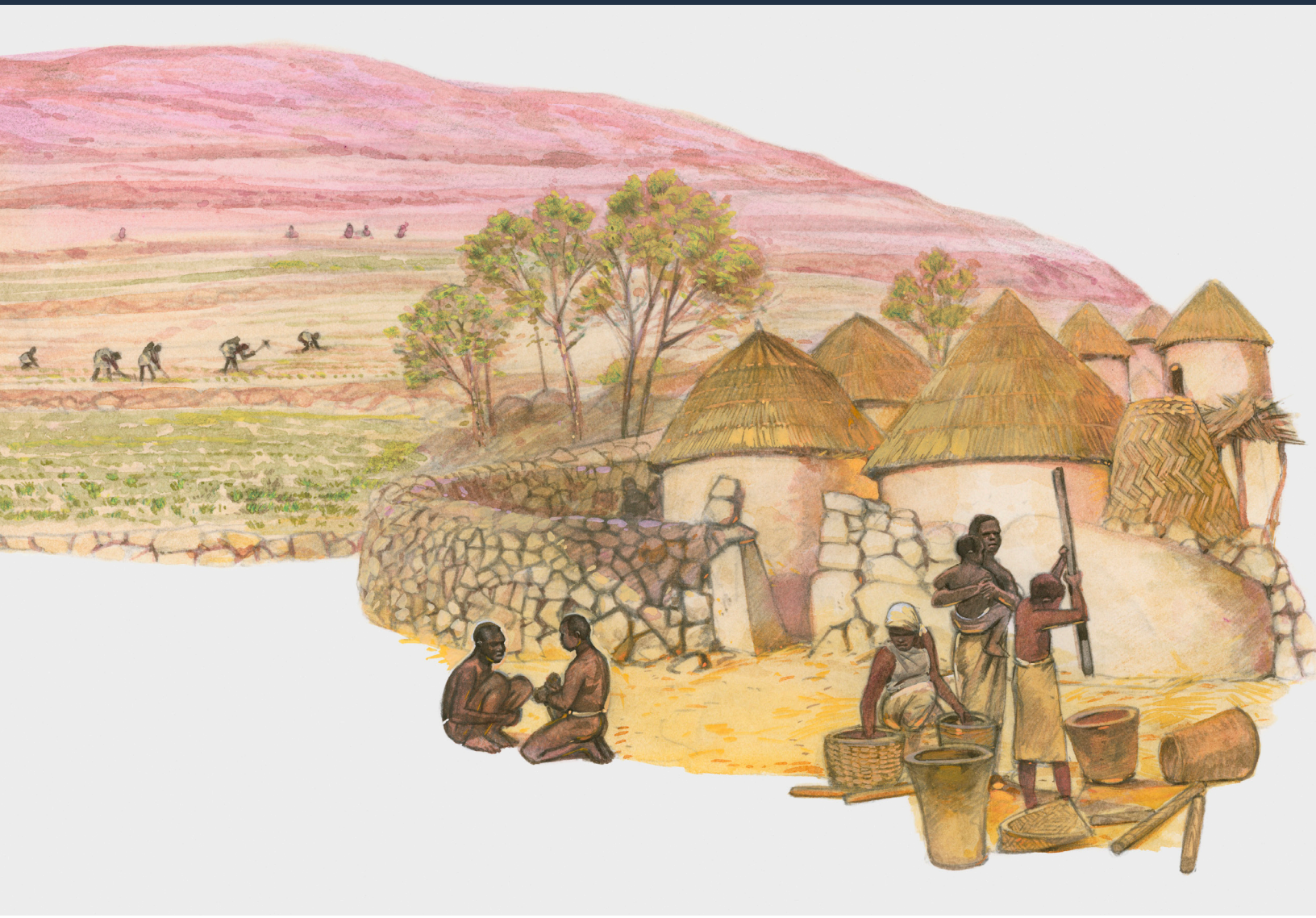

The Spread of Farming in Sub-Saharan Africa: Bantu Migration

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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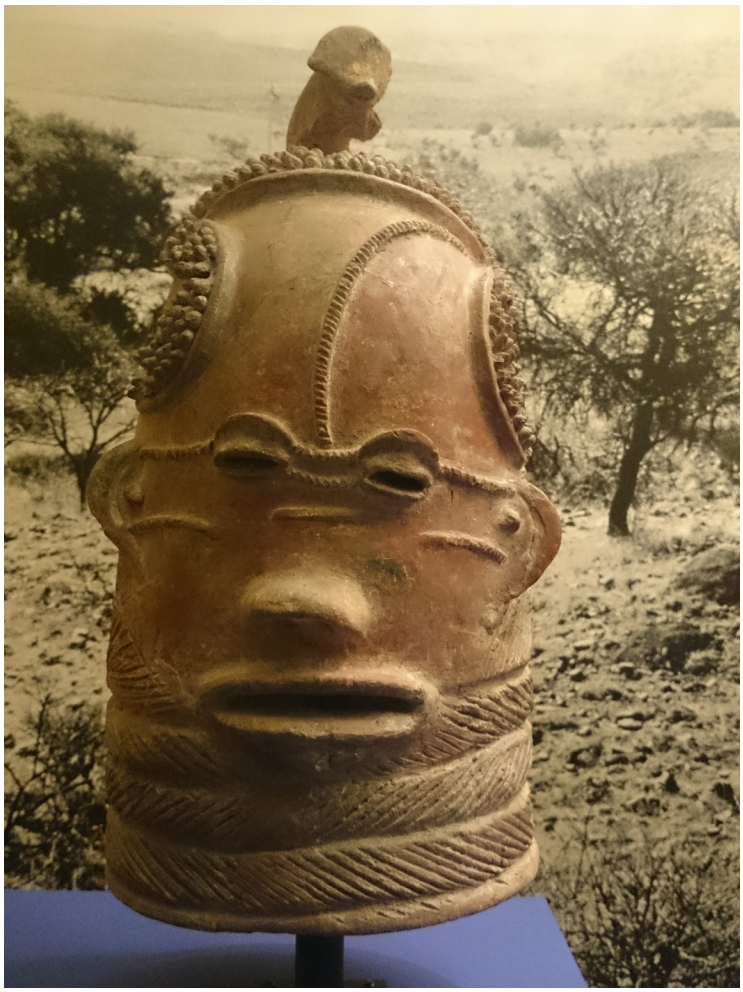
Connections across a wide region

The Bantu migration is a fascinating story in the history of agriculture. It is hard for historians to find information about the Bantu people because they passed information through oral tradition. They left very little in writing until the Middle Ages. Researchers have still found ways to trace the movement of Bantu-speaking peoples. This migration began possibly as early as 2000 BCE.

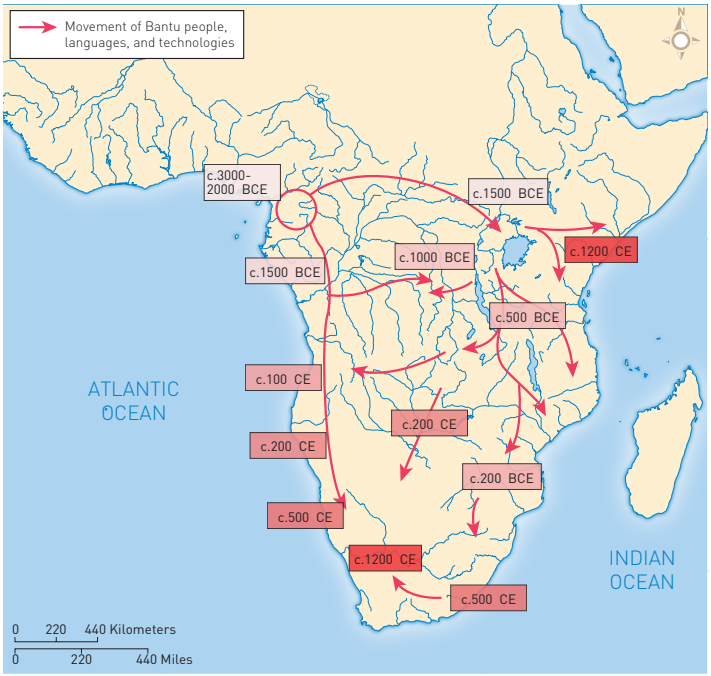
The Bantu began in western Africa and moved south and east. Evidence suggests they moved sometime between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE. They had a network across the trunk (center) of Africa by about 1200 CE. Bantu expansion reached almost all the way to the southern tip of the continent. The result was a web of trade, cultural exchange, and shared technology.

The agricultural revolution in much of Afro-Eurasia began around 8,000 to 10,000 years ago. The agricultural revolution began later in sub-Saharan Africa. It is not known why. There is some evidence of farming in modern-day Cameroon as early as 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 similar to the one above. Different maps often show different pathways. It's hard to know what information is reliable. There are different types of evidence to show where the Bantu traveled. Experts in archaeology, languages and DNA all have their own evidence.

Let's look at the ancient settlements of Bantu-speaking populations in Cameroon. Archaeologists have found *potsherds* (pieces of broken pottery) dating back to 5000 BCE there. Populations who made pottery typically did not move around. This shows that there was an agricultural society. This supports the theory that sub-Saharan agriculture could have begun in this region.

Archaeologists look at pottery found in other parts of Africa. They are able to map out how agriculture spread. We can see where it started in western Africa. It then spread out south and east.

Researchers who study languages look at modern Bantu-based languages, like Swahili. These linguists can determine how the Bantu language spread through the continent. Their evidence shows that Bantu-speaking people migrated from western Africa to the south and east.

More recently, scientists who study genetics have examined the issue. They looked at the DNA of modern Bantu language speakers. They compared them to the DNA of the original Bantus of western Africa. They can see who is most closely related to the original Bantus.

These experts from different disciplines all reached the same conclusion. They determined that the Bantu moved south and east from western Africa between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE.

Theories about the Bantu migration

How did the large Bantu network come into being? There are three main theories. One is that it formed by the physical migration of the Bantu people. The other two theories are adoption and diffusion. These say that the network was created by Bantu ideas and technologies spreading to other people.

There are still disputes about which of these theories is correct. They might all be a part of the real story.

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 Bantu farmers move from their homeland while their ancestors did not? There must be a reason. It could be because they needed better resources or because there was a change in climate.

What seems certain is that sub-Saharan farming began near Cameroon. It dates to somewhere between 5000 and 2000 BCE. Beyond that, researchers can only debate. Perhaps scholars will be able to agree on a single theory. It may help explain the spread of agriculture and language across the African continent.

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Image credits

Cover: Settlement of the Engaruka poeple, Northern Tanzania, c. 15th century © Tony Smith / Getty Images

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. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iziko_Lydenburg_Heads_2.JPG

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