



# 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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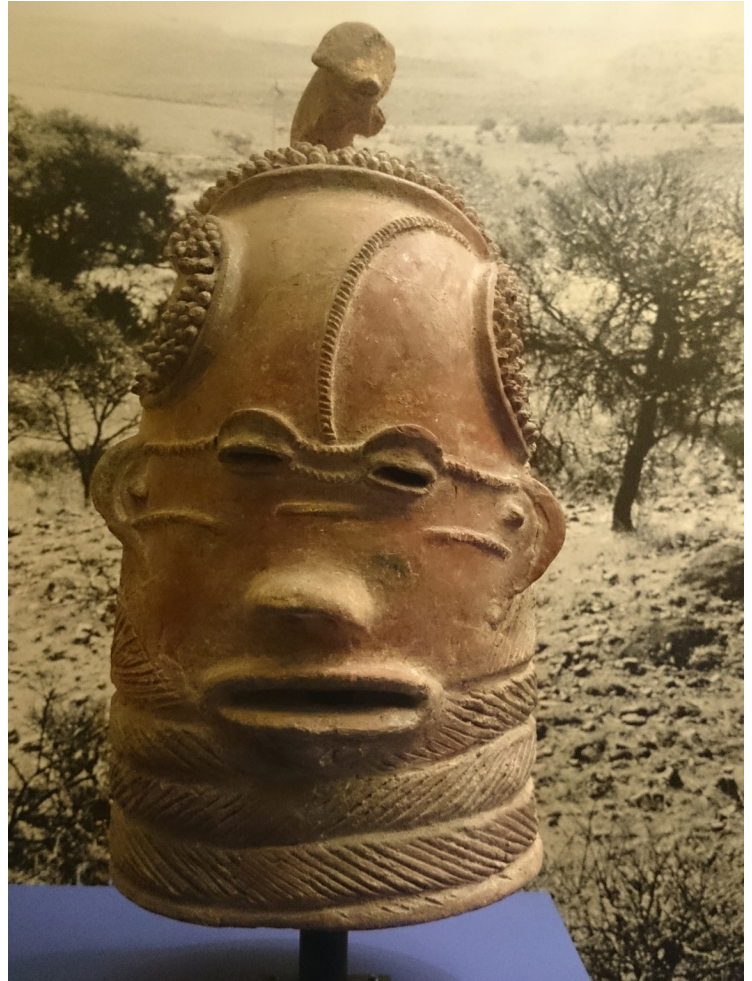


## Connections across a wide region

The migration of the Bantu people is a fascinating story in the history of agriculture. The Bantu passed information through a rich 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 that began possibly as early as 2000 BCE.

The Bantu began in western Africa and migrated south and east. Evidence suggests that they moved across the continent sometime between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE. By about 1200 CE, they had a cultural and technological network across the trunk (center) of Africa. 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. It seems to have begun much later in most of sub-Saharan Africa. It is not known why. There is 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, which are all evidence of agriculture. They date to between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE. These tools spread in the same areas the Bantu did, then spread out across most of Africa. How did these technologies move to create this vast network across the continent?

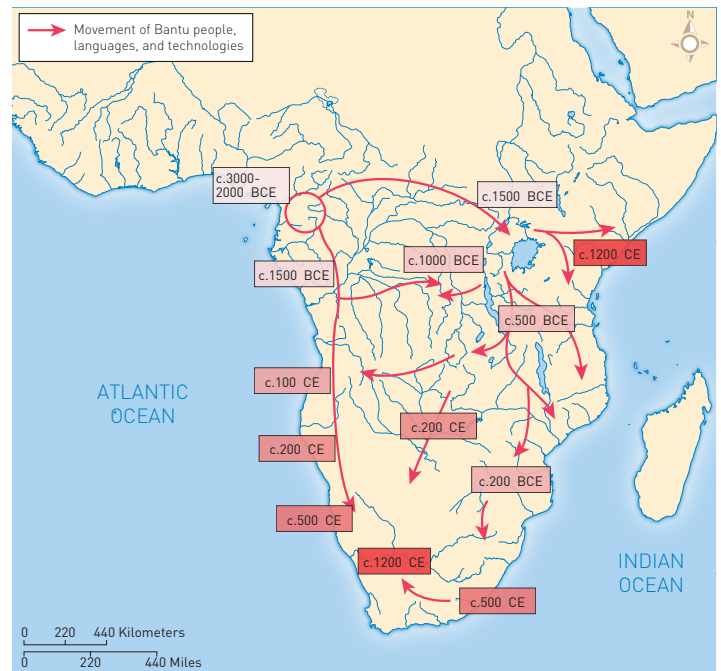


*The Lynderburg head, one of several sculptures from early Bantu-speaking peoples in southern Africa. The decorative motifs show a great continuity with Bantu figures and decorations across large areas of Africa. By Rexford Nkansah, African Center, Cape Town, CC BY 3.0.*





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 and it's hard to know what information is reliable. There is excellent evidence for the movement of Bantu technologies and culture from a variety of academic disciplines.

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

Archaeologists analyze the age of potsherds found in other parts of the continent. That creates data that can be used to map the spread of agriculture. We can see where it started in western Africa, and then how it radiated out south and east.

Researchers who study languages can also gather evidence about the spread of the Bantu language. Linguists analyze modern Bantu-based languages, like Swahili. They try to determine how the Bantu language spread through the continent.

More recently, scientists who study genetics have analyzed the DNA of modern speakers of Bantu languages. They have compared them to the DNA of the original Bantus of western Africa. Their data allows them to see which populations are most closely related to the original Bantus.

Both the linguists and geneticists reached the same conclusion of the archaeologists. They all determined that the Bantu moved south and east from western Africa between 2000 BCE and 1000 CE.

## Theories about the Bantu migration

Bantu migration opens a discussion about the movement of people, technology and culture in these ancient times. How did the vast Bantu network actually come into being? The three theories that have emerged are migration, adoption and diffusion. Migration refers to the physical migration of the Bantu people. Adoption and diffusion refer to the spread of Bantu ideas and technologies.

There are still disputes about which of these theories is correct or how they might all be part of the same story. Genetic evidence may indicate something different than the archaeological evidence.

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

The story of the agricultural revolution in sub-Saharan Africa is incomplete. Experts from multiple academic disciplines continue to debate the Bantu migration routes based on their evidence. Some even question whether they migrated at all.

One question to ask is why Bantu farmers moved from their homeland while their foraging ancestors did not. Leonard Ngcongco of the University of Botswana has explained that “people move ... for a reason. They move because the population has expanded. They move because the resources which support the population in the settlements have become more or less inadequate. They move because there are changes to the climate and they move for the sake of finding better areas in which to live” (BBC).

What seems certain is that farming in the region began near the modern-day border of Cameroon and Nigeria. It dates to somewhere between 5000 and 2000 BCE.

Beyond that, researchers can only debate. Perhaps historians, along with scholars in other disciplines, will find answers to these questions as new evidence emerges. These scholars may help explain the spread of agriculture and language across the African continent.

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## Tony Maccarella

Tony Maccarella holds a Masters degree in Curriculum and Instruction and has been teaching history since 1982. He has served as an AP European History Reader and Table Leader since 2002, and has published several books for improving research and writing skills in AP history classes. Tony currently teaches history at Saddle River Day School where he also serves as the Head of Upper School.

## 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](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Iziko_Lydenburg_Heads_2.JPG)

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