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Author(s): H. H. Johnston

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The Bantu Borderland in Western Africa.

By H. H. JOHNSTON, H.M. Vice-Consul, Cameroons.

Map, p. 676.

THE region stretching from Old Calabar and the Cross river to the base of the Cameroons Mountains is very interesting from an ethnological point of view, because it is, on the West Coast of Africa, the borderland of the Bantu. South of the river Ndiani, which flows into the estuary of the Rio del Rey, the population, with the exception of a few scattered colonies of foreign Calabar traders, belongs in race and language to the great Bantu family which stretches uninterruptedly eastwards and southwards from the Cameroons to Zanzibar and to Natal. North of the Ndiani river we enter that interesting belt extending across the continent of Africa southward of the Sahara Desert from Senegambia to Abyssinia, which may be conveniently known by its Arab name—the Sudan.

Here, in contrast to the homogeneity of race and language which prevails in the southern half of Africa, we find an amazing variety of negro and negroid races, and an uncounted number of dissimilar tongues. The inhabitants of the district of Old Calabar chiefly belong to the Efik tribe, and their language, which bears the same name, is a form of speech distantly—but decidedly—related to the Ibo group which prevails in the upper part of the Niger delta and stretches across to the western bank of the Cross river.

The Efik people, now the ruling race along the lower courses of the Cross and Old Calabar rivers, appear to have emigrated over a hundred years ago from a district on the Cross river adjoining the Ibo country. Pushing their way towards the sea, they dispossessed and partially absorbed or drove away the former inhabitants of the district now known as “Old Calabar” (Calabar is a word of obscure origin, first used by the Portuguese), these inhabitants belonging to the “Akwa” or “Abakpa” tribe, and being connected in race and language with the people inhabiting the district on the Upper Cross river.

The Efik people, or their congeners speaking a nearly identical language, have penetrated to the Kwō-Ibo and Opobo rivers on the west, while little trading colonies, started from Old Calabar, are dotted here and there among the Bantu tribes, beyond the Rio del Rey. Between Old Calabar and the Akpayafé river there still linger remnants of the older possessors of the land, such as the Akwa or Abakpa people. These helot races have imitated their Efik rulers in many things, but their languages bear much less affinity with the Efik dialects than with the Upper Cross river tongues.

The farther one travels in a south-easterly direction from Old Calabar the more sparsely the country is inhabited, until the land on the southern

side of the Mboma-Njinga river begins to rise into hills and mountains, and then one finds oneself approaching the populous country of the Bakundu people. These, in common with the closely allied Barondo (who inhabit the coast and advance in little isolated settlements into the Calabar district), are the first tribes speaking purely Bantu languages which are to be met with in journeying from Old Calabar towards the Cameroons. The Bakundu speech, which is also common to the Barondo, is almost identical with the Duala of the Cameroons river. This is a rather curious fact, as the two kindred dialects are separated by many intervening Bantu languages which are greatly dissimilar. The architecture, manners, and customs of the Bakundu-Barondo people are also those of the Duala and of the neighbouring Bantu tribes to the south and east, and save where direct Efik influence has been exerted and deliberate imitation has taken place, there is little resemblance to the mode of building, the customary practices and the current superstitions of Old Calabar. On the other hand, the Efik people have certainly received their architecture and their ethics from the Niger basin.

Perhaps, before proceeding further, a brief description of the geography of this Bantu Borderland may be of interest. With the exception of the intrusive volcanic mass of the Cameroons Mountains, the country lying between the Cross river on the west and the Cameroons river on the east is of the same general character. For an average distance of 40 miles from the sea, the soil is chiefly a thick stratum of alluvial mud overlying sand or gravel. Here and there, elevated islands of gravelly soil, with small fragments of porphyry and quartz, rise above the dead-level of the mangrove marshes, and these are invariably the site of native villages and plantations; or in certain districts, although there is scarcely any perceptible elevation above the marsh, little tracts of clean sandy soil may be met with which are at once distinguishable from a distance by the varied vegetation they support. But with these exceptions, the marshy, low-lying ground continues up to the base of the interior chain of hills where it abruptly gives place to the outcropping rocks. Here are often discernible the traces of an ancient shore-line, showing that this continuous fringe of flat marsh-land which borders so much of Western Africa was clearly formed by the constant alluvial deposit of the many streams and torrents perpetually coming down from the interior tableland, often thick with the red soil which they hold in solution and deposit when they slacken in their flow. Here, in this first abrupt rise of the land, going interiorwards, all the rivers have their last falls, which may either be magnificent cascades of 80 feet in descent, or mere rapids not impossible of ascent. The rocks are chiefly basalt, clay-slate, ironstone, porphyry, and quartz. Iron is clearly present in the soil. Mica is found in most of the stream-valleys, and there are traces of antimony.

The principal rivers draining this district are, beginning on the west,

the Cross river, which is a large and important stream, and rises somewhere in the highlands near the sources of the Binué and its affluents; the Old Calabar river, the Akwa (known on our charts as the "Great Qua"), the Akpayafé, the Ndiani, the Mboma-njinga (which three last form the Rio del Rey estuary); and round the eastern versant of the Cameroons Mountains, the Mungo (which Dr. Zintgraff has traced much farther to the north than it appears on the maps), and the Cameroons river and its affluents; besides which may be mentioned the two large streams recently discovered by Lieutenants Kund and Tappenbeck, the Njong and the Sannaga.

The tribes inhabiting the lower course and middle bend of the Cross river appear to have come from the north, north-east, and north-west; those inhabiting the upper Cross river and the country between that stream and the Ndiani river, from the east; and the Bantu tribes on the Mungo and the Mboma-njinga, from the south and south-east. In the district through which the Akpayafé river flows, above its last rapids, is an utter wilderness of dense forest, uninhabited by man. This, in fact, appears to be a kind of No Man's Land not yet reached by the tribes converging on it from north, east, and south.

To explain the migrations of these various races, I wish to give a brief hypothetical explanation of the origin of the Bantu family of languages and its non-Bantu congeners. We may imagine that very far back in the history of Africa there was a nest of flourishing negro tribes somewhere in the very heart of Africa, between the Shari and the Welle-Ubangi, who all spoke kindred languages, which, farther back still, had sprung from one mother tongue. From this no doubt populous centre emigrants had constantly been starting from the west before the period I am alluding to, and had carried with them tongues and dialects which have given rise to most of the languages in Western Africa between the Gambia and the Niger. But there still remained in this district north of the Congo, east of the West Coast watershed, south of Lake Chad, and west of the western affluents of the Nile, two flourishing and nearly-allied tribes, whom we will call the Bantu and the Semi-Bantu. The parent race from which these two were descended spoke a prefix-using tongue, which was connected in origin with the primitive Fula language, and possibly with the languages of Darfur and of Kordofan. The Bantu descendant somewhat extended and developed the prefix system derived from its mother, while in its Semi-Bantu sister the variety of prefixes and their use as relatives largely decreased. Some one of the many unrecorded convulsions which must have continually agitated communities of savage men and still re-act on them in savage Africa, drove the Semi-Bantu and the Bantu peoples from their common home, the former probably before the latter. The Semi-Bantu proceeded due west towards the Niger, and the Bantu turned to the south and south-east.

The Semi-Bantu greatly discarded and wore away the grammatical structure inherited from its mother and which its Bantu sister so developed and perfected, but retained in a great measure its primal stock of word-roots. In due time, among many other forms of speech we wot not of, the Semi-Bantu gave rise to most of the modern Binué languages, to the languages (such as Ibo) on the lower Niger, and to the languages spoken on the Cross river at the present time. These tongues, while retaining many roots in common with the Bantu, have a grammatical structure which lacks all, or nearly all, the Bantu features. The resemblance in vocabulary with the Bantu increases as you proceed eastward, but it is not to be explained by the theory of "loan-words," although these, too, also exist, because the similarity in the word-roots strikes too deeply into the language-system. The Semi-Bantu, in fact, bears to the Bantu proper the same kind of relationship as the Hamitic to the Semitic tongues.

The primitive Bantu tribe speaking the mother-tongue of all the Bantu languages moved away from its original home in a south and south-easterly direction, as I have already remarked, and probably located itself for some time in the district lying between the Welle, the Congo, and the Muta-nzige and Albert Nyanza lakes; in fact, somewhat to the north of the present Bu-regga* country. Here, no doubt, it settled down for a while and thrived and multiplied, and here probably it received the ox, sheep, goat, pig, and domestic fowl from tribes to the north, to whom they had permeated from Egypt (*vide* the essay on the Bantu languages in my book on the 'Kilima-njaro Expedition,' and the note respecting the introduction of the domestic fowl into Africa). Rapid increase and its consequent troubles caused the primal Bantu people to again split up and its sections to part company, and the great Bantu invasion and occupation of the southern half of Africa began to take place. Except the feeble, dwarfish races of Akkas or Hottentots and Bushmen, there seem to have been few inhabitants to dispute southern Africa with the Bantu, and from their centre of activity in Bu-regga, they sent out streams of emigrants westward along the Welle and the Congo, eastward to the Nyanzas and the Zanzibar coast, and southward to Damaraland and Natal. I have more immediately to do with the western migration, at present. This has reached the Cameroons and the Borderland in the north-west from two directions. One immigration—the earlier one—came evidently right across from the Welle-Mobangi and occupied the Cameroons from the east and gave rise there to the modern tongues of Bayoñ, Ndob, Nsō, Boñkeñ, Basā, Baluñ, Abo, and Barombi—languages which, while retaining many archaic roots and forms yet exhibit signs of great corruption and

* The Ki-regga language spoken by the Ba-regga in Bu-regga is the most archaic in form—the least corrupted of the known Bantu languages. By "known," I mean those that have been written down and submitted to our examination.

“wearing-down,” and have evidently suffered from their contact and struggles with alien tongues. The other and later intrusion of Bantu languages came up from the south along the coast, and is represented by the Duala of the Cameroons river, the Isubu of the Cameroons Mountains, and the Bakundu of the Mboma-njinga and the Upper Mungo rivers. The dialects of the island of Fernando Po appear to have originated from the earlier invasion of Bantu—from the “Abo” group—rather than from the later or “Duala” section. The Duala-Bakundu languages are less corrupted in their structure and phonology than the older Abo dialects, which first occupied the Cameroons country, and offer considerable resemblances with the Congo languages, with which they are connected by a string of intervening tongues. The language of the Fans, it may be interesting here to remark, appears to approximate more to the Abo type of Bantu speech than to the Duala-Congo tongues around it.

I may conclude this short paper by giving a list of the principal languages spoken in and around the Bantu Borderland in West Africa. I will divide them into their two classes of Bantu and Semi-Bantu, and I would premise that I have collected vocabularies of all that I mention and have made grammatical studies of some.

Class: SEMI-BANTU.

Name.	Locality.
Andoni	Andoni river (near Bonny).
Kwō	East bank of Opobo river and Kwo-Ibo river.
Efik	Lower Cross and Old Calabar rivers.
Ibo (various dialects)	Upper part of Niger Delta and western bank of Cross river.
Umon	Umon country on Cross river.
Ikun	Cross river, above Umon.
Akunakuna	Cross river, above Ikun.
Arun	Middle Cross river, above Akunakuna.
Atam	Upper Cross river.
Nki	Cross river, beyond Atam.
Manyōñ	Inland, eastward of Nki.
Mbudikom, or Mburikum	South-east of Nki, on extreme Upper Cross river.
Mbe	Interior, near Manyōñ.
Ejam, or Ezam, or Akpa	Between Upper Cross river and coast.

Class: BANTU.

Name.	Locality.
Ndob	Interior, near sources of Cameroons river.
Bōñkeñ	Upper Cameroons river.
Budīman	Cameroons river.
Baluñ	Lower Mungo river.
Abo	North of Cameroons river.
Barombi	On upper part of river Mboma-njinga and Rombi Mountains.
Bakundu (Barondo)	Upper Mungo and lower Mboma-njinga rivers, and sea-coast near Río del Rey.
Bakwiri and Isubu	Cameroons Mountains and Bimbia.
Duala	Lower Cameroons river.

10°

6°

THE
CAMEROONS DISTRICT
Showing the
BANTU BORDERLAND
IN
WEST AFRICA.

By H.H. Johnston, H.M. Vice Consul, and German Authorities.

Scale of English Miles.

C. Bullen

C. Horatio (Hermosa)
Horatio I.

FERNANDO PO

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