

A HISTORICAL-LINGUISTIC APPROACH TO THE SUBSISTENCE OF THE FIRST BANTU SPEAKERS SOUTH OF THE RAINFOREST: THE BANANA CASE

The Bantu Expansion is the principal linguistic, cultural and demographic process in Late Holocene Africa. Different disciplines have dealt with the question of how the relatively young Bantu language family (ca. 5000 years) could spread over disproportionately large parts of Central, Eastern and Southern Africa. The prevailing synthesis is a model in which the Bantu language dispersal is conceived as resulting from a single migratory macro-event driven by agriculture. However, many questions about the movement and subsistence of ancestral Bantu speakers are still open. Through the BantuFirst project (ERC Consolidator's Grant n° 724275), archaeologists, palaeobotanists and linguists form a cross-disciplinary team to carry out evidence-based research on the first Bantu-speaking settlements south of the rainforest. Their goal is to acquire a new transversal view on the interconnections between human migration, language spread, climate change and early farming in Late Holocene Central Africa in order to improve our current understanding of the Bantu Expansion.

Historical linguistics

The project's historical-linguistic research is devoted to the West-Western branch of the Bantu family (Grollemund et al. 2015), aka West-Coastal Bantu (Vansina 1995, Bostoen et al. 2015). Those languages are spoken southern Gabon, southern Congo, south-western DRC and northern Angola including Cabinda. We focus on expanding existing specialized reconstructed West-Western Bantu lexicon, especially in the domains of subsistence and land use strategies of ancestral West-Western Bantu speakers. The map (figure 1) displays our present understanding of the internal classification of the West-Western Bantu (WWB) branch. Currently, only the WWB subbranch known as the Kikongo Language Cluster (KLC) has been subject to detailed phylogenetic studies, based on basic vocabulary (de Schryver et al. 2015; Bostoen and de Schryver 2018a; b). One objective of the project's linguistic research is to integrate a comprehensive set of West-Western Bantu data from the Nzebi-Mbete-Teke and Yanzi subgroups into a lexicon-based phylogenetic approach and to explore new directions by factoring in phonological and grammatical data. Another objective is to **expand the existing specialized reconstructed lexicon of West-Western Bantu**, especially in the domains of subsistence and land use strategies of ancestral West-Western Bantu speakers. These reconstructions will be compared to **the archaeological and ethnobotanical findings** brought about by the project.

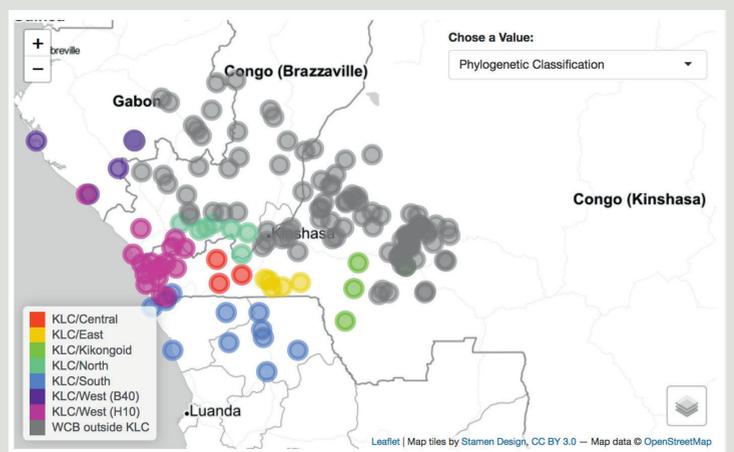


Figure 1: This map shows the location of language varieties belonging to the West-Coastal (Vansina 1995; Bostoen et al. 2015) or West-Western branch (Grollemund et al. 2015) of the Bantu language family. For an interactive version, see QR Code.



Banana (*Musa sp.*)

In our research on the subsistence of the first Bantu speakers south of the rainforest, the banana (*Musa sp.*) is especially relevant because it is still not clear when, how and by whom bananas were introduced in Africa. We intend to shed new light on these questions and to better understand: (i) the role that bananas played in the diet of early Bantu speakers; and (ii) how banana exploitation contributed to the Bantu expansion through Central-Africa. Vernacular terms for banana in WCB languages are compared in order to trace the role of the banana in the diet of the first Bantu people south of the rainforest. These present-day terms can be either inherited from an ancestor language or a borrowing. If a banana term can be reconstructed to an ancestor language, for example Proto-West-Western Bantu, than this means that the people who spoke this language already knew the banana and that it was a part of their diet.

A first widespread cognate term in WWB languages is ***kòndò** (table 1). This term has been examined by many authors (Guthrie 1967-71, Blakney 1963, Rossel 1998, Philippson & Bahuchet 2008, Blench 2009, Bostoen & Koni Muluwa 2017). WWB languages seem to have inherited from their most recent common ancestor, as present-day terms follow regular sound changes (Bostoen & Koni Muluwa 2017). This does not necessarily mean that by the time the first Bantu speakers reached south of the rainforest they knew bananas, since the term may have originally applied to false banana (*Ensete sp.*), as proposed by Blench (2009). Reflexes of ***kòndò** are indeed used for *Ensete* varieties in WWB languages (Table 1), but these are always accompanied by a modifier which makes it possible that the term referred to banana first, and was used for false banana afterwards. The reconstruction of ***kòndò** in Proto-WWB is as such maybe not conclusive linguistic evidence for banana cultivation by the first Bantu speakers south of the forest. More terms for *Ensete* should be gathered, in order to exclude this possibility.

Language	Term	Translation	Source
Hungan	lùkhón/màkhón	banane (<i>Musa sp.</i>)	(Kasuku-Kongini 1984)
Kimbeke	mankondo	banane (<i>Musa sp.</i>)	(Lukanda 1990)
Ngowe / Ngubi	dukóndó	MUSA. — GROSSE BANANE (1) (MUSACÉES) (<i>Musa sp.</i>)	(Raponda-Walker & Sillans 1961)
Nsong	konde	banana (<i>Musa sp.</i>)	(Blakney 1963)
Ntandu	dinkòndò	Musa spsp. (Musaceae) (<i>Musa sp.</i>)	(Daeleman & Pauwels 1983)
Manyanga	ma-nkòndo mankita	esp. de bananes très bonnes. Musa Arnoldiana (<i>Ensete sp.</i>)	(Laman 1936)
Yans	kwon est, kwon a musit	faux-banancier (<i>Ensete sp.</i>)	(Swartenbroeckx 1948)
Ntandu	dinkòndó dikízeke	Ensete gillettii (DE WILD.) CHEESM. / Ensete ventricosum (WELW.) CHEESM. (Musaceae) (<i>Ensete sp.</i>)	(Daeleman & Pauwels 1983)

Table 1: *kòndò terms in WWB languages

A second cognate banana term in WWB languages is ***kò** (Table 2). Guthrie (1967-71) and Rossel (1998) link it with ***kòndò**. According to Rossel (1998), ***kò** would be the shortened form of ***kòndò** through the sound change ***nd > Ø** in stem-final position. However, according to our research, this sound shift is not regular in the WWB languages. Hence, ***kò** and ***kòndò** must have a distinct origin. It is likely that ***kò** can be reconstructed in Proto-WWB, which would provide linguistic evidence for banana cultivation among early Bantu speakers south of the rainforest, but this needs further research.

Language	Term	Translation	Source
Mpuono	ko	banana	(Blakney 1963)
Lya	likó	banana	(Philippson & Bahuchet 2008)
Bembe	ko	banana	(Philippson & Bahuchet 2008)
Duma	ku	banana	(Blakney 1963)
Duma	liko	banana	(Mouandza 1991)
Nzebi	ləkó	banane plantain	(Blanchon & de Nadaillac 1987)

Table 2: *kò terms in WWB languages

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