

THE FIRST BANTU SPEAKERS SOUTH OF THE EQUATORIAL RAINFOREST: PRELIMINARY NEW EVIDENCE FROM HISTORICAL LINGUISTICS AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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The Bantu Expansion is one of the main linguistic, cultural and demographic processes in Late Holocene Africa and a hotly debated issue in African History. Scholars from disciplines as diverse as linguistics, archaeology, anthropology, genetics and palaeoenvironmental studies have contributed to solving 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. They often did from a discipline-specific point of view.

The Bantu Expansion stands for the concurrent dispersal of Bantu languages and Bantu-speaking people from an ancestral homeland situated in the Grassfields region in the borderland between current-day Nigeria and Cameroon. During their initial migration across most of Central, Eastern, and Southern Africa, which took place between approximately 5,000 and 1,500 years ago, Bantu speech communities not only introduced new languages in the areas where they immigrated but also new lifestyles, in which initially technological innovations such as pottery making and the use of large stone tools played an important role as did subsequently also farming and metallurgy. Wherever early Bantu speakers started to develop a sedentary way of life, they left an archaeologically visible culture. Once settled, Bantu-speaking newcomers sometimes had intensive contacts with autochthonous hunter-gatherers, as is still visible in the gene pool and/or the languages of certain present-day Bantu speech communities.

Although the driving forces behind the Bantu Expansion are still very much a matter of debate, 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, it is increasingly believed that

the climate-induced destruction of the rainforest in West Central Africa around 2,500 years ago had a more significant impact on the earliest phases of the Bantu Expansion than farming. Many basic questions about the movement and subsistence of ancestral Bantu speakers are still completely open and can only be addressed through genuine interdisciplinary collaboration.

The BantuFirst project (<http://www.bantufirst.ugent.be/>) is such a cross-disciplinary research project, which aims at transforming our thinking on the Bantu Expansion by collecting new empirical evidence to gain a better understanding of the interconnections between human migration, language spread, climate change and early farming in Late Holocene Central Africa. It unites archaeologists and linguists into one single team. Together they carry out evidence-based research on the first Bantu speech communities south of the equatorial rainforest in parts of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), the Republic of Congo and Angola that are as yet still unexplored by archaeologists. In this talk, I will present the new archaeological evidence collected during two BantuFirst fieldwork campaigns in the Kongo Central, Kwilu and Mai Ndombe Provinces of the DRC in 2018 in conjunction with historical linguistic research carried out as part of the project. I will also assess to which new insights the recently obtained data from these two bodies of evidence lead with regard to the appearance of the first Bantu-speaking village communities south of the rainforest.