

## **BAUTU THEORY'S TROUBLING ISSUED: A CLOSE EXAMINATION OF BANTU THEORY AND MANY OF ITS UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

**Israel Ntaganzwa**

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**Abstract:** *It is becoming increasingly clear that Bantu theory will remain unresolved after all these years because it has too many unanswerable questions and to date no satisfactory explanations have been provided. The aim of this paper is to briefly summarize some of these issues and to highlight some of the tragic consequences that have been directly or indirectly associated with Bantu theory. Although my direct approach to this subject appears to be rather provocative, my real intentions were to emphasize these important issues, bring them into the open, and invite non-linguists as well as the public in general to participate in, or at least pay close attention to, this fascinating and long-standing debate. Considering all these important issues, the inescapable conclusion that can be drawn is that Bantu theory in general is based on pure conjecture, speculation and guesswork to say the least. It is a good theory that was simply accepted at face value and taken for granted based on presumed facts. With so many unresolved issues regarding this theory, linguists must find new and better explanations to prove it and to support it or abandon it altogether.*

**Keywords:** Bantu migrations, Bantu genes, Bantu culture, Bantu history, Bantu languages.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Sub Saharan Africa is home to some 500 ethnic groups whose languages are known as Bantu, a term coined by W. H. Bleek in 1850. Though there are striking similarities among some of these languages, others are so diverse that their speakers cannot at all communicate. Because of these highly exaggerated similarities, it is assumed that Bantu people might have migrated from one geographic point which was pin-pointed by Joseph Greenberg as somewhere between Nigeria and Cameroon. Malcolm Guthrie thought that Bantu's original homeland was Katanga in southern Congo. No one has satisfactorily answered this question. Why? Because this alleged migration never happened.

In addition to Bantu's land of origin, there are many other issues that are not yet resolved. They include:

- Bantu historical evidence
- Bantu migrations
- Bantu languages diversity
- Bantu cultural diversity
- Bantu genetic mysteries

-Is there such a thing as a Bantu gene?

Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyigo began to question the validity of Bantu theory as early as 1976, and in 1995 Jan Vansina was asking the same questions. In chapter 6 “The Bantu-speaking Peoples and Their Expansion” in UNESCO’s *General History of Africa*, vol. III, both authors joined forces and openly voiced their doubts about Bantu theory in general. Here is Vansina’s conclusion:

...The assumption of a single large-scale migration by the original speakers of Bantu is extremely unlikely...There never was a single Bantu migration, even if one calls it “expansion”...The existing Bantu expansion hypothesis must be totally abandoned. The scrapping of the hypothesis will make room for more realistic and quite different interpretations and research hypothesis (Vansina, 1995:195).

The term “Bantu” is found in few languages but in many others, such a word with its proper and correct spelling: “B-A-N-T-U” does not exist. Ironically, many sub-Saharan Africans who did not even know the meaning of such a word, appear to have discovered an identity that they never had and have used it since then to implant, establish, and declare themselves as the real majority of the original Africans. Indeed, as Jan Vansina pointed out, “Bantu myth has replaced Hamitic myth. Bantu languages are equated with people, a type of society, a type of culture, and even a race. They are said to be the first civilization... (Vansina, 1995:195).”

## **BANTU: THEIR LANGUAGES, THEIR ALLEGED MIGRATIONS, AND THEIR EXPANSIONS INTO THE SUB-SAHARAN AFRICAN**

Modern study of Bantu languages was popularized by Malcolm Guthrie, a former missionary in Zambia and a Professor of Linguistics at the London School of African and Oriental Studies. He collected over 20,000 words from Bantu languages, and finally divided them into 15 zones, based on their similarities and their diversities. One of the most baffling mysteries about Bantu is their land of origin, which is allegedly located somewhere between modern Cameroon and Nigeria as mentioned earlier. It was easy for European linguists to study, reconstruct, and classify their own languages because, in addition to being their mother tongues, there were other well known historic languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Greek, Latin, and German, any of which could serve as a starting point to identify other languages that subsequently branched off from them. Unfortunately for Bantu languages, no such ancient languages are known. To compare or to connect the alleged proto-Bantu language from which all the so-called Bantu languages supposedly originated is based purely on guesswork. None of Bantu theorists know anything about this alleged dead language,

where exactly it was spoken, what it sounded like, or who spoke it. There is no proof whatsoever that this language ever even existed.

If Bantu historic migration from one central location was such a sound theory, however, a simple genetic examination would easily trace each and every Muntu to a close common ancestor in Cameroon, Nigeria or Katanga. Indeed, such a test should be Bantu theorists' smoking gun, and the most unassailable scientific proof of Bantu's connection to their origin. However, no genetic study has demonstrated conclusively that Bantu people can all be traced back to one central geographic location. Recently published genetic reports based on the Y chromosome, mtDNA, and diverse haplogroups within Bantu groups, some of which showed Pygmy blood concluded that:

Overall, therefore, there seem to have been higher drift on the male than on the female line during the Bantu dispersals, resulting in a reduced variety of incoming haplogroups and haplotypes. This may in part be accounted for by higher levels of assimilations on the female side, possibly from both Central and (in the case of the eastern Bantu) East Africa, or it may reflect a larger female effective population size in the dispersing groups. Different mating patterns and cultural practices between males and females may have played a part in these processes (Salas et al., 2002:1108).

Another research group came to the same conclusion:

Our results support the sex-biased model whereby the replacement of pre-existing languages by Bantu languages more closely parallels the turnover of Y chromosome than mtDNA. How can this be explained? One explanation is that Bantu male farmers dispersed over longer distances or in greater numbers than Bantu females. Another possibility is that males and females dispersed equally, but there was a higher 'effective' migration rate for Bantu Y chromosome than Bantu mtDNA. As Bantu farmers dispersed, they likely intermarried to some extent with the original inhabitants related to modern Pygmies and Khoisan (Wood et al., 2005: 8).

Other researchers concurred and pointed out that the discrepancies between the mtDNA and the Y chromosome among Bantu was due to the fact that during their long migrations, Bantu males preferred to marry Pygmy ladies because they were famous for their fertility and there was no bride price to be paid (Destro-Bisol, G., et al., 2007:9). Many Africans believe that such discrepancies can be attributed to polygamy, where fewer males had offsprings with many females.

In a recent genetic report concerning Rwanda's so-called Bantu group known as Bahutu, it was revealed that their genes are the most diverse in the whole world ([www.dnatribes.com](http://www.dnatribes.com),

2007, pp. 8-9). That is not hard to explain, because for instance President Kayibanda was a bastard son of a Congolese soldier, which is why his Y-DNA would not match Bahutu's genes. President Habyarimana's father came from Bufumbira in Uganda, and here again his Y-DNA would not match any Muhutu in Rwanda. To many Rwandan historians this came as no surprise, because it is well known that Bahutu have been migrating to Rwanda during the past several centuries from neighboring countries and they were free to settle wherever they chose to live without restrictions of any kind. After all, Rwandans believed that their Rwanda was the world and vice versa. These new migrants were automatically adopted and incorporated into local clans where they became new members. That is the only logical explanation as to why both Bahutu and Batutsi of Rwanda and Burundi share the same clans in various proportions as well as the language and everything else.

Country	1900	1950	2000
Angola	470,000	4,100,000	10,100,000
Botswana	109,000	389,000	1,576,000
Burundi	1,493,000	2,360,000	6,700,000
Cameroon	2,716,000	4,955,000	15,421,000
Congo	4,103,000	11,203,000	51,955,000
Kenya	1,352,000	6,265,000	29,904,000
Malawi	717,000	2,881,000	11,109,000
Uganda	1,649,000	5,199,000	23,986,000
Namibia	400,000	511,000	1,798,000
Rwanda	996,000	2,082,000	7,229,000
South Africa	5,014,000	13,683,000	43,686,000
Tanzania	3,968,000	8,313,000	36,232,000
Zambia	1,340,000	2,440,000	9,770,000
Zimbabwe	692,000	2,170,000	11,342,000
Mozambique	223,000	5,739,000	17,242,000
Total	23,477,000	70,490,000	273,970,000

Fig.1 Bantu population increase (1900-2000).

During the last century, Bantu population has increased tenfold (Fig.4). Prior to 1900, however, it was another story. We can assume that between 1600 and 1900 the sub Saharan population increased at an average of five fold each century by conservative estimates, and doubled during the previous centuries. If we calculate backwards we can conclude that by 1000 AD there were no more than 1000 people who made up the entire Bantu population! This assumption takes into account other non Bantu groups such as the hunters/gathers of the tropical forests and the so-called Bushmen of southern Africa, Nilotics of Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and northern Congo, and the agropastoralists of central and east Africa, which would reduce Bantu population down to zero (0) by 800 AD.

## **PYGMIES/BUSHMEN/AGROPASTORALIST AND THEIR BENTU CONNECTION**

The connection between Bantu and hunters/gatherers was suggested by Inskip:

“...There is no such a thing as the Bantu physical type...Bushmen-like skeletons have been found as far afield as the Nile valley, and dating back to 12,000-14,000 years ago. By contrast the oldest Negro (Bantu) are no older than 6,000 years. Few Negro remains have been found at all, and of those known from Southern Africa none is older than about 1,500 years Inskip 1979:122.”

Desmond Clark had the same idea:

“ The mixed Negro and Khoisan physical characteristics shown by the skeletal remains from sites in Zambia, Rhodesia and northern Transvaal, show just such a hybridization. Indeed, this is the most likely explanation of why it is not possible to speak of a Bantu physical type. Bantu speakers from east Africa exhibit as many differences among themselves, for example, as do those from central and southeastern Africa from one another. This must be due largely to their mixed genetic composition as well as to environmental adaptation.

The many kinds of ecological circumstances in which the Bantu language and iron age technology developed and the variable composition of the gene pool resulted in the proliferation of a large number of tribal units after AD one thousand. Not until the eleventh century in the subcontinent do we begin to see the onset of competition for land and this rivalry was probably one of the reasons for the growth of a number of centralized autocracies which maintained their individuality by conquest, trade and religious ties. Each had a cultural entity of its own but was capable of being grouped within larger units exhibiting a common broad patterns of culture (Clark 1970:218-219).”

The transformation of hunters/gatherers into Bantu is not at all as farfetched as some might think. Rwanda has an interesting case of hunters/gatherers who, overnight, went through such a transformation from hunting/gathering to agriculture and set up their permanent, productive, and thriving settlements and lived happily ever after. This group is known as “*Abayovu*” which means “elephant eaters.” They were given such a name because they hunted elephants and ate their meat, which was a major taboo in Rwandan culture. Most of them settled in provinces like Kinyaga of western Rwanda, an area that ranks among the highest for rainfall in Africa, a perfect environment for growing and producing large quantities of beans, bananas, yams, and cassava which had just been introduced in the region. For these Pygmies, growing yams and bananas in a fertile place like Kinyaga turned out to be more practical, more productive, a lot easier, safer, and more rewarding than chasing elephants. When Belgians colonized Rwanda, *Abayovu* were issued Bahutu ID cards and that is how they were made to join Bantu club even though they were not even remotely related to any Bantu group.

The harsh realities of the pastoral nomadic life in the plains of east Africa that included

frequent draughts and vicious predators that preyed on domesticated animals, quite understandably forced many to give up cattle for good. There is also no denying that the invasion of the Europeans, beginning with Angola in 1575, gave a boost to agricultural communities as good lands were used to accommodate these settlers with their large-scale commercial plantations for growing tea, coffee, cotton, and other exotic crops for western markets, all the while squeezing and pushing agro-pastoralists and hunters/gatherers off the land.

For hunters/foragers, forest trees were soon to be cut down for timber and rubber plantations, while the animals that they once hunted would be driven to extinction, to local national parks, or to European zoos. These hunters/gatherers had no choice but to learn for the first time how to till the land, and forced to join Bantu cultivators.

The sub Saharan Africa of three thousand years ago was inhabited by hunters/gatherers (Pygmies) in the Congo forests, foragers in the south (Bushmen), and agropastoralists in Sudan, eastern Congo, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi, while Bantu agriculturalists were nowhere to be found at that time. How could they have practiced agriculture if they had no corn, cassava, sorghum, millet, beans, peas, banana, or yam in addition to having no tools to till the land with? It gets even more bizarre in the case of Rwanda's Bantu for instance, who arrived from Cameroon with nothing and never even learned how to fish in the country's shallow swampy rivers, and refuse to eat ants and other insects like Baganda or Congolese.

If Bantu evolved from hunters/gatherers/agropastoralists as we proposed here, then it would eliminate the need to invoke the Cameroon/Katanga origin issue which becomes irrelevant. The Creation of Bantu Communities should not be assumed to have been a result of a massive migration from somewhere, just as the Latin Communities of Western Europe was not born of Italian migrations into Portugal, Spain, France, Belgium, Switzerland and Romania.

### **BANTU'S TINY LINGUISTIC BRANCH**

In some of the Bantu language trees prepared by the Tervuren linguists, graphic models are depicted showing which languages borrowed words from other languages in order to explain Bantu migrations from Cameroon to their present homes. According to this theory, the language that borrowed the fewest words from others was the closest to the proto-Bantu language that was spoken by the old Muntu patriarch. Professor Christopher Ehret of the University of California, a good historian, prolific writer, and one of the least intimidating of all Bantu theorists, presents a compelling case that supports the basic tenets of this model. He has adapted one of the graphics into an elegant matrix, in a much friendlier version, that is quite impressive (Ehret, 2001:18,19). If I were a linguist attempting to use this matrix to reconstruct and to classify western European languages, however, I would naturally place the

English language very close to French language, which would be erroneous. Using Ehret's matrix, I attempted to connect the dots tracing Bantu migrations from Cameroon, and what I came up with was a bizarre zigzag movement across sub Saharan Africa that did not make much sense (Fig.3).

It never ceased to amaze me how African experts like Julius Nyerere, the prolific, colorful, illustrious Malimu who was obsessed with Shakespeare to the point of translating his works in Kiswahili (not in his mother tongue Kichagga), could write so well and so much on his own brand of socialism and other political stuff yet he remains silent about his Bachagga tribal people. Sure he was not a historian, but why not commission someone to write about it? Jomo Kenyatta in his classic book "Facing Mount Kenya" translated in Kiswahili as "*Naushanglia Mlima Kenya*," does not dig deeper into his Gikuyu peoples' history. He does not even try. Rumor has it that he may not have written the book, after all, and those who are familiar with his writing style tend to agree.

Here the point is that many African intellectuals from Bantu nations have done absolutely nothing about their own history, which is why the whole theory remains such an embarrassing myth. Afrocentrists and other African radicals can no longer blame the "White Man" for not volunteering to write history for them. It is time for the African to get up, study and write his own history. No more excuses.

### **KISWAHILI IS DEFINITELY AN ARAB DIALECT**

There is no doubt that Kiswahili's role, its impact, and its influence on many languages within its sub-group has been deliberately downplayed. Though it has obviously borrowed so many words from Arabic and other Bantu languages, it has also lent more words to more Bantu languages than any other.

That being said, it is imperative to take a closer look at this language and its very suspicious connection with Arabic. Though the early years of Baswahili settlement on the east coast remain a controversial debate among many historians, it is a fact that groups of sailors from the Middle East settled on the east coast of Africa between Somalia and Kenya, at a location they called "Bilad Sawahili" meaning "the towns of coastal people." These sailors married African women and their descendants eventually populated the east coast all the way from Somalia to Mozambique. Undoubtedly a genetic study of Baswahili people will someday prove their obvious connection with the Arabs.

Kiswahili	English	Kiswahili	English
Kisrani	Omen	Hofu	Shame

Jini	Evil	Shujaa	Brave
Kulaini	to curse	Hasira	Anger
Kubariki	to bless	Kukasirika	to be angry
Kuhubiri	to preach	Huruma	Pity
Kushtaki	to accuse	Huzuni	Grief
Silaha	Weapons	Furaha	Happiness
Desturi	Habits	Bahati	Luck
Kusaidia	to help	Roho	Soul
Jirani	Neighbor	Safi	Clean
Adui	Enemy	Baridi	Cold
Rafiki	Friend	Rangi	Color
Uhuru	Freedom	Radi	Thunder
Kutawala	to rule	Kitamu	Sweet thing
Lugha	Language	Harufu	Smell
Sauti	Voice/sound	Mara	Times
Au	Or	Asubuhi	Morning
Namna	Means	Karibu	Welcome
Hakika	Facts	Tayari	Ready
Lazima	A must	Kudumu	to last
Shaka	Doubt	Haraka	Hurry
Sababu	Cause	Sumu	Poison
Nia	Reason	Damu	Blood
Siri	Secret	Afya	Health
Kusahau	to forget	Mdhaifu	Skinny person
Busara	Wisdom	Kaburi	Grave
Kuamini	to believe	Maiti	Death
Kufikiri	to think	Kuma	Vagina
Akili	Akili	Samaki	Fish
Hodari	Brave	Jamaa	Family
Kusamehe	to forgive	Sasa	Now
Kutumaini	to hope	Umri	Age
Hatari	Danger	Nusu	Half
Baba	Father	Kusafiri	to travel
Bibi	Wife	Kubaki	to remain
Dada	Sister	Kufaulu	to succeed
Harusi	Wedding	Kuketi	to sit
Hewa	Wind	Kufurahi	to rejoice
Bahari	Sea	Kuharibu	to destroy
Dunia	Earth	Kujaribu	to try
Wakati	Time	Kujibu	to answer



Kubadili	to substitute	Sehemu	Section
Kila	Each	Kabla	After
Mila	Custom	Baada	Before

Fig.2 Words that Kiswahili “inherited” from Arabic ( Max Planck Institute).

Needless to say, we must acknowledge and come to terms with the undeniable fact that many Bantu languages, when reduced to deceptively simple structures, are inexplicably similar, though such similarities have been greatly exaggerated by Bantu theorists, most of whom do not speak any of them. As far as they are concerned, these languages and their speakers are all alike; they look alike, they sound alike, and they are all alike! What else is new?

### **SOME OF BANTU CUTURAL PECULIARITIES AND DIVERSITIES**

Another one of many Bantu mysteries involves non-Bantu groups who, for unknown reasons, have decided to adopt Bantu languages as their language of choice. This is the case in Burundi, Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, eastern Congo and Kenya, a region heavily populated by ancient agro-pastoralists who preceded Bantu migrants. It is assumed that these non-Bantu communities spoke their own languages before Bantu migrants joined them, but it is not clear why or how “Bantu”, the languages of new migrants, became the languages of choice and were adopted and spoken by all. In many parts of northern Uganda, western Kenya, northern Congo, and western Tanzania, similar migrations of both Bantu and non-Bantu took place, but in each case each group has constantly kept and maintained its land, its customs, its own language, and its distance. Why would there be such major discrepancies in very similar situations?

Even more troubling about Bantu as one group is their seemingly illogical but nonetheless striking cultural diversity. Their traditional customs, their tribal rituals, and their religious beliefs and taboos vary a great deal from one group to another and this is hard to explain. Africans strongly believe in their gods and such beliefs are deeply rooted in their traditional attachment to their departed ancestors. It makes no sense that they would not worship the same gods that they inherited from their ancestors in Cameroon. It would have been preposterous, a sacrilege, and an abomination for a member of these ancient cults to deliberately forsake the gods of their ancestors under any circumstances. Did Bantu migrants see the light for the first time after leaving their proto-Bantu homeland? Strangely, to Bantu theorists this appears to be irrelevant; almost a non issue which is rarely discussed or written about.

In the Congo, Cameroon, and Gabon, they worship a god named *Nzambe*. Could this *Nzambe* have been the original God that the ancestors of Bantu once worshipped in Cameroon? And if that was indeed the case, why did their descendants reject it and adopt several new ones? None of this seems logical. Kagame provided a list of about 24 gods worshiped in many

Bantu communities (Kagame, 1976: III).

Fig.7 Bantu Gods.

1. *Nzambe* (Cameroon, Congo/Zaire, Congo, and Gabon).
2. *Kalunga* (Congo/Zaire, Angola, and Namibia).
3. *Leza* (Zambia, south Congo/Zaire, and Angola).
4. *Mwari* (Mozambique).
5. *Imana* (Rwanda, Burundi, Tanzania, and Congo/Zaire).
6. *Mungu* (Tanzania, Kenya, Malawi, and Mozambique).
7. *Modimo* (Zambia, Lesotho, and South Africa).
8. *Chikwembu* (Mozambique).
9. *Mvidi Mukulu* (Congo/Zaire).
10. *Unkulunkulu* (South Africa).
11. *Suku* (Angola).
12. *Ruhanga* (Uganda and Congo/Zaire).
13. *Njakomba* (Central African Republic and Congo/Zaire).
14. *Iliyuba* (Cameroon, Kenya, and Tanzania).
15. *Kazoba* (Uganda).
16. *Inkulukumba* (Mozambique).
17. *Kalaga* (Congo/Zaire).
18. *Mbumbi* (Congo/Zaire).
19. *Nguluwi* (Tanzania).
20. *Kalungu* (Namibia and Angola).
21. *Nyamuhanga* (Congo).
22. *Nyamuzinda* (Congo and Zaire)
23. *Nambelebele* (Tanzania).
24. *Katonda* (Buganda).

## CONCLUSION

It is about time that African linguists themselves should get together to discuss this theory among themselves; compare notes about their languages, their history, and the connections that exist among their nations. This is the only way they will be able to determine for themselves how to explain some of Bantu issues that remain unresolved.

In order to accomplish this every effort should be made to recruit new African graduates and to encourage them to study and to explore this fascinating field of Bantu languages; the core of sub-Saharan African history. It is imperative that Bantu studies in general should be brought into the open and, hopefully, a general program will be designed for high schools as part of African history.

Non-linguistic scholars also should get actively involved and work closely with linguists by sharing their personal experiences and their professional expertise. Baswahili scholars, for instance, should guide and help linguists to determine the crucial role that Kiswahili has played in the very large communities of the east coast of Africa, all the way from Somalia to South Africa.

Bantu theory is no longer an issue involving linguists only. It has social, political, historical, geographical, scientific and cultural implications that can no longer be ignored or left to certain experts. Now it is up to the Africans and other progressive linguists to take another look at this theory, to scrutinize it, and make appropriate adjustments or get rid of it once and for all.

### **Acknowledgement**

Israel Ntaganzwa is a Rwandan independent researcher based in New York, with a general interest in the history of Africa's Great Lakes region and specifically pre-colonial Rwanda and the ancient kingdoms of Nkore, Karagwe, Burundi, and eastern Congo.

Due to limited space, references were not included but they are feely available upon request.