

Retrieving Food History through Linguistics: Culinary Traditions in Early Bantuphone Communities

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Introduction¹

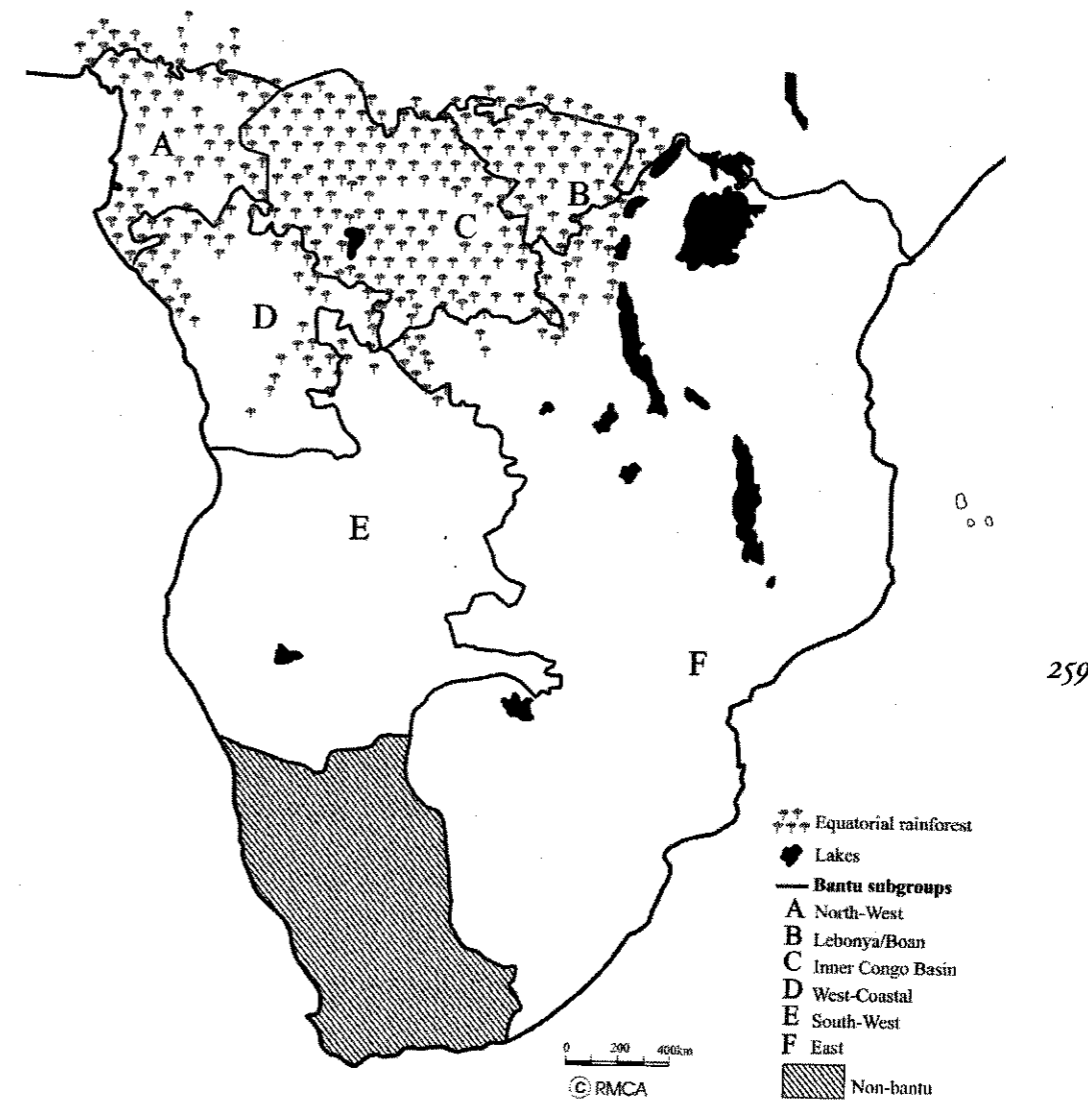
Most research on food history is based on the study of written documents. These documents vary from Mesopotamian grocery lists (Bottéro 2004), the Maya codex and travellers' accounts (Coe 1994), to early cookbooks and literary texts (Alcock 2005). But what if no documents are available for a particular period or region? How can we study the food history of Celtic Europe before the arrival of the Romans, of the Pre-Columbian Americas, or of Sub-Saharan Africa before Arabs and Europeans set foot on its shores? Archaeology is one way to explore early history. While it can uncover some culinary utensils and food remains, other tools, preparation techniques, and products left no traces at all. Linguistics can shed light on these otherwise hidden stages of human history. In this paper, we describe how linguistics can serve to reconstruct culinary traditions of early Bantuphone communities. Bantu, a lower node in the Niger-Congo tree, is Africa's largest language group, stretching from Cameroon to Kenya and as far south as southern Africa.

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From Language to History

Vocabulary shared between languages can generally be taken as a result of shared history. Starting from this premise, the historical-comparative study of culinary vocabulary may yield indirect, though valuable evidence on the culinary practices of past Bantuphone peoples. This approach involves both the reconstruction of vocabulary that was inherited from an ancestor language and spread with the dispersal of descendant languages and also the identification of loanwords which spread across languages through contact. The geographical distribution of shared vocabulary indicates either the relative time-depth of the proto-language to which inherited vocabulary is reconstructible, or routes of diffusion for loanwords. Following the basic idea of the *Words-and-Things* method, when a word can be reconstructed in a proto-language with a specific meaning, the referent of that word must have existed in the period this proto-language was spoken. The reconstructibility of **-bumb-* 'to bake in ashes' into Proto-Bantu, for instance, implies that early Bantuphone communities were familiar with this cooking technique (Ricquier & Bostoen 2008).²

A limitation of lexical data is that they do not allow making estimations in terms of absolute chronology, let alone in terms of calendar dates. One can only reconstruct a relative chronology, tied to the historical subgrouping within a language family.



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Figure 1. The Bantu subgroups.

This requires a fairly good understanding of that family's internal classification, which is the case for Bantu. Moreover, several initial stages in the Bantu expansion can be tentatively associated with archaeological findings. This allows integrating these language developments in a (still approximate) absolute chronology. It is agreed upon that Proto-Bantu originated in the grasslands of the Nigerian/Cameroonian border. Its daughter languages started to disperse from there 'some five millennia or a little longer ago' (Nurse & Philippson 2003: 165). This timeslot corresponds roughly with the emergence of macrolithism associated with the growing significance of pottery as found in archaeological sites scattered over the Central African rainforest between the first centuries of the second millennium BC and the last centuries BC (de Maret 1994–1995; Lavachery 2001). Likewise, it is commonly believed that the East-Bantu subgroup has its origins in the East-African Great Lakes region. Certain scholars, such as Phillipson (2005: 249–265), link its expansion with the south and eastward spread of the Early Iron Age Industrial Complex through East Africa. The oldest ceramic tradition of this complex, found all over the Great Lakes region, dates between 550 BC and AD 650 (Clist 1987). Other stages in the Bantu expansion, for example the spread of South-West-Bantu, are less well associated with archaeological findings.

Cuisine in early Bantuphone communities: the state of research

Both linguists and historians have approached the history of Bantuphone communities through the comparative study of cultural vocabularies. In most cases, reconstructing food history was not their primary goal. They were more interested in political and social developments (Klieman 2003; Schoenbrun 1998; Vansina 1990, 2004), in the history of technologies such as pottery (Bostoen 2005a) and wood-working (Bulkens 1999a, 1999b), in Bantu lexical reconstructions in general (Guthrie 1970a, 1970b, Bastin & Schadeberg 2003) or in issues of comparative linguistic method (Bostoen 2001; Ricquier & Bostoen 2008). Exceptions mostly concern the reconstruction of food plant names (Philippson & Bahuchet 1994–95; Bostoen 2005b; Maniacky 2005), or the borrowing of food knowledge from Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic speaking peoples in East Africa (Ehret 1967; Schoenbrun 1993). Only a few studies, such as de Luna (2008) and Schoenbrun (1998), focus on the food history of a regional Bantu cluster. However, most of the aforementioned research touches on food history. Taken together, they offer the first insights into early Bantu food history.

Cultivated foods

Scholars generally associate the Bantu expansion with the spread of agriculture, even though direct archaeological evidence for early food production in West-Central Africa is scarce (Bellwood 2002; Holden 2002; Phillipson 2002; Vansina 1994–95).

The importance of tubers, more specifically yams, for early Bantu-speakers has often been stressed (Vansina 1994–95). Maniacky (2005) reconstructs several Proto-Bantu names for 'yam', i.e. **-kùá*, **-bàdá*, **-dúndú*, **-kàmbà*, etc. Some of these also occur in

non-Bantu Niger-Congo. This indicates that the ancestors of the early Bantuphone peoples already consumed yams. Given the number of reconstructions, it can be assumed that different varieties were known. Unfortunately, almost no reconstructions can be linked to a specific yam variety. Therefore, it is difficult to determine which species early Bantu-speakers may have grown. Moreover, since many wild species occur in the Bantu area, the reconstructed yam terms do not provide reliable evidence for agriculture. The domestication of wild yams did not necessarily produce new names. One interesting exception is **-bàdá*, a term widely associated with *Dioscorea alata*, a yam species of Asian origin, and reconstructible to Proto-Bantu. If this reconstruction did not originally designate another species, it could mean that this yam existed in West-Central Africa before the Bantu expansion (Maniacky 2005).

Two Proto-Bantu reconstructions provide a more solid indication of food production among early Bantu-speakers: **-kòndè* 'cowpea (*Vigna unguiculata*)' and **-jùgù* 'Bambara groundnut (*Vigna subterranea*)' (Philippson & Bahuchet 1994–95). Both legumes are indigenous to Africa, but their domestication centre is generally situated outside the Bantu domain (Basu et al. 2007; D'Andrea et al. 2007). Other plants possibly cultivated by early Bantu-speakers are castor beans (*Ricinus communis*) and gourds (Klieman 2003). Guthrie (1970a, 1970b) reconstructs *°-bòndò/°-mòndò* 'castor-oil plant/bean'. Bulkens (1999a) confirms the early use of gourds as containers on the basis of the Proto-Bantu reconstruction **-cùpà* 'calabash bottle' and the more regional western proto-form *°-béndá* 'calabash'. The only reconstruction available for an edible gourd species is *°-(n)gòndó* '*Cucumerops edulis*', a gourd cultivated for oil (Vansina 1990).

Although not indigenous to Africa, bananas (*Musa sp.*) probably played a key role in the early Bantu expansion (Blench 2009; De Langhe et al. 1994–95; Klieman 2003; Mbida et al. 2001; Neumann & Hildebrand 2009; Philippson & Bahuchet 1994–95; Rossel 1998; Schoenbrun 1998; Vansina 1990). The *Musa* genus is of Asian origin and only occurs as cultivars in Africa. The existence of some widespread Bantu terms for banana and/or plantain seems to confirm their importance in early subsistence (Blench 2009; Philippson & Bahuchet 1994–95; Rossel 1998). However, reconstructions, such as *°-kòndè*, *°-kòndò* and *°-kò* (Guthrie 1970a) or alternatively *°-gondí*, *°-gòndò* and *°-gò* (Philippson & Bahuchet 1994–95) are not well established. It is not clear how these phonologically similar reconstructions relate to each other and whether they have a common etymology. Their phonological irregularities could result from contact-induced change, namely the diffusion of bananas and related vocabulary across communities after Bantu languages were introduced in an area. Finally, we need to know more about the relationship of certain Bantu banana terms with vocabulary in West African non-Bantu languages (Blench 2009).

An important change in the diet of Bantuphone peoples took place at a later stage of the Bantu language dispersal. Some 2500 to 3000 years ago Bantuphone communities emerged in the Great Lakes region, east of the equatorial rain forests (Ehret 1998; Nurse & Philippson 2003). In this area, they encountered peoples speaking Nilo-Saharan,

Afro-Asiatic and possibly even Khoisan languages. These interactions as well as different environmental circumstances resulted in an altered lifestyle and diet. We have evidence in the form of loanwords that East-Bantu-speakers acquired knowledge of cereal cultivation through contact with speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages. East-Bantu-speakers probably acquired pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) first as the term most frequently associated with this cereal, °-bèdè, is widespread in East-Bantu and reconstructible to Proto-East-Bantu. Its ultimate point of origin, however, is the West-Nilotic subgroup of Nilo-Saharan (Bostoen forthcoming-a). Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*), another indigenous African cereal, must have been introduced after Proto-East-Bantu had diverged into separate languages, because the words for this crop have a more local distribution (Bostoen forthcoming-a; Philippson & Bahuchet 1994-95). The same is true for finger millet (*Eleusine coracana*) (Philippson & Bahuchet 1994-95).

South of the equatorial rain forests, South-West-Bantuphone peoples also made the cultivation of cereals part of their subsistence. Vansina (2004) dates the adoption of cereal agriculture in this region towards the end of the first millennium AD (Vansina 2004). Based on climatic and environmental evidence, he supposes that cereals arrived in South-West Africa from the east, having spread through northern Botswana, south of the middle Zambezi River and south of the Okavango delta. Ehret (1998) presumes a somewhat earlier introduction by or before the middle of the first millennium AD, but also from an eastern centre of dispersion. According to Ehret, many South-West-Bantu cereal-related words have an East-Bantu origin, but several of those words need further analysis. For example, Ehret posits that °-sángú 'sorghum' was borrowed from East-Bantu °-sàngú 'individual grain'. Nevertheless, Bostoen (forthcoming-a) reconstructs °-cángú with the meaning 'pearl millet' as a predominantly western Bantu term with a considerable time-depth and excludes an eastern origin through borrowing. The word itself might date back to Proto-Bantu, but probably not associated with this cereal. Indeed, Vansina (2004) proposes it originally referred to grass seeds. The independent introduction of pearl millet into western Bantu-speaking Africa is supported by the recent discovery of charred remains of the cereal dating back to 400-200 BC in two archaeological sites from southern Cameroon (Eggert et al. 2006; Kahlheber et al. forthcoming). As the discrepancies in the historical-linguistic interpretations show, the history of cereal cultivation in the south-west needs further research.

Domesticated animals

The early Bantuphone communities had three domesticated animals: °-búdi 'goat', °-kángà 'guinea fowl' and °-búà 'dog' (Guthrie 1970a; Guthrie 1970b; Klieman 2003). Dogs were probably above all hunting companions, but may also have been eaten. The preparation of dog meat has been reported in the northern Bantu domain (Vansina 1985). An important change concerning livestock was the acquisition of cattle. This happened in the same period as the adoption of cereal cultivation through contacts

with non-Bantu-speakers in the north-eastern Bantu domain, probably Nilo-Saharan speakers as suggested by some loanwords in East-Bantu (Schoenbrun 1998). Cattle-keeping remained a relatively unimportant activity until East-Bantu started to diverge and people became interested in the secondary products milk and blood (Ehret 1998; Schoenbrun 1993). For example, Schoenbrun (1997) reconstructed °-caabo 'container, churn, milking calabash, basket type', °-tunda 'churn', and °-lás- 'to bleed cattle' in Great-Lakes-Bantu, an East-Bantu subgroup.

In South-West Africa, keeping cattle would equally have been introduced during the first millennium AD, probably from South-East Africa. Similar to events in the East, cows were only milked later and not all cattle-keepers in the South-West adopted this practice (Ehret 1998; Vansina 2004). Ehret (1998) considers the distribution of °-gòmbè 'cow' and °-tàngá 'cattle-pen' as indicative of their westward diffusion. He claims that cattle vocabulary was not only borrowed from East-Bantu, but also from Khoisan. Vansina (2004) and Haacke (2007) do not share this view. However, the acquisition of sheep-keeping from Khoisan peoples is unanimously accepted, with broad recognition that the southern Bantu term °-gù 'sheep' is a Khoekhoe loan (Ehret 1998; Haacke 2007; Vansina 2004). In return, Khoisan speakers obtained goats from Bantu-speakers (Haacke 2007).

Wild foods

Most historical-comparative research on plant and animal names focuses on domesticates. However, early Bantu-speakers had a mixed subsistence. As is still the case in many present-day Bantuphone communities, wild foods such as fish, game, wild plants and honey were an important component in the earliest Bantu diet, if not the most important. Early Bantu-speakers fished with hook and line, °-dób- and, at later stages of the Bantu expansion, new fishing techniques, such as °-dùb- 'to fish with a basket', were developed (de Luna 2008; Ehret 1998; Vansina 1990). The most advanced lexical reconstruction work done so far on Bantu fish names focuses on the languages of Gabon, a regional scope too limited to draw conclusions on fish species consumed by early Bantu-speakers (Mouguiama-Daouda 1995). In de Luna (2008), two reconstructions for fish are mentioned, °-kóngá 'eel' and °-mpende 'bream (catfish?)', but neither has Proto-Bantu status. The early Bantuphone peoples hunted with spears, °-gòngá/°-jòngá, and with the bow, °-tá. They trapped, °-tég-, the animals that would otherwise plunder their fields. Several Proto-Bantu terms referring to wild animals, such as °-gòì 'leopard', °-jògù 'elephant', °-kákà 'pangolin or scaly ant-eater', °-játú 'buffalo', °-gùbù 'hippopotamus' etc. have been reconstructed, but no one has yet systematically analysed their place in the subsistence systems of the early Bantuphone communities. The first Bantuphone peoples also collected honey, as is indicated by the reconstructions °-jiki 'bee; honey' or °-júki 'honey' (Bastin & Schadeberg 2003; de Luna 2008; Klieman 2003; Vansina 1994-95).

We know a little more about the exploitation of wild trees by early Bantuphone peoples, including the use of the oil palm, called either °-bídà or °-téndé (Bostoen 2005b).

These words refer to both the tree and its nuts, implying that the latter were valued in the early period. This linguistic evidence is bolstered by the presence of charred palm nut husks in many archaeological sites from West-Central Africa commonly associated with the Bantu expansion (de Maret 1994–95). Moreover, the occurrence of the oil palm terms cited above in non-Bantu Niger-Congo languages indicates that the ancestors of early Bantu-speakers already exploited this plant. However, Bantu peoples added a new use, the extraction of palm oil. We know this because Bantu-speakers coined a new word, **-gādī* to talk about 'palm oil'. After the Proto-Bantu period, western Bantu peoples began producing an alcoholic beverage from the oil palm and other palm trees, referring to this beverage with reflexes of **-dōgū* (Guthrie 1970a; Vansina 1990; 2004). Other trees known by early Bantuphone communities were **-bīdf* 'African olive' (*Canarium schweinfurthii*), and **-cākú* 'safou plum' (*Dacryodes edulis*) (Bostoen forthcoming-b). The seeds of the former oleaginous tree are frequently found in association with palm nut husks in West-Central African archaeological sites associated with the Bantu expansion (de Maret 1994–95). It can be assumed that the early Bantu-speakers gathered the fruit of these trees in the wild, but they may have practised some kind of arboriculture as well (Bostoen forthcoming-b; Lavachery 1998).

Cooking techniques and utensils

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How did early Bantu-speakers prepare the plants and animals they ate? Right now, we have a rather fragmentary picture of cooking techniques and utensils. One technique is **-jánik-* 'to spread to dry in the sun' (Bastin and Schadeberg 2003; Guthrie 1970b) whereby food items were dried in order to preserve them. Once dried or immediately after the harvest, starchy foods like yams could be pounded (**-tō-*) (Bastin and Schadeberg 2003) in a mortar (**-dū ~ *-nū*) with a pestle (**-icē*) (Bulkens 1999b). This is in contradiction with Vansina (1985, 2004) and Ehret (1998) who link mortars with the introduction of cereals, and who consider some of the mentioned reconstructions as loans from Nilo-Saharan subgroups. It is not certain whether the mortars of the early Bantuphone peoples were wooden mortars, or more basic varieties such as a stone or a carved-out tree-stump (Bulkens 1999b).

The aforementioned **-būmb-* 'to bake in ashes' is one of the few Proto-Bantu reconstructions referring to a cooking technique (Ricquier & Bostoen 2008). It was most certainly applied to yams and other vegetables, and maybe also to pieces of meat and fish wrapped in leaves. Another technique was roasting directly over the fire, reconstructed as **-káng-* (Bostoen 2001). Some other lexical reconstructions listed in Bastin & Schadeberg (2003) designate the same or similar techniques, but need further analysis to determine their time-depth.

With respect to cooking tools, early Bantu-speakers used at least two types of clay pots in their cooking, **-jōngó* and **-bigá*. The first term probably referred to a spherical cooking pot having a certain height and with a medium opening, used to boil basic foodstuffs. The second term was the generic term for 'pot', which may have additionally

designated a specific kind of cooking pot distinct from the one named **-jōngó*. Its function and form are difficult to retrieve from the present-day data (Bostoen 2005a). Early Bantu-speakers used a spatula or stirring stick (**-ikō*) when cooking in these pots (Bulkens s.d.). Besides the Proto-Bantu reconstruction **-gādī* 'palm oil' mentioned above, Guthrie (1970b) reconstructs **-kútā* 'fat; oil', which seems to be a more generic term. This suggests that the palm oil was not the only type of oil familiar to early Bantuphone communities. These lexical reconstructions for different kinds of oil hint at the cooking technique of frying, but the only reconstructed word for frying so far, **-kádang-*, is of more recent eastern Bantu origin (Bostoen 2001). It is possible that oil was used only as seasoning or that it was not used in cooking at all, but rather for cosmetic purposes.

Important culinary changes are related to the introduction of cereals. Pearl millet and other cereals were threshed (**-pūd-*), ground (**-ti-*) and winnowed (**-jēd-*), all being reconstructions which need more study (Bastin & Schadeberg 2003; Guthrie 1970b; Schoenbrun 1997). Instead of grinding, cereals could also be processed with a mortar and pestle. Despite the fact that Bantuphone peoples already had mortars, a new word appeared in Proto-East-Bantu: **-tūdf* (Bulkens 1999b). Ehret (1998) considers this to be a loanword from Eastern Sahelian, a Nilo-Saharan subgroup. From our own research, we have learnt that both flour and stiff flour-based porridge, the staple in large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, are innovations linked to the introduction of cereals. A widespread word in the Bantu languages for this porridge is **-kīmā*. In contrast to Ehret (1998), this word is not a Nilo-Saharan borrowing, but instead a Proto-Bantu word that originally referred to a mash of starch food such as yams or plantains. With the introduction of cereals and flour, people could prepare the staple carbohydrate in a new manner and the word underwent a semantic shift. Instead of pounding starchy roots to produce mash, cereal growers could produce flour and stir it into hot water until it became a thick porridge. This preparation method is referred to with reflexes of **-dūg-* in the east of the Bantu region, and **-jīpik-* in the South-West, each an older Bantu word that also underwent a regional semantic shift to talk about this form of cooking. Nowadays, the new technique is applied as well to tubers, such as cassava, and plantains.

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Of course, the adoption of cereals and cattle were not the only changes in the culinary traditions of the Bantuphone peoples. The Proto-East-Bantu reconstruction **-kádango* indicates that people in the Great Lakes region, for instance, developed a small and rather flat pot with a wide opening used for frying or dry-roasting (Bostoen 2005a). This noun is derived from the above mentioned verb **-kádang-* 'frying', which is probably also an East-Bantu innovation (Bostoen 2001). Taken together, the two terms suggest that the appearance of this new type of pot correlated with the emergence of a new cooking technique. Later, when the East-Bantu languages started to diverge, the speakers further innovated their vocabulary for pots and even for plates (Bostoen 2005a).

