

# Bantu expansion

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The **Bantu expansion** or the **Bantu Migration** was a millennia-long series of migrations of speakers of the original proto-Bantu language group.<sup>[1] [2]</sup> The primary evidence for this great expansion, one of the largest in human history, has been primarily linguistic, that is that the languages spoken in sub-Equatorial Africa are remarkably similar to each other, to the degree that it is unlikely that they began diverging from each other more than three thousand years ago. Attempts to trace the exact route of the expansion, to correlate it with archaeological evidence, and more recently, with genetic evidence, have not been conclusive, and so many aspects of the expansion remain in doubt or are highly contested.

The linguistic core of the Bantu family of languages, a branch of the Niger–Congo language family, was located in the region of modern Cameroon and Eastern Nigeria. From this core, expansion began about three thousand years ago, with one stream going more or less east into East Africa, and other streams going south along the African coast of Gabon, Democratic Congo and Angola, or inland along the many south to north flowing rivers of the Congo River system. The expansion eventually reached South Africa probably as recently as 300 A.D.<sup>[3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8] [9] [10] [11]</sup>

Initially archaeologists believed that they could find archaeological similarities in the ancient cultures of the region that the Bantu were held to have traversed; while linguists, classifying the languages and creating a genetic table of relationships believed they could reconstruct both material culture elements, new crops and the like. They believed that the expansion was caused by the development of agriculture, the making of ceramics and the use of iron, which permitted new ecological zones to be exploited. In 1966 Roland Oliver published an influential article presenting these correlations as a reasonable hypothesis.<sup>[12]</sup> They pushed out or absorbed the hunter-forager Khoisan, who formerly inhabited these areas. Meanwhile in Eastern and Southern Africa, Bantu-speakers adopted livestock husbandry from other peoples they encountered, and in turn passed it to hunter-foragers. Herding practices reached the far south several centuries before Bantu-speaking migrants did. Archaeological, linguistic, genetic and environmental evidence all support the conclusion that the Bantu expansion was one of the most significant human migrations and cultural transformations within the past few thousand years.

## Pre-expansion demography

Before the expansion of farming and herding peoples, including those speaking Bantu languages, Africa south of the equator was populated by neolithic era hunting and foraging people.

### Central Africa

Groups ancestral to the modern Central African forest peoples (so-called Pygmies), inhabited this part of Africa prior to the Bantu expansion. Many pygmy groups now speak Bantu languages, however a considerable portion of their vocabulary is not Bantu in origin. Much of this vocabulary is botanical, deals with honey collecting, or is otherwise specialized for the forest and is shared between western Pygmy groups. It has been proposed that this is the remnant of an independent western Pygmy (Mbenga or "Baaka") language.<sup>[16]</sup>

### Southern Africa

Proto-Khoisan-speaking peoples, whose few modern hunter-forager and linguistic descendants today occupy the arid regions around the Kalahari desert. Many more Khoekhoe and San descendants have a Coloured identity in South Africa and Namibia, speaking Afrikaans and English.

### Eastern Africa

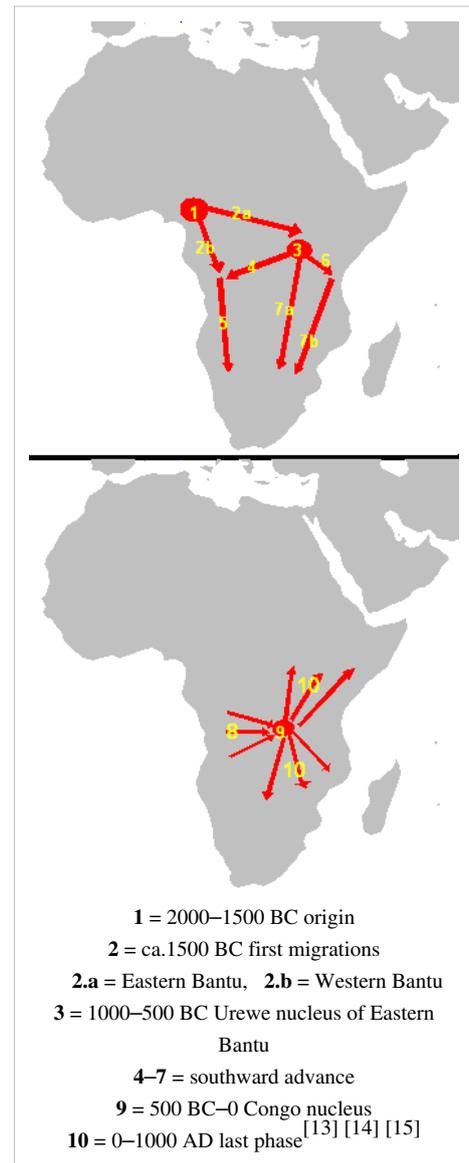
The Hadza and Sandawe-speaking populations in Tanzania, whose languages are proposed by many to have a distant relationship to Khoekhoe and San languages, comprise the other modern hunter-forager remnant in Africa. (Other scholars dispute the hypothesis that the Khoisan languages are a single family, and the name is simply used for convenience.)

Parts of what now is present-day Kenya and Tanzania were also primarily inhabited by agropastoralist Cushitic speakers from the Horn of Africa followed by a later wave of Nilo-Saharan herders.<sup>[17] [18] [19] [20]</sup> The presence of food producing peoples to the Northeast halted the Bantu expansion in this zone of serious cultural resistance.

## Expansion

### c. 1000 BC to c. 500 AD

It seems likely that the expansion of the Bantu-speaking people from their core region in Cameroon began around 1000 BC. Although early models posited that the early speakers were both iron using and agricultural, archaeology has shown that they did not use iron until as late as 400 BC, though they were agricultural.<sup>[21]</sup> The western branch, not necessarily linguistically distinct, according to Christopher Ehret, followed the coast and the major rivers of the Congo system southward, reaching central Angola by around 500 BCE.<sup>[22]</sup> Although it is clear that there were human populations in the region at the time of the expansion, genetic research from Cabinda suggests that only haplogroups that originated in West Africa are found in the area today, and the distinctive L<sub>0</sub> of the pre-Bantu



population is missing, suggesting that there was complete population replacement, at least until the expansion reached South Africa when a more complex intermixing took place.<sup>[23]</sup>

Further west, Bantu-speaking communities had reached the great Central African rainforest, and by 2500 years ago (500 BCE) pioneering groups had emerged into the savannas to the south, in what are now the Democratic Republic of Congo, eastern Angola and Zambia.

Another stream of migration, moving east by 3000 years ago (1000 B.C.), was creating a major new population center near the Great Lakes of East Africa, where a rich environment supported a dense population. Movements by small groups to the southeast from the Great Lakes region were more rapid, with initial settlements widely dispersed near the coast and near rivers, due to comparatively harsh farming conditions in areas further from water. Pioneering groups had reached modern KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa by 300 A.D. along the coast, and the modern Limpopo Province (formerly Northern Transvaal) by 500 A.D.<sup>[24] [25] [26]</sup>

### **From the 1200s to 1600s**

Between the 13th and 15th centuries, the relatively powerful Bantu-speaking states on a scale larger than local chiefdoms began to emerge, in the Great Lakes region, in the savanna south of the Central African rainforest, and on the Zambezi river where the Monomatapa kings built the famous Great Zimbabwe complex. Such processes of state-formation occurred with increasing frequency from the 16th century onward. They were probably due to denser population, which led to more specialized divisions of labour, including military power, while making outmigration more difficult. Other factors were increased trade among African communities and with European, Swahili and Arab traders on the coasts; technological developments in economic activity, and new techniques in the political-spiritual ritualization of royalty as the source of national strength and health.<sup>[26]</sup>

### **Rise of the Zulu Empire and the Defecane (18th-19th centuries)**

By the time Great Zimbabwe had ceased being the capital of a large trading empire, Bantu peoples had completed their colonization of southern Africa, with only the western and northern areas of the Cape not dominated by them. Two main groups developed, the Nguni (Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi), who occupied the eastern coastal plains, and the Sotho–Tswana who lived on the interior plateau.

In the late 18th and early 19th century, two major events occurred. The Xhosa, the most southerly tribe, who had been gradually migrating southwest, made the first tentative contact with the Trekboers gradually trekking northeast from the Cape colony.

At the same time major events were taking place further north in modern day KwaZulu. At that time the area was populated by dozens of small clans, one of which was the Zulu, then a particularly small clan of no local distinction whatsoever. In 1816 Shaka acceded to the Zulu throne. Within a year he had conquered the neighboring clans, and had made the Zulu into the most important ally of the large Mtetwa clan, which was in competition with the Ndwandwe clan for domination of the northern part of modern day KwaZulu-Natal.

Shaka also initiated many military, social, cultural and political reforms, creating a well-organized centralized Zulu state. The most important of these were the transformation of the army, thanks to innovative tactics and weapons he conceived, and a showdown with the spiritual leadership. He clipped the wings of the witchdoctors, effectively ensuring the subservience of the "Zulu church" to the state. Another important reform was to integrate defeated clans into the Zulu, on a basis of full equality, with promotions in the army and civil service being a matter of merit rather than circumstance of birth.

After the death of Mtetwa king Dingiswayo around 1818, at the hands of Zwide king of the Ndwandwe, Shaka assumed leadership of the entire Mtetwa alliance. The alliance under his leadership survived Zwide's first assault at the Battle of Gqokli Hill. Within two years Shaka had defeated Zwide at the Battle of Mhlathuze River and broken up the Ndwandwe alliance. Some of these tribes began a murderous campaign against other Nguni tribes and clans, setting in motion what has come to be known as Defecane or Mfecane, a mass migration of tribes fleeing the

remnants of the Ndwandwe. By 1825 Shaka had conquered a huge empire covering a vast area from the sea in the east to the Drakensberg mountains in the west, and from the Pongola River in the north to the Mbashe River in the south, not far from the modern day city of East London.

An offshoot of the Zulu, the Kumalos, better known to history as the Matabele, created under their king Mzilikazi an even larger empire, including large parts of the highveldt and modern-day Zimbabwe.

Shaka, who had had contacts with British explorers, realized that the white man posed a threat to local populations. He planned to begin an intensive program of education to enable the Nguni people to catch up with the Europeans. However in 1828 Shaka was murdered by his half-brother Dingane, who succeeded him. A weak leader, Dingane was defeated by his half brother Mpande, who was helped by Boers under Andries Pretorius. His son, Cetshwayo as king of the Zulus brought the British army the worst defeat it ever suffered at the hands of a technologically less advanced fighting force at the Battle of Isandlwana in 1879, at great cost to his *impis*. Later the Zulus were overcome by modern European military technology.

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## Further reading

- B. Bousman The Chronological Evidence for the Introduction of Domestic Stock in Southern Africa ([http://www.txstate.edu/anthropology/cas/journal\\_articles/herder.pdf](http://www.txstate.edu/anthropology/cas/journal_articles/herder.pdf))(1998)

## External links

- A Brief History of Botswana (<http://www.thuto.org/ubh/bw/bhp1.htm>)
  - On Bantu and Khoisan in (Southeastern) Zambia (<http://elaine.ihs.ac.at/~isa/diplom/node59.html>) by Isabella Andrej (1998 diploma thesis)
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