

Was there a proto-Bantu word for 'whale'? Explorations in early Bantu maritime history

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Sharks are numerous and highly speciated in the Atlantic, but most languages only have a generic term for 'shark'. By contrast, the Yasuku distinguish no less than ten shark species. The common term for 'shark' in NW Bantu is #ndomi. Table 1 shows the reflexes of this root for 'shark' in NW Bantu.

Language	Attestation
Mokpe	ndomi
Isu	ndómí
Wumboko	ndómè
Wuvua	ndómí
Pungu	ndóm
Malimba	ndómé
Yasuku	ndómí
Mabi	ntúmá/bi- large shark
Tanga	ndómé
Yasa	ndómí

Rays are covered by a general term in coastal Cameroun. Table 2 shows the distribution of the root #nduba in NW Bantu; this applies to *Raja* spp., *Dasyatis* spp. and perhaps *Gymnurus* spp.



Language	Attestation
Londo	lùbà
Isu	lù-bà / mù-
Wumboko	lùbà
Wuvua	lù-bà / mù-
Pungu	dù-bà / mù-
Malimba	dù-bà / mù-
Duala	duba
Yasuku	dùbà / mùbà
Mabi	duba V.
Tanga	dùba ·
Yasa	ndù-bà / ìm-

An important commercial species along the coast of Cameroun is the ladyfish, 'herring' (in Cameroun English) *Elops lacerta* and *E. senegalensis*. Table 3 shows the terms for 'ladyfish' in NW Bantu



Language	Attestation
Wumboko	mótàngà
Wuvua	mò-tàngà / mè-
Yasuku	mòndè akò
Mabi	n-tàngà / mí-
Tanga	ntàngà
Yasa	mótàngà / mè-

The dolphinfish, *Coryphaena equiselis*, a large pelagic species, is commonly caught around the Gulf of Guinea. Table 4 shows the terms for 'dolphinfish' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Yasuku	èkóngò / bi-
Mabi	kúngú / bi-
Tanga Bano'o	è-kóngwà / be-
Yasa	è-kóngò / be-

Sea and estuarine mammals

Apart from bony fish, the sea offers a wide variety of other edible resources. Largest are the sea-mammals, whales, dolphins and porpoises. Whales were never captured by coastal peoples (although the transplanted populations of São Tomé e Príncipe did go after whales, using small boats, a technique they may have learnt from Basque sailors in the 16th C). Nonetheless, whales can be seen off the coast in Cameroun and Gabon and are occasionally beached. The whale features in a number of oral traditions and whale rib-bones are sometimes used to adorn the chairs of chiefs, rather like elephant tusks in inland areas. Species are quite diverse; local French distinguishes *baleine*, large whales and *cachalot*, small whales that accompany them. Common species in the area are the sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*) and Bryde's whale (*Balaenoptera edeni*) but there may well be sperm whales (*Physeter catodon*). It seems unlikely that the widespread term for 'whale' in NW Bantu (Table 5) can be attached to a particular species.

Language	Attestation
Londo	ndòndò
Isu	ndòndò
Wumboko	nòndò
Wuvua	nòndò
Yasuku	ndòndò
Tanga	ndòndò
Yasa	ndòndò

Marine turtles

The other important marine species is the turtle. Five species of turtle nest on the beaches of Cameroun. Most languages have a single term for all marine turtles and this is often the same word as for freshwater turtle and tortoise, with 'sea' qualifying it. Table 8 shows the terms for 'turtle' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Londo	ku ya mariba
Isu	è-ku / yè-
Wuvua	kù
Malimba	kùdù
Yasuku	kùtù
Tanga	kùdù
Yasa	kùdù



Large cast-nets are extremely common in this region. Table 10 shows the general term for 'cast-net' in NW Bantu.

Language	Attestation
Londo	mbunja
Isu	mbùndjà
Wumboko	mbùnzà
Wuvua	mbùnzà
Malimba	mbùndjà
Tanga	mbùndjà
Yasa	mbùndjà

An intriguing question is whether fish-hooks were known prior to European contact. All fish-hooks today are made of industrial steel, so this says little about their antiquity. Fish-hooks have been found in archaeological contexts across Sahelian Africa, but all the evidence is that they fell out of use thousands of years ago. Despite this, NW Bantu has a relatively stable term that does not look like a borrowing. Table 11 shows these terms for 'hook'



Language	Attestation
Londo	iyòbì
Isu	yòvì pl. yòvì
Wumboko	nòwì
Wuvua	itfàwò / Bèyòwò
Yasuku	n-ìsò / mi-
Tanga Bano'o	vìsòb / mábò
Tanga Bapuku	vìsòb / wòbò
Yasa	i-yòbò / m-

Canoe paddles have a distinctive shape throughout the region. Table 14 shows the terms for 'paddle' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Proto-Bantu	kápi
Londo	kafi
Isu	pàki
Wumboko	fàki
Wuvua	fáí
Yasuku	páyò ? < Fr. <i>pagaille</i>
Tanga	kápi
Yasa	kávì

The ocean

Early Bantu had a panoply of words describing the sea and weather conditions. Table 15 shows the terms for 'ocean' or 'sea' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Londo	mbo
Isu	mwándjà
Wumboko	mwánzà
Wuvua	m*anzà
Malimba	tùbè
Yasuku	tùwè
Tanga	tùbè
Yasa	tùbè

Storms at sea are one of the most dangerous events for fishermen, but also are said to sometimes attract fish. At any rate they are a characteristic meteorological phenomenon and Table 16 shows the terms for 'storm' in northwest Bantu

Language	Attestation
Londo	ngunga
Isu	ngòy, è-wùlì / Bè-
Wumboko	mòmbànù
Wuvua	mbimbi
Mabi	mbávù
Tanga	yóngòwà
Yasa	bòkùdì

Crustaceans

Marine and seashore crustaceans are highly diverse along this coast (Schneider 1990). The diversity of vocabulary reflects the economic importance in different regions. For example, some groups have a single word for 'crab', others distinguish up to six species in categories closely matching scientific identifications. Lobsters, crayfish and other crustaceans are easily carried in the ballast of ships and can thus be transported to a new environment when the ballast of the ship is discharged. Thus, *Panulirus argus*, the Caribbean spiny lobster, is thought to be a recent introduction to the region perhaps transported by this means. No language was found to have distinct terms for different lobster species, although individual fishermen were well aware of differences in phenotype and habitat. Table 6 shows the terms for 'lobster' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Londo	mò-sà / mè-
Isu	mò-say / mè-
Wuvua	mwési pl. mīsi
Malimba	mūhādè / mi-
Tanga	nwá m*á túbè / mèyá myá túbè
Yasa	mò-yá m*á túbè / mè-yá má túbè

The large marine crabs in this region are both diverse and numerous. There are also a much smaller variety of freshwater crabs and also land crabs. Many languages only have a single term for 'crab' but others make quite complex distinctions. Table 7 shows the generic term for 'crab' in NW Bantu

Language	Attestation
Londo	mákáká
Wuvua	li-kákò / m-
Yasuku	li-kákò / mi- 'marine crab'
Yasuku	mikáyàlá mi tuwe
Tanga	ikákù / má- 'swimcrab' <i>Callinectes</i> spp.
Yasa	mákákò "má túbè 'swimcrab' <i>Callinectes</i> spp.



Fish capture techniques

Fish are captured using a wide variety of techniques. Some of these are clearly of great antiquity and adapted to particular species, locations and seasons. Table 9 summarises the fishing gear used along the coast

Category	Types	Comment
Harpoon guns		recent introduction
Hooks		probably of recent introduction
Cast-nets	double clap-nets plunge-basket sweep-net	
Seines	hand-seine circular seine	
Gill-nets	floating gill-net bottom-set gill-net	
Valve-traps	cylindrical valve-traps conical valve-traps	set in extensive networks of fish-fences used for shrimps
	valveless non-return traps	
Long-lines	Baited long-lines Foul-hook long-lines	

Source: Terminology from Reed *et al.* (1967) and FAO/NIOMR (1994)

It is now recognised that the domestication of calabashes for fishing-floats was a key initial step towards plant domestication in the New World. However, fishing floats in Africa may well be post-European. All fishing floats in use today are made from industrial materials. Table 12 shows the terms for 'fishing-float'

Language	Attestation
Londo	mbongo
Isu	mbèndù
Wumboko	mbèndù
Wuvua	mbèndù
Yasuku	mbèndù
Tanga	mbèndù
Yasa	mbèndù

Boats

The principal method of boat construction along the west coast is the canoe made from a single tree-trunk. Fire is used to split the canoe and open up the interior and adzes shape the outside of the canoe. However, today only small canoes are made in this way and all larger boats are made from planks. Ssentongo & Njock (1987) suggest that all the plank boats are of Ghanaian or Nigerian origin and are thus not very old. They refer to very large canoes with up to fourteen paddlers used with large purse seines used for Sardinella and bonga; no such canoes were seen today. Table 13 shows the stem for 'canoe' in northwest Bantu;

Language	Class	Attestation
Londo		wá-lò / m-
Isu		wá-lò / m-
Wumboko		bá-lò
Wuvua		gbá-yò / má-
Yasuku		n-bóngò mi-
Tanga		mbó-lò / m-yá-lò
Yasa		bwá-lò / m-
Mbuun	B87	bwár



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The conventional model of the Bantu expansion is dominated by the conceptual world that Bantu lexical reconstructions suggest. These focus above all on farming, river fisheries, and forest mammals. Hence the characteristic model of an overland expansion south and east of the Cameroun rainforest, a view apparently supported by finds of pottery along the major river systems. The possibility that there was also a maritime expansion down the west coast of Africa has hardly been considered, in part because marine vocabulary has not been reconstructed. The archaeologist Bernard Clist has excavated shell mounds in coastal Gabon and suggested that seagoing populations may well have played a greater role in early movements down to Angola, but this has not been taken up by the archaeological community.

Nonetheless it remains a possibility that the early Bantu had a seagoing culture, and spread down the west coast of equatorial Africa. We know that the island of Fernando Po was regularly visited in the pre-Iron Age and that its rocks were in particular demand for stone axes (Sheppherd 1983). We know that the ancestors of the Bubi reached the island prior to the diffusion of iron smelting. Fishing must thus have represented a major aspect of their subsistence (Tessmann 1931). This implies a familiarity with a rich variety of marine species, as well as the many open water species entering the numerous estuaries around the Bight of Biafra, which can be brackish in certain seasons. Despite this, there has been virtually no work on the lexicon of marine life specific to the Bantu of the west coast of subequatorial Africa. The possibility should be considered that one strand of Bantu expansion was a rapid coastal movement southwards and that this would be reflected in a reconstructible terminology relating to the sea.

To explore this hypothesis from an ethnographic and linguistic point of view, extensive surveys of coastal Bantu populations with a maritime orientation in Cameroun were undertaken in early 2010. As a result it is now possible to say that there *is* an extensive range of proto-Bantu vocabulary relating to sea-fish, boats, weather and ocean conditions, which has hitherto been unrecorded and effectively ignored. The possibility that one thread of the early period of Bantu prehistory was based on complex exploitation of pelagic resources can no longer be ignored. The southern extent of this migration is unknown, in the absence of research in the relevant locations, but it is most likely the severe surf conditions in Angola would have precluded further expansion, which may explain the predominance of coastal foragers below a certain latitude.

Complementary evidence for such an expansion would be archaeological. If this was indeed southwards along the west coast, it should be reflected in patterns of pottery and settlement. Unfortunately, coastal archaeology in this region remains poorly developed. The main source is the excavations of Bernard Clist in Gabon (Clist 1991, 1995, 1998, 2005) also Van Neer & Clist (1991). The coastal Iron Age site of Oveng, 12 km N of Libreville, dates to 1700 BP, and a detailed analysis of the faunal remains indicates that its occupants had a marine diet largely based on the shellfish *Anadara senilis*, *Tympanotus fuscatus*, *T. radula* and the oyster *Ostrea tulipa* (Van Neer & Clist 1991) and a variety of fish species adapted to brackish or seawater. There is additional evidence for a smaller component of gathered forest produce and hunting of small mammals. The authors point to the significance of this subsistence strategy and its relevance for the Bantu expansion, expanding the perspective of more simplistic 'across the forest' models in authors such as Vansina (1990, 1995).

Earlier work at Pointe-Noire and in Angola is reported in scattered sources (Clist & Lanfranchi 1991). Pais Pinto (1988) describes the Cachama sites near Benguela where the collection of marine resources predominate. The site of Benfica, near Luanda, dating to ca. 1800 BP, also suggests a subsistence strategy where marine resources were highly significant. Sites with published faunal analyses are few and far between, but descriptions of ceramic traditions are more common and point to movement down the coast earlier than 1800 BP. Denbow (1986, 1990) describes the ceramics of Tchissanga, near the mouth of the Congo, which consistently date to around the 6th century BC, and are related to the Okala traditions in Gabon and those of Ngovo in the DRC. Evidence for a rapid expansion down the west coast remains fragmentary, but what sites there are provide intriguing hints of such a movement.

Can the present be read back into the past?

Although the first image of sea fisheries is very 'traditional', in fact numerous introductions in the post-European era have changed the dynamics of subsistence fisheries considerably. A significant problem is the extent to which modern techniques are simply updated former practices as opposed to introductions. For example, the anchor is almost certainly a European introduction, yet it appears to have an embedded local name. Plank boats may well also be post-European. If pre-Iron Age sailors could cross the surf to Bioco on a regular basis, they must have had large boats, and not just the small monoxylous canoes made today. Sails are found in more sheltered lagoons and estuarine areas and are certainly post 16th C. More difficult to determine is net-fishing. Although nets are certainly pre-European, it is less clear whether the floats and sinkers characteristic of European nets are later developments. All the parts of the net today are manufactured from industrial materials, plastic and other synthetics. Some types of net-fishing, such as shore dragnets, have names that point to European origins, in this case *tire-tire*.

The legend of the red fish and other aspects of oral history

An interesting contribution to the early history of the Bantu-speaking area is entitled 'The Pygmies were our Compass' (Kliemann 2003). Among other topics this refers to the widespread myth or narrative that the pygmies were already resident in the forest when particular Bantu groups reached their present site and that they were led there by pygmies. Variants of this myth have been recorded among several coastal people. In this version, the pygmies are in residence on the seashore when the Bantu arrive and they show the Bantu peoples a red fish which has the characteristic that it does not change colour when cooked. This is a sea fish (perhaps the grouper, *Epinephelus* sp.) and from this knowledge the Bantu began sea-fishing. This story is beguiling but puzzling because there is no evidence for pygmies taking any significant interest in sea-fishing

Conclusions

The literature on the Bantu expansion and the standard list of PB reconstructions assumes a land-based expansion across the equatorial rainforest following the rivers. But there is nothing inherently impossible about an active Bantu maritime culture spreading rapidly down the western seaboard of Africa after 4000 bp and indeed this has some support from archaeology. Map 1 shows a proposal for this early coastal migration with its southern limits.



The collection and synthesis of maritime vocabulary in the languages of coastal Cameroun points to a rich lexicon which has previously gone unrecorded. Early traffic with the island of Bioco, perhaps connected with the stone axe trade, has shown that pelagic fishing techniques and a knowledge of the open ocean must have been a significant element in Bantu subsistence in this region. Lexical links with fishing populations north and west of the coastal Bantu also suggest active sea-based interchanges in prehistory. The problem is how far south this population expansion was able to push before increasingly rough surf forced its bearers inland. Until more data is available on coastal language in Gabon and other countries, this question will remain difficult to answer.