

People on the Move

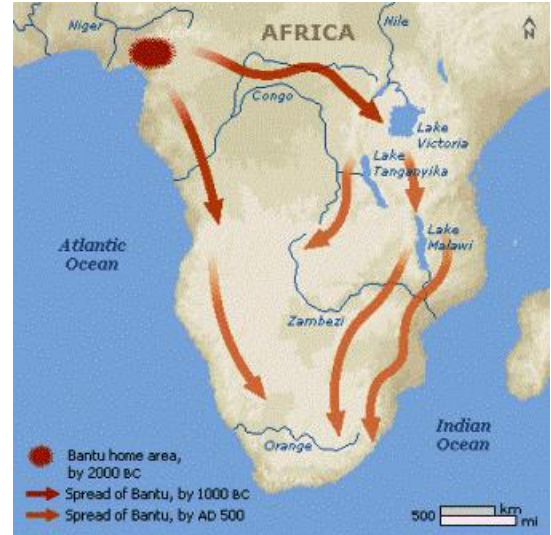
The Story of Africa – BBC World Service

Armed with iron smelting technology the Bantu of west and central Africa dispersed across the continent, changing its linguistic and cultural landscape. A number of theories have been put forward to explain this migration.

NEED TO MOVE

"When people move they move for a reason. They move because the population has expanded. They move because the resources which support the population in the settlements have become... inadequate. They move because there are changes to the climate and they move for the sake of finding better areas in which to live."

-Professor Leonard Ngcongco, University of Botswana.



SLOW BUT STEADY

One theory is that there were waves of migration, one moving through the east of Africa and another making its way through the center of the continent. In Zambia, there is evidence of at least three routes of migration - from the great lakes, from the Congo forest and from Angola. There is evidence that the Bantu ancestors of the modern Swahili peoples mastered sailing technology and possessed canoes and boats so they could make their way along the Zambezi River.

"Chief among the reasons for migration is environmental stress and population increase in West Africa, forcing people to move. It is important to realize that these people are not moving across the landscape like bugs bunny or the energizer bunny, but essentially they are moving slowly, gradually inhabiting areas that were good for farming and livestock raising."

-Dr Chapirukha Kusimba, Field Museum, Chicago.

CONQUERORS, COLONIZERS OR ADVENTURERS?

Most historians appear to believe that rather than arriving en masse like a conquering horde, the migrations were more sporadic with small pockets of people moving from one point to another. It is not entirely clear how the Bantu reacted when they came upon existing communities but it is likely that there was considerable absorption, assimilation and displacement of other peoples during the migration period. The Bantu were armed with superior weapons and their iron implements allowed them to cultivate land and clear forests efficiently. If they came as colonizers, then it is unlikely to be in the sense we understand the term today. Historians believe there was social interaction and intermarrying and trade.

EVIDENCE

The evidence for migration is based on three main areas of research. They are:

• Linguistic

A comparative study of languages spoken in some parts of eastern, central and southern Africa show similarities with the mother tongues originally spoken in West Africa. There are some 450 known languages in the Bantu family from Gikuyu in the north to Setswana in the south.

• Pottery

There is evidence of similar pottery technology in eastern, southern and western Africa.

Iron Age farmers were skilled pot makers and decorated their pots with grooves and patterns. Related groups of peoples used similar styles of decoration.

• **Iron**

There is little or no evidence of iron working in east and southern Africa before the arrival of the Bantu suggesting that new technology was spread by the migrants.

Questions

1. According to Professor Leonard Ngcongco, what are some of the reasons that people migrate to new places? _____

2. How does Dr. Chapirokha Kusimba describe the speed with which the migration took place? Why do you think it moved at such a speed? _____

3. Based on the article, how would describe the interaction between the migrating Bantu people and existing communities? _____

4. What technology did the Bantu have that gave them an advantage over other African groups? Explain one way it gave them an advantage. _____

5. How do scholars know today that the Bantu Migration took place?

6. How can similarity of languages prove the Bantu Migration? _____

