The Fang coming all the way down from ‘Egyptland’?
Or how the walls of a myth may come tumbling down…

L. J. van der Veen (DDL, UMR 5596, Lyon)
Research with J.-M. Hombert (Lyon), P. Mouguiama-Daouda (Lyon-Libreville), D. Comas (Barcelone), L. Quintana-Murci (Paris), L. Sica (Franceville, Gabon)

Objective
- Presentation of some expected and unexpected results from the "Language, Culture and Genes in Bantu" project (OHLL, OMLL) related to
  - Fairly well-known population
  - Migration

Outline
- The Fang
  - Where they live
  - Who they are
  - Where they come from
- Evidence from Linguistics
- Evidence from Population Genetics
  - MtDNA
  - Y-chromosome
- Possible scenario(s)
- Further investigation

Fang: where they live
- Southern part of Cameroon (with the Bulu and Beti pops as their northern neighbours)
- Most of the northern half of Gabon
- Small region in northwest of Congo-Brazzaville
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Geographical distribution of Fang, Beti and Bulu
With recent expansion patterns for Fang dialects: Ntumu, Mvaï, O-kak, Mekè, Nzaman, Betsi
(Perrois 1972:102)

Fang: who they are

- Most recently installed Bantu-speaking population in Gabon
- Demographically and linguistically, dominant group (Gabon)
- ±700,000 individuals distributed over 3 countries
- Patrilinear descent system
- Marriage strategy: exogamy
- Farming villagers

Fang: who they are

- Oral tradition
  - Mvett (storytelling/music): performing ancestral myth
  - Differences between clans/lineages!
- Initiation rituals
  - Bwiti: adopted from Tsogo (southern Gabon) at beginning of 20th century
  - Melan, as part of Byeri: ancestor worship
- Art
  - Masks (Ngil), funeral statuettes (Byeri), …

Fang women coming home from plantation - Cureau (1912)

Oral tradition – Mvett (storytelling/music): performing ancestral myth

Initiation rituals – Bwiti: adopted from Tsogo (southern Gabon) at beginning of 20th century

Art – Masks (Ngil), funeral statuettes (Byeri), …

Fang women coming home from plantation - Cureau (1912)

Rumours spread by Mpongwe and allied brokers? (The latter’s privileged position being threatened!)
Fang: who they are

- Usually considered to belong to larger cultural unit, with Beti and Bulu (the so-called ‘Pahouin’ group)
  - ‘Mpangwe’, ‘Pamouay’ or ‘Pamue’ < (mi-)pamye ‘I don’t know’?? (Mpangwe B11a)
  - Name most certainly attributed by others, probably the Mpongwe
- Possibly, a confederation of various clans/lineages
  - Related? Unrelated? Both?

Fang: where they come from

- Most consensual and most likely scenario (though limited time depth!)
  - Fairly well-documented demic expansion within the Cameroon-Gabon area, though the precise (ancient) geographical origin (Mvog Etanga) still a matter of debate
    - Adamawa highlands in north-central Cameroon?
    - Upper-Sangha in western Central-African Republic?
    - Both?
  - Wave-like expansion
    - Several stages and branches (split-offs)
  - Intensified during 18th century AD and come to an end during first half of 20th century AD in Gabon

- Trigger(s) and/or conductor(s):
  - Groups (of non-Bantu speakers) invading northern Cameroon and triggering migration movements
    - I.e. Fulani expansion triggering southward migrations
    - More generally, Muslim invasions and slave trade (the figure of the ‘Crocodile’ in Fang oral tradition?)
  - Trade, European goods (increase of economic exchange: ivory, ironwork, captives, etc.) and misery among Fang were crucial factors, especially during final stage of expansion
    - Search for women (exogamy) and very high cost of dowry
      - Fang dowry system: highest cost in Gabon (Mayer, 2002)
    - Possibly, decrease of elephant population (Cadet, 2005)
  - More than one population involved!
    - Proto-Fang: part of a more general, southward movement

- Fang’s arrival in Gabon (chronology)
  - Prior to arrival, the Mpongwe (Myene-speakers) are the exclusive trade partners of the Europeans
  - First reference to Fang in Gabon: Bowdich, 1819 (inland location, but where?)
  - First contacts between Fang and Europeans: Wilson, 1842 (first description)
  - Progressive entering of the Estuary: from 1844 on
  - Descent encouraged by the French: development of trade activities (tied to destiny of the Colony?)
  - Southward movement to Ogooué: from 1866 on
- N.B. Some accounts suggest presence of Fang in Gabon (Komo region) is older
Fang: where they come from

- Arrival profoundly reshuffled the populational and linguistic landscape (their number, skills, economic status, etc.)
  - Previously installed groups left their territory being pushed away by the Fang (e.g. Kele (B22))
  - Those who stayed underwent process of gradual assimilation (e.g. Makina (A83))

- Main sources: oral traditions and testimonies, some written documents (reports, registers)

A more picturesque, Romantic theory: Nomadic warriors come down from the Upper-Nile region

- Theory elaborated by the French (!) Rev. Trilles (1912, 1931) and several other ‘specialists’. ‘Egyptian’ origin (plateaux of Bahr-el-Ghazal) for the Fang population, language and culture
  - Built on a series of speculative and often random parallels drawn by 19th century administrators, explorers and missionaries (natural fascination with the Unknown, the presumably ‘Unspoilt’, the Savage)
  - Built on debatable interpretation of Mvett, and arguments referring to linguistic, cultural and phenotypical traits (skin colour, overall size, etc.)
Fang: where they come from

- Direct descent of nomadic tribe heading for the conquest of Gabon
- Theory has become very popular, especially among Black African scholars, but also among non-scholars
- In Gabon, common belief that the Fang, as well as their language, are not Bantu
  - Birth of a new, glorifying myth, cunningly exploited by the French colonisers

Evidence from linguistics

- Fang: A75 (A70: FANG-BULU cluster)
- Gabon: northern, southern and intermediate dialects (Medjo Mvé, 1997)
- Impact on surrounding languages
  - Dominant language assimilating several other, related and less related, languages (cf. Shiwa, A83 dialect spoken by Makina)
  - Currently spoken by nearly 30% of the Gabonese population!

Fang: where they come from

  - School of thought
    - “White Egyptologists falsify ancient History!”
- Similar claims for Basaá (A43a) and Mboshi (C25) languages
- Theory in its strongest version claims that all Black African languages and cultures descend from the ancient Egyptian civilisation
Evidence from linguistics

- Fang looks different from the neighbouring Bantu languages (at the surface)
  - Some peculiar phonological features
    - 8V + 3 diphongs
    - Labiovelars ([kπ], [gβ])
    - Predominantly closed syllables
    - Palatal nasals in word-final position
  
  Fang Ntumu (Bitam, Gabon)
  Proverb (P. Medjo Mvé)

- But... according to Guthrie (1948, 1967-71), Hombert et al. (1989), Medjo Mvē (1997) and Mba-Nkoğhe (2001):
  - Absolutely no evidence of a non-Bantu substratum
  - All the traits of a regular Bantu language
    - Lexicon can be directly and straightforwardly related to Proto-Bantu reconstructions, through regular sound correspondences (vowels, consonants, tones)
    - Regular Bantu noun class system
    - Regular Bantu verb system
  - Fang is a foolproof Bantu language, no doubt

Evidence from genetics (mtDNA)

- MtDNA variation (analysis team directed by L. Quintana-Murci)
  - 1404 samples (i.e. individuals) from Gabon and Cameroon
  - 9 hunter-gathering ‘Pygmy’ pops (421 individuals), 20 Bantu-speaking farming pops (983 individuals)
  - No evidence at all of a Semitic or Egyptian origin
  - If Fang really descended from ‘Egypt’, all Bantu-speaking groups of the area would be related to the (ancient) Egyptians!

(Data, analysis and slide by Lluis QM)
Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Y-chromosome variation (analysis directed by J. Bertranpetit and D. Comas)
  - 900 samples from Gabon and Cameroon
  - 3 hunter-gathering (‘Pygmy’) populations, 20 Bantu-speaking farming populations
  - 18 STR markers (3 reactions)
  - ~40 SNP markers
  
  (Data, analysis, slides by David Comas)

Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups

Correspondence analysis: haplogroup composition
First two dimension plot (75.6% genetic variance)

Evidence from genetics (Y)

- First result: Fang are basically ‘Bantu’!

- But... Fang attest a non-African haplogroup (R1b)!!

- However... they are not the only ones!!!
  - Punu, Teke, Ndumu, Obamba! (In particular!)
  - Pops having different oral traditions
    - Especially Fang vs. others
  - Pops not directly related, linguistically
    - Especially Fang vs. others
  - Geographical distance
    - Fang vs. others
Peopling of Gabon by Punu, Ndumu, Teke and Fang acc. to oral traditions

Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Distribution, origin and age of this haplogroup?

Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups

Haplogroup R1b* modified from Cruciani et al. 2002

Chad: 20 - 35%
North Africa: 7%
Middle East: 10%
Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Haplogroup R1b*
  - Estimated age: $13,000 \pm 3,000$ years
- Haplogroup R1b (including Chad samples)
  - Estimated age: $12,700 \pm 2,200$ years
- Haplogroup R1
  - Out-of-Africa
  - Partial back migration (~$16,000$ YBP)
  - Subsequent contacts: Central Africa

Possible scenario(s)

- Scenario(s)
- Type(s) of migration

Possible scenario(s)

- Contacts between Bantu-speaking farmers and other groups (Nilo-Saharan?) before and/or during southward-bound migration
  - Initial contacts: Chad?, northern Cameroon?, Central-African Republic? Farther south?
  - More than one region, possibly
  - Over an undetermined but considerable stretch of time
- Several Bantu-speaking pops have thus become, with others, the new ‘carriers’ of a much older ‘back-into-Africa’ migration

Current distribution of Nilo-Saharan languages
Possible scenario(s)

- Carried along by southward migrations
- Not a rush!
  - Large-scale movement, with various rates of velocity over time
  - On the whole, slow progression
- No direct descent from the Upper-Nile region!
  "Out-of-Egypt theory" is untenable
  - Serious problem of time depth! Much older genetic substratum
- Not a carefully planned, aggressive conquest!
  - Non-oriented, non-planned, non-linear process

Possible scenario(s)

- Non-teleological event (most of the time)
  - Just 'get out of the way' ... to God-knows-where
- No nomads: authentic villagers
  - Probably experienced tradesmen already in pre-colonial times
- Wave-like in space, in time ('flea-like')
  - Southern linguistic features in some northern dialects (Gabon) strongly suggest (minor) back migrations
  - Some split-offs may have miscarried
  - Some groups stay, others move on

Potential migration areas

Primary and secondary dispersal areas

Possible scenario(s)

- Triggered and/or encouraged by a variety of factors that may evolve over time
- Repellers, attractors, conductors
  - E.g. Fulani expansion: height of centralised empire during 19th century AD
    - Usman dan Fodio
    - Sokoto empire and jihad (northern Nigeria)
  - Invasions, raids and pressure contributed to southward migratory movements through Niger and Nigeria into Cameroon
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Possible scenario(s)

- European trade and goods: efficient attractor during second half of 19th century in Gabon (strategic, political choice!)
- Repellers: fear of slave trade, strong social ties (clans)

Complex event:
- Migration(s) within migration (admixture before and/or during spread)
- Several (related or not related) populations involved

Incorporation: partial integration through contact with pops already in place (substratum) and/or encounters of various types (!)
- Archaeological evidence: Hunter-collecting settlements prior to arrival of Bantu villagers
  - Carriers of R1B??
- Motivation and modes of incorporation?
  - Evidence (Y-chromosome) only concerns male individuals
    - What about females?
  - Voluntary basis? Forced integration?
  - Time depths?

Possible explanation for perceived phenotypical traits in Fang??
- Why Fang and not the other pops such as Punu?

‘R1b-free’ pops: Myene (B10), Tsogo (B30) and Kele (B20) groups
- No real contact with R1b-carrying pops
  - More ancient? (Suggested by linguistic evidence!)
  - Other migrations paths? (Coastal?!, more western?)
- Limited number of Kele and Pygmy individuals: gene flow
Further investigation

- Further explore origin and distribution of the non-African haplogroup
  - Chad, Cameroon and Central African Republic (e.g. Upper-Sangha area in CAR)
  - Farther down south
    - Examining North-South, decreasing gradient
    - Two Congos (other Bantu-speaking populations)
    - Angola (idem)

- Linguistic research
  - Proto-Fang
    - Vocabulary
      - Reconstructions
      - Borrowings

- Sorting out time depths
  - Fang: Originally an (ethnic) unity? Or result of (recent) convergence?
    - Cultural variation
      - Artefacts (funerary statuettes, traditional knives) and style differences within Fang (Terbois, I.a.)
    - Differences between Fang and Bid (Laburthe-Toïra, 1981)
  - Problems with genealogies within ‘Fang’: absence common ancestors, incompatibilities
    - Lineages as most significant units?
  - Variations in oral tradition
  - What can population genetics tell us?

References (1)


References (2)

References (3)


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