1. Villagers vs. Hunter-gatherers (‘People of the Forest’)

1.1 Looking for (synchroneous) linguistic patterns

According to Bastin et al. (1999) lexicostatistically based classification (fig. 3), Bantu can be subdivided into four major groups of unequal size: MBAM-BUBI (yellow), NORTH-WESTERN Bantu (green), WESTERN Bantu (orange) and EASTERN Bantu (no color). Similar patterns arise from Hulin & Gray (2000; added signs ours) who experimentally applied methods used in phylogenetic analysis to linguistic data (fig. 3).

Due to the difficulty to disentangle the complex linguistic networks, a satisfactory complete sub-classification has been achieved so far for Bantu as a whole. Simple traditional dendrograms are clearly incomplete. A broad picture has to be assumed, where *Forest Bantu* (typically A, 8, B and C) opposes to *Savanna Bantu* (the rest). Smaller regional studies may contribute to elaborate a more comprehensive and more international classification.

The Gabon-DRC-Congo area also affects a highly complex situation (Van der Veeren 2005). Figures 3 to 6 show for each language variety within this model of linguists a major linguistic barrier appears between north-western and central-western Bantu (fig. 3, 4 and 5), in several places more or less blurred by convergence phenomena. In Gabon, north-western Bantu comprises the A zone languages (A43, A75 and A80) as well as the MYNE (B10), part of KELE (B30) and TSIGO (B30) groups. B10 and B30 form a sub-group (cf. Mouguiama-Daouda & Van der Veeren 2003), sharing several, mainly lexical tentative convergence or by prolonged contact. The exact status of the fairly complex and geographically hitoscattered KELE group needs further investigation (Bastin et al. 1999; floating group).

Central-western Bantu in Gabon is represented by the SHIRA–VILU and the B50–B60–B70 (NTH–MBITE–KIE) clusters. In both, respectively, these groups are clearly related to H, B and C zone languages. The proximity between BSO and the B50–B70 cluster may also be due to extensive convergence.

1.2 Working out processes capable of accounting for the nowadays linguistic patterns

As for Bantu-speaking Africa, Western Central Africa attains the highest degree of linguistic diversity. This region is also located near the closest relatives of Bantu. Therefore, scholars nowadays agree the Bantu homeland was located in the northwestern part of this area (e.g., the Bamenda Highlands of Cameroon, in the vicinity of Mount Cameroon). The expansion must have been gradual and wave-like, following an initial period of discrete fragmentation. Dendrochronology suggests a relative late time depth of some 5,000 years for the beginning of the diversification process. However, recent evidence from archaeology rather points for an approximate time depth of 4,000 years.

The north-western languages are nowadays considered to be the descendants of the earliest split from the Bantu “tree.” Western Central Africa must have been the scene of the gradual spread of Bantu, in particular the western, southwestern expansion. The present, often extremely complex, linguistic situations (multilingual continua) can be accounted for by gradual fragmentation and extensive linguistic convergence (admixture) due to prolonged contact and multilingualism.

Fig. 7 proposes a broad and necessarily oversimplified scenario for the Gabon area, based on extensive and careful study of both the distribution of linguistic traits within the area and oral literature, and also on archeological data and the limited available historical data. Data suggest the area was occupied by successive waves of Bantu-speakers coming from the north, the south and the west. Convergence by contact was widespread, especially in the center. (Probably several languages and/or populations have disappeared in the course of time. The extent of language replacement may have been considerable, but remains to be determined more precisely.)

The issue concerning the primitiveness (language) of the hunter-gatherers communities is currently being examined. Niger-Congo or non-Niger-Congo? Archaeological evidence shows that when the first Bantu speakers arrived in Central Africa, the hunter-gatherers were already living in the area and had a complex culture. The question of the question has never been clearer.

2. The Fang enigma: the origin of Fang

Figures 3 to 6 illustrate an example of a fairly well-documented demic expansion within the Cameroon-Gabon area. The precise geographic origin of this migration is still a matter of debate (Adamaus Malek at the north of Cameroon). Some 1000 YBP, a group of Bantu-speakers left the Yaunde region (most probably not the starting point of this migration) moving southwest. Part of them, the Proto-Fang, also invaded the Gabon area. Their movement is particularly apparent when analyzed by successive waves of Bantu-speakers approaching from more northern regions (Oy, Ibo, Ibibio, Eria, etc.), intermixed during the 17th century and onwards. To date, the origin of Fang is a ‘zone language’ (AT7; AT8–BUBI) cluster spoken in Cameroon and most of northern Gabon. As for Gabon, it comprises northern and southern dialects, as well as some intermediate varieties (Medjo Mvé 1997). In this area, Fang (as a dominant language) has an increasing impact on the surrounding languages and is currently replacing several of them (e.g. the Shu language as MBAM spoken by the Mbom). It is spoken by almost 30 percent of the Gabonese population.

A theory elaborated by Rael, Hattie Thrush, (1999; 2002) in the early 20th century claims an Egyptian origin for the Fang population, its language, and its culture, on the basis of traits or one of its traditions (the ‘Mali’) and several arguments referring to linguistic, cultural and physical (a ‘terrestrial’ route). According to the adherents of this theory, the plateau of Cabri-Ghale (upper Nile, Kenya/Uganda/Sudan area) should be regarded as the most probable cradle of the ancestral community of Fang. Some have even claimed that the ancestors of the (antecedents of the Fang) ‘Fang Conquests’ were a group of Egyptian immigrants living in Africa.

This theory, which is based on a series of speculations and often random parallels shown by 19th-century explorers (Paul du Chaillu, Marqas, missions, etc.), has become very popular amongst all Bantu-speaking Africans. This is mainly because Fang is an interesting and unique language, a branch of the Bantu “tree.” Therefore, Fang has been considered to be the original Bantu language, but also as a possible result of the mixture of Bantu and non-Bantu languages.

The question remains unsolved. Many outstanding cultural anthropologists (e.g., Bekomo-Priro & Labbe-Tsik-Tsik 1981) also consider the “Out-of-Egypt” theory to be untenable. None of the alleged cultural traits can be considered to be specifically ancient Egyptian or Hermetic. Analysis of the Mưa variation in Gabonese and Cameroon populations do not seem to support a non-Bantu origin for Fang either. The same claim is made for many Bantu-speaking languages in the whole area (cf. Bussière, 2003). This new approach means in Gabonese and Cameroon populations do not seem to support a non-Bantu origin for Fang either. The same claim is made for many Bantu-speaking languages in the whole area (cf. Bussière, 2003).

Quirke (1998; 1987–87), Hombert et al. (1989; and more recently, Medjo Mvé (1997) have unambiguously shown that the Fang language cluster, despite its few rather unusual features such as (e.g. s V, V, 5 diphthongs, labiovelars, predominantly closed syllables, palatal nasals in word-final position), consists of the traits of a regular language. There are absolutely no evidence of a non-Bantu substratum. Fang lexicon can be directly and straightforwardly related to the Proto-Bantu reconstructions (Guthrie 1957-71), through regular sound correspondences (sonorants, consonants). The language also possesses a regular Bantu noun class system, a regular Bantu verb system, etc. (Hombert et al. 1989; Medjo Mvé 1997; Mbouma-Neput 2001).

The alleged structural parallels (essentially sound correspondences) between ancient Egyptian and Black African languages such as Fang and Basaá have no scientific basis at all. They are merely seen as systematic, randomly chosen, chance similarities. Moreover, typological similarities do not prove affiliation. For instance, the cultural anthropologists (e.g., Bekomo-Priro & Labbe-Tsik-Tsik 1981) also consider the “Out-of-Egypt” theory to be untenable. None of the alleged cultural traits can be considered to be specifically ancient Egyptian or Hermetic. Analysis of the Mavaş variation in Gabonese and Cameroon populations do not seem to support a non-Bantu origin for Fang either. The same claim is made for many Bantu-speaking languages in the whole area (cf. Bussière, 2003).

Therefore, the "Out-of-Egypt" theory can be for only to be qualified as the "Egyptian dream". Nevertheless, it is fascinating example of how a modern founder myth can come to life. Some consider (cf. Bernault 2003; 1999) this myth was created and used by the French in order to justify their colonial policy.

For a substantial critical overview of the linguistic, anthropological and historical weaknesses of this theory, see Mouguiama-Daouda (2005). This major publication also presents evidence drawn from the study of cultural lexicon related to the realities of flons and facts.