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

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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
Fang: who they are

- Most recently installed Bantu-speaking population in Gabon
- Demographically and linguistically, dominant group (Gabon)
- $\pm 700,000$ individuals distributed over 3 countries
- Patrilineal 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 XXth century
  - Melan, as part of Byeri: ancestor worship
- Art
  - Masks (Ngil), funeral statuettes (Byeri), ...

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Fang: who they are

- Ethnic group that has never failed to fascinate the European traders, explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, ever since the first encounter
- Reputation largely based on Western (mis)-perceptions (outsiders’ view, ideology, etc.)
  - ‘Ferocious’, ‘superior’, ‘nomadic’ ‘conquerors’
  - Suspected of having practised cannibalism
    - Rumours spread by Mpongwe and allied brokers? (The latter’s privileged position being threatened!)

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Fang: who they are

- Usually considered to belong to larger cultural unit, with Beti and Bulu (the so-called ‘Pahouin’ group)
  - ‘M pangwe’, ‘Pamouay’ or ‘Pamue’ < (mi-)pamye ‘I don’t know’?? (Mpongwe 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
Fang: where they come from

- Trigger(s) and/or conductor(s):
  - Groups (of non-Bantu speakers) invading northern Cameroon and triggering migration movements
    - I.a. 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

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Fang: where they come from

- 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 entring 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

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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 (*B*22))
  - Those who stayed underwent process of gradual assimilation (*e.g.* Makina (*A*83))

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

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Migrations of Fang groups since the 17th and 18th centuries, according to oral traditions
(Modified from Perrois 2006)

Fang: where they come from

- 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
**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

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**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!
Evidence from linguistics

- Fang looks different from the neighbouring Bantu languages (at the surface)
  - Some peculiar phonological features
    - 8V + 3 diphtongs
    - Labiovelars ([kp], [gb])
    - Predominantly closed syllables
    - Palatal nasals in word-final position

> Fang Ntumu (Bitam, Gabon)
Proverb (P. Medjo Mvé)

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Evidence from linguistics

- But... according to Guthrie (1948, 1967-71), Hombert et al. (1989), Medjo Mvé (1997) and Mba-Nkoghe (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

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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)

Evidence from genetics (Y)

- First result: Fang are basically 'Bantu'!
Evidence from genetics (Y)

- 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
Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Distribution, origin and age of this haplogroup?
Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups

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Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroup R1

Haplogroup R1b*:

- Chad: 20 - 95 %
- North Africa: 7 %
- Middle East: 10 %

Modified from Cristiani et al. 2002

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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Haplogroup R1b*
  - Estimated age: 13,000 ± 3,000 years
- Haplogroup R1b (including Chad samples)
  - Estimated age: 12,700 ± 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

Fang warrior (19th century drawing)
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

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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
Possible scenario(s)

- Triggered and/or encouraged by a variety of factors that may evolve over time
- Repellers, attractors, conductors
  - E.g. Fulani expansion: high 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
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
Possible scenario(s)

- 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 scenario(s)

- ‘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
- Possible explanation for perceived phenotypical traits in Fang??
  - Why Fang and not the other pops such as Punu?
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
    ▪ Examen North-South, decreasing gradient
      - Two Congos (other Bantu-speaking populations)
      - Angola (idem)

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

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Further investigation

- Sorting out time depths
- Fang: Originally an (ethnic) unity? Or result of (recent) convergence?
  - Cultural variation
    ▪ Artefacts (funeral statuettes, traditional knives) and style differences within Fang (Perrois, i.a.),
    ▪ Differences between Fang and Beti (Laburthe-Tolra, 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?

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References (1)


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References (2)


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