The origins of the Fang: language, culture and genes
Myth and reality

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Objective

- Presentation of some expected and unexpected results of the "Language, Culture and Genes in Bantu" project (OHLL, OMLL programmes)

- Findings related to
  - Fairly well-known Black African population
  - Population movement and migration

- Linguistics and other disciplines
  - Population genetics
  - Archaeology and history
  - Cultural anthropology
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
Geographical distribution of Fang, Beti and Bulu

With recent expansion patterns for Fang dialects: Ntumu, Mvai, Okak, Mekê, Nzaman, Beti
(Modified from Perreth 1972-2002)

Fang: who they are 1/4

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

Fang women coming home from plantation - Cureau (1912)
Fang: who they are 2/4

- **Oral tradition**
  - *Mvett* (storytelling/music): performing ancestral myth
    - More or less important differences between lineages!

- **Initiation rituals**
  - *Bwiti*: adopted from Tsogo (southern Gabon) at beginning of 20th century AD
  - *Melan*, as part of Byeri: ancestor worship

- **Art**
  - Masks (e.g. *Ngil*), funeral statuettes (« Byeri »), ironwork, ...

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Fang: who they are 3/4

- 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!)
    - Rumours (?) cunningly used by Fang to strengthen their position.

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Rumours spread by Mpongwe and allied brokers? (The latter’s privileged position being threatened!)
Fang: who they are 4/4

- Usually considered to belong to larger cultural unit, with Beti and Bulu (the so-called ‘Pahouin’ group)
  - ?? ‘M pangwe’, ‘Pamouay’ or ‘Pamue’ < (mi-)pawye ‘I don’t know’ (Mpongwe language, B11a)
  - Name most certainly attributed by others, probably the Mpongwe brokers (external naming or exoglossy)

- Possibly, a confederation of various lineages
  - Related? Unrelated? Some related, others not?

Fang: where they come from 1/7

- Most consensual and most likely scenario (though limited time depth!)
  - Fairly well-documented demic movement within the Cameroon-Gabon area, though the precise (ancient) geographical origin is still a matter of debate

  - Real intensification during 18th century AD and come to an end during first half of 20th century AD in Gabon
Fang: where they come from 2/7

- Not just one population involved!
  - Proto-Fang: part of a much more general, southward movement

- Turmoil and slave trade in more northern regions
  - Cameroun, Nigeria
  - Raids by Islamic groups

Fang: where they come from 3/7

- 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
  - Southward movement to Ogooué river: from 1866 on
  - Descent encouraged by the French: development of trade activities
    - Destiny of Fang tied to destiny of the Colony!

- Some accounts suggest presence of Fang in Gabon (Komo region) is older
  - Couple of isolated villages! (Avant-garde?? Iron workers? Salt traders?)

- N.B. Revision of borders (Berlin Conference, 1884-5) introduced part of Fang into Gabon without movement!
Fang: where they come from 4/7

- 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), Kota (B25))
  - Those who stayed underwent process of gradual cultural and linguistic assimilation (e.g. Makina=Osyeba (shiva, A83))
    - Osyeba occupied much larger area before arrival of Fang!

- Main sources: oral traditions and testimonies, some written documents (accounts, reports, registers); carefully built inferences
  - Although divergent in many respects, these sources corroborate the Fang movement and/or migration

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Expeditions of Compiègne and Marche (Marche, 1878:405)

Fang: where they come from 5/7

- A more picturesque, Romantic theory: nomadic warriors come down from the Upper-Nile region in order to conquer Gabon

  - 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 6/7

- 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, and subsequently adopted by the Fang!
Fang: where they come from 7/7

  - 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 1/5

- Fang: Bantu A75 (A70: FANG-BULU cluster)
- Gabon: Northern, southern and intermediate dialects (Medjo Mvé, 1997)
  - Admixture to some extent
- 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 2/5

- Fang looks very different from the neighbouring Bantu languages in Gabon
  - Some peculiar phonological features
    - 8V + 3 diphthongs (vs. 7V/5V elsewhere)
    - Phonemic nasalised vowels
    - Labiovelars ([kp], [gb])
    - Predominantly closed syllables (open syllables elsewhere)
    - Palatal nasals in word-final position

Fang of Bitam (northern Gabon)

Proverb (P. Medjo Mvé): Kábân dàdzí évóm étsìní. ‘A sheep ruminates where it is tied up.’

Evidence from linguistics 3/5

- Homburger (1941, 1951): semi-Bantu... (between Bantu and Sudanic)
- 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, undoubtedly
Map (TC Schadeberg) showing the current distribution of the some 500 Bantu languages

Consensus dendrogram for languages of Gabon. Alewijnse et al. (2007)

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Evidence from linguistics 4/5

- How some of the unusual phonological features originated:
  - Loss of final vowel in many words
  - Umlaut of V₁ preceding loss of final vowel
  - Emergence of mid and complex tone on remaining syllables by left-spreading, preceding loss of final vowel
  - Phonemic nasalised vowels: loss of intervocalic or final (velar) nasal consonants

- Areal phenomenon: Grassfields Bantu, other zone A languages

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Evidence from linguistics 5/5

- Alleged structural parallels (essentially, sound correspondences) between ancient Egyptian and Black African languages such as Fang and Basaá have no scientific basis at all
  - Non systematic, randomly chosen, chance similarities
  - Typological similarities do not prove affiliation
  - Nowadays languages are being compared with ancient languages, e.g. Mboshi (Bantu, C25) with ancient Egyptian
  - Core lexicon is poorly represented
  - Examples of ‘comparative series’ (hereafter)

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mboshi (C25)</th>
<th>Copt</th>
<th>Ancient Egyptian</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ndzô</td>
<td>adjo</td>
<td>d.t</td>
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But Proto-Bantu: *-yókà

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<tr>
<td>dina</td>
<td>ran</td>
<td>mm</td>
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But Proto-Bantu: *-yínà (di- : noun prefix classe 5)

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<th>Copt</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>i-bia</td>
<td>ba, bai</td>
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But Proto-Bantu: *-bídà

No regular correspondences! Chance similarities...

Mouguiarma-Daouda (2005)

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Evidence from genetics (mtDNA) 1/3

- MtDNA variation
  - Analysis team coordinated by L. Quintana-Murci (Institut Pasteur, Paris)
  - MtDNA: maternally-inherited, non-recombining
  - 1404 samples (i.e. individuals) from Gabon and Cameroon
  - 9 hunter-gathering 'Pygmy' pops (421 individuals), 20 Bantu-speaking farming pops (983 individuals)
  - Fang: DNA from 66 individuals

(Data, analysis and slide by Lluis QM)

Evidence from genetics (mtDNA) 2/3

- **No evidence at all** of a Semitic or Egyptian origin!
  - If Fang really descended from the ancient Egyptians, all Bantu-speaking groups of the area would be related to them!!!
Evidence from genetics (mtDNA) 3/3

Principal Coordinates

Evidence from genetics (Y) 1/4

- Y-chromosome variation
  - Analysis coordinated by J. Bertranpetit and D. Comas (Barcelona)
  - Y-chromosome: paternally-inherited, non-recombining
  - 900 samples from Gabon and Cameroon
  - 3 hunter-gathering ('Pygmy') populations, 20 Bantu-speaking farming populations
  - 18 STR markers (3 reactions) and ~40 SNP markers

(Data, analysis, slides by David Comas)
Evidence from genetics (Y) 2/4

- First (rather expected) result:
  - Fang are basically 'Bantu'!

Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups

Correspondence analysis: haplogroup composition
First two dimension plot (75.6% genetic variance)
Evidence from genetics (Y) 3/4

– But... Fang attest a non-African haplogroup (R1b*)!!
  ▪ Haplogroup = particular lineage

– However... they are **not the only ones**!!
  ▪ Punu, Teke, Ndumu, Obamba! (In particular!)
    – All Bantu-speaking pops of farming villagers
    – Pops that have **different oral traditions**
      ▪ Especially Fang vs. others
    – Pops that are **not directly related, linguistically**
      ▪ Especially Fang vs. others
    – Pops that are **geographically quite remote**
      ▪ Fang vs. others

Peopling of Gabon by Punu, Ndumu, Teke and Fang acc. to oral traditions

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Evidence from genetics (Y) 4/4

- Distribution, origin and age of this haplogroup?

Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups
Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroup R1

- Haplogroup R1b* (40%)

Modified from Cruciani et al. 2002

- Chad: 20-35%
- North Africa: 7%
- Middle East: 10%

Age: ~13,000 ± 3,000 years

Bantu
Bantu with 13.2 repeat
Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroup R1b*

Haplogroup R1b including Chad samples
(only 12 STRs)

Age: ~12,700 ± 2,200 years

Bantu
Bantu with 13.2 repeat
Chad

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Haplogroup R1
Partial back migration and subsequent contacts

~16,000 years ago
Possible scenario(s) 1/12

- Scenario(s)
- Type(s) of movement
  - Population on the move
  - Expansion, migration
- Impact on perception of social status
- Impact on perception of language

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Possible scenario(s) 2/12

- Contacts between Bantu-speaking farmers and other groups (Nilo-Saharan?) before and during southward-bound migrations of the first
  - Initial contacts: northern Cameroon?, Chad?, Central-African Republic (CAR)? Farther south?
  - More than one region, possibly
  - Over a considerable stretch of time (2-3 centuries for Fang; older for the other Bantu-speaking groups)

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Possible scenario(s) 3/12

- 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 (the ‘Basques’ of sub-Saharan Africa!)
    - Carriers of R1(b)?? Possible, though not very likely...
  - Motivation and modes of incorporation?
    - Evidence (Y-chromosome) only concerns male individuals
      - What about females?
    - Voluntary basis? Forced integration?
    - Time depths?
  - Not all Fang were originally Fang-speakers: traces??
The limited extension of the equatorial forest between 20,000 and 11,000 $^{14}$C years BP, making a Nilo-Saharan expansion possible.

Possible scenario(s) 4/12

- Several Bantu-speaking pops have thus become, with others, the ‘carriers’ of a much older ‘back-into-Africa’ migrated genetic marker, Fang in particular.
  - Migration within migration (through admixture)
  - Complex event
Possible scenario(s) 5/12

- Linguistic evidence: Fang migration clearly was part of western Bantu expansion
  - Fang became the most southern zone A language
- Linguistic and cultural evidence for Fang homeland before movement: forest environment or at fringe of forest
  - Thorough knowledge of the forest’s ecosystem
    - Flora, fauna
    - Hunting the elephant (i.a.)
- Possible homeland(s) (Mvog Etanga):
  - Adamawa highlands (north-central Cameroon)?
  - Upper-Sangha (western Central-African Republic)?
  - Both?

Possible scenario(s) 6/12

- Not a rush!
  - Large-scale movement, with various rates of velocity over time (some accelerations)
  - On the whole, a slow progression
    - Moving up, with partial expansion by rapid migration (groups)
- 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!
  - On the whole, a non-oriented, non-planned, non-linear process
Possible scenario(s) 7/12

- No hordes of nomads: authentic villagers
  - Misperception based on final stage of expansion (which concerned only a part of Fang population!!!)
  - Probably experienced tradesmen already in pre-colonial times (ivory, ironwork, etc.)!

- Wave-like in space, in time (sometimes ‘as the flea jumps’)
  - Southern linguistic features in some northern dialects (Gabon) strongly suggest (minor) back migrations
  - Some split-offs may have miscarried
  - Some groups stayed, others moved on
  - Not a sudden, massive invasion of Gabon

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Possible scenario(s) 8/12

- Triggered and/or encouraged by a great variety of factors that **evolved over time**

- Repellers, conductors, attractors
  - Populations invading northern Cameroon and triggering population movements (cf. dominos): Muslim invasions and slave trade (the figure of the 'Crocodile' in Fang oral tradition?), times of uncertainty
    - E.g. Fulani expansion: height of centralized empire during 19th century AD
    - Usman dan Fodio
    - Sokoto empire and jihad (northern Nigeria)
Possible scenario(s) 9/12

- European trade and goods: efficient attractor during second half of 19th century in Gabon (the French: strategic, political choice!). Answer to misery among Fang, especially during final stage of expansion
  - Search for women (exogamy) and extremely high cost of dowry
    - Fang dowry system is the most expensive of all in Gabon (Mayer, 2002)
  - Possibly, decrease of elephant population (Cadet, 2005)

- Also repellers in Gabon: fear of (ongoing) slave trade, strong social bonds (within lineages)

Possible scenario(s) 10/12

- The way the Fang were perceived and described by the Europeans during the 19th century in Gabon, i.e. as newcomers, very much determined the way the local people talk about them and themselves, mixing myth and reality
  - Strengthened Fang’s feelings of superiority
  - Created representations on both sides that still last
    - Useful stereotypes
    - Myth adopted by the Fang
  - Induced a new struggle for power
    - Large impact on populations and languages (Makina!)

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Possible scenario(s) 11/12

- Impact on perception of Fang language
  - Extensive change: Fang no longer recognised as Bantu (drastic change in metalinguistic judgments)
  - (Adopted) myth (shared cultural representations) only reinforced this biased perception
    - Linguistic and cultural identity claimed by the community
  - Make others adopt the same representation

- How belief systems may bias perception!

Possible scenario(s) 12/12

- Possible explanation for perceived phenotypic 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 1/2

- 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)
  - Fang: all lineages or only some of them?

- **Linguistic research**
  - Proto-Fang
    - Vocabulary (core, cultural)
    - Reconstructions
    - Loans

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Further investigation 2/2

- Sorting out **time depths**

- Fang: **Stable ethnic unity?** Or result of (recent) convergence?
  - Cultural variation
    - Artifacts (*funeral statuettes, traditional knives, traditional shield* and style differences within Fang (Perrois, i.a.)
    - Variations in oral tradition
  - Problems with genealogies within 'Fang': absence common ancestors, incompatibilities
    - Lineages as most relevant units? (Instead of current subgroups: Betsi, Ntumu, Okak, Mvai, Make, Nzaman) (Laburthe-Tolra, 1981)
    - What can population genetics tell us?

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Acknowledgements

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- To CNRS
- To the organisers (CLCG)
- To the audience

Fang blacksmiths in 1856
(Du Chaillu, 1863:168)

References (1)

References (2)


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References (3)


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Primitive homeland

- 'Mvog Etanga'

- Overall convergence of Fang oral traditions
  - Limited time depth (reliability)

- Wider context in keeping with the migration (Beti, Bulu)

- Role of war: one of the factors
Primitive homeland

- Cultural evidence: artefacts, lifestyle, etc.
  - Elephant skin-covered shield (80x60 cm) ( ngu), sword ( ña), axe ( ñvôn), kind of knife ( onzil); anthropomorphic statuettes and masks
  - Internal (original) developments? External influences?

- Extent of acquaintance with current environment

- Take clans as basic units of investigation, instead of the current (linguistically-based) subgroups (Betsi, Ntumu, Okak, Mvai, Make, Nzaman) (Laburthe-Tolra)

Not all Fang were originally Fang-speakers

- Probably, Fang not directly pushed themselves
  - Beti as intermediates
  - Domino effect
Migrations of Fang groups since the 17th and 18th centuries, according to oral traditions

(Modified from Perros 2006)

Map of explorations by Du Chaillu (drawn by the author, 1863)

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Map of explorations by R. de Lannoy de Bessy (1879-1886)

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