

# LINGUISTICS FOR THE USE OF AFRICAN HISTORY AND THE COMPARATIVE STUDY OF BANTU POTTERY VOCABULARY

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## **1. Introduction**

Ever since African historical linguistics emerged in the 19th century, it has served a double purpose. It has not only been practiced with the aim of studying language evolution, its methods have also been put to use for the reconstruction of human history. The promotion of linguistics to one of the key disciplines of African historiography is an inevitable consequence of the lack of ancient written records in sub-Saharan Africa. Scholars of the African past generally fall back on two kinds of linguistic research: linguistic classification and linguistic reconstruction. The aim of this paper is to present a concise application of both disciplines to the field of Bantu linguistics and to offer two interesting comparative case studies in the field of Bantu pottery vocabulary. The diachronic analysis of this lexical domain constitutes a promising field for interdisciplinary historical research. At the same time, the examples presented here urge history scholars to be cautious in the application of words-and-things studies for the use of historical reconstruction. The neglect of diachronic semantic evolutions and the impact of ancient lexical copies may lead to oversimplified and hence false historical conclusions.

## **2. Bantu languages and the synchronic nature of historical linguistics**

Exact estimations being complicated by the lack of good descriptive material, the Bantu languages are believed to number at present between 400 and 600. They are spoken in almost half of all sub-Saharan countries: Camer-

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oon, Central-African Republic, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Congo, RD Congo, Rwanda, Burundi, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Comoros, Angola, Zambia, Malawi, Mozambique, Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, South-Africa, Lesotho and Swaziland. South of 5° latitude North, Bantu is the predominant language group.

In spite of the huge area the Bantu languages cover at present, they are probably of quite recent origin. Bantu only figures at the bottom line of the family tree of Niger-Congo, one of the four major African language families (see Williamson 1989). As can be seen in the fragmentary tree structure in figure 1, it is subordinate to the southern sub-branch of Bantoid, which is in turn a branch of Benue-Congo, one of the principal phyla of Niger-Congo. Although every comparison – especially within language families – is faulty, the position of Bantu within Niger-Congo could be compared to what West-Scandinavian or Frisian represents within Indo-European. Its distribution area is nevertheless the largest one in Africa. The historical implications of this situation will be dealt with further on.

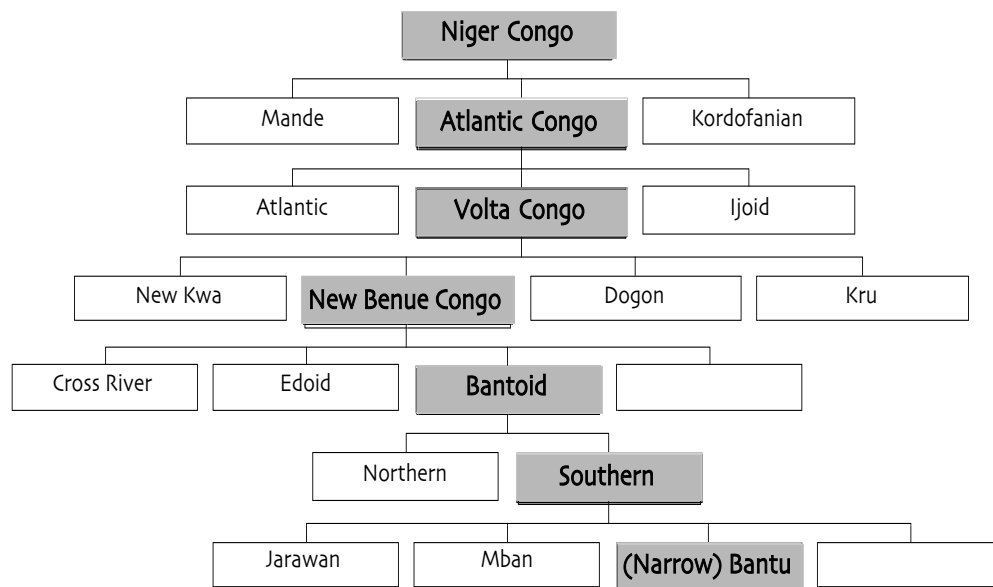


Figure 1. Family tree of the Niger-Congo family based on Williamson (1989)

The beginning of Bantu (historical) linguistics as a ‘scientific’ discipline is marked by the work of the German missionary Wilhelm Bleek. In 1851, he submitted a PhD-dissertation written in Latin at the university of Bonn, which was a comparative study of South-African Bantu languages. He is

thought to have coined the term Bantu<sup>2</sup>. Ever since this pioneering work, the amount of historical-comparative studies on Bantu languages has been growing exponentially, ranging from large-scale lexical and grammatical reconstruction of the supposed common protolanguage or regional protolanguages (e.g. Homburger 1925, Meinhof & van Warmelo 1932, Bourquin 1953, Meeussen 1969, Guthrie 1967–71, Bastin et al. 2002) to internal macro-classifications (e.g. Guthrie 1948, Heine 1973, Henrici 1973, Coupey et al. 1975, Bastin et al. 1999). Even though these comparative studies always have a diachronic purpose, they almost exclusively rely on ‘synchronic’ data. Since the overall majority of Bantu languages are what one normally calls ‘oral’ languages, diachronic linguistics is compelled to be interlanguage comparative in nature. In this context, both ‘synchronic’ and ‘oral’ are somewhat misleading concepts. Instead of speaking of oral languages, it is more appropriate to talk about languages lacking an ancient written tradition, since comparativists actually also work on written documents. A non-written or non-documented language cannot be integrated in their reasoning (see Grégoire forthcoming). Although corpora of genuinely written language gain increasing acceptance in Bantu linguistics (Prinsloo & De Schryver 2001), historical-comparative Bantuists still chiefly hinge on tapescripts of spoken language. Apart from a few rare exceptions, these accounts do not date much further back than one century ago. Hence, one speaks of comparison of ‘synchronic’ data, even when there is a gap of several decades between the data of the different languages under comparison. Unlike in Indo-European historical linguistics, neither written records of a same language stretching back in time at regular intervals nor written testimonies of protolanguages are available.

### 3. *Contributions of Bantu linguistics to African historiography*

As was laid out in the introduction, comparative Bantu linguistics has not only been exercised for the sake of language evolution, but it has also been studied to get access to Africa’s extra-linguistic past. Forced by the lack of ancient written records, scholars of various disciplines, linguists as well as historians and archaeologists, have relied on its methods to form an idea of the past cultures that may have flourished in the forests and savannas peopled

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘Bantu’ is derived from the stem *-ntu*, which takes the nominal prefix *mu-* (*mu-ntu*) to form the singular form of the noun meaning ‘person, man, human being’ and the nominal prefix *ba-* (*ba-ntu*) to form the plural form. Most, but not all Bantu languages share this noun.

by Bantu speaking populations<sup>3</sup>. Nurse (1997) distinguishes two kinds of contributions of historical linguistics to the reconstruction of the African past: linguistic classification and linguistic reconstruction.

Classification studies are based on the classic comparative method, on the one hand, or on more alternative methods, such as lexicostatistics and glotto-chronology, on the other. In spite of the pitfalls of language classification, especially those based on lexicostatistics (Nurse 1997: 363–366), both linguists and non-linguists have used internal classifications of the Bantu languages to reconstruct the history of the contemporary speakers of these languages. Many of these studies are linked to the so-called ‘Bantu expansion’ issue. As was stated above, the Bantu languages cover an enormous part of the continent in spite of their fairly recent diversification. Among scholars of African history, this fact has led to the idea of a relatively quick and fast spreading of peoples over a huge distance stretching between the Cameroon-Nigeria border area, at present commonly accepted as the Bantu cradle, and South-Africa, the present-day most southern point of its distribution. It gave rise to the hypothesis of mass emigrations from the cradle area into the forests and savannas to its south and south-east, but linguistic data do not really support such a scenario. As the Belgian Bantuist Meeussen (1980) has claimed, without sound archaeological data it will always be difficult to know if language dispersal is due to the movement of entire populations or the migration of small splinter groups. Nevertheless, ever since the 1960s, a continuous stream of publications has tried to reconstruct the spreading of the Bantu languages and by extension the migration paths of their speakers by way of language classifications. Apart from the setting of the Bantu cradle, a common factor in these studies is the overall distinction between a western and eastern bloc of Bantu languages<sup>4</sup>. As can be observed on map 1<sup>5</sup>, two other but smaller sub-groups are situated in the north-western margin of the Bantu domain (see Bastin & Piron 1999). Disagreement, however, exists on the way these major blocs relate to each other as well as on the way in which the Bantu languages have spread over the territory that they occupy at pre-

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<sup>3</sup> It must be noted that since recently, comparative Bantu studies also serve a third purpose, i.e. linguistic typology.

<sup>4</sup> Ehret (2001) has recently rejected the existence of Western Bantu as a single genetic primary branch that is the counterpart of an Eastern Bantu branch containing the rest of the Bantu languages.

<sup>5</sup> All maps will be presented in the appendix of this paper.

sent. Following Wiesmüller (1996), two models of macro-historical evolution of the Bantu languages prevail. The first scenario is what will be called the east-next-to-the-west-model, while the second one will be referred to as the east-out-of-the-west-model. As shown on map 2, the first model supposes that two distinct waves leave from the Bantu nucleus. The spreading of western Bantu is characterized by a north-south movement throughout the rain forest and a rapid group internal fragmentation. The diffusion of eastern Bantu moved from west to east along the borders of the rain forest before the group was dispersed from the Great Lakes region to the south. This idea emanates from the work of Möhlig (1977, 1981)<sup>6</sup> and the historical linguistic research based in Tervuren (Belgium), e.g. Coupez et al. (1975), Bastin et al. (1983) and Bastin et al. (1999). The second model assumes a first spreading from the Bantu homeland through the tropical forest into the lower Congo region. From there a second wave would have started in different directions, one of which is at the origin of the eastern Bantu languages. This model is defended, either explicitly or implicitly, in the works of Heine (1973), Henrici (1973), Ehret (1972, 1973, 2001) and Heine, Hoff & Vossen (1977)<sup>7</sup>. Despite this disagreement on the precise dispersion paths of the Bantu languages, the idea of a single continuous language dispersion that strongly underlies the concept of ‘Bantu expansion’ is no longer tenable. The classical tree model is inherently biased towards the representation of language evolution as the branching off of cognate groups. The very common but nevertheless invalid equation of language history and human history then leads to the interpretation of these different branches as the result of the migration of populations. The fact that Bantu languages must have spread over their current distribution area in a relatively fast way has favored the idea of mass migration. A wave model of language evolution (Vansina 1995), however,

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<sup>6</sup> Möhlig (1977, 1981) maintains the hypothesis of the eastern Bantu languages having moved into the Great Lakes region from a point in the north-east of the Rain Forest, although he refutes a mono-genetic model of Bantu language development, exclusively based on lexicostatistical data. On the base of recurrent phonological shifts, he has developed a stratification model that ought to allow the integration of convergence inducing linguistic loan processes.

<sup>7</sup> Vansina (1995) endorses an alternative model. He presupposes a first eastward movement of the original Bantu language towards, but not into the Great Lakes region, after which he conjectures a southward expansion of the East Bantu language from the rainforests somewhere east of the Ubangi/Zaire confluence towards the middle Zambezi river. He presumes that East Bantu may well have spread southwards west of lake Tanganyika, or on both sides of the lake, before it ever reached the Great Lakes area.

might enable us to draw a more realistic and more gradual image of the so-called Bantu expansion.

The second contribution of historical linguistics to African historiography stems from reconstruction studies, especially from lexical reconstruction. Large-scale lexical reconstruction projects, of which Meeussen (1969), Guthrie (1967–71), Coupez et al. (1998) and Bastin et al. (2002) are undoubtedly the most far-reaching ones, have been undertaken since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The reconstruction of parts of the vocabulary of the common Bantu protolanguage inevitably led to the question of its historical implications (Dalby 1976). Starting from the basic premise that a word reconstructed in the protolanguage refers to an extra-linguistic reality existent in the prototime (Schrader 1907), both linguists and historians tackled word lists in order to reconstruct the culture of the speakers of Proto-Bantu or any other reconstructed regional protolanguage. Since the 1950s, this research method has found a very fruitful field of application in Bantu studies. It rejoins the principles of the words-and-things movement that originated in the early 20th century in the field of Indo-European linguistics and owes its name to the journal ‘Wörter und Sachen’ that was founded in 1909 by the Indogermanist Rudolf Meringer and the Romanist Meyer-Lübke (see Malkiel 1993). Within the domain of Bantu studies, roughly two types of words-and-things studies can be distinguished. Studies of scholars such as Vansina (1990) (Equatorial Rainforest), Klieman (1997) (Western Equatorial Rainforest), McMaster (1988) (Uele region) or Schoenbrun (1998) (Great Lakes region) have reconstructed the history of one particular region on the base of the vocabulary of the languages spoken there. Others, like Ehret (1967) (cattle), De Maret & Nsuka (1977) (metallurgy), Philippson & Bahuchet (1996) (crops), Bulkens (1999a-b) (mortars and calabashes), have rather considered vocabulary linked to a particular semantic field. The comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary, which will be handled in the next section, belongs to this last type of words-and-things studies. After the presentation of both the aims and the historical potential of this study field, some inherent pitfalls of the words-and-things method will be illustrated by means of examples from the comparative study of pottery terminology.

#### ***4. The comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary***

For the reconstruction of history in sub-Saharan Africa, ceramics have played a very significant role. According to Kanimba (1996: 104), their study provides a fruitful domain of historical research for at least three reasons: (1) pottery is the materialization of a collective tradition: the tools, actions and rules are traits that are accumulated and transmitted from generation to gen-

eration; (2) ceramics, which are abundant, stable, and highly resistant to decay, have proved to be the guiding artifact in the study of past cultures in sub-Saharan Africa; (3) potting is one of the few traditional crafts that are still respected and have remained relatively unchanged over time. In other words, a historical-comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary implies the interaction of linguistics with archaeology and ethnography. According to Gosse-lain (2000: 190), pottery traditions are what could be called ‘sociotechnical aggregates’, an intricate mix of inventions, borrowed elements and manipulations that display an amazing propensity to redefinition by individuals and groups. This characteristic does not only highlight the historical potential of a comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary, but also urges the researcher to take as many elements as possible into consideration. As a consequence, not only individual lexical items, but all vocabulary referring to the different aspects of this traditional handicraft must be taken into account: the materials and utensils used, the actions performed and the products obtained throughout the production process. The Comparative Bantu Pottery Vocabulary Database enables a global approach of this kind. This collection of more than 5700 terms from nearly 400 different Bantu languages is the product of a continuous accumulation of data from various resources. The majority of the lexical data stems from a systematic perusal of Bantu language dictionaries, wordlists, lexicons, grammars and other linguistic resources. Secondly, vernacular terms from ethnographic works dealing with contemporary pottery fabrication were integrated<sup>8</sup>. Finally, by means of personal fieldwork in Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, Malawi and Zambia, more detailed data were acquired. Thanks to its substantial volume, the Bantu Pottery Vocabulary Database is a powerful tool for comparative research. It allows comparing the internal organization of pottery terminology in different languages, examining the distribution of individual stems within the Bantu domain, unveiling semantic shifts to which certain forms have been exposed and retracing the evolution of pottery vocabulary at different levels of historical depth. In a final stage, it will be possible to confront the results of the linguistic comparative analysis with the findings of ethnographic and archaeological research.

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<sup>8</sup> Both the linguistic and ethnographic sources have mainly been consulted in the libraries of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Tervuren).

### 5. *Pitfalls of the words-and-things method*

As mentioned above, the words-and-things method relies on the basic assumption that the existence of a word in a language implies the existence of the thing to which it refers in the culture of its speakers. Obviously, the referential scope of the concept ‘thing’ is not limited to material objects only, it implies immaterial things as well (Schuchardt 1912: 830). Although this basic assumption legitimately accords to language the potential of describing the world in which it is or was spoken, prudence is urged in using the words-and-things method with the intention of reconstructing human history. By means of two examples from the comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary, important pitfalls, which may possibly falsify the historical conclusions drawn from words-and-things studies, will be dealt with in a concise way.

A first pitfall concerns the historical link between a word and a thing. Let’s take the case of the verb root *\*-bɔmb-*, which shows the importance of considering the impact of diachronic semantic evolutions. Reflexes of this verb root are attested in the whole Bantu domain. As can be observed from the examples shown in table 1, a very frequent translation of the verb is ‘to mould pottery’.

*Table 1.* Reflexes of *\*-bɔmb-* meaning ‘to mould pottery’

<i>Language</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Source</i>
Pokomo	Tanzania	kuumba	to mould pottery	(Hinnebusch 1973: 353) <sup>9</sup>
Lega	DR Congo	ko.bómba	to mould pottery	(Botne 1994: 63)
Tonga	Zambia	ku bumba	to mould pottery	(Hopgood 1953: 39)
Tswana	Botswana	-bópa	to make a pot	(Creissels 1999: 330)

Two very common nouns linked to pottery production were also derived from this verb root: *\*-bɔmbà* ‘pottery clay’ and *\*-bɔmbî* ‘potter’. As a consequence, various authors (e.g. Guthrie 1967–71, Bastin et al. 2002) have reconstructed this form in Proto-Bantu with the sense ‘to mould pottery’. Given the widespread distribution of *\*-bɔmb-*, as displayed on map 4, the reconstruction of this verb root in Proto-Bantu is beyond doubt. Whether this root really had the meaning ‘to mould pottery’, however, is more questionable. As can be seen on the same map, a considerable number of north-western Bantu

<sup>9</sup> In the Bantu languages, the infinitive form of the verb is usually preceded by a nominal prefix *ku-* and followed by a final suffix *-a*. In Bantu dictionaries, different notation conventions for verbs and nouns are used. For verbs, the notation of nominal prefixes and final suffixes is optional, whereas for nouns, the notation of nominal prefixes is optional.



languages have a reflex of the verb root *\*-b̥mb-*, but its meaning is different from ‘to mould pottery’. The distribution of these languages is not geographically random. It coincides more or less with the contours of the equatorial rainforest within the Bantu area. This means that the sense ‘to mould pottery’ is only attested in the Savanna Bantu languages and not in the Forest Bantu languages. This is a very significant observation from a historical point of view, since the verb *\*-b̥mb-* is only one of the common pottery related lexemes that is missing in the Forest Bantu languages. Besides, also for other sets of cultural vocabulary, these languages show an isolated development (see Bostoen forthcoming). Moreover, even in the Savanna Bantu languages, the semantic field of *\*-b̥mb-* is considerably larger than ‘to mould pottery’, as can be deduced from the examples presented in table 2.

Table 2. Reflexes of *\*-b̥mb-* having another meaning than ‘to mould pottery’

<i>Language</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Source</i>
Rundi	Burundi	ku b̥mba	arrondir (‘to round’)	(Rodegem 1970: 44)
Nyakyusa	Tanzania	uku bumba	knead clay with hands	(Felberg 1996: 13)
Mongo	DR Congo	-b̥mba	conserver, garder (‘to conserve, to stock, to keep’)	(Hulstaert 1957: 226)
Tetela	DR Congo	-ómbá	crépir, appliquer du torchis (‘to plaster clay, to put a plaster’)	(Hagendorens 1975: 287)
Boma	DR Congo	-bwùma	amasser la terre (‘to heap up earth’)	(Hochegger 1972: 21)
Punu	Gabon	-bumba	entourer des bras une personne pour lui donner une accolade (‘to put your arms around someone to embrace him/her in a solemn way’)	(Bonneau 1956: 111)
Havu	DR Congo	-bumb-	fermer en joignant deux bords (‘to close by joining two tips’)	(Aramazani 1985: 55)

For reasons of space, the very broad semantic field of the verb *\*-b̥mb-* will not be elaborated in detail here. However, figure 2 (see next page) shows in a concise way the large range of meanings that were observed in association with reflexes of *\*-b̥mb-* in different Bantu languages. This diagram clearly shows that ‘to mould pottery’ is only one of the many meanings that can be conveyed by this verb. The more general meaning ‘mould in clay’ seems more appropriate to derive the other attested meanings.

In terms of semantic reconstruction, it is far from certain that ‘to mould pottery’ is suitable for reconstruction in Proto-Bantu. In view of the fact that it is quasi absent from the Forest Bantu languages, it is probably the outcome of a semantic change that postdates the Proto-Bantu era. Moreover, since it concerns a fairly unmarked semantic shift, it is not excluded that the meaning ‘to mould pottery’ has independently popped up at different periods and at different places.

Another fact questioning the sense ‘to mould pottery’ for *\*-b̥mb-* in Proto-Bantu is the fairly widespread distribution of the verb *\*-mā-* in the north-western languages. This verb refers to the action of moulding pottery and must be much older than Bantu: its reflexes are not only attested in several Bantoid sub-groups, Williamson & Shimizu (1968) have even reconstructed the root *\*-ma-* in Proto-Niger-Congo with the meaning ‘to build (mud house); to mould (pot)’. On the basis of these data, ‘to mould pottery’ seems to be the result of an innovative semantic shift within the non-forest languages. A similar example was given by Grégoire (forthcoming). The reflexes of the verb root *\*-t̥d-* are generally translated as ‘to beat’ and/or ‘to forge’. Just like *\*-b̥mb-*, this verb form can without any doubt be reconstructed in Proto-Bantu. Nevertheless, as de Maret & Nsuka (1977) had already pointed out, it is debatable whether the meaning ‘to forge’ can be attributed to the reconstructed verb. The sense ‘to beat iron’, which probably is a more appropriate translation than ‘to forge’, can simply be the result of semantic specialization of the basic meaning ‘to beat’. In the same line of reasoning, Grégoire (1975: 140) demonstrated that the meaning ‘iron’ attached to the reflex of the proto-form *\*-j̥mā* is the result of a gradual specialization from the sense ‘thing’ over ‘precious thing’, ‘goods’ and ‘wealth’. The attestation of *\*-j̥mā* ‘iron’ in several Bantu languages is thus likely to be the outcome of a convergent semantic shift, rather than the reflection of a common history. All these examples show that semantic reconstruction must be undertaken with prudence, especially when technical vocabulary is concerned.

## LINGUISTICS FOR THE USE OF AFRICAN HISTORY

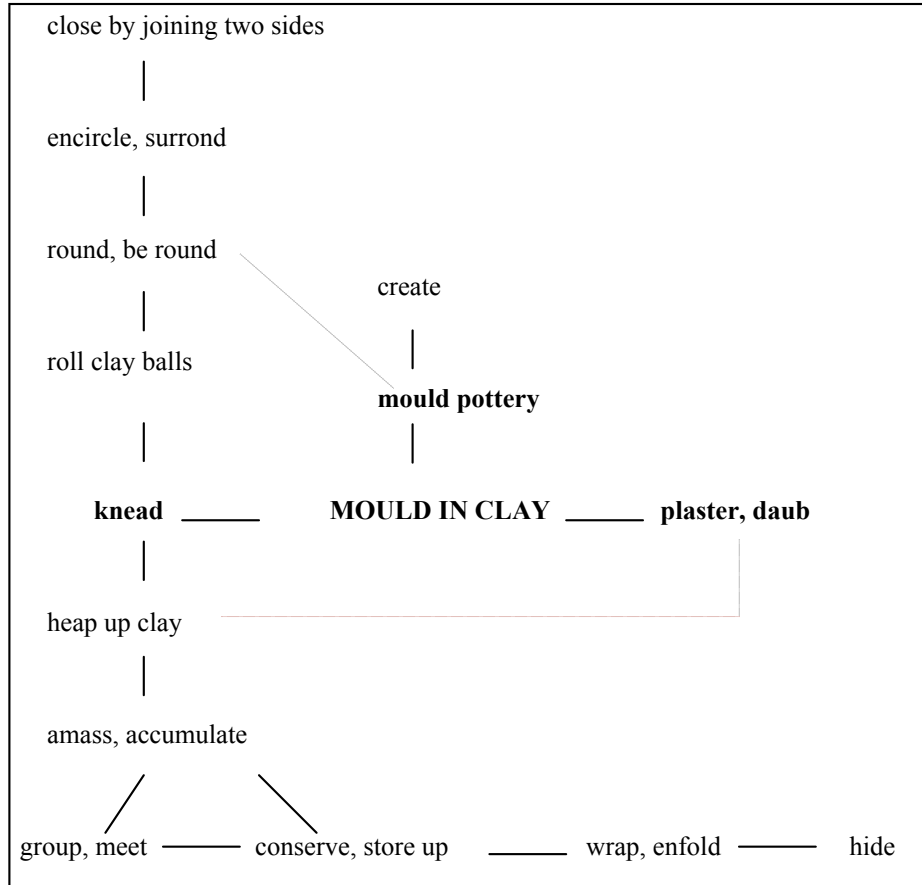


Figure 2. The semantic field of the Bantu verb *\*-bũmb-*

A second factor complicating the application of the words-and-things method is the identification of the precise origin of lexical resemblance. A detailed study of the present-day reflexes of the Proto-Bantu noun stem *\*-bũgã* ‘earthen pot’ reveals phonologically irregular forms, which are probably the outcome of very ancient loan processes. Due to ulterior developments, these ancient loans became transparent, which has complicated the distinction between inherited and diffused (‘copied’) vocabulary. As map 5 shows, the reflexes of this noun stem (generally designating a very common kind of earthen pot) are widespread within the Bantu area.

The second consonant of the majority of the reflexes regularly corresponds to *\*g*. The nouns presented in table 3 exemplify different reflexes of this consonant in intervocalic position.

Table 3. Regular reflexes of the noun stem *\*-b ì g á*

	<i>Language</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>Verb</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Source</i>
*g>g	Ngindo	Tanzania	k i b i g a	(earthen) cook- ing pot	(Crosse-Upcott 1955: 29)
*g>gh	Shambala	Tanzania	ì g h á	water pot	(Besha 1993: 53)
*g>k	Tsogo	Gabon	m b è k á	marmite	(Marchal-Nasse 1979: 157)
*g>y	Chewa	Malawi	m b i y â	beer brewing pot	(Botne & Kulemeka 1995: 72)
*g>Ø	Duala	Cameroon	m b è á	small sauce-pan	(Ittmann 1976: 321)

Map 5 shows that the majority of the *\*-b ì g á* reflexes attest y/Ø in C<sub>2</sub> position<sup>10</sup>. This is also the case in most of the north-western languages, although, in this context, the regular correspondence of \*g is k (cf. Guthrie 1967–71; Möhlig 1977, 1981)<sup>11</sup>. The Tsogo example shown in table 3 is the only north-western form with k in second stem consonant position. Only in a minority of Cameroonian languages, y or Ø are regular reflexes of \*g<sub>2</sub>. In Duala, for instance, following correspondences are observed: *\*-b ì g á* ‘pot’ > *m b è a*; *\*-j ò g ù* « elephant » > *n j ò y*; *\*-b ù g á* ‘open space; threshing-floor; village, path’ > *b ú à*; *°-d í g-* ‘be burnt; be blackened’ > *-d i à* (Ittmann 1976: 95)<sup>12</sup>. In all the other languages of this region, [y]/[Ø] is not the regular reflex of \*g, as the few examples in table 4 show. The reflexes of *\*-b ì g á* are clearly distinct from the reflexes of other proto-forms with \*g<sub>2</sub>.

<sup>10</sup> I did not distinguish between the reflexes of the glide y and the zero reflex Ø, because it is generally difficult to say if y is either the reflex of \*g just before total loss or the result of a glide insertion in order to obtain the canonical syllable structure –CVCV after the total loss of \*g.

<sup>11</sup> C<sub>2</sub> = second consonant of the noun stem.

<sup>12</sup> All the reconstructed forms were taken from Bastin et al. (2002). A form preceded by a \* is a Proto-Bantu reconstruction, while ° refers to an uncertain and/or a regionally bound reconstruction. For the reconstructed forms, the 7V-system /i ɪ e a o ʊ u/ is adopted.

Table 4. Irregular reflexes of the noun stem *\*-b ì g á*

<i>Language</i>	<i>Country</i>	<i>*-j ò g ù</i> 'elephant'	<i>*-g è g ò</i> 'tooth'	<i>*-j ì g á</i> 'pot clay'	<i>*-b ì g á</i> 'pot'	<i>Source</i>
Basaa	Cameroon	n j ò k	l ì k è k	/	h i b é é	(Lemb & Gastines 1973)
Bulu	Cameroon	z ò k	e t f à k	v i e k	m v é	(Alexandre 1956)
Fang	Cameroon Gabon	n ð ò k h	é k e k h	v y e k h	m v i	(Galley 1964)

This irregularity has incited several authors to reconstruct an alternative protoform *\*-b ì y á* (Guthrie 1967–71) or *°-b ì j á* (Bastin et al. 2002). Even if the reconstruction of such an alternative protoform might be justified on a regional level, it is very unlikely that its reflexes are not historically related to the reflexes of the regular *\*-b ì g á*. Both types of reflexes are semantically and phonologically too similar to attribute their resemblance to mere coincidence. How, then, can these irregularities be explained? First of all, a more detailed study of phonological evolutions in this region shows that the correspondence *\*g<sub>2</sub>~k* is less uniformly attested than one might expect on the basis of a superficial overview. Several authors have stressed the instability of [k] in intervocalic position. Janssens (1993: 285), to name only one, states that the loss of velar consonants between two vowels is quite a trivial phenomenon in the north-western Bantu languages. It can be explained through an intermediate stage in which the consonant has a weakened realization as a fricative or a glottal stop. Another possible source for these deviant forms could be lexical diffusion from languages like Duala, where the sound shift *\*g>y/Ø* is regular. Several studies have drawn attention to the extraordinary linguistic fragmentation and the high degree of multilingualism characteristic of this particular area of the Bantu domain (cf. Bouquiaux 1979, Warnier 1980). Nevertheless, there are no real linguistic indications that corroborate the latter hypothesis. Furthermore, the number of reflexes with *C<sub>2</sub> y* or *Ø* is simply too large to be exclusively due to either the floating nature of *\*g<sub>2</sub>* in intervocalic position or processes of lexical diffusion. It seems more likely, then, that the irregular reflexes date back to a remote past that postdates the Proto-Bantu era, but predates the dispersion of the north-western languages. If one considers these reflexes as cognate to reflexes that regularly reflect *\*g* in *C<sub>2</sub>* position, one has to reconstruct a protoform with *\*g* as *C<sub>2</sub>* in Proto-Bantu. The shift *\*g<sub>2</sub>>y/Ø* is a historically well-established and frequent sound shift in Bantu, which does not hold for the inverse shift. Hence, the

Proto-Bantu etymon must be reconstructed as  $*-b\grave{i}g\acute{a}$ . The north-western reflexes must then stem from a stratum in which the proto-consonant  $*g_2$  was strongly weakened or even completely lost. At this level, a reconstruction of the type  $^{\circ}-b\grave{i}j\acute{a}$  is acceptable. It is difficult to figure out what kind of historical situation this stratum exactly represents. One could presume a state of dialectal fragmentation of the protolanguage (cf. Vansina 1995), combined with an economic situation of regional specialization, which is a common situation at least in pre-colonial Africa (cf. Fagan 1977, Warnier 1985). In such a context, the diffusion of a pot name from a potter community speaking a dialect in which the consonant  $*g$  in intervocalic position was about to vanish or was already lost, to another dialect which did not lose  $*g$ , is not implausible. This diffused term may have been transmitted to subsequent generations that have gradually moved away from the ancestral cradle. The  $*g$  weakening dialect would thus have died out, leaving behind as sole heritage some irregular forms that have survived in non-perished sister dialects. This phenomenon of irregular variability between contemporary reflexes, which are probably cognates but cannot be related on the basis of regular phonological changes, is a notorious methodological problem within Bantu comparative linguistics, generally known as OSCULANCE (Guthrie 1967–71; Bostoen 2001). It also occurs in other language families like the Indo-European one (cf. Malkiel 1979). As other osculant pairs similar to  $*-b\grave{i}g\acute{a}/^{\circ}-b\grave{i}j\acute{a}$  in Bantu (e.g.  $^{\circ}-b\acute{e}g\grave{u}/^{\circ}-b\acute{e}j\grave{u}$  ‘seed’ or  $*-p\acute{i}g\grave{o}/^{\circ}-p\acute{i}j\grave{o}$  ‘kidney’ (cf. Bastin et al. 2002) can be observed, more research into this phenomenon seems to be required

## 6. *Concluding remarks*

In this paper I have tried to show that African historical linguistics, in particular comparative Bantu studies, since long have been relied on for the reconstruction of Africa’s past. In the light of the general lack of written records, both linguistic classification and reconstruction are trustworthy sources of historical information, provided that they are exercised with the necessary methodological rigour. The comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary constitutes a promising field for inter-disciplinary historical research in the realm of words-and-things studies. However, the case studies of  $*-b\grave{u}mb-$  and  $*-b\grave{i}g\acute{a}$  illustrate that both the disregarding of diachronic semantic change and the misjudgment of the different origins of lexical resemblance may lead to false historical assumptions.

The multiple diachronic semantic shifts that the verb  $*-b\grave{u}mb-$  underwent, demonstrate that the history of a word and the history of a thing do not

necessarily match. The present-day association of a word form with a particular concept in several related languages, does not automatically entail their association in the past. Words-and-things studies tend to focus on the reconstruction of word forms, while the impact of semantic changes is underestimated. The most occurring sense in present-day languages is generally reconstructed as the meaning of the word in the protolanguage. It is questionable, however, if such an approach is justified, particularly in the case of technical vocabulary.

It is a well-established fact that the closely related Bantu languages have been in continuous contact for ages and that their speakers are often highly multilingual. In this linguistic continuum, the distinction between the theoretically clearly separate classes of inherited words, on the one hand, and loan words, on the other, becomes easily blurred. Phonological irregularities, commonly seen as indicative of lexical copies, easily fade. Hence, the distinction between old loan words and inherited words becomes hard to make. The *\*-b̥gā* case study has nevertheless shown that the detailed study of phonological evolutions in a very wide-ranging set of Bantu languages may result in the disclosing of phonological irregularities indicative of ancient lexical copying processes.

Unlike unconsidered application of the words-and-things method, which may generate oversimplified historical conclusions, the linguistic study of global lexical domains, such as pottery vocabulary, combined with other fields of (cultural) vocabulary and the research results of disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology, may allow us to unite pieces of the big African historical puzzle.

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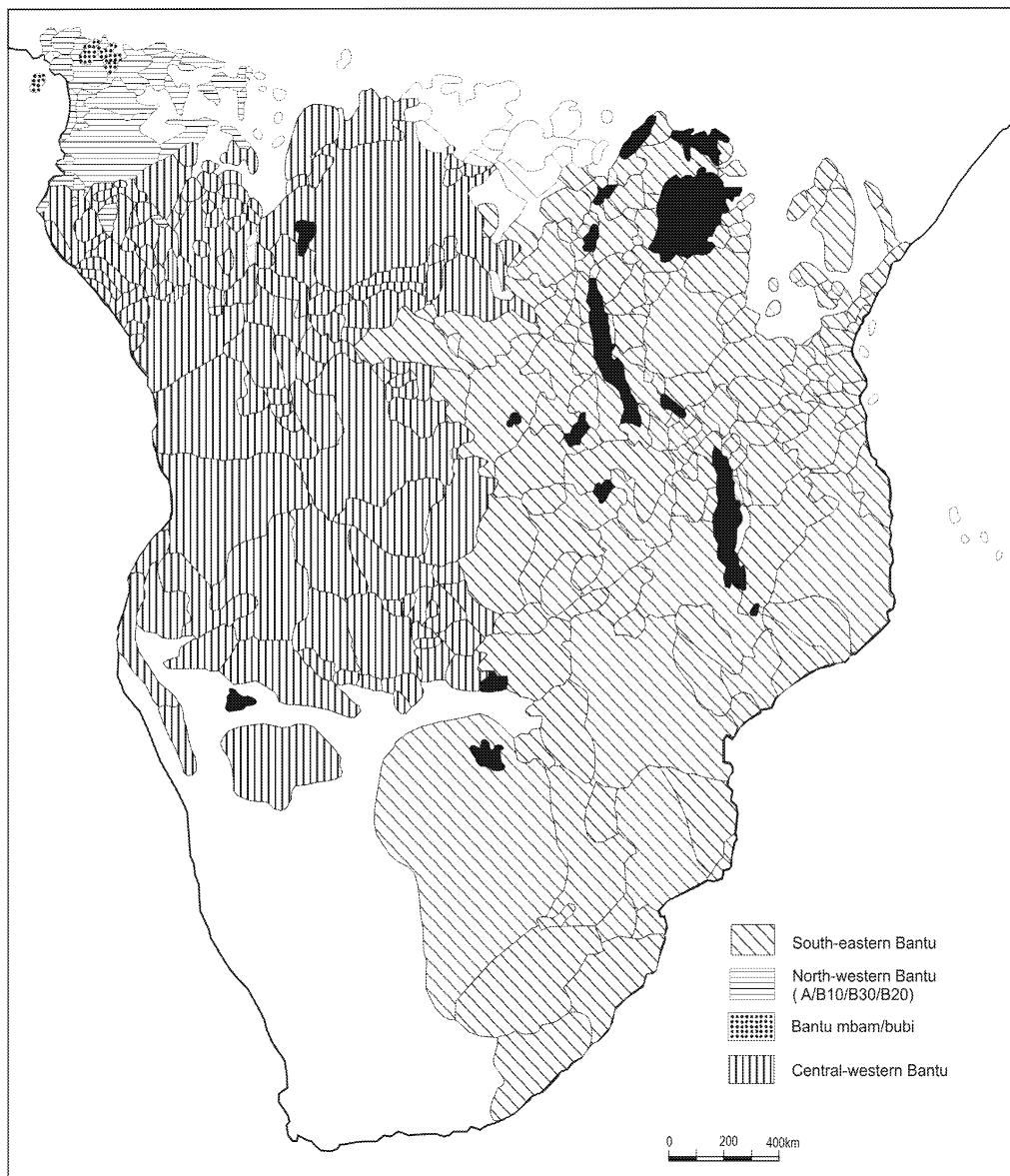
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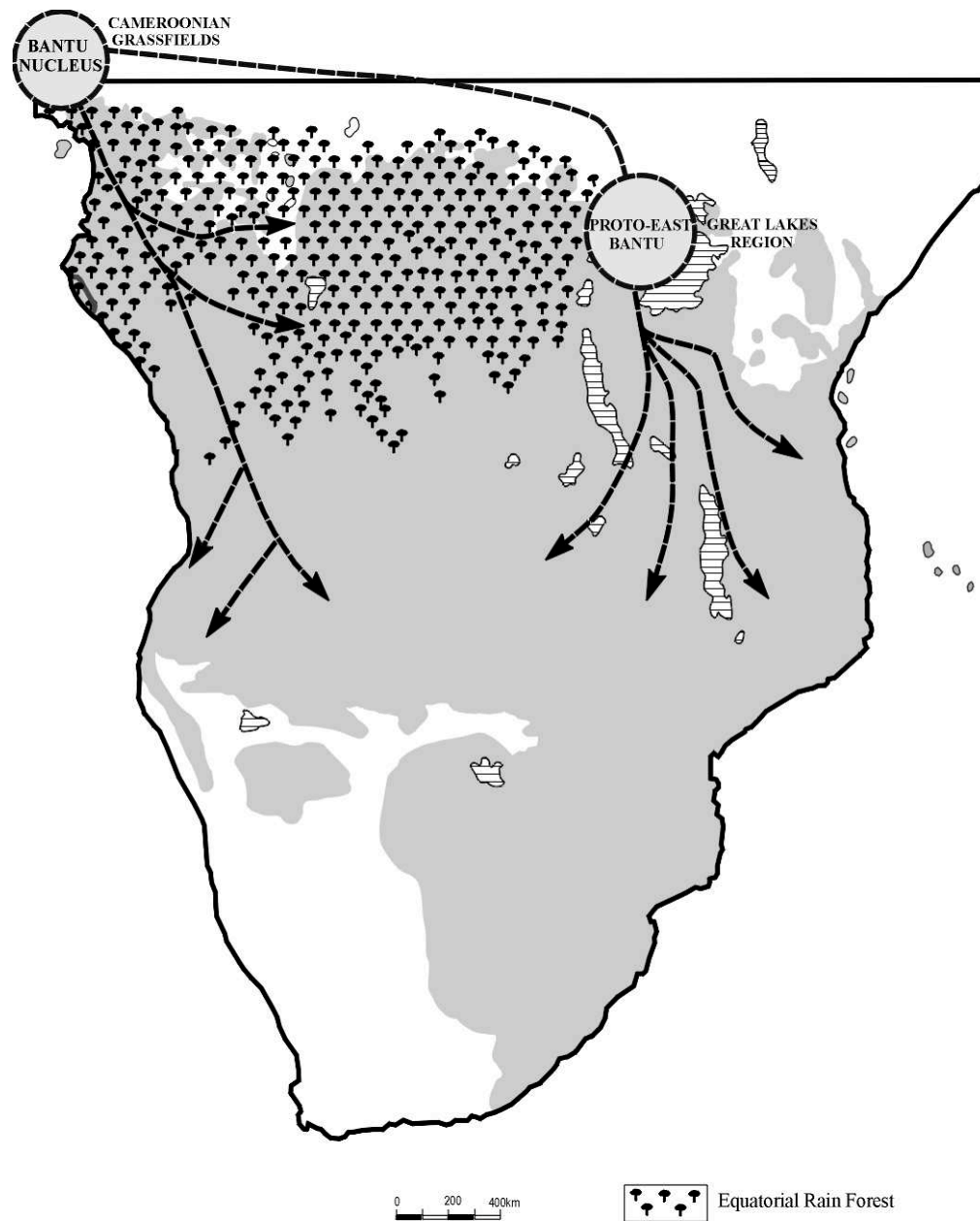
APPENDIX

*Map 1.* The four principal Bantu subgroups, according to Bastin & Piron (1999)

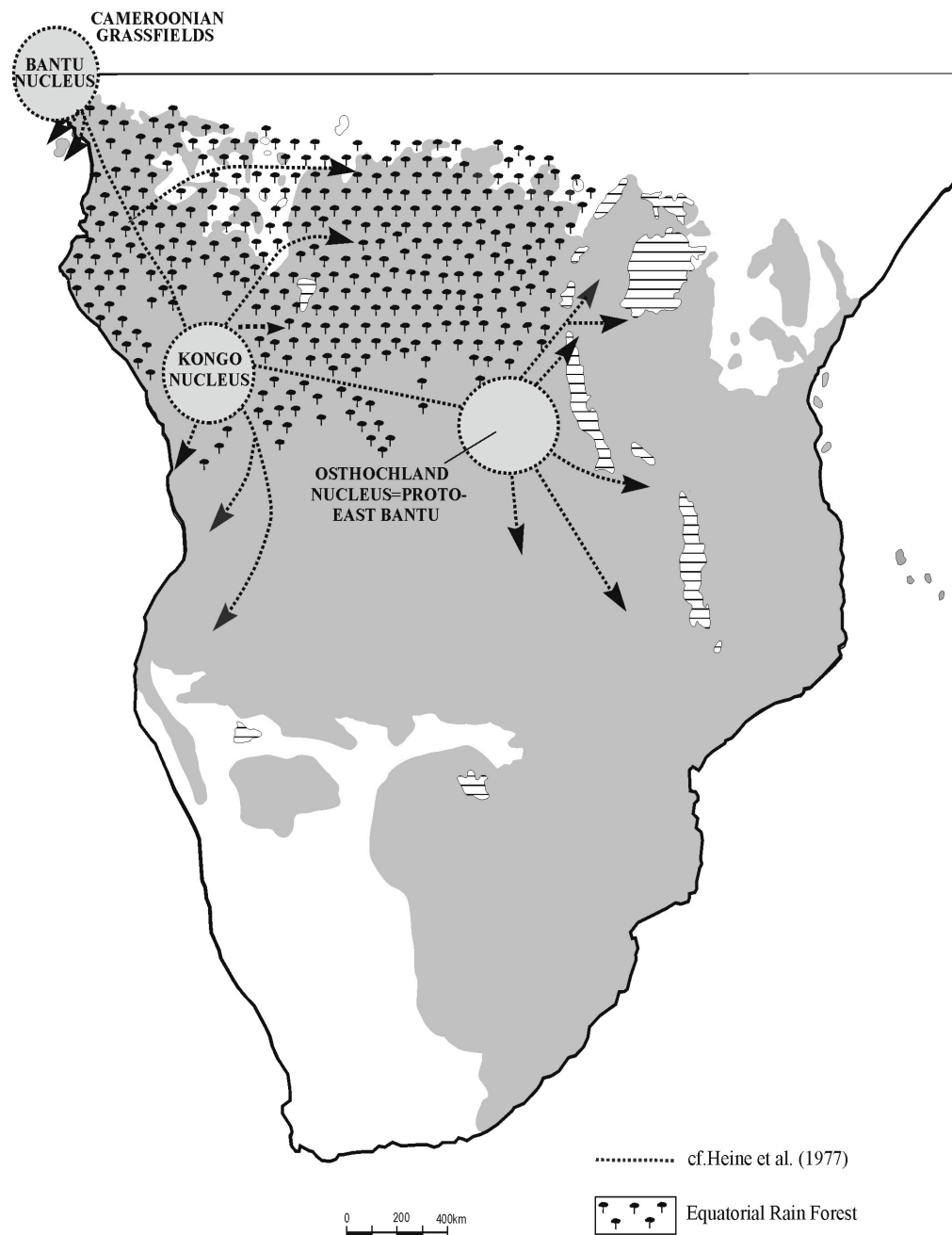


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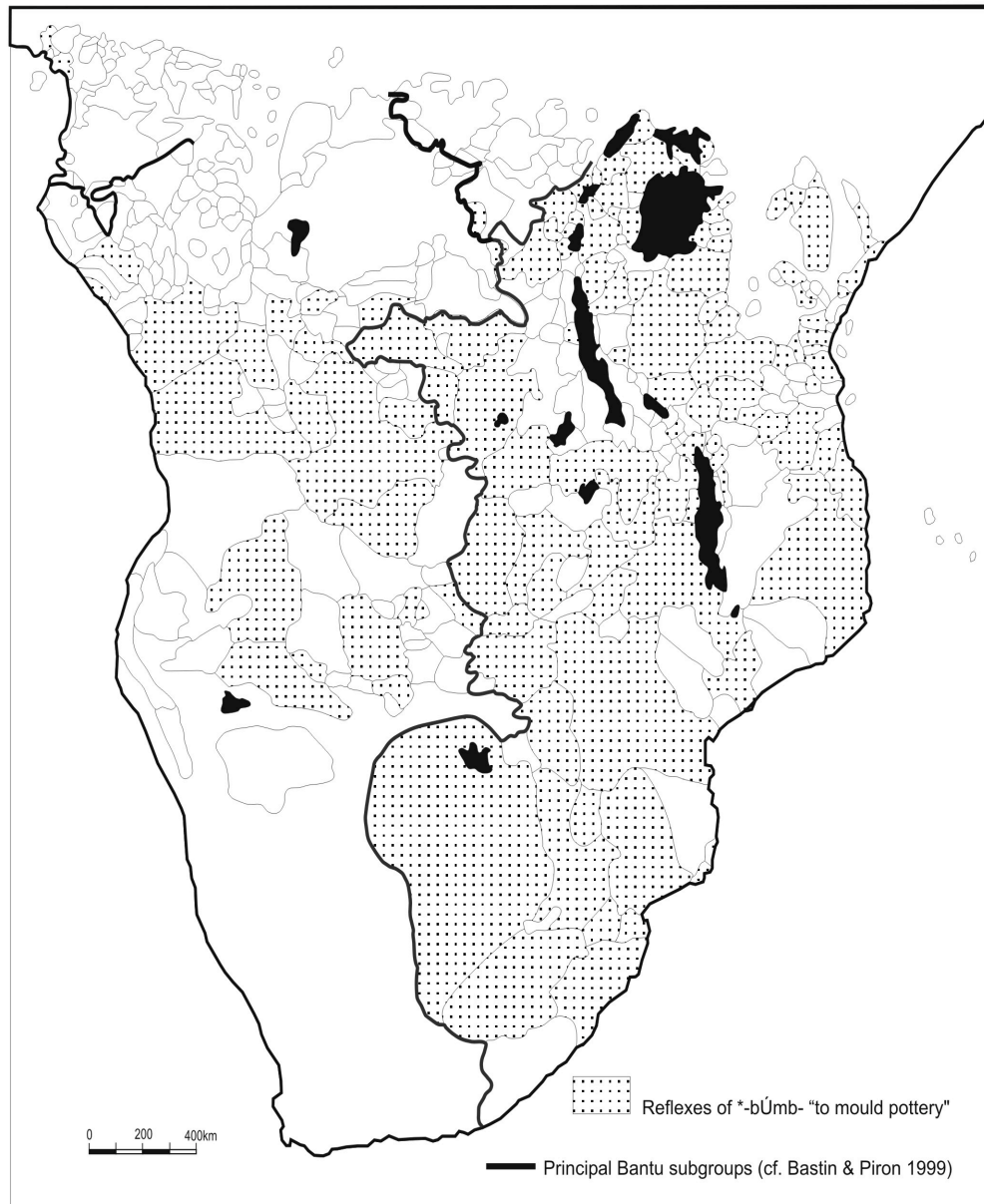
*Map 2. East-next-to-the-west-model of the diffusion of Bantu languages (cf. Möhlig 1977, 1981; Coupey et al. 1975; Bastin et al. 1983; Bastin et al. 1999)*



*Map 3. East-out-of-the-west-model of the diffusion of Bantu languages (cf. Heine 1973; Henrici 1973; Ehret 1972, 1973, 2001; Heine, Hoff & Vossen 1977)*



*Map 4.* Distribution of *\*-bŭmb-* reflexes signifying ‘to mould pottery’



Map 5. Distribution of  $*-b\bar{i}g\bar{a}$  reflexes according to C<sub>2</sub> evolution

