Retrieving Food History through Linguistics: Culinary Traditions in Early BantuPhone Communities

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Introduction

Most research on food history is based on the study of written documents. These documents vary from Mesopotamian grocery lists (Bottero 2004), the Maya codex and travelers’ accounts (Coe 1994), to early cookbooks and literary texts (Acock 2005). But what if no documents are available for a particular period or region? How can we study the food history of Celtic Europe before the arrival of the Romans, of the Pre-Columbian Americas, or of Sub-Saharan Africa before Arabs and Europeans set foot on its shores? Archaeology is one way to explore early history. While it can uncover some culinary remnants and food remains, other tools, preparation techniques, and products left no traces at all. Linguistics can shed light on these otherwise hidden stages of human history. In this paper, we describe how linguistics can serve to reconstruct culinary traditions of early BantuPhone communities. Bantu, a lower node in the Niger-Congo tree, is Africa’s largest language group, stretching from Cameroon to Kenya and as far south as southern Africa.

From Language to History

Vocabulary shared between languages can generally be taken as a result of shared history. Starting from this premise, the historical-comparative study of culinary vocabulary may yield indirect, though valuable evidence on the culinary practices of past BantuPhone peoples. This approach involves both the reconstruction of vocabulary that was inherited from an ancestor language and spread with the dispersal of descendant languages and also the identification of loanwords which spread across languages through contact. The geographical distribution of shared vocabulary indicates either the relative time-depth of the proto-language to which inherited vocabulary is reconstructible, or routes of diffusion for loanwords. Following the basic idea of the Words-and-Things method, when a word can be reconstructed in a proto-language with a specific meaning, the referent of that word must have existed in the period this proto-language was spoken. The reconstructibility of “bmbmb” to bake in ashes” into Proto-Bantu, for instance, implies that early BantuPhone communities were familiar with this cooking technique (Ricquier & Bostoen 2008).

A limitation of lexical data is that they do not allow making estimations in terms of absolute chronology, let alone in terms of calendar dates. One can only reconstruct a relative chronology, tied to the historical subgrouping within a language family.

Figure 1. The Bantu subgroups.
This requires a fairly good understanding of that family's internal classification, which is the case for Bantu. Moreover, several initial stages in the Bantu expansion can be tentatively associated with archaeological findings. This allows integrating these language developments in a (still approximate) absolute chronology. It is agreed upon that Proto-Bantu originated in the grasslands of the Niger/Cameroon border. Its daughter languages started to disperse from there some five millennia or a little longer ago (Nurse & Philipson 2003: 163). This timeline corresponds roughly with the emergence of macroethnism associated with the growing significance of pottery as found in archaeological sites scattered over the Central African rainforest between the first centuries of the second millennium BC and the last centuries BC (de Maret 1994–1995; Lavachery 2000). Likewise, it is commonly believed that the East-Bantu subgroup has its origins in the East-African Great Lakes region. Certain scholars, such as Philipson (2005: 149–165), link its expansion with the south and eastward spread of the Early Iron Age Industrial Complex through East Africa. The oldest ceramic tradition of this complex, found all over the Great Lakes region, dates between 550 BC and AD 650 (Clift 1987). Other stages in the Bantu expansion, for example the spread of South-West-Bantu, are less well associated with archaeological findings.

Cuisine in early Bantu phone communities: the state of research
Both linguists and historians have approached the history of Bantu phone communities through the comparative study of cultural vocabularies. In most cases, reconstructing food history was not the primary goal. They were more interested in political and social developments (Kleiven 2003; Schoenbrun 1998; Vannina 1990, 2004), in the history of technologies such as pottery (Bosonto 2005a) and wood-working (Bulkins 1999a, 1999b), in Bantu lexical reconstructions in general (Guthrie 1970a, 1970b, Baard 1979 & 2001) or in issues of comparative linguistic method (Bosonto 2001; Rioquier & Bosonto 2008). Exceptions mostly concern the reconstruction of food plant names (Philipson & Buhacht 1994–95; Bostoen 2003; Maniacky 2005), or the borrowing of food knowledge from Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic speaking peoples in East Africa (Ehret 1967; Schoenbrun 1993). Only a few studies, such as de Luna (2008) and Schoenbrun (1998), focus on the food history of a regional Bantu cluster. However, most of the aforementioned research touches on food history. Taken together, they offer the first insights into early Bantu food history.

Cultivated foods
Scholars generally associate the Bantu expansion with the spread of agriculture, even though direct archaeological evidence for early food production in West-Central Africa is scarce (Bellwood 2002; Holden 2001; Philipson 2002; Vannina 1994–95).

The importance of tubers, more specifically yams, for early Bantu speakers has often been stressed (Vannina 1994–95). Maniacky (2005) reconstructs several Proto-Bantu names for yam, i.e. *kadi, *badi, *dindi, *bambu, etc. Some of these also occur in non-Bantu Nige-Congo. This indicates that the ancestors of the early Bantu peoples already consumed yams. Given the number of reconstructions, it can be assumed that different varieties were known. Unfortunately, almost no reconstructions can be linked to a specific yam variety. Therefore, it is difficult to determine which species early Bantu-speakers may have grown. Moreover, since many wild species occur in the Bantu area, the reconstructed yam terms do not provide reliable evidence for agriculture. The domestication of wild yams did not necessarily produce new names. One interesting exception is *bambu, a term widely associated with Discorea acaze, a yam species of Asian origin, and reconstructable to Proto-Bantu. If this reconstruction did not originally designate another species, it could mean that this yam existed in West-Central Africa before the Bantu expansion (Maniacky 2005).

Two Proto-Bantu reconstructions provide a more solid indication of food production among early Bantu-speakers: *kandu (cowpea (Vigna unguiculata)) and *uyu (Bambusa groundnut (Vigna subterrannea)) (Philipson & Buhacht 1994–95). Both legumes are indigenous to Africa, but their domestication centre is generally situated outside the Bantu domain (Bieu & Daniel 2007; D’Andrea et al. 2007). Other plants possibly cultivated by early Bantu-speakers are cassava beans (Retina communis) and gourds (Kleiven 2003). Guthrie (1970a, 1970b) reconstructs *bado (castor-oil plant/bean). Bulkins (1999a) confirms the early use of gourds as containers on the basis of the Proto-Bantu reconstruction *cepi (calabash bottle) and the more regional western proto-form *bambu (‘calabash’). The only reconstruction available for an edible gourd species is *tou (Cucumis angulosus), a gourd cultivated for oil (Vannina 1990).

Although not indigenous to Africa, these reconstructions probably played a key role in the early Bantu expansion (Blench 2009; De Lange et al. 1994–95; Kleiven 2003; Bieu & Daniel 2007; Neumann & Hildebrand 2009; Philipson & Buhacht 1994–95; Rosel 1998; Schoenbrun 1998; Vannina 1990). The *bado genus is of Asian origin and only occurs as cultivated in Africa. The existence of some widespread Bantu terms for banana and/or plantain seems to confirm their importance in early subsistence (Blench 2009; Philipson & Buhacht 1994–95; Rosel 1998). However, reconstructions, such as *kadi, *kandu and *kob (Guthrie 1970a) or alternatively *gandi, *gandi and *gob (Philipson & Buhacht 1994–95) are not well established. It is not clear how these phonologically similar reconstructions relate to each other and whether they have a common etymology. Their phonological irregularities could result from contact-induced change, namely the diffusion of bananasi and related vocabulary across communities after Bantu languages were introduced in an area. Finally, we need to know more about the relationship of certain Bantu banana terms with vocabulary in West African non-Bantu languages (Blench 2009).

An important change in the diet of Bantu peoples took place at a later stage of the Bantu language dispersal. Some 2500 to 1000 years ago Bantu people communities emerged in the Great Lakes region, east of the equatorial rain forests (Ehret 1998; Nurse & Philipson 2001). In this area, they encountered peoples speaking Nilo-Saharan.
with non-Bantu-speakers in the north-eastern Bantu domain, probably Nilo-Saharan speakers as suggested by some loanwords in East-Bantu (Schoenbrun 1998). Cattle-keeping remained a relatively unimportant activity until East-Bantu started to diverge and people became interested in the secondary products milk and blood (Ehret 1998; Schoenbrun 1993). For example, Schoenbrun (1997) reconstructed *ćɛŋbɛ 'containers, churn, milking calabash, basket type', *ändern 'churn', and *dɨs- 'to bleed cattle' in Great-Lakes-Bantu, an East-Bantu subgroup.

In South-West Africa, keeping cattle would equally have been introduced during the first millennium AD, probably from South-East Africa. Similar to events in the East, cows were only milked later and not all cattle-keepers in the South-West adopted this practice (Ehret 1998; Vansina 2004). Ehret (1998) considers the distribution of *ŋmədə ‘cow’ and *tandɔ ‘cattle-pong’ as indicative of their westward diffusion. He claims that cattle vocabulary was not only borrowed from East-Bantu, but also from Khoisan. Vansina (2004) and Haase (2007) do not share this view. However, the acquisition of sheep-keeping from Khoisan peoples is unanimously accepted, with broad recognition that the southern Bantu term ‘qə ṣɛɛpp’ is a Khoekhoe loan (Ehret 1998; Haase 2007; Vansina 2004). In return, Khoisan-speaking peoples obtained goats from Bantu-speakers (Haase 2007).

Wild foods

Most historical-comparative research on plant and animal names focuses on domesticates. However, early Bantu-speakers had a mixed subsistence. As is still the case in many present-day Bantu-speaking communities, wild foods such as fish, game, wild plants and honey were an important component in the earliest Bantu diet, if not the most important. Early Bantu-speakers fished with hook and line, *dɔb and, at later stages of the Bantu expansion, new fishing techniques, such as *dɔb ‘to fish with a basket’, were developed (de Luna 2008; Ehret 1998; Vansina 1990). The most advanced lexical reconstruction work done so far on Bantu fish names focuses on the languages of Gabon, a regional scope too limited to draw conclusions on fish species consumed by early Bantu-speakers (Mguashiana-Dosso 1995). In de Luna (2008), two reconstructions for fish are mentioned, *kɔŋgə ‘eel’ and *ɛmpende ‘locum (catfish)’, but neither has Proto-Bantu status. The early Bantu-speaking peoples hunted with spears, *dɔŋpɔ ‘spear’, and with the bow, *təbo. They trapped, *tɔŋ ‘large animals, that would otherwise plunder their fields. Several Proto-Bantu terms referring to wild animals, such as *qəp ‘leopard’, *jɔŋ ‘elephant’, *kəp ‘pangolin or scaly anteater’, *jɔ,nil ‘buffalo’, *jɔp ‘hippopotamus’ etc. have been reconstructed, but no one has yet systematically analyzed their place in the subsistence systems of the early Bantu-speaking communities. The first Bantu-speaking peoples also collected honey, as is indicated by the reconstructions *jəp ‘bom; honey’ or *jəp ‘honey’ (Bustin & Schadeberg 2003; de Luna 2008; Klieman 2003; Vansina 1994: 95).

We know a little more about the exploitation of wild trees by early Bantu-speaking peoples, including the use of the oil palm, called either *dɔn ‘or *dɔn ‘(Bostoen 2006).

Domesticated animals

The early Bantu-speaking communities had three domesticated animals: *dɔb ‘goat’, *kɔŋgə ‘giraffe’, and *dɔb ‘dog’ (Gathrie 1970a, Gathrie 1970b, Klieman 2003). Dogs were probably above all hunting companions, but may also have been eaten. The preparation of dog meat has been reported in the northern Bantu domain (Vansina 1985). An important change concerning livestock was the acquisition of cattle. This happened in the same period as the adoption of cereal cultivation through contacts

Afro-African and possibly even Khoisan languages. These interactions as well as different environmental circumstances resulted in an altered lifestyle and diet. We have evidence in the form of loanwords that East-Bantu speakers acquired knowledge of cereal cultivation through contact with speakers of Nilo-Saharan languages. East-Bantu speakers probably acquired pearl millet (*Pennisetum glaucum) first as the term most frequently associated with this cereal, *dɔb ‘is widespread in East-Bantu and reconstructable to Proto-East-Bantu. Its ultimate point of origin, however, is the West-Nilotic subgroup of Nilo-Saharan (Bostoen forthcoming-a). Sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor), another indigenous African cereal, must have been introduced after Proto-East-Bantu had diverged into separate languages, because the words for this crop have a more local distribution (Bostoen forthcoming-a; Philippson & Bahuchet 1994-95). The same is true for finger millet (*Eleusine coracana) (Philippson & Bahuchet 1994-95).

South of the equatorial rain forests, South-West Bantu-speaking peoples also made the cultivation of cereals part of their subsistence. Vansina (2004) dates the adoption of cereal agriculture in this region towards the end of the first millennium AD (Vansina 2004). Based on climatic and environmental evidence, he supposes that cereals arrived in South-West Africa from the east, having spread through northern Botswana, south of the middle Zambezi River and south of the Okavango delta. Ehret (1998) proposes a somewhat earlier introduction by or before the middle of the first millennium AD, but also from an eastern centre of dispersion. According to Ehret, many South-West Bantu cereal-related words have an East-Bantu origin, but several of those words need further analysis. For example, Ehret points that *ćaŋg ‘sorghum’ was borrowed from East-Bantu *ćaŋ ‘individual grain’. Nevertheless, Bostoen (forthcoming-a) reconstructs *ćaŋ with the meaning ‘pearl millet’ as a predominantly western Bantu term with a considerable time-depth and excludes an eastern origin through borrowing. The word itself might date back to Proto-Bantu, but probably not associated with this cereal. Indeed, Vansina (2004) proposes it originally referred to grass seeds. The independent introduction of pearl millet into western Bantu-speaking Africa is supported by the recent discovery of charred remains of the cereal dating back to 400-200 BC in two archaeological sites from southern Cameroon (Egger et al. 2006; Kahlheber et al. forthcoming). As the discrepancies in the historical-linguistic interpretations show, the history of cereal cultivation in the south-west needs further research.

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designated a specific kind of cooking pot distinct from the one named "jëngi". Its function and form are difficult to retrieve from the present-day data (Bos Red 2005).

Early Bantu speakers used a spatula or stirring stick ("bOta") when cooking in these pots (Bulkens e.d.). Besides the Proto-Bantu reconstruction "ngid" palm oil mentioned above, Guthrie (1970a) reconstructs "kùnd" fats; oil, which seems to be a more generic term. This suggests that the palm oil was not the only type of oil familiar to early Bantu communities. These lexical reconstructions for different kinds of oil hint at the cooking technique of frying, but the only reconstructed word for frying is "kùnd", is of more recent Bantu origin (Bos Red 2001). It is possible that oil was used only as seasoning or that it was not used in cooking at all, but rather for cosmetic purposes.

Important culinary changes are related to the introduction of cereals. Pearl millet and other cereals were threshed ("pOde"); ground ("a"), and winnowed ("jënd"); all being reconstructions which need more study (Bastin & Schadegl 2003; Guthrie 1970b; Schoenbrun 1997). Instead of grinding, cereals could also be processed with a mortar and pestle. Despite the fact that Bantu peoples already had mortars, a new word appeared in Proto-East-Bantu (*dOdë) (Bulkens 1999b). Ehret (1998) considers this to be a loanword from Eastern Sahelian, a Nilo-Saharan subgroup. From our own research, we have learnt that both flour and sift flour-based porridge, the staple in large parts of Sub-Saharan Africa, are innovations linked to the introduction of cereals. A widespread word in the Bantu languages for this porridge is "kùndë". In contrast to Ehret (1998), this word is not a Nilo-Saharan borrowing, but instead a Proto-Bantu word that originally referred to a mash of starchy food, such as yams or plantains. With the introduction of cereals and flour, people could prepare the staple carbohydrate in a new manner and the word underwent a semantic shift. Instead of pounding starchy roots to produce mash, cereal growers could produce flour and stir it into hot water until it became a thick porridge. This preparation method is referred to with reflexes of "ngid" in the east of the Bantu region, and "jënd" in the South-West, each an older Bantu word that also underwent a regional semantic shift to talk about this form of cooking. Nowadays, the new technique is applied as well to tubers, such as cassava, and plantains.

Of course, the adoption of cereals and cattle were not the only changes in the culinary traditions of the Bantu peoples. The Proto-East-Bantu reconstruction "kùndëng-" indicates that people in the Great Lakes region, for instance, developed a small and rather flat pot with a wide opening used for frying or dry-roasting (Bos Red 2005). This noun is derived from the above mentioned verb "kùndëng" 'frying', which is probably also an East-Bantu innovation (Bos Red 2001). Taken together, the two terms suggest that the appearance of this new type of pot correlated with the emergence of a new cooking technique. Later, when the East-Bantu languages started to diverge, the speakers further innovated their vocabulary for pots and even for places (Bos Red 2005a).
Concluding remarks and agenda for future research

The linguistic evidence presented in this paper summarizes what we currently know from linguistic evidence of the culinary traditions of the early Bantu-speaking communities. The lion’s share of the available lexical reconstructions relate to the diet of early Bantu-speakers. Scholars have paid particular attention to foods obtained from domesticates, both cultivars and livestock, but relatively little is known about the practices of early farmers and pastoralists. As for wild foods, some lexical reconstruction work has been done on foraging practices such as hunting and fishing, but little is known about the species obtained this way. The collection of honey has been documented to some extent. Although some historical linguistic research has been done on wild tree names, our knowledge of wild plants in the diet of early Bantu-speakers remains limited. Information on cooking techniques and utensils is even more fragmentary. Some lexical reconstructions provide indirect evidence for food preparation techniques, such as drying, pounding, threshing and winnowing, and others for cooking techniques, such as baking in ashes, frying, roasting and preparing porridge. We also have linguistic evidence for the use of pots, mortars, pestles, stirring sticks or spindles, and calabashes. We know a lot about the exact preparations of particular dishes with only a few reconstructions for palm oil, palm wine and porridge.

Needless to say, a lot of work still has to be done. Future research should focus on food products, such as beverages, relishes, flour, porridges, etc., cooking techniques and cooking utensils. We also need to know more about the names of wild foods, including plants, mushrooms, fish, game, and edible insects such as caterpillars. Moreover, we still do not have reconstructions for the names of many cultivated plants, like the Peanut and Livingstone potato as well as egg plants. These new data will allow us to have a more nuanced idea of the varied and balanced diet the early Bantu communities probably had. Special attention should be paid to the names for condiments. After all, how can we know what the food of the early Bantu communities tasted like, if we do not know how they seasoned their preparations? Finally, the Bantu area has not been equally covered. A lot of research has centred on East-Bantu and to a lesser extent on South-West-Bantu, whereas the North-West remains largely invisible in publications. The outcome of this uneven regional focus is that some proposed reconstructions could prove incorrect. Taking into account the entire Bantu domain, we might be able to propose more valid reconstructions.

Notes

1. This paper is part of the PhD-project 'A Comparative Linguistic Approach to the History of Culinary Practice in Bantu-speaking Africa' carried out at the Université libre de Bruxelles and the Royal Museums for Central Africa, and has been presented at the Symposium de la Recherche Scientifique. We thank Kathryn de Luna for commenting on an earlier draft.

2. Reconstructions preceded by * go back to Proto-Bantu, while * to reconstructions which are of more limited time depth and/or less solid. Bantu languages are total. The score occurs on a word indicates a high time and the grave accent a low time, e.g. *a/Proto-Bantu is reconstructed with two vowels represented here as *a a.

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