

POTS, WORDS AND THE BANTU PROBLEM: ON  
LEXICAL RECONSTRUCTION AND EARLY  
AFRICAN HISTORY\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Historical-comparative linguistics has played a key role in the reconstruction of early history in Africa. Regarding the ‘Bantu Problem’ in particular, linguistic research, particularly language classification, has oriented historical study and been a guiding principle for both historians and archaeologists. Some historians have also embraced the comparison of cultural vocabularies as a core method for reconstructing African history. This paper evaluates the merits and limits of this latter methodology by analysing Bantu pottery vocabulary. Challenging earlier interpretations, it argues that speakers of Proto-Bantu inherited the craft of pot-making from their Benue-Congo-speaking ancestors who introduced this technology into the Grassfields region. This ‘Proto-Bantu ceramic tradition’ was the result of a long, local development, but spread quite rapidly into Atlantic Central Africa, and possibly as far as Southern Angola and northern Namibia. The people who brought Early Iron Age (EIA) ceramics to southwestern Africa were not the first Bantu-speakers in this area nor did they introduce the technology of pot-making.

**KEY WORDS:** Archaeology, Bantu origins, linguistics.

THE Bantu languages stretch out from Cameroon in the west to southern Somalia in the east and as far as Southern Africa in the south.<sup>1</sup> This group of closely related languages is by far Africa’s most widespread language group. Nevertheless, Bantu is commonly seen as one of the most recent offshoots of the largest African language family, Niger-Congo.<sup>2</sup> What, then, caused the Bantu languages to expand over the huge area they occupy today? This question constitutes a ‘major puzzle in the history of Africa’,<sup>3</sup> i.e. the ‘Bantu

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<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the number of Bantu present-day languages vary between 440 (M. Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu: An Introduction to the Comparative Linguistics and Prehistory of the Bantu Languages* [4 vols.] [London, 1967–71]) and 680 (M. Mann and D. Dalby, *A Thesaurus of African Languages. A Classified and Annotated Inventory of the Spoken Languages of Africa* [London, 1987]), depending on how one distinguishes a language from a dialect.

<sup>2</sup> Niger-Congo is the biggest of Africa’s four language families (see J. H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa* [The Hague, 1963]). Its internal classification is still a matter of ongoing research and debate. For a recent proposal, see K. Williamson and R. Blench, ‘Niger-Congo’, in B. Heine and D. Nurse (eds.), *African Languages: an Introduction* (Cambridge, 2000), 11–42.

<sup>3</sup> J. Vansina, ‘Bantu in the crystal ball, I’, *History in Africa*, 6 (1979), 287–333.

Expansion' or the 'Bantu Problem'.<sup>4</sup> Although the Bantu language expansion is primarily a linguistic issue, non-linguists have also tackled this conundrum. Historians, anthropologists and archaeologists have reformulated the problem in terms of societies: how does one explain the means by which a group of closely related speech communities came to populate a disproportionately large part of Africa? To answer this question, linguistic data have been associated with non-linguistic facts, notably remains of material culture, and archaeology has played an ever-increasing role in the linguistic paradigms that account for the Bantu language dispersal.<sup>5</sup> Archaeological evidence has been used to buttress linguistic theories, and, conversely, linguistic assumptions have helped to frame archaeological data into a historical narrative.

While historians initially held exclusive rights on brokering between the two sets of data, historical linguists and archaeologists have responded to each other's hypotheses, creating an interdisciplinary discourse on the topic of Bantu origins that relies heavily on the continuously changing and contested internal classifications of the Bantu languages.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, Bantu 'genealogical' trees are predominantly the result of lexicostatistics whose historical significance is restricted. Based on the comparison of a limited list of lexical items belonging to what is presumed to be a universal 'core vocabulary', this short-cut method can be useful for establishing tentative relationships between languages that lack the descriptions necessary for the more comprehensive historical-linguistic studies using the comparative method. Lexicostatistical classifications may, therefore, be supported by further comparative research, but should never be considered as definitive genealogical classifications, even if some scholars of early Bantu history have taken their 'genetic' status for granted.<sup>7</sup> Because of these limitations, Eggert is right in claiming that 'it is hardly adequate to prematurely link, as has been so frequently done, archaeological finds and features with linguistic phenomena and to suggest possible routes for language diffusion of whatever nature'.<sup>8</sup> A linguist should not call upon ceramic tradition X to lend a historical status to subgroup Y for want of proper linguistic arguments. Similarly, an archaeologist should not advance the same subgroup Y as evidence for its assumption on ceramic tradition X, definitely not if this subgroup has been proposed solely on account of lexicostatistical data. Such 'fachübergreifenden Klonung' ('interdisciplinary cloning') is bound to lead to historical chimaeras, rather than to reliable insights into Africa's

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, R. Oliver, 'The problem of the Bantu expansion', *Journal of African History*, 7 (1966), 361–76; J. Vansina, 'New linguistic evidence and the Bantu expansion', *Journal of African History*, 36 (1995), 173–95; M. K. H. Eggert, 'The Bantu problem and African archaeology', in A. B. Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology: A Critical Introduction* (London, 2005), 301–26. <sup>5</sup> Eggert, 'The Bantu problem'.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, T. C. Schadeberg, 'Historical linguistics', in D. Nurse and G. Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages* (London, 2003), 143–63.

<sup>7</sup> For a critical introduction to lexicostatistics and other historical-linguistic methods and their use for the reconstruction of African history, see D. Nurse, 'The contributions of linguistics to the study of history in Africa', *Journal of African History*, 38 (1997), 359–91. <sup>8</sup> Eggert, 'The Bantu problem', 321.

past.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, even if certain methodological anomalies from the past may advocate prudence in interdisciplinary exchanges, they should not be taken as a pretext for abolishing all forms of cross-border collaboration. From this angle, the present paper discusses how the diachronic study of cultural vocabularies may contribute to a judicious interdisciplinary approach to the ‘Bantu Problem’.

WORDS-AND-THINGS: FROM LEXICAL TO HISTORICAL  
RECONSTRUCTION

In addition to lexicostatistics, another development in the field of Bantu historical linguistics is the diachronic study of cultural vocabularies, also known as the *Words-and-Things* method. Although the method was a product of early twentieth-century Indo-European linguistics, it has only hesitantly gained ground amongst African linguists.<sup>10</sup> The method is founded on the basic idea that a community’s culture is reflected in its language. The major domains of human activity have an appropriate vocabulary, which is historically significant when it is shared with other languages. Vocabulary shared between two languages is evidence of shared history. In essence, apart from coincidence and independent convergent evolutions, this shared vocabulary can basically have two distinct sources. One language may have borrowed a word from the other or both from a third language, or both languages may have inherited a word from a common ancestor language. In the case of lexical borrowing, one may presume contact between both speech communities or between each of the two communities and a third community. In the case of inheritance, the vocabulary in question may be reconstructed into their ancestral language, which is, due to the lack of written records, generally a hypothetical proto-language in the Bantu context.<sup>11</sup> A term can be traced back to Proto-Bantu if it has a significant distribution among the different Bantu subgroups, or to a regional proto-language like Proto-East-Bantu if the term’s distribution is limited to East-Bantu. Most historical linguists agree that ‘a reconstructed proto-language can be, at best, an approximation to what the putative unique ancestor of a given language family may have been like’.<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the reconstruction of vocabulary in a proto-language allows one to hypothesize about the culture of its

<sup>9</sup> W. J. G. Möhlig, ‘Sprachgeschichte, Kulturgeschichte und Archäologie. Die Kongruenz der Forschungsergebnisse als methodologisches Problem’, *Paideuma*, 35 (1989), 189–96.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the origins of the method, see Y. Malkiel, *Etymology* (Cambridge, 1993). For more information on its application for the use of African history, see Nurse, ‘The contributions’, or the introductory chapter of K. Bostoen, *Des mots et des pots en bantou. Une approche linguistique de l’histoire de la céramique en Afrique* (Frankfurt am Main, 2005).

<sup>11</sup> More complex historical scenarios should of course be reckoned, since both sources of lexical resemblance interact easily. A word borrowed at a certain point in time, for instance, may get integrated into the language’s lexicon and be transmitted subsequently as part of the inherited vocabulary. Words may also pass from one language to the other when a community shifts to a new language, but maintains part of its original vocabulary.

<sup>12</sup> R. M. W. Dixon, *The Rise and Fall of Languages* (Cambridge, 1997), 45.

speakers. Although the method's principles are simple, a rigorous linguistic approach is still indispensable for reliable conclusions.

In the domain of Bantu studies, historians were the first to apply the Words-and-Things method to reconstructing history. Following the pioneering work of Christopher Ehret, a school of 'linguistic historians' has relied heavily on Words-and-Things principles to reconstruct the early history of different Bantu-speaking regions.<sup>13</sup> In contrast to 'historical linguists', who primarily analyse and compare languages to reconstruct the history of languages, 'linguistic historians' use language essentially 'to reconstruct the *human* past' and 'they see the classification of languages not as an end in itself, but rather as the first step towards the reconstruction of broader and encompassing human histories'.<sup>14</sup> Consequently, the historian's analysis of linguistic data tends to be more superficial and does not always follow what linguists consider as their code of practice. A concrete example of this situation is Jan Vansina's recent claim that the speakers of Proto-Njila, the latest common ancestor language of the South-West-Bantu languages, were potters.<sup>15</sup> Although the claim is probably not false, the lexical evidence on which it is based is shaky and partial. Vansina's claim is based on attestations of the verb *\*-búmb-* (to make pottery), which Malcolm Guthrie detected in these languages.<sup>16</sup> In a footnote, Vansina cites the noun *omumi* (potter) from the Angolan language Nyaneka as supplementary evidence. However, historical linguistic analysis of this noun reveals that it cannot derive from *\*-búmb-*, but is a reflex of the verb *\*-mà* (to make pottery).<sup>17</sup> Since his basic interpretation of this lexical evidence was faulty, Vansina did not consider the broader distribution of the verb root *\*-mà* in the South-West-Bantu languages. Furthermore, systematic data collection reveals that it is also attested in other languages of the same group, a fact that has considerable historical implications. It is obvious that such inconsistencies may weaken the soundness of the historical assumptions built on language data.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, C. Ehret, 'Cattle-keeping and milking in eastern and southern African history: the linguistic evidence', *Journal of African History*, 8 (1967), 1–17; D. L. Schoenbrun, *A Green Place, a Good Place: Agrarian Change, Gender and Social Identity in the Great Lakes Region to the 15th Century* (Oxford, 1998); J. Vansina, *How Societies Are Born: Governance in West Central Africa Before 1600* (Charlottesville, 2004).

<sup>14</sup> K. Klieman, 'Comments on Christopher Ehret, "Bantu history: re-envisioning the evidence of language"', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34 (2001), 48–51. <sup>15</sup> Vansina, *How Societies*, 45. <sup>16</sup> Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*.

<sup>17</sup> The term *omumi* is an agent noun derived from the verb *\*-ma*, which is attested in reduplicated form in Nyaneka: *-mama* 'modelar com barro (ou outro material aplicável)' (A. J. Da Silva, *Dicionário Português-Nhaneca* [Lisbon, 1966], 360). Even if Proto-Bantu (PB) *\*b* before *\*U* may regularly become zero in Nyaneka, e.g. PB *\*-búbi*, (spider) > *e-uzi*, this verb cannot possibly be derived from *\*-búmb-*, since *\*U* and *\*mb* remain respectively *u* and *mb* in Nyaneka, e.g. PB *\*-bútò* (seed) > *om-buto*; *\*-jím-b-* (to sing) > *imba*.

<sup>18</sup> In Bostoën, *Des mots*, 11–15, or K. Bostoën, 'What comparative Bantu pottery vocabulary may tell us about early human settlement in the Inner Congo basin', *Afrique & Histoire*, 5 (2006), I discuss in more detail why this simple example is a symptom of a deeper problem. See also R. Klein-Arendt, 'Pre-colonial non-Bantu influence on Savannah Bantu vocabulary. The case of the Chaga (E62) iron terminology', in K. Bostoën and J. Maniacky (eds.), *Studies in African Comparative Linguistics with Special Focus on Bantu and Mande* (Tervuren, 2005), 147–64. For that matter, not only

However, the amount of lexical data covered by ‘linguistic historians’ is often so vast as to make close scrutiny of all their lexical evidence quasi-impossible. As a result, the historical validity of their conclusions is difficult to assess. Even working out a single set of reflexes for two roots involves massive amounts of individual comparisons of words and meanings.

The example from Vansina’s recent study demonstrates several possible pitfalls of using the Words-and-Things method for the reconstruction of early history. First, in order to achieve reliable results, data must be collected from as many languages as possible, rather than relying on apparently representative sets of languages, as found in existing Bantu lexical reconstruction databases.<sup>19</sup> Thorough data collection helps to ensure more accurate mapping of a word’s distribution. Secondly, the major comparative series for each of the semantic fields concerned must be defined.<sup>20</sup> Thirdly, a sound diachronic phonological analysis of each comparative series, according to the principles of the comparative method, is necessary to distinguish real from apparent reflexes and inherited from borrowed reflexes.<sup>21</sup> Fourthly, a diachronic semantic analysis of each comparative series allows one to identify possible semantic innovations. As this paper will demonstrate, neglecting such semantic shifts may have significant implications for the historiography at stake. Finally, even if one focuses on the comparative vocabulary of one particular region, one cannot lose sight of the entire Bantu domain, or even data beyond Bantu. This information is necessary to assess the chronological depth of the vocabulary concerned and to avoid what I call ‘historical myopia’.

#### COMPARATIVE BANTU POTTERY VOCABULARY

The invention of pottery is a highly significant cultural phenomenon in human history. Although the role of early ceramics in different areas of the world is still a matter of debate, the emergence of pottery in a culture has often been linked with important changes in lifestyle, such as sedentary living and the emergence of food production. Although pottery may have had different functions in different communities, and at distinct times in the same communities, it obviously had, and still has, a major impact on people’s lives. Ceramics have not only assumed a utilitarian role, for instance in the

linguists question the methodological validity of the way certain historians approach language data; there also exist serious debates amongst historians themselves. See for instance J. Vansina, ‘Linguistic evidence and historical reconstruction’, *Journal of African History*, 40 (1999), 469–73, in which he heavily criticizes C. Ehret, *An African Classical Age: Eastern and Southern Africa in World History, 1000 BC to AD 400* (Charlottesville, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> See for instance Y. Bastin *et al.*, *Reconstructions lexicales bantoues 3 / Bantu Lexical Reconstructions 3* (Tervuren, 2003), online database (<http://linguistics.africamuseum.be/BLR3.html>), or Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*. Given the vastness of their enterprise, these studies can only give us a rough idea of both the actual distribution and the semantics of lexical items. That is why their valuable data need to be complemented in order to be appropriate for reliable historical reconstruction.

<sup>20</sup> A comparative series is a set of terms occurring in different languages with similar phonological form and a related meaning.

<sup>21</sup> For a good introduction to the comparative method, see Nurse, ‘The contributions’, 361–3; for more extensive information, see for instance T. Crowley, *An Introduction to Historical Linguistics* (Auckland, 1992).

preparation and storage of food and beverages, but clay pots and figurines have also served ritual and medical purposes.<sup>22</sup> In sub-Saharan Africa pottery is invested with great symbolic importance. The craft is surrounded with rituals and prohibitions and several steps in the production sequence serve as a metaphor for interpreting and acting upon certain facets of human experience. People make metaphoric use of pottery vocabulary to refer to transformations from wet to dry, soft to hard, raw to cooked, natural to cultural and impure to pure through the operation of heat. This vocabulary is also used to mark isolation and destruction, to designate bodily cavities or to discuss concepts like spirit, conception and essence.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, 'potting traditions are "sociotechnical aggregates", an intricate mix of inventions, borrowed elements, and manipulations that display an amazing propensity to redefinition by individuals and local groups'.<sup>24</sup> A potter's technical behaviour thus leaves room for choices along both functional and social or symbolic lines, creating multifaceted associations between technological styles and social identity.

Because pottery making continues to be practised throughout Africa, its manufacturing process, well-described in ethnographic literature, has also become a key topic in ethno-archaeology. In addition, ceramics are archaeologists' principal data source in Africa, at least for Ceramic Later Stone Age (CLSA) and Iron Age (IA) assemblages, because of their survival in poor conservation contexts. As part of their analysis, archaeologists classify pottery into related traditions 'to situate cultures in time and in space, and to reconstruct not only exchange networks of goods and peoples, production and consumption patterns, and sociopolitical structures, but also more recently, thought systems'.<sup>25</sup> This high archaeological visibility and ethnographic prominence, combined with a high linguistic prominence, makes pottery a particularly attractive subject for interdisciplinary research.

Particular ceramic traditions and Bantu language subgroups have often been associated with each other.<sup>26</sup> The absence of a systematic comparative study of Bantu pottery vocabulary, however, led to the present work, which relies on a lexical database of more than 5,800 pottery-related terms from about 400 different Bantu languages.<sup>27</sup> The vocabulary was subdivided into five main categories: (a) verbs meaning 'to make pottery', (b) nouns designating 'potter', (c) nouns for raw materials like pottery clay and grog, (d) nouns for different types of pots, and (e) nouns and verbs referring to the different gestures and implements of the 'chaîne opératoire' or production

<sup>22</sup> W. K. Barnett and J. W. Hoopes (eds.), *The Emergence of Pottery: Technology and Innovation in Ancient Societies* (Washington, 1995).

<sup>23</sup> N. Barley, *Smashing Pots. Feats of Clay from Africa* (London, 1994); O. P. Gosselain, 'In pots we trust. The processing of clay and symbols in Sub-Saharan Africa' *Journal of Material Culture*, 4 (1999), 205–30; A. Jacobson-Widding, 'Pits, pots and snakes. An anthropological approach to ancient African symbols', *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 1 (1992), 5–27.

<sup>24</sup> O. P. Gosselain, 'Materializing identities: an African perspective', *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory*, 7 (2000), 190.

<sup>25</sup> O. P. Gosselain, *Poteries du Cameroun méridional. Styles techniques et rapports à l'identité* (Paris, 2002), 7 (my translation).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, T. N. Huffman and R. K. Herbert, 'New perspectives on Eastern Bantu', *Azania*, 29–30 (1994–5), 27–36.

<sup>27</sup> Bostoën, *Des mots*.

sequence.<sup>28</sup> The extensive vocabulary included in this database made it possible to map accurately the current distribution of lexical items, retrace historically crucial semantic shifts, reconstruct pottery vocabulary to different stages of chronological depth and reconstitute the lexical diffusion networks of different geographic areas.

#### HISTORICAL POTENTIAL OF COMPARATIVE POTTERY VOCABULARY

Although the diachronic study of early Bantu pottery vocabulary may contribute to our knowledge of the early history of pottery in the Bantu area, the historical conclusions drawn from these lexical data are valuable, but limited. In this paper, I will illustrate these potentialities and limitations through the analysis of one crucial category of pottery vocabulary: verbs referring to the fabrication of pottery.

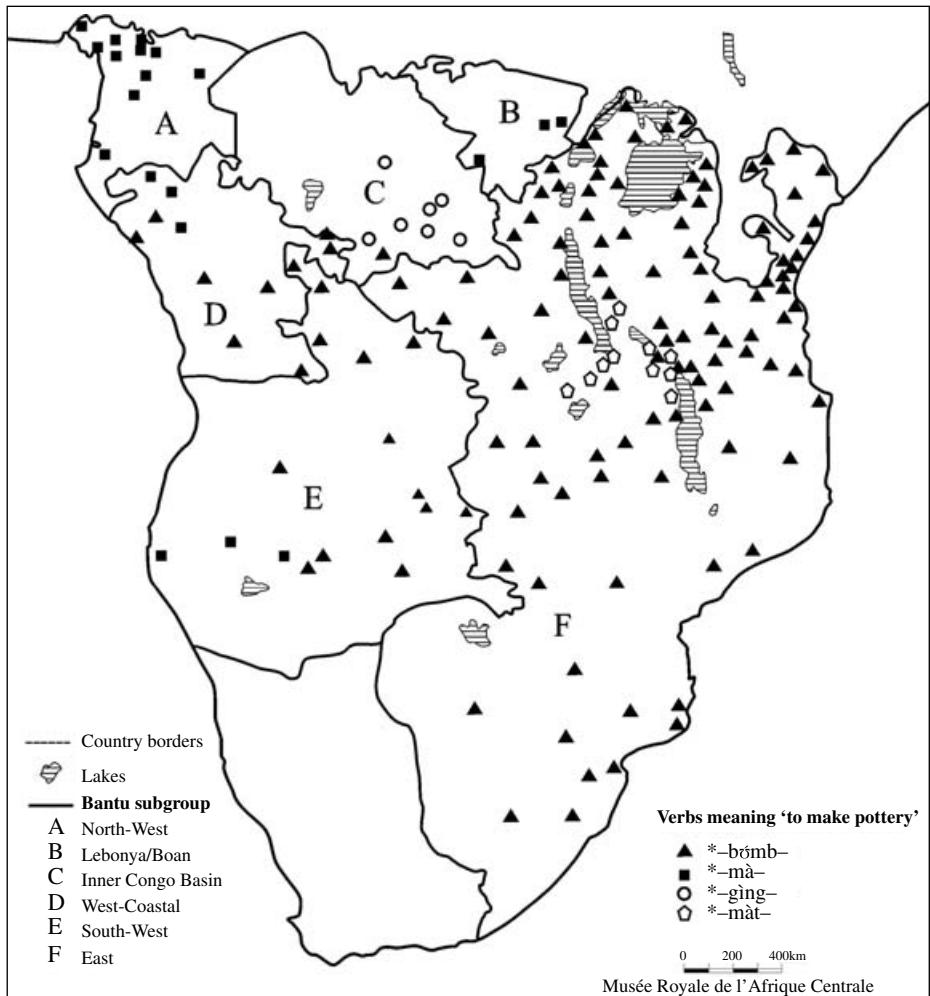
The semantic field related to pot-making in Bantu languages is organized around the generic verbs meaning ‘to make pottery’. Insofar as the manufacture of clay pots is still a regular activity, most Bantu-speaking communities have such a generic verb. The semantic ranges of these verbs are so general that to a large extent they stand for the craft as a whole. They not only refer to the act of shaping pots as such, but also serve as roots from which nouns and other verbs are derived. Such derivatives refer to the potter, the potter’s clay, particular types of pots, potters’ tools and certain gestures of the manufacturing process. In Tetela (Inner Congo Basin, Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC]), the verb *-kenga* refers to the making of pots, while the derived nouns *onkengi* and *lokenga* designate the potter and a type of clay pot, respectively.<sup>29</sup> In Rundi (Burundi’s national language), different pottery-related nouns and verbs are derived from *kubũmba* (to make pottery), i.e. *kubumbabumba* (to knead the clay), *kubumbagira* (to rough out the mould of a pot), *umubũmvyi* (potter), *ibũmba* (potter’s clay), *umubũmbwa* (a clay pot or utensil), and *ikibumbuzo* (a board for beating the bottom of a pot until it is even).<sup>30</sup> Cross-linguistically, the most widespread derivations of these generic verbs are the nouns for ‘potter’ and ‘potter’s clay’.

Interestingly, these common Bantu verbs meaning ‘to make pottery’ are very restricted in number. Among the Bantu languages, only four verbs are sufficiently recurrent to reconstruct them beyond a purely local level, i.e. *\*-mã-* in the northwestern and some extreme southwestern languages, *\*-bũmb-* in the eastern and certain southwestern languages, *\*-ging-* in the Inner Congo Basin Bantu languages and *\*-mât-* in the Lake Corridor

<sup>28</sup> Vocabulary was collected not only in linguistic, but also in ethnographic, literature. See, for instance, the online available repertory of the Centre de Recherches Archéologiques (CReA) of the Université libre de Bruxelles, set up by O. Gosselain (June 2002), including more than 800 bibliographical sources referring to some 650 populations of sub-Saharan Africa: [www.ulb.ac.be/philo/crea/pdf/sources\\_poterie\\_contempo.pdf](http://www.ulb.ac.be/philo/crea/pdf/sources_poterie_contempo.pdf).

<sup>29</sup> J. Hagendorens, *Dictionnaire français–otetela* (Leuven, 1984) (my translation).

<sup>30</sup> D. Senasson, ‘Approche ethno-archéométrique des céramiques actuelles de la région de Mubuga (Burundi)’ (unpublished Master’s thesis, Paris, 1993); K. Bostoën and G. Harushimana, ‘Parole et savoir-faire populaires: conversations à propos de la poterie des Twa au Burundi’, *LPCA Text Archives*, 4 (2003), 1–39 ([www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca/textarchives/vol4/manwerika\\_sinabajije.html](http://www2.fmg.uva.nl/lpca/textarchives/vol4/manwerika_sinabajije.html)) (my translation).



Map 1. Distribution of the main Bantu verbs meaning 'to make pottery'.

languages, as illustrated in Map 1.<sup>31</sup> This small number suggests that these verbs are only very rarely replaced. Given their significant degree of preservation, one may presume that their eventual substitution must be the result of an important historical disruption. Consequently, they constitute the lexical category *par excellence* to bring to light certain aspects of early pot-making history in the Bantu domain. However, two factors hamper the historical potential of these verbs.

First of all, the semantic range of each of the verbs is quite general, which may partially explain why they are so rarely replaced. From an

<sup>31</sup> This does not mean that no other verbs with the same meaning are attested. In some North East Coast Bantu languages, such as Digo, Bondei, Ruguru, Kami and Kutu, for example, a verb related to the Swahili verb *kufinyanga* (to make pottery) occurs. However, such verbs are few and most of them are limited to one particular language where they often coexist with one of the major verbs.



Table 1. *The semantic range of the verb kubúumba and some of its derivatives in Rwanda.*


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*kubúumba*, ‘to work clay or an analogue substance’

A. ‘to make traditional pottery’  
 B. ‘to model clay or another substance, e.g. cow-dung or butter’  
 C. ‘to work clay by mechanical means, e.g. for making bricks or tiles’  
 D. ‘to make fine ceramics, of the faience type’  
 E. ‘to bring closer two separated things, which have the same articulation, the same hinge or junction-point’  
 F. ‘to meet’  
 G. ‘to put under one’s authority several geographical entities, such as hills (“*collines*”) or regions, or several persons’  
 H. ‘to possess entirely, without share’  
 I. ‘to surpass the others’  
 J. ‘to be sufficient for a certain individual, as regards a quantity of food or beer’

*ibuúmba*, ‘clay’  
*ikibuúmba*, ‘a child who does not have its teeth yet, considered as an embryonic being’  
*urubuúmba*, ‘clay soil’  
*imbuúmba*, ‘statue of a cow in clay, used in the ancestral cult’  
*umubúumbyi*, ‘potter’  
*kubúumbabuumba*, ‘to make round, spherical’  
*ibuúmbabóumba*, ‘polenta’  
*kubúumbagira*, ‘to go heavily’  
*kubúumbatana*, ‘to stick together’  
*mubuúmba*, ‘round, spherical object’  
*ikibúumbiro*, ‘feeding trough for cows, consisting of a tank dug in the ground and cemented with clay’  
*urubúumbiro*, ‘hearth of a traditional house, made of raw clay modelled in a circular base’  
*kubúumbira*, ‘to put a bed of clay on the internal walls of a feeding trough dug in the ground’

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ethno-archaeological point of view, it is interesting to note that no link exists between a community’s verb for shaping pottery and the precise manner in which their pots are made. Although the shaping technique constitutes the quintessence of the manufacturing process, it does not determine the choice of the corresponding verb. Two speech communities with the same manufacturing technique may use different verbs. Both the Beti-Fang in Cameroon and the Haya in Tanzania, for instance, are reported to apply the coiling technique, but they use the verbs *\*-mâ-* and *-búmb-*, respectively.<sup>32</sup> Alternatively, the same verb may be used in two communities having a different technique. Both the Copi of southern Mozambique and the Nande of DRC, for example, have the verb *\*-búmb-*, but the former apply the

<sup>32</sup> G. Tessmann, *Die Pangwe. Völkerkundliche Monographie eines Westafrikanischen Negerstammes* (Berlin, 1913); E. Césard, ‘Le Muhaya (L’Afrique Orientale)’, *Anthropos*, 31 (1936), 97–114; S. Galley, *Dictionnaire fang–français et français–fang, suivi d’une grammaire fang* (Neufchâtel, 1964); S. Kaji, *A Haya Vocabulary* (Tokyo, 2000).

Table 2. *Reflexes of the verb \*-màt- inside and outside the Lake Corridor area*

| <i>Outside the Lake Corridor area</i> |                 |   |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---|
| Mbunda (Zambia)                       | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to clay, to smear clay a second time'  |
| Makonde (Mozambique)                  | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to daub, to put adobe in the walls'  |
| Luba (DRC)                            | <i>kumàsa</i>   | 'to mason, to build (like termites constructing or repairing a termite-hill); to rough-cast, to plaster clay' |
| Bemba (Zambia)                        | <i>kumasa</i>   | 'to mud, to plaster, to seal or cover with mud'   |
| Nyaneka (Angola)                      | <i>otyimato</i> | 'walls' <sup>33</sup>   |
| <i>Inside the Lake Corridor area</i>  |                 |   |
| Nyakyusa (Tanzania)                   | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to plug, to stop up, to fill in (crack) / to plaster'  |
| Ngoni (Tanzania)                      | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to plaster'  |
| Nyiha (Tanzania)                      | <i>kumatha</i>  | 'to make pottery / to plaster a hut with clay'  |
| Tumbuka (Malawi)                      | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to make pottery / to stick dongo on wall; to plaster'  |
| Fipa (Tanzania)                       | <i>ummasi</i>   | 'potter'  |
| Lambya (Malawi)                       | <i>kumata</i>   | 'to make pottery' <sup>34</sup>   |

drawing-of-a-lump technique, and the latter the coiling technique.<sup>35</sup> Therefore, these recurrent verbs cannot reveal historical details on the evolution of pot-shaping techniques within the Bantu area. This dissociation should warn against hasty correlations between the archaeological and comparative linguistic records. As a result, pottery production techniques shared by different Bantu speech communities rarely match with shared vocabulary.

Secondly, the semantic scope of generic verbs is often more general than 'to make pottery'. Although dictionaries and certainly ethnographic sources tend to focus on this particular meaning, in many languages it is only one meaning among several others. The multifaceted semantic field of the verb

<sup>33</sup> These examples were taken, in order of appearance, with my translation, from D. E. C. Stirke and A. W. Thomas, *A Comparative Vocabulary of Sikololo–Silui–Simbunda* (London, 1916); V. Guerreiro, *Rudimentos de língua maconde* (Lourenço Marques, 1963); E. Van Avermaet and B. Mbuya, *Dictionnaire kiluba–français* (Tervuren, 1954), *The White Fathers' Bemba–English Dictionary* (London, 1954) and *Guia de conversação olunyaneka* (Huilla, 1908).

<sup>34</sup> These examples were taken, in order of appearance, with my translation, from K. Felberg, *Nyakyusa–English–Swahili and English–Nyakyusa Dictionary* (Dar es Salaam, 1996); R. Moser, *Aspekte der Kulturgeschichte der Ngoni in der Mkoa wa Ruvuma, Tanzania* (Vienna, 1983); J. Busse, *Die Sprache der Nyiha in Ostafrika* (Berlin, 1960); Y. Turner, *Tumbuka–Tonga English Dictionary* (Blantyre, 1952); A. Charmoille, *Dictionnaire kifipa–français* (Rome, 1902). The Lambya example stems from my own field notes, as does the meaning 'to make pottery' in Tumbuka, which is not mentioned by Turner, *Tumbuka*.

<sup>35</sup> L. F. Dos Santos, *Dicionário Português–Chope e Chope–Português* (Lourenço Marques, 1949); K. Kavutirwaki, *Lexique nande–français et français–nande* (Kinshasa, 1978); for Copi pottery, see A. C. Lawton, 'Bantu pottery of southern Africa', *Annals of the South-African Museum*, 49 (1967), 1–440; for Nande pottery, see L. Bergmans, 'Kruiken en potten', *Ontwakend Afrika*, 58 (1955), 21–30.

*kubóumba* and its derived nouns and verbs in the Kinyarwanda language illustrate this point well.<sup>36</sup>

This diversity of meanings of the verb *\*-bómb-* is found throughout Bantu languages, though seldom so condensed in one language as is the case with Kinyarwanda. Cross-linguistically, the sense ‘to make pottery’ can at best be considered as a very prominent specialization of a fundamental meaning that is still more comprehensive. Although the semantic multiplicity of *\*-bómb-* is unequalled, a wide range of different meanings applies for the other generic verbs as well. Interestingly, most of them manifest a particularly intimate link with the use of clay for building purposes. The above-mentioned verb *\*-màt-*, for example, which means ‘to make pottery’ in the Lake Corridor languages, refers to the smearing of clay, more particularly to the plastering of mud walls, in other Bantu languages, as seen in the examples in Table 2.

Even in certain Lake Corridor languages, the meaning ‘to smear clay, to plaster’ is still attested, sometimes in co-existence with ‘to make pottery’. These definitions suggest that the latter meaning is the result of a semantic innovation characteristic of this particular language group. Consequently, the association of the four common Bantu verbs with pot-making may be the result of a semantic shift from ‘building with clay’ to ‘building clay pots’.<sup>37</sup> As I will argue further on, this is especially the case for the verb *\*-bómb-*.

#### GENERIC POTTERY VERBS REPRESENTING DISTINCT HISTORICAL STRATA

Despite the previously mentioned limitations, generic verbs for pot-making are historically significant. Their importance derives not only from the fact that people do not change them easily, but also from their actual distribution in the Bantu languages. Apart from the comparative method and diachronic semantics, a third important auxiliary approach of the Words-and-Things method is linguistic geography. The geographical distribution of present-day lexical items constitutes one basis of historical interpretation, because spatial distribution is interpreted as a function of time. When studying the different Bantu terms for a certain concept, true cognates are first identified by means of the comparative method and then mapped on linguistic charts. The terms with the larger distribution are generally considered older than the ones with a more limited distribution. ‘Large’ and ‘limited’ should not be interpreted purely in terms of quantity, however, but rather *vis-à-vis* a term’s spread in the different Bantu subgroups. In this respect, a term that is rare but scattered amongst the North-West and East-Bantu languages, for example, will be judged as older than a term having a very dense distribution

<sup>36</sup> A. Coupez *et al.*, *Dictionnaire kinyarwanda–kinyarwanda et kinyarwanda–français* (Tervuren, 2005) (my translation).

<sup>37</sup> A similar semantic evolution from a general to a more restricted technical sense was observed for the common Bantu verbs for forging, e.g. *\*-tód-* and *\*-pònd-*, whose basic meanings are ‘to hammer, to beat’ and ‘to pound, to beat’, respectively. See P. de Maret and F. Nsuka, ‘History of Bantu metallurgy: some linguistic aspects’, *History in Africa*, 4 (1977), 43–65; R. Klein-Arendt, ‘The iron crafts of the Swahili from the perspective of historical semantics’, *Afrikanistische Arbeitspapiere*, 64, *Swahili Forum*, 7 (2000), 153–204.

restricted to the West-Bantu languages. These terms are cross-language synonyms, so the more local (=more recent) terms can be interpreted as innovations replacing the more widespread (=older) terms. Thus, different recurrent terms for the same semantic notion represent distinct historical strata. The oldest stratum emanates from Proto-Bantu, while younger strata go back to subsequent phases of Bantu language divergence. The remainder of this paper will focus on the oldest pottery-related lexical strata.<sup>38</sup>

PROTO-BANTU POTTERY VOCABULARY: CONTINUATION OF AN  
INHERITED TRADITION

The reconstruction of a Proto-Bantu verb meaning ‘to make pottery’ is more complicated than one would presume, considering the unanimity amongst scholars who, following Guthrie, consider the verb *\*-bómb-* as lexical evidence for the fact that ‘pot-making was a regular activity of the speakers of PB-X’.<sup>39</sup> As can be seen on Map 1, this verb is indeed the most common in the Bantu domain. However, the same map shows that this verb only means ‘to make pottery’ in most Eastern and certain South-West-Bantu languages. It is completely absent from the North-West-Bantu languages of Cameroon and Gabon, from the northeastern DRC Bantu languages, also known as Boan and Lebonya, and from the Forest Bantu languages of the Central Congo Basin, at least with the meaning ‘to make pottery’.<sup>40</sup> The verb occurs as a term in certain of these languages, but with different meanings, such as ‘to plaster (mud) walls’, ‘to roughcast’, ‘to make a hillock (as on tomb)’ and ‘to apply cob’. The historical-linguistic implications of this semantic variation for *\*-bómb-* cannot be underestimated.

The North-West languages are spoken in an area adjacent to the Bantu homeland and constitute a primary subdivision. The historical status of the poorly documented Bantu languages of the Uele region is far less established, but they possibly form a primary Bantu branch too. The Central Forest Bantu languages do not constitute a main subdivision, but they flank the North-West languages and are one of the main West-Bantu subgroups.<sup>41</sup> In other words, *\*-bómb-* does not refer to pottery in several of the principal Bantu subdivisions. Moreover, though predominant, ‘to make pottery’ is only one of the many senses of the verb in the Eastern and South-West-Bantu languages, as the above-cited Rwanda example illustrates. Therefore,

<sup>38</sup> As pointed out earlier, the verbs *\*-gìng-* and *\*-màt-* are confined to the Inner Congo Basin and the Lake Corridor area, respectively. They will not be discussed further in this paper. The verb *\*-gìng-* plays a prominent role in a lengthy article I wrote on the pottery vocabulary of the Inner Congo Basin. See Bostoën, ‘Comparative Bantu pottery vocabulary’.

<sup>39</sup> Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu*. In Guthrie’s terms, PB-X approximately equates to Proto-Bantu.

<sup>40</sup> See Vansina, ‘New linguistic evidence’.

<sup>41</sup> For more details on the internal Bantu classification, see for instance D. Nurse and G. Philippson, ‘Towards a historical classification of the Bantu languages’, in D. Nurse and G. Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages* (London, 2003), 164–81; or Vansina, ‘New linguistic evidence’, which is based on the later-published Y. Bastin *et al.*, *Continuity and Divergence in the Bantu Languages: Perspectives from a Lexicostatistic Study* (Tervuren, 1999). The subgroups and their designations referred to in this article follow the aforementioned Vansina classification.

the semantic range of *\*-bómb-* is much larger than Guthrie supposed and probably did not specifically refer to pot-making in Proto-Bantu. The specialized meaning 'to make pottery' is the result of a subsequent semantic shift.

In sum, the verb *\*-bómb-* can be reconstructed in Proto-Bantu, since the phonological form has a wide distribution among present-day Bantu languages. Nevertheless, it constitutes shaky lexical evidence for the hypothesis that pottery was produced at the historical depth of Proto-Bantu because the known distribution of the meaning 'to make pottery' with the form *\*-bómb-* is not attested across the main Bantu subgroups.

More solid evidence for this hypothesis is provided by a verb that has never been reconstructed before in Bantu, i.e. *\*-mà-*. As can be seen on Map 1, this is because it has left fewer traces amongst present-day languages than *\*-bómb-*. The verb has only been documented in some twenty exclusively West-Bantu languages. However, it always has the meaning 'to make pottery'. Moreover, it occurs in several historically significant subgroups and is present in at least one of the subgroups that lacks *\*-bómb-* (to make pottery), i.e. in the North-West languages. Most of its reflexes occur in this part of the Bantu domain. It may also occur in the Uele Bantu languages, but the scarcity of language data for this area prevents us from conclusively establishing them as *\*-mà-* reflexes, and the term is absent in the Central Forest Bantu languages, where *\*-ging-* is the main verb.<sup>42</sup> Remarkably, reflexes have also been detected in some languages from Southern Angola and Northern Namibia, e.g. Khumbi, Ndonga and Kwanyama that belong to the South-West subgroup of West-Bantu. Thus, despite its numerically weak representation, *\*-mà-* is dispersed among at least as many main Bantu subdivisions as *\*-bómb-*. This scattered distribution is typical of an old term, while the continuous distribution pattern of *\*-bómb-* is characteristic of a more recently spread term.

Nonetheless, the presence of *\*-mà-* in the western part of the Bantu domain is less scattered than one may suppose at first sight. The most common name for potter's clay in this area is a noun historically derived from this verb, i.e. *\*-mà*. It covers both the West-Coastal and South-West-Bantu languages. Surprisingly, reflexes of the verb *\*-mà-* and the noun *\*-mà* rarely co-occur in one and the same language. Together, however, they occupy the better part of the West-Bantu domain. What is more, *\*-mà-* is attested with the sense 'to make pottery' in non-Bantu Benue-Congo languages, and even in Niger-Congo languages beyond Benue-Congo.<sup>43</sup> This distribution means that the application of *\*-mà-* to pot-making largely predates Proto-Bantu and the expansion of its daughter languages. This verb root can be reconstructed in Proto-Bantu, from which the West-Bantu languages inherited it. Given its wide distribution beyond Bantu, however, it cannot be seen as a Bantu

<sup>42</sup> The verb *-me-* (to make pottery) occurs in the Budu language (N. Asangama, 'Le budu: langue bantu du nord-est du Zaïre, esquisse phonologique et grammaticale' [2 vols.] [Ph.D. dissertation, Paris, 1983]), whilst *kumaja* (to make pottery) is found in the Lengola language (L. Stappers, 'Esquisse de la langue lengola', *Africana Linguistica*, 5 [1971], 255–307).

<sup>43</sup> K. Williamson and K. Shimizu, *Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist* (2 vols.) (Ibandan, 1968); R. Harguindeguy, *Premiers éléments pour un dictionnaire adja-français* (Azové, 1969).

innovation. Proto-Bantu itself inherited it from an ancestor language. Although a more detailed study of non-Bantu data is needed, this verb presumably goes back to Proto-Benue-Congo, and perhaps even earlier. Thus, in terms of cultural history, *\*-mà-* is better lexical evidence than *\*-bómb-* to establish that pot-making was a regular activity in the Proto-Bantu era.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it also suggests that Proto-Bantu-speakers certainly did not invent pottery. The linguistic data indicate that ancestors of Proto-Bantu-speakers had practised the craft long before.

EARLIEST POTTERY VOCABULARY AND EARLIEST CERAMICS IN  
THE BANTU DOMAIN

Language data suggesting that Proto-Bantu-speakers elaborated upon an inherited pot-making tradition is supported by archaeological data. The earliest sub-Saharan African ceramics are situated far to the north of the Bantu homeland. The so-called 'wavy-line pottery' and 'dotted wavy line pottery', uncovered in different sites of the southern Sahara, e.g. in northern Niger<sup>45</sup> and central Sudan,<sup>46</sup> are believed to be a local invention from as early as 9,500 years ago.<sup>47</sup> The linguistic affiliation of these early potters is far from established. Slightly more recent ceramics discovered across West Africa were probably produced in a Niger-Congo language context. These ceramics were found in the Sahel at sites such as Ounjougou and Kouroukorokalé in Mali,<sup>48</sup> Konduga in Northern Nigeria,<sup>49</sup> and in the Guinean Gulf in sites such as Iwo Eleru in the Ivory Coast,<sup>50</sup> Dutsen Kongba in Nigeria,<sup>51</sup> and Kintampo<sup>52</sup> and Bosumpra<sup>53</sup> in Ghana. The decoration of all these ceramics, i.e. comb and stick impression and grooving,<sup>54</sup> is similar to their

<sup>44</sup> Other lexical evidence pointing in the same direction is the reconstruction of two Proto-Bantu nouns referring to types of pottery, i.e. *\*-bigá* (pot), and *\*-jǒngú* (cooking pot). As regards the potter's clay, the noun *\*-mà* is the most likely candidate for reconstruction to Proto-Bantu. However, *\*-bómbà* (potter's clay) cannot be excluded.

<sup>45</sup> J. P. Roset, 'Les plus vieilles céramiques du Sahara', *Archéologia*, 138 (1983), 43–50.

<sup>46</sup> A. S. Mohammed-Ali and A. R. M. Khabir, 'The wavy line and the dotted wavy line pottery in the prehistory of the Central Nile and the Sahara-Sahel belt', *African Archaeological Review*, 20 (2003), 25–58.

<sup>47</sup> D. W. Phillipson, *African Archaeology* (3rd ed., Cambridge, 2005), 151–60; S. K. McIntosh and R. J. McIntosh, 'Recent archaeological research and dates from West Africa', *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), 413–42.

<sup>48</sup> E. Huysecom *et al.*, 'Ounjougou (Mali): a history of Holocene settlement at the southern edge of the Sahara', *Antiquity*, 78 (2004), 579–93; K. MacDonald, 'Kouroukorokale revisited: the Pays Mandé and the West African microlithic technocomplex', *African Archaeological Review*, 14 (1997), 143–60.

<sup>49</sup> P. Breunig *et al.*, 'New research on the Holocene settlement and environment of the Chad Basin in Nigeria', *African Archaeological Review*, 13 (1996), 111–45.

<sup>50</sup> R. Chenorkian, 'Ivory Coast prehistory: recent developments', *African Archaeological Review*, 1 (1983), 127–42.

<sup>51</sup> R. N. York, 'Excavations at Dutsen Kongba, Plateau State, Nigeria', *West African Journal of Archaeology*, 8 (1978), 139–63.

<sup>52</sup> A. B. Stahl, 'Reinvestigation of Kintampo 6 rockshelter, Ghana: implications for the nature of change', *African Archaeological Review*, 3 (1985), 117–50.

<sup>53</sup> A. B. Smith, 'Radiocarbon dates from Bosumpra Cave, Abetifi, Ghana', *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, 41 (1975), 179–82.

<sup>54</sup> T. Shaw, 'Holocene adaptations in West Africa: the Late Stone Age', *Early Man News*, 3–4 (1978–9), 51–82.

Saharan counterparts. Philippe Lavachery argues that '[t]his strongly suggests that, between 8000 and 6000 BP, the technology of pottery slowly moved southward after its appearance in the Sahara. Potsherds from the Shum Laka rock shelter in northwestern Cameroon, while being the southernmost examples among these, fit quite well in the overall picture'.<sup>55</sup> These ceramics certainly date back to 4000 BP,<sup>56</sup> but their emergence could be older.<sup>57</sup> Not only were they uncovered in the Bantu homeland, but according to the currently available data, they are also the earliest ceramics found in the Bantu speaking area. As such, they constitute a bridge between the older Guinean Gulf potteries and the more recent ones, which emerged further south in the Equatorial West-Bantu area.

Lavachery sees a significant link between the technological diffusion of pottery in western Africa and the serious climatic deterioration that occurred around 7100-6900 BP in the Sahara and the Sahel.<sup>58</sup> This dessication may have forced Sahelian groups to move southwards into West Africa, for instance into the Guinean Gulf, and more particularly into the Grassfields where the climate was favourable to forest extension.<sup>59</sup> The result was a kind of cultural symbiosis, whereby local microlithic Late Stone Age (LSA) traditions mixed with new Stone to Metal Age (SMA) technologies with macrolithic tools, polishing and pottery. Traces of the new practices turn up in the archaeological record beginning in 7000-6000 BP, but they only become predominant from 5000 to 4000 BP onwards.<sup>60</sup> This chronology suggests that pottery, like the other new technologies, underwent a long local development in the Grassfields, most likely in relative isolation from the rest of eastern West Africa.<sup>61</sup> As a working hypothesis, which needs far more substantive historical linguistic research and evidence, one can suppose that this process might have coincided with some stage of the evolution of Proto-Bantu from Proto-Benue-Congo.

In the latest classifications, Bantu constitutes a subgroup of Southern Bantoid, which forms part of Bantoid. This group in turn is one of the several lower twigs on the Benue-Congo branch of the Niger-Congo

<sup>55</sup> P. Lavachery, 'The Holocene archaeological sequence of Shum Laka rock shelter (Grassfields, Cameroon)', *African Archaeological Review*, 18 (2001), 240.

<sup>56</sup> P. de Maret, 'Pits, pots and the far west streams', *Azania*, 29-30 (1994-5), 318-23.

<sup>57</sup> See Lavachery, 'The Holocene archaeological sequence', where the author discusses the possible appearance of pottery around 7000 BP. The evidence is still weak however, since only four potsherds were found.

<sup>58</sup> F. A. Hassan, 'Abrupt Holocene climatic events in Africa', in G. Pwiti and R. Soper (eds.), *Aspects of African Archaeology* (Harare, 1996), 83-9; Lavachery, 'The Holocene archaeological sequence'.

<sup>59</sup> J. Maley and P. Brenac, 'Vegetation dynamics, palaeoenvironments and climatic changes in the forests of West Cameroon during the last 28,000 years BP', *Review of Palaeobotany & Palynology*, 99 (1998), 157-87.

<sup>60</sup> Since the appearance of Neolithic attributes, such as pottery and ground stone tools, does not coincide with the advent of food production in much of Africa, certain archaeologists avoid the term 'Neolithic'. I adopt here the designation 'Stone to Metal Age', preferred by de Maret and Lavachery, knowing that many African archaeologists still use the old term 'Neolithic' as a synonym of SMA. Others, like Stahl, have settled on 'ceramic Late Stone Age'. See Stahl (ed.), *African Archaeology*.

<sup>61</sup> Lavachery, 'The Holocene archaeological sequence'.

tree.<sup>62</sup> K. Williamson tentatively located the proto-Benue-Congo homeland around the Niger–Benue confluence in Nigeria.<sup>63</sup> Consequently, the linguistic development concurring with the gradual adoption of the SMA technologies in the Grassfields needs to be situated lower in the Benue-Congo tree. Since all non-Bantu Bantoid languages occur in the Nigerian–Cameroonian borderland, the separation of Proto-Bantu from the rest of the Bantoid languages presumably took place there. The reconstruction of *\*-mà-* (to make pottery) to Proto-Bantu and beyond suggests that Benue-Congo speakers introduced pottery into the Grassfields.

The earliest ceramics south of Shum Laka have been excavated at sites such as Obobogo in Cameroon,<sup>64</sup> Okala and Lopé in Gabon,<sup>65</sup> Ngovo,<sup>66</sup> Imbonga, Maluba in DRC, Pikunda in the Congo<sup>67</sup> and Batalimo in the Central African Republic<sup>68</sup> – i.e. scattered in the current North-West-Bantu area. They belong to technological assemblages comparable with the Shum Laka SMA ceramics, in association with polished stone tools such as axes and hoes, nuts of the *Elaeïs guineensis*, and the grains of the *Canarium schweinfurthii*. None of these ceramic traditions is definitively older than the earliest Shum Laka pottery. They date from the first centuries of the second millennium BC onwards until the last centuries BC.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, when comparing Map 2 with Map 1, one notes that the distribution area of these early pottery sites coincides, at least partially, with the geographic range of the reflexes of *\*-mà-* (to make pottery). It seems significant that both the oldest ceramics in the Bantu domain and the oldest pottery-related Bantu vocabulary stratum are located in the same area. It is all the more important that the northern reflexes of *\*-mà-* (to make pottery) occur in languages descending from one or more of the primary offshoots of Proto-Bantu. Thus, the distribution of *\*-mà-* appears to confirm the historical link between these archaeological sites and the earliest West-Bantu language expansion. Early Bantu speech communities were in all likelihood responsible for the

<sup>62</sup> K. Williamson and R. Blench, ‘Niger-Congo’; D. Nurse and G. Philippson, ‘Introduction’, in Nurse and Philippson (eds.), *The Bantu Languages*, 1–12.

<sup>63</sup> K. Williamson, ‘Benue-Congo overview’, in J. Bendor-Samuel (ed.), *The Niger-Congo Languages. A Classification and Description of Africa’s Largest Language Family* (Lanham, 1989), 247–75.

<sup>64</sup> P. de Maret, ‘New survey of archaeological research and dates for West-Central and North-Central Africa’, *Journal of African History*, 23 (1982), 1–15.

<sup>65</sup> A. Assoko Ndong, ‘Synthèse des données archéologiques récentes sur le peuplement à l’Holocène de la réserve de faune de la Lopé, Gabon’, *L’Anthropologie*, 106 (2002), 135–58; B. Clist, ‘Archaeology in Gabon, 1986–1988’, *African Archaeological Review*, 8 (1989), 59–85; B. Clist, ‘Le site d’Okala, Province de l’Estuaire, Gabon et son importance pour la compréhension de la sédentarisation en Afrique Centrale’, *Comptes-rendus de l’Académie des Sciences de Paris*, 325 (1997), 151–6; B. Clist, ‘Des premiers villages aux premiers européens autour de l’estuaire du Gabon. Quatre millénaires d’interactions entre l’homme et son milieu’ (Ph.D. dissertation, Université libre de Bruxelles, 2005).

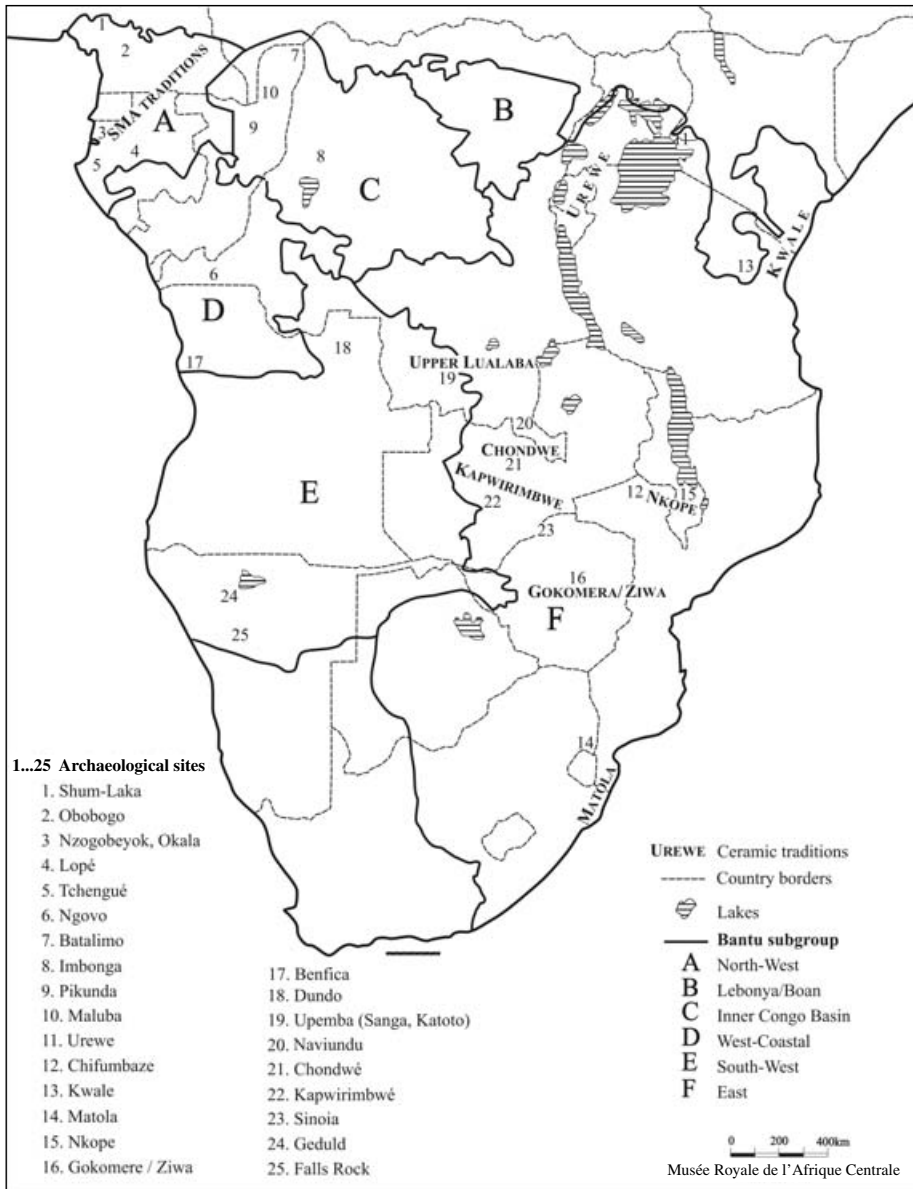
<sup>66</sup> P. de Maret, ‘The Ngovo group: an industry with polished stone tools and pottery in Lower-Zaire’, *African Archaeological Review*, 4 (1986), 103–33.

<sup>67</sup> M. K. H. Eggert, ‘The Central African rainforest: historical speculation and archaeological facts’, in I. Glover (ed.), *The Humid Tropics* (London, 1992), 1–24.

<sup>68</sup> R. de Bayle de Hermens, *Recherches préhistoriques en République Centrafricaine* (Paris, 1975).

<sup>69</sup> De Maret, ‘Pits, pots’.





Map 2. Location of archaeological sites and early ceramic traditions cited in this paper.

introduction of pottery to this region.<sup>70</sup> While the technological transition between LSA, SMA and EIA took place very gradually in the Grassfields over a period of about 5,000 years (7000 to 2000 BP), the transition was much

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, N. David, 'Early Bantu expansion in the context of Central African prehistory: 4000-1 BC', in L. Bouquiaux (ed.), *L'expansion bantoue. Actes du Colloque International du CNRS, Viviers (France), 4-16 avril 1977*, vol. III (Paris, 1980), 609-47;

more abrupt in Atlantic Central Africa. From the second millennium BC onwards, the LSA industries give way to the typically SMA ceramic assemblages over the span of only a few centuries.<sup>71</sup> All these elements favour the hypothesis of a technological revolution, which happened concurrently with the early spreading of Bantu languages in this area.<sup>72</sup> Although technical diffusion and language shift amongst the pre-existing communities need to be taken into account, these processes were in all likelihood initiated by the migration of small Bantu speech communities.<sup>73</sup>

Examining archaeological parallels for the southwestern extension of the earliest lexical stratum is less obvious, since archaeological data for Angola and Namibia are relatively scarce. In Angola, the earliest known ceramics originate from Benfica, a site close to Luanda, and are no older than the second century AD.<sup>74</sup> They are possibly analogous to the SMA potteries from Kinshasa and the Lower Congo region.<sup>75</sup> The typology of other early Angolan ceramics has little in common with the northern SMA industries.<sup>76</sup> In northern Namibia, early ceramics date back to the first centuries of our era. These have been discovered at several sites in Kaokoland<sup>77</sup> and along the Kavango River,<sup>78</sup> at Falls Rock<sup>79</sup> and at Geduld.<sup>80</sup> Bones of domestic sheep and a high quantity of microlithic projectile points connected with

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P. de Maret, 'Le contexte archéologique de l'expansion bantou en Afrique centrale', in T. Obenga, *Actes du Colloque international 'Les peuples bantou. Migrations, expansion et identité culturelle' Libreville 1-6 avril 1985*, vol. 1 (Libreville, 1989), 118-38; J. Vansina, 'Western Bantu expansion', *Journal of African History*, 25 (1984), 129-45.

<sup>71</sup> P. Lavachery, 'De la pierre au métal. Archéologie des dépôts holocènes de l'abri de Shum Laka (Cameroun)' (3 vols.) (Ph.D. dissertation, Université libre de Bruxelles, 1998).

<sup>72</sup> With regard to dating, this is several millennia later than the period Kairn Klieman claimed, i.e. 5000-4000 BC (see K. Klieman, 'The Pymies Were Our Compass': *Bantu and Batwa in West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* [Portsmouth, 2003], 35-65). Her very early Bantu expansion hypothesis is mainly founded on glottochronological calculations, a lexicostatistics-based method commonly rejected by linguists (see, e.g., Nurse, 'The contributions', 366), and a number of early C14 dates for ceramics from the La Sablière site in Gabon, which are problematic (for the most critical appraisal of those dates, see Clist, *Des premiers villages*).

<sup>73</sup> B. Clist, 'Synthèse régionale du Néolithique', in R. Lanfranchi and B. Clist, *Aux origines de l'Afrique centrale* (Libreville, 1991), 181-3; B. Clist and R. Lanfranchi, 'Contribution à l'étude de la sédentarisation en République Populaire d'Angola', *Leba*, 7 (1992), 245-67.

<sup>74</sup> J. R. Dos Santos and C. M. N. Everdosa, 'A estação arqueológica de Benfica, Luanda', *Revista da Faculdade de Ciências da Universidade Luanda*, 5 (1970), 33-51; R. Lanfranchi and B. Clist, 'Néolithique: Angola', in Lanfranchi and Clist, *Aux origines*, 179-80.

<sup>75</sup> D. W. Phillipson, 'An archaeological reconsideration of Bantu expansion', *Muntu*, 2 (1985), 69-84.

<sup>76</sup> B. Clist and R. Lanfranchi, 'Age du Fer Ancien: Angola', in Lanfranchi and Clist, *Aux origines*, 219-23.

<sup>77</sup> R. Vogelsang *et al.*, 'Holocene human occupation and vegetation history in Northern Namibia', *Die Erde*, 133 (2002), 113-32.

<sup>78</sup> J. Richter, 'Archaeology along the Kavango river / Namibia', *Southern African Field Archaeology*, 11-12 (2002-3), 78-104.

<sup>79</sup> J. Kinahan, *Pastoral Nomads of the Central Namib Desert* (Windhoek, 1991).

<sup>80</sup> A. B. Smith and L. Jacobson, 'Excavations at Geduld and the appearance of early domestic stock in Namibia', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 50 (1995), 3-14.

some of these finds suggest an economy based on small cattle herding and hunting. Therefore, it is generally assumed that this Ceramic Late Stone Age pottery predates the arrival of Bantuphone farmers in the area and was produced by Khoi speakers.<sup>81</sup> Early Bantu-speakers were not necessarily agriculturists, however. The linguistic affiliation of a past community cannot be derived from its material culture. Hunter-gatherers and herders may have played a prominent role in the dispersal of South-West-Bantu languages. Originally relying on forest-based subsistence strategies, Bantuphone agriculturalists have long been dependent on autochthonous communities as they adapted to new climatic and environmental conditions.<sup>82</sup> This long-term interaction may have induced assimilation and language shift, both from Bantu- to non-Bantu-speakers and vice versa. Clearly, early Bantuphone communities established south of the equatorial forest relying on either herding/hunting or a mixed economy of agriculture and herding/hunting, are not unimaginable.<sup>83</sup>

Interestingly, this CLSA pottery is probably not an independent innovation. The earliest examples are high-quality ceramics, well baked and with thin walls. They do not represent the initial phase of a local invention. Consequently, the technique was most likely imported<sup>84</sup> and may be related to another kind of pottery with herder affiliations, i.e. Bambata ware, known from western Zimbabwe,<sup>85</sup> central Botswana,<sup>86</sup> Magaliesberg in South Africa and the Waterberg Plateau in Namibia.<sup>87</sup> Most of the findings pre-date AD 500,<sup>88</sup> but the oldest date back to as early as 200 BC<sup>89</sup> Its emergence could thus precede the beginning of the EIA south of the Zambezi, but the distribution and dating of Bambata sites is not a settled issue. Being found in LSA contexts containing domestic ovicaprid remains, Bambata pottery is generally imputed to Khoi herders. All the same, even if these ceramics are stylistically distinctive from EIA potteries and even if they were transmitted through LSA networks, their roots might still lie in earlier contacts between (Khoi) herders and (Bantu) agriculturalists further north,

<sup>81</sup> See, for instance, Richter, 'Archaeology along the Kavango', 81.

<sup>82</sup> Vansina, 'New linguistic evidence'; J. Denbow, 'Congo to Kalahari: data and hypotheses about the political economy of the western stream of the Early Iron Age', *African Archaeological Review*, 8 (1990), 139–76.

<sup>83</sup> J. Vansina, 'A slow revolution: farming in subequatorial Africa', *Azania*, 29–30 (1994–5), 15–26.

<sup>84</sup> See, for example, Smith and Jacobson, 'Excavations at Geduld', 9; R. Vogelsang, 'Migration oder Diffusion? Frühe Viehhaltung im Kaokoland', in M. Bollig, E. Brunotte and T. Becker (eds.), *Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven zu Kultur- und Landschaftswandel im ariden und semiariden Nordwest Namibia* (Cologne, 2002), 141.

<sup>85</sup> K. R. Robinson, 'Bambata ware: its position in the Rhodesian Iron Age in the light of recent research', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 21 (1966), 81–5.

<sup>86</sup> Denbow, 'Congo to Kalahari'.

<sup>87</sup> P. Mitchell and G. Whitelaw, 'The archaeology of southernmost Africa from c. 2000 BP to the early 1800s: a review of recent research', *Journal of African History*, 46 (2005), 209–41. See also P. Mitchell, *The Archaeology of Southern Africa* (Cambridge, 2002) (particularly ch. 9, 'Taking stock: the introduction and impact of pastoralism').

<sup>88</sup> J. Denbow, 'A new look at the later prehistory of the Kalahari', *Journal of African History*, 27 (1986), 3–28.

<sup>89</sup> N. Walker, 'The significance of an early date for pottery and sheep in Zimbabwe', *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 28 (1983), 88–92.

e.g. in southern Zambia,<sup>90</sup> but more substantive evidence for this Bantu contact scenario still needs to materialize.<sup>91</sup> Regardless, the precise relationship between Bambata and the CLSA potteries found in Namibia is not yet established. For the time being, a distinct origin cannot be excluded. Given the remnants of the earliest pottery-related Bantu lexical stratum in south-western Africa, the possible link between the introduction of pottery in this region and the more northern SMA ceramics of Atlantic Central Africa merits a more detailed investigation. Future archaeological finds in Namibia and Angola and better documentation of the South-West-Bantu languages may shed new light on this question. A study of pottery vocabulary in the Khoisan languages should also be undertaken.

POST-PROTO-BANTU POTTERY VOCABULARY: INNOVATION AND  
OVERLAPPING STRATA

Even if *\*-bómb-* did not belong to the Proto-Bantu core pottery vocabulary, its historical importance within this semantic field cannot be underrated. The distribution and quantity of current-day languages in which a reflex of it is the principal verb for making pots suggests that *\*-bómb-* became increasingly prominent after the first fragmentations of the Proto-Bantu nucleus, but when and where? Before formulating an answer, we must recall two preliminary facts. First, we are considering a semantic shift from a general to a specialized meaning, not the emergence of an entirely new word. Since semantic changes are more volatile than, for example, sound changes, it is possible that this shift took place independently more than once.<sup>92</sup> However, the verb did not develop this meaning in any of the Forest Bantu languages, which implies that its emergence as the dominant core of the pottery semantic field was not completely random. If the meaning turned up so easily, one would expect it to appear in at least some of the Forest Bantu languages that attest the verb phonologically. Secondly, on geographical-linguistic grounds, the large number of present-day *\*-bómb-* reflexes needs to be subdivided into two clearly distinct groups. Map 1 shows that, in the eastern part of the Bantu domain, the *\*-bómb-* reflexes meaning 'to make pottery' are ubiquitous and distributed almost uninterruptedly. In only a minority of East-Bantu languages, a more recent verb replaced *\*-bómb-*, e.g. *\*-màt-* (to make pottery), found in the Lake Corridor languages. In the western part of the Bantu domain, however, the presence of *\*-bómb-* is much less pervasive. It is only one amongst several other pottery verbs. What is more, its distribution area is squeezed between the main group of *\*-mà-* reflexes in the north-west and the few in the south-west. This fact is most significant from a historical point of view. It means that the West-Bantu *\*-bómb-* reflexes cut

<sup>90</sup> D. W. Phillipson, 'The first South African pastoralists and the Early Iron Age', *Nsi*, 6 (1989), 127–34; Denbow, 'A new look'.

<sup>91</sup> Mitchell and Whitelaw, 'The archaeology of southernmost Africa', 216.

<sup>92</sup> An analogous scenario has been suggested for the verb *\*-tòd-* (to forge), being a specialization of the meaning 'to hammer, to beat', and several other metallurgy-related terms, e.g. *\*-tádè* (stone) adopting the meaning 'iron ore'. See de Maret and Nsuka, 'History of Bantu metallurgy', or P. de Maret and G. Thiry, 'How old is the Iron Age in Central Africa?', in P. R. Schmidt (ed.), *The Culture and Technology of African Iron Production* (Gainesville, 1996), 29–39.

through the earliest Bantu pottery-related lexical stratum, represented by \*-mà-, and, therefore, constitute a more recent layer of vocabulary. This distribution is unlike East-Bantu, where \*-bómb- is definitely the oldest verb signifying 'to make pottery'. This overlap of lexical strata indicates contact between Bantu speech communities of distinct historical origin.

Allowing for the omnipresence of \*-bómb- as the main generic verb for pot-making in East-Bantu, it is quite likely that it acquired this meaning in the latest common ancestor of these languages, i.e. Proto-East-Bantu.<sup>93</sup> However, initially, the speakers of Proto-East-Bantu relegated to oblivion the verb \*-mà- that they inherited from their Proto-Bantu ancestors, by giving prominence to \*-bómb- as the core pottery verb. Having made its way to the centre of this lexical domain before the fragmentation of Proto-East-Bantu, \*-bómb- was passed down from one generation to the next, as the East-Bantu languages gradually diverged and spread over the area they currently occupy. This initial spread occurred with the dispersion of a branch of Bantu languages and their speakers over territories where no Bantu speech communities had lived before. This point explains the quasi-exclusive occurrence of \*-bómb- as the core pottery verb in East-Bantu.

The history of the verb in West-Bantu is an entirely different story. Taking into account the scattered remains of the oldest \*-mà- stratum in both the northwestern and southwestern ends, its emergence and spread as the main pottery-related verb must have taken place in a context of pre-existing Bantu speech communities that already had pottery vocabulary. The languages attesting \*-bómb- (to make pottery) belong to the only two West-Bantu subunits located in the savannahs south of the equatorial rain forest i.e. West-Coastal and South-West.<sup>94</sup> These units are historically closely related. In both groups, traces of \*-mà- can be identified. As discussed above, the derived noun \*-mà (potter's clay) is predominant in the two groups (its equivalent \*-bómbà [potter's clay] is rare, unlike in East-Bantu where it is omnipresent). The verb has only survived in the South-West-Bantu languages of Southern Angola and Northern Namibia. This distribution suggests the intermingling of two historically distinct lexical strata, whereby the more recent one has gradually – but not completely – absorbed the earliest one through contact with historically distinct Bantu speech communities. Two possible origins can be proposed for this more recent stratum.

<sup>93</sup> This author tends to see East-Bantu as a primary branch of Proto-Bantu, as it emerges from several internal Bantu classifications (see, for instance, P. Piron, *Classification interne du groupe bantoïde* [2 vols.] [Munich and Newcastle, 1997]; or Bastin *et al.*, *Continuity*). There is no space here to set out the reasons at length, but unlike Ehret, for instance, I do not see East-Bantu as a sub-sub-branch of Savannah-Bantu. See Ehret, 'Subclassifying Bantu'; C. Ehret, 'Bantu expansions: re-envisioning a central problem of early African History', *International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34 (2001), 5–41. Moreover, like Nurse and Philippson, I am rather hesitant about the validity of a Savannah branch of Bantu and consider the linguistic traits shared by these languages, as opposed to the Forest Bantu languages, as the result of contact 'across the Savannah communities, once they had formed a more or less continuous chain from southwest to northeast' (Nurse and Philippson, 'Towards', 180). As I will explain further on, this Savannah continuum might account for the presence of \*-bómb- in the West-Bantu languages. <sup>94</sup> Designations adopted from Vansina, 'New linguistic evidence'.

The progressive adoption of *\*-bómb-* in the West-Bantu savannah languages might be the result of East-Bantu influences.<sup>95</sup> As indicated above, the savannah south of the equatorial rain forest is known to have been a major contact zone. Long-lasting lateral influences have led to the merging of speech communities and the incorporation of Eastern linguistic traits into West-Bantu and vice versa, despite their origins in distinct sub-branches of Proto-Bantu.<sup>96</sup> In terms of pottery vocabulary, it is not unimaginable that contact and the gradual and small-scale immigration of communities of eastern origin favoured the increasing use of *\*-bómb-*, and induced the partial disappearance of the earliest lexical stratum in the West-Coastal and South-West-Bantu languages.

A second possible scenario is the independent emergence of *\*-bómb-* (to make pottery) in the West-Bantu savannah languages. This would mean that the verb autonomously underwent the same semantic shift in the latest common ancestor of the West-Coastal and South-West-Bantu languages as it did in Proto-East-Bantu. In that case, the subsequent expansion of these two subgroups would have involved the steady absorption of earlier pot-making Bantu speech communities using *\*-mà-*. In most of the languages resulting from this assimilation, the verb of the newcomers, i.e. *\*-bómb-*, won its suit, but in some of the South-West-Bantu languages the old verb was maintained. This interpretation is based on some preliminary conditions that are not inconceivable, but require confirmation. Firstly, it presupposes that the West-Coastal and the South-West-Bantu languages have a latest common ancestor that is, contrary to common belief, not shared with the West-Bantu languages of the Inner Congo Basin. Secondly, it presumes the existence of Bantu speech communities in this region prior to the dispersal of the West-Coastal and the South-West-Bantu languages, even if these languages are generally seen as the first Bantu representatives there.

In either case, the presence of *\*-bómb-* in the southwestern part of the Bantu domain is an innovation *vis-à-vis* Proto-Bantu. Contrary to the recent claims of Vansina concerning the pottery vocabulary in Proto-Njila,<sup>97</sup> the central position of this verb in the semantic field is not a Proto-Bantu retention, but the result of a secondary evolution. Ignoring the presence of *\*-mà-* in these languages is ignoring a pre-existing pottery-related lexical layer, and, consequently, the fact that the Bantu speech communities using *\*-bómb-* were not the introducers of pot-making in this region.

#### ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN *\*-bómb-* AND THE CHIFUMBAZE COMPLEX

The promotion of *\*-bómb-* to the status of the generic pot-making verb in Proto-East-Bantu indicates a shift in pottery vocabulary, which might indicate an innovation or break in the ceramic tradition. Likewise, the transfer of this verb to the East-Bantu daughter languages as they gradually dispersed over the area they occupy today may indicate the transmission of the renewed pottery tradition. This historical-linguistic picture obviously correlates with the archaeological picture of the Early Iron Age Industrial Complex, also

<sup>95</sup> This is the assumption I favoured in Bostoën, *Des mots*.

<sup>96</sup> Cf. Nurse and Philippson, 'Towards', 173–6. <sup>97</sup> Vansina, *How Societies*, 45.

known as the Chifumbaze complex,<sup>98</sup> whose archaeological sites ‘make a marked contrast with those that had gone before, and contain the first evidence ... for the cultivation of crops, for the herding of domestic animals, for settled village life, for metallurgy and, south of Tanzania, for the manufacture of pottery’.<sup>99</sup> Its oldest ceramic indicator is the Urewe tradition, found over the East-African Great Lakes region and dated to between 550 BC and AD 650.<sup>100</sup> On both typological and chronological grounds, several regional ceramic traditions of more southerly latitudes can be derived from this ancestral Urewe tradition.<sup>101</sup> Since a majority of the Chifumbaze sites are in the area where East-Bantu languages are spoken, this EIA complex is often believed to be ‘the archaeological signature specifically of eastern Bantu and its influences’.<sup>102</sup> In this respect, the eastern predominance of *\*-bómb-* lends support to the widely held belief that the first East-Bantu-speakers in these areas were responsible for the introduction of pot-making. The thorny issue, however, is to determine how far East-Bantu influences reached.

Archaeologists generally distinguish separate subgroups of the Chifumbaze complex. The easternmost – Phillipson’s ‘eastern stream’ – is actually the only one that is well established and directly related to the Urewe tradition.<sup>103</sup> An EIA coastal ceramic continuum cutting through Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, Swaziland and South Africa in less than two centuries from the early second century AD links the Great Lakes Region with southern Natal. Kwale and Matola wares constitute the main EIA coastal lowland traditions. Possibly derived from the Matola traditions are slightly more recent EIA wares found further inland in sites scattered over Malawi, eastern Zambia and much of Zimbabwe, although certain archaeologists see the Nkope and Gokomere/Ziwa traditions as representatives of a distinct subgroup.<sup>104</sup> This eastern stream is also clearly mirrored in the linguistic record. Languages from the northeastern and southeastern ends of the Bantu domain and some intermediate coastal languages display a marked linguistic proximity.<sup>105</sup> As demonstrated elsewhere,<sup>106</sup> the easternmost East-Bantu languages also share with the ‘Northeast Savannah’ languages<sup>107</sup> a characteristic lexical pottery-related innovation, which possibly has its morphological equivalent in the EIA archaeological record.<sup>108</sup> Moreover, other

<sup>98</sup> Phillipson, ‘An archaeological reconsideration’.

<sup>99</sup> Phillipson, *African Archaeology*, 249.

<sup>100</sup> B. Clist, ‘A critical reappraisal of the chronological framework of the early Urewe Iron Age industry’, *Muntu*, 6 (1987), 35–62.

<sup>101</sup> For an overview of eastern and southern African sites linked to the Chifumbaze complex, see Phillipson, *African Archaeology*, 249–65. <sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* 264.

<sup>103</sup> Phillipson, ‘An archaeological reconsideration’, 76–8.

<sup>104</sup> T. N. Huffman, ‘Ceramics, settlements and Late Iron Age migrations’, *African Archaeological Review*, 7 (1989), 155–82.

<sup>105</sup> Y. Bastin, ‘Essai de classification de quatre-vingts langues bantoues par la statistique grammaticale’, *Africana Linguistica*, 9 (1983), 11–108; for more details on this East-Coastal-Bantu, see also K. Bostoen and C. Grégoire, ‘La question bantoue: bilan et perspectives’, *Mémoires de la Société de Linguistique de Paris* (forthcoming).

<sup>106</sup> Bostoen, *Des mots*, 406–13, 427–32. The lexical innovation in question is *°-kɛ́ adango* (frying pan). <sup>107</sup> See, for instance, Nurse and Phillipson, ‘Towards’, 175.

<sup>108</sup> This concerns a bowl Van Grunderbeek regards as an Urewe innovation indicating a change in subsistence economy. Similar bowls were found in other ‘eastern stream’ sites. See Van Grunderbeek, ‘Essai d’étude typologique de céramique urewe de la région des

linguistic data point towards the northeastern part of the Bantu domain as a centre from which different pottery-related lexical innovations diffused.<sup>109</sup> This distribution correlates with the Great Lakes region as the homeland of the Urewe tradition and relates to the hypothesis that the EIA technique of pottery in East-Bantu Africa has its origin in this part of the continent. Thus, we can safely propose that the development of this eastern facies went along with the dispersal of at least a part of the East-Bantu subgroups.

The correlation between the distribution patterns of more westerly EIA manifestations and East-Bantu is more problematic. Phillipson once supposed that the 'western stream' of the Chifumbaze complex resulted from a spread of Urewe culture to the southern savannahs around the flank of the equatorial forest.<sup>110</sup> This scenario could correlate with the hypothesis that the dispersal of the *\*-búmb-* stratum in the western savannah Bantu languages is due to East-Bantu influences. However, neither the internal coherence nor the western extent of this EIA facies is established. Moreover, the historical relationship of the more westerly EIA ceramic traditions to Urewe ware is far more questionable than is the case for the eastern traditions. This may, in part, be attributed to the fact that fewer archaeological projects have been undertaken in these regions. The EIA is well known from sites in the Congolese–Zambian Copperbelt, central Zambia and northeastern Zimbabwe. The EIA potteries from this area belong to three distinct but closely related traditions, respectively Chondwé, Kampwirimbwé and Sinoia, ranging from AD 300 to the eleventh century.<sup>111</sup> They are not only slightly younger than their more easterly counterparts, but also typologically distinctive. Another well-known tradition is represented by the earliest ceramics of the Upper Lualaba region, which bear witness to an EIA that is quite different from the interlacustrine EIA.<sup>112</sup> The origin of these western EIA manifestations is unclear. Unlike the eastern ceramic traditions, none of them can be directly derived from the Urewe tradition. The Great Lakes Bantu languages and westernmost East-Bantu languages (southeastern DRC, Zambia, Malawi, northeastern Zimbabwe) share – apart from *\*-búmb-* – a set of pottery-related terms that are absent from the rest of (East-)Bantu. Although this distinctiveness could be the reflection of a 'western stream', both the linguistic evidence and the archaeological data are, for now, too weak to confirm this hypothesis. Moreover, it is difficult to estimate how far the influence of this western EIA facies extended. It was once assumed that the ceramic traditions of central and southern Zambia expanded considerably westwards,<sup>113</sup> but finds of ceramics dated as early as  $\pm 200$  BC in the upper Zambezi valley,<sup>114</sup> or maybe even the

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collines au Burundi et Rwanda', *Azania*, 13 (1988), 11–55; R. C. Soper, 'Early Iron Age pottery types from East Africa: comparative analysis', *Azania*, 6 (1971), 39–52.

<sup>109</sup> Bostoën, *Des mots*, 406–13.

<sup>110</sup> D. W. Phillipson, 'Archaeology and Bantu linguistics', *World Archaeology*, 8 (1976), 65–82.

<sup>111</sup> Phillipson, 'An archaeological reconsideration', 78.

<sup>112</sup> P. de Maret, *Fouilles archéologiques dans la vallée du Haut-Lualaba, Zaïre: Sanga et Katongo, 1974* (Tervuren, 1985) and *Fouilles archéologiques dans la vallée du Haut-Lualaba, Zaïre: Kamilamba, Kikulu et Malemba-Nkulu, 1975* (Tervuren, 1992).

<sup>113</sup> Phillipson, 'An archaeological reconsideration', 78.

<sup>114</sup> Phillipson, 'The first South African pastoralists', 131.



fourth century BC,<sup>115</sup> raise questions about the direction of this expansion. Several sites in northern Angola contain abundant finds of early ceramics, which have been identified as EIA because they have nothing in common with the more northerly SMA potteries of the Lower Congo region, Gabon and Cameroon.<sup>116</sup> However, only the ceramics of the Dundo site in the extreme northeast of the country can be safely considered as a western extension of the Copperbelt EIA.<sup>117</sup> These elements may be archaeological correlates of early East-Bantu influence on West-Bantu. However, the currently available archaeological data from this area are too fragmentary to exclude a distinct origin of the EIA, just as the linguistic data cannot exclude the independent emergence of *\*-bómb-* (to make pottery) in savannah West-Bantu.

The way Urewe ceramics emerged west of Lake Victoria provides another historical problem. Proto-East-Bantu replaced the Proto-Bantu verb *\*-mà-* for pot-making with *\*-bómb-*, but it maintained two common terms inherited from Proto-Bantu, i.e. *\*-bigà* (pot) and *\*-jòngú* (cooking pot). In terms of cultural history, these terms suggest the renewal of ceramic knowledge Proto-East-Bantu-speakers inherited from their Proto-Bantu-speaking ancestors. In terms of the available archaeological evidence, and in contrast to the North-West-Bantu domain where the first potteries appear as a continuation of the Shum Laka tradition, the Urewe tradition seems to appear 'out of the blue'. Although there are some similarities with pottery from Chad<sup>118</sup> and the Central African Republic (CAR),<sup>119</sup> no scholar has yet identified an earlier tradition from which Urewe could unquestionably derive.<sup>120</sup> Van Grunderbeek suggests a possible relationship with the SMA ceramics from Batalimo (CAR), which might indicate that Urewe pottery has its origins in the emigration of Bantu-speakers from the northern equatorial forest. However, the evidence is weak and needs further substantiation. For the time being, the relationship between archaeological evidence for the ancestral SMA Grassfields and for the EIA Urewe traditions, both most likely exported south(east)wards by Bantu-speakers, remains unclear. Similarly, the precise link between Proto-East-Bantu and its ancestor Proto-Bantu awaits clear-cut linguistic evidence.

#### CONCLUSION

Bantu language classifications having long been linguists' main contribution to the reconstruction of early African history, both 'linguistic historians' and 'historical linguists' increasingly rely on the study of cultural vocabularies to disentangle the 'Bantu Problem'. Although tackling the same historical questions with the same sources of evidence, the two groups of scholars

<sup>115</sup> N. Katanekwa, 'Upper Zambezi Iron Age research project phase II: a preliminary report', *Archaeologia Zambiana*, 20 (1981), 12–14.

<sup>116</sup> Lanfranchi and Clist, 'Néolithique: Angola', 179.

<sup>117</sup> Clist and Lanfranchi, 'Age du Fer Ancien: Angola', 220.

<sup>118</sup> R. C. Soper, 'A general review of the Early Iron Age of the southern half of Africa', *Azania*, 6 (1971), 5–38.

<sup>119</sup> M.-C. Van Grunderbeek, 'Essai de délimitation chronologique de l'Age du Fer Ancien au Burundi, au Rwanda et dans la région des Grands Lacs', *Azania*, 27 (1992), 53–80.

<sup>120</sup> Phillipson, *African Archaeology*, 251.

may differ in their methodological rigour. This paper advocates strict adherence to the best practices in historical-comparative linguistics for independently arriving at the best possible historical conclusions, which may subsequently be integrated into a historical narrative developed from interdisciplinary data. A number of fundamental methodological conditions, such as a sound phonological and semantic analysis and a sufficiently large and representative database, must be satisfied to produce reliable results. Based on the comparative study of one particular lexical field of great historical prominence, Bantu pottery vocabulary, this case study shows that only carefully conducted comparative linguistic research, however laborious it may be, yields useful insights into the early history of areas without ancient written traditions.

In this particular case, the diachronic development of Bantu pottery vocabulary reflects broad patterns of historical evolution. More specifically, the two primary Bantu verbs meaning ‘to make pottery’, i.e. *\*-mà-* and *\*-bómb-*, represent the two oldest historical layers of Bantu pottery vocabulary. The reconstruction of the verb *\*-mà-* into Proto-Bantu indicates that its speakers were acquainted with the art of pot-making. Moreover, taking into account both the occurrence of this verb beyond Bantu languages and the archaeology of the Guinean Gulf region, one can formulate different assumptions on the origin of this ‘Proto-Bantu ceramic tradition’. First, pot-making had a long, local Grassfields development in a speech context coinciding with the gradual separation of Proto-Bantu from the other Bantoid languages. Second, Benue-Congo speakers most likely introduced this craft into the Grassfields region. Within the Bantu domain, the parallel between this oldest lexical stratum and the distribution area of the earliest SMA potteries corroborates the hypothesis that early Bantu-speakers introduced pottery into Atlantic Central Africa. The extension of this lexical layer into the Bantu languages of Southern Angola and northern Namibia suggests that early Bantu-speakers may even have initiated it in this part of the continent, where the currently available archaeological data are too scanty to look for reasonable parallels for this linguistically founded assumption.

The disappearance of *\*-mà-* and the emergence of *\*-bómb-* in Proto-East-Bantu as the main pottery verb seems to match with a cut-off point in the archaeological record, i.e. the introduction of EIA ceramics into the Great Lakes region and their subsequent dispersal in eastern and southern Africa. The dispersal of this stratum coincided at least partly with the primary spread of East-Bantu languages and the craft of pottery in this area. The western extension of the *\*-bómb-* distribution area cuts through the earlier *\*-mà-* stratum and indicates the dispersal of a more recent stratum. This suggests far-reaching East-Bantu influences on the West-Bantu savannah languages, and by extension that the introduction of EIA pottery in this area could have an eastern origin. However, neither the historical-linguistic situation nor the current state of archaeology can exclude the possibility that these phenomena are the outcome of an independent western innovation. Regardless, one can assume that potters using *\*-bómb-* introduced EIA pottery into the southwestern savannahs. However, they were neither the first potters nor the first Bantu-speakers in this region.

This rudimentary historical narrative built on the comparative study of one particular semantic field simultaneously substantiates and revises existing

narratives on the early past of Bantu-speaking societies, and raises new questions to direct future research in particular ways. It illustrates the historical potentialities of the Words-and-Things method, but accentuates at the same time its limitations. The comparison of Bantu pottery vocabulary is quite unsuccessful, for instance, for reconstructing the history of particular ceramic fashioning or decoration techniques. The generic verbs discussed in this article are not distinctive in this respect and the specialized vocabulary for the technical gestures or tools involved is cross-linguistically diversified to an extent that no lexical reconstruction or mapping of loan-word diffusion routes is possible. Moreover, the kind of data used make it easier to ask and to attempt to answer the 'when', 'where' and 'by whom' questions of the emergence and diffusion of pot-making than to push into the 'why' questions or into the implications of the increasing importance of pot-making for people's lives in the past. In sum, the historical insights supplied by comparative lexical data may be substantial, but often lack the sophistication needed to write the sweeping histories some people would like to draw from language data.