

Bantu Migrations

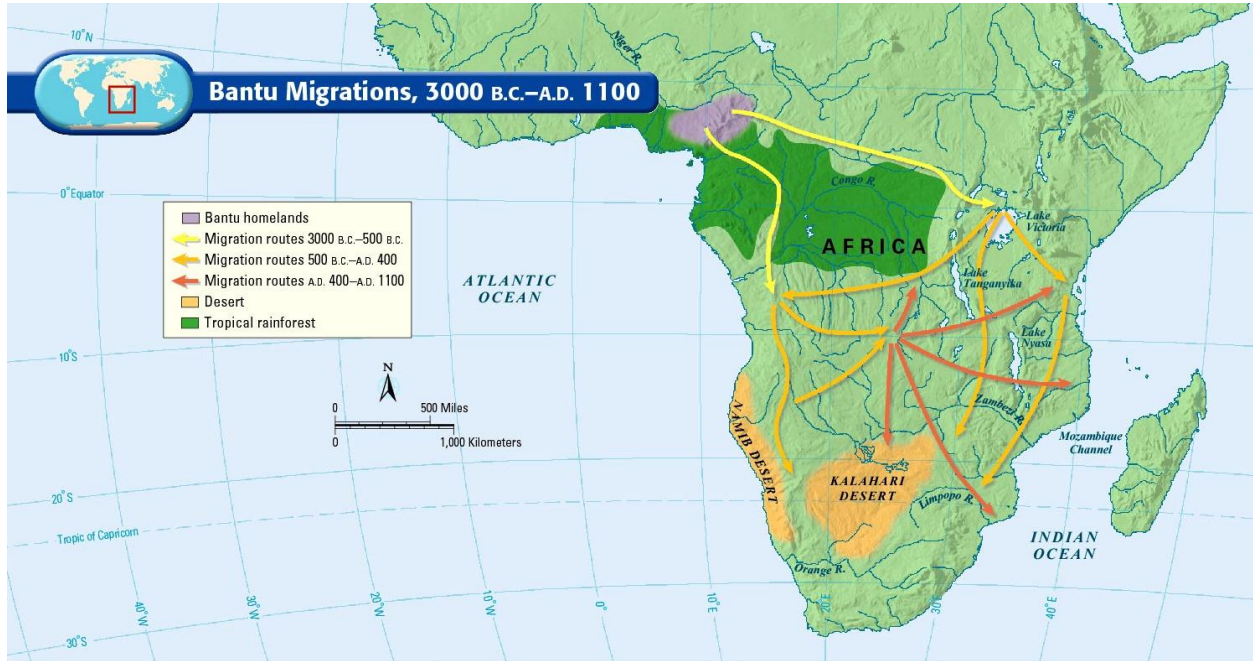
The Bantu migration was one of the first major events in African history.

The Bantu-speaking peoples migrated from Western Africa-- near modern-day Nigeria-- southward and eastward, spreading out across all of the southern half of the African continent. This migration started at about 1000 B.C.E., and ended at about 1700 A.D.

The Bantu-speaking peoples brought agriculture to the southern half of Africa, which was mostly populated by foragers, herders, and hunter-gatherers. Bantu peoples settled land and created great empires like the Great Zimbabwe and the Zulu kingdom, and continued to expand and settle more land.

This migration, or expansion, was discovered through LANGUAGE. Bantu refers to several similar languages, or a 'family' of languages, that can be found throughout central and South Africa.

Contemporary Bantu languages are different from the ancestral languages of 3000 years ago, and it is this change and evolution in language that has allowed historians and anthropologists to track this great movement across a huge continent.



People on the Move

Armed with iron smelting technology the Bantu of west and central Africa dispersed across the continent, changing its linguistic and cultural landscape. A number of theories have been put forward to explain this migration.

One theory is that there were waves of migration, one moving through the east of Africa and another making its way through the center of the continent. In Zambia, there is evidence of at least three routes of migration - from the great lakes, from the Congo forest and from Angola.

There is evidence that the Bantu ancestors of the modern Swahili peoples mastered sailing technology and possessed canoes and boats so they could make their way along the Zambezi River.

Most historians appear to believe that rather than arriving en-masse like a conquering horde, the migrations were more sporadic with small pockets of people moving from one point to another.

It is not entirely clear how the Bantu reacted when they came upon existing communities but it is likely that there was considerable absorption, assimilation and displacement of other peoples during the migration period. The Bantu were armed with superior weapons and their iron implements allowed them to cultivate land and clear forests efficiently.

If they came as colonizers, then it is unlikely to be in the sense we understand the term today. Historians believe there was social interaction and intermarrying and trade.

EVIDENCE

The evidence for migration is based on three main areas of research. They are:

- **Linguistic**
A comparative study of languages spoken in some parts of eastern, central and southern Africa show similarities with the mother tongues originally spoken in West Africa. There are some 450 known languages in the Bantu family from Gikuyu in the north to Setswana in the south.
- **Pottery**
There is evidence of similar pottery technology in eastern, southern and western Africa. Iron Age farmers were skilled pot makers and decorated their pots with grooves and patterns. Related groups of peoples used similar styles of decoration.
- **Iron**
There is little or no evidence of iron working in east and southern Africa before the arrival of the Bantu suggesting that new technology was spread by the migrants.

The Bantu proved enormously successful at adapting to their new environments and it has been argued by some historians that they brought not only new methods of survival but the development of the system of statehood that we still find today.



Bantu men making Iron



Bantu Iron tools and Weapons



Bantu Women today in typical dress