THE DEBATE:

BANTU MIGRATION / EARLY IRON AGE

The linguistic term 'Bantu', from *ba-* (plural) and *–ntu* (person), that (or something similar) is common to most of this family of languages was first coined by a South African linguist, Willem Bleek, in the 1860s (*A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages*, 2 vols, Cape Town, 1862-9). Bleek concluded that the Bantu languages and people who spoke them probably originated from the lakeland region of east Africa. African oral traditions seldom traced dynastic origins back further than 500 years, which seemed to fit in with Bleek's observations of linguistic similarity. He concluded that Bantu-speakers must have arrived in South Africa in a great conquering migration, exterminating the indigenous 'Bushmen' as they advanced, until halted by the white men (who had been doing the same thing to the indigenous people) as they advanced eastwards from the Cape in the eighteenth century. This theory, beloved of white supremacists in the twentieth century, conveniently fitted white claims that they had just as good a right of origin in South Africa as the black people.

The first attempt at a wide-scale and systematic study of the languages was undertaken by the linguist and sometime colonial administrator, Harry H. Johnston. Between 1880 and 1900 Johnston visited, sometimes in private capacity, sometimes as colonial administrator, both the western region (Nigeria, Cameroon, Congo Basin and Angola) and the eastern region (Mozambique, Malawi, Zambia, Tanzania and Uganda). He compiled his study of 200 words across 300 languages, most of them collected by him personally and, in retirement, he published his *Comparative Study of the Bantu and Semi-Bantu Languages* in 1922. He devised a genealogy of the languages, tracing their roots to the Nigeria-Cameroon region and concluding that this origin was very ancient, probably before the Common Era (CE).

In 1948 Malcolm Guthrie published *The Classification of the Bantu Languages* (Oxford) which suggested that, although the oldest Bantu language may have been in the Nigeria-Cameroon border region, thereafter a small number of Bantu-speakers migrated along the rivers of the Congo basin until they reached the headwaters of the Lualaba (upper Congo) in the Katanga/Lake Kisale region on the southern edge of the forest. It was from here, argued Guthrie, that the

main dispersal took place – east, west, north and south. Guthrie based his theory upon this being the place of greatest language similarity (convergence).

The pioneering Africanist historian Roland Oliver, in writing (with John D. Fage) the first modern history of the continent (*A Short History of Africa*, first edition 1963), attempted to synthesise this linguistic evidence with archaeological research, linking Bantu expansion with iron-working farmers. Following Guthrie's proposal Oliver concluded that the arrival of the Asian banana and yam on the east African coast in the early centuries CE (brought by those Austronesians who colonised Madagascar at this time) was key to the dispersal of the Bantu. The adoption of these crops in the Katanga region would have hugely increased the food supply, leading to a local population explosion and setting off a rapid dispersal of Bantu-speaking farmers.

That year, 1963, however, Guthrie's view was challenged by Joseph Greenberg of Indiana University who published his *The Languages of Africa*, which encompassed the results of more than a decade of linguistic research and interpretation. Greenberg placed the primary Bantu dispersal point as the Benue/Adamawa highlands region of eastern Nigeria/Cameroon. In contrast to Guthrie he argued that the languages of greatest diversity (divergence) were the oldest for they had been dispersing from each other for the longest period of time. Following this principle he traced the primary dispersal many centuries back into the BCE period, going eastwards round the north of the forest to the lakeland region of east Africa and southwards through the forest to its southern fringes. This theory has stood the test of time, with modern refinements, despite the publication of Guthrie's 4 volume *Comparative Bantu* in 1968-71.

Since then historians, such as in particular Jan Vansina ('New linguistic evidence and the "Bantu Expansion"', *Journal of African History*, 1995, Vol 36, 173-95) have been marrying the increasing archaeological evidence of iron-working dating back to at least the beginning of the Common Era (CE) with more nuanced studies of local language divergences and linkages. Confirming Greenberg's basic thesis, the picture now emerges of settlements building up in size until soils became exhausted and then segmenting into numerous smaller groups that each sought out new virgin soil – not necessarily always in a southerly direction. It is thus a complex picture, far from simple, and open to further refinement as new areas, such as Angola, are opened up for archaeological research.