

RECENT MODELS OF
THE AFRICAN IRON AGE AND
THE CATTLE-RELATED EVIDENCE

Our present models and theories of African history and pre-history are profoundly influenced by the physical anthropologists' perceptions of human reality in present-day Africa. Professor P. V. Tobias has suggested that the present-day people of Africa, excluding the recent arrivals from Europe and Asia, descended from a common proto-Negriform stock which gave birth first to the so-called "Khoisan" (I am using here the terminology of my source, not the historically justified Khoe and San, meaning the Hottentots and the Bushmen) and later to the Negro genetic type.¹ Of greater importance to archaeologists, who deal mainly with the so-called pre-history, is the fact that, genetically speaking, the difference between the "Khoisan" and the Negroids is smaller than the difference between these two African racial types and all other non-African types. This realisation tends to have one

¹ P. V. Tobias, "Recent human biological studies in Southern Africa, with special reference to Negroes and Khoisans," *Transactions of the Royal Society of South Africa*, 40, 3 (1972), p. 116, 120; R. R. Inskip, *The Peopling of Southern Africa*, Cape Town, 1978, p. 122.

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consequence: the pre-historic and even historic developments are generally perceived as explainable from within Africa, without any need for external clues or explanations. Archaeological finds are thus taken for evidence of a basically internal evolution and the finds of foreign glass beads, though very frequent and spread all over Africa, are seen as belonging to the same category as Persian, Chinese, or Arab ceramics and are explained as indication of a coastal trade.²

In this picture the existing variety of racial types does not seem to be of great importance, especially since the alleged stagnation of the "Khoisan" people might have begun as early as 6,000 to 15,000 years ago.³ The field is seemingly left open to one, physically and culturally dominant, group of Negroid Bantu-speakers. This tends to be confirmed by the present and recent historical occupation of most of sub-Saharan Africa by the Negroid people speaking a large number of closely related languages. These languages are commonly known as Bantu languages on account of the presence in most of them of the word *-ntu* for a person, a man.

Working within this framework it is relatively easy to develop credible models of development from hunting-gathering through pastoralism to primitive agriculture and an Iron Age. If, for instance, a skull of a definitely Negroid type were found (which has not yet happened) in South Africa dated to let us say the second millennium B. C., the evolutionary models of Africa would be simplified to an almost trivial case of simple Darwin-like social evolutionary spiral. Geography, in terms of movements that are the cause of cultural interchange and minor, not fundamental, diversification, would play an insignificant role. The result would be the settlement of Africa by a number of rather distinctive cultural if not ethnic and, certainly, linguistic groups; unless, of course, we could prove a great deal of rather purposeless wandering by the given population all over the huge area. But the fact that we have no evidence of such an early presence of the Negroid type in southern Africa, and the fact that Negroid people do speak a number of very closely related languages distributed over a large area, reminds us of the necessity to

² P. S. Garlake, *The Kingdoms of Africa*, Oxford, 1978, p. 78.

³ Tobias, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

consider the geographical factors. It is the linguistics primarily that tell us that the area presently occupied by the Bantu-speaking Negroids was not always their home. This leads us to the well known theory or theories of the so-called Bantu migrations, Bantu expansion, or Bantu genesis.

T. N. Huffman wrote in 1970 that “of all the great cultural movements of the world, the Bantu migration is one of the most striking and impressive.”⁴ Thus we see that *Bantu* is perceived not only as a linguistic term as it is often stated, but also as a cultural term. But what is the so-called Bantu culture? Is there any such thing or concept? It is often said that no, there is not one Bantu culture but a variety of African cultures. However, the next step from this point is to label such cultures virtually X, Y, Z, without any attempt to link each of these cultures with specific people defined by ethnic and linguistic criteria. This in fact is happening in archaeological literature where various archaeological cultures, i.e. mostly ceramically defined, are named after the sites where they were first found. Pastoralist culture X is then related with the pastoralist culture Y and the only traditional label attached to them is that the makers of these cultures were Negroids and that they spoke Bantu languages.⁵ D. W. Phillipson puts it in this way: “...the individual names of modern societies or ‘tribes’ are of little relevance to the prehistorian, or even—it is now widely recognized—to the historian who is dealing with events of more than a very few centuries.” And he has a useful piece of advice for a student of Africa’s past: “it is with the processes of linguistic development, divergence and interaction that the prehistorian should be primarily concerned.” This because “language, as a diachronic cultural phenomenon which is relatively resistant to total eclipse, provides a valuable connecting thread between prehistoric societies and their successors.”⁶ This piece of advice is worth remembering, especially when we are tempted to speak of cultures X, Y, Z.

⁴ T. N. Huffman, “The Early Iron Age and the spread of the Bantu,” *South African Archaeological Bulletin*, 25 (1970), 3.

⁵ N. J. van der Merwe, “The Iron-Age: a prehistory of Bantu-speaking South Africans,” *Perspectives on the Southern African Past*, University of Cape Town, Centre for African Studies, 1979, Occasional papers, no. 2, p. 101.

⁶ D. W. Phillipson, *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa*, London, 1977, p. 292.

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So far, we could have remained aloof from the cultural definition of the Negroid Bantu-speakers although Huffman has said that their migration represented one of the greatest cultural movements. The next thing archaeologists noticed, however, was that while cattle, sheep, goats, pastoralism, iron, copper, metallurgy, and agriculture were present in North Africa since at least the third millennium B. C., the archaeological record of what is presently known as Bantu Africa is silent about these cultural items up to the early first millennium A. D. Thus archaeologists were led to seemingly the only conclusion that these items must have been brought there from the north by the Negroid Bantu-speakers who presently are the dominant inhabitants of this part of Africa. Hence the Bantu-speaking Negroids became culturally defined as Iron Age farmers and pastoralists.

In the early twentieth century most archaeologists, historians and ethnographers believed that these cultural items, i.e. metallurgy, pastoralism, etc., were brought to eastern, central and southern Africa by the Semitic people from the area of the Middle East, or by the Hamites. Cultural and religious analogies were brought forth to support this theory. But this theory proved insufficiently supported by archaeological and linguistic evidence and, presently, the majority of Africanist scholars, with some exceptions mainly outside the geographically defined field, seem to accept the theory that iron, metallurgy, copper, currencies, livestock, basic agriculture and the Bantu-speaking Negroids form a well rounded and self-sustained package. The objective of this article is to raise some questions about the solidity and homogeneity of this package. But before I do so, let us review briefly the latest and best formulated model of the so-called African Iron Age, which is claimed to be a result of the cultural expansion of the Negroid Bantu-speakers. This model was first outlined by D. W. Phillipson in 1976 and completed and formalized in his book *The Later Prehistory of Eastern and Southern Africa* in 1977.

Phillipson's model is presented as if primarily based on archaeological and, especially, ceramic evidence, but its basic framework and the pattern of human movement within it is derived from linguistic evidence. Ceramics in fact are used primarily as markers of chronology. The linguistic evidence mean-

while consists of the present and reconstructed pattern of spatial distribution of Bantu languages, and the dynamics behind this distribution are extrapolated primarily from the terminology related to livestock, especially cattle, and certain domesticated plants. Terminology related to the basic and defining element of the Iron Age, that is iron, metals and metallurgy, does not figure in Phillipson's model.⁷

The key words in Phillipson's argument, as well as in the arguments of his critics, are the proto-Bantu reconstruction **-gombe* and the proto-Khoe reconstruction **-koma*, both with the meaning of cattle, cow, etc. These two words were recognized by an American historical linguist, C. Ehret, in 1967, as ultimately related to a common ancestor in the form **-(k)umbi* which is claimed to be a proto-Central Sudanic word for cattle.⁸ Another important linguistic point in Phillipson's argument is the observation that while **-koma* and its variants such as *gomab*, *gomas*, *-komo*, *-homo* occur only in the Khoe languages and in Bantu languages south of the Zambezi, reflexes (derivatives) of **-gombe* are found in most of the remaining languages north of the Zambezi. With this basic linguistic information in hand and with the knowledge of ceramic traditions of eastern, central and southern Africa, Phillipson constructed a model of the Early and Later Iron Age which may differ in minor details from the models constructed by his colleagues and critics, but agrees with them on the central issue of identity of the moving forces behind the African Iron Age.

PHILLIPSON'S MODEL

On linguistic grounds it has been established that the earliest known ancestral home of the Negroid Bantu speakers was the rain forest and adjoining grasslands of Cameroon and south-east Nigeria, south-east of the Benue River. The following summary is based on Phillipson's book and articles:

⁷ Phillipson, *op. cit.*, pp. 220, 223, 147.

⁸ C. Ehret, "Cattle-keeping and milking in eastern and southern Africa", *Journal of African History*, 8, 1 (1967), pp. 8-9; D. W. Phillipson, "Archaeology and Bantu Linguistics," *World Archaeology*, 8, 1 (1976), pp. 77-9.

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“Leaving Cameroon at an unspecified time in the first millennium B.C. (ca. 1000-200 B.C.), the proto-Bantu Negroids set off in two directional streams: the eastern heading for the Central Sudanic area north-west of Lake Albert, and the southward for the equatorial forest and the savanah area in north-western Angola. While the southward stream appears to have been the primary bearer of Bantu languages and of goats, the eastern stream, while passing through the Central Sudanic area, picked up cattle, metallurgy, and related terminology from that area. This stream shed some of its accumulated experience in the Interlacustrine area giving birth, before the end of the first millennium B.C., to the so-called Urewe and related pottery traditions (ca. 300-0 B.C.).”

Phillipson's reviewer, T.N. Huffman, thinks Urewe may be up to 400 years younger.⁹

“Part of this stream then proceeded in a south-westerly direction around the rain forest to the area of secondary dispersal in north-western Angola, bringing along the Central Sudanic cattle and terminology. When this stream met with the southward stream in the area of secondary dispersal around A.D. 100, the two streams merged into one western Early Iron Age stream. This combined stream then crossed Angola into South-west Africa and enriched the San people with cattle and pottery, though not with iron, thus turning part of the San into Khoe or Hottentots. The Central Sudanic name *goma* (*s* is taken here for a Khoe feminine gender marker) is claimed to be the proof of it and the word is rendered in the proto-Bantu form **-koma*. From ca. A.D. 200, the second part of the eastern stream pushed vigorously southward along the Eastern Highlands. By ca. A.D. 400 it reached the Transvaal, but while passing through tsetse infested southern Tanzania apparently lost its cattle (known by the Central Sudanic name *gombe* or its eastern proto-Bantu variant *n'gombe*). Some breakaway groups from the secondary area of dispersal and from the western stream moved eastward, reaching the tertiary area of dispersal in Shaba around A.D. 400-500, and establishing contact with the eastern stream emanating from the Interlacustrine area. The resulting

⁹ T.N. Huffman, “African origins”, review of Phillipson's *The Later Prehistory...*, in *South African Journal of Science*, 75 (1979), p. 235.

Eastern Highland language group (Eastern Bantu) then expanded eastward from Shaba between ca. A.D. 1000-1100, introducing Later Iron Age culture to the eastern half of sub-Equatorial Africa."¹⁰

Phillipson's final word about this outline of the Iron Age in Africa is that: "Both archaeology and linguistics... point to the area to the north-west of Lake Albert as that where the formative processes of the Early Iron Age Industrial Complex took place."¹¹

Now there are several problems with this model which so heavily relies on linguistic evidence. First of all, as Phillipson admits, "the archaeology of this region," i.e. between Lake Albert and Lake Chad, "is virtually unknown." Thus the greatest technological, pastoral and agricultural movement in African history originated from a big blank hole in the heart of Africa. Secondly, the differences and contradictions between various students and classifiers of the languages in this area indicate, and D. Dalby plainly states, that the Central Sudanic languages form a poorly known and consequently poorly defined group.¹² Thus linguistically speaking the Central Sudanic area is not a blank but a grey hole. This leads to the most important defect of the entire model and this is that Ehret's identification of the key words for cattle and other livestock as Central Sudanic is evidently erroneous. Phillipson's model thus stands on clay legs.

Ehret's error, which has not been corrected in his more recent writings, can be demonstrated step by step. The Khoe word *goma-* for cow, cattle, has three genders *gomab* (masc.), *gomas* (fem.) and *gomai* (neut.) while neither the Bantu, who are supposed to have been its transmitters, nor the Central Sudanic source languages presently recognize grammatical gender. The sound shift from **(k)umbi* to **-koma* and *goma*, Ehret admits, "cannot be explained on the basis of Bantu sound changes" and it had to occur in a non-Bantu and most probably Khoe language.¹³

¹⁰ C. A. Hromník, *Indo-Africa: Towards a New Understanding of the History of Sub-Saharan Africa*, Cape Town, Juta, 1981, p. 109.

¹¹ Phillipson, *op. cit.*, p. 220.

¹² Phillipson, *op. cit.*, p. 214; D. Dalby, "The prehistoric implications of Guthrie's Comparative Bantu: II—problems of cultural vocabulary," *J. A. H.*, 17, 1 (1976), pp. 24-5; J. H. Greenberg, *The Languages of Africa*, Bloomington, 1970, pp. 85-129.

¹³ Ehret, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

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Not even the southern Bantu, the Zulu, Xhosa, and Sotho reversed this change, i.e. from *-(k)umbi to *goma-*, although they originally came from the Eastern Bantu area where the form *-gombe was in general use. This dramatic and irreversible change from *-(k)umbi or -gombe to *goma* (-b, -s, -i) and -komo raises the suspicion that the Khoe *goma-* has nothing in common with the Bantu -gombe or the Central Sudanic *-(k)umbi. This in turn raises the possibility that the Khoe obtained their cattle and their word to name it from another source.

From historical sources we know that already during and before the first century A. D. iron tools such as hoes, hatchets, awls, etc., were exported from India to eastern Africa where they were bartered for ivory, tortoise shell, game hides and gold. Another item bartered for gold was cattle which was sold not on hoof but quartered and cut into strips like biltong.¹⁴ The name of this beef among the Indian traders was *gomas*, meaning the meat of cow, which is identical with the Khoe feminine form *gomas* for cow. Thus we find in the Indian *gomas* meaning beef an alternate and historically supported source for the Khoe word *gomas* (-b, -i). At the same time we know that the so-called Hottentot cattle was a humped zebu type i.e., *bos indicus*, or of the humped sanga type which is a mixed type produced by crossbreeding of the Indian humped zebu with the north African humpless longhorn cattle. Most authorities agree that Indian zebu entered Africa via the littoral of the Arabian sea which lends credibility to the identification of not only the Khoe *gomas* with the Indian *gomas* (गौ) but also of the Hottentot cattle with the Indian humped cattle and its crossbreeds.¹⁵

Most of the Khoe sanga (*sanga* is an Indo-Ethiopian word for bull) have a cervico-thoracic hump resulting from the interbreeding of the humpless cattle with the thoracic humped zebu. The last type is most common in the Deccan in South India from where the iron tools were exported to Africa long before the arrival of the first Negroid Bantu speakers in southern Africa.¹⁶

¹⁴ *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, ed. by W.H. Schoff, New York, 1971, pp. 28-9; Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography of Cosmas, an Egyptian Monk*, Cambridge, 1897, 52-3.

¹⁵ H. Epstein, *The Origin of the Domestic Animals of Africa*, New York, 1971, 1, p. 519.

¹⁶ F.R. Allchin, "Early domestic animals in India", in *The Domestication*

An anonymous prepublication reader (linguist) of this article has suggested that the stem underlying the Khoe form *gomas* is *koma-*, and this, he argues, has derived from the proto-Bantu **-komo*. But stating that clearly **-komo* represents an earlier form, this linguist overlooks the fact that all derivatives of *gomas* emanate from the Khoe area into the surrounding or overlapping Bantu area, not *vice versa*. This view also ignores the archaeological evidence which attests the presence of the Indian cattle/beef among the food items of the Khoe centuries before the appearance of the first Bantu-speaking Negroids in their area.¹⁷

Doubts that we may have about the identification of the source of the Khoe cattle and its name with the name and cattle of India may perhaps be dispelled by a brief look at the origin of the second key word *-gombe*. **-gòmbè* is taken by the British linguist, Malcolm Guthrie, for a proto-Bantu word for cattle and Ehret says that it derives from the Central Sudanic **(k)umbi*. But we discover that the truest form of the Central Sudanic *(k)umbi* is *-umbi* and we find it in the form of *m-ombe* in Zezuru which is spoken in the heart of gold producing Mashonaland where the early as well as the more recent exchange of beef for gold took place. The closest relative of the stem *-umbi* or *-ombi* is not the common Bantu *-gombe* but the Merina or Malagasy word for cattle *-ombi* (*o'mby*) in Madagascar.¹⁸ Here we could argue that the Merina, who are of Malayo-Indonesian origin, received their cattle and their name from the migrating Bantu speakers. But then we find out that the Malagasy *o'mby* is identical with the Malayo-Indonesian *o-mby* for *bos indicus* or an ox, a cow, and cattle.¹⁹ This word, *o-mby* for cattle, occurs in a number of Malayo-Indonesian languages and nobody has so far come forward with a theory, not even to speak of proofs, that *bos*

and Exploitation of Plants and Animals, ed. by P. J. Ucko and G. W. Dimbleby, London, 1969, p. 319; Epstein, *op. cit.*, I, p. 549.

¹⁷ See T. N. Huffman, "Cattle from Mabveni", *S. A. A. B.*, 30 (1975), pp. 23-4; and other literature on the early cattle in southern Africa.

¹⁸ Ehret, *op. cit.*, p. 85; M. Guthrie, *Comparative Bantu: An Introduction to the Comparative Linguistics and Prehistory of the Bantu Languages*, Farnborough, 1967-71, 4 volumes, *passim*.

¹⁹ Hromník, *op. cit.*, p. 118.

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indicus and its name were introduced to Malaya and Indonesia from Africa.

Thus we see that what Ehret understood to be a set of Central Sudanic words, that Phillipson and other archaeologists see as having been distributed throughout Bantu and Khoe-speaking Africa by the migrating Iron Age Negroids, are in fact Indian and Malayo-Indonesian words attached to the livestock that is certainly of Indian origin. These words and these cattle were brought to Africa by Indians and Indonesians though not necessarily at the same time. The Indian *gomas* reached Africa no later than the last millennium B. C. and is found in the languages of the earliest central and southern African pastoralists, the Khoe. The Malayo-Indonesian word *o-mby* for the same type of Indian cattle reached Africa most probably in the early first millennium A. D. when the gold mines of Mashonaland, which means the land of gold in its Indian original form Sonabar, were exploited by the common effort of Indians and Indonesians and with the assistance of the Khoe.²⁰

In my recent book, *Indo-Africa*, I have brought forth many examples of combined historical, archaeological and linguistic evidence which, like the here presented cattle-related evidence, support the basic thesis hinted at here, i.e. that Africa was settled and exploited by Indians and Indonesians long before the appearance of the first Negroids in the later part of the first millennium A. D. in eastern, central and southern Africa. This evidence also raises questions about the origin of the so-called Bantu speakers and of the Khoe. The length of this article does not permit the answering of these questions, important as they may be, but they have been partly answered in other publications of this author.

SUMMARY

In spite of the enormous amount of labour expended in excavating, classifying and interpreting ceramic evidence, linguistic evidence forms the base of the presently most common models of the African Iron Age. The presumed Central Sudanic words for

²⁰ C. A. Hromník, "Are there any Shona? A question left unanswered by historians", *Mankind Quarterly*, 20 (1979-80), pp. 11-34.

cattle found in Bantu and “Khoisan” languages are taken for evidence of the spread of livestock-keeping, metallurgy and related mining and trade from the north to the south by the Bantu-speaking Negroids. A kind of proto-Negriform stock is believed to be the common ancestor of the Negroids and the “Khoisan” (In reality the Khoe and the San). This article shows that the mentioned key words are in fact Indian and Malayo-Indonesian. This raises questions about the validity of the presently common models of early settlement of Africa and about the claimed marginal importance of the non-African elements in the make-up of the Bantu-speaking Negroids and the Khoe.

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