

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 416 681

FL 025 077

AUTHOR Bulkens, Annelies
TITLE Some Nominal Stems for "Canoe" in Bantu Languages.
PUB DATE 1997-08-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Computer Assisted Language Learning (27th, Leiden, The Netherlands, August 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS African Languages; *Bantu Languages; Comparative Analysis; Contrastive Linguistics; Diachronic Linguistics; Geographic Distribution; *Grammar; *Language Patterns; *Morphology (Languages); Nouns; Uncommonly Taught Languages

ABSTRACT

An analysis of terminology for "canoe" in Bantu languages first gives some background information on early wooden canoes in Subsaharan Africa, then examines the origins of nominal stems for "canoe" in those languages. It is noted that a nominal stem identified early in the history of Bantu comparative linguistics is found in about 160 of the approximately 200 Bantu languages, but that the problem of the initial consonant has remained unsolved. Phonological and morphological patterns are traced in a number of the languages. It is concluded that in general, Bantu language have conserved the proto-Bantu nominal stem for "canoe." Two main geographic centers of lexical innovation are identified. A map illustrating the distribution of specific stems is included. Contains 32 references. (MSE)

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Some nominal stems for 'canoe' in Bantu languages

Annelies Bulkens

K.M.M.A. - M.R.A.C. Tervuren

27th CALL, Leiden, August 1997.

Introduction

Long before people invented the wheel or before they began using animals as a means of locomotion, transport by waterways was commonly known throughout the world. Different types of rafts, from the simple floating tree trunk to huge calabashes, have always been and are still being used. The most ancient technique of boat-building, attaching animal skins to a frame, is quite complicated, and it is thus not surprising that man soon found an alternative, the dug-out canoe. The technologies used in fabrication of the dug-out, controlled burning and carving, are after all much easier to handle.

The oldest dug-out canoe in the world has been found in the Netherlands and has been dated to around 8000 BP. The one which is of more interest to us, the oldest trace of a wooden canoe in Subsaharan Africa, has been excavated in Dufuna in northern Nigeria. This canoe is slightly younger than the one found in Pesse, but with its presumed age of about 7200 years, it is still one of the oldest in the world. The Dufuna canoe, however, is much more elaborate than contemporary European canoes, with a bow and stern that are carefully worked to points (Breunig, sd, 465). This implies that this canoe must be part of an older naval tradition, which developed independently, and that the origin of water transport in Africa lies even further back in time.

Linguistic discussion

Considering the lexical data, it is clear that the Bantu languages inherited a generic nominal stem for 'canoe' together with the object, from an earlier era. One nominal stem signifying 'canoe' was reconstructed early in the history of Bantu Comparative Linguistics. In this corpus of about two hundred Bantu languages the nominal stem *-á t ð occurred about one hundred and sixty times. The distribution of this nominal stem is general throughout the Bantu area, although one can observe a blank on the east coast and a fragmented distribution in zone S which is caused by climatological and environmental factors. The reflexes of this nominal stem are furthermore distributed in a very dispersed manner in the zones bordering the west coast (see Map 1).

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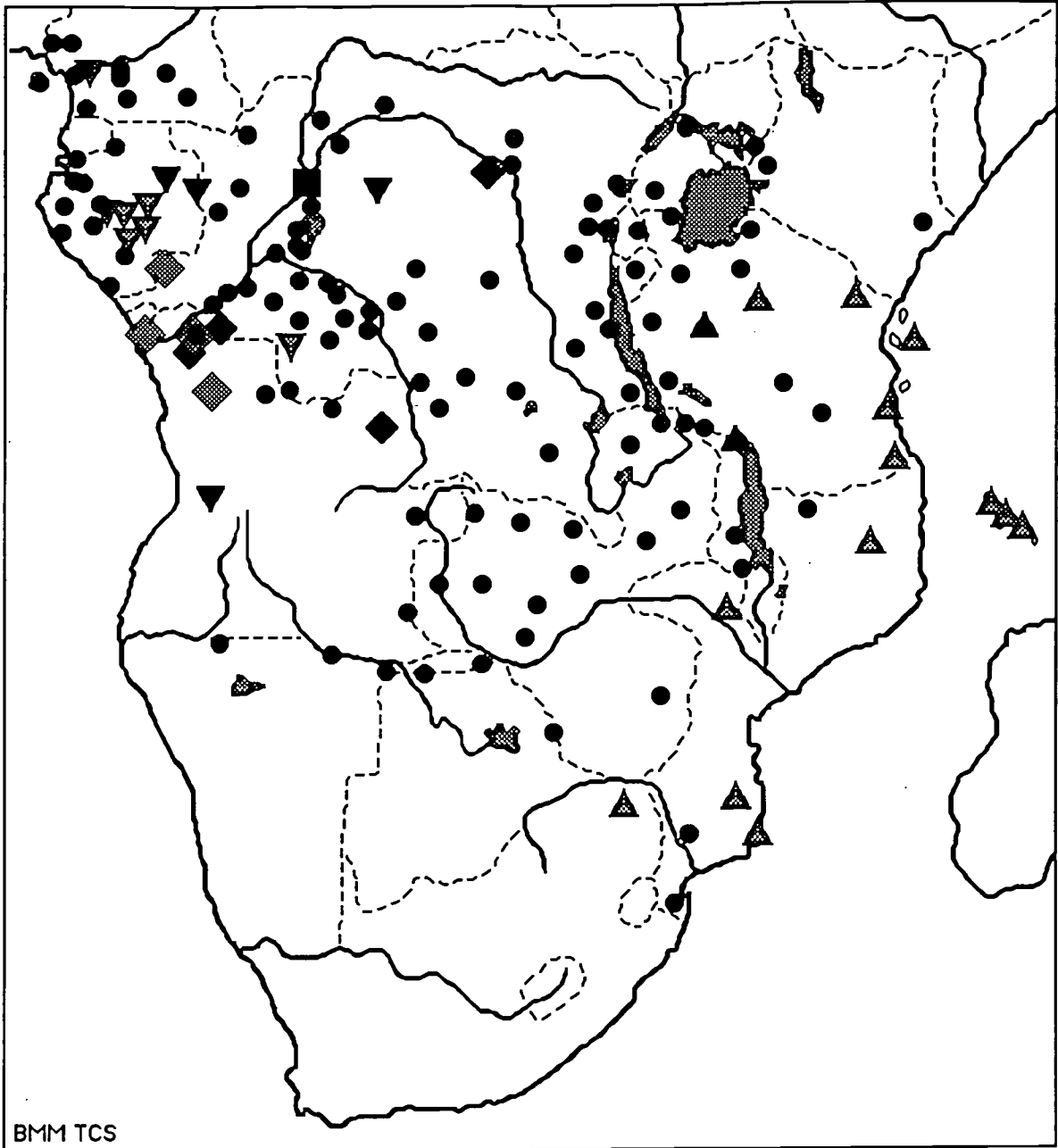
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BMM TCS

- | | | | |
|---|------------------|---|----------|
| ■ | C32 Bobangi | ◊ | °-longo |
| ◆ | *-átə + °-longo | ▲ | °ngalawa |
| ▲ | *-átə + °ngalawa | ▼ | °-béngò |
| ▼ | *-átə + °-béngò | ● | *-átə |

Map 1

General distribution of nominal stems meaning 'canoe'.

Although the reconstruction of the nominal stem has been acknowledged by different authors, the problem of the initial consonant remained unsolved. The former propositions are shown in (1). Whereas Meinhof and Van Warmelo and Greenberg propose a -VCV nominal stem, the other authors reconstructed a consonant-initial nominal stem.

(1) Former reconstructions :

Reconstructed form	Meaning	Source
*-gato 14	canoe	(Homburger, 1914, 358)
*-atə 14	boat, canoe	(Meinhof & Van, 1932, 187)
*-átə	boat	(Greenberg, 1948, 202)
*-yátə 14-6	canoe	(Guthrie, 1970, 154)
*-(j)átə 14	(boat) canoe	(Meeussen, 1980, 21)

In my data only four languages, listed under (2), attest such a consonant-initial nominal stem :

(2) *-(j)átə or *-átə ?

Language	Noun	Meaning	Source
a) Kota B25	-yàzǐ 7-14	canoe	(Piron, 1990, 173)
b) Masaba J31	-háárə 5-6	canoe	(Siertsema, 1981, 14)
c) Pende L11	-wátɔ̄ 5Ø-6	canoe	(Niyonkuru, 1978, 161)
d) Bukusu J31c	-járə 5-6	boat, canoe	(De Blois, 1975, 184).

In Kota this initial consonant is due to reclassification of the nominal stem. I compared two dialectal variants of Kota, Kota Mandungwe and Northern Kota.

(3) Northern Kota (Jacquot, 1983, 276) vs. Kota mandungwe (Piron, 1989, 84) :

Northern Kota	Gender	Kota mandungwe	Gender	Meaning
yàzǐ - bwàzǐ	19-14	èyàzǐ - bwàzǐ	7-14	canoe
íɲɔ̄dǐ - bɔ̄ɲɔ̄dǐ	19-14	ìɲɔ̄dǐ - bɔ̄ɲɔ̄dǐ	9i-14	bird
ìkáyì - bɔ̄káyì	19-14	ìkǎí - bɔ̄kǎí	9i-14	leaf
íyə̄ - bɔ̄yə̄	19-14	yɔ̄ - bɔ̄yɔ̄	9-14	sleep

In northern Kota the gender of the nominal stem $-\dot{a}z\dot{1}$ is 19-14, with the noun prefix of class 19 being i . In the other Kota variant, this class 19 doesn't exist any longer and the nominal stems have been reclassified. The nominal stem signifying 'canoe' has now obtained the irregular 7-14 gender. The noun prefix of class 7, $\dot{e}-$, has been pre-prefixed to the former class 19 prefix, thus creating the illusion that the semivowel is the initial consonant of the nominal stem.

In contemporary Masaba (J31) (Siertsema, 1981, 183-186), $/bw/ \sim /w/ \sim /h/ \sim /Ø/$ are allomorphs. One can easily imagine the following evolution :

$*b\dot{o}-\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 14-6 > $^{\circ}bw\dot{a}r\dot{5}$ > $^{\circ}hw\dot{a}r\dot{5}$ > $^{\circ}-h\dot{a}\dot{a}r\dot{5}$ 5-6 'canoe',

in which the initial b has weakened to an uvular fricative and is no longer recognized as part of the noun prefix which has been integrated in the nominal stem. By analogy to the plural noun class 6, the nominal stem has consequently been reintegrated into the gender 5-6. Integration of the noun prefix of class 14 into the nominal stem also accounts for the consonantal initial in Pende, where the nominal stem has been reinterpreted as $-\dot{w}\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 'canoe'. The gender 5Ø-6 being very common in Pende, the speakers have reclassified the nominal stem in this way :

$^{\circ}\dot{w}-\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 14-6 > $^{\circ}w\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ > $^{\circ}-w\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 5Ø-6 'canoe'.

The last consonant initial reflex of the nominal stem $*-\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ has been found in Bukusu (J31c) where its initial consonant is due to descriptive choices of the author. Although none of the nominal stems mentioned in (4) surfaces with an initial consonant, the author proposes the following underlying forms with an initial palatal consonant.

(4) Bukusu (J31c) (De Blois, 1975, 183-185)

	Reconstruction	Underlying form	Realisation
canoe	$*-\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 14	$-\dot{j}\dot{a}r\dot{5}$ 5	$[l\dot{1}ly\dot{a}:r\dot{5}]$
finger-nail	$*-\dot{j}\dot{a}d\dot{a}$ 11	$-\dot{j}\dot{a}l\dot{a}$ 11	$[l\dot{1}lw\dot{a}:l\dot{a}]$
tooth	$*-\dot{j}\dot{1}n\dot{5}$ 5	$-\dot{j}\dot{1}n\dot{5}$ 5	$[l\dot{1}l\dot{1}:n\dot{5}]$

In short one can conclude that none of the consonant initial nominal stems that are attested in this corpus provide convincing proof for a -CVCV stem reconstruction. The nominal stem $*-\dot{a}t\dot{5}$ 'canoe' in gender 14-6 seems to account for all contemporary reflexes.

In (5) some of the most common sound correspondences have been listed :

(5)

Language	S.C.	Reflex of * $\text{-át}\delta$	Meaning
Kwanyama R21	*a > a	$\text{-át}\delta$ 14-6+14	canoe
Duala A24	*a > ɔ	$\text{-ɔl}\delta$ 14-4	canoe
Kele C55	*t > t	wátδ 14-6	canoe
Mbuun B87	*t > r	bwár 14	canoe
Puku A32	*t > l	$\text{-ál}\delta$ 14-4	canoe
Ngongo B80	*t > d	-àd 14-6+14	canoe
Pogoro G51	*ɔ > ɔ	$\text{-at}\delta$ 14-6	boat
Seki B21	*ɔ = i	$\text{-wát}\int\text{i}$ 5Ø-6	canoe
Ewondo A72a	*H-L > H-L	-â l 14-6	boat
Luba sh L33	*H-L > L-H	$\text{-à t}\delta$ 14-6	canoe, boat
Punu B43	*H-L > H-H	$\text{-á á t}\acute{u}$ 14-6	canoe
Sukuma F21	*H-L > L-L	$\text{-à t}\delta$ 14-6	canoe

I have already mentioned that, although reflexes of the nominal stem * $\text{-át}\delta$ are widely used throughout the Bantu domain, two main centres of lexical innovation exist. On the east coast and in the regions further inland numerous reflexes of the noun °ngalawa have been found.

(6)

Language	Noun	Meaning	Source
Nyamwezi F22	ngalava 5-6	boat, canoe	(Maganga, 1992)
Pare G22	ngàlāwā 9-10	canoe	(Kagaya, 1989, 146)
Swahili G42	ngarawa 9-10/6	outrigger canoe	(Sacleux, 1891, 732)
Makonde P23	ingalava 9-10	boat, canoe	(Guerreiro, 1963, np)
Tswa S51	yingalava 9-10	sail-boat	(Persson, nd, 104)

This loanword from Mahrati, an Indian language, has been adopted together with the object it originally designed, a double outrigger canoe. Swahili, as a commercial language and as the language of naval specialists, has without any doubt played an intermediary role in the ensuing dispersion of this nominal stem throughout the region. During this dispersal the stem progressively lost its more specific meaning and has come to design different types of boats and canoes, with or without sails.

On the opposite side of the continent one finds two independent innovations : °-bɛŋgð and °-lɔŋgð. The first one, °-bɛŋgð, is attested in a widespread area coinciding with the banks of the river Congo and its tributaries. Reflexes are attested in zones A, B, C, H and R, as noted in (7).

(7) Reflexes of °-bɛŋgð 'canoe':

Language	Nominal stem	Meaning	Source
Basaa A43	-ðŋgɔ̃ 3-4	canoe	(Letac, 46)
Wumbvu B24	-búúŋgù 9-6+9	canoe	(Jacquot, 1983, 230)
Bobangi C32	-éŋgð 14-6	canoe	(Whitehead, 1899, 286)
Suku H32	-búŋgú 9-10	boat	(Piper, 1977, 112)
Umbundu R11	-pungu 14-8	boat	(Da Costa, 1894, 12)

Except for the identity of its vowels, whose reconstruction remains quite arbitrary, the formal reconstruction of this regional nominal stem is certain. But what about its meaning ? The nominal stems in (7) all design canoes or boats, but when observing neighbouring languages in (8) one notices a similar nominal stem which designates 'a harbour' or 'a beach'.

(8) Reflexes of °-bɔŋgð 'beach':

Language	Nominal stem	Meaning	Source
Yansi B85	-bongo 5-6	harbour	(Nguma, 1986, 202)
Lingala C36d	-bɔŋgð 5-6	riverside	(V. Everbroeck, '85, 85)
Lega D25	-bɔŋgð 5-6	riverside	(Terashima, 1991, 22)
Mbala H41	-bùùŋgù 13-11	beach	(Mudindaambi, '81, 663)

These two different sets of meanings are in fact very close to one another. *-átɔ̃ being the proto-nominal stem for 'canoe' and the distribution area of reflexes of °-bɔŋgð 'beach' being much larger than the one of °-bɛŋgð 'canoe', the new meaning of °-bɛŋgð 'canoe' has probably been derived from °-bɔŋgð 'beach'. The hypothetical procedure of this semantic change is shown in (9).

(9)

°-bɔŋgð : 'beach' → 'where the canoes are' → 'at the canoes' → 'canoe'.

Another innovation has taken place in the region of the Congo Delta. In zones B, C, H and K one finds numerous reflexes of the nominal stem °-lɔŋɡo. Some of these reflexes can be found under (10).

(10) Reflexes of °-lɔŋɡo 'canoe':

Language	Nominal stem	Meaning	Source
Laali B73b	-lɔ́ŋɡɔ̃ 5Ø-6	canoe	(Bissila, 1991, 11)
Bobangi C32	-lɔ̃ŋɡɔ̃ 3-4	large canoe	(Whitehead, 1899, 286)
Suundi H13b	-lɔ̀ŋɡũ 14-6	canoe	(Baka, comm.)
Ciokwe K11	-lɔŋɡu 11	large boat	(Mac Jannet, 1949, 8)

Contrary to °-béŋɡɔ̃ which seems to have adopted a generic meaning, for °-lɔŋɡo one often finds the more specific meaning of 'a large canoe'. Some languages do still use a reflex of *-á t̃ɔ̃ as the generic term while they have adopted °-lɔŋɡo with this more specific meaning. Once again one needs to question the origin of this lexical innovation. Mbala, another language of zone H, has a similar nominal stem -lɔ̀ŋɡũ which signifies 'a tree with sticky sap':

(11) Reflexes of °-lɔŋɡo 'Symphonia Globulifera':

Language	Nominal stem	Meaning	Source
Kundu A11c	-lɔŋɡo	Symphonia Globulifera	(Tailfer, 1989, 637)
Tetela C71	-lɔ́ŋɡɔ̃ 3-4	Symphonia Globulifera	(Hagendorens, 1975, 285)
North Binja D24	-rɔŋɡu 7-8	Symphonia Globulifera	(Tailfer, 1989, 637)
Mbala H41	-lɔ̀ŋɡũ 5-6	a tree with sticky sap	(Mudindaambi, 1981, 780)
Ngangela K12b	-lɔŋɡu 3-4	a tree with good wood	(Balao, 1939, 93)

With the help of dr. Beeckman of the Africa Museum of Tervuren I was able to identify this tree, which is named °-lɔŋɡo in Bantu languages, as *Symphonia Globulifera*, and soon noticed that the area of distribution of °-lɔŋɡo 'canoe' fits entirely within the area of distribution of this tree on the African continent. *Symphonia Globulifera* grows from the Gulf of Guinea up to Kisangani in the East, while the distribution of reflexes of °-lɔŋɡo 'canoe' is limited to the west of this area.

This tree possesses an essential quality for boatbuilding. While its diameter of about 1m doesn't allow canoes to be carved from its trunk, its sap, once it has solidified, forms an excellent waterproof coating for canoes. One can thus imagine that this nominal stem °-lɔŋɡo originally signified '*Symphonia Globulifera*'. Boat-building people probably soon began to name the waterproofing technique after the origin of the sap they used. The progressive dispersal of this kind of treated canoes to non-maritime peoples can have caused the latter to name the canoe itself after the technique.

When one compares the distribution maps of both °-bɛŋgɔ̃ and °-lɔŋgɔ, their complementarity is quite remarkable. In this corpus I found only one language, Bobangi, that possesses reflexes of both nominal stems. The Bobangi live alongside the river Ubangi and are aquatic specialists. At the end of the nineteenth century their language was spoken alongside the western part of the Congo river into the Kongo area. It is thus not an unlikely hypothesis that Bobangi as a widely-used trade language influenced neighbouring languages in their maritime vocabulary.

Another type of innovation of nominal stems for 'canoe' needs to be mentioned here. In different Bantu languages, the formal analogies between containers and boats caused speakers to use one word to name both objects. This can be compared to the English situation where the word 'vessel' signifies both 'container' and 'boat'. Some examples are shown in (12).

(12) Analogy container - boat :

Language	Noun	Meaning	Source
Nen A44	ĩsɔ̃y 7-8	wooden dish - canoe	(Dugast, 1967, 87)
Mpongwe B11a	owaro 14-6 epele z'owaro	canoe oval dish	(Walker, 1939, 476)
Sangu B42	-búŋgù 9-2+10 -búŋgù 7-8	canoe pot	(Ondo, 1988, 344)
Swahili G44	chombo 7-8	container - boat	(Sacleux, 1891, 98)

Conclusion

In general, Bantu languages seem to have well conserved the proto-Bantu nominal stem $*-á t \delta$. Its reflexes are so largely attested throughout the whole of the Bantu domain that it is worthwhile to check if traces of this stem can be found in other branches of the Benue-Congo or even Niger-Congo family. In (13) one notices that the proto-Benue-Congo reconstruction is closely related to the proto-Bantu nominal stem. The nouns found in some Kwa and Voltaic languages even seem to suggest a possible Niger-Congo history for this nominal stem, but this hypothesis has to be verified with more and more recent data.

(13) Nominal stems in Niger-Congo languages :

Family	Language	Noun	Source
Benue-Congo	Proto-Yukuben-Kutep	*ku-yat canoe	(Shimizu, 1971, 185)
	Tiv	t s̄ ð boat	(Terpstra, 1968, 10)
	Proto-Benue-Congo	*bu-atumu canoe	(De Wolf, 1971, 57)
Kwa	Izon	á r ũ boat	(Williamson, 1983, 10)
	Udso	arɔ canoe	(Koelle, 1854, 94-95)
Voltaic	Moore	arɔngɔ canoe	(op. cit. p. 94-95)
	Gurma	bíāru canoe	(op. cit. p. 94-95)

Next to the more conservative Bantu languages two main centers of lexical innovation have been identified, one on the Swahili coast, and one in the area delimited by the loop of the river Congo in Western-Central Africa. Especially in the latter case, Bantu languages indigenous innovations force us to take into account the importance of the environment and the influence of specialists, in this case boat-builders, on neighbouring languages.

Annelies Bulkens
Linguistics Dept.
Africa Museum
B-3080 Tervuren
BELGIUM

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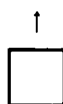
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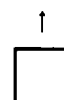
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Toll Free: 800-799-3742
FAX: 301-953-0263
e-mail: ericfac@inet.ed.gov
WWW: http://ericfac.piccard.csc.com*

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(Rev. 9/97)

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