

**THE UNITY OF AFRICAN ANCIENT
HISTORY: 3000 BC TO AD 500**

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CHAPTER THREE

PROBLEMS IN THE STUDY OF ANCIENT AFRICA

IT WAS SUGGESTED in Chapter One that this work focuses on the subject of ancient African culture and trade; and that Africa South of the Sahara was not isolated from the northern parts of Africa due to its location within the territories of Punt, Panchea and Azania which were well known in North Africa. To this end, Egypt and other North African civilisations did not only integrate with the Mediterranean, but with the rest of Africa as well.

It should be noted first that, all attempts by scholars of historical studies to understand how Africa South of the Sahara was peopled in ancient times based their conclusions on studying cultural aspects of a number of distinct groups within Africa without making any reference to ancient records. Since ancient records offer hints on how Africa was peopled, what the rest of scholarship was supposed to do was to corroborate their findings with those records. For instance, while the larger part of Africa south of the Mediterranean belt is reported in ancient records to have been peopled by "Ethiopians", literally meaning dark skinned people, the modern study has denied the existence of such people in the northern parts of Africa, i.e. the Nile Valley. Even in the larger region of the Sub-Saharan Africa, "Ethiopians" in the form of Bantu speakers and Nilotes are speculated to have arrived there only after the BC/AD changeover. The larger region outside the West African forest areas, thought to have been home to "Ethiopians"/"Negroid" people by ancient travellers, is said in most of the modern scholarship to be the home of "Caucasians" and "Capoids".

In relation to this general problem, debates emerged on how particular African ancient polities such as Egypt, Cush, Swahili, Songhai and Zimbabwe were peopled and whether the founders of such civilisations were "Ethiopians" or people of other races. Probably the two persistent problems in the study of ancient Africa are: the attempts to establish the identity of the people who founded the Egyptian civilisation and to explain the spread of "Ethiopians" or Bantu Speakers into Sub-Saharan Africa. There have been several other interesting peopling problems, including how Khoisan speakers came to populate Southwest Africa and how people of Austronesian origin settled in Madagascar.

It is not within the scope of this work to enter into the debate about the origin of the ancient Egyptians. It does, however, provide data on how this ancient civilisation was culturally and linguistically linked to Sub-Saharan Africa. It would seem that, until very recently, most scholars, probably from the time of Flinders Petrie (see Trigger 1989:154), supported the colonial thesis that Egypt belonged to non-Africans; and that even if its founders were thought to have been Africans, they were thought to have been non-"Ethiopians". "The impetus for all change in Egypt was seen as the result of invasions and migrations from Asia, the Near East, and even Europe" (Marks & Mohammed-Ali 1991: 7).

After this thesis was strongly questioned by Martin Bernal (1978 in several volumes) and by Cheikh Anta Diop (1981a&b; see also Diop et al, 1997), most scholars began to consider the possibility that Africans, including "Ethiopians", could have been the founders of Dynastic Egypt. Bernal proposed that the rise of black slavery and racism was the philosophical foundation upon which European scholars hijacked not only the Egyptian civilisation, but also the other African civilisations from Africans. He suggested that the "ancient model" prior to the 1830s, which derived its evidence from ancient records, left no doubt that the Egyptian civilisation belonged to Africans (Bernal 1987, Vol. 1).

In a similar vein, Diop argued that Egyptians were none other than Africans similar to those dominating the rest of West Africa and the southern half of Africa.

Ancient Egypt was a Negro civilisation. The history of Black Africa will remain suspended in air and cannot be written correctly until African historians dare to connect it with the history of Egypt (Diop 1997: 725).

It must be noted here that this author will only add evidence to that already provided by previous scholars. Bernal (1987), for example, has already provided the best conclusions needed for the understanding of the problem. It is in this regard therefore, that this work will not concern itself with discussing the background to the Egyptian question. There are other basic issues, however, that will be addressed in this work whose background is provided in the next chapter. Thus, this chapter will address four interrelated problems:

The first problem pertains to the origin and spread of the Bantu speakers who are presently found in the larger part of Sub-Sahara Africa. The Bantu speakers are also known to have been responsible for the Early Iron Working traditions, hence the study of their origin and spread dominated African scholarship of the 20th Century. The most influential explanation of how the Bantu speakers came to be here they are found today comes from linguists. The thesis advanced by Christopher Ehret (1998; 2000) is the most current. According to Ehret, Bantu speakers are thought to have spread from Niger-Cameroon before 1000 BC. The proto-Bantu speakers, also known as Kordofanian, are also thought to be the ancestors of populations extending from the Nile to West Africa across Chad. Their movement is said to have traversed across the Congo forest up to the Great Lakes Region after 1000 BC where they found established communities of Nilo-Sahelians who passed to these Bantu incomers elements of agriculture, iron technology, domestication of animals and house styles. It is the adoption of techno-cultural knowledge and skills by the incoming Bantu speakers that is said to have distinguished them from those who did not reach the Great Lakes Region hence the distinction between the western and the eastern Bantu speakers. The latter are better known as the *Mashariki* and this implies that they never existed in East Africa until the BC/AD changeover.

At around the BC/AD changeover, the *Mashariki* are thought to have initiated another movement across the modern Central Tanzania to the coast and then down to Southern Africa. This particular movement is interesting because its migrants are

said to have borrowed more from an already existing Eastern Sahelian or Cushitic population that is alleged to have already spread to Southern Africa. This further movement of the *Mashariki* to the south was restricted to the coastal hinterland because it is suggested that different peoples, the Cushites and the Austraneans, already occupied the coastal strip making it difficult for the Bantu speakers to traverse, settle or take over the coast and the islands. There are other further movements of Bantu speakers southwards, thought to have occurred at about BC/AD changeover, from the Great Lakes region and the Atlantic coast to population Southwestern Africa. The whole scenario presented above would suggest, therefore, that the cultural developments on the larger region South of the Sahara dating before BC/AD changeover cannot possibly be attributed to the Bantu speakers.

The second problem pertains to the existence of Pastoral Neolithic sites in the F Valley and the nearby regions of Kenya and Tanzania. These are thought to have originated from the north-eastern parts of Africa or beyond; or from the Sahelian part of the Nile Valley and Sudan and hence, non-Bantu speakers. Both linguists and historians have contributed explanations on this origin and spread. Pockets of modern populations speaking Nilotic and Cushitic languages have been thought to be remnants of a population that once settled in the larger part of East Africa in the last three millennia BC. Ehret (1998) suggests that this population had spread as far as modern Zimbabwe, and had passed sophisticated techno-cultural aspects to the incoming Bantu speakers.

Archaeologists have regarded these populations as pastoral in culture and Neolithic in technology. In their view, the modern pockets of communities speaking Nilotic and Cushitic languages reflect the ancient distribution of a once larger population with southern limits around Lake Eyasi in northern Tanzania, Kilimanjaro in the east and parts of Serengeti/Masai Mara in the west (Bower and Nelson 1978; Ambrose 1982, 1984; Robertshaw 1990). According to Phillipson (1993:156-157):

...the area where the former presence of the Southern Cushitic-speakers is attested approximately the same as that covered by the distribution of sites which have yielded evidence for domestic animals at this time. It therefore seems reasonable to accept as a working hypothesis the view that most if not all the inhabitants of the sites were speakers of Southern Cushitic languages.

Another part of the second problem is the spread of people of Cushitic characteristics to the rest of North and West Africa. Probably the most acceptable position is that which suggests that the Cushites are of Asiatic origin or borne out of interaction between Asiatics and Africans (see MacEachern 2000). Another strong argument is that the Cushites are a branch of Afro-Asiatic population with its origin in areas of the Horn of Africa and that it is from here that Lybico-Berbers, Chad people and ancient Egyptians originated (see Bernal 1996 Vol 2). Further discussion on this question is provided in Coon (1965) and Cavalli-Sforza (2001). Its further insights into this discussion are provided in Chapter Ten.

The third problem, which is related to the second one, is the speculation that the settlements and population on the coast of East Africa reported in the Roman documents such as the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* and Claudius Ptolemy's *Geographia* were Cushitic in nature and that the Bantu speaking population came to the coast later, probably after the 3rd Century AD (Horton 1990 (see modified view in Horton and Middleton 2000); Sutton 1994-5 (see his changed view in 1998); Ehret 1998).¹

On the other hand, the Austraneans were thought to have come to eastern Africa between the BC/AD changeover and AD 300 bringing with them Asiatic crops and other techno-cultural aspects. It is either the Austraneans or the Cushites who are alleged to have founded the coastal trading towns, such as Rhapta, mentioned in the Roman documents. From these towns, packages brought from Asia were passed onto the Bantu speakers in the interior and, through them, spread to the rest of Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent scholarship has suggested the Kenyan coast as the location of Rhapta so that it is closer to the Cushitic populations of Northeast Kenya and Somalia (Horton, 1990; Ehret, 1998).

The fourth problem is the one that considers Khoisan speakers to have been the dominant population in Sub-Saharan Africa up to the BC/AD changeover when they were allegedly replaced by the incoming Bantu speakers (see Ehret, 1998: 92). In a colonial or traditional archaeological model (see Ambrose, 1983: 107-108), Khoisan speakers are associated with hunting and gathering modes of production and Neolithic technology, as opposed to the Bantu speakers, who are associated with agriculture and iron technology and the Sahelians, who are associated with a pastoral lifestyle. Khoisan speakers are also linked with rock shelters and caves in which they are alleged to have painted or engraved (Lewis-Williams, 1983).

It has been a commonly held opinion that people of click languages or their ancestors have not or could not have settled permanently in a place, associated with domesticated animals, or produced any writing. When such aspects are found in an area thought to have been settled by them then it is thought that the area had been settled interchangeably with other races or that a borrowing from Bantu speakers or people of Sahelian origin had occurred. This is believed to be the manner in which Khoisan speakers of Southern Africa became pastoralists, as explained by Ehret in his most recent work:

From Northeastern Botswana southward, the further spread of livestock raising was carried forward by the descendants of the early Khwe. Their encounter with Eastern Sahelians, it can be suggested, precipitated the adoption of domestic animals, possibly initially sheep only but, certainly soon afterward, cattle, by at least some of the Khwe and by their Khoikhoi descendants (Ehret, 1998: 217-218).

It is not only domestication of animals that was thought to have been passed on to the "Bushmanoid", but other aspects as well, such as ceramics (see Reid et al 1998: 95).

In addressing the fourth problem, the constant mention in various literatures of the existence of Khoisan speakers or their cultural elements in North Africa mainly in the

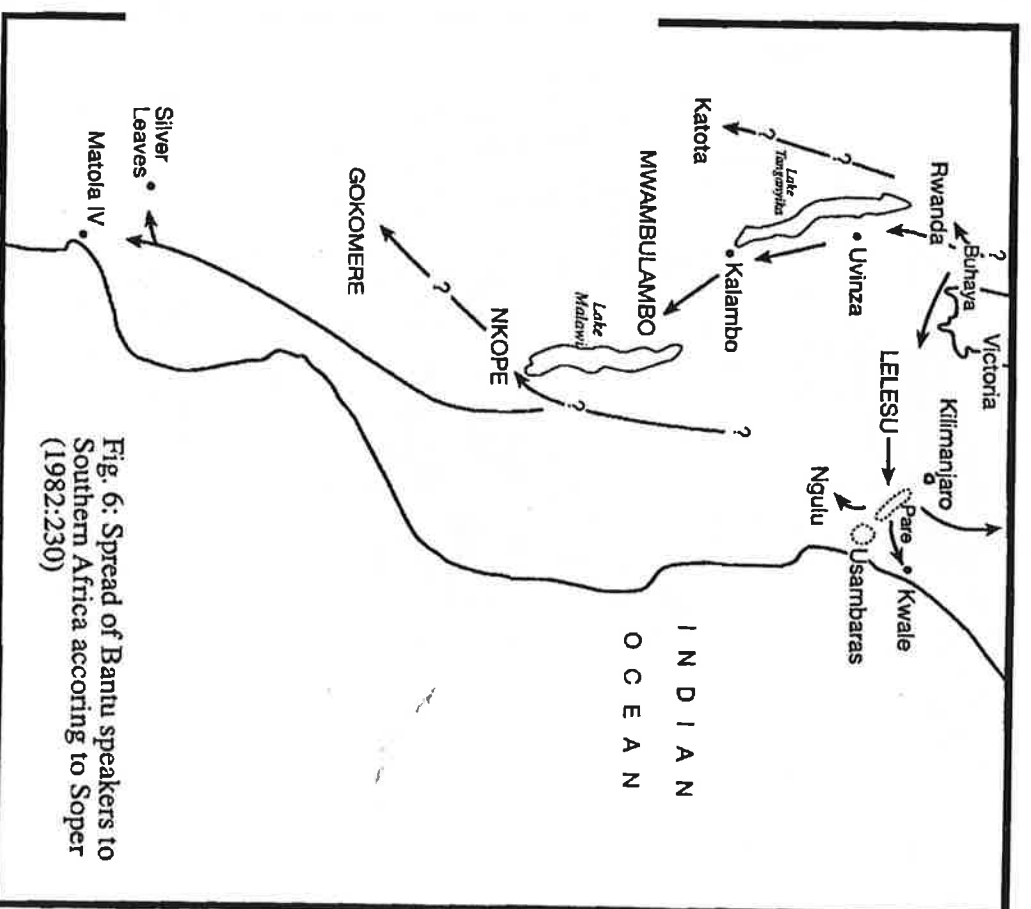


Fig. 6: Spread of Bantu Speakers to Southern Africa According to Soper (1982: 230)

Saharan region will also be tackled. There has not been a satisfactory explanation as to how relics of a population known to be dominant in Southern Africa would also have been present in such great numbers in North Africa. Willcox (1984) has noted this consistently in relation to parietal records:

Among the earliest Egyptians, however, traces had been found of 'Bushmen', some of whose characteristics were modified as a result of their becoming acclimatized to Mediterranean ecological conditions. Even today, there were vestiges of this 'Bushman' type in the population of Egypt. A Negro culture did not really appear prior to the Neolithic period (see Leclant in Driop, 1981: 63).

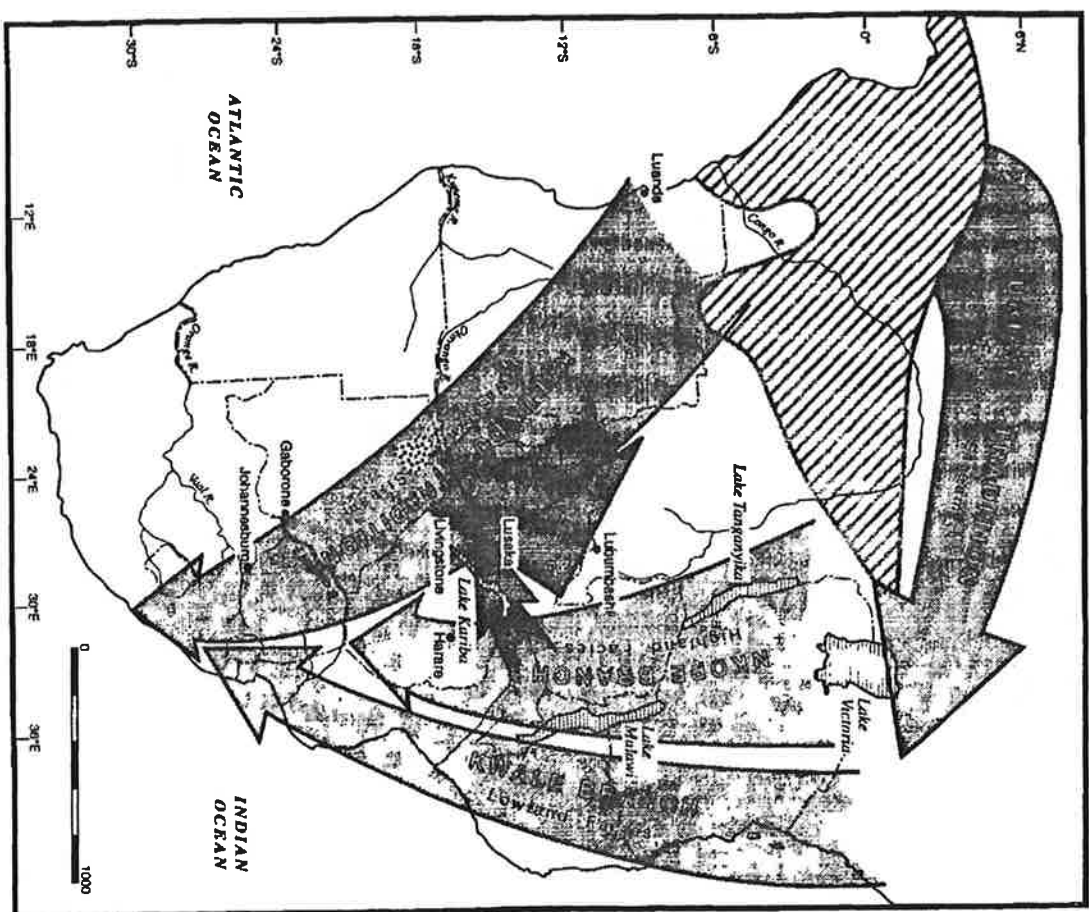


Fig. 7: Spread of Bantu Speakers to Southern Africa According to Huffman and Herbert (1994-5)

It should be noted here that, in this work the solving of the above stated problems will go hand in hand with the solving of a few other related problems not covertly stated in this chapter. For instance, review of ancient literature reveals that early scholars viewed Dynastic Egypt as a civilisation of the "Ethiopians" while Bantu speakers' etymology provides corroborating evidence of etymons similar to those

recorded in ancient Egyptian records. Old and new data will be used in this work explain how Sub-Saharan Africa was peopled in ancient times, and at the same time shed some light into the peopling of Ancient Egypt. Also in trying to understand how Sub-Saharan Africa was peopled the problem of where territories such as Panchaea, and Azania were located will be solved. The dating of ancient African cultural materials will be correlated with the dating of the ancient records referred to these territories as belonging to "Ethiopians".