

Bantu Migratory Routes into Kenya and Tanzania: Implications on Luyia Dialects Classification

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The Bantu peoples are an ethnolinguistic grouping of distinct native African ethnic groups who speak Bantu languages. They are native to the countries of East Africa, Central Africa, West Africa and Southern Africa. The savannah and rain forest regions of the Niger River in West Africa (Nigeria, Cameroon, and Gabon) was their heartland. They had the technology to create iron from iron ore, but where this came from is debatable. This was and still is the classic identifier of the Bantu. From the Niger River area, they migrated across the Sub-Saharan region concurrently in diverse tangents. Some groups of the Bantu migrated via Central Africa into the Great Lakes region of East Africa. Historians and Linguistics have attempted to trace the migratory routes of Bantus in Kenya by appropriating historical linguistics, lexicostatistics and observation of the relative closeness of local language(s) to each other plus the language(s) originally spoken by the Bantu people of the Niger River area. Its noteworthy, however, that the passage of a language may not necessarily reflect the migration of its speakers as evidenced by the fact that Bantu languages and aspects of Bantu culture were adopted, although the migrants equally learnt from other indigenous peoples. From Southern West Africa (the West Bantu) and the Great Rift Valley of East Africa (the East Bantu) two streams of Bantu peoples then moved further south in a second wave of migration which occurred during the 1st millennium BCE. The Abaluhya sub-groups which moved to Western Kenya from Eastern Uganda were possibly the earliest settlers in the lake region. This could probably explain the relatedness of the Luyia dialects spoken along the Kenya - Uganda boarder, with some dialects on the Ugandan side while majority remain spoken on the Kenyan side. Inferential lingua-histo-lexicology points to the fact that Abaluhya and Gusii people represent the spearhead of migration into the region. The two represent descendants of possibly the earliest Bantu groups to have arrived in Kenya. These groups did not live in isolation from each other they had various levels of interaction thus practicing convergence and conversion. Could this also explain the relatedness between Loogoli, (a Luyia dialect) and Ekegusii, which share similarities in a number of diachronic processes? The period between 1500 and 1850 saw the migration of many Bantu clans and families from Eastern Uganda into Western Kenya. The classification of Luyia dialect division still remains a puzzle, especially on the concept of north versus south. Using data collected from 19 Luyia dialects, this paper explores factors that may form the basis of explaining the dissimilarities among Luyia dialect lexical words through the lenses of the migration journey into Western Kenya. A 500 word list modified from the original Guthrie list was used to collect data from the following Luyia dialects: Logooli, Idaxo, Isuxa, Tiriki, Kisa, Bukusu, Kabras, Saamia, Wanga, Xaayo, Marachi, Nyala A, Nyala B, Tsotso, Tura, Tachoni, Nyore, Marama, Gisu and Maasaba. It is hoped that discussions on explanations of Luyia dissimilarities will shed light on the Luyia classification puzzle.