

New insights into the genetic history of Bantu speakers in Africa thanks to UGent research

Bantu is the largest language family in Africa. More than 350 million people speak one or more of the approximately 500 Bantu languages today. This family includes Lingala, Kiswahili, Kikongo, Ciluba, Kinyarwanda and Kirundi, languages also spoken a lot in Belgium and Europe.

In a new interdisciplinary study in *Nature*, an international group of scientists confirms that the spread of this language family, which started in West Africa about 5,000 years ago, was mainly driven by human migration. Migrating Bantu speakers spread their languages and new ways of life throughout central, eastern and southern Africa. In the process, they established intensive contacts with populations speaking other languages who already lived in those regions, such as hunter-gatherers in the Congo rainforest and the Kalahari Desert. Most contemporary Bantu speakers have distant ancestors originating from West Africa, while a minority are descended from local populations. The expansion of Bantu languages and their speakers dramatically transformed the linguistic, cultural and biological landscape of Africa.

This new study is based primarily on modern genetic data from 1763 individuals, including 1526 Bantu speakers from 147 different language communities in 14 different African countries, as well as ancient genetic data (aDNA) from 12 individuals from the Late Iron Age. More than one-third of the new data comes from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), previously underrepresented in evolutionary genetic studies. Together with their Congolese partners, the Ghent research teams of Prof. Koen Bostoen (BantUGent, Department of Languages and Cultures, Faculty of Arts and Philosophy) and Prof. Joris Delanghe (Department of Diagnostic Sciences, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences) collected modern genetic data. These genetic data were analyzed at the University of Uppsala (Sweden) under the direction of Prof. Carina Schlebusch.

Africanist and linguist Koen Bostoen, who leads interdisciplinary research on the deep history of Central Africa: "Our study shows that Congo was crucial for the migration and settlement of Bantu language communities even before the start of our era. It represents an important impetus to better understanding a distant past that also concerns many new Belgians."

Clinical biologist Joris Delanghe, who coordinates medical research in eastern Congo: "The dataset at the basis of this study will also play a prominent role in future research on health issues which different regions in Congo face."

More info:

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The full study can be consulted at <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-023-06770-6>