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PROTO-BANTU DESCENT GROUPS

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¹ Before his death, Hage and I had only corresponded and conversed about this present chapter. Here is presented the first draft I saw, as I found it in Hage's papers after his death. I left the work as found but for the addition of Footnotes 2, 7 and 9 and, of course, the present footnote. Two developments since Hage's death should be mentioned. The first is that in both Hage's Proto-Bantu and Proto-Oceanic works, details of the distributional arguments for matrilineality were left to another day. Hage was first occupied with linguistic and lifeway observations (Hage [1998, 1999, 2001], Hage and Marck [2001, 2002, 2003], Marck, Hage, Bostoen, and Kamba Muzenga [this volume] and in this present chapter). I have since emphasized the distributional evidence in favor of Proto-Oceanic society matrilineality (Marck forthcoming) and in favor of Proto-East Bantu matrilineality (Marck and Bostoen this volume). The second development since Hage's death is my growing respect for Divale's (1974, 1984) thesis of recurring shifts in human societies to uxorilocality and thence matrilocality upon migration (and the common devolvement thence, over one, two and three thousand years, of the matrifocal institutions). I assign a central significance to this in both the Oceanic (Marck forthcoming) and East Bantu (Marck and Bostoen this volume) situations. Hage (1998:374), in a paper on Proto-Oceanic society mentioned Divale (1974) and may have been aware of Divale (1984). In suggesting a "why" for Proto-Bantu matrilineality we mention, in the present posthumous chapter, only absence of males due to hunting and not Divale's "uxorilocality upon migration" theme.

Abstract

In Paths in the Rainforest Vansina (1990) argues on the basis of historical linguistic evidence that early Bantu society was organized around 'houses' headed by big men and united by an ideology of cognatic descent. The purpose of this paper is to suggest, on the basis of historical linguistic and cross-cultural evidence, that Proto-Bantu society had unilineal descent groups probably in the form of low-level matrilineal chiefdoms.

[Proto-Bantu society, descent groups, house societies,
historical linguistics]

PROTO-BANTU DESCENT GROUPS

In Paths in the Rainforest Vansina (1990) argues on the basis of historical linguistic evidence that Proto-Western Bantu and Proto-Bantu society had cognatic ('undifferentiated') descent groups. Cognatic descent provided a convenient ideology for 'Houses' established by local 'Big Men' and it proved adaptive during the early Bantu expansion into the equatorial rainforest (Vansina 1990). Unilineal descent was a later 18th and 19th century development suited to the altered material and political circumstances of many Bantu societies – wealth and disorder – and hence corporate descent groups. We propose, on the basis of historical linguistic, cross-cultural and comparative ethnographic evidence that Proto-Bantu and Proto-Western Bantu society had unilineal descent groups and we suggest that the mixed agricultural and hunting economy of early Bantu society would have favored matrilineal descent groups in particular.

Proto-Bantu Kin Terms and Descent Groups

In Vansina's reconstruction of Bantu history Proto-Bantu society originated in the Benue Valley region of Nigeria

some time before 3000 BC. On the basis of glottochronology and archaeology, Vansina (1990:52-3) dates the split into Western and Eastern Bantu languages around 3000 BC². The Bantu expansion eastward into the equatorial rainforest and southward began a millennium later. The early Bantu economy was based primarily on yam cultivation and hunting; cereals and iron tools came later. The dates and the status of Western and Eastern Bantu languages are open to question. Ehret (1998) reconstructs a gradual differentiation of the Bantu languages consistent with an unfolding agricultural expansion from Cameroon into favorable parts of the rainforest reaching the western fringe of the woodland savanna (Proto-Savanna Bantu) in the second millennium BC and the western border of the Western Rift (Proto-Mashariki) before 1000 BC. But there is general agreement on the location of the Bantu homeland (Greenberg 1963), the direction of the Bantu expansion and the nature of the early Bantu economy.

According to Vansina Proto-Western Bantu and by extension Proto-Bantu society was organized on the basis of 'Houses' established by competing 'Big Men' supported by their relatives, friends, clients and dependents. Houses were units of production varying in size from 10-40 individuals and in longevity, sometimes dissolving upon the death of a

² Neither Hage nor I had seen Vansina (1995) prior to Hage's death. But Vansina (1995) didn't speak to the "house" versus "lines" arguments which was Hage's main purpose in mentioning Vansina (1990). - J.

big man and sometimes continuing into the next generation under new leadership. Houses were united by an ideology or fiction of cognatic ('undifferentiated') descent³. As evidence for cognatic descent Vansina cites a cluster of Proto-Bantu (PB) lexical reconstructions from Guthrie (1967-71)⁴.

The strongest evidence for undifferentiated descent are terms derived from the verb 'to give birth to' (CS 208) and other derivations such as 'relative' (CS 210:5) and 'seed' (CS 211). These include 'House' (ps 50 [3:67]) and many more reflexes not noted by Guthrie which prove that this derived term is Proto-Western Bantu. People did not think or act in terms of unilineal descent... Consequently, free men had a wide choice as to the establishment they cared to join.

Vansina (1990:75)

According to Vansina, etymologies for terms for 'House' in Proto-Western Bantu (PWB) is neutral with respect to gender

Marck

³ 'Undifferentiated' descent (from Lévi-Strauss 1969) and 'bilateral' descent in Vansina are synonyms for cognatic descent.

⁴ In Guthrie's Comparative Bantu a C.S.--Comparative Series--'is a list of items with two distinguishing features: (a) each item has the same assignable meaning, which acts as a connector of the C.S.; (b) the shapes of the items display sets of patterns that recur in other C.S.' (Guthrie 1967-71:17). P.S. refers to 'partial series.'

and hence descent was neither male (patrilineal) nor female (matrilineal):

The etymology of terms for 'House' does not usually refer to gender as one would expect in unilineal descent situations. The etymologies found refer to 'house', 'bed', 'hearth', 'hearthstones', 'plaza of authority', 'offspring of', 'grandchild of', 'species', 'root', 'shield' and 'communal shed'.

Vansina (1990:319).

Vansina is skeptical that kinship terminology can be used to infer the structure of descent groups. He classifies PWB and PB kinship terminology as "bifurcating Hawaiian" with separate terms for cross-relatives in the parents' generation (MB and FZ)⁵ and a single term for all relatives in ego's generation including siblings and cousins. Vansina observes that the bifurcating feature fits with unilineal descent but the Hawaiian feature fits with undifferentiated (cognatic) descent.⁶

Contrary to the assumption made by Vansina, to establish whether Proto-Bantu and Proto-Western Bantu society had

⁵ The following kin term abbreviations are used: F father, M mother, B brother, Z sister, C child, ms male speaking, ws female speaking, FB father's brother, MZ mother's sister and so forth.

⁶ Vansina limits his remarks on bifurcation to Crow and Omaha-type terminologies, i.e. terminologies which have intergenerational skewing. Many unilineal societies have neither Crow nor Omaha terminologies. The

unilineal descent groups much can be learned through knowledge of the parents' generation kin terms⁷. In her dissertation on Bantu kinship Laumanns (1941) gives the following PB terms, which according to Vansina apply to PWB as well:

great majority of unilineal societies in the Ethnographic Atlas (Murdock 1967) have Iroquois terminologies.

⁷Here I have changed Hage's wording in which the sentence originally ended with "...it is only necessary to know the terminology of the parents' generation." This is the only change I made to the manuscript with the exception of adding Footnotes 1, 2 and 9. - J. Marck

-vava, ta: F, FB
 -ma, nina: M, MZ
 -ma -luma: MB, lit. 'male mother'
 -ta -kalî, -nali, nkali: FZ, lit. 'female father'
 -ana, yana: C
 '-ipwa, -ipua ZCms, BCws

Laumanns states explicitly that the terms for F and M are extended to FB and MZ respectively: "In the classificatory sense, the parallel relatives on the father's side [FB] and mother's side [MZ] belong to the parents' class" (Laumanns 1941:13).⁸ In the classification of Lowie (1948) PB and PWB kinship terminology is bifurcate merging in type: $F = FB \cdot MB$, $M = MZ \cdot FZ$. (It is not necessary for our purpose, but terms in the child's generation are also bifurcate merging: $C = BCms = ZCws \cdot ZCms = BCws$.) Intuitively, bifurcate merging terminology reflects a rule of unilineal descent since it separates patrilineal from matrilineal relatives. Cross-culturally, as shown in Table 1, bifurcate merging terminology is strongly associated with unilineal – either patrilineal or matrilineal – descent. The few exceptions in Table 1 are best interpreted as survivals of earlier unilineal systems given the lag between changes in descent rules and changes in kinship terminology (Murdock 1949).

⁸ 'Väter in diesem weiteren Sinne sind Vaterbrüder ... Mütter sind Mutterschwestern ...' (Laumanns 1941:13).

Table 1. The relationship between bifurcate merging kinship terminology and descent groups.

type of kinship terminology	descent groups		
	unilineal	cognatic	absent
bifurcate merging (F = FB ≠ MB)	47	0	8
other	63	10	47

Sources: Murdock (1967, 1970), Murdock and White (1969).

The absence of cross-cousin terms in the reconstruction of PB kinship terminology (the Hawaiian feature) can be interpreted as a marking effect. In Greenberg's (1990[1980]) theory of kinship universals, the parents' generation is unmarked as against ego's (and all other) generations. It is an implicational universal that the presence of cross-cousin terms implies the presence of cross-uncle/aunt terms but not conversely. Diachronically interpreted, cross-cousin terms are lost before cross-uncle/aunt terms and hence more difficult to reconstruct (Hage 2001). We assume⁹ that PB or an ancestor of PB had cross-cousin terms to fit with the cross-uncle/aunt terms in the parents' generation and with the cross-nephew/niece terms in the child's generation.

As shown in Table 2 bifurcate merging terminology is also highly correlated with unilocal residence – either

patrilocal or matri-avunculocal residence. Proto-Bantu and Proto-Western Bantu society, with or without 'Houses,' probably had unilineal descent and unilocal residence contrary to Vansina's reconstruction.

Table 2. The relation between bifurcate merging kinship terminology and residence rules.

type of kinship terminology	residence	
	unilocal	non- unilocal
bifurcate merging (F = FB ≠ MB)	49	5
other	103	17

Sources: Murdock (1967, 1970), Murdock and White (1969).

Matrilineal Descent in Early Bantu Society

Vansina argues that cognatic ('bilateral') descent would have been adaptive in early Bantu society given its joint dependence on both agriculture – yam cultivation – and hunting. The first settlers in the rainforest lived..

in the forest where the environment lent itself best to their double preoccupation with hunting and agriculture. They probably lived in an oasis and general demographic pressure remained very low. When

⁹ “[A]ssume” is perhaps too strong a word. - J. Marck

it increased at the center of the oasis emigrants had to adapt to more distant, less favorable environments. Hunting required collective and individual mobility... The kinship model which corresponds best to this state of affairs is bilaterality since it leaves a wide choice [of residence] to the individual male: he can join any of the villages of his four grandparents or even that of his father-in-law.

Vansina (1980:151)

But as we have established, early Bantu society would seem to have been unilineal, not cognatic (bilateral). Male absence due to the continued reliance on hunting favors the presence of matrilineal institutions. In Harris's (1980, 1985) model the development of matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent is favored under conditions of prolonged male absence for purposes of trade, warfare and resource exploitation. In contrast to patrilocal residence and patrilineal descent in which absent husbands must rely on wives "whose alien descent group loyalties override any obligation to [their] husband[s]" (Harris 1980:97), in matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent absent brothers can rely on their sisters to look after their common lineage interests. Ethnographic examples of this model include the Iroquois of the Northeastern Woodlands, the Huron of Ontario (Harris 1980), the Haida of the Northwest Coast of North

America (Hayden 1993) and among colonizing societies the Lapita peoples of the Pacific (Hage and Marck 2003). In Micronesia male mobility in interisland voyaging for purposes of trade and warfare was highly correlated with matrilineal institutions (Hage and Marck 2002). African examples would include the Yao of Malawi, a matrilineal, matrilocal society with prolonged male absence due to trading and slave-raiding expeditions (Mitchell 1956). The Iroquois case is especially pertinent because the development of matrilineal institutions has been linked to the limited adoption of horticulture due to a short growing season and the continued reliance on hunting, fishing, raiding and warfare which entailed prolonged male absence (Trigger 1978). As for the broad choice of descent group affiliation, mobile males are more easily assimilated to matrilineal groups. As Mary Douglas (1969:127) has written with respect to African societies, matrilineal as opposed to patrilineal descent groups have "an open recruitment of talent and manpower."

Conclusion

We conclude on the basis of historical linguistic and cross-cultural evidence that early Proto-Bantu and Proto-Western Bantu society had unilineal, probably matrilineal descent groups. Contrary to Vansina, unilineal descent was not a late - 18th and 19th century - development. Comparative

ethnographic evidence suggests the presence of matrilineal residence in early Bantu society as an adaptation to a mixed agricultural and hunting economy. Our interpretation is consistent with that of Ehret (1998) who has argued, on the basis of PB house and descent group terms and derivations, that PB *-ganda "anciently identified a matriline" rather than a 'house' as Vansina believed. According to Ehret there is a contrasting "strongly reconstructible PB term" for house, *-júbò.

Ehret also contests Vansina's interpretation of PB *-kumu (CS 1265) as meaning 'big man', a leader whose position is achieved rather than inherited (non-chiefly). According to Ehret *-kumu is derived from the PB verb meaning 'to be honored' and meant "'honored person'--most probably a hereditary ritual head of a narrower, lineage grouping of households within the wider kin... [who] continued to have a leadership role in society" (Ehret 1998:149). Ehret's reconstruction suggests the presence of, probably low level, matrilineal chiefdoms in early Bantu society. The early Bantu expansion may have been led not by "young and ambitious" sons of big men as Vansina (1990:55) proposes, but by emigrating junior collaterals of chiefly successors. Oceanic parallels have been posited by Bellwood (1996), Kirch (1997) and Hage (1999).

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