

Kin terms in the East Bantu proto languages: initial findings¹

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¹ Marck began this work as a project of the Health Transition Centre, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, Australian National University in 1997 and was joined by Hage in 1999. Collection of data and initial analysis proceeded until the time of Hage's death in 2004. The present report was completed in December 2005 and January 2006 when Bostoen joined the project and Kamba generously supplied much unpublished data. Marck received institutional support from the Service of Linguistics, Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium in 1997, 1998, 2005 and 2006 and received institutional and financial support for this project from the Centre for Research and Documentation on Oceania, School for Advanced Studies in Social Sciences, Marseille, France (CREDO-EHESS) in 2004. The work was finalised by Marck and Bostoen in Tervuren in January 2006 at which time they began work on Marck and Bostoen (this volume).

Abstract:

A bifurcate merging parental generation terminological system is reconstructed for Proto East Bantu as are a term for 'cross-cousin' and terms for 'parent-in-law' which were, literally, 'cross-cousin's father' and 'cross-cousin's mother'. Because Proto East Bantu, its daughter interstages considered and most of the extant daughter societies have this same kin term system and the modern daughter societies seem universally to have lineage systems, we conclude that the last 2500 years of Proto East Bantu and Proto East Bantu descended social organization was dominated by unilineal societies practicing 'preferential' cross-cousin marriage. This ancient system and its hallmark kin terms survived shifts from matrilineal to patrilineal descent in the instance of those East Bantu subgroups at the northwest and southern fringes of East Bantu's distribution.

The only possible way of answering the question why a particular society has the social system that it does have is by a detailed study of its history over a sufficient period, generally several centuries.

Radcliffe-Brown (1941:16)

Body

The approximately 500 present-day Bantu languages extend from Cameroon in the northwest to southern Somalia in the northeast and into Southern Africa and the limits of the African continent in the south (Map 1). The Bantu group is a branch of Benue-Congo, which is, in its turn, a subgroup of the Niger-Congo phylum (Williamson and Blench 2000:30-36). The Proto Benue-Congo homeland has been tentatively located in the neighbourhood of the Niger-Benue confluence in Nigeria (Williamson 1989:269-272) and Proto Bantu is believed to have been spoken in the vicinity of the Cameroon Grassfields, close to the modern Nigerian border. From there, Bantu speaking peoples are posited to have begun their dispersal some five millennia ago (Nurse and Philippson 2003:164). Proto East Bantu was spoken ca. 500 BC, a date offered on the basis of certain antecedent archaeological traditions first arriving to the East Africa Highlands at about 1000 BC and the apparent spread of descended peoples by 500 BC (cf. Nurse 1999).

Guthrie (1967, 1970a, 1970b, 1971) sub-divided the Bantu languages into 15 distinct zones on the basis of a set of typological and geographical criteria. Given the large number of Bantu languages and the vast area they occupy, such a coding system is very useful for comparative purposes since it allows one to situate a Bantu language according to the zone in which it was grouped. This widely utilized referential tool

has, however, only limited historical value and can by not be considered a demonstrated phylogenetic classification of the Bantu languages. Later studies have therefore tried to revise it to match more with historical linguistic reality. One such revision is zone J, which is a regrouping of part of Guthrie's zones D and E (see Bastin 1978). It is one of the few revisions that is largely though not universally accepted.

Map 1 - here

Dialect areas appear to have spread, overlapped and variously merged or balkanized as the languages' speakers spread. Description is scant for most of the languages and several of Guthrie's zones, especially in the western part of the Bantu area.

Historically speaking, more than a century of comparative linguistic research has led to a better understanding of the Bantu language dispersal, but many questions remain unanswered. As yet, no internal classification of the Bantu languages has reached unanimity (Schadeberg 2003) but Map 1 shows Bastin and Piron's (1999) widely respected estimation of the main groups. A major issue of debate is the position of East Bantu in the genealogical tree, i.e. is it a primary branch or lower level offshoot? In any event, it is widely believed that part of zone D, zones J and E, and the zones to their south (F, G, M, N, P, S, and possibly parts of L and K) form a genetic unity and that "during the last half of the first millennium BC, Bantu-speaking communities spread slowly east and south from the rainforests, gradually becoming the predominant linguistic population of most of subequatorial Africa" (Nurse 1999:2).

Accordingly, the reconstruction of kinship terms to their hypothetical common parent language, i.e. Proto East Bantu, provides evidence of social organization in Eastern Africa some 2500 years ago.

Three of the Guthrie zones in Bastin and Piron's (1999) East Bantu have rather more social organization description than the others and they were the subject, by default, of special study in the present work, although kin terms from all Bantu zones were examined where available. These three zones, J, G and S, show agreements with each other and to external evidence which allow the reconstructions of the Proto East Bantu parental generation and cross-cousin terminologies shown in Table 1. We refer to 'Common' zone J, G and S forms to escape the obligation of arguing that J, G or S are closed subgroups, although they may be. The 'Common' reconstructions receive the standard single star when external cognates are known and double stars (for less reliability) when no external cognates can presently be demonstrated.

 Table 1 – here

The Proto East Bantu 'cross-cousin' term has been discussed in various ways by Murdock (1959:383-4), Bastin (1971:36), Schoenbrun (1997:70-1, 1998:96-7) and Fourshey (2002:146-147). Table 2 gives typical cognates from some zone J, zone G and zone S languages and one from zone M.

 Table 2 – here

As can be seen in Table 1, a bifurcate merging parental generation terminological system (F=FB, MB, M=MZ,FZ)² is reconstructed for Proto East Bantu as are a term for ‘cross-cousin’ and terms for ‘parent-in-law’ which are, literally, ‘cross-cousin’s father’ and ‘cross-cousin’s mother’. Table 2 shows typical agreements for the reconstructed ‘spouse’s parent’ terms. Bifurcate merging parental generation terminologies are most often associated with lineal societies and terms equating a consanguine with an affine are essentially diagnostic of cousin marriage.

As Proto East Bantu, the interstages considered and most of the daughter societies have this same system, we conclude that the last 2500 years of Proto East Bantu descended social organization was dominated by unilineal clan-based societies practicing ‘preferential’ cross-cousin marriage, as are most of the daughter societies today.

If Radcliffe-Brown (1941:3) defined our task as one of arriving at valid abstractions, we wish to point out that there is nothing abstract about this central core of reconstructions. These have simply and demonstrably been at the core of some of the most stable kin terms in these East Bantu systems for two or three thousand years³.

² F – ‘father’, B – ‘brother’, M – ‘mother’, Z – ‘sister’.

With respect to how to define the Zulu parental generation terminologies, Kuper (1979:373) noted that “A number of modern kinship specialists would argue that such a question is inevitably arid, since the categories are too crude, and because kinship terminologies are not simply definable entities.” He did not, however, take that position himself and shed light on a puzzle of the general system of kin and its nomenclature for Southern Africa. Here we hope we have shed some light on the general system of kin and its nomenclature through East and Southern Africa over the last 2500-3000 years. We have done so, rather exclusively, by discovering the general stability of a bifurcate merging parental generation terminology coupled with a similarly stable system of special terms for cross-cousins and the naming of parents-in-law as ‘father-of-cross-cousin’ and ‘mother-of-cross-cousin’.

Our study of the ‘prescriptive’ marriage terms does not presently suggest what sort of symmetry or asymmetry is reconstructable for East Bantu cross-cousin marriage systems through time and space and such determinations are, in any event, often beyond linguistic methods. We have surveyed the alliance literature and feel it is presently best to simply note the confusion we encounter⁴ when trying to make sense

³ Terms for ‘grandparent’, Proto East Bantu **-kòòkú*, and ‘grandchild’, Proto East Bantu **jǐǐòkòdò*, have been similarly stable but are not of great moment in social organization studies and are not, therefore, given or expanded in Table 1. Further work on these and other terms is reported in Marck and Bostoen (this volume).

⁴ ‘[W]e’ (the linguist co-authors), due to the death of Hage, the social anthropologist, just as the project was developing its social anthropological fruits.

of how fluid and competing social organization principles are played out through time and space when contrasted with the central linguistic observation that alliance ('spouse's parent') has, through 2500 or 3000 years of East Bantu prehistory, typically been defined as 'cross-cousin's parent'. Through time and space and into many or most of the living societies considered, it has done so whether the society was matrilineal or patrilineal. This may have marched through time, as with Krige's (1975)⁵ example involving Lovedu (zone S) circulation of bridewealth cattle, as strongly preferential. But we cannot know, through linguistic methods, the commonness of this preference in the past. Such matters are little reported in the ethnographic literatures for East Bantu or Bantu in general. Casting about for ethnographic data on this matter elsewhere, the Dravidian region of India with its prescriptive marriage systems have, variously through the region, as few as 10 percent and only as many as about 50 percent of marriages following the cross-cousin pattern (Dumont 1993, Trautmann 1993a, Trautmann 1993b).

We have shed little light on the sorts of questions Hage (2006) addressed for the East Bantu Yao (zone P) with its Dravidian system. Our study shows that there is little ancient about the Yao kin terms concerned and that those terms seem what Hage said they were: a local development⁶. We have, however, completed the beginnings of

⁵ Krige's paper's title reads as if Lovedu is matrilineal but refers to comment's Krige offers on another author's work, not to Lovedu, which is patrilineal.

⁶ Or that, perhaps, of Yao and its immediate relatives. It is a zone P language and there is little ethnographic or linguistic description for this group.

work towards understanding and elucidating the Proto East Bantu system. We posit elsewhere (Hage and Marck this volume, Marck and Bostoen this volume) a matrilineal Proto East Bantu society, as are most of today's East Bantu societies and Bantu societies in general. By this model it is the patrilineal societies East Bantu societies of zones J and S that have (independently of one another) changed. It would seem that lineality was maintained through a period of double descent or that there was a cognatic (non-unilineal) period short enough that it didn't disturb the parental generation kin term distinctions which commonly become generational ($F=FB=MB$, $M=MZ=FZ$) given enough time in a cognatic society.

Map 1: Guthrie's zones and Bastin and Piron's (1999) current estimation of the main subgroups

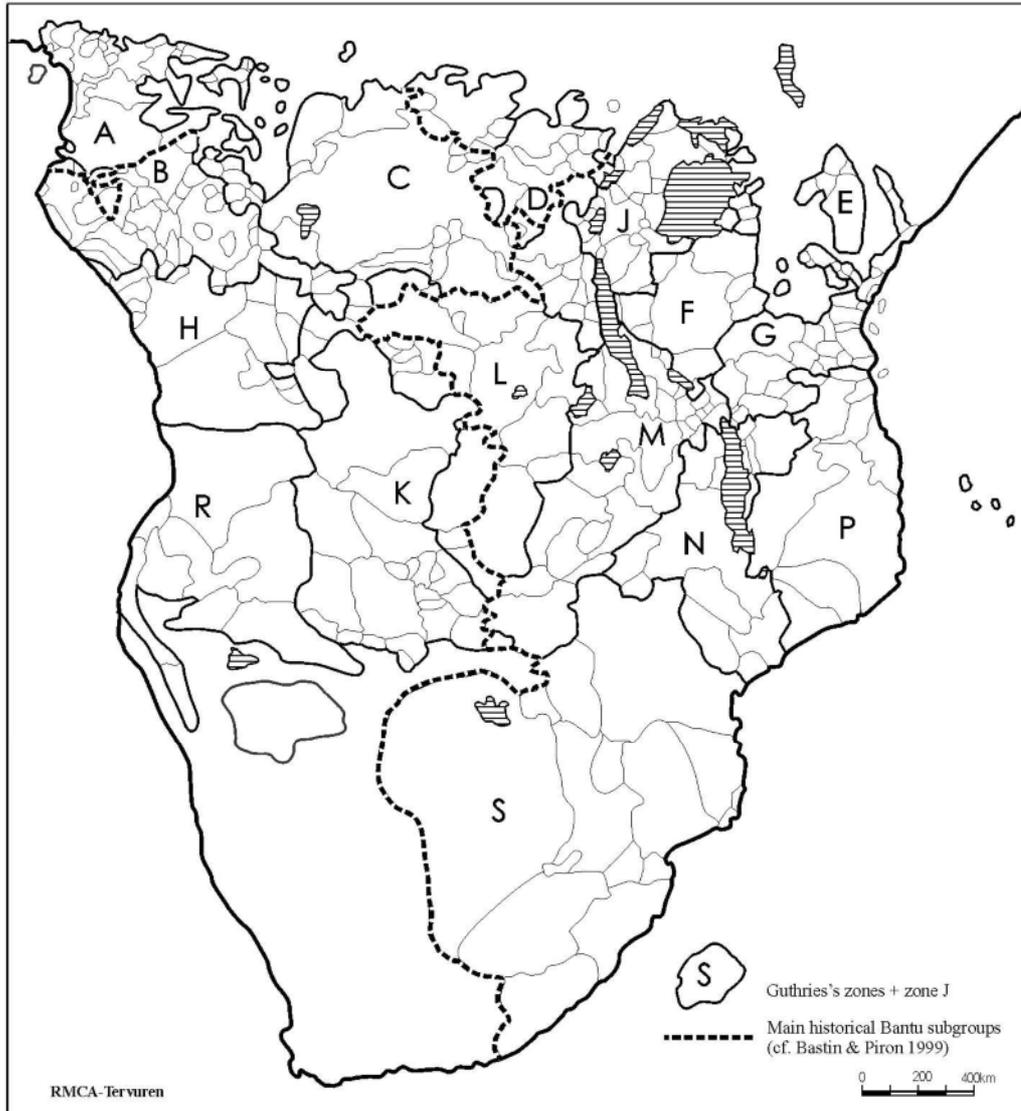


Table 1: Proto East Bantu reconstructions

	Proto East Bantu	'Common' Zone J	'Common' Zone G ¹	'Common' Zone S
F, FB (1s)	*tààtá ²	*tààtá ²	*tààtá ²	*tààtá ²
M, MZ (1s)	*mààmá ²	*mààmá ²	*mààmá ²	*mààmá ²
MB (1s) ('M-•')	*máá-dómè ³	*máá-dómè ³	**tumba ⁴	*máá-dómè ³
FZ (3s) ('F-•')	*i-cé-n-kádí ³	*i-cé-n-kádí ³	*ca-n-kádí ⁵	*F-kádí ³
cross-cousin	*bíádá ⁶	*bíádá ⁶	*bíádá ⁶	*bíádá ⁶
parent-in-law	*F/M-*bíádá ⁶	*F/M-*bíádá ⁶	*F/M-*bíádá ⁶	*F/M-*bíádá ⁶

Table Notes:

See Marck and Bostoen (this volume) and Table 2 (below) for supporting data for the reconstructions. Numbered notes: **1.** * - proto form. ** - form common amongst some languages of the zone. **2.** Bastin et al. (2003). **3.** J.G. Kamba Muzenga, from work in progress on suppletive possessives in Bantu kin terms. **4.** Kwere, Ngulu, Shambala *tumba*. **5.** Possible vowel change: *cé-n-kádí > *ca-n-kádí. Several of the

zones show change where others retain all the old morphemes, suppletive 'father' morphemes or innovative 'father' morphemes: Non-East Bantu: (H) Ovimbundu *tate-kai*, (R) Umbundu *tatekã*, Ambo *usin-kasi*; East Bantu: (F) Nilamba *shangáázi*, Nyamwezi, Sukuma *sengi*, (G) Gogo *nyina-henga*, Kagulu *mai sangasi*, Kwere *mama sangazi*, Luguru *shangazi*, Ngulu *mame sangazi*, Shambala *naa ngazi*, (J) Nyoro *isen-kati*, Chiga *cwen-kazi*, Ganda *senga*, *sengawe*, Soga *songa*, Nyambo *cwen-kazi*, Haya *ishéngghâzi*, *ishengkazi*, (M) Lamba *kashi*, (S) Ronga *rara-kati*, Venda *ma-khadzi*, Zulu *ubabe-kazi*. 6. Bastin (1971:36-37) and Schoenbrun (1997:70).

[[NOTE TO TYPESETTER: table above IS a table but most grid lines were suppressed to emphasize and distinguish Proto East Bantu reconstructions from the others]]

Table 2: East Bantu cross-cousins and spouse's parents.

Language	Cross-cousin	Spouse's father	Spouse's mother
J11 Nyoro		ise-zara	nyina-zara
J13 Kiga	mu-zara	ice-zara	nyina-zara
J15 Ganda		se-zala	nya-zala
J61 Rwanda	mu-byara		
G12 Kagulu		baba fiala	
G34 Ngulu		tate vyalu	mame vyalu
G63 Bena		nya-fiyara	nya-fiyara
M51-2 Ambo	mu-fyala	usi-fyala	nyina-fyala
S21 Venda	mu-zala		
S21 Basuto	mo-tsoala		
S32 Lovedu	mo-tswala		mma-tswale
S41 Pondo	m-zala		
S42 Zulu	um-zala	u-babe-zala	u-mame-zala
S44 Ndebele	um-za	u-baba-zala	u-mama-zala

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