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87

TRACING ORIGINS THROUGH LANGUAGE: BETTE- BENDI AND BANTOID

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Introduction

"Bette-Bendi" stands for the two closely related dialects of the Bette people in Obudu Local Government Area and the Bendi people in Obanliku Local Government Area, both local governments being in the Northern part of Cross River State, Nigeria. Both "Bendi" and "Bette", therefore, stand for each of the peoples and their dialects while, in addition, "Bendi" also designates the geographical territory of the Bendi people.

Until August 1991, when the erstwhile Obudu Local Government Area was split into two to yield the present Obudu and Obanliku Local Government Areas, both Bendi and Bette were under the then Obudu Local Government Area. But following the split, the Bette are now in Obudu while the Bendi belong with the Obanliku Local Government Area. Yet, the splitting of former Obudu into two, which was mainly for developmental purposes, has not severed the filial, cultural, historical and linguistic ties between these two groups. It is in this context that the two dialects and their speakers have been placed in focus for this paper.

It is important to quickly point out that the isolation of Bette and Bendi for this discourse is not intended to present this group as independent of, or detachable from, their kith and kin either in these two neighbouring local government areas, whom Simon Ogar has referred to as "the Descendants of Agba" in his seminal work, *The Fading Legacies of the Descendants of Agba* (2006). In one of the

versions presented in his book, Ogar identifies the descendants of Agba to include the present Elighe (Alege), Bette, Bendi, Bekwarra and Igede while in another, Ukpe, Ubang, Bokyi, Utugwang and Obanlikwu groups of communities as well as East Mbube are added to the cluster. While the nature and extent of the sanguine relationship among these various groups is yet to be firmly established, the classification of all the languages or dialects of this broad group (except Igede) under the Bendi subgroup points to a possible oneness of the group.

Going by genealogical approximation, it is very unlikely that any of these groups of people had settled in their present locale earlier than the 18th century. Today, as one of the smallest ethnic minority groups in Nigeria, certain questions have continued to linger in the minds of many a member of this group. Among the questions have been the following: (a) Where did their ancestors come from? (b) What route(s) did they follow? (c) At which places did they settle temporarily before reaching their present locale? (d) About when did the migration(s) take place? (e) What factors motivated their emigration from their original home(s)? Finding empirically fool-proof answers to these questions and many others has not been an easy task because of certain inhibitions. These include the stark absence of any written records on the people's migration as at when it took place; inadequate financial support for research in the country, Nigeria; and a lack of interest and commitment to these disturbing questions by most of the well-to-do sons and daughters of the area.

Nevertheless, there have been a few researches, based mainly on oral narratives, which have pointed to the

central African region as the direction from which the people came. One representative sample of this consensus is, again, from Ogar's work (2006):

Historically, the people of Obudu (Bette, Bendi, Boki, Obanlikwu, Ukpe, Oban, Alege, Utugwang) are believed to have migrated from the Bantu-tribes [sic] of Central Africa and came [sic] down through the Cameroons to settle on the legendary round-top hill called Ulanga. This claim of oneness is buttressed by the close affinity of the people as well as their linguistic grouping... and other identical cultures and customs (2006:15).

Central Africa or beyond as the place from which these northern Cross River groups migrated seems to be the consensus in most, if not all, of the existing unpublished sources on their origins, some of which include Jeremiah A. Ogar's "Bette in Pre-Colonial Era: Impact of British Colonial Administration on Bette Traditional Society, 1908 – 1932" (1978); Joseph Ushie's oral literature project, "Bette-Bendi Migration and Unim Libum: A Legend" (1982); Godwin Agim's Bachelor of Arts essay, "The Pre-colonial History of Bendi and Impact of Colonial Rule up to 1936" (1980); and David Imbua's similar essay, "Bendi and Her Neighbours, 1900 – 1991" (2002). Based on these historical accounts, it is almost certain that these groups, going by their common linguistic identity, came from one source, most likely

massaging. Language change often comes through two broad ways – the slow, almost unnoticeable change characteristic of all living things, and through encounter of a particular language's speakers with external situations.

Such situations may include migration from one geographical area to another with the result that the new environment may not have physical features which existed in the former location, or may have features which did not obtain in the former locale. One result of this is often a loss of words designating the missing referents or an acquisition of new words to describe new features found in the new environment. Sometimes, too, migration brings people into contact with speakers of other languages, and inter-language borrowing necessarily occurs. Conquest of one people by another also commonly affects languages of the people in contact with the language of the dominated almost always losing to that of the dominant group.

In Western Europe, for example, the English lexicon of today has a high presence of both French and Latin words as a result of the domination of the English people in learning by Rome, and by conquest in 1066 A.D. by French-speaking Normans. Within the Bendi cluster, for instance, if the Iggede had not emigrated out of the group, their language would still have been mutually intelligible today, but migration replaced their old speech with their language of today, which is considered to be of the Idomoid stock. Language change which results from this kind of encounter is always quite fast and fundamental, especially where the groups in contact belong with two distinct language phylae or families.

Beside migration and conquest, human language, as a natural phenomenon subjected to mutability, can be born, can grow, change and can also die. Indeed, linguists maintain that no one can pronounce any sound exactly the same way twice, and no two persons ever realise the same sound exactly the same way. Each person's special way of using language has, thus, come to be known as the person's idiolect while, from a strictly technical point of view, a collection of idiolects which is different from another collection may be described as two distinct dialects of the same language provided that there is still mutual intelligibility among speakers of the respective dialects. For example, we refer to Bette and Bendi as dialects in this sense because although the two speech forms are different from each other in some aspects, these differences do not impede mutual intelligibility among the speakers. Still from a technical perspective, we refer to two forms of speech as different languages when the two are no longer mutually intelligible. This is why it has not been easy to determine which of the speech forms within the Bendi cluster we can consider different languages and which mere dialects of one another.

Some languages, however, share features which show clearly that they come from a common ancestral tree in spite of their being mutually unintelligible. There are usually ways of identifying such languages. These may be in the form of their words or the structural patterns of their sounds and sentences. In the world today, there are about 20 language families. These include Khoisan, Niger-Congo, Nilo-Saharan, Afro-Asiatic (all in Africa), Indo-European, Caucasian, Dravidian, Uralic-Yukaghir, Altaic, Chukchi-

Kamchatkan, Sino-Tibetan, Miao-Yao, Austro-Asiatic, Daic, Austronesian, Indo-Pacific, Australian, Eskimo-Aleut, Na-Dene and Amerind (North and South America) families. It must be stressed that languages that come under the same family do not necessarily have to be mutually intelligible. It is mostly the words, usually their stems or roots, and the structural patterns and sounds that suggest what languages belong with what family or phylum.

The Niger-Congo Family

The Niger-Congo family is unarguably the family with the largest population of speakers in Africa. Roger Blench (qtd in Williamson, 1989:2) lists the following groups as members of this family: Mande, Kordofanian, Atlantic, Ijoid, Kru, Gur, Adamawa-Ubangi, Kwa, Benue-Congo, Bantoid, Bantu and Dogon. Of these, Bette-Bendi comes under the Bendi cluster of the Cross River languages, which, in turn, comes under the Benue-Congo. Other subgroups within the Benue-Congo are Defoid, Edoid, Nupoid, Idomoid, Igboid, Kainji and Platoid, Cross River, Bantoid and Bantu. The cognates that follow illustrate the connectedness of some of these languages:

Bette-Bendi	Other Benue-Congo Languages	English
inyia, enyia	unam (Efik-Ibibio) nyiam (Tiv and several Bantu languages) nyam (Lingala, DR Congo)	animal/meat
obu/ubu	ebot (Efik-Ibibio) ewu (Igbo)	goat

iya/iye	iya (Efik-Ibibio) iya/iye (Yoruboid, Defoid)	mother
unwa/onwai	nwa (Igbo)	Child
otu/utsu	etsu (Nupe)	king/chief
lishi	isi (Igbo)	head
be	be (Nupe) bak (Ejagham) ba (Gang) bia (Igbo) ba (Ga) bra (Twi)	come
Whutiong/kutiung	utong (Efik-Ibibio)	ear
Shikwu	ikwu (Igbo)	extended family
ukor/ukua	ukoh (Oro)	dry forest/forest
nye imea	nyo omia (Efik-Ibibio)	I will beat you
ambe maa?	amema? (Efik-Ibibio)	Have you finished?
Tye	tor (Efik - Ibibio)	hit [with a motor vehicle]
awum/whuwum	anwum (Efik - Ibibio)	It has borne [fruit]
whube/kubel	ube (Efik - Ibibio)	hole/trench
whutie/kutie	ette (Efik - Ibibio)	father

These terms are only illustrations of the connectedness among these languages, and by no means an exhaustive presentation of cognates among the Benue-Congo languages. For instance, the lexical items representing 1 - 6 in Bette-Bendi and Ibibio counting systems are clear cognates, and it is most likely that this closeness is replicated among these two language groups

and some others within the Benue-Congo subgroup. They are:

Counting Systems in Bette-Bendi and Ibibio

Bette-Bendi	Ibibio	English
iken	keed	one
ifee	iba	two
itii	ita	three
inde	inang	four
idiong	ition	five
idiong ken	ition keed	six

Within the Benue-Congo is the Cross River group which sub-divides into the two broad classifications of Bendi and Delta-Cross. According to Farclas (in Bendor-Samuel, 1989:381), the Bendi cluster comprises the following: Bekwarra, Bette, Bendi, Basang, Busi, Bisu, Ukpe, Bayobiri, Ubang, Alege (Elighe), Utugwang, Okorogung, Okorotung, East Mbube, Afrike, Bumaji, and Bokyi. It is yet to be established, using the sociolinguistic criterion of mutual intelligibility, which of these we would consider dialects of one another, and which, distinct languages. Nevertheless, this linguistic classification has tended to strengthen the version of Simon Ogar's work which presents all the speakers of this group as belonging to the same group that emigrated from somewhere in Central Africa or beyond.

As it is with the history of this group, so has it been with the group's language in terms of paucity of research. Farclas (in Bendor-Samuel, 1989) laments that "The Bendi languages remain almost completely unstudied..." This dearth of scholarship on the Bendi languages has contributed to the uncertainty in the classification of this group as either belonging to the Bantu, Bantoid or some

other larger subdivision. In re-classifying the group with Delta-Cross, for example, Kay Williamson remarks, under Cross River:

In II 1.2.12 above we separated Bendi (Greenberg's Cross River I) from the Bantoid languages, with which Bennett and Sterk had combined it. Here we reunite Bendi with Delta-Cross and thereby reconstitute, provisionally, Greenberg's Cross River division. Evidence for Cross River innovations (i.e. innovations shared exclusively by Delta-Cross and Bendi) is not as strong as we would like... (in Bendor-Samuel, 1989:267)

This lacuna in the study of Bendi languages, responsible for the uncertainty in the classification of the group, is what this paper seeks to reduce by showing the connectedness of the group to the Bantoid sub-family, even if this will only lead us to a tentative conclusion.

Bette-Bendi and Bantoid:

It needs to be stressed once again that the two dialects of Bette and Bendi are chosen out of the Bendi cluster, more as representative samples of the group than for any other consideration. Another obvious reason is that these are dialects with which I am most familiar. Linguistically speaking, perhaps the one most noticeable distinction between Bette-Bendi and other members of the cluster is the general absence of the liquid sound /r/ from

Bette-Bendi, which is preponderant in most of the other dialects or languages of the cluster.

As correctly noted by Faraclas, the languages or dialects under this group have hardly been studied. One consequence of this is that there is yet no standard orthography for either Bette or Bendi. According to John Watters (in Bendor-Samuel, 1989:401), the Bantoid language groups are Mambiloid, Fam, Tiba, Dakoid, Tivoid, Ekoid, Mbe, Jarawan, Mamfe, Ring, Momo, Menchum, Mbam-Nkam, Misaje, Essimbi, Tikar, Beboid, and Bantu. Bantoid is "one of 12 branches of Benue-Congo, itself a branch of the Niger-Congo language family". Essentially, the Bantoid languages are spoken in Central, Southern, East and parts of West Africa. Watters' classification fuses into the one Bantoid family the previously separate Bantu and Bantoid groups. In the Northern Cross River State environment and its neighbourhood, among the Bantoid languages are Tiv, Becheve, Utanga and most of the languages spoken in neighbouring Cameroonian communities up to Mamfe. In this study, we would use both Bantu and Bantoid as appropriate.

According to the Online Encyclopedia, Wikipedia, "A common characteristic of Bantu languages is that they use words such as 'muntu' or 'mutu' for 'person', and the plural prefix for human nouns starting with 'mu-'...in most languages is 'ba-'... thus giving *Bantu* for 'people' ". In Bette-Bendi, the singular for 'person' is 'undi' while the plural is prefixed with "be-", which is a variant form of "ba-". This explains the high presence of communities whose names begin with the prefix "be-" among the Bette-Bendi speakers as in Bette, Bendi, Begiaba, Bedia, Begiatte,

Begiagbai, Begiagbah, Bendigie, Betukwel, Bebuawhan, Bebuabie, Bebuatswan, Bebuagbong, Bebuabong, Begiatsul, Bebuagam, etc. Indeed, it is necessary to add that this prefix or a variant of it such as "ba-" "bu-" or "whu-" obtains among all the languages or dialects of the Bendi cluster, in Bokyi, it features as "ba-" or "bu-" or "bo-" hence Bokyi, Bateriko, Bumaji, Boje, Bashua, Buyia, etc.

With regard to this prefix, there is a recent observation we made about the Bendi dialect, which when fully investigated, might yield either the proto-Niger-Congo, proto-Benue-Congo or proto-Bantoid form of the prefix. As we mentioned earlier, Bendi refers to a place, a people and a dialect. Bendi, as a place, is made up of ten communities or supra-villages. But incidentally, even within the Bendi community, dialects are fast emerging on the basis of the villages such that it has become possible to tell where one Bendi person comes from just through listening to his or her speech. Villages like Begiagbai, Begiagba, Omale, Lishikwoe and, to some extent, Begiatte, speak the Bendi that is considered an older, "less diluted" form than what obtains among Ketiong, Begiatsul, Akorshi and Kekwoakai. Because of her erstwhile sojourn among the Obanliku neighbours, Bendigie speech bears features that seem to reflect this historical interaction.

Among those who speak the "less diluted" Bendi, one notices the voiced dental fricative /v/ in the question, "shivaang sha?" while in Ketiong, it is the approximant, /w/ as in "shiwang sha?" In Akorshi, it is the approximant /w/ followed by the diphthong /ai/ to yield "shiwai sha?". Yet, in Bette, it is the voiced bilabial stop /b/ as "kibaang sha?" or "shibaang sha?" for "What is it?"

What we deduced from this observation is that the /v/ sound was the proto-form which later changed to /w/ and /b/ in other speech varieties. This position is supported by the fact that in all Bendi villages today, including the old men and women in villages using /w/, the /v/ is used and considered the archaic form.

Among Bantoid, proto-Benue-Congo or Niger-Congo speakers, we have a replica of the same pattern of change as seen in the word for "come." For the Tiv speakers, the word is "Va;" Ebir, "Ve;" Nupe "be;" Ejagham, "bak;" Yoruba, "wa"; Ga, "ba"; Ewe, "va"; Igbo, "bia"; and Twi, "bra". It is possible that this pattern of change from /v/ to either /b/ or /w/ is what manifests in the initial consonant sounds in the following one sentence in Kiswahili and Shona, both of which are Bantu languages:

Kiswahili: "Watoto wadogo wamekisoma"

Shona: "Vana vadoko variverenga"

English: "Children have read [a book]"

Notice especially similarities between "wadogo" and "vadoko". If the /v/ and /w/ sounds are the same, then the remaining difference between the two words is just whether the velar sounds /k/ and /g/ are voiced or unvoiced.

One other feature of Bantu languages, which also manifests in Bette-Bendi and, indeed all Bendi, languages is reduplication. According to the online encyclopedia, Wikipedia, "Reduplication is a common morphological phenomenon in Bantu languages and is usually used to indicate frequency or intensity of the action signalled by (unreduplicated) verb stem." From Kiswahili we have the example "pigapiga" where "piga" means "strike". "Pigapiga"

therefore means "strike repeatedly". This is a prominent feature of Bette-Bendi, as we find in these examples:

Gbligbli (adverb) - "quickly" where "gbli" means "quick" or "quickly"

shangshang (adverb) - "Quietly" where "shang" means "in silence" or "silent."

Zaabzaab (adjective) - describing a desperate running.

Tyutyu/tuotuo (adjective) - slowly where "tyu" means "slow" or cautiously.

Likwulikwu (adverb) - superficially/only surface, where "likwu" means surface or top.

Inyia iyi iki-iki/ikibikib (adjective) - the meat is bony where "iki" means "bones"

Umenmen (adverb) - steadily/meticulously slowly - where "men" is "slow".

Likailikai/likalika (adjective) - very poor where "likai" means "poverty".

Zimzim (verb) - scattered, haphazardly, where "zim" means to "scatter" or disorganise".

Shuelshuel (adjective) - of a place, completely unkempt.

Nguelnguel (adjective) - disorderly

Further, Trask (1993) observes that it is mainly in Bantu languages of Kamba, Kikuyu and Zulu that we find a manifestation of the *hesternal* and the *hodiernal* tense forms among African languages. In his *A Dictionary of Grammatical Terms in Linguistics* (Trask, 1993:128), "hesternal" is said to denote "a tense form occurring in certain languages which typically refers to events in the recent past, including yesterday, but not 'earlier today'". This tense form shows up in Bette-Bendi distinctly as follows:

Agim amaa/umaa be - Agim (did come) came - before today

Ayendi amaa/umaa be he Ukalaba - Ayendi (did come) came to Calabar - before today.

The same dictionary defines "hodiernal" as a term denoting "a tense form, particularly a past-tense form, occurring in certain languages which typically refers to events occurring on the day of speaking". Examples from Bette-Bendi are as follows:

Agim ayi/uyi be - Agim (did come) came - earlier today

Ayendi ayi/uyi be - Ayendi (did come) came - earlier today.

The distinctive tense markers here are "umaa/amaa", which stands for "earlier but before today" and "uyi/ayi" which designates past of "earlier today". The occurrence of these two verb forms in Bette-Bendi further strengthens the status of this language and indeed the entire Bendi cluster as Bantoid languages.

In terms of cognate lexical items, we may not have much apart from the word for "meat" or "animal", which is "nyam, inyia, nyiam, unam" among the Bantoid or Benue-Congo or Niger-Congo speakers. However, Ushie (1982:6) records the following from the Kenyang (or Banyang) language of Cameroon:

English	Bette-Bendi	Kenyang/Banyang
Meat	inyia	nya
Bag	eba/kibam	eba
Hands	abwo/abuo	awor
My father	etie-ye/atiagi	eta-ya
Clouds/sky	shibu/bibu	nebu
You (singular)	wo	wor
War sword	akplagya	akparaja

A response to drum	oweil	Owei!
Palm oil	bewhu	bawed
Me	me	meh
Kind of dance	uglinya	ugrinya

These cognate items seem to tie Bette-Bendi to this Cameroonian language, Banyang or Kenyang, which has been classified under Bantoid. Furthermore, in his book, *Polyglotta Africana*, S. W. Koelle erroneously classifies both Alege (Elighe) and Bokyi, which come under the Bendi cluster, as "Unclassified South African languages" (1854: 18-19) and classifies Yala correctly as "An unclassified Niger Delta language". It is most likely that it is the striking resemblance between these two Bendi languages and Southern African Bantu languages, as noticed by Koelle that led him to this error.

In the realm of performance, it is most likely that the same sense of *deja vu* which misled Koelle into classifying these two languages under the Bantu group, is the explanation for the instantaneous acceptance which Congolese music enjoyed among the Bendi speakers, and indeed, several other groups in West Africa in the 1950s through the early 1980s. The music, mostly in the Congolese Bantu language of Lingala, was received and treated as if it were part of the Bendi-speaking people's own cultural heritage; many youths of those days competitively adopted fanciful-sounding words from it for nicknames. This explains why the musical legend, Franco Luambo Makiadi, popularly known by the name of his band as "Ok Jazz," has remained that generation's musical idol till date. In this music, the Bette-Bendi speakers seem to find their own

speech mannerisms, rhythm and musical culture, on which much can be written.

Another striking point worth presenting here is that there is a certain place in the Bette-Bendi speakers' collective memory known as **Whungo**, which is considered the farthest place or the very end of the world; this place features in their speech when someone sent on an errand or mission over-delays. When the errand person or emissary returns, s/he is usually queried, "Was it **'Ungo** you went to?" (Whungo becomes **'Ungo** in Bette-Bendi connected speech). This mythical place certainly did not become a part of the people's collective memory in our days of bicycles, motorcycles, cars, aeroplanes, ships, airports, seaports and motorable roads.

It is, therefore, not a place from which a modern man returned to inform the people about since its existence in the people's collective memory pre-dates our modern times of travel by air, ships or motor vehicles. Indeed, in an interview, the present oldest man in Bendi, Ushie Ukpang (aged slightly over 100), confirms that he met the expression as a child as a part of the Bette-Bendi people's oral heritage, "The word came from our forefathers and it refers to a very distant place, a distance difficult to cover. I was born to hear our forefathers use the expression" (Ushie, Interview, 2009). My position is that since this long-lost mythical **Whungo** came into the people's collective memory before our modern times, the place must have been the original home of the people's ancestors upon which on reflection, appeared too far to return to, especially since the journey would be on foot.

The question, then, is, Where is Whungo? The starting point in addressing this question is to explain the present location of the Bette-Bendi-speaking people. As we said in the introduction, these two communities are located in Obudu and Obanliku local government areas of Cross River State. The two local government areas are the last on Nigeria's eastern border with the Republic of Cameroon, which is in Central Africa. Although these two local government areas are in Nigeria and not in Cameroon, there has been a high level of interaction among them and communities in Cameroon. They often attend common markets, intermarry, and have often moved into each other's land as settlers.

It is from this direction that the people believe their ancestors came. Given this familiarity with one another, it is most likely that the Bette-Bendi people would have easily traced or located Whungo if it were anywhere in Cameroonian territory. Furthermore, the place would not have been considered "the end of the world" to anyone from Obudu or Obanliku, considering their long-standing interactions with the people of Cameroon. Perhaps, it should be added that until the plebiscite of 1961, western Cameroon was part of Nigeria. It follows, therefore, that Whungo cannot be in the present Cameroonian territory.

With Cameroon ruled out, seven countries remain within the Central African region. These are Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Republic of Congo and Sao Tome and Principe. The geographical location of Obudu and Obanliku local government areas also rules out the possibility of the people coming from Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Sao

Tome and Principe, all of which are either islands or mainland countries too far south from Obudu and Obanliku. Similarly, Chad is too far to the north of the study area for its people to have come in from this direction. Besides, Chad does not appear to have any significant population of Bantu-speaking peoples, if any at all. The remaining three likely Central African countries are Central African Republic and the two Congos – Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo Kinshasa) and Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville). Geographically, linguistically and ethnically-speaking, these three countries are the most likely locations especially as they also have places that can be considered sufficiently far from Obudu and Obanliku.

To further determine whether Whungo would be in Central African Republic or in any of the two Congos, we return to the Bette-Bendi prefixation system, particularly as it describes 'people' or 'people of'. We had shown earlier that, as with other Bantoid languages, the Bendi cluster of languages or dialects has "ba-", "be-", "bu-", "whu-", "bo-" as the variant forms of the prefix designating "people of". Here, let us add to this the less frequent forms, "ka-", "ke-", "ku-" as in Kakwel, Kationg/Ketiong, Kekwoakai, Kubong, Kutia and Kutiang. For Whungo, therefore, we can have Bango, Bengo, Bungo, Bongo, Kango, Kengo, Kungo.

In this language or dialect, /u/ and /o/ can be in free variation, and this is one of the features distinguishing the older Bendi tongue from Bette and the new generation Bendi speech. In the Bendi of the older generation, "Ushie" would be realized as "Oshie"; "Ugar" would be "Ogai" or "Ogar". This means that "Kungo" could also have possibly been realized as "Kongo." But since "ko-" is no longer a

popular prefix, it has been left out from the list of possible prefixes designating "people of" in Bette-Bendi, especially as "ku-", its co-variant, is represented.

Based on the tentative position that the people emigrated from somewhere in the central African region or beyond, the next question is, which place or places in this region comes/come closest to any of these possible reconstructed variants of Whungo? Given the tendency of affixes, generally, to decay over time, it is possible that the mythical, long-lost farthest place in the Bette-Bendi people's collective memory relates to any of the present words: Congo [Kongo], Bakongo, Kikongo. This, then, leads us to the present two Central African countries of Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo Kinshasa) and the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville) as the likely mythical land that has remained a linguistic relic or fossil in today's Bette-Bendi speech. In the two Central African countries, there are Kiswahill, Tshiluba, Kikongo and Lingala as main indigenous languages, all of which are of the Bantu sub-family.

In these two countries today, Congo refers to the country, Bakongo designates one of the majority ethnic groups while Kikongo is one of the majority indigenous languages. Considering both the spatial and temporal distances of the present Bette-Bendi-speaking people from this region today, it seems safe to identify the **Whungo** of our collective memory as standing for a place either in the present Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo Kinshasa) or the Republic of Congo (Congo Brazzaville). If this is so, then Central African Republic is also ruled out as the mythical Whungo except future research will prove otherwise.

We had pointed out earlier that all human languages undergo change even when their speakers do not come into contact with speakers of other languages, and that this mutation is usually hastened when a people migrate or interact regularly with other groups. In such a case, a language can be completely lost within a second generation of the contact, as the Germanic race that settled in France's territory of Normandy lost their Germanic tongue. In the light of this, it should not be expected that Bette-Bendi speech of today can be mutually intelligible with the speech of any of the Bantu groups from which it had emigrated. After all, within the Bendi cluster today, it has become uncertain which of the speech forms to consider dialects and which distinct languages in spite of the continuing interaction among the people in a relatively contiguous settlement. Still, from a professional linguistic flank, the connectedness of Bette-Bendi to Kikongo, Kiswahili, Lingala or Tshiluba can be established, thus confirming the exact group from which the people moved.

In view of the stark absence of written historical records from the Bette-Bendi end, research into the more formally documented history of the Bakongo and groups in the Democratic Republic of Congo, generally, is suggested. For instance, the Sudanic kingdom of Kongo, which was inhabited by the Bakongo, was destroyed in the late 17th Century by contact with the Portuguese. Could this event have caused an emigration of some of the people from this land? Such research on this subject from the Congo axis, augmented by similar researches from the flanks of linguistics and culture, can help to confirm or refute this tentative conclusion. If confirmed, the research is likely to

contribute to the discourse on the pattern of Bantu migration, especially if it is established that other Cross River languages are also of the Bantu subfamily. Supporting the completion of this research to its logical conclusion is, hence, a long-lasting legacy waiting for someone to claim.

In sum, the totality of the pieces of linguistic evidence examined in this paper suggests very strongly that the Bendi subgroup of Cross River languages belongs to the Bantoid sub-family, and further, that the people most likely emigrated from somewhere in the present Democratic Republic of the Congo, as suggested by the few existing historical studies on the area. What is, however, uncertain is whether other members of the Cross River sub-family also share these linguistic fossils with the Bendi languages and are also Bantu or Bantoid.

Before we conclude, we must stress that this research report is yet too exploratory to be considered a conclusive proof that Bette-Bendi, or the entire Bendi cluster of languages, is a Bantoid language as classified by Watters. A closer examination of this language group is still necessary to establish this position more firmly. What appears rewarding, however, is that these linguistic artefacts seem to be in tandem with the existing historical accounts in their look towards the Bantoid-speaking Central Africa or beyond as the original home of the Bendi-speaking group. As further research is conducted into the origin of this group from other flanks such as language and history, archaeology and culture, we hope to be getting closer and closer to the people's definitive original home.

Suggestions and Recommendations

In May, 2009, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) released a report alerting the world to the fact that by the end of this century, only 600 of the present number of 6,500 languages in the world would survive. Others, the report indicates, would go into extinction. The implications of this are, to those who understand the role of language as a storehouse of a people's culture and worldview, very grave. What this means is that songs, folktales, legends, history, science and other forms of culture housed in these languages or dialects will vanish, leaving their speakers naked and feeding on other cultures through their languages.

On the contrary, African American English, sometimes referred to as "Ebonics," has been listed among the varieties of human languages that will survive. This is because of the importance these descendants of enslaved Africans place on language as a cohesive tool among them. Sadly, however, Africans who have remained on the continent are fast dispensing with their languages and cultures through switching to other tongues and cultures, notably English. My suggestion is, hence, that Africans on the continent, too, can and should take concrete measures to preserve, protect and project their languages.

Secondly, for scholarly purposes, if for no other, all the languages or dialects within the Bendi cluster must be seen as necessary, important and complementary to one another. Indeed, each of the speakers should see it as his/her responsibility to tend to the health of any of the languages or dialects within the cluster whether it is his/her own or not. Typical examples of these are names such as

Emukwong, Elighe, Kekwoakai, Ngoukpu, Uwhong, Kugbudu, etc., all of which have either been anglicised or spelt according to neighbouring dialects which produced the first generation of literate persons, mostly teachers, who had to spell these names their own way rather than as pronounced by the native speakers themselves.

As an illustration of the complementary role of these dialects or languages, in Bekwarra, for example, the word "Atabe ochi" has continued to designate the supreme being, but it has disappeared almost completely from Bette and Bendi, leaving only a residue in the expression, "Atabli whutse otuu umbuo ke shigem abe" (the god on high has fetched water for the cripple) and in the word "lifaung atabli" (Atabli's domain, which stands for the Christian concept of "heaven").

The existence of this residue in today's Bette-Bendi speech signifies that Bekwarra's meaning of the word as "supreme being" was initially for all the Bette, Bendi and Bekwarra speakers. The Bendi dialect has a large collection of words which are no longer found in either Bette or Bekwarra; these words function as synonyms for the ones still being shared by Bette and Bekwarra. Just a few of these are "libii" for "utia" (farm), "utse ye" (platonic friend) which has no equivalent in Bette, "tuu mi/tsu meh" (greet me) which retains only its extended meaning of "appreciating my effort" in Bette but keeps its double meaning as "greet" and "appreciate" in Bendi. There is also the word "nduu" which means "gone" or "left" as in "Nduu libii" (gone to the farm). It is, therefore, our view that cross-referencing among the Bendi languages or dialects

will help us immensely in trying to relate this linguistic group to other members of its language family.

In addition to the above, we recommend that the people preserve and protect even those old forms of Bette-Bendi speech which are no longer in daily use among them as this will help them in the process of using the language to reconstruct their history and in translation. Some of these words are: "ngwe libaung" (get into inter-community bond of friendship for mutual protection), "itse 'uwuhuo" (instinct or intuition), ungie obwai (fire), "ukwayi" (the bird known as "akpii" in Bendi and Bette today), "ushulaka" (a queer angle or tilt of an object from a line or order), "osukpekpe" (a kind of tray now extinct but which was much like the present whudiya), "akpebishang" (death), "kétàng" (razorblade), "aglaa" (chief as in aglaa "whunong/kunuung" (chief or king of beauty), "liblii" (a traditional food silos), "upeeb" (a building in rectangular shape), "ogeh" (a fence round a compound) "whugiong/kuging" (a defensive wall round a city), etc. Also, the language of "ipeh" (our indigenous medium for looking into the unknown) and proverbs should be preserved. Equally important are our African names even when our own ignorance of their original contexts makes us to ridicule or be hostile to some of these. Typical examples are "Shitsuwhey/Kikiuwhey", "Ukelina", "Abubuo", "Ukong", "Young'ya", "Youngwhende", etc.

Perhaps, an explanation of one or two of these names would help illustrate the point. "Shitsuwhey/Kikiuwhey" was short form for "Shitsuwhey/Kikiuwhey utetong ayoung u whai shii?" "Utetong/uteteng" means garden egg, and it served as an alternative to salt in soup. But since salt was

generally preferred, hardly did anyone who could afford it, go after the utetong/uteteng soup. Thus, a member of the society who considered himself abandoned by his community could name his child "Shitsuwhey/Kikiuwhey utetong/uteteng" which none would go for if he has a choice. Ukelina is the short form of "Ukelina/ushua linai ungi le shibai shitor le" (Seeker of trouble remembers not a wound is painful). "Abubuo" is short form for "Abubuo agai ugai ha agia okwe" (The empty-handed/poor ends his reception of his guest at the gate [since he would have nothing to offer if the guest gets to his house]).

Also necessary is the need to preserve, protect and project the literature in the form of folktales, proverbs, songs, riddles, legends, myths, ballads and chants in this and other African languages. It is most crucial and urgent that we tackle these challenges if we are to be able to hand down to our children whatever remains of the much we got from our own fathers. It is indeed a challenge for all Africans whose indigenous languages are said to be endangered to work vigorously towards reversing the trend.

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