While the basic genetic unity of the Bantu family has been recognized for a century and a half (see Schadeberg (2003: 144–146)), important aspects of its internal composition and external relationships remain poorly understood. Greenberg (1955: 40) is credited with the now widely-accepted view that the Bantu homeland was located around the Cameroon-Nigeria border. However, there is still no consensus on the details of Bantu’s split from the rest of Benue-Congo, nor is it even clear exactly which Benue-Congo languages should be classified as Bantu—or, more precisely, as Narrow Bantu, a term used to designate a hypothetical node in the Benue-Congo family tree clearly delineating “Bantu” languages from their closest Bantoid relatives (see Nurse & Philippson (2003b: 5–7)). The most problematic part of the “Bantu”-speaking area, in this regard, is the northwest, roughly consisting of southern Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and Congo-Brazzaville. As Nurse & Philippson (2003b: 5) write, “Although [languages of this area] are geographically closest to what we think was the Bantu cradleland, they are not thereby linguistically most similar to what we assume were the shapes and features of early Bantu.” Two of the most enduring questions in Bantu historical linguistics are, therefore, (i) where in the northwest of the Bantu area (if anywhere) can we draw the line between Narrow Bantu and Bantoid and (ii) how do we reconcile the differences between the grammatical features of the languages of the northwest with those of the languages to the east and south. Resolving these questions is not of interest solely to linguists. The Bantu expansion represents one of the great dispersals of recent prehistory (Diamond & Bellwood 2003). The linguistic patterns of the Bantu area are, therefore, also of relevance to historians, anthropologists, and
archaeologists, insofar as they can be used to verify or refute hypotheses put forward by specialists in those fields regarding the spread of Bantu peoples and cultures.

It is, thus, quite exciting to see a new work like this one by Mouguiama-Daouda (M) covering not only what is known at present about the languages of Gabon, a country located in the heart of the northwest Bantu area, but also summarizing and synthesizing relevant work on the history, anthropology, and archaeology of the country. While the book suffers, at various points, from a lack of expositional clarity, it must be immediately acknowledged that work of such interdisciplinary scope is quite rare and its coverage is impressive, making it a more than worthwhile addition to the Bantu historical linguistics canon.

The book is divided into three main parts, not counting a brief introduction and conclusion and three appendices. The references are subdivided by field (e.g., linguistics, archaeology, history, etc.). The three main parts are entitled “Methodology”, “Language and history of the Bantu”, and “Towards a new synthesis”. I discuss each in turn, referring to them as part I, part II, and part III, respectively (though M does not explicitly adopt this convention).

As implied by its title, methodological concerns are the focus of part I the book, and it includes discussion not only of relevant issues in historical linguistics but also of issues in related disciplines. As such, very little of its content makes specific references to languages of Gabon, or even Africa. The subject matter in all but its last section will be familiar to historical linguists—topics covered include the notion of a proto-language, linguistic paleontology, determining the location of homelands, etc. Presumably, this material is aimed primarily at non-linguists. While most of this discussion should be relatively non-controversial, there are a few parts that may be misleading to the non-specialist. Some would seem to be within the realm of reasonable variation in the attitudes of different scholars. For example, the discussion of glottochronology (15–17) implies that this method for dating splits among language groups is more widely-accepted than current conventional wisdom would suggest (see, for example, Janda & Joseph (2003: 118)). This criticism could be a mere quibble, if it were not for the fact that, in parts II and III of the
book, M makes use of glottochronology to establish dates for the breakup of different language
groups found in Gabon. While linguists will know that dates arrived at in this way should
probably not be taken too seriously, this may be less clear to non-linguists.

In a similar vein, M (18) claims that, today, all linguists accept the validity of Greenberg’s
method of mass comparison. This would seem to be an overstatement. While it is widely held
among Africanists that mass comparison yielded valid results for the languages of that continent,
Greenberg’s application of the method to other parts of the world has been much more
contentious (see, for example, Campbell (1988: 596–597)). None of this is to say that M is not
entitled to his own opinions on issues like the validity of mass comparison. The question, here, is
the extent to which claims like the one just mentioned above belong in an introductory section
covering basic issues of historical linguistic methodology—in particular in a book which is likely
to be of interest to non-linguists as well as linguists.

The last section of part I gives an overview of methodological issues in other areas,
including archaeology, anthropology, genetics, and, briefly, oral history. This section provides
useful introductory material for interpreting the non-linguistic discussion of later parts of the
book.

Part II gives an overview of Bantu comparative linguistics and history. The bulk of it
focuses on linguistic issues, but it also includes some discussion of relevant work from related
disciplines (51–56). It is accompanied by three appendices found at the end of the book on the
topics of phonological, morphological, and lexical reconstruction of Proto-Bantu. The purpose of
this part of the book is not to break new ground but, rather, to give relevant background
information for part III. Among other things, it gives a concise and clear summary of research
done on the internal classification of Bantu, the external classification of Bantu, discerning the
location of the Proto-Bantu homeland, and possibilities for Proto-Bantu culture, as revealed by
the reconstructed lexicon. It also includes M’s first application of glottochronology—in this case
to arrive at an age for Proto-Bantu of about 5000 years (46).
It would have been useful if, in part II, M had more clearly highlighted points of relevance to later sections. For example, the discussion of the development of western Bantu languages (47–48) could have been linked more explicitly to the later discussion of the rise of the language groups of Gabon itself.

Part III of the book is the most important and is where the bulk of the original research is presented. The scope and coverage of this part of the book is impressive, as it integrates information from not only a wide variety of linguistic work but also from work done in a number of other disciplines. It begins with a classification of the languages of Gabon, enumerating both language groups and languages following the reference classification of Guthrie (1970) (see Maho (2003) for a recent overview and update) and incorporating recent proposals regarding their genealogical grouping. (Guthrie’s classification makes use of letter-number codes grouping languages into genetic/geographic groups which are assigned letters, while languages within the groups are assigned numbers. For example, the language Tsogo, in group B, has code B31.) All of the languages of Gabon, with exception of Baka, an Oubangian language spoken by Pygmy populations, are of Bantu origin. Almost all are from Guthrie’s zones A and B, but there is one language in the far southwest of the country, Vili, belonging to Guthrie’s zone H, whose languages are otherwise spoken in Congo-Brazzaville, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Angola. Since languages of zones A and B are restricted to the northwest of the Bantu area, they are quite interesting from the perspective of Proto-Bantu reconstruction for reasons mentioned above, namely (i) they are spoken close to the location of the putative Proto-Bantu homeland and (ii) they are typologically divergent from the Bantu prototype. Many of the Gabonese Bantu languages are also spoken in nearby countries or have close relatives spoken in those countries. The one exception is a group labeled Myene-Tsogo, comprising Guthrie’s groups B10 and B30, which is only found in Gabon (71).

The issue of how to name languages—and distinguishing between languages and dialects—has always been a tricky one in Bantu linguistics. One can, therefore, not generally fault a given
author for choosing any one set of conventions for referring to particular varieties over any other. However, given that a work like this one could easily become a standard reference on Gabonese languages, it would have been in order for M to make clearer how the names used in this book (63–64) relate to other existing conventions. Many of the listed names can be associated, through their associated Guthrie codes, to the languages given in Maho (2003) (which is the closest thing there is to an up-to-date standard), but this is not the case for all of them. For example, Maho (2003: 642) assigns two names to code A75, Fang and Pangwe, while M breaks down this “language” into six different varieties. I believe all Bantuists would readily accept that a work focusing on one part of the Bantu-speaking area might require different groupings than those given in a general reference work like Maho (2003). Nevertheless, M’s enumeration of Gabonese languages would have been much more useful had it been explicitly situated with respect to some current, widely-available classificatory scheme. Furthermore, doing so would have presented M with an opportunity to use his considerable expertise to discuss issues relating to language/dialect distinctions in Gabon, thus allowing this book to contribute to the improvement of existing reference classifications.

Following the listing of the Bantu languages of Gabon, M gives their geographic locations (65–67). Unfortunately, the language map given for the country (66) was not made specifically for the book, and it is quite difficult to use it together with the text for several reasons. First, it does not indicate linguistic divisions but, rather, the topography and provincial boundaries of the country. So, one can not easily ascertain how languages on the map pattern into genealogical groupings. Second, the language names found on the map differ from those used in the text in some cases (and this does not seem to be specifically addressed at any point). For example, the B30 language referred to in the text as puvi is found on the map as Vove (and is known in Ethnologue 15 as Bubi). Similarly, the A80 language referred to in the text as chiwappears on the map as Shiwa. Finally, from a readability perspective, the print for language names is quite small and, in some places, very hard to read. Given that, later in this section, an important topic
is migrations of different speaker communities within and into Gabon, the lack of any map specifically designed for the book is striking.

The geographic discussion is followed by a section on the genealogical classification of the Gabonese languages (68–75), which is based on the work of Guthrie and a more recent lexicostatistical survey (Bastin et al. 1999). While lexicostatistical data is, obviously, not an ideal basis for genealogical classification, it is widely employed within Bantu linguistics, and, here, M is simply making use of some of the best data available. Discussion of the problems associated with the use of lexicostatistics would have been worthwhile at the beginning of this section (along the lines of what is done in Nurse & Philippson (2003c: 166)), with a further indication that all conclusions based on such evidence should be considered tentative. (It should be noted that M does briefly address concerns relating to the use of lexicostatistics later in the discussion (87).) While this reviewer would have preferred much clearer signaling throughout the section that the groupings proposed by lexicostatistics would be better treated as hypothetical than “proven”, it is hard to fault M specifically for not doing this, since his treatment is not out of line with a general tendency in Niger-Congo studies to present complete family trees on the basis of lexicostatistical evidence (see, for example, Williamson & Blench (2000), Williamson (1989: 21)). However, more problematic than the reliance on lexicostatistics in this section is the (unqualified) use of glottochronology to date the splits of different language groups. It would almost certainly have been more appropriate to downplay the application of glottochronology and, instead, to have focused more on the relative chronology of the splits among the various proposed groups.

In this section, M also addresses issues relating to borrowings of terms for flora and fauna and possibilities for using toponyms to reconstruct migration patterns. He then gives proposals for the migrations of different linguistic groups into and within Gabon based on the linguistic evidence.
While the discussion in this section of part III is some of the most important in the book, it is, unfortunately, quite difficult to follow. All of the major points are embedded in the prose without accompanying tables or figures. In addition, there is no consistent convention for referring to years in the far past, which hinders the comparison of different dates. For example, in some cases, in the same paragraph, years are related directly to the present (as in, “two thousand years ago”) and in other cases “conventional” years are employed (as in, “1000 BC”).

Following the discussion of the linguistic issues, the subject matter shifts to related disciplines. The known history of the various language groups is given, and this is followed by an examination of the archaeology of the region; a discussion of anthropological patterns in the area, including an interesting division between matrilineal and patrilineal groups; and a survey of different styles of artwork found in Gabon. There is then a section on the interactions between shifts of language and shifts of other aspects of culture. The author’s general claim is that (at least in Gabon) communities tend to shift languages before changing other features of their culture (e.g., naming conventions, clan systems, etc.), and several cases conforming to this claim are discussed. Overall, I found these sections to be quite impressive, in their systematic survey of such a wide variety of work from other disciplines.

M moves through all this material fairly quickly, but one can still get a broad sense for how the linguistic facts of Gabon match with facts gathered by scholars in other areas. It becomes immediately apparent that the movements of both linguistic and cultural traits in the region are far more complex than what is implied by the simplistic notion of “the Bantu expansion” (see Vansina (1995) for critical discussion) and that the current linguistic geography of Gabon is not well-understood as resulting from a single “wave” of Bantu speakers, whose common language became differentiated over time. Rather, the combined evidence strongly suggests that Gabon has been affected by a number of different movements of Bantu speakers, coming not only in an initial wave from the Bantu homeland to the north but also in later movements from the east and the south and, again, from the north. Furthermore, even the one language group described by M
as being confined to Gabon, Myene-Tsogo, clearly underwent significant country-internal movements. And, none of this is to mention a number of apparent pre-Bantu cultural shifts for which there is also evidence.

The final section of part III (119–130) presents a synthesis of the material covered and also attempts to put to rest claims that have been made about the origins of certain Gabonese peoples which appear to have been accepted by some African scholars but which have no strong empirical support—the strangest of these almost certainly being the idea that speakers of Fang are somehow of Egyptian origin. Part III is then followed by a brief conclusion to the entire book which is, in turn, followed by the appendices mentioned above.

There is no doubt in my mind that this book represents a significant step forward in our understanding of the history of the Bantu languages. The task of reconstructing the past of a family consisting of somewhere between 300–600 languages (Nurse & Philippson 2003b: 2–3) for which there are no written records going back more than a few hundred years will not easily be solved by purely linguistic means. Synthesizing information from related disciplines, wherever possible, can clearly play an important role in the development and refinement of linguistic hypotheses for Bantu prehistory—just as linguistic data can inform work done in related fields.

This book, however, is not without its flaws, the most problematic one being its general lack of readability. Some specific issues were pointed out above, and to those I would like to add three more. The first is that it is often hard to tell from the text what material is taken from other authors and what represents new ideas, a problem which is compounded by a general lack of page numbers associated with references. The second is that there is very little explicit signaling of how the different sections of the book interrelate. It, therefore, is easy to get lost in a section on, say, archaeology and not understand which facts are of most pertinence to the linguistic issues. Finally, it becomes clear from reading the book that the political borders of Gabon do not form a particularly natural linguistic zone. More discussion of the linguistic situations of
Equatorial Guinea, Southern Cameroon, and, perhaps, parts of Congo-Brazzaville would have made it easier to interpret many of the facts presented and also made this book a stronger contribution to general Bantu linguistics.

None of this is to say, however, that this book does not represent an important accomplishment. As far as I am aware, work like this is unprecedented in Bantu linguistics—and it seems to be quite rare in linguistics in general. For large language groups with little written record, an integrative approach like the one taken by M seems to be essential to unravelling their complex histories, and one can only hope that this book will inspire similar work in the future.

References


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