

## **The Origin and Evolution of Setswana Culture: A Linguistic Account**

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### **Abstract**

Language is one of the important means by which all cultural experiences, both conceptual and material, are accumulated, stored and transmitted either vertically from generation to generation or horizontally from one ethnolinguistic group to another. In most societies such accumulation, storage and transmission are done by way of narration, stories, fables, proverbs, idioms, sayings, riddles, songs, totems and education. The most important form of transmission is done through education, whether formal or informal. Language is, therefore, both the means and the custody in cultural accumulation and transmission. Although a language's sound system and grammar may reflect societal cultural characteristics, it is the lexical stock or vocabulary which is the most important custodian of cultural experiences in a given ethnolinguistic group. This study uses Setswana speakers' cultural vocabulary to trace the evolution of this ethnolinguistic group from its ancestral Bantu origins to its present state. It is based on the assumption that the current Batswana's lexical stock is a reflection of the cultural experiences which have been accumulated over several millennia following a series of complex group's interactions with the physical environment, social milieu and the supernatural world, during the Bantu movements from their cradle in what is now Cameroon. These interactions gave rise to physical adaptations, innovations and adoptions which moulded the current Setswana language and culture.

### **Introduction**

It is often said that language is a mirror of culture. Whoever started this dictum had problems with his physics, since, if culture were to be reflected in a mirror, then language would be an image and not the mirror itself. Leaving aside this apparent physics fallacy, the truth still remains that language reflects the cultural experience of a given society. This experience is normally arrived at after a number of interactions. An interaction between the members of a society and their milieu or environment results in an acquisition of knowledge, skills and ideas about their physical world. An interaction between the members of a society among themselves gives rise to the development of customs and traditions of that society. On the other hand, an interaction between the members of a society and their supernatural world results in the adoption of beliefs and taboos, which may eventually develop into a religious institution.

In this way, culture can be described as the accumulated knowledge, customs, traditions, beliefs and other forms of experience of a given ethnolinguistic group which determine that group's way of life, social practice, behaviour, attitudes, aspirations as well as its artistic expression, the use of tools, and all other means of production (Goodenough 1957). In this study, an ethnolinguistic group is defined as a group of people who are characterised by a common language, culture and a sense of common origin and identity. An ethnolinguistic group usually coincides with a speech community in the sense of Gumperz (1968). The two terms will, therefore, be used interchangeably. However, both notions would appear rather simplistic in the case of the Setswana speaking community, which is made of small communities with their own specific cultural identities, ranging from differing traditions, customs, practices and even insignia and totems. Our use of the term ethnolinguistic entity is made in more general perspective within the conception of the *merafe* (tribal nation). Also, in reality, Setswana culture cannot meaningfully be divorced from its genetically or geographically related languages. In our context, we have the other Sotho-Tswana languages, including Shekga-

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lagarhi, Sepedi, and Sesotho; and Southern Bantu, in general, which comprises Sotho-Tswana, Nguni, Tsonga and Inhabane languages. Again, in view of our limited space, we shall not consider the other groups.

Language is, therefore, one of the important means by which all cultural experiences, both conceptual and material, are accumulated, stored and transmitted either vertically from generation to generation or horizontally from one ethnolinguistic group to another. In most societies such accumulation, storage and transmission are done in the ways of narration, stories, fables, proverbs, idioms, sayings, riddles, songs, totems and education. The most important form of transmission is done through education, whether formal or informal. This is because education transmits cultural values consciously, intensively and, normally, systematically (Batibo 1994). For example, among the Setswana speaking people, initiation schools such as *bogwera* and *bojale* were important means of cultural transmission.

### **Culture as Reflected in Language**

Although a language's sound system and grammar may reflect societal cultural characteristics (Wardhaugh 1986), it is the lexical stock or vocabulary which is the most important custodian of cultural experiences in a given ethnolinguistic group. A language's vocabulary is in itself divided into two categories which are basic vocabulary and cultural vocabulary which we now turn to.

#### *Basic vocabulary*

Basic vocabulary is the lexical stock which is basic in all human languages. It denotes objects and phenomena that are found universally, such as common actions and physical qualities, parts of the body, common geographical terms, natural phenomena, and the lower numerals. Basic vocabulary tends to persist even through various environmental and socio-economic changes. Normally, this type of vocabulary does not reveal much about a linguistic community's cultural experiences.

#### *Cultural vocabulary*

Cultural vocabulary is the lexical stock that a linguistic community develops or adopts through its many cultural experiences after interacting with its physical environment, social milieu and the supernatural world. From the physical environment, a linguistic community will form vocabulary which denotes the relevant topography, vegetation, wildlife and climatic conditions. From the social milieu, it will form vocabulary to depict its specific traditions and customs, including the socio-political life of the people, their food, dress, life-style, settlements, tools and artistic expression. Also, some specialised vocabulary will be created or adopted to deal with any socio-economic activities in which the ethnolinguistic group will be involved, such as stock-keeping, crop-farming, fishing, hunting, food-gathering, bee-keeping, iron-smelting or pottery-making.

From the supernatural world, an ethnolinguistic group will create special vocabulary to depict the deity and other religious beliefs, including interaction with the dead, such as the case of ancient Egypt. Some vocabulary might also denote social taboos and superstitious life.

### **Determining Cultural History from Cultural Vocabulary**

Tlou and Campbell (1984) mention five main sources of obtaining information about the past, namely: oral History or traditions, Archaeology, eyewitness accounts, official records and other History books. One other source which could have been mentioned is language or linguistic information. In determining the cultural history of an ethnolinguistic group, linguists and ethnolinguists use carefully worked out cultural word-lists, categorized according to types of physical environments, fauna, flora, climatic conditions, economic activities, traditions, customs, social life and beliefs. By using a method known as

Historical and Comparative Linguistics, linguists are able to determine the type of vocabulary that a speech community has retained, created or adopted from another speech community. It is possible to describe not only the cultural history of a group but also the patterns of exchange with other groups, with whom the relevant group came into contact.

Hence, we can distinguish between i) inherited vocabulary, that is vocabulary that is inherited from an earlier ancestry of an ethnolinguistic group; ii) created vocabulary, that is vocabulary that was formed following new cultural or environmental needs; and iii) borrowed vocabulary, that is vocabulary which was adopted from another ethnolinguistic group following the adoption of cultural material from that group or interaction through trade, commerce, religion, etc.

Inherited vocabulary only survives if the object, idea, or phenomenon it denotes continues to exist in an ethnolinguistic group. If the object ceases to exist or to be salient, the vocabulary item will either fall into disuse, or be used for a different concept. Later generations will have no idea of the vocabulary item or its original meaning.

Created vocabulary is normally formed through such processes as coinage, derivation, semantic expansion, compounding and term manipulation (Batibo 1992). New terms are usually created to denote newly encountered objects, ideas or phenomena. Some of these objects may be resurfacing after having disappeared for a number of generations. Sometimes vocabulary disuse may be prompted by socio-cultural reasons, such as superstitions or taboos. At times, new vocabulary may be created to replace the one whose social value has changed.

Borrowed vocabulary often contains sound and word-structure characteristics that would point to its foreign origin. It is usually adapted or nativised to correspond to indigenous formal and structural norms. It is only by studying the lexical stock of other ethnolinguistic groups adjacent to a given ethnolinguistic group that the source and patterns of linguistic borrowing could be determined. By implication, this would reveal the patterns of cultural exchanges. Usually the direction of cultural exchange would be inferred from the nature of the lexical item, and the other languages of the same language family. In fact, cultural interpretation is like solving a puzzle, where you have to make your judgment on the basis of a limited number and often complex clues. Cross-checking with information from other disciplines becomes not only desirable but essential. Studying the lexical stock of an ethnolinguistic group, therefore, casts a light on its cultural history on the basis of inherited, created and borrowed vocabulary.

### **Tracing the Cultural History of Setswana Speakers**

#### *The Bantu origin of Setswana*

Setswana, like most languages in Africa, south of the equator, belongs to the Bantu language family (Meinhof 1932; Guthrie 1948 and 1967-1971; Doke 1967 and Obenga 1985). Here one needs to say something about the term *Bantu*, especially in southern Africa, where it has acquired some socio-political connotations. In African linguistics, the term Bantu is used simply to denote a family of languages which have common linguistic characteristics in sound, grammar and basic vocabulary. In most of these languages, the word for people is *bantu*, *vandu*, *batho*, *watu*, *banhu*, *banu* and so on, hence the common term *Bantu*. (For practical reasons, both tense and lax high vowels of Proto-Bantu will be represented the same way, namely /i/ and /u/.) The term *Bantu* has been in existence since W Bleek first described the Bantu languages in 1859 and 1862. One may remark that *The Oxford South African English Dictionary Project* at Rhodes University has adopted the term *Sintu* to denote this language family, as an alternative to the term *Bantu* (Wolvaardt 2010). However, the term *Bantu* continues to be used widely, especially outside South Africa.

On the other hand, the Zulu Language and Literature Department at the University of Natal-Durban advocates the term *Kintu* for the same family (Canonici 1994). These terms have been pro-

posed presumably in order to avoid the politically distorted word Bantu. In this study, we shall use the term *Bantu* as it has been used by linguists. All Bantu languages are believed to have originated from the same linguistic ancestry. The term *Proto-Bantu* (PB) is used to call the hypothetical language, that was spoken somewhere in the western parts of present day Cameroon about 3,500 years ago, from which the 650 or so Bantu languages have evolved (Heine and Nurse 2000). All Bantu languages have similarities in their sound inventory, word structure, and basic vocabulary, which they have inherited from PB.

#### *Inherited cultural vocabulary from Proto-Bantu*

Most of our knowledge of the cultural entity of PB is contained in the reconstructed Bantu forms (Meinhof 1932; Guthrie 1967-1971 and Meeussen 1969). Polomé (1977) attempted a reconstruction of the PB cultural features inferred from the common *Bantu* vocabulary, that is the vocabulary, which is prevalent in both Western and Eastern streams. Here, one is mindful of some of the new archaeological theories regarding the possible routes of Bantu migration, and the whole question of Western and Eastern streams (Huffman 1989 and Phillipson 1994).

Basically, the ancestral Bantu speakers in their early eastward and southward diaspora from Cameroon 3,500 years ago, according to the inferred cultural data, were dwellers of the rain-forest and later savanna areas with wide stretches of bush. They lived in environments with various species of palm-trees. The wildlife consisted mainly of the lion (*n-cimba*), genet, jackal, hyena (*m-piti*), elephant (*n-iogu*) and numerous kinds of antelopes (*n-kudu*, *m-pala*), leopard (*n-goi*), monkey (*n-kima*), and porcupine (*n-ungu*) among others. There were also numerous rivers in which crocodiles (*n-gwina*) and hippos (*n-gubu*) were found. Common ants and insects included termites (*n-cwa*), spiders (*du-bubi*), mosquitoes (*m-bu*), locusts (*n-iige*), bees (*n-yuki*) and house-flies (*n-gi*). Common birds (*n-yoni*), included the partridge (*n-kwale*) and the guinea-fowl (*n-kanga*). Fish (*n-cwi*) was also found in the rivers and ponds or lakes (*madiba*). Terrestrial crabs (*n-kere*) were abundant. As we shall see, many of these words exist in present Setswana, only that their sound structure has changed.

The only widespread agricultural crop was bulrush millet. There were also certain kinds of roots and tubers. Oil plants and nuts (*bu-kuta*) were also cultivated. The tilling of the land was done by the use of digging sticks, usually made from ebony tree (*di-gembe*). The only domestic animals, at the beginning of Bantu migration, were the goat (*m-budi*), chicken (*n-kuku/n-koko*) and the dog (*m-bwa*). No wonder these noun stems are widespread in several languages found in Cameroon and Nigeria which are related to the Bantu family. Also goat milking (*-kama*) may have been practiced. The ancestral Bantu speakers made pottery by moulding clay (*-bumba*) and wore cloth from dried skins (*n-gubo*). They used bows (*bu-ta*), spears (*di-cimu/di-cumu*) for hunting and fighting.

People lived in huts (*n-ju*) and made fire (*mu-dido*). For amusement they danced (*-bina*), and sang (*-yimba*) and played the drum (*n-goma*). Women plaited (*-cuka*) their hair. People believed in witchcraft (*-doga*) as well as in ancestral spirits (*mu-dimu*). Also medicine-men (*n-ganga*), nowadays called traditional doctors, had an important role in society. There were not many economic activities, except for some commodity exchanges (*-guda*), counting (*-bada*) and measurement (*-pima*). Certainly, there is room for other views about the presence of some of these objects in the Bantu language family, such as later diffusion, especially in the case of domesticated animals.

From the reconstructed scenario above, it is clear that the ancestral Bantu speakers, at the time of the diaspora, were basically Late Stone Age farmers and hunters who used mainly wooden and stone tools. There is no evidence of iron-making at this time, as even the PB term *ki-uma* which now means 'iron' meant at that time 'wealth', as it is still used in north-western Bantu (Inskeep 1969:24).

### *Inherited cultural vocabulary from Eastern Bantu*

During the Bantu diaspora or migration, one important direction of movement was towards the Great Lakes into eastern Africa and then southwards (Batibo 1985). This branch has come to be known as Eastern Bantu stream and according to archaeological findings (Phillipson 1977), it is believed to have reached the Great Lakes by 400 BC, if not earlier; and then eastern Africa, namely Kwale (Tana River) by AD 100; and finally, southern Africa, Zambezi River by AD 300 and Limpopo River between AD 400 and AD 500.

Eastern Bantu vocabulary is much richer in cultural content than PB vocabulary. According to Guthrie (1967-1971, while Proto-Bantu (or Common Bantu) vocabulary comprises only 23% of items, Eastern Bantu lexical stock is composed of at least 41%. This is partly a result of the abundance of innovations that occurred over more than 1,000 years of movement and partly because of contacts with several groups such as the Sog Eastern Sudanic, Central Sudanic, Southern Cushitic, Nilotic and Khoisan people. Thus, the formidable environmental and socio-economic series of adaptation gave rise to the multiplication of new cultural vocabulary, especially in the domains of crop-farming and livestock-raising (Ehret 1973, 1974, 1980, 1996 and Hinnebusch 1991).

More crop-farming terms emerged, especially those adopted from Eastern Sudanic/Central Sudanic sources such as pennisetum sorghum (*-bele*), beer (*-alua*) and porridge (*-gali*). A new type of metal hoe (*-cuka*) was also adopted. While in their eastern African habitat, the Bantu migrants came into contact with cattle, presumably through Eastern or Central Sudanic groups while in the Great Lakes (Ehret 1974, 1996 and Schoenbrun 1993a). Thus new cattle terms were adopted. These included cow (*-gombe*), the most widespread term for 'cattle' in general, female livestock (*-bogoma/buguma*) and kid (*-mee*).

The Eastern Bantu contact with Southern Cushitic groups brought some cultural vocabulary as well, particularly in the domains of animal husbandry such as *-gonde* (ram), *-gulyati* (he-goat), *-dogosa* (mature cow), *-diiku* (young bull), *-dama* (calf), *-tasa* (barren cow), *-yagamba* (bull), *-dii-ma* (herd (v)) and *-sagama* (animal blood). Southern Cushitic vocabulary also contains terms for grain processing such as *-tuda* (pound(v)), *-yici* (pestle) and *du-bugu* (bark-cloth).

From eastern Africa, the Bantu are presumed to have acquired the knowledge of working iron (*ki-uma*), which earlier meant 'wealth'. They used the hammer (*n-vundo*) to forge (*-tuda*) the ore (*di-tade*) and the bellows (*mi-guba*) for keeping the charcoal (*ma-kada*) 'burning hot'. The origin of iron-making industry among Eastern Bantu is still a disputable topic among comparative linguists and even historians (Cohen 1972; Phillipson, 1977; Ehret 1974, Schoenbrun 1993b and Vansina 1995). It is evident that the eastern African environment since the eastward Bantu migration some 2,500 years ago and the progressive development of the socio-economic activities were the two primary sources of the cultural enrichment of the Eastern Bantu migrants.

Ehret (1973) attempted to reconstruct the locations of contact between Eastern Bantu and the Eastern and Central Sudanic groups. According to him, the first contacts took place in the Great Lakes region where Eastern Bantu adopted cattle and crop-farming. That is where the terms *-gombe* (cattle), *-bogoma/buguma* (female cattle), *-bele* (sorghum) and *-alua* (beer) are believed to have originated. From Ehret's earlier reconstruction of Bantu migration, the region of contact, for most South-Eastern Bantu languages, was thought to have taken place at the southern tip of present Lake Tanganyika (north of Zambia). In his earlier publications, Ehret was of the view that the Central Sudanic groups had spread to Central Africa as far as the Zambezi River before the arrival of the Bantu speaking groups in the area, and that they might have been instrumental in spreading the first sheep and cattle to Southern Africa through Khoe groups who, at that time, were located somewhere in central Africa (Ehret 1973 and 1974), or the Tshu-khoe as suggested by Smith (1990:59); Hitchcock and Smith (1982) and Parsons (1993:11). Although traces of Eastern Sudanic are visible in Southern Bantu, including Setswana, there is no clear evidence that the Sudanic

speakers came as far as the Zambezi River before the arrival of the Bantu speakers. In fact, Ehret himself has now abandoned his claim of the presence of Central Sudanic in Central or Southern Africa. In some of his later publications (Ehret 1996), he provides some lexical evidence that points to the fact that Eastern Sudanic groups must have influenced what he calls Kusi (or South-Eastern) Bantu communities during the later half of the last millennium BC, around the southern tip of Lake Tanganyika, as well as the Proto-Khoe in present-day west Zimbabwe.

Ehret's change of position coincides with the hesitation some historians like Tlou and Campbell (1984:31) have had over the theory that Central Sudanic groups had migrated to Southern Africa as far as the Zambezi River. The presence of Sudanic groups in Central and Southern Africa is certainly one grey area in our history in which historians, archaeologists and linguists need to investigate more thoroughly. Such investigation would help to explore the presence of Central Sudanic vocabulary, such as *pene* (goat in Shiyeyi and *mo-raka* (cattle post or large herd of cattle) in Setswana.

The Bantu languages that moved to Central and Southern Africa, through Eastern Africa, expanded their cultural experience not only through the new environment that they came across, but also through their contacts with several other groups such as Eastern Sudanic, Central Sudanic, Southern Cushitic and Khoesan groups. According to a new theory advanced by Vansina (1995:190-193) the migratory movements took place in a wave-like manner, rather than in a branching mode, except in the final stages of migration.

### **Setswana-Speakers' Cultural History as Inferred from the Prevailing Cultural Vocabulary**

#### *Common Bantu characteristics in Setswana*

Setswana language has preserved its Bantu characteristics by retaining the basic PB linguistic features such as the grammar, sound system and the basic core vocabulary. The grammatical heritage, which is usually the most conservative of the linguistic features, is evidenced in the typically Bantu noun class system, coupled by a regular concordial agreement as well as the usual complex verbal structure and an elaborate derivational system. The Bantu characteristics of the sound system is to be found especially in the well-balanced seven-vowel system.

On the part of the vocabulary, most core vocabulary depicting common actions and physical qualities human body parts, natural and geographical phenomena, and the lower numerals are of common Bantu origin. In fact, Setswana still retains more than 56% of the basic vocabulary found in ancestral Bantu (Batibo 2014).

#### *Identification of cultural vocabulary in Setswana*

A language normally contains thousands of both basic and cultural vocabulary items. Any study of such vocabulary can never be exhaustive because of the open-endedness of the lexical inventory. The present discussion of the Setswana cultural vocabulary should be considered only on its methodological merits rather than on any claim to make an exhaustive description of the complex cultural realities. The study will attempt to interpret in a rather speculative and impressionistic manner, the various cultural features of the Setswana speakers as inferred from the socio-economic and environmental vocabulary, which was extracted from a 1000-wordlist supplemented by Setswana language dictionaries, namely Kgasa (1976), Kgasa and Tsonope (1997), Matumo (1993) and Otlogetswe (2012). In fact, one should see this type of description as that of a builder who is trying to reconstruct a house which had fallen to the ground. He may not be able to fit all the pieces in place because some of them may have been lost or badly damaged. His ability to reconstruct the earlier structure will very much depend on the pieces which are still intact.

The term 'Setswana-speakers', in this study, is to be limited to the mother-tongue speakers ('Tswana') of Setswana. Since this is mainly a cultural rather than a historical account, one will avoid, especially

at this initial stage of our survey, all chronological details. The following description is based on a pilot research involving both environmental and cultural vocabulary which was administered over the main Setswana dialects. The survey did not include any data from Ngamiland or South Africa. From the survey, it was possible to interpret the Setswana cultural past as follows:

#### Crop farming culture

The Setswana-speakers have continued to preoccupy themselves with sorghum cultivation (*ma-bele*) since the presumed Central or Eastern Sudanic contacts in the Great Lakes. Millet (*le-belebele*) seems to be a later adoption in the present farming culture, hence the derivation of its name from that of sorghum. Other crops have had certain importance in the Setswana speakers' culture, namely beans (*di-na-wa*), vegetables (*mo-rogo*) and sugar-cane (*n-tshwe*). (This study will conform to the current Setswana orthography in which the voiceless velar fricative consonant is spelt as 'g'). Mushroom collection seems to have been a common practice. The commonest tools appear to have been the hoe (*mo-goma*) and the axe (*se-lepe*). Following the current Setswana orthography, the lax high vowels in Setswana will be spelt as 'e' and 'o', just like their mid counterparts). The latter term (*se-lepe*) originating from PB. Other crops such as sweet potatoes, bananas, maize and rice appear to have been adopted relatively recently. Some crops such as cassava and yams, which are common in Eastern Bantu, are practically unknown in Setswana farming culture.

The early Eastern Bantu culture of pounding, grinding, sifting and winnowing grain seems to have been carried on as the vocabulary indicates. Also the practice of making porridge as the main staple food has been kept. Only the original word for porridge (*bu-gali*) from Eastern Sudanic has been replaced in Setswana by a new form (*bo-gobe*). This could indicate certain changes in the preparation process. Cooking has continued to be done by boiling, roasting, burning and frying. The practice of salting food (*-loka* < *-dunga* Eastern Bantu (EB)) has also been maintained. Moreover, the art of making sorghum beer (*bo-jalwa* < *-alwa*) has been kept. What is amazing is that the Setswana speakers have introduced the art of cooking beans and maize together (*le-fata*) seemingly independent of north Eastern Bantu where the practice is very common in some ethnic groups. There is a possibility of a Portuguese influence, but this needs further investigation.

#### Stock-keeping culture

There is still unresolved controversy over the introduction or presence of cattle in Southern Africa, especially with regard to the presence of Khoe herders before the arrival of mixed farmers from the north (Barnard 1994:35; Tlou and Campbell 1997). However, there is a seemingly general consensus that the main thrust of sheep and cattle in Southern Africa came from the north, presumably before the arrival of the Bantu speaking populations.

According to some authors, livestock was acquired by the Khoe-speaking people, who, at that time, were located in Central Africa (Parsons 1993:11; Smith 1990:59; Tlou and Campbell 1997). However, some archaeologists believe that cattle were introduced into northern Botswana (Toteng) by AD 150. According to Denbow and Denbow (1989), early ironworking settlers with goats at Tsodilo obtained cattle from Khoe pastoralists. Cattle presence seems, therefore, to precede Bantu-speaking groups in Southern Africa.

The next controversy is whether or not the first Southern Bantu speakers, including ancestral Setswana-speakers, brought their own cattle or adopted from the Khoe. A close study of the Setswana cattle vocabulary shows no clear lexical retentions from Eastern Bantu, except for the word *-gama* (milk(v)) (from *-kama* (squeeze out, extract, milk) (Guthrie 1967-71). The root *gomo*

(*kgomo*) for (cattle) could have come from Khoe *-gom* (cow) (where the last vowel /o/ was added through vowel insertion and harmony (personal communication with Andy Chebanne 25 September 2015). Moreover, another possible source of the word *kgomo* could have been the form *kolomo*, which meant 'wild animal' in Southern Bantu.

As mentioned earlier, the ancestral Bantu-speakers were only familiar with the goat (*m-budi*), the chicken (*n-koko*), and the dog (*m-bwa*). These terms are, therefore, widespread in all Bantu languages. The tendering of these animals has continued to be practiced in the Botswana livestock culture. As livestock-raising became important in many Bantu societies, the need arose to make certain distinctions such as male/female, adult/young and castrated/non castrated. In the case of north Eastern Bantu, many of the terms were adopted from Southern Cushitic or Nilotic languages (Ehret 1974, and 1980). But in the case of Southern Bantu, Setswana included, wild animals were used to provide the various livestock distinctions. Thus, *poo* (bull) was derived from PB *m-bogo* (buffalo) and *phoko* (he-goat) from PB *m-pongo* (bushbuck, eland). The diminutive suffix *-ana* was used for the young ones such as Setswana *potsana* (kid) (< *po-di-ana*), *kokwana* (chick) (< *koko-ana*), *namane* 'calf' (< *nama-ana*) and *konyana* 'lamb' (< *ku-ana*). A special noun class derivation in Setswana of *mo-koko* (rooster) from *koko* (chicken) was introduced.

The sheep was a later adoption in north Eastern Bantu, mainly through Southern Cushitic groups (*g-taama-gondi* and *-kolo*). However, in Southern Bantu, sheep were introduced through the Khoe. Hence the form *guu* in Khoe was adopted as *n-ku* in Setswana. According to Smith (1990), sheep existed in many parts of Southern Africa even before the arrival of the Bantu speaking groups in the area. The more rigorous Southern Bantu cattle culture seems to have developed much later during the Southern African settlement. This is probably because the first cattle could not survive the tsetse-fly infected zones of central Africa or alternatively, there was a later socio-economic change in the region associated with cattle. Thus, most cattle terms are now innovations through extension of meaning, derivation, borrowing, except for *gama* (milk (v)), which is consonant with its use in many languages of north Eastern Bantu (that is, East Africa). According to Ehret (1974), the use of *-gama* for the same meaning could be coincidental. Through the ingenuity of ancestral Setswana-speakers. Setswana (through Southern Bantu) has been enriched by extensions of meaning such as *bo-loko* (cow-dung) from PB *budongo* (wet soil) or *-disa* (herd (v)) from PB *-di-is-a* (make eat).

However, cattle culture among the Setswana-speakers became important so rapidly that more terms had to be created for cattle identification in terms of colour patterns and horn types. Some terms such as *bua* (skin an animal (v), c.f. *kx'ua* in Xóð), may have been adopted from Khoesan. Cattle-keeping developed major importance between AD 900 and 1200 as people gained in cattle wealth, and therefore, there was stratification of society. It became an integral facet of political and economic structure, both amongst Sotho-Tswana and Nguni people. Thus, terms like *bogadi* (bride price), *mafisa* (lending cattle to another person); and *kgamelo* (milking vessel) came into active use and, certainly, indicate the social importance of cattle. This is one feature which distinguishes Southern Bantu languages from more agriculturally-based Central Bantu groups like Shona, Chewa or Sena. However, several lexical items remain unidentified as to their origin. These include items like *pitse* (horse), *thele* (udder), *mo-reba* (barren cow) and terms for cow colours and colour patterns.

### Hunting culture

Hunting was an important activity of the Bantu-speaking people since the time of their diaspora. The ancestral Setswana-speakers appear to have continued with that culture through the use of bows, arrows, spears and traps. Many Eastern Bantu savanna game animals have continued being hunted and, therefore, their names have remained actively in use. Such animals include the hartebeest, the eland, the kudu, the impala

and the duiker. Most of these animals have a long history of wide distribution throughout Southern and Eastern Africa. Hunting activity was associated with ceremonies and sacrifices.

The fact that new names are now used for the lion, the giraffe, the gazelle, the antelope, the hare and even insects, such as the mosquito, could indicate that certain ecological environments were not suitable for these animals during the Bantu migration. Thus the original Proto-Bantu vocabulary fell into disuse. On the other hand, the continued existence of many names for wild animals is an indication that up to relatively recently many parts of Botswana were ecologically suitable for a good range of wild animals. Moreover, the term for *tau* (lion) is only found in Southern Bantu languages and it seems to have originated from a euphemistic word –*daga* (avoid, be feared (v)), hence *n-dag-u* (something to be avoided) > *tau* (lion) (Bastin 1994:54).

Except for the terms for spear (*segai*) and arrow head (*motsu*) which appear to be of Khoesan origin, our survey did not identify Khoesan loanwords in hunting. This is rather surprising because, if the ancestral Setswana (or Southern Bantu) speakers adopted cattle and sheep from the Khoe, they should equally have taken from them much of the hunting skills and game names.

### Fishing culture

Fishing among the Bantu-speakers was only extensively practiced where there were abundant water bodies such as ponds, lakes, rivers, or the sea. The fact that the original Bantu fishing terms are not found in Setswana would indicate that fishing was either abandoned or practiced minimally at one time. This coincides with the ethnographical account that the indigenous Setswana speaking people, in common with other Sotho groups and the Nguni, have strong taboos against water animals, like fish and crocodiles. This may explain why the Batlhaping variety of Batswana are said to have gotten their name (which means “the fish people”) because of eating fish, a thing which was not common among Batswana. This would explain why the crocodile (*kwena*) is a totem. Many of the current lexical items for water activities are either loanwords or extended meanings of existing words. There is some lexical evidence to suggest that this happened during the Southern Bantu formation period. However, the PB terms for river (*noka* < *n-donga*) and stream (*mo-edi* < *mu-gedi*) were retained, just as the terms for swimming (*-shapa* < *camba*) and drown *-nwela* < *-nueda*). It appears that Setswana-speakers had direct or indirect knowledge of lakes and the sea. This is because they have special vocabulary for these entities. Some of these terms such as *loatle* ‘sea’ are cognate with those of Nguni languages, an indication of Southern Bantu habitation near the sea at one point. If we go by Huffman’s (1989) proposal that Southern Bantu speakers probably arrived in south-eastern Africa after AD 1000 via Mozambique, we could assume that they were in contact or near the sea along the Mozambican coast.

### Bee-keeping culture

Although bee-keeping was not a central preoccupation of ancestral Bantu, many Bantu languages have kept terms for bee, honey, honey-comb and bee-wax. Setswana has also these terms, but most of them do not reflect Bantu origins. This would imply a more recent re-activation of the bee-keeping culture, presumably through Khoesan influence. In fact, the term for traditional alcohol (*-khadi*) appears to have originated from Khoisan’s term for honey-beer.

### Iron-working culture

As mentioned earlier, the original Bantu-speakers were probably part of a broader regionally differentiated Late Stone Age culture. However, they developed or adopted an iron-working tradition during their migration as Eastern Bantu (Turner 1987). New iron-working vocabulary was developed with the new practice. This vocabulary included *di-tade* (iron-ore), *-tuda* forge (v)), *mi-guba* (bellows) and *n-yundo* (hammer).

This iron-working lexicon has been preserved in Setswana as *mo-thudi* (black-smith), *noto* (hammer) and *me-uba* (bellows). This would suggest that unless brought by later Bantu waves, iron-working has been the practice of early Setswana speakers in Botswana since their Eastern Bantu connections. Setswana (and Southern Bantu in general) added new terms for iron and metals, such as *tshipi* (iron) (from Proto-Southern Bantu (*cimbi*) and *-fisa* (smelt (v)) (from Proto-Southern Bantu *-pica*). The term *hamole*, from Afrikaans, is now more commonly used than *noto* in Setswana; while *se-kere* (scissors) is clearly a loanword from Afrikaans.

Although iron-working industry, particularly smelting iron was originally secluded and culturally complex, it appears to have later been more public, hence the use of loanwords from Afrikaans. On the other hand, Botswana was not part of the zone of diffusion of the Portuguese originated lexical item *-pio* (knife, wire), which was adopted in many Bantu languages as 'knife' (Moehlig 1981).

#### Pottery-making culture

Pottery-making, as it has been mentioned earlier, was one of the traditional practices of ancestral Bantu. As some archaeologists have suggested, it pre-dates iron-making and copper-industry. This skill was gradually modified by early Eastern Bantu, through the addition of more types of pots and ways of preparing them. However, the Setswana data surveyed so far does not seem to have any Eastern Bantu terms for pottery. The absence of Eastern Bantu pottery terms in Setswana seems to contradict the present archaeological position that the Tswana-Nguni pottery forms come from East Africa, particularly from the Urewe traditions (Phillipson 1994; Huffman 1989 and Soper 1982). Therefore, further investigation is needed. According to Phillipson (1994:191) the greater part of Botswana is covered by the Chifumbaze pottery complex.

#### House- building culture

The ancestral Eastern Bantu modes of building houses, fences and villages appear to have been maintained. The Eastern Bantu round-shaped huts seem to have been maintained, thus even the PB term for house (*n-ju*) has been preserved as *n-tlo* in Setswana. The inside furniture seems to have remained basically the bed and the stool, as in ancestral Bantu. Surprisingly, the Eastern Bantu term for house leaking (*-duj-a*) has remained active (> *-dutla*). It all suggests that there has not been any time in the ancestral Setswana-speakers' history when leak-proof houses were built!

#### Social systems

This study was not able to determine the origins of the term *kgotla* (ward, elders' council) nor the word *kgosi* (chief), (or *inkosi* in Nguni), although in some north Eastern Bantu languages *-gosi* means 'male person'. The term could have undergone shift at the time when the Southern Bantu groups were constituting their socio-political systems. Also the term could have infiltrated into the southern part of Africa from North-Western Bantu where, in its original form *-koci*, it meant 'lion' (Guthrie 1970 and Bastin 1994). It is well noted that in Southern Africa there is a strong relationship between kingship and the lion, both denoting power.

Social organisation appears to have been maintained since early Eastern Bantu, just as the prominence of traditional medicine-men (*n-gaka* < *-ganga* PB) who were both healers and diviners (Kuper 1980 and Huffman 1989). Witchcraft (*-bo-loi* < *bu-dogi* PB) has continuously been carried out, just as reverence for ancestral spirits. Later, the concept for one deity emerged. Hence the term *modimo* acquired two referents, that of ancestral spirit and that of God, forcing a prefixal distinction, namely Noun Classes 1 and 2 for ancestral spirit and Noun Class 3 for God (Batibo 2014). Taboos and other beliefs have continued to be observed.

The wearing of clothes made of hide appears to have prevailed. There is no linguistic evidence of bark-cloth. Many initiation customs, especially for girls seem to have been preserved, hence the use of *n-gwale* for 'girl initiate' as in many parts of Eastern Bantu. Moreover, many kinship terms do not coincide with those of north Eastern Bantu. This could imply a period of reorganisation of the kinship system in Southern Bantu, or Setswana in particular.

Hair-plaiting (*-loga* < *-duka* (knit, weave (v)) seems to have replaced the PB stem *-cuka* (plait hair). This could suggest the introduction of new styles of plaiting hair, involving knitting modes. However, body and house decorations seem to be relatively new adoptions or innovations (Kuper 1975). Moreover, singing and dancing, at the time of merry-making, appear to have been common. The role of the drum (*-goma* in Eastern Bantu) which is so important in many north Eastern Bantu societies, where it is often associated with chieftaincy, seems to have had less importance in the Southern Bantu cultures, particularly among the Setswana speaking people. A new term is now used, that is *mo-ropa*. However, the term *koma* has remained to denote ritual singing or singing of triumph. This is a clear shift in meaning prompted by the predominance of singing rather than drum playing in the later development of many Southern Bantu societies.

#### Physical environment

Our data on physical environment shows that Setswana speakers have had long experience with stony, sandy, clayey and swampy grounds. They have also lived in valleys, mountains and plateaux. Equally, they have settled near rivers, streams, including dry river beds. According to the speakers of Setswana, drought (*le-uba*) is associated with the sun, since in PB, the stem *-yuba*, from which the word *le-uba* has developed, means 'sun'. The word was later associated with extreme sun heat which dries up vegetation, thus causing drought, which is the new meaning in Setswana.

Although many Setswana speakers now live in semi-arid areas, they seem to have had much contact with grassland and wooded savanna ecology, as they have preserved terms for a variety of wild animals, insects, birds and reptiles. Some of these names descend from PB or Eastern Bantu. Some of the names, however, appear to be later creations, derivations or borrowings.

#### **The Setswana-Speakers' Interaction with Khoesan and other Groups**

Setswana-speaking people's (and Southern Bantu in general) admixture with the Khoesan people is evidenced from the difference in their physical attributes (such as body-built, complexion and appearance), as compared to their Central and Northern Bantu counterparts (Barnard 1992; Tlou and Campbell 1984). What one would have expected from this heavy intermingling is a linguistic hybrid, similar to the famous Ma'a (or Mbungu) case in East Africa between Cushitic and Bantu (Thomason and Kauffman 1988). But Setswana has borrowed very negligible lexical material from the Khoesan. Moreover, even the characteristic clicks which are prevalent in the other Southern Bantu languages, like IsiXhosa, IsiZulu and Sesotho, are marginally used in Setswana, since they are only found in ideophones and interjections (Janson and Tsonope 1991). One explanation which has been suggested (Denbow and Wilsen 1986:151) is that the intermingling was not done on equal ground, but between the privileged Bantu and the socio-economically vulnerable Khoesan groups. It was the Khoisan people who strove to learn the Southern Bantu languages, Setswana included, rather than the other way round. Khoesan terms were, therefore, used only where Bantu forms did not exist. The adoption of clicks in several of the Southern Bantu languages may have been an act of prestige rather than an expression of necessity. In the case of the Nguni languages, the situation seems to have been much more complex (Traill 1994 and 1995). Some scholars, however, believe that Setswana made use of more clicks in the past, but that it has shaded them off because of status complex (Denbow and Campbell 1986; Westphal 1971).

Moreover, there must have been a time when mass acquisition of Proto-Tswana/Sotho was undertaken by non Tswana/Sotho groups, presumably the Khoesan. This gave rise to some instability in the internal structure of Tswana/Sotho language cluster, prompting far-reaching phonological changes and a heavily overlapping phonological system, which is presently evidenced in Setswana (Cole 1955; Doke 1967; Batibo *et al* 1995; Batibo and Tsonope 1995; Janson 1991). Setswana, however, did not go through the avoidance system, such as the *Isihlonipho sabafasi* (use of foreign words and sounds for social avoidance, especially for women), as shown by Finlayson (1995), which attracted many Khoesan vocabulary items and sounds in IsiXhosa and IsiZulu.

Also some Setswana vocabulary points to the fact that there may have existed some trade contact with East Africa, presumably as an exchange zone during the time when Southern and Central Africa trade with India and the Arab world. There is a significant resemblance of certain lexical items with Swahili. These items include terms for money/wealth, difficulties and categories of people. The important feature about these terms is that they defy the regular sound correspondences found in the other lexical items. Some of these terms, such as *madi* must have diffused across many parts of Southern Africa. Thus, Shona, Tswana, and Nguni languages all use *mari*, *madi*, *mali* etc. The word itself originates from Arabic-Persian *maal* (meaning 'silver'). This would tend to confirm the East Africa-South African historical connection. Only Sotho uses *tshelete*, from Afrikaans. The East Africa-Southern Africa connection becomes more obvious as one moves towards the eastern coast.

### **The Current Position of Setswana in Southern Africa and Botswana**

Over the years, Setswana language has expanded to become a major language in southern Africa. At present it is spoken by over 5 million people in four countries, namely Botswana, South Africa, Namibia and Zimbabwe (Batibo 2014) It is one of the African languages which have been designated by the African Union, through the African Academy of Languages (ACALAN), as the vehicular indigenous language for the southern African region, together with Chinyanja (ACALAN 2008).

In Botswana, Setswana is spoken by 78.6% of the population as mother tongue and over 90% as first and second language (Batibo 2005). It is, therefore, the most dominant language in the country, not only demographically but also socio-politically. It is the lingua franca and sole national language of the country (Republic of Botswana 1994). However, Botswana is a multilingual and multicultural country with 26 other indigenous languages, which include 13 other Bantu languages, namely Shekgalagarhi, Sebirwa, Setswapong, Silozi, Ikalanga, Zezuru, Nambya (Najwa), Chikuhane (Sesubiya), Shiyeyi, Thimbukushu, Rugciriku (Rumanyo), Otjherero and Sindebele. Moreover, there are 12 Khoesan (Non-Bantu Click) languages, namely Ju/'hoan, =Kx'au/'ein, =Hoan, Nama, Naro, /Gwi, //Gana, Kua, Shua, Tshwa, Khwedam and !Xóǀ.

Despite the predominance of Setswana language and culture, the other indigenous languages are protected through the provisions of the national Vision 2016, which state that, by the year 2016 (now 2036), Botswana will be a fully democratic, educated and informed nation, in which 'no student will be disadvantaged by ethnic origin, gender, language or remoteness of settlement' (Republic of Botswana 1997:55). Through this vision, Botswana has striven to be fully democratic, united and compassionate. The year 2016 is also the time when Botswana celebrates its 50-year anniversary of Independence, having achieved many of its Vision 2016 goals. One of its future challenges will be how to ensure the effective role of Setswana as the country's national language, while safeguarding the vitality and use of the other indigenous languages in the country, especially in the face of English as the official and global language.

## **Conclusion**

The above discussion was not meant to provide a comprehensive and watertight description of the Setswana-speakers cultural history nor to give a wholly accurate and in-depth account of this complex ethnolinguistic group. In fact, in the eyes of many historians, ethnographers and anthropologists, what has been presented here may not seem new, and may even look superficial in some parts. I would like such people to be mindful of the fact that this account is merely exploratory and tentative, in that it is based on Setswana lexicon surveyed so far.

A more thorough study of the lexicon is the major task ahead. This discussion was aimed at two important aims. First, it was meant to demonstrate that Linguistics, like Archaeology, can play an important role in uncovering the cultural History of a society. Both disciplines interpret residual materials which reflect prehistorical social systems, movements and patterns of socio-economic exchanges. But, unlike Archaeology, with its unique radiocarbon 14 techniques, Linguistics cannot provide precise dates for any historical events. Ethnolinguists and comparative and historical linguists could make an important contribution to the discovery of the complex patterns of migration, settlements, ethnic interactions, and socio-economic exchanges between the various Bantu and Khoisan speaking groups in Botswana.

A comprehensive study should cover not only Setswana but all other 29 or so languages spoken within the borders of Botswana and especially in the Okavango Delta where there is a concentration of linguistic and cultural data (Gunnink *et al* 2015). Also the investigation of Setswana within the context of Southern Bantu would be the most appropriate in tackling the problem, as probably some of the most relevant sources for Setswana cannot be found in Botswana, but elsewhere (Schapera 1976). Certainly, comparative and historical linguistic methods should not be used alone but in conjunction with, or in order to supplement, the five methods mentioned by Tlou and Campbell (1984).

Second, this study was meant to illustrate the complex nature of the Setswana culture in that it is a product of more than two thousand years of environmental adaptation, technological development and socio-economic interaction and exchanges. The cultural enrichment was particularly conspicuous for Southern Bantu groups who travelled longer distances and, therefore, had more exposure to environmental conditions and to contacts with other ethnolinguistic groups (Mpulubusi 1995). This study has shown that the Setswana language is a product of PB, Eastern Bantu and Southern Bantu cultures. It has not attempted to describe any of the unique cultural aspects of the Setswana-speakers or their historical significance. Traditionally, the Setswana-speakers have a social system based on cattle use, but their subsistence economy was based on crop-agriculture, hunting and collecting wild food. Cattle were used for maintaining social, political and economic relations. Much of this is emphasized in the language. This cattle-connection differentiates them from the more crop-agriculturally based peoples to the north, and links them to the Amanguni in the south. With the passage of time, Setswana-speakers have expanded their culture through constant environmental adaptations, innovations and adoptions of skills and practices from other groups, including global technology and information flow. This is reflected in the recent Setswana dictionary by Otlogetswe (2012).

## **Note**

An earlier version of this study was presented as a professorial inaugural lecture on 20 March 1996 at the University of Botswana under the title: 'The Role of Language in the Discovery of Cultural History: Reconstructing Setswana Speakers' Cultural Past'.

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