THE BANTU ANCESTORS' IMAGE OF GOD: A LINGUISTIC ACCOUNT

H. M. Batibo

ABSTRACT

In all the lexical reconstructions which have been made to establish Bantu Proto-forms, that is forms which are presumed to have been used as vocabulary by the ancestral Bantu speakers, there is no any common lexical item for the deity or Supreme Being. The question therefore is: Did the ancestral Bantu speakers have a notion of the deity? If so, how did they conceive this reality? If not, when did this notion come into the Bantu languages? This question about the image or perception of God by the ancestral Bantu speakers is the main concern of this study, whose assumption is that, if the ancestral Bantu speakers believed in a deity, then there should be a name for this supreme-being, which would have spread out across all the Bantu speaking areas and that this name would reflect the way they perceived this supreme body. The study reveals many facts about the origin of the perception of God by the Bantu speakers and how the notion has been conceived by the speakers of various Bantu languages. The study also confirms, what has been observed by other scholars (c.f. Nkomazana, 2007), that the notion of the deity was in existence even before the coming of the missionaries.

1. Introduction

A number of attempts have been made to reconstruct the vocabulary which was used by the ancestral speakers of a language, which has been given a hypothetical name of Proto-Bantu. This language is presumed to have been spoken more than 3,500 years ago (1,500 BC) in the south-west of what is now Cameroon, from where its speakers migrated to central, eastern and southern parts of Africa. After more than three millennia of multiplication and diversification, there are presently more than 500 languages which predominate in Africa, south of the equator, commonly known as Bantu languages (Heine and Nurse, 2000).

The most elaborate reconstructions of the vocabulary, which was used by the ancestral Bantu speakers, include the ones of Guthrie (1967-71), Meinhof (1932), Meeussen (1969) and Welmers (1973). In all these reconstructions, there is no any Proto-form, that is a reconstructed form to represent a common vocabulary for the deity or Supreme Being. Even in the Bantu cultural vocabulary which was reconstructed later by Polomé (1977), no mention was made of a supreme divine power. The question therefore is: Did the ancestral Bantu speakers have a notion of the deity? If so, how did they conceive this reality? If not, when did this notion come into the Bantu languages?

2. Research Methods and Analytical Framework

This question about the image or perception of God by the ancestral Bantu speakers prompted me to investigate whether the notion of God existed in Proto-Bantu. If not, then when did it emerge in the currently spoken Bantu languages? The assumption of the study is that, if the ancestral Bantu speakers believed in a deity, then there should be a name for this supreme-being, which would have

spread out across all the Bantu speaking areas and that this name would reflect the way they perceived this supreme body.

The analysis is based on the widely used basic linguistic theory, which investigates linguistic data in its entirety. According to this descriptive approach, language should be described in its own terms by looking at all its aspects (Dixon, 2010). This model emphasizes that the description of a language should be language-based, plain, comprehensive and thorough. It should be inspired by comparing all the features across languages in order to identify common elements and trends (Dryer 2001). This line of approach is important in making a comparative and thorough study of the notion of God in Bantu. The study will consider the semantic attributes of the deity in the identified forms.

The data which were used in this study were collected from both primary and secondary sources. The primary sources included information gathered from a questionnaire which was sent to several departments dealing with African languages in selected Universities in the 22 countries where Bantu languages are spoken. Some questionnaires were also sent to individuals personally known to me in the Bantu speaking countries. On the other hand, the secondary sources included the massive database compiled by the International Centre of Bantu Civilization (CICIBA) in Libreville, Gabon. The database was compiled by Obenga (1985). Other secondary sources were also found in the works of Kagame (1956), Mbiti (1972) and Mulago (1973).

3. The Supernatural Powers in Proto-Bantu

The absence of a Proto-form for the deity does not mean that the ancestral Bantu speakers did not believe in supernatural powers. They had some Proto-forms for several types of what they believed to be supernatural powers as shown in Example 1 below.

Example 1: Proto-forms for supernatural powers in Proto-Bantu (c.f. Guthrie, 1967-71; Meeussen, 1969)

**mu-dimu[1]	(Cls 3/4)	‒ancestral spirit‖
**mu-log-i	(Cls 1//2)	‒witch‖
**-log-a		‒bewitch‖
**mu-yedi	(Cls 3/4)	‒moon, lighter of the night‖
**li-yuba	(Cl. 5)	‒sun, provider of life‖
**lu-pepo	(Cls 11/10)	‒strong wind, demon‖
**n-jadi	(Cls 9/10)	‒lightening‖

These two-starred reconstructions (**) signify that the lexical items are inherited from Proto-Bantu, the ancestral language. Thus, they are spread across all the Bantu speaking areas. According to Proto-Bantu conception, these were supernatural entities as they were propelled or empowered by some supernatural forces (Obenga, 1985).

4. Emergence of the names for the deity

The names for ‒God‖ appear to have emerged after the settling of the Bantu speakers in central, eastern and southern Africa, that is in the sub-equatorial parts of Africa. It is possible that it emerged after the Bantu speakers came into contact with other groups such as Central and Eastern Sudanic people, Nilotes, Cushites or Khoesan or it could have emerged out of new conceptual innovations and diffusions.

In the contemporary Bantu languages, there are numerous names for the deity. Some of them have specific reference to some aspects of nature. The most commonly used are shown in Example 2 below.

Example 2: Commonly used names for the deity

* ka-tonda	(Cls 12/13)	‒God‖	(Inter-Lacustrine Bantu)
* n-jambe	(Cls 9/10)	‒God‖	(West-Central Bantu)
* mu-kumu	(Cls 1/2)	‒God‖	(Central Bantu)
* mu-lungu	(Cls 3/4)	‒God‖	(Eastern Bantu)
* mu-dimu	(Cls 3..4)	_God‖	(South-Western Bantu)
* n-koci	(Cls 9/10)	‒God‖	(South Eastern bantu)
* mu-bumbi	(Cls1/2)	‒God‖	(North eastern Bantu)
*mu-kama	(Cls 1/2)	‒God‖	(West Lake)

These one-starred reconstructions (*) signify that the lexical items have emerged after the Bantu speakers had spread out in their different locations in the Bantu area. Hence, these names are geographically restricted in their occurrence. However, these names had different original meanings, which have been extended through the extension of meaning to also signify ‒God‖. The original and extended meanings are shown in Table 1 below:

Table 1: The original meanings of the commonly used names for the deity

	Name	Original Meaning	Extended Meaning
1.	*ka-tonda	creator	God
2.	*n-jambe	provider	God
3.	*mu-kumu	traditional doctor/chief	God

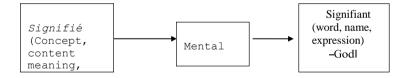| 4.	*mu-lungu	supernatural, outsider	God
5.	*mu-dimu	ancestral spirit	God
6.	*n-koci	lion/chief	God
7.	*mu-bumbi	pot-maker, one who moulds	God, Creator
8.	*mu-kama	chief, king	God, Ruler

5. Discussion

There are many observations which one can make with regard to the above data. The most conspicuous ones are:

a) The common attributes of the deity

The common attributes of the deity emerged, when the concept of a supreme being emerged among the Bantu language speakers. There were certain attributes associated with this concept. Hence, a linguistic symbol or name had to be created in order to support this concept (Brosnaham and Malmberg, 1970; De Saussure, 1906; Martinet, 1970). The relationship between concept and linguistic expression or word is shown in Diagram 1 below;

Diagram 1: The relationship between signifié (meaning) and significant (expression) (After De Saussure, 1906)

Signifié (Concept, content meaning,	→	Mental	→	Signifiant (word, name, expression) ‒God‖

According to the above diagram, the concept God has been associated, by the English language speakers, mentally with the expression /gʘd/ (in the spoken form) and ‒God‖ in the written form. It means that the choice of the linguistic expression or word was done arbitrarily by the English language speakers and was made to represent the concept of the deity.

b) Methods of creating a linguistic symbol in a language

According to Yule (1996) there are many methods which languages have adopted in creating new words. Hence, new vocabulary is formed following these methods. When a concept is completely new in a language community, a new linguistic expression or word will have to be created or formed. The formation of the new word will follow one of the   following

mechanisms:

    i)   Coining, that is the invention of a totally new name. This is done commonly in the invention of new trade names (e.g. Xerox, Kleenex, nylon, zip in English);

    ii)   Borrowing, that is the adoption and institutionalization of a word from another language (e.g. telescope, paternal, microscope, words of Greek or Latin origin in English);

    iii)   Compounding, that is the combination of existing words (e.g. football, houseboy in English)

    iv)   Derivation, that is the forming of a word from a root or stem by using new affixes of new words from stems or roots of existing words (e.g. settlement, return, demote, reproduction in English).

However, if it happens that an object or phenomenon in the environment resembles, in some respects, the new concept, then the language may use the existing word by just extending its meaning to also cover the new concept. This process in known as: Extension of meaning. It is one of the commonest methods of word creation.

c) The origin of the names for the deity in Bantu languages

Curiously, the origin of the commonly used names for God, in most Bantu languages, have evolved through the process of Extension of Meaning. Usually, the original meaning provides some clues about the nature or attributes of the concept. Most of these terms belong to classes 3/4 (**mu-/mi-) or 9/10 (**n-/n-), which are classes for living, but non-human entities.

According to the reconstructed noun class system, Proto-Bantu had over 20 noun classes. Most of the works which have been carried out on the noun class system in Bantu languages have looked at the noun classes from a semantic and anthropological perspective. The most prominent studies include Barton and Kirk (1976), Creider (1975), Denny and Creider (1976), Greenberg (1977), Guthrie (1967-1971), Herbert (1977), Kagame (1976), Krapf (1850), Mbiti (1972), Meeussen (1969), Mulago (1973), Obenga (1985) and Welmers (1973).

One of the most recent repartition of the Bantu noun classes, according to their semantic attributes, was made by Batibo (1987), who used the voluminous works of Guthrie (1967-71) to extract the main semantic features for each of the Proto-Bantu noun classes. Although the original repartition may have been blurred through reorganization and semantic shift, yet a certain pattern can be established, which is given in Table 2 below.

Table 2: The Bantu noun class prefixes and their semantic attributes (After Batibo 1987)

No.	Noun class Prefix	Semantic Attributes

1/2	**mu-/ba-	Human beings, human nature
la/2a	**Ø-/baa-/bu-	Kinship relations
3/4	mu-/mi-	Trees, plants, vegetation, wooden objects, non-human living entities (planted)
5/6	**li-/ma	Collective objects, like fruits, pebbles, stones, paired body parts, mass nouns, liquids, augmentatives, massive natural phenomena
7/8	**ki-/bi-	Man-made objects, objects with marked or despised features, unnatural phenomena
9/10	**n-/n- or Ø-/Ø-	Animals, insects, reptiles, non-human living entities (animate), non-human animate
11/10	**lu-/n-	Elongated objects, phenomena which last in time or space
12/13	**ka-/tu-	Diminutives, belittled, reputed, honorific
14/6	**bu-/ma-	Consolidated or amassed objects, abstracts
15/6	**ku-/ma-	Actions, events, processes, states, limbs
16/17/18	**pa-/ku-/mu-	Locatives (at, to, in)

Hence, as one can see from Table 2 above, only classes 3/4 (**mu-/mi-) and 9/10 (**n-/n-) have semantic attributes relating to living, but non-human entities. This explains why most names for the deity are in these classes.

d) The attributes of the concept of deity

From Table 2 above, it is possible to deduce the attributes of the deity by the ancestral Bantu speakers. These attributes are shown in Table 3 below:

Table 3: The attributes of God as interpreted from the associated similes

	Item in the original meaning	**Attribute of God**
1.	Chief	Supreme being
2.	Traditional doctor	Protector of Life
3.	Outsider	Supernatural Being
4.	One who moulds, pot-maker, initiator	Creator
5.	Lion	Powerful, Almighty
6.	Ancestral Spirit or Spirit of the Dead	Attachment with Living

The above attributes of God are in many ways similar to the concept of the deity in Christianity and Islam.

e) The multi-faceted perception of the deity

The multi-faceted perception of the deity was part of the way the ancestral Bantu speakers conceived ‒God‖. In some languages, He was perceived as one entity, but having many facets or functions. Hence, different names were given according to each function that He performed. An example is shown in Table 4 in the case of Shisukuma, a language spoken in north-west Tanzania.

Table 4: The different names of the deity in Shisukuma

	Name	Meaning	Origin or Literal meaning
1.	Li-welelo[2] (Cls 5a)	‒God‖	‒The wider universe‖
2.	Li-kunze (Cls 5a)	‒God‖	‒The super-natural‖
3.	Li-mudimi (Cls 5a)	‒God‖	‒The over-seer‖
4.	Mu-lungu (Cls 3)	‒God‖	‒The outsider‖
5.	Ø-Seba (1a)	‒God‖	‒Master, Lord‖

Notice that the use of the augmentative extra-prefix cls 5a (Li-) is an indication that God is conspicuously supreme in size and power.
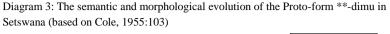
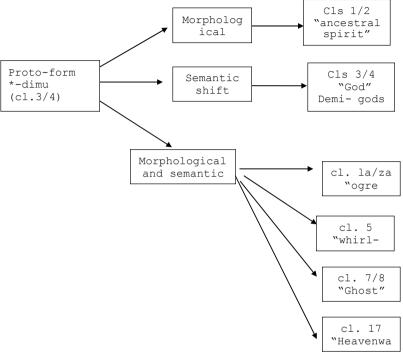**f) The evolution of the name used for deity in some languages**

The name for God has evolved in some Bantu languages to include other senses. This is the case in Setswana, where the original Proto-form **mu-dimu meant ‒ancestral spirit or spirit of the dead‖, as in the other Bantu languages. However, in Setswana and other Sotho languages, there was an extension of meaning, so that mo-dimo/medimo[3] (cls 3/4) meant both ‒ancestral spirit‖ and ‒God‖.   In order to distinguish the two meanings, there was a noun class shift as follows:

a)   Cls 3/4:   Mo-dimo/me-dimo[4]   ‒God‖/semi-gods   (no longer ‒ancestral spirit‖)

b)   Cls 1/2: mo-dimo/ba-dimo ‒ancestral spirit‖   (Hence ‒ancestral spirit‖ changed from cls 3/4 to Cls 1/2)[5].

After the emergence of two pairs of noun classes associated with Proto-Bantu stem **-dimu, other semantic attributes were associated with this stem. However, this association followed the semantic values of the respective noun classes. These new lexical items are listed below (Cole, 1955: 103).

a)   Ø-dimo/bo-dimo (cls la/2a), ‒ogre, cannibalistic giant‖. These are noun classses associated with kinship terms, but also human beings having distinctive characteristics);

Diagram 3: The semantic and morphological evolution of the Proto-form **-dimu in Setswana (based on Cole, 1955:103)

b) le-dimo (cl.5) ‒whirl-wind, hurricane‖. This is a class associated with huge phenomenon in its derived form. Hence, portraying a hurricane as a huge phenomenon;

c) se-dimo (cls 7/8) ‒Ghost, unearthly creature(s)‖. This noun class is usually associated with people having marked/inhuman characteristics. Hence a ghost is seen as inhuman or abnormal being;

d) go-dimo (cl.17) ‒up above, the top, heavenwards‖. This class is normally associated with direction in space or time. Hence, Heaven is seen as a place in an upward direction, above the earth.

The morphological and semantic evolution of the Proto-Bantu stem **-dimu ‒ancestral spirit‖ in Setswana can be represented in Diagram 3, as shown above.

6. Conclusion

This study has revealed that the Proto-Bantu speakers did not have a word or concept for the deity, although they believed in supernatural powers, including ancestral spirits. The concept of the deity emerged later after Bantu migration and settlement. On the other hand, the fact that the names for the deity have evolved from existing Bantu words shows that there was no outside influence. The names were not brought by missionaries, but the latter used them to enhance the concept of God in Christianity and so to bring Christianity close to the indigenous knowledge of the converts. This observation confirms the findings of Nkomazana (2007), who comes up with a similar conclusion.

Since the concept of God came after the noun class system had been established, there was no class reserved for the deity. In most cases, God was perceived either as having special human nature or as a non-human but living entity. The complexity of natural phenomena both physical and supernatural, as conceived by the Bantu speakers, is contained in the complex noun class system which categorizes the universe and ecosystem. This has attracted much attention from a number of scholars, with linguistic, philosophical and anthropological orientations. One can also argue, as Whorf (1956) did, that the complex level of conceptualization in the Bantu languages must have provided a mental support for the Bantu speakers to conceive the existence of the deity as a supernatural power.

Lastly, the study has shown that the Bantu speakers believed in one God. It is therefore curious to note that in Nollywood films, the tendency is to project the idea that there were many ‒gods‖ in the African traditions.

End Notes
1. In this study some uniformity has been made in the way the Proto-forms are represented graphically.

2. The words are written according to the prevailing orthographies in the respective languages. However, this representation does not affect the analysis.

3. In this study, the Setswana words will be spelt according to the current Setswana orthography.

4. The concept of ‒semi-gods‖ is not common in Setswana. However, according to Cole (1955:103), Setswana speakers use the plural me-dimo (Cl.4) to refer to ‒semi-gods‖. This would imply that they basically believe in one God, and any plural notion would refer to less revered supernatural beings, including idol worship-snakes and wooden-made animals.

5. Curiously, Batswana, and the other Sotho language speakers, chose to associate the notion of ‒ancestral spirits‘ with the human classes (Cls 1/2). The concept of God was associated with non-human living entity, hence remained in Cls 3/4. This is presumably because God is often conceived as super-human.

References

Batibo, H. M. 1987. The Bantu ancestors' vision of the world. Journal of Linguistics and Language in Education. 2:1-21

Brosnaham, L. F. and Malmberg, B. 1970 Introduction to Phonetics. Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd.

Burton, M. and L. Kirk, 1976. Semantic reality of Bantu noun classes: The Kikuyu case. Studies in African Linguistics. 7(2): 157-174.

Cole D. T. 1955. Tswana Grammar. Johannesburg: Longman

Creider, C.A. 1975. The Semantic stem of noun classes in Proto-Bantu. Anthropological Linguistics. 17: 23-42.

De Saussure, F. 1906. Cours de Linguistique Générale. Genève: Payot

Denny J. P. and C.A. Creider, 1976. The semantics of noun classes in Proto-Bantu. Studies in African Linguistics, 7(1):1-30.

Dixon, R. M. 2012. Basic Linguistic Theory. Vols 1-3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dryer, M. 2006. Descriptive Theories, Explanatory Theories and Basic Linguistic Theory. In Felix Ameka, Alan Dench, Nicholas Erans (eds.) Catching Language: Issues in Grammar Writing. Pp 207-234. Berlin Mouton de Gruyter.

Greenberg, H. J. 1977. Niger-Congo noun class markers; Prefixes, suffixes, both or neither. Studies in African Linguistic Supplement. 7: 97-104

Guthrie, M. 1967-71. Comparative Bantu. 4 Volumes. London: Gregg.

Heine B. and D. Nurse, 2000. Introduction to African Languages: An Introduction Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Herbert, R. R. 1977. Prefix restructuring, lexical representation and the Bantu noun. Studies in African Linguistics Supplement. 7 : 105-111.

Kagame, A. 1956. La philosophie bantu-*rwandaisede l"être.* Bruxelles : Académie royale des sciences coloniales.

Krapf, J. L., 1850, Outline of the Element of the Kiswahili Language. Tubingen.

Martinet, A. 1970. Eléments de linguistique générale. Paris: Armand Colin.

Mbiti, J. 1972, Religions and philosophy. London: Heinemann

Meeussen, A. C., 1969, The Bantu Grammatical Reconstruction, Tervuren (Ms).

Meinhof, C. 1932. Introduction to the Phonology of the Bantu Languages. Berlin: Dietrich Reimer/Ernst Vohsen.

Mulago, A 1973. La religion traditionnelle des bantu et leur vision du monde. Kinshasa : Presse Universitaire du Zaire.

Nkomazana, F. 2007. Some evidence of belief in the one true God among the Batswana

before the missionaries, in BOLESWA Journal of Theology, Religion and Philosophy, Vol. 1(3) : 24-36.

Obenga, T. 1985. Le bantu: langues, peuples, civilisations. Paris: Présence Africaine

Polomé, E. 1977. A reconstruction of the Bantu culture. In L. Bouquiaux (ed.), *L"Expansion Bantu*. Pp 153-167. Paris: Centre National de Recherche Scientifique.

Welmers, 1973. W.E. 1973. African Language Structures. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Whorf, B. L. 1956. Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings, J.B. Carrol ed., Cambridge, A: MIT

Yule G. 1996 The Study of Language. Second Edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.