

Basenji Origin and Migration: Into the Heart of Africa

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Introduction

Basenji-like dogs are found throughout western and central sub-Saharan Africa. Evidence for the existence of dog is scarce in the archaeological record for Africa, especially in central Africa. Linguistics and migration of the African people will be used to show the possible route taken by the Basenji's ancestor into western and central Africa.

Niger-Congo people and the introduction of the dog

In Johannes (2005) it was proposed that the most likely route taken by the Basenji's ancestor was probably through central Sahara. The people living in the mountains of the central Sahara spoke languages that are part of the Nilo-Saharan phylum. Just to the southwest of the Nilo-Saharan people was another group of people who spoke languages that were in the Niger-Congo phylum. It was likely that the dog was traded, given or migrated from the Nilo-Saharan to the Niger-Congo people. It was the Niger-Congo people who brought the Basenji-like dogs into western and central Africa.

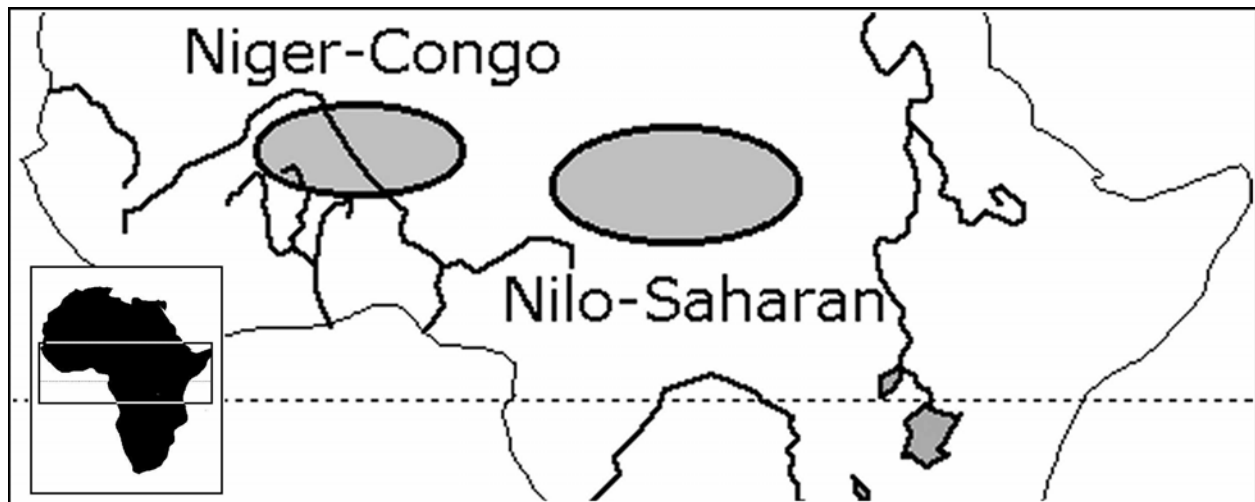


Figure 1 – Possible area of origin for Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan languages. (Shaw, 1993)

The Niger-Congo language family has been estimated to be 7000 (Blench, 2005) to 15,000 years (Heine & Nurse, 2000) years old. An early idea by Westermann (1911) that Niger-Congo and Nilo-Saharan are related has been strengthened by comparisons done by other linguist (Blench, 2005). People speaking Niger-Congo languages migrated from their area origin throughout sub-Sahara Africa. Blench (2005) suggests that the Niger-Congo language phylum started its expansion because of the introduction of the bow and arrow, poison used on arrows, the dog and improving climate.

Although the exact time period for the adoption of the bow and arrow is not known for the Niger-Congo people, linguistic evidence seems to indicate an early adoption. Blench (2005) has compiled the word for several different Niger-Congo languages and thinks the root word for bow is #-**taN**. Some examples of the word for bow in Niger-Congo languages are **sa**, **ta**, **taai**, **to**, **tam-o**, **ta-ba**, **kusaa**, and **kuta**. The bow and arrow gave the Niger-Congo people an advantage because they had the ability to travel further distances and shoot game at greater distance than those people still using the spear.

Two other developments may have spurred the spread of the bow and arrow; poison and the dog (Blench, 2005). Throughout sub-Sahara Africa plants are specifically cultivated for use as poison to be used on arrow tips. The poison provides an additional advantage by reducing the danger of hunting since the animal can be shot from a distance and approached only after it dies from the poison.

The dog allowed hunting by an individual. The dog flushes and tracks game that has been shot. A bow and arrow along with the dog improved the productivity of the Niger-Congo people compared to those still using the spear. Blench (2005) looked at linguistic evidence to uncover when the dog was introduced to the Niger-Congo people. He states that using linguistic evidence to determine the diffusion has a problem because the words for dog tend to

phonaesthetic. However, Niger-Congo has a distinct root word for dog, something like #-**buli**. Some examples of the word for dog in Niger-Congo languages are **bu, biri, bere, bwa, gbe, bwe, bo, bana, and bela**. The similarity of the word for dog within the Niger-Congo languages suggest an earlier introduction or a possible semantic shift of a term that originally applied to the jackal and was later applied to the dog.

Migrations into West Africa

West Africa was populated very sparsely by hunter-gathers during the Pleistocene. The population increased during the Holocene some 12,000 years ago (Blench, 2005). For some 9000 years stone tools remain unchanged until around 5500 BC, pottery and ground stone artifacts made their appearance in southwest Nigeria and further east at Shum Lake around 5000 BC (Phillipson, 1993). Further west pottery and ground stone tools were found in the Ivory Coast dating to 3000 BC and Sierra Leone around 4000BC. It is possible this was the expansion of Niger-Congo speakers into West Africa. Population change started increasing 4000 years ago with spread of agriculture. The southward spread of Saharan nomads seems to have intensified agricultural development. Migration was the movement of small kin-based groups rather than large migrations. (Newman, 1995). This expansion of the Niger-Congo people has left very few linguistic traces of the original people living in West Africa. Blench (1995) believes this indicates that the Niger-Congo were successful in absorbing the original people because they had technological or societal advantage.

In tracing the development of languages within the Niger-Congo group, the earliest languages to split off seem to be languages now spoken in West Africa, such as Mande and Atlantic. Mande was more northerly before moving later southward and westward to the coast. Atlantic was nearer the coast. Dogon and Ijoid split off next. Dogon is found south of the bend of the Niger while Ijoid moved down the Niger to finally end up at the Niger Delta. Later language groups such the Kru and Kwa are found in Ivory Coast and Liberia (Blench 2005 & Vogel, 1997).

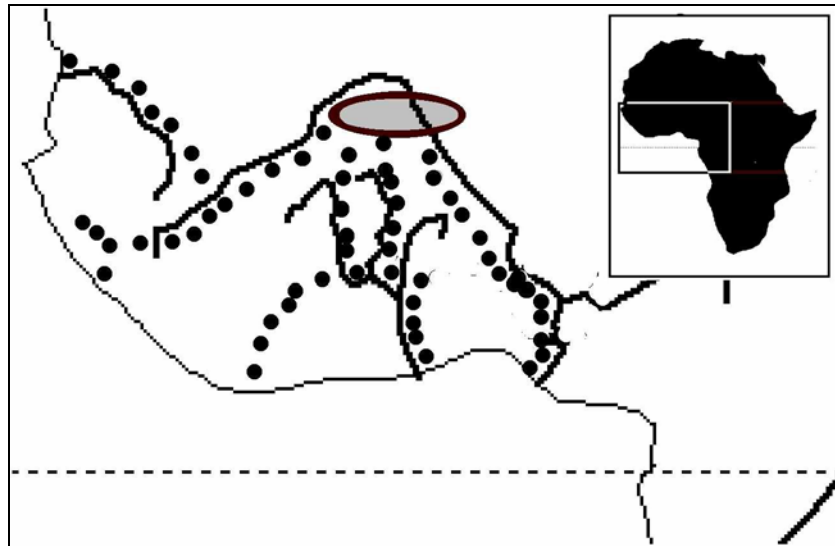


Figure 2 – Possible routes taken by Niger-Congo speaking people in West Africa.

Although Paris (1992) reports inhumations of domestic dogs dating to at least the early second millennium BC from Chin Tafidet in Niger, elsewhere in West Africa there are no sites dated earlier than 200 BC. Despite this, all other types of circumstantial evidence suggest dogs are of considerable antiquity and it is likely that either dog Bones may have been confused with those of jackals or it is a consequence of the system of keeping. (Blench, 2005).

Migrations into Central Africa

Two language groups migrated to central Africa, Ubangian and Bantu. Both these groups had dogs and spread them into central, eastern, and southern Africa. These migrations occurred later than the migration into West Africa. Figure 3 shows the Bantu and Ubangian areas of origin and their migration routes covering the time period from 5000 to 2000 years ago.

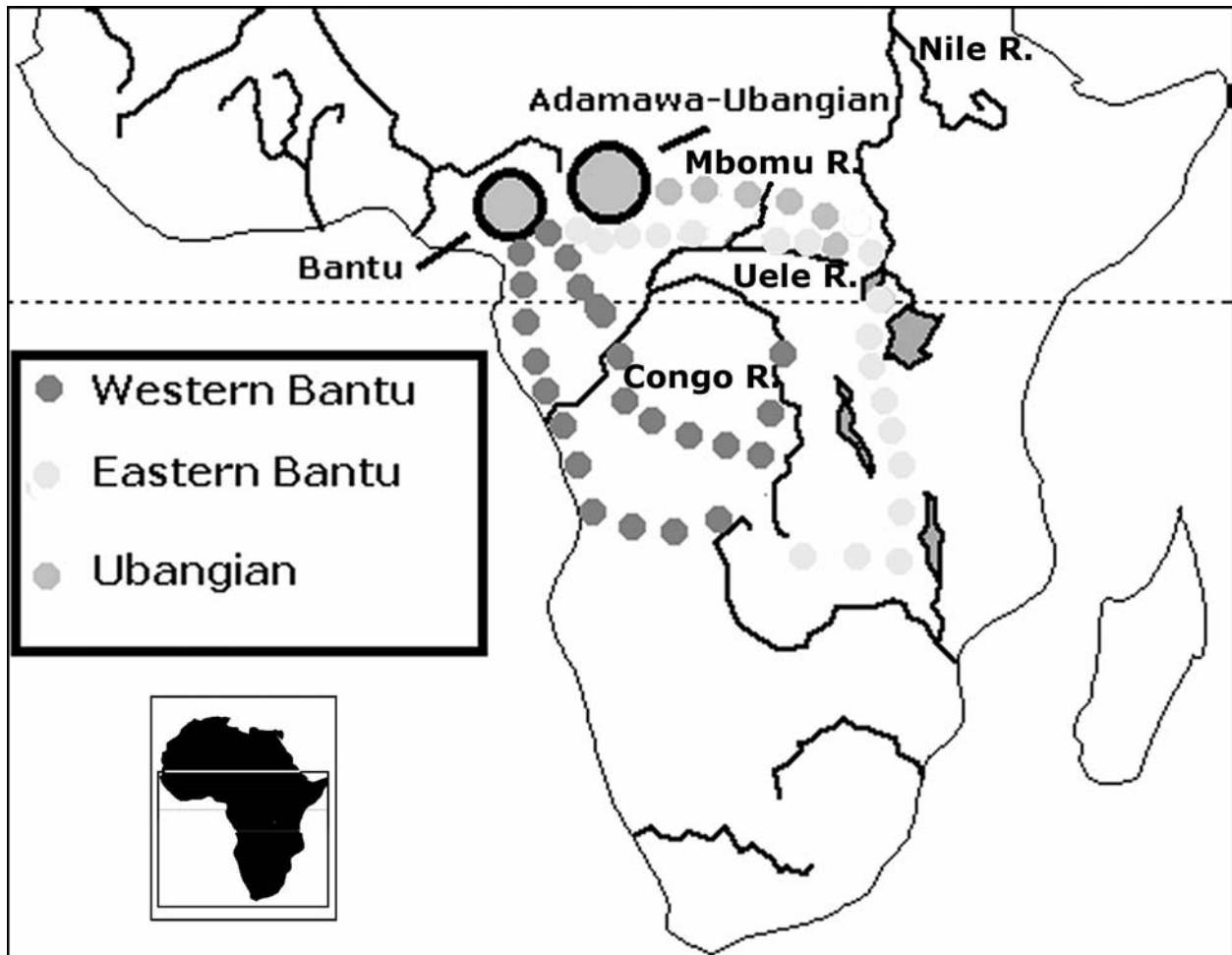


Figure 3 – Bantu and Ubangian core areas and their migration routes in central Africa (Newman, 1995).

The Adamawa-Ubangian area of origin was in Cameroon and CAR (David, 1982). They lived in the savanna and northern forest-savanna mosaic and supported themselves by cultivating and fishing. Around 3000 B.C. the proto-Ubangian started moving to the east crossing and following the Ubangi River and reaching just beyond the confluence of the Mbomu and Uele Rivers (Saxon, 1982). In this confluence it was settled by what is now called the Eastern Ubangians. They seem to have grown millet, yams, calabash, and perhaps the oil palm. By the mid-second millennium the Eastern Ubangians begin to expand further and diverging into different groups. One of these was the proto-Zandeans that went up the Uele east of the confluence. This expansion covered the Uele Basin to the edge of the Nile watershed. By 2000 years ago the Ubangian had ceased expanding their territory. Around the time Europeans started exploring the southern Sudan and northeast Congo the Zande were conquering their neighbors. These neighbors, for the most part, spoke other Ubangian languages (Saxon, 1982). It is from the Zande people that the Avongara Basenjjs were procured.

While the Ubangian expansion was limited, the Bantu's was not. The Bantu people now occupy most of central and southern Africa. The similarity of the languages spoken in sub-equatorial Africa has been recognized since the Portuguese started sailing the West and East Coast of Africa. Linguist studying the distribution and diversity of the Bantu languages noted that in the western Cameroon and eastern Nigeria, while not fully Bantu, were clearly related (Phillipson, 2002). The greatest diversity and separation between languages is found in southern Cameroon. In the Congo basin the languages show the next highest diversity and the least diversity is found between Mt. Kenya and Cape Town (Heine, 1993). This range in diversity indicates the area of origin for the Bantu languages is in Cameroon or southern border area of Nigeria (Heine, 1993). 5000 years ago the Bantu people were hunting, gathering and fishing along with cultivating yams, legumes, peppers, and gourds. Population growth was not rapid, but it was sufficient to cause migration in search of new areas to live. They could not move north or east because agriculturists were already present. The first direction taken was east above the equatorial forests. It is possible that the Eastern Bantu did not stop until reaching Uganda because they were be pressured by the Ubangian people who were also migrating into the area. 3000 years ago the Eastern Bantu reached Uganda and by 2000 years ago they had migrated to just beyond the southeast corner of the central African rainforest (Newman, 1995). The Western Bantu headed south, by 3500 years ago they passed beyond the Cameroon Plateau and in the equatorial rain forest between the Sanagha and Ogooue river. They also followed the coast. along river valleys, living in scattered villages of 100 or so people. The Bantu continued south until they reached the southern limit of the rainforest and turned to the east

along narrow belt of moist woodland. Some of these people who traveled on the southern border of the rainforest turned northward up river systems and populated the eastern half of the Congo River basin.

Possible reasons for the geographic distribution of coat color

The Basenji breed standard now recognizes three colors, Red and White, Tri-color, Black and White, and one color pattern, Brindle & White. Two of these colors, Red and Tri-color, are possibly the original colors for the Basenji's ancestor when it started its migration with the Niger-Congo people.

Red and White and Tri-color seem to occur throughout the range of the Basenji like dogs, with red being the predominant color. In West Africa Red and White and Tri colored dogs are present in Nigeria, Benin, Gambia and Gabon (BCOA, 2005, MacDonald, 1967, and Berre-les-Alpes, 1971). Liberia also has Red and White dogs, but Standifer (1964) stated he never saw or heard of any Tri-colored dogs. Margaret Miller, in her account of dogs of Liberia, does say she saw Tri-colored dogs – “which were black mostly with little brown spots over their eyes, on their cheeks and on the underside of their tails” (C Trois-Hoerr, 2001). These two colors are also seen in Central Africa from Cameroon to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). In Sudan Tudor-Williams (1959) observed that Red was predominant with Tri-colors being about the quarter of the dogs. Olivia Burns observed in the southern Congo that majority are chestnut with white points with small percentage are black (Coe, 1994). At that time description of black, tan, and white was described as black.

Black and White dogs occur in western and central Africa. In West Africa the color seems to be distributed along the coast and has been found in Gambia and Liberia (MacDonald, 1967, Standifer, 1964). In central Africa the color has been observed in Cameroon, Gabon, Sudan, East Africa, Zambia, Angola and southern Congo (Berre-les-Alpes, 1971, Tudor-Williams, 1989, Epstein, 1971, Ford, 1967). Although a broad distribution suggestions that this color could also be an original color of the Basenji's ancestor, there are some factors that might indicate it is not. The Black and White dogs found in Liberia have the dominant black gene. This is probably true of black and white dogs found along the West Coast of Africa from Senegal to Angola. Large black dogs occur in Cameroon, Lunda, Kioko, and Angola. It is thought their origin is Portuguese (Epstein, 1971). The Portuguese begin exploring the African West Coast in the 15th century. They setup settlements in Guinea and Angola (Historyworld, 2005). It is possible the dogs they brought along had the dominant black color and passed this on to native dogs. Curby (1987) observed on their entire trip in northeastern Zaire only three dogs that could have been pure black and white, and two other black and whites that had red hair scattered in the black. The second type he observed, black with scattered red, is called Fula black and is known to be recessive (Coe, 1994). Because he saw so few black and white dogs, Curby believes that the dominant black and white color is not indigenous to central Africa. Over the range of the Basenji it seems that two different types of black and white occur, one dominant and the other recessive. It is thought that the Kru (Liberia) and Ubangian (Central African Republic [CAR], Sudan and DRC) languages are related linguistically (Blench, 2005). It is possible these people had a common origin, yet the Kru have dogs with dominant black while the Ubangian people have dogs with recessive black. This could indicate that a later introduction of the black color occurred.

The Brindle color pattern has the most restricted range, occurring in southern Sudan and northeast DRC above the Uele River (BCOA, 2005 and Tudor-Williams, 1989). It is possible that this color pattern is also in eastern CAR. Coe (1994) states that the Brindle color was not mentioned in the area in the 1920's and 30's. This possibly suggests an outside introduction. An increase in the number of brindles seems to have occurred, with brindles being one-fifth of the population in 1959 and increasing to one-third in 1987 (Coe, 1994).

Conclusion

The migration of the Niger-Congo people possibly shows that Basenji went in two different directions after reaching sub-Saharan Africa. The first was into West Africa, only later did a second migration occur into central Africa.

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