

The Fang coming all the way down from 'Egyptland'?

Or how the walls of a myth may come tumbling down...

L. J. van der Veen (DDL, UMR 5596, Lyon)
Research with J.-M. Hombert (Lyon), P. Mouguiama-Daouda (Lyon-Libreville), D. Comas (Barcelone), L. Quintana-Murci (Paris), L. Sica (Franceville, Gabon)

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Objective

- Presentation of some **expected and unexpected results** from the "Language, Culture and Genes in Bantu" project (OHLL, OMLL) related to
 - Fairly well-known population
 - Migration

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Outline

- The Fang
 - Where they live
 - Who they are
 - Where they come from
- Evidence from Linguistics
- Evidence from Population Genetics
 - MtDNA
 - Y-chromosome
- Possible scenario(s)
- Further investigation



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Fang: where they live

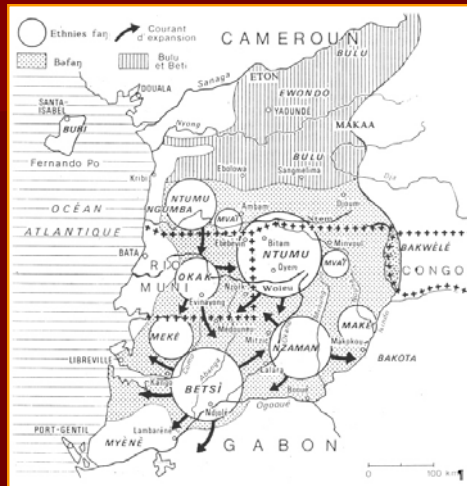
- Southern part of Cameroon (with the **Bulu** and **Beti** pops as their northern neighbours)
- Most of the northern half of Gabon
- Small region in northwest of Congo-Brazzaville

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Geographical distribution of Fang, Beti and Bulu

With recent expansion patterns for Fang dialects: Ntumu, Mvai, Okak, Mekè, Nzaman, Betsi

(Perrois 1972:102)



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Fang: who they are

- Most recently installed Bantu-speaking population in Gabon
- Demographically and linguistically, dominant group (Gabon)
- ±700,000 individuals distributed over 3 countries
- Patrilineal descent system
- Marriage strategy: exogamy
- Farming villagers



Fang women coming home from plantation - Cureau (1912)

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Fang: who they are

- Oral tradition
 - Mvett (storytelling/music): performing ancestral myth
 - Differences between clans/lineages!
- Initiation rituals
 - Bwiti: adopted from Tsogo (southern Gabon) at beginning of XXth century
 - Melan, as part of Byeri: ancestor worship
- Art
 - Masks (Ngil), funeral statuettes (Byeri), ...



Fang Ntumu reliquary

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Fang: who they are

- Ethnic group that has never failed to fascinate the European traders, explorers, missionaries, anthropologists, ever since the first encounter
- Reputation largely based on Western (mis-)perceptions (outsiders' view, ideology, etc.)
 - 'Ferocious', 'superior', 'nomadic' 'conquerors'
 - 'Intelligent', 'industrious', 'honest', 'handsome'
 - Suspected of having practised cannibalism
 - Rumours spread by Mpongwe and allied brokers? (The latter's privileged position being threatened!)

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Fang: who they are

- Usually considered to belong to larger cultural unit, with Beti and Bulu (the so-called 'Pahouin' group)
 - 'Mpangwe', 'Pamouay' or 'Pamue' < (mi-)pamyé 'I don't know'?? (Mpongwe B11a)
 - Name most certainly attributed by others, probably the Mpongwe
- Possibly, a confederation of various clans/lineages
 - Related? Unrelated? Both?

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Fang: where they come from

- Most consensual and most likely scenario (though limited time depth!)
 - Fairly well-documented demic expansion within the Cameroon-Gabon area, though the precise (ancient) geographical origin (*Mvog Etanga*) still a matter of debate
 - Adamawa highlands in north-central Cameroon?
 - Upper-Sangha in western Central-African Republic?
 - Both?
 - Wave-like expansion
 - Several stages and branches (split-offs)
 - Intensified during 18th century AD and come to an end during first half of 20th century AD in Gabon

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Fang: where they come from

- Trigger(s) and/or conductor(s):
 - Groups (of non-Bantu speakers) invading northern Cameroon and triggering migration movements
 - I.a. Fulani expansion triggering southward migrations
 - More generally, Muslim invasions and slave trade (the figure of the 'Crocodile' in Fang oral tradition?)
 - Trade, European goods (increase of economic exchange: ivory, ironwork, captives, etc.) and misery among Fang were crucial factors, especially during final stage of expansion
 - Search for women (exogamy) and very high cost of dowry
 - Fang dowry system: highest cost in Gabon (Mayer, 2002)
 - Possibly, decrease of elephant population (Cadet, 2005)
- More than one population involved!
 - Proto-Fang: part of a more general, southward movement

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Fang: where they come from

- Fang's arrival in Gabon (chronology)
 - Prior to arrival, the Mpongwe (*Myene-speakers*) are the exclusive trade partners of the Europeans
 - First reference to Fang in Gabon: Bowdich, 1819 (*inland location, but where?*)
 - First contacts between Fang and Europeans: Wilson, 1842 (*first description!*)
 - Progressive entering of the Estuary: from 1844 on
 - Descent encouraged by the French: development of trade activities (*tied to destiny of the Colony!*)
 - Southward movement to Ogooué: from 1866 on
- N.B. Some accounts suggest presence of Fang in Gabon (Komo region) is older

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Bahr-el-Ghazal, Sudan

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Fang: where they come from

- Direct descent of nomadic tribe heading for the conquest of Gabon
- Theory has become very popular, especially among Black African scholars, but also among non-scholars
- In Gabon, common belief that the Fang, as well as their language, are not Bantu
 - Birth of a new, glorifying myth, cunningly exploited by the French colonisers

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Fang: where they come from

- Sometimes, strong ideological dimension: Cheikh Anta Diop (1979, 1981, 1993) and Théophile Obenga (1985, 1993)
 - School of thought
 - "White Egyptologists falsify ancient History!"
- Similar claims for Basaá (A43a) and Mboshi (C25) languages
- Theory in its strongest version claims that all Black African languages and cultures descend from the ancient Egyptian civilisation

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Evidence from linguistics

- Fang: A75 (A70: FANG-BULU cluster)
- Gabon: northern, southern and intermediate dialects (Medjo Mvé, 1997)
- Impact on surrounding languages
 - Dominant language assimilating several other, related and less related, languages (cf. Shiwa, A83 dialect spoken by Makina)
 - Currently spoken by nearly 30% of the Gabonese population!

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Evidence from linguistics

- Fang looks different from the neighbouring Bantu languages (at the surface)
 - Some peculiar phonological features
 - 8V + 3 diphthongs
 - Labiovelars ([kp], [gb])
 - Predominantly closed syllables
 - Palatal nasals in word-final position

 *Fang Ntumu (Bitam, Gabon)*
Proverb (P. Medjo Mvé)

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Evidence from linguistics

- But... according to Guthrie (1948, 1967-71), Hombert et al. (1989), Medjo Mvé (1997) and Mba-Nkoghe (2001):
 - Absolutely no evidence of a non-Bantu substratum
 - All the traits of a regular Bantu language
 - Lexicon can be directly and straightforwardly related to Proto-Bantu reconstructions, through regular sound correspondences (*vowels, consonants, tones*)
 - Regular Bantu noun class system
 - Regular Bantu verb system
- Fang is a foolproof Bantu language, no doubt

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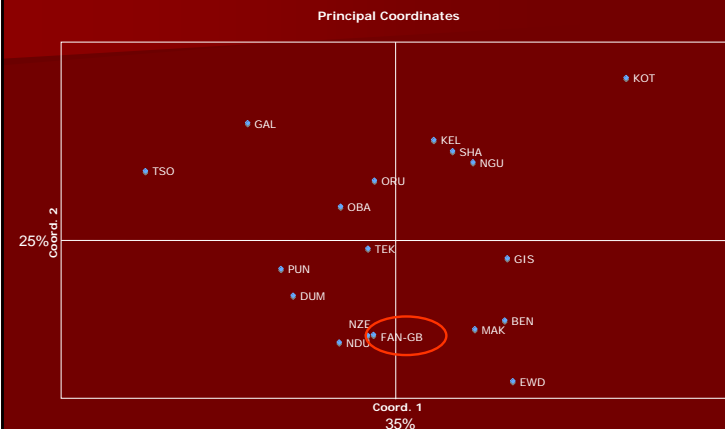
Evidence from genetics (mtDNA)

- MtDNA variation (analysis team directed by L. Quintana-Murci)
 - 1404 samples (i.e. individuals) from Gabon and Cameroon
 - 9 hunter-gathering 'Pygmy' pops (*421 individuals*), 20 Bantu-speaking farming pops (*983 individuals*)
 - No evidence at all of a Semitic or Egyptian origin
 - If Fang really descended from 'Egypt', all Bantu-speaking groups of the area would be related to the (ancient) Egyptians!

(Data, analysis and slide by Lluis QM)

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Evidence from genetics (mtDNA)



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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Y-chromosome variation (analysis directed by J. Bertranpetit and D. Comas)
 - 900 samples from Gabon and Cameroon
 - 3 hunter-gathering ('Pygmy') populations, 20 Bantu-speaking farming populations
 - 18 STR markers (3 reactions)
 - ~40 SNP markers

(Data, analysis, slides by David Comas)

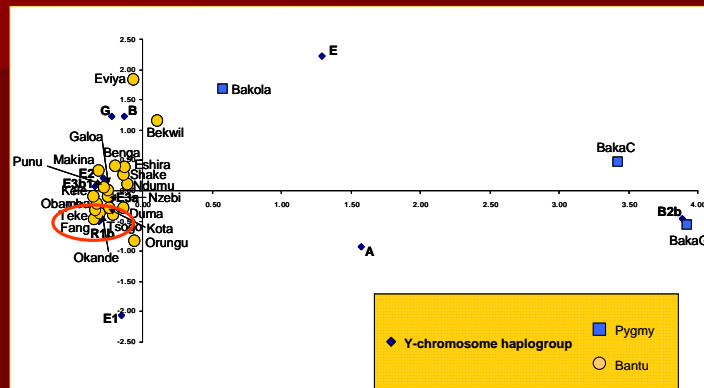
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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- First result: Fang are basically 'Bantu'!

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Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups



Correspondence analysis: haplogroup composition
First two dimension plot (75.6% genetic variance)

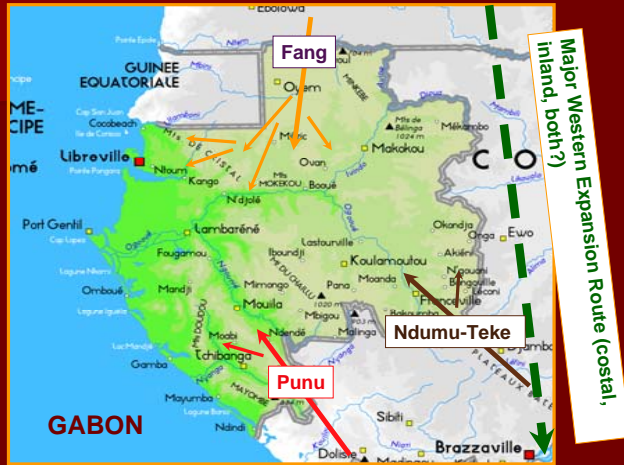
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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- But... Fang attest a non-African haplogroup (R1b)!!
- However... they are not the only ones!!!
 - Punu, Teke, Ndumu, Obamba! (In particular!)
 - Pops having different oral traditions
 - Especially Fang vs. others
 - Pops not directly related, linguistically
 - Especially Fang vs. others
 - Geographical distance
 - Fang vs. others

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Peopling of Gabon by Punu, Ndumu, Teke and Fang acc. to oral traditions



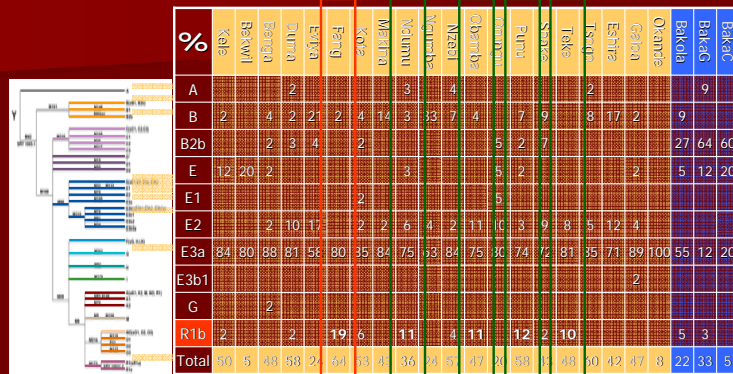
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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Distribution, origin and age of this haplogroup?

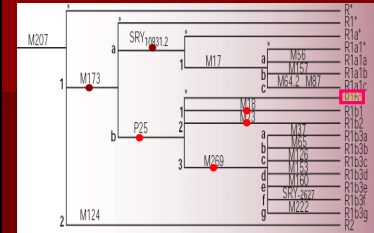
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Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroups

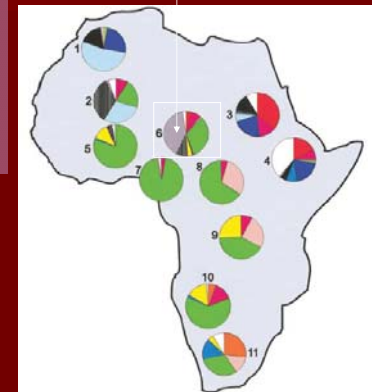


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Y-chromosome in Central Africa: haplogroup R1



Haplogroup R1b*



Haplogroup R1b*
(Zalloua, personal communication)

Chad: 20 - 35 %
North Africa: 7 %
Middle East: 10 %

Modified from Cruciani et al. 2002

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Evidence from genetics (Y)

- Haplogroup R1b*
 - Estimated age: 13,000 ± 3,000 years
- Haplogroup R1b (including Chad samples)
 - Estimated age: 12,700 ± 2,200 years
- Haplogroup R1
 - Out-of-Africa
 - Partial back migration (~16,000 YBP)
 - Subsequent contacts: Central Africa

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Possible scenario(s)

- Scenario(s)
- Type(s) of migration



*Fang warrior
(19th century
drawing)*

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Possible scenario(s)

- Contacts between Bantu-speaking farmers and other groups (Nilo-Saharan?) before and/or during southward-bound migration
 - Initial contacts: Chad?, northern Cameroon?, Central-African Republic? Farther south?
 - More than one region, possibly
 - Over an undetermined but considerable stretch of time
- Several Bantu-speaking pops have thus become, with others, the new 'carriers' of a much older 'back-into-Africa' migration

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*Current distribution
of Nilo-Saharan
languages*



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Possible scenario(s)

- Carried along by southward migrations
- Not a rush!
 - Large-scale movement, with various rates of velocity over time
 - On the whole, slow progression
- No direct descent from the Upper-Nile region!
"Out-of-Egypt theory" is untenable
 - Serious problem of time depth! Much older genetic substratum
- Not a carefully planned, aggressive conquest!
 - Non-oriented, non-planned, non-linear process

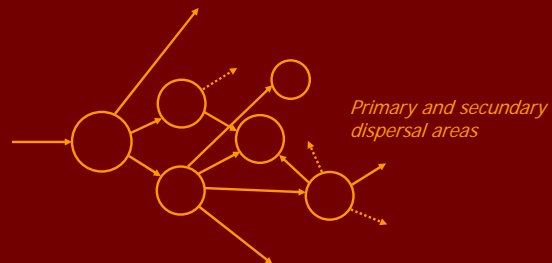
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Possible scenario(s)

- Non-teleological event (most of the time)
 - Just 'get out of the way' ... to God-knows-where
- No nomads: authentic villagers
 - Probably experienced tradesmen already in pre-colonial times
- Wave-like in space, in time ('flea-like')
 - Southern linguistic features in some northern dialects (Gabon) strongly suggest (minor) **back** migrations
 - Some split-offs may have miscarried
 - Some groups stay, others move on

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Possible scenario(s)



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Possible scenario(s)

- Triggered and/or encouraged by a variety of factors that **may evolve over time**
- Repellers, attractors, conductors
 - E.g. Fulani expansion: height of centralised empire during 19th century AD
 - Usman dan Fodio
 - Sokoto empire and jihad (northern Nigeria)
 - Invasions, raids and pressure contributed to southward migratory movements through Niger and Nigeria into Cameroon

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Fulani (Fulbe) people

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Possible scenario(s)

- European trade and goods: efficient attractor during second half of 19th century in Gabon (strategic, political **choice!**)
- Repellers: fear of slave trade, strong social ties (clans)
- Complex event:
 - Migration(s) within migration (admixture before and/or during spread)
 - Several (related or not related) populations involved

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Possible scenario(s)

- Incorporation: partial integration through contact with pops already in place (*substratum*) and/or encounters of various types (!)
 - Archaeological evidence: Hunter-collecting settlements prior to arrival of Bantu villagers
 - Carriers of R1B??
 - Motivation and modes of incorporation?
 - Evidence (Y-chromosome) only concerns male individuals
 - What about females?
 - Voluntary basis? Forced integration?
 - Time depths?

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Possible scenario(s)

- 'R1b-free' pops: Myene (B10), Tsogo (B30) and Kele (B20) groups
 - No real contact with R1b-carrying pops
 - More ancient? (Suggested by linguistic evidence!)
 - Other migrations paths? (Coastal??, more western?)
 - Limited number of Kele and Pygmy individuals: gene flow
- Possible explanation for perceived phenotypical traits in Fang??
 - Why Fang and not the other pops such as Punu?

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Further investigation

- Further explore **origin** and **distribution** of the non-African haplogroup
 - Chad, Cameroon and Central African Republic (e.g. Upper-Sangha area in CAR)
 - Farther down south
 - Examen **North-South, decreasing gradient**
 - Two Congos (other Bantu-speaking populations)
 - Angola (idem)
- Linguistic research
 - Proto-Fang
 - Vocabulary
 - Reconstructions
 - Borrowings



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Further investigation

- Sorting out time depths
- Fang: Originally an (ethnic) unity? Or result of (recent) convergence?
 - Cultural variation
 - Artefacts (*funeral statuettes, traditional knives*) and style differences within Fang (Perrois, i.a.),
 - Differences between Fang and Beti (Laburthe-Tolra, 1981)
 - Problems with genealogies within 'Fang': absence common ancestors, incompatibilities
 - Lineages as most significant units?
 - Variations in oral tradition
 - What can population genetics tell us?

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Acknowledgements

- To ESF,
- To CNRS,
- To the Organisers,
- To the Audience,



*Fang blacksmiths in 1856
(Du Chaillu, 1863:168)*

... for this stimulating workshop!

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