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An intellectual history of power: usable pasts from the Great Lakes Region.

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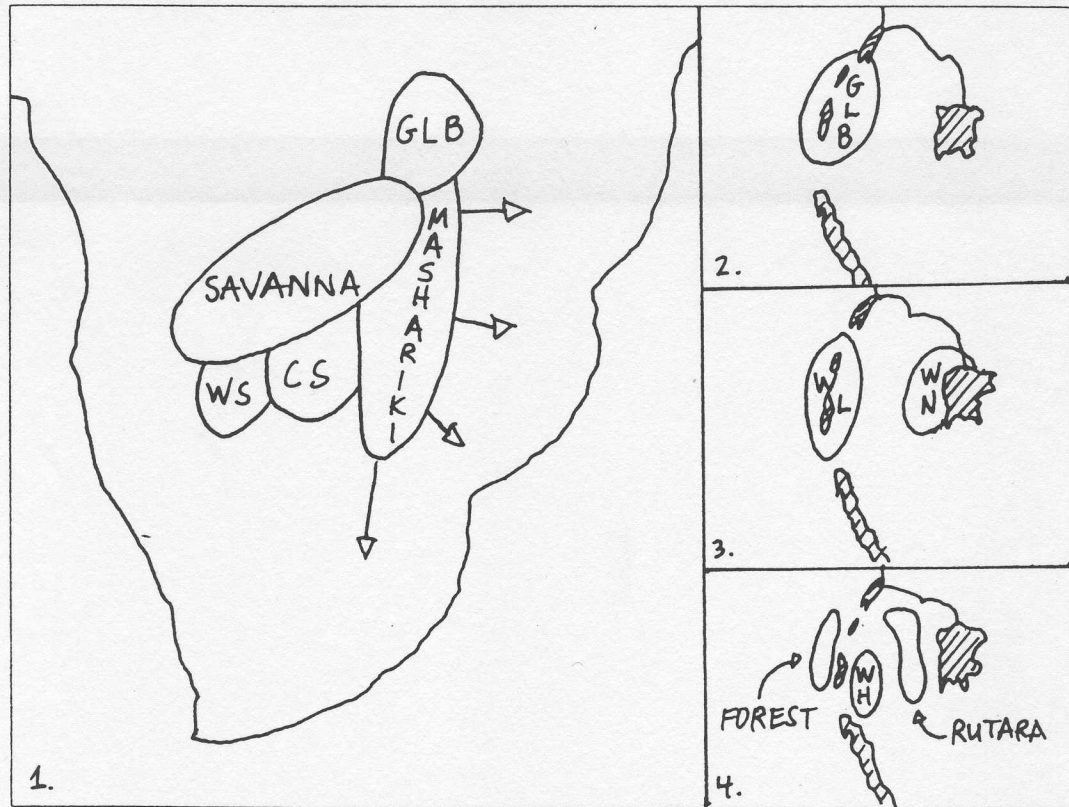
Introduction

The paper sketches the historical development of concepts of power in societies between eastern Africa's Great Lakes from before ca. 500 BC to ca. AD 1500. The sketches will require a consideration of older societies centered on territories to the south and west of the Great Lakes region, such as those which spoke the Proto-Savanna dialects and those of their descendants who spoke the Proto-Mashariki dialects (See Fig. 1; the linguistic terminology for subgroups follows Ehret 1994). By combining the methods of comparative linguistics with those of comparative ethnography (Ehret 1988, 574-85; Vansina 1990, 9-16), the resulting intellectual history of semantic creativity develops within contexts of economic and environmental processes of change, all of which may profitably be set against the archaeological record. But the task of correlation awaits a different venue. Here I offer a set of tentative first steps toward the intellectual history of power in eastern and southern Bantu-speaking African societies.

Such a history of power, based on comparative linguistics and comparative ethnography, offers to us a sense of regional cultural legacies whose definitional boundaries crossed colonial allegiances and therefore cross post colonial allegiances. These regional cultural legacies form both the basis for building ethnic identities and for disaggregating them. In the recent colonial past, they helped to build ethnicities because the socioeconomic divides within any ethnicity (and which ethnicity hopes partly to shield from view) required constant cultural attention to their maintenance and renegotiation, an attention which drew upon, among other things, a common language of power. Regional cultural legacies also helped to disaggregate ethnicities because people were able to "turn" their reservoir of meanings in order to reveal knowledge and experience which members of different ethnicities shared. Thus, shared history – as a part of discursive knowledge, as a part of social philosophy – may divide as often as it may unite groups of people.

A key question which follows from this is what drives a sense of commonality to replace a deadly ethnic division? What might, for example, induce national and local leaders in Buha, Burundi and Rwanda to exploit the fact that Kiha, Kirundi, and Kinyarwanda are mutually intelligible languages in the fashioning of a political culture other than their current, deadly ones? I will pretend here to do no more than offer some evidence for a regional cultural legacy whose boundaries are far older than those which define 20th century ethnicities. A regional cultural legacy forms a resource

Figs. 1-4. Bantu Linguistic Geography.



which leaders and followers will draw on in different and contradictory ways. Be that as it may, thinking about the resource itself, reflecting on its mere existence, at least opens up the possibility of thinking about the deeper layers of something pan-regional if not, just now, pan-African.

The region in question lies between eastern Africa's Great Lakes. As I see it, and as important parts of its cultural legacy reflect in their distributions, the region covers the lands surrounding Lake Victoria and reaching westwards into the Kivu Rift valley (Figs. 2-4). There Great Lakes cultural roots stretch from the shores of northern Lake Tanganyika to the eastern shores of Lake Rwitanzige. The basis for speaking of a pan-Great Lakes cultural world rests on a set of related languages and cultural practices used by those who live there. I have chosen historical changes in philosophies of power as that part of their cultural legacy to discuss because such a focus reveals two important things. Firstly, Great Lakes peoples have invented types for their conceptions and articulations of power and, secondly, these types of power have been reconstituted in fundamental ways. These two historical developments reflect profound transitions in the social history of the Great Lakes region.

My position on the utility of these pasts might be summarized as such: if people between the Great Lakes could overcome the challenges to social health posed by environmental change, by agricultural intensification, and by centralized political and military force, then they can overcome viral crisis, the cash-crop dilemma, and the banality of the post colonial politics of ethnicity. An intellectual history of power is one place to begin such a quest.

A sketch of the historical development of philosophies of power must be drawn within the framework provided by a genetic classification of Great Lakes Bantu languages. This approach requires awareness of three sorts of historical processes: inheritance or retention, areal spread, and convergence or linguistic drift. The first process means that, within a genetic classification, we may divine the semantic histories of words for power by collecting the widest possible set of meanings for each term, plotting their distributions, and observing their interconnections with other semantic

territories. Deducing their semantic histories will, then, normally involve laying next to each other the successive stages in the widening, narrowing, or extending of the semantic territory superintended by a given term. The linear historical relationship between these territorial stages should be visible in their belonging to different of the subgroups which constitute the genetic classification. This is as much to say that some languages from each branch of Great Lakes Bantu (or of Proto-Savanna Bantu) will possess words whose phonological shapes correspond to each other regularly and which share semantic territory unique enough to set them off from their relatives but similar enough to have descended from an earlier and common semantic territory with the same or broader distributions. These are the familiar rules of evidence for the comparative method.

Areal features may be reflected in the distributions of terms for sorts of power which look like blocks of contiguous attestations, blocks whose boundaries cross-cut the neat boundaries of the genetic subgroups. These sorts of features betoken diffusional processes. Linguistic drift or convergent features are those which emerged in two or more non-adjacent speech communities. Such items look like inherited features because they have similar phonological shape and meanings and because regular sound correspondences exist between the features. However, the relevant sound shift might have been conditioned by features which emerged later, in separate speech communities, and caused the shifts to occur at different points in time rather than at one point in the time of a common proto-language. Or, derivational shifts (deverbatives, for example) and metaphorical extensions may be so common and unremarkable as to have occurred repeatedly at different points in time.

While these are important guidelines and warnings for the historian who would use comparative linguistic method, if followed faithfully they can produce sound language data. In order to eliminate the possibility that convergence may have produced a putative inherited form, that item must be fitted into an ever more complicated web of mutually reinforcing and mutually interdependent meanings or of non-verbal cognate sets. John Janzen (1992) has outlined such a case with his study of *ngoma*, and we can do the same here for a handful of terms which tell us about power. But, before moving to the heart of the paper, a few words about scholarly perceptions of power are in order, because we must take great care not to import them uncritically into the history of African philosophies of power.

Representations of the total semantic territory of western scholarly concepts of power lies beyond the scope of this paper. What follows is thus terribly reductionist. For many of us trained in Western scholarly traditions, power takes a variety of forms but seems to break down into two large types: instrumental and creative. Instrumental power is concerned with securing outcomes through the control of people's actions (Roscoe 1993). Creative power is concerned with manipulating and inventing forms of meaning which have the capacity either to legitimate instrumental power, to help people renegotiate their social relationships or to help groups superintend the boundary between wilderness and order. The two forms intersect repeatedly.

The one is not epiphenomenal on the other. Because power over people's actions is crafted within the semantic universe of moral agency (even if ultimately guaranteed by coercive capacity), precisely that universe in which creative power works, the two forms must be studied together. For example, clientship, chiefship, and healing each brings together aspects of both sorts of power. The fusion of instrumental and creative power achieved by persons in these institutions, and the borders they draw around the two sorts of power will be studied historically using comparative linguistics, comparative ethnography, and archaeology. Their makers bequeathed to their followers a rich cultural heritage which crossed then and crosses now divides based on difference.

Do such divides exist in Great Lakes cultural history? And, if so, how do their boundaries and internal workings change over time? Answers to these questions may be sought by pursuing the semantic histories (using the methodologies just glossed) of six words which stake out important

Figure 5 Proto Savanna Bantu. (After Ehret 1994).¹

1. Western-Savanna

- a. Luyana-SW Bantu (K.30, R.13, R.20-40)
- b. Lwena (K.10)
- c. Lunda (L.50)
- d. Pende (L.10)
- e. Mbundu (H.20-40)
- f. Ovimbundu (R.11)

2. Central-Savanna (L.20-40, M.40-50)

3. Mashariki

a. Kaskazi

- i. Great Lakes
- ii. Upland (E.50-60, 74a)
- iii. Kati
 - *Takama (F.10-20, F.31, 32)
 - *NEC (Sabaki: E.71-74b, G.40; Seuta: G.20, 31, 34; Ruvu: G.10, 30 [except G.31 and G.34])
 - *Njombe (G.60)
- v. Kilombero (G.50, P.15)
- vi. Rufiji-Ruvuma (N.10, P.10 [except p.15], 20)
- vii. Mwika-Rungwe (M.10-30)

b. Kusi

- i. Nyanja-Tumbuka (N.20-40)
- ii. Makua (P.30)
- iii. Shona (S.10)
- iv. SEnBantu (S.20-60)
- v. Botatwe (M.60)

[Not included: Nkoya (L.60), Subiya, and Totela (K.40)]

divides in Great Lakes theories of power, divides which expressed as much a philosophy of ontology (an understanding of being and of its implications) as they expressed a philosophy of politics. The terms to be discussed are *kupánga* "create", *kudèma* "order", *kugàbá* "give out", *kukída* "surpass, overcome", *mâna* "capacity to create life", and *-gàlá* "physical principle of life". The semantic histories of these terms will be traced from Pre-Great Lakes Bantu eras through Great Lakes times and into more recent centuries. Three main periods of linguistic history will be covered: Proto-Savanna, Proto-Great Lakes Bantu, and the Proto-West Nyanza and Proto-Western Lakes periods. Please see the maps, diagrams, and the semantogram at the conclusion of the essay.

Proto Savanna (Fig. 5) represents a very early era in Bantu language history. The group includes Luban and some languages from Guthrie's zone H, K, and R (Fig. 2). The internal complexity of Proto Savanna Bantu implies a great time depth for the appearance of communities which spoke its dialects. These may well have been neolithic horticulturalists, though nothing more can be said about their subsistence base at this time. Ehret has compiled the evidence from shared lexical innovations which support not only the genetic integrity of Proto Savanna but also that of its constituent branches. These data were presented in Cambridge, 1994 and contain much of interest about Proto Savanna cultural history.

¹ Because I have only studied carefully the shared lexical innovations (and not the lexicostatistics) which support this classification, it appears here as an outline and not as a tree diagram. The other three classifications appear as tree diagrams because both innovations and lexicostatistics support them mutually.

