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

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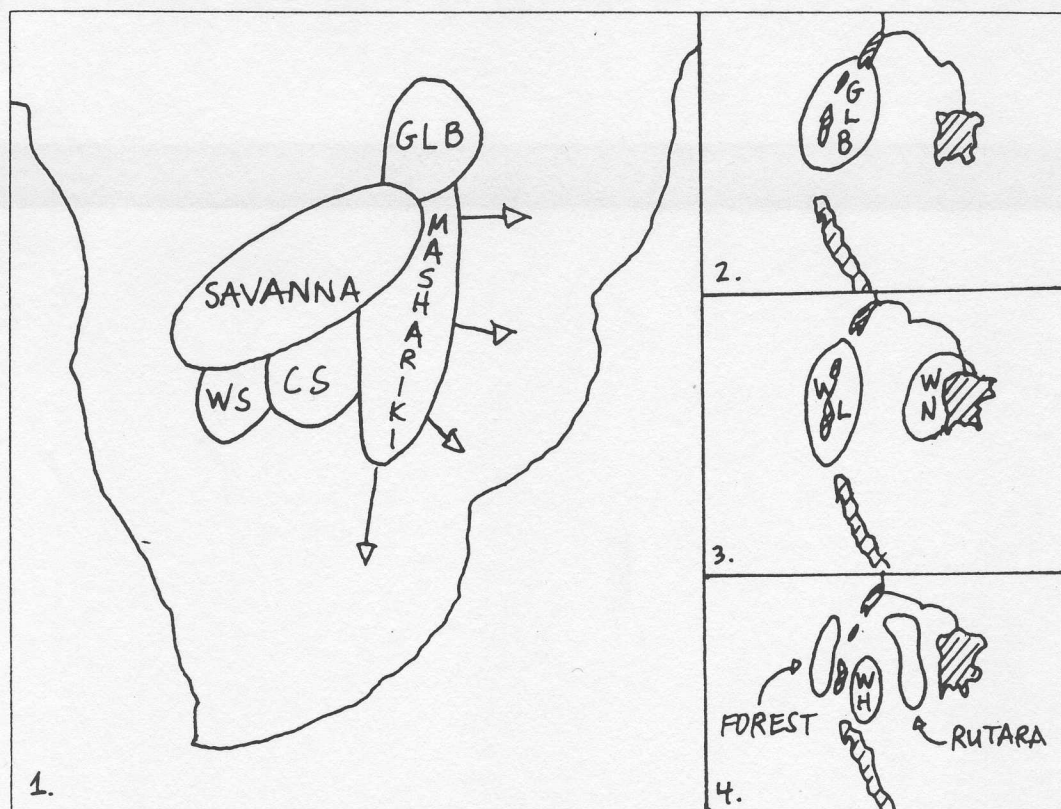
Introduction

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 diffusionary 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.

Proto Great Lakes Bantu (Diagram 1) represents the earliest Bantu-speaking communities to settle in the Kivu Rift and its immediate environs (Fig. 1). All the members of the Royal Museum of Central Africa's Zone J, plus the Mara and Suguti branches of East Nyanza, descended from Proto Great Lakes Bantu (Fig. 1). Schoenbrun (1994) has presented both the lexicostatistical data and the shared lexical innovations which support the genetic integrity of Proto Great Lakes Bantu and of its constituent branches. Proto West Nyanza (Diagram 2) and Proto Western Lakes (Diagram 3), and their descendant speech communities form the third geographic-linguistic context for this discussion of the historical development of African theories of power (Fig. 2).

Dividing instrumental from creative power

Great Lakes Bantu societies understood that one axis along which they could negotiate their social lives connected the capacity for creating order to the capacity for life. The Proto Savanna verbs *kupánga* and *kudèma* expressed this first principle and the nouns *imààna* or *imàanyi* (Proto Great Lakes) and *-gàlá* (Proto Savanna) expressed the latter idea (Cf. semantogram in Table 1).

The most widely distributed meaning for *kupánga* is "to act, create or make something corporeal". This Proto Savanna meaning narrowed to "to seize by magic, control by powerful speech plus a material item" in Proto Mashariki. This meaning narrowed further in the Proto Great Lakes Bantu noun for "supernatural creative power, including the creator spirit". Proto West Nyanza and Proto Western Lakes communities derived terms for (PWL) "blood pact", "to prevent rain", and (PWN) "to shine intensely (of the sun)".

The verb *kudèma* has two apparently distinct meanings with tantalizing hints at a common origin. The very same phonological and tonological shape means both "to become heavy" and "to create a corporeal thing (like making a drum or stringing a bow)". Both meanings may be reconstructed for Proto Savanna. In the latter meaning, the verb overlaps with *kubumba* "to fashion a pot" (in some languages the two are synonyms [i.e. in Kihaavu]). These two meanings produce two interconnected semantic histories. In Proto Mashariki the meaning "to overwhelm, fail" appears to have been derived from "to become heavy". In Proto Western Lakes the noun "creator, maker (an attribute of the creator spirit)" appears to have been derived from the Proto Savanna meaning "to create a corporeal thing". In Proto Rutara this meaning narrowed further in the verb "to control, govern, dominate". The interrelationship between the two fields of meaning comes in Rutaran times. By adding to the verb for creative power the meanings of legitimate political power, Rutaran communities brought into existence the claim that both the King and the Creator Spirit ruled by overcoming obstacles and, thus, ruled by creating power from their acts of domination.

Great Lakes societies built other semantic bridges from creative power to instrumental power. The Proto Savanna noun *magàlá* "physical life force", its widest meaning, narrowed to Proto Forest "rich person or leader" and "sons (those whom a single wife bore and who will stand to inherit a father's property)". As well, the Proto Savanna verb *kukída* "to pass over, surpass" narrowed to Proto Mashariki "to heal, cure". The meaning narrowed further in Proto Western Lakes to "to become rich". Finally, the Proto Great Lakes noun *màna* "life force, capacity to give the life force" appears to have been derived from Prot Bantu *-mànl* v. "to think" (with reflexes in Guthrie's A.46 to P.21; Guthrie 1967-1971). The derivation means that, late in the dissolution of the Proto Great Lakes dialect chain, people understood a direct connection to exist between knowledge and creative power. And more--that such a connection served as a central feature in legitimizing the instrumental power of politics. A similar such process appears to have taken place with the verb *-paan-* "to give (to each other)" as its semantic territory grew to include "give counsel (PGLB)", "punishment, chastisement (PWL)", "wonder, marvel, horror (PWN)", and "ritual danger". The process seems to have included even the innovation of a verb *kuhanuula* "narrate a historical tale".

Not all terms which spoke of power redrew the boundaries between the instrumental and the creative. Some never crossed this semantic divide. The verb *kugàbá*, in its widest meaning, expressed the act of giving away something, of dividing something up between two or more individuals. Languages from A.24 (Duala) to S.42 (Zulu) express this action with a reflex of the verb *kugàbá*. In Proto-Mashariki, the meaning narrowed to "to exercise power, execute decisions". Proto Kivu society felt the necessity to distinguish acts of giving things from acts of distributing things by having added a prepositional suffix to the ancient verb root to express the latter meaning. A later step in the elaboration of gift-exchange ideology occurred in Proto Rutara society, where the Proto Kivu prepositional verb *kugàbúlira* came to mean "cattle contract" in a class 14 deverbative form.

Anthropologists from Victor Turner (1967) to David Parkin (1990) have recognized that divisions between instrumental and creative powers exist in many African (and other) societies. Thus, to demonstrate the existence of their linguistic signs might seem unremarkable. However, if differences in the distributions of the signs and their specific expressions of the lines joining and dividing the two semantic realms match the subgroups which constitute a genetic classification of the Bantu languages, then those lines, those joins and divides which the signs express, may be put into historical motion. We can observe how the meanings changed over time by charting, from subgroup to subgroup, how people preserved centers of semantic territory even while they narrowed, widened or extended them metaphorically. These continuities and variations reflect the cultural work of different Bantu-speaking communities.

Great Lakes Bantu-speaking communities classified the powers in their world in part by creating discursive distinctions between instrumental and creative powers. Instrumental power involved getting people to do things. It included conceptions of warfare and violence. The main division in this field was that between the power of order and the power of conquest or domination. This last divide within instrumental forms represents a classic means to establish legitimacy--be a civilizer, a conqueror, or a civilizing conqueror. Creative power involved the mysteries of the life force and the quest for balance and health. The main division in this field lay in distinguishing the capacity to give life (*mâna*) from the force of life itself (*-gàlá*). This phenomenological construction, I believe, made possible the art of healing through acts of empowering words [such as in those spoken over medicines or as in those spoken in divination (*-dàgudi*, from *-dàg-* "promise, teach")]. The conceptual separation of the gift of life from the force of life itself meant that people expected or hoped that healers possessed a practical knowledge which could have bridged that gap. Healers, their knowledge and their speech, together, made possible the maintenance or re-establishment of a link between the sources of life (rain, blood, milk, semen, etc.) and its different manifestations (crops, children, cattle, etc.).

Another development lay in the transformation of formerly instrumental power into creative power, and vice/versa, by reapplying terms for the one to qualities of the other. These re analyses of the divides between one or the other sort of power may represent social processes of metonymy. An example may illustrate this point. When Proto Rutara-speakers added the meanings "control, govern, dominate" to the verb *kulèma*, which had meant before, in Proto Kivu society, "to create or make a corporeal thing", they expressed both an attribute of kingship and an attribute of *mâna*, the force which gives life. Proto Rutaran society brought into discursive existence a metonymic joining of king and spiritual force, and they made it possible thereby to pose moral hypotheses about the conditions of the one by reference to the actions of the other. The familiar dyad of 'divine kingship', where a king represented his people and his kingdom and possessed moral responsibility for the health and fertility of both, comes partly into existence through the kind of semantic extensions and colonizations of hitherto distinct sorts of power which the example of Proto Rutara *kulèma* illustrates.²

² The example of *kuhánga* expresses this process as well: note its meaning extensions in Proto West Nyanza and in Proto Western Lakes to include what individuals can do with properly superintended creative power.

The dispersed creative powers so far discussed were (a) prerogatives of internal frontiersmen who sought through them to set up ritual and hegemonic control over the land, and (b) were the nemeses of would-be centralizers of state power because they and their practitioners were so hard to supervise and because they so easily formed bases for armed revolt, as in the later cases of Nyabingi, Lyangombe, Kiranga, and Cwezi Kubandwa. In this regard, the historical development of 'powers' cannot be studied apart from the historical development of socially meaningful space. But this is another task.

Conclusion: utility and practice

The terms discussed so far represent a mere fraction of the semantic worlds of power, whether creative or instrumental or some combination of the two. They reveal that divisions between creative and instrumental powers are not heuristic, are not merely artefacts of this researcher's imagination (as he had feared!) or of his imaginative readings of William Arens and Ivan Karp (1989), or of Aidan Southall (1991), or of Paul Roscoe (1993). They reveal also that divides were negotiable in the past just as they are today (pace the redefinition of oral traditions such as the *òlùgero lwa Kintu* in Buganda, for which see Benjamin Ray (1981) and Schoenbrun (1993:43-5). These divides change position. Whether we speak of the divide between the creative and the instrumental, or of divides within these realms, or of recombinations and new articulations of their parts, we speak of consciousness, of the legacies of both practical and discursive knowledge. This is the stuff of history no more and no less than is technological and environmental change.

These histories constitute an archive of regional discursive forms which transcend colonial boundaries. Two courses may be pursued to exploit this realization: (1) The promotion or use of regional languages as trans-national media of communication, and (2) the development of regional bundles of social philosophy in order to reclaim for nationalist politics a transnationalist, even a Pan-Great Lakes Bantu raiment of terms and conditions for conducting political life.

Diagram 1 Proto Great Lakes Bantu and its Subgroups. Glottochronology reckoned at shared retention rate of 86 per cent per 500 years.

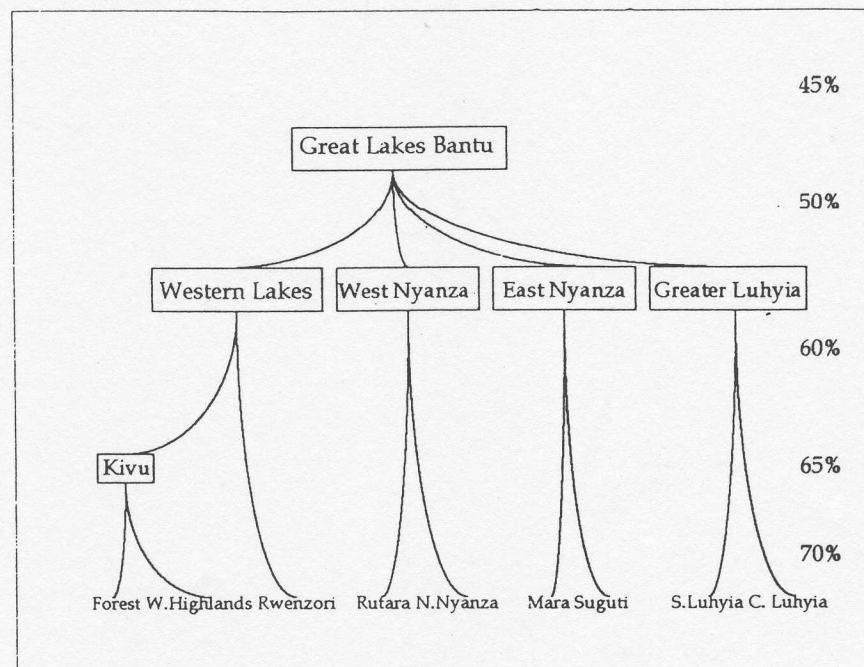


Diagram 2 West Nyanza Bantu and its Subgroups. Glottochronology reckoned at a shared retention rate of 86 per cent per 500 years.

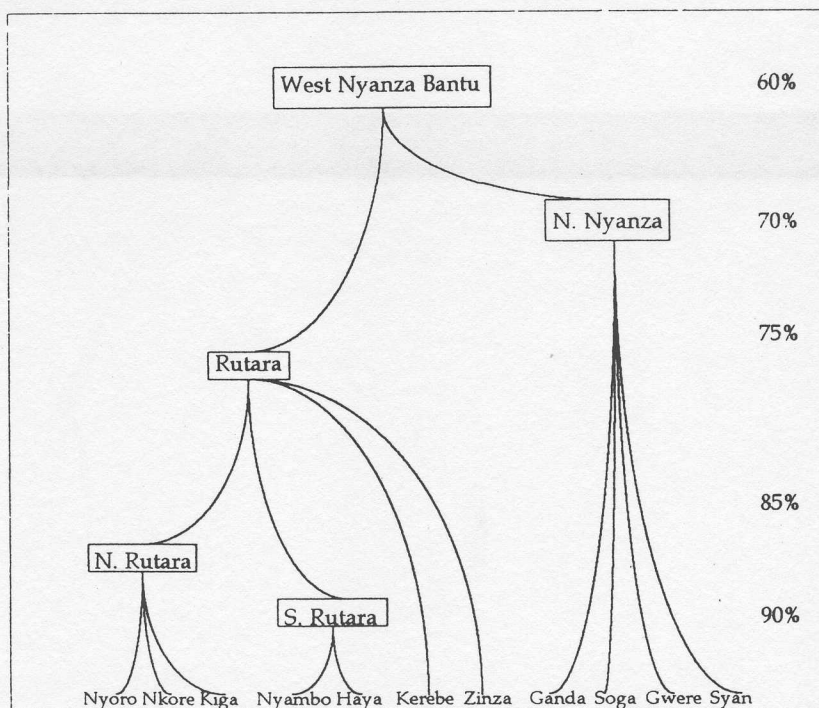


Diagram 3 Western Lakes Bantu and its Subgroups. Glottochronology reckoned at a shared retention rate of 86 per cent per 500 years.

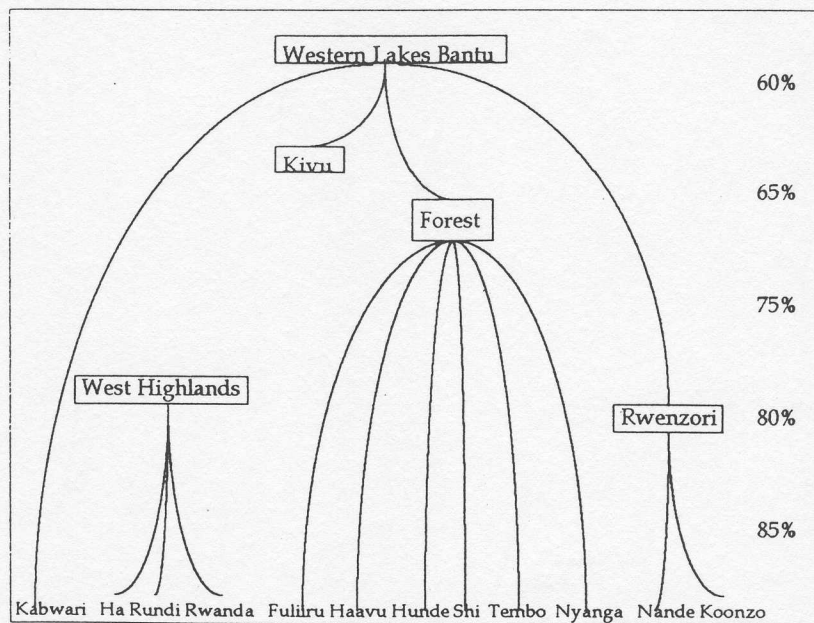


Table 1. A Semantogram for Five Terms for Power in Bantu.

	<u>*kupánga</u>	<u>*kudèma</u>	<u>*kugàbá</u>	<u>*-mànIa</u>	<u>*-gàlá</u>
Proto-Savanna	"Act, Create something"	"Become heavy"; "Put in order"	"Give out, distribute"	"Think"	"Physical principle of life"
↓					
↓					
Proto-Mashariki	"Seize by Magic; Give power to an object via speech"	"Overwhelm, fail"	"Make decisions, command"		
↓					
↓					
↓					
Proto-Great Lakes Bantu	"Super-natural creative power; name for an agent of creation"; "shine (of sun)"	"Creator, maker (attribute of creator spirit)"	"Divide up, distribute"	"Life force, capacity to give the life force"	
↓					
↓					
↓					
↓					
Proto-West Nyanza		"Control, govern, dominate [Proto-Rutara]"			
↓					
Proto-Western Lakes	"blood pact"; "prevent rain".	"Creator, maker [retained]"	"Gift exchange of cattle [Proto-West Hilands]"		"Rich person, leader"; "Sons [Proto-Forest]"

Explanatory Guide: Read the semantogram from top to bottom in order to move from the past towards the present, in order to follow that linear course of semantic retention and shift. Blank squares indicate retention of earlier meaning. Words with asterisks preceding them ("starred forms") are proposed phonological reconstructions of the sound shapes as they existed in the Proto-Savanna (or earlier) communities. Rules of regular sound correspondences underly these proposals.

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