**THE BANTU MIGRATIONS**

**ORIGIN**

The actual origins or the Bantu is shrouded in mystery. However, Bantu is a common term used to refer to the over 400 different ethnic groups of Africa stretching from borders of the Sahara desert to South Africa that have similar languages and to some extent customs. Their movements have been called migrations because they are large scale movements over long distances. It is important however to understand that these movements did not occur all at once. They took place in several phases.

The Bantu speaking people were actually part of the Iron Age people from the Middle East areas of Northern Africa. They originally settled along the banks of the Nile River. Later, they moved west across North Africa and occupied some areas in the ancient Saharan grasslands. From there, they moved to the area around Lake Chad, Nigeria and the highlands of Cameroon called the Benue-Cross region. However, some also settled in the great lakes region in east Africa.

These people were given the name „Bantu‟ because of the similarities that were noticed in their languages. For example, the prefix „ba-‟ and the suffix „-ntu‟ was actually common among the languages they spoke.

**CAUSES**

* The drying up of the Sahara grasslands led the groups that practiced agriculture to migrate in search of new fertile land and water for farming.
* There was a great population increase, causing others to migrate in search for new land.
* Changes in occupations from agriculture to hunting, herding, and metallurgy.
* Successive disputes between various tribes led to the migration of some groups. This normally happened when a king died and members of the royal family quarreled about who should succeed.
* Criminals and formerly enslaves people migrated in order to run away from being punished or killed.
* Tribal wars caused migrations as defeated tribes ran away from powerful ones for safety and to avoid enslavement.
* The slave trade contributed to the migrations in order to avoid being attacked and sold as slaves.
* Some groups or individuals migrated to follow large herds of animals that supported their economy.
* Another reason that led to the Bantu migrations was that of expansion. Some rulers wanted to expand their kingdoms and therefore caused weaker tribes to migrate to new regions to avoid being conquered.

**First group**

Traveled southeast and southwest from the fringes of the Sahara Desert to the regions of the Western and Eastern Sudan (meaning “Land of the Blacks” in Arabic).

This was around the 1st to the 3rd Century.

They settled here because of the fertile land, minerals, and grazing land.

Interaction with other Arab-African Nomadic groups established strong trading ties by the 9th Century

**Second group**

Passed through the Congo Forest, avoided Zaire River, and settled in Katanga or Shaba.

This was about the 5th century.

They settled here because of the fertile land, good rainfall, minerals, and grazing land.

Interacted with the Portuguese in the early 15th Century who introduced them to new crops like, maize, sweet potatoes, and bananas.

**Third group**

This group included the Sotho and Nguni who went north east via Tanzania and through the western side of Lake Malawi.

They settled in Mashonaland.

Here, they were forced out by the Rozwi, Shona and the Karanga.

The group went to settle in South Africa.

This occurred between 9th and the 14th century.

**Fourth group**

Migrated around the 14th century.

Settled western side of Lake Malawi.

The descendants of this group are the Tumbuka, Nsenga, Kamanga and Tonga of Malawi.

Another group of the Shona, Rozwi, and Karanga took a short cut, crossed the Zambezi River and settled in Mashonland.

**WAYS OF LIFE**

**Economic**

The Bantu were agriculturists who grew crops like sorghum, millet, beans, maize, and sweet potatoes.

They were pastoralists who kept animals like cattle, pigs, goats.

They were hunters who hunted wild game for meat.

They were also smelters and also made farming implements

Pottery makers, made channel decorated type.

Made baskets and mats.

**Social**

Lived in small households.

Households were made of pole and daga.

Roof was thatched with grass.

Huts built in a secular form

Kraal built in the middle for protection of the cattle.

Diet included fish, meat, and vegetables.

Bark of the tree used as cloth.

Completely an oral cultural with tribal “*griot*” (gree-yaws) that maintained an oral record of the tribal history and culture

**Political**

Family household under eldest male member.

Family formed clans which formed villages.

Villages headed by a headman.

Villages formed a chiefdom or kingdom.

Headed by a chief or king respectively.

**Religious**

Believed in a superior being.

They called their superior being by different names.

Their god would be approached by leaders who were semi-divine.

Had different spirits for different problems.

Religious ceremonies held on tombs, under the msoro tree or any other sacred place.

Cattle and/or other animals would be killed only during such ceremonies.

**EFFECTS**

**METALLURGY**

They introduced iron-working and the use of iron tools in the interior of East Africa were at first using stone tools but when iron-smelting was started, there was an increase in food production.

The knowledge of iron smelting which the Bantu introduced led to the making of better weapons (bows, arrows and spears) for defense and protection against neighboring tribes.

**AGRICULTURE**

The Bantu introduced and increased the knowledge of food and extensive crop cultivation (ie: yams, bananas, beans). Earlier on, the inhabitants of East Africa were food gatherers, but with the introduction of iron tools (hoes and pangas for tilling and clearing the land), food production seriously increased.

They introduced subsistence agriculture, whereby they grew enough food for home consumption, and the rest could be kept in case of shortages, or be exchanged in barter trade.

**LANGUAGE**

Their movement led to the spread of the Bantu based languages throughout Africa, including the more well known languages of Swahili, Zulu, Xhosa, Mbundu & Lingala.

**SOCIAL**

They opened new land to settlement by families and clans in permanent homes and villages based in kinship ties and both Matrilineal and Patrilocal systems.

They spread the oral tradition of maintaining tribal histories through “*griot*” (gree-yaws).

**POLITICAL**

They introduced a kin-based system of government whereby the tribal chief acted as the overall ruler, under the guidance of a group of tribal elders.

Eventually, as populations grew, bigger tribes and larger states grew with more centralized forms of government with kings ruling over many villages led by tribal chiefs. (ie: Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, Kongo, and the Swahili City-States)