A Historical-Linguistic Approach to the Introduction of Cereals in the Culinary Traditions of Early Bantu Speech Communities

1. Background

- Linguistic approach to history of culinary practice in Bantu-speaking Africa
- Bantu expansion: relatively rapid language dispersal over huge area in association with early agriculture
- Interaction between history of food, cuisine and agriculture (cf. Fuller 2005)

2. Origin of cereal agriculture in Bantu-speaking Africa: state of the art

- Widely believed to be first introduced through contact with non-Bantu, especially Nilo-Saharan, speakers in Great Lakes area and spread further from there among ‘Savannah Bantu’ speakers (Ehret 1973, 1998; Schoenbrun 1993; Vansina 2004)
- Recent contestation of single Eastern point of introduction
  - Archaeobotany: cultivated pearl millet remains from southern Cameroon, dating back to 400 to 200 B.C., probably linked to a period of climate change, forest disturbance and increasing seasonality between ± 500 and 100 B.C. (Egger et al. 2006, Kahlheber et al. 2010)
  - Linguistics: *-k'ima* reconstructible as term for ‘pearl millet’ to high node in Western Bantu and even to Proto-Bantu with generic meaning ‘grain’ (Bostoen 2006-7)

3. Vocabulary related to the preparation of flour-based porridge

- Not reconstructible to Proto-Bantu
- Often food-related Proto-Bantu vocabulary which undergoes semantic shift to refer to flour-based porridge and its preparation, possibly a culinary innovation associated with the introduction of cereal agriculture
  - *-k’ima*: ‘mash’ in Proto-Bantu (retained in NW-Bantu) > ‘flour-based porridge’ in East- and South-West-Bantu
  - *-dug*: ‘paddle’ in Proto-Bantu > ‘stir flour in water’ in East-Bantu
  - *-jiljik*: ‘cook, boil’ in Proto-Bantu > ‘stir porridge’ in South-West-Bantu
  - *-pönd*: ‘pound, stamp, beat’ in East-Bantu > ‘cook/stir porridge’ in the languages of the border region of Angola, Namibia, Botswana and Zambia
- ‘flour’ in languages of the rain forest: many loanwords, often of European origin -> not an old tradition in the rain forest -> linked to the presence and (re-)introduction of cereals?

4. Preliminary conclusions

- No vocabulary related to the preparation of cereals can be reconstructed into Proto-Bantu
- Rain forest Bantu languages often use a European loanword to refer to ‘flour’ -> both flour and flour-based porridge are culinary innovations associated with the (re-)introduction of grain agriculture
- Time-depth of the introduction of cereals: the single eastern point of origin?
  - Certain cereal-related isoglosses manifest a clear-cut East-West split, while others have a ‘Savannah Bantu distribution’ possibly successive waves of cereal diffusion which interact differently with the Bantu language dispersal
  - Semantic shift of *-k’ima* ‘mash’ to ‘flour-based porridge’: once or independently in different languages/potheses in time?
  - Complementary distribution of *-dug* and *-jiljik* matches complementary distribution of W and E Bantu words for ‘pearl millet’ possibly further evidence for at least two separate introductions of early cereal agriculture in Bantu domain

References

Kahlheber, Birgit, and Koen Bostoen. 2010. ‘Plant cereal remains from southern Cameroon, dating to 400 to 200 B.C., prove the early introduction of cultivated pearl millet into Africa.’ *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference on Early Plant Domestication in Africa.*