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## **Büttner's contribution to a comparative dictionary of the Bantu languages**

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BÜTTNER'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO A COMPARATIVE DICTIONARY  
OF THE BANTU LANGUAGES

Thilo C. Schadeberg

Clement M. Doke, renowned South African Bantuist and historian of Bantu linguistics (in: C.M. Doke and D.T. Cole, Contributions to the History of Bantu Linguistics, Johannesburg 1961) does not take notice of Büttner's early reconstruction of Proto-Bantu roots by comparing lexicographic materials. Consequently, it is worthwhile to call attention to a paper published already in 1879/80 which is not easily accessible.

Carl Gotthilf Büttner (1848-1893) served as a missionary from 1872 to 1880 in Southwest Africa among the Herero<sup>1</sup>. It was during this period that he started a project of which we have only the following paper as testimony:

XIX. Contributions to a Comparative Dictionary of the Bantu Languages. I. - Collected by C.G. Büttner, Missionary, Director of the Augustinum Institution, Otyimbingue, Damaraland. - Communicated by the General Secretary. (Read, 27th August, 1879.)  
in: The Transactions of the South African Philosophical Society, vol. I, 1877-80, pt. 3 (Cape Town 1880),

Büttner took the material for his comparisons from the following sources:

S.W. Koelle, Polyglotta Africana;  
W.H.I. Bleek, The Languages of Mozambique;  
6 different works of E. Steere;  
5 other dictionaries;  
Büttner's "own collections for the Herero and Otyambo languages".

To Büttner, 'Bantu languages' comprised all languages Koelle had classified as "South African Languages,

<sup>1</sup> All information on Büttner's life was taken from:  
E. Dammann, "C.G. Büttner, der erste Berliner Afrikanist",  
Wissenschaftliche Zeitschrift der Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Jg. VIII (1958/59) Nr. 2/3, pp. 237-240.

distinguished by an initial inflection". So we may call his collection a forerunner of the Benue-Congo Comparative Wordlist now being published. Büttner compares words from about 100 languages, of which he names 94 at the start of his paper. 60 of these are what we today call 'Bantu' languages. The entries for 70 of his languages were taken from Koelle's Polyglotta Africana.

The main part of his paper consists of 50 (re)constructed Bantu (or Benue-Congo) roots. The hypothetical nature of these roots is made clear by their being printed in capitals; they are clearly distinguished from entries of individual languages. Büttner tried to eliminate prefixes and suffixes from his constructed roots. To each proto-root, reflexes from the compared languages are then added. These reflexes are ordered according to their meanings. At the end of the paper we find registers in English, Becwana, Kaffir and Herero.

The following is a list of Büttner's 50 root constructions together with the English equivalents of those words, which have been compared in order to gain these proto-roots. I have added proto-Bantu (or: Ur-Bantu) roots as constructed by C. Meinhof, W. Bourquin and others wherever these authors compared the same words and/or reached similar results:

|           |                                        |                  |   |
|-----------|----------------------------------------|------------------|---|
| 1. LUNG   | God (in heaven)/Heaven/<br>Sun / Cloud | luṅgu            | M |
| 2. NDYAMB | God / Ancestral spirit /<br>Heaven     | ḡambe            | S |
| 3. YUL    | Heaven/God                             | ḡulu             | M |
| 4. ?      | Earth                                  | ḡkí              | M |
| 5. YUV    | Sun / Day / Heaven / Moon              | ḡuva             | M |
| 6. WEZ    | Moon / Star                            | ḡelí             | M |
| 7. NYOND  | Star / Moon / Sun                      | ḡota M / tondo B |   |

|           |                                          |                                 |    |
|-----------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----|
| 8. TANY   | Day / Noon / Sun                         | kana                            | B  |
| 9. ?ISHI  | Day (Daylight ?) / Noon / Evening        | <u>k</u> i                      | B  |
| 10. GUL   | Evening / Night                          | ɣulo                            | B  |
| 11. SUK   | Night / Time of twenty-four hours / Day  | tûku                            | M  |
| 12. TYA   | Dawn (Sunrise ?)                         | kia                             | M  |
| 13. LIL   | Fire / Sun / Moon / Day                  | lilo                            | M  |
| 14. PIY   | Heat, Hot                                | pika                            | B  |
| 15. NDIND | Smoke                                    | -                               |    |
| 16. DEB   | Water / River / Rain / Milk              | lîva                            | M  |
| 17. MBUL  | Rain                                     | vûla                            | M  |
| 18. ?     | Lightning                                | -                               |    |
| 19. TUTUM | Thunder                                  | tutuma                          | M  |
| 20. LAMB  | River                                    | -                               |    |
| 21. MBUND | Mist, Fog / Dew                          | kuŋgu                           | B  |
| 22. NGAM  | Dew                                      | me                              | B  |
| 23. MBEP  | Wind (Air, cold) / Breath, Soul / Spirit | pepo                            | M  |
| 24. ?     | Stone                                    | <u>v</u> we                     | M  |
| 25. LWAL  | Cliff, Rock                              | -                               |    |
| 26. TENG  | Metal (Iron/Gold/Lead/Stone)             | -                               |    |
| 27. SANG  | Sand                                     | kaŋga                           | M  |
| 28. NOK   | Clay (Mud, Dirt)                         | loŋgo                           | B  |
| 29. TOP   | Mud (Clay)                               | tope                            | M  |
| 30. ONGW  | Salt                                     | oyua (oŋgua)                    | B  |
| 31. ?     | Mountain                                 | ɣoŋgo                           | M  |
| 32. ZUL   | Shadow                                   | lûli (lîfuli)                   | B  |
| 33. ?     | Froth, Foam, Soum                        | kûlo                            | MM |
| 34. WIN   | Hole                                     | ina                             | B  |
| 35. VUMB  | Dust                                     | ɣûmbi; <u>v</u> û ( <u>vu</u> ) | B  |
| 36. ?     | Space, (Time)                            | -                               |    |
| 37. TEL   | Tree                                     | tî                              | M  |
| 38. TAMB  | Branch / Leaf                            | tavi                            | M  |
| 39. KUN   | Firewood                                 | kunî, kuî                       | M  |
| 40. KAL   | Coal                                     | kala                            | M  |
| 41. HUL   | Thicket (Forest)                         | -                               |    |
| 42. KWIB  | Thorn                                    | ɣîva D; iɣua                    | B  |
| 43. NYAS  | Grass / Leaf / Flower                    | nyakî                           | BA |

|           |           |         |          |
|-----------|-----------|---------|----------|
| 44. TANG  | Gourd     | taŋga   | M        |
| 45. YONOL | Millipede | ɣoŋgolo | B        |
| 46. GUP   | Tick      | kupa    | M        |
| 47. ?     | Spider    | vuvili  | M; ɣai D |
| 48. KONG  | Scorpion  | ɣe, ŋge | M        |
| 49. TWAL  | Louse     | -       |          |
| 50. CHWA  | White Ant | kwa     | M        |

Ur-Bantu roots are quoted from the following sources:

- B W. Bourquin, Neue Ur-Bantu-Wortstämme (Berlin 1923).
- BA W. Bourquin, "Weitere Ur-Bantu-Wortstämme", Afrika und Übersee, vol. XXXVIII, pt. 1 (1953), pp. 27-48.
- D O. Dempwolff, "Beiträge zur Kenntnis der Sprachen in Deutsch-Ostafrika. 9. Ostbantu-Wortstämme", Zeitschrift für Kolonialsprachen, vol. VII (1917), pp. 134-149, 167-192.
- M C. Meinhof, Mitteilungen des Seminars für Orientalische Sprachen, Abt. 3, vol. VII (Berlin 1904), quoted from source B.
- S Struck, Anthropos, vol. 6 (Wien 1911), quoted from source B.

Unfortunately, Büttner neither states nor shows his method of comparison and (re)construction, but it seems his Contributions ... were only part of much wider preparations for a more exhaustive work which he wished to write or to initiate. Büttner died before reaching 45 years of age. His work on comparative Bantu linguistics was carried on by Carl Meinhof, who also seems to have inherited Büttner's linguistic collections. Meinhof introduced more solid methods into reconstruction of Bantu roots (cf. his Grundriß...), but he did not show in detail to what extent his work was based on C.G. Büttner's.

RESUME:

Les contributions de Büttner à un dictionnaire comparatif des langues bantoues.

Dans le tome I des Transactions of the South African Philosophical Society (Cape Town 1880), on trouve un article de la plume de C.G. Büttner intitulé:

Contributions to a Comparative Dictionary of the Bantu Languages. I.

Cet auteur y donne une description comparative de mots tirés d'une centaine de langues et établit cinquante racines bantoues. Ces dernières sont citées dans notre article. A cela s'ajoutent les racines du bantou commun y correspondant, et telles qu'elles ont été reconstituées par les disciple de Büttner. - Malheureusement, Büttner ne nous donne aucune indication quant à ses méthodes de comparaison. Peu avant sa mort prématurée, il chargea C. Meinhof de poursuivre ces recherches de linguistique comparée et lui légua également ses manuscrits consacrés à ces problèmes.