

## THE BANTU ANCESTORS' VISION OF THE WORLD

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### 1. Introduction

The discussion presented in this paper is as old as the notion of "Bantu" itself. In fact, the question of the Bantu ancestors' vision of the world started to preoccupy the Bantu comparative and historical linguists since the noun class system was first described by Bleek (1862). This question has not been the sole monopoly of linguists, since philosophers (especially missionaries), ethnographers, historians, archaeologists, oral traditionalists and even sociologists have been very much concerned about the relationship between the noun class markers as found in the contemporary Bantu languages and the way the Bantu ancestors perceived or categorized the world around them.

### 2. Origins of Noun Classes in the Ancestral Bantu Language

In considering the origin of noun class prefixes in the ancestral Bantu language, one is inevitably confronted by the Guthrie-Greenberg controversy of whether to regard Bantu as a separate entity or as part of a large linguistic family, the Niger-Congo. Even if we took the latter position, we would still be confronted by two hypotheses about the origins of the noun class system in Niger-Congo. According to the Welmers' Double Affixation hypothesis (Welmers, 1973), the noun classes started in Niger-Congo by double affixation, one unit functioning as a definite article, the other as a class marker. The second hypothesis which will be referred to here as the Greenberg Demonstrative Hypothesis (Greenberg, 1977) states that the currently known affixes in Niger-Congo languages were first demonstrative qualifiers which later changed to definite articles before being reduced to affixes. As a justification to this hypothesis, the case of the Latin demonstrative ille which changed to the French definite article le is mentioned.

Although both hypotheses attempt to throw light on the origins of the noun class systems, they do not help us very much in describing the relationship between the formal markers (the affixes) and the categorization of the universe. The assumption through-out this paper is that the formal categorization of the universe was productive not only in Niger-Congo but also during the ancestral Bantu stages. One evidence for this claim is the close relationship between the form and the content of the noun classes - a relationship which has been blurred or deformed, in many instances, by formal and semantic shifts.

3. Semantic Repartition of Noun Classes in Bantu.

Up to 23 Noun Class reflexes have been recognized in Bantu languages (Kadima, 1969). These are shown in (1) below:

- |              |            |
|--------------|------------|
| (1) cl 1 mu- | cl. 12 ka- |
| cl. 2 ba-    | cl. 13 tu- |
| cl. 3 mu-    | cl. 14 bu- |
| cl. 4 mi-    | cl. 15 ku- |
| cl. 5 di-    | cl. 16 pa- |
| cl. 6 ma-    | cl. 17 ku- |
| cl. 7 ki-    | cl. 18 mu- |
| cl. 8 bi-    | cl. 19 pi- |
| cl. 9 N-, Ø- | cl. 20 gu- |
| cl. 10 N, Ø  | cl. 21 gi- |
| cl. 11 du.   | cl. 22 ga- |
|              | cl. 23 e-  |

Since the pioneering studies on Bantu languages by Bleek (1862) and Krapf (1850), many attempts have been made to identify the semantic content of the noun classes as a basis for discovering the Bantu ancestors' vision of the world and how they classified the different abstract and concrete phenomena of the universe. These studies have tended to take either a philosophical or a purely semantic interpretation. The philosophical interpretation was pioneered by Krapf (1850) who remarked that "the deep recesses of the South-African mind, which in its contemplation of the world, assigns a different position to every noun ..... The mind of the South African

Southafrican divides, as it were, the whole creation into two halves, of which the one is governed by the principle of spontaneity of movement, and of creative activity, whilst the other follows the principle of passiveness and necessity". (p.29-30) Krapf's philosophical remarks were followed by those of another missionary, Wagner (1927), who observed that "the Ntu trend of mind is given to think in categories, just as also was that of the Sumerians. This led to the so-called Ntu 'classes' " (p.9). This philosophical approach was followed up by other scholars, mainly missionaries and theologians, like Mbiti (1972), Fourche (1973), Mulago Mulago (1973) and Kagame (1976), who, generally, regarded the Bantu categorization of the world as a manifestation of a much deeper "Ntu" philosophy aimed at comprehending life, destiny, society, nature, death and the universe at large. The noun class system was expected to reflect this conception. A more objective and popular approach has been to attempt a semantic interpretation of the noun classes. Such studies have been undertaken, among others, by Leakey (1959), Whiteley (1961), Polomé (1967), Richardson (1967), Kadima (1969), Givon (1971), Guthrie (1971) Bennett (1970), Creider (1975), Denny and Creider (1976), Batibo (1976/1985), Obenga (1985), Spitulnik (1986). Many of these interpretations were based on individual languages. A comparison of three semantic based interpretations is found in (2) below:

(2) Paired Classes	Leakey (1959)	Whiteley (1961)	Batibo (1976/85)
1/2	Primarily human	Human beings	Human beings 6
3/4	Mostly large trees and plants	Trees, wooden objects, some foods, natural objects and some animals	Trees, plants parts of the body, wooden objects natural objects, foods, utensils.
5/6	Objects or being with Supernatural Significance	Persons, animals, birds, fruits, natural features. Also large-sized objects.	Natural objects, parts of the body, plants, fruits, small animals, artificial objects, liquids and masses

Paired Classes	Leakey (1959)	Whiteley (1961)	Batibo (1976/85)
7/8	Primarily inanimate objects.	Animals, birds, objects, persons with marked characteristics, natural phenomena	Artificial objects, tools, utensils parts of the body, natural phenomena, higher figures, some diseases, some abstract nouns, persons with marked characteristics.
9/10	Mostly living things not included in 3/4	Animals, fruits, natural phenomena, objects	Animals, birds, snakes, fish, insects, fruits, natural phenomena, parts of the body, tools, social terms, some diseases, some abstract names.
11/10	Undulated objects	Long, thin, objects, insects, fruits some abstract qualities.	Natural phenomena, parts of the body, long objects, insects, grains, some abstract names, some social terms.
12/13	Diminutives	Diminutives. Also some animals and common objects.	Mainly diminutives
14/6		Objects, insects, animals, fruits, collectives various abstract qualities	abstracts, grains, ornaments, collective objects, natural phenomena, fruits, small insects, some diseases, artificial objects
15		Nomino-Verbals	Nominoverbals Also some parts of the body
16/18		Exclusively place words	Exclusively place words or derivations

4. Problems in Bantu Class System Studies.

The traditional attempts to determine the semantic bases of the Bantu noun classes has often been frustrated by the following problems as manifested in table (2) above:

(i) There is often lack of consistency in that one concept can be found in more than one class. For example, the terms for "parts of the body," "natural phenomena" and "social or cultural activities" can be found in up to 6 grammatical genders (i.e. paired classes involving singular and plural forms)<sup>1</sup>. It is therefore difficult to tell which of these prefixes represents the original form for the concept - assuming that there was only one original form for each concept.

(ii) It is also common that one grammatical gender contains many concepts. A typical example is the gender constituting classes 7 and 8 which, according to Batibo (1976) has 9 concepts. These concepts include "artificial objects", "tools", "utensils", "parts of the body", "natural phenomena", "higher figures", "some diseases", "some abstract nouns" and "persons with marked characteristics." It becomes again difficult to decide which of these concepts was the original or inherent concept for that gender.

(iii) Another related problem has been the existence of many prefixes for the same stem in the various Bantu languages. Thus, for the stem -gudu "leg" and -ti "stick" there are divergent prefixes according to individual languages. This is shown in (3) below:

- (3) -gudu<sup>2</sup> "leg"  
okuguru cl.15 (Ganda)  
kugulu cl.15 (Sukuma)  
mguu cl. 3 (Swahili)  
likulu cl. 5 (Luhya)  
kigulu cl. 7 (Sagala)  
lokolo cl. 11 (Mongo)  
-ti "stick"  
moté cl.3 (Kamba)  
eti cl.5 (Ndonga)  
ekiti cl.7 (Nyoro)  
uthi cl.11 (Zulu)  
okati cl.12 (Kwanyama)

(iv) Yet another problem is the overlap of some of the semantic denotations. For example, the "diminutive concept" is often expressed in noun classes 7/8, 12/13 and 19/13. While the "augmentative concept" is expressed in noun classes 5/6, 20, 21 and 22. The question is whether all these grammatical genders expressed the same concepts in ancestral Bantu. Did all the forms exist in ancestral Bantu in the first instance?

(v) Also there have been overlaps of certain prefixes which are formally similar. This is the case of prefixes like di-/gi- and bu-/du-. As a result of this overlap, it is not easy, in many cases, to tell where they originally belonged.

#### 5. Bantu Noun Classes Revisited

In order to arrive at a more objective and realistic interpretation of the repartition of the Bantu nouns it is important to begin by the following observations:

(i) The ancestral Bantu speakers, like any cultural group, visualized and interpreted the world phenomena according to their own experiences and beliefs. Some of their interpretations may not necessarily correspond to the contemporary knowledge and attitudes about the world phenomena.

(ii) There is a gross misinterpretation in the contemporary Bantu languages with regard to the prefixes, derivational processes and semantic denotation. This is because the formation of the many Bantu languages was accompanied by both prefix and semantic shifts. Thus, as Whiteley (1965) remarked, even in two very closely related dialects of the same language, there may exist two different prefixes for the same noun stem (e.g. the noun for "legs" is mi-guu (cl.4) in Zanzibar Swahili, but ma-guu (cl.6) in Mombasa Swahili).

(iii) There have also been false productivity in some of the contemporary languages. This is probably the result of reinterpretation of the semantic markers or inappropriate marking of new vocabulary. For example, in Kiswahili,

nouns denoting animals belong to the m-/wa- classes (1/2). On the other hand, many nouns denoting human beings like mabibi "ladies", mabwana "gentlemen" and mahujaji "pilgrims" belong to class 6, but the concordial agreements are in the wa- class (cl.2). As a result, debates have often arisen where many alternative forms exist, such as the Kiswahili noun, mauti "corpse", whose class appartenance has shifted from cls. 9/10 to cls. 5/6 and then recently to cls. 1/2<sup>4</sup>.

In this study I would like to eliminate the above problems by working on the following assumptions.

- (i) The prefixes of the typical Bantu words reveal the ancestral Bantu vision of the world.
- (ii) Where all or the majority of the Bantu languages have kept only one class (or grammatical gender) for a given noun stem, the noun class should represent the one which existed in ancestral Bantu.
- (iii) The Bantu nouns were repartitioned according to the conspicuous features or notions as interpreted by the ancestral Bantu speakers.

In my documentary research, I identified about 250 noun stems among Guthrie's starred forms. These stems were picked on two conditions: (a) that they were typically ancestral Bantu by the fact that they covered the entire Bantu Zone, and (b) that they had only one predominant gender (at least 80% of the entries in the comparative series should belong to only one gender). It was therefore assumed that the predominant gender was the original one. This is

evidenced by the fact that most (if not all) the contemporary languages have inherited that gender. Cases where many divergent genders existed in contemporary languages for the same noun stem were not considered.

The study demonstrated that the Bantu nouns could be divided according to five categories. These are as follows:

(i) Time, Space and Force

The Bantu ancestral speakers may have visualized their universe in terms of time, space and force.

An object was considered with respect to its location in space or time either outside, on or above something else, i.e. pa- (cl.16), or inside something else, i.e. mu- (cl.18)<sup>5</sup>.

Moreover, an object was also considered in terms of its movement, force or ability to initiate a process or to enter into a state. Thus, the force concerned all actions like go, run, eat which would have the prefix ku- (cl.15) as well as the limbs which initiate action or movement like leg (kugudu), hand (ku-boko) and ear (ku-tué). Also the ku- prefix (cl.17) was used to indicate direction of movement or action, e.g. kunju to the house"<sup>6</sup>.

(ii) Human Nature

The ancestral Bantu speakers may have classified human beings as a special category. Hence the classes mu-/ba- (cls. 1/2) were reserved for different categories of human beings as exemplified in



(4) below:

(4) <u>stranger</u> (mu <sup>g</sup> eni)	<u>person</u> (mu-ntu)
<u>thief</u> (mu-yí <sup>b</sup> i)	<u>woman</u> (mu-ka <sup>d</sup> i)
<u>dead person</u> (mu-kú)	<u>medicineman</u> (mu-kúmu)
<u>child</u> (mu-ya <sup>n</sup> a)	<u>young girl</u> (mu-ya <sup>d</sup> i)

(iii) Shape, Position and Association

Objects were also perceived according to their shape, position and the way they associated with other objects. Such objects were classified as follows:

(a) du-(cl.11); Elongated or stretched

Concrete objects which were elongated and therefore extended or wide-spread belonged to the du-class (cl.11). Examples of elongated (usually thin and long) objects are listed in (5) below:

(5) <u>rib</u> (du-ba <sup>d</sup> u)	<u>spider's web</u> (du-bu <sup>b</sup> i)
<u>grey hair</u> (du -bu <sup>i</sup> )	<u>umbilical cord</u> (du-dida)
<u>tongue</u> (du-di <sup>m</sup> i)	<u>sting, thread</u> (du-di <sup>l</sup> )
<u>finger</u> (du-ja <sup>d</sup> a)	<u>firewood</u> (du-kui)
river (du-yi <sup>g</sup> i)	<u>feather</u> (du-yoyá)

The mass and abstract nouns which are considered as "elongated" or "wide-spread" are shown in (6) below:

(6) <u>wind</u> (du-pe <sup>p</sup> o)	<u>dust</u> (du-kungú)
<u>dew</u> (du-me)	<u>fame</u> (du-kúmu)
<u>journey</u> (du-gendo)	<u>death</u> (du-kú)
<u>song</u> (du-yimbo)	

The only apparent exceptions to this interpretation are listed in (7) below:

- (7) hill (du-gu<sup>u</sup>)                      slap (du-pí)  
daytime (du-tiku)                      door (du-yigi)

Possible explanations to these exceptions would be that a hilly place was often a chain of hills and therefore looked like an "elongated" or "chained block. While a slap was made by the palm of the hand which is "elongated" in shape. On the other hand, a daytime was seen as a long stretch of "moments" from morning till evening. Lastly, the door was made up of long and thin bundles of reeds or sticks. It usually had an "elongated" form which corresponded to the frame of the doorway (-diango).

- (b) mu-/mi- (cl.3/4): Planted in space or time

Ancestral Bantu speakers had a special category of concrete nouns which were "planted" in space. Example (8) comprises names of objects "planted" on human or animal body.

- (8) head (mu-tué)                      forearm (mu-kóno)  
tail (mu-kída)                      lip (mu-domo)  
back-bone (mu-gongo)                      finger (mu-núe)  
vein, tendon (mu-kipa)                      tusk (mu-banga)  
animal hair (mu-cinga)                      leg (mu-yendo)

The examples in (9) indicate the names of objects which are considered to be "planted" or "plantable" on the ground.

(9) <u>grain of seed</u> (mu-canga)	<u>village</u> (mu-gimu-ji)
<u>baobab</u> (mu-damba)	<u>fish-trap</u> (mu-gono)
<u>bamboo</u> (mu-dangi)	<u>sugar-cane</u> (mu-guba)
<u>doorway</u> (mu-diango)	<u>garden</u> (mu-gunda)
<u>fire</u> (mu-dido/mu-yoto)	<u>fig-tree</u> (mu-kuyú)
<u>root</u> (mu-di/mu-yidi)	<u>ebony tree</u> (mu-pingo)
<u>trap</u> (mu-tego)	<u>tree</u> (mu-ti)

The apparent exceptions are listed in (10) below:

(10) <u>body</u> (mu-bidi)	<u>spirit</u> (mu-dimu)
<u>penalty</u> (mu-dandu)	<u>river</u> (mu-donga)
<u>work</u> (mu-dimo)	<u>stream</u> (mu-geda)
<u>load</u> (mu-digo)	<u>taboo</u> (mu-gido)
<u>handle</u> (mu-pini)	<u>heart</u> (mutema/tima)
<u>year</u> (mu-yaka)	<u>moon</u> (mu-yedi)
<u>life</u> (mu-yoyo)	

These apparent exceptions could be explained as follows:

- Nouns denoting objects or phenomena associated with human beings are conceived as "planted". For example, the penalty is "planted" on the wrongdoer, the taboo and the spirit are "planted" on an individual, family or whole clan for given reasons. The life and the heart are "planted" into a human being to make him live. Also the body of a living person is "planted" on the ground as he is upright.

- Certain natural objects like rivers and streams are seen as "planted" horizontally on the ground. While the handle is regarded as "planted" into the tool (hoe, axe or adze).

- The moon was perceived as "planted" in the sky; while the terms year and work (dim from -dim- "to cultivate") were associated with cultivation or "planting" activities.

- The load was considered as "planted" on the human body (head or shoulder), when one was carrying it.

(c) N-/Ø. Displacing in Space or Time

The nouns in this category denote objects or phenomena which can displace or move in time and space or which have resulted from detachment. The displaceable objects (normally animals, insects, birds, snakes and fish) are listed in (11) below:

(11) <u>rat</u> (m-beba)	<u>louse</u> (n-dá)
<u>goat</u> (m-búdi)	<u>locust</u> (n-gige)
<u>monitor lizard</u> (m-búdu)	<u>warthog</u> (n-gidi)
<u>jackal</u> (m-báda)	<u>leopard</u> (n-go)
<u>python</u> (n-cáto)	<u>crocodile</u> (n-guena)
<u>elephant</u> (n-jóku)	<u>cow</u> (n-gombe)
<u>hippotamus</u> (n-gubú)	<u>pig</u> (n-gudube)
<u>chicken</u> (n-kókó)	<u>guinea-fowl</u> (n-kángá)
<u>snake</u> (n-yóka)	<u>fish</u> (n-tuí)
<u>hyena</u> (m-píti)	

While examples in (12) illustrate nouns which are conceived as associated with some forms of "detachment".

- (12) path (n-jida) - "displaces" as you walk along.  
seed (m-bégú) - "detached" from its skin or cover.  
adze (m-bejo) - "detaches" wooden objects.  
open space (m-búga) - "detached" from any plantation.  
rain (m-búda) "detached" from the sky.

calabasse bottle (n-cúpa) - a gourd which is "detached" from its seeds.

skin (n-gobo/gobi) - "detached" from the body.

drum (n-goma) - "displaced" as message is communicated through drumming.

famine (n-jada) "displaces" from one locality to another.

round hut (n-ju/n-jó) "displaceable" (temporary) dwelling place.

(d) di- (cl.5) Usually existing in pairs or identical forms

Many nouns in this category denote objects which exist in pairs. This is exemplified in (13) below:

- (13) wing (di-babá)                      twin (du-pacá)  
breast (di-béede)                      horn (di-pembe)  
shoulder (di-bega)                      buttock (di-táko)  
arm (di-boko)                              cheek (di-táma)  
knee (di-duí)                              eye (di-yíco)  
nostrils (di-juđu)

The other nouns in this category denoting objects which may exist in many numbers, but in "identical" shapes or sizes are shown in (14) below:

- (14) tooth (di-yíno/-gino)              stone (di-bue)  
boil (di-pute)                              cloud (di-bingú)  
bone (di-kupa)                              egg (di-gí/di-gé)  
spot (di-bada)                              molartooth (di-gigo)  
charcoal (di-kada)                      hoe (di-gembe)  
tree trunk (di-tina)

The apparent exceptions are explained in (15) below:

(15) fire-place (di-gíko) - "identical" fire-places in different homes.

sky, top (di-gúdu) - "identical" sky each day.

sun (di-júba) - "identical" sun daily and many "identical 'suns'" during the day.

ten (di-kúmi) - a number of counted objects, usually identical or similar.

hundred (di-gana) - a number of counted objects, usually identical or similar"

name (di-gína/di-yína) - names "identical" with clan or family names.

(iv) Existing in Collective or Large Quantities

Ancestral Bantu speakers also recognized three types of objects existing in collective or large quantities.

These are:

(a) bu- (Cl.14) Usually Collective

The nouns in this category denote objects or phenomena which are usually conceived in their collective state. Examples of such nouns and their respective explanations are given in (16) below.

(16) bead (bu-cánga) - a collective form of beads strung together.

village (bu-dá) - a collection of huts or houses.

bedstead (bu-dídi) - a collection of sticks spread on a bed frame.

birdlime (bu-dimbo) - a collection of special sticky liquid from trees.

witchcraft (bu-dogo/bu-dogi) - a collection of supernatural forces.

illness (bu-dúaide) - a collection of bodily sufferings.

bitterness (bu-dudu) - a concentration of bitter taste"

medicine (bu-ganga) - a concentration of forces found in

special herbs and roots.

speed (bu-yangu) - a concentration of haste.

canoe (bu-yáto) - a collection of floating woods.

fear (bu-yóba/bu-yóga) - a concentration of emotions

which make one afraid.

The apparent exceptions to this interpretation are bow (bu-tá) and night (bu-tíku). The bow might have been conceived as "concentration of power" in war (bi-tá, cl.8). In fact, many Bantu cultures still give special significance to the bow. While night was seen as a "collection of life" in sleep as opposed to the elongated or stretched day-time (du-tíku, cl.11).

Moreover, this category was also associated with abstract terms because abstraction was probably conceived as a collection of life experience put together in a generalised or abstract form. For example (bu-dúaide) was conceived as a collection/<sup>of</sup> bodily sufferings according to generalized life experience.

(b) ma- (cl.6): Usually amassed

Nouns in this category denote objects which are usually amassed together so that they are conceived as one entity. Most of such objects belong to non count nouns, especially liquids. Examples are given in (17) below:

- (17) milk (ma-bééde)      blood (ma-gida)  
clay (ma-búmba)      oil (ma-gúta/kúta)  
ashes (ma-bú)      nasal macus (ma-mída)

tears (ma-jicódi)      wisdom (ma-gano)  
water (ma-díba/ma-yígi)

The word wisdom (mā-gano) in the above example, could be explained as "amassed experience." Moreover all the nouns in cl.5 (di-) had their plural in cl.6 (ma-) because such pairs or "identical" objects were regarded, in their quantitative aspect, as amassed together.

(c) N- /∅ - (cl.10): Bundled or assembled

Any "elongated" objects were considered as bundled together when in plural form and any "displaceable" objects were considered as "assembled together". Exemplified are given in (18) below

(18) <u>ribs</u> (m-badu)	<u>feathers</u> (n-yoya)
<u>strings</u> (n-dí)	<u>cattle</u> (n-gombe)
<u>firewood</u> (n-kúí)	<u>locusts</u> (n-gige)
<u>goats</u> (m-búdi)	<u>chicken</u> (n-kókó)
<u>huts</u> (n-ju/n-jb)	<u>hyenas</u> (m-píti)

(v) Deviated from the Norm

Any objects or phenomena which deviated from the norm in size or characteristics were placed in special classes. These classes served also as derivatives, in which case they would replace or precede the inherent classes in specific conditions.

(a) ka-/tu- (cls 12/13): Diminutives

Nouns which belonged to classes 12/13 were normally diminutives, that is nouns which denoted small or despised objects. The only inherent nouns from Guthrie's data are:



excreta (ka-bi)- probably because it is "reject" from the body.

sleep (tu-lo, cl.13)- a doubtful case.

Many nouns in this class are derivatives. Examples are given in (19) below:

- |                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| (19) <u>baby</u> (ka-ana) | <u>stream</u> (ka-geda)     |
| <u>pebble</u> (ka-bue)    | <u>stick</u> (ka-ti)        |
| <u>dwarf</u> (ka-ntu)     | <u>young goat</u> (ka-budi) |

(b) gi - (cl.20) or gu - (cl.21): Augmentatives

Nouns which belonged to these classes were normally augmentatives, that is nouns which denoted large or colossal objects. There are no inherent nouns from Guthrie's data. However, the augmentative prefixes were used as derivatives, in which case they replaced/<sup>or</sup>preceded the inherent noun prefixes. Examples are given in (20) below:

- |                                 |                              |
|---------------------------------|------------------------------|
| (20) <u>giant</u> (gi-ntu)      | <u>big river</u> (gi-geda)   |
| <u>rock</u> (gi-bue)            | <u>large hyena</u> (gi-piti) |
| <u>large elephant</u> (gi-joku) | <u>big child</u> (gi-ana)    |

(c) Ki-/bi- (cls 7/8): Having Marked characteristics

Nouns which belonged to Noun classes 7 and 8 normally denoted objects with marked or special characteristics. Such characteristics could be deformity, artificiality, eventfulness or speciality. Example are listed in (21) below:

- (21) -Deformity (lack of something)
- |                                  |                            |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <u>lame person</u> (ki-dema)     | <u>bedstead</u> (ki-tanda) |
| <u>wound, sore</u> (ki-donda)    | <u>stool</u> (ki-tebe)     |
| <u>-artificiality</u> (man-made) | <u>basket</u> (ki-tunga)   |
| <u>cloth</u> (kidamba)           |                            |
| <u>mortar</u> (ki-nu)            |                            |

- well, pool (ki-timá)      paddle (ki-dapo)  
-evenfulness (special event or period)  
dry season (ki-cipo)      war (bi-tá, cl.13)  
oath taking (ki-dápo)  
-speciality (objects of special significance)  
iron, hoe (ki-gega)  
taboo (ki-gida)  
special object (ki-ntu)  
special measurement (ki-pimo)  
one type of frog (ki-yudá)

The two apparent exceptions to this interpretation are waist (ki-búnu or ki-búno) and chest (ki-kúba). The former could be said to be a special part of the body which has special significance, especially for women. The latter had special significance because it was the mark of strength in men.

#### 6. Some Observations

The above interpretation of the noun class system as used by the ancestral Bantu speakers enables us to make the following observations.

(i) It is possible to limit the semantic features to only one per class or per gender. This had not been possible in the earlier attempts. Hence we can summarize these features as shown in (22) below:

(22)

1. cls 1/2 = "human"	9. cl.11 = "stretched"
2. cls 3/4 = "planted"	10. cl.12/13 = "diminutive"
3. cl 5 = "itematized"	11. cl.14 "collective"
4. cl.5 = "amassed"	12. cl.15 = "dynamic"
5. cls 7/8 = "marked"	13. cl.16 = "exterior"
6. cl.9 = "displaceable"	14. cl.17 = "directional"
7. cl.10 <sup>(1)</sup> = "assembled" (pl. of 9)	15. cl.18 = "interior"
8. cl. 10 <sup>(2)</sup> = "bundled" (pl. of 11)	

(a) The above pattern enables us to posit that there were four types of noun classes in ancestral Bantu, each of which had its specific function in the language. These types are:

(a) Classes which Repartitioned the Universe

The first type of noun classes is that which repartitioned the universe as the Bantu speakers visualised it. The universe was apparently divided in eight categories.

- "Human" World (human beings e.t.c. cl.1 = mu-)
- "Moving" World (animals, insects, snakes birds, fish etc. cl.9 = N)
- "Planted" World (trees, plants, limbs etc. cl.3=mu-)
- "Itematized" (non living, body organs etc. cl.5 = di-)
- "marked" World (special or man-made objects etc. cl.7=ki-)
- "amassed" World (masses, liquids, uncountables cl.6 =ma-)
- "stretched" World (strings, ropes, threads, chains etc cl.11 = du-)
- "collective" world ( collective objects or phenomena, qualities, states etc. cl.14=bu-)
- "dynamic" world (limbs, actions, processes).

(b) Number Classes

The second type of classes is that which pluralized the classes in (a) above. These are:

- "humans" = cl.2 (ba-)
- "moving" bodies = cl.10 (N-)
- "planted" objects = cl.4 (mi-)
- "itematized" objects including limbs = cl.6 (ma-).  
The class of amassed objects is used.
- "marked" objects = cl.8 (bi-)
- "stretched" objects = cl.10 (N). Overlapping with the plural of "moving" bodies.

(c) Classes which Derived other Notions

Some classes acquired secondary functions by extending their content. Thus cls 5/6 (di-/ma-) also functioned as augmentatives, cls 7/8 (ki-/bi-) functioned as depreciatories. Moreover a new gender (cls.12/13 = ka-/tu-) was introduced to denote diminutiveness. Also the locatives (pa- ku-, mu-) appeared in order to indicate the positions of objects.

(d) Intensified Derivative classes

Other derivative classes were introduced as emphatic forms of the original derivatives. These are: The Emphatic Diminutive Class 19 (pi-) and The Augmentative Classes 20, 21 and 22 (gu-, gi- and ga- respectively) and The Emphatic Locative Class 23 (i-/e-)<sup>7</sup>.

(iii) There seems to have been a significant overlap in both form and meaning in the contemporary Bantu languages. The prefixes which have easily merged are: 5/21, 6/22, 11/14, 9/10 and 10(1) (plural of 9)/10(2) (plural of 11). Other prefixes which have equally merged in some languages include 1/3, 2/6, 4/8, 5/8, 7/8, 5/11 and 8/21. Moreover, the similarity of some of the meanings made it easy for some of the classes to merge. This is the case of the "assembled" (cl.10<sub>(1)</sub>) and "bundled" (cl.10<sub>(2)</sub>) or "small-sized" (cls. ka-/tu-) and "marked" (cls. ki/bi).

(iv) The predominance of some semantic features over the original or inherent forms may have caused the old prefixes being replaced by new ones. For example, the stem - gudu (leg) was in cl.15 (ku-) because of the dynamism of the leg. However, some languages must have considered the other features like pairing, attached (planted) to the body, marked and elongated as more prominent, thus placing those classes as exemplified in (23) below:

- (23) okuguru/ámaguru (Ganda) cls. 15/6  
kugulu/magulu (Sukuma) cls. 15/6  
likulu/makulu (Luhya) cls. 5/6  
mguu/miguu (Swahili) cls. 3/4  
kigulu/vigulu (Sagala) cls. 7/8  
lokolo/nkolo (Mongo) cls. 11/10

(v) Where new prefixes were to be adopted for newly created nouns, each Bantu language selected the relevant class(es) according to the most conspicuous characteristics of the object. This resulted in having different prefixes for the same item as exemplified in (24) below:

(24) -ti (stick) derived from \*muti "tree"

mote "stick" (Kamba), cl.3 (conceived as originating from something "planted")

eti "stick" (Ndonga), cl.5 (conceived as one of "identical" sticks.

ekiti "stick" (Nyoro), cl.7 (conceived as "man-made")

uthi "stick" (Zulu), cl.11 (conceived as "elongated")

Okati "stick" (kwanyama) cl.12, (conceived as "small-sized")

(vi) Some of the contemporary languages have modified some of the semantic features by expanding, reducing or shifting them. A good example is Swahili which has expanded the semantic feature human in cl.1/2 to animate. Hence mnyama (animal) and wanyama (animals) belong now to classes 1 and 2. Moreover, many classes have acquired secondary meanings. For example, the traditionally "marked" classes have acquired other connotations such as pejorative, derogatory, diminutive, augmentative or honorific meanings.

## 7. Conclusion

The foregoing was yet another contribution to the description of the noun class system in Bantu and how the ancestral Bantu speakers may have perceived and categorized the world around them. The study has shown that by using the typically Bantu noun stems which are assumed to represent the earlier Bantu nouns, it is possible to arrive at common semantic features for each class or grammatical gender. Some of the interpretations required considerable understanding of the Bantu "inner" mind and the way they visualized the universe. It has been demonstrated that the noun class systems in the contemporary languages have lost the original regularity due to both formal and semantic shifts.

NOTES

1. According to the Bantu traditions, a "grammatical gender" is any pair of classes involving singular and plural forms.
2. For practical reasons, in this paper, Guthrie's vowel distinctions i/i and u/u have not been followed.
3. According to Guthrie (1967-71) some noun prefixes such as pi- entered much later in Proto-Bantu.
4. The case of mauti "corpse" was extensively debated in the Tanzania Radio Programme "Mbinu za Kiswahili" where it was noted that the word belonged morphologically to cl.6, etymologically to cls 9/10, but semantically to cls 1/2. It was the last factor which was taken as predominant.
5. According to Guthrie (1967-71) the locative classes were extra-dependent in that they were normally juxtra-posed on the inherent prefixes.
6. The identity of classes 15/17 was also stated by Johnston (1919).
7. The discussion presented here was inspired, in part, by the studies of Homburger (1941), Meeussen (1967) and Kadima (1969).

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