Bantu Migration: People on the Move

**Directions:** Read the text below, examine the documents, and answer the accompanying questions.

**Iron Metallurgy in Africa**

We know from archaeological data that by about the fifth century BCE the skills and technology required for iron working had spread throughout much of central, eastern and southern Africa. It is not known exactly how this transmission of knowledge and expertise took place, but it is believed to be linked to a mass movement of people across the continent, known as the 'Bantu migration.' This episode in Africa's past has often been ignored but its implications for the future development of the continent is crucial. Bantu is the word widely used as a description of a body of people originally based in west or central Africa who, over the course of three thousand years, moved to populate east and southern regions. It's not clear how the Bantu gained their skills in iron working. The great iron smelting tradition of the Kushite Kingdom of Meroë (around 500 BCE) in Nubia did not spread either further west or towards the south, although we do not know this for sure.

In West Africa, the knowledge of iron working may have come from the Phoenicians who in 800 BCE founded the colony of Carthage on the North African coast. The skills may have crossed the Sahara desert with the Berber nomads who dominated much of the North African plains. It has also been suggested that iron smelting may have started in Africa itself, without any outside influences, but so far none of the theories are conclusive. What we do know is that iron smelting was established in Nigeria, central Niger and southern Mali by around 500-400 BC, spreading to other parts of West Africa by 1000 AD.

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**African Ironworking**

Refining metal was an important technological advance in every civilization. Africa was no exception. Iron tools were stronger than copper or bronze tools, so iron tools and the technology to produce them were very valuable.

Producing iron began by mining the iron ore. The iron itself was bound up with other minerals in rocks. The trick was separating the iron from the unwanted minerals. That was the function of the furnace shown below. This process is known as smelting.

1. Layers of iron ore were alternated with layers of charcoal fuel inside the furnace. Temperatures inside the furnace would reach about 2000º F.
2. A tuyère (twee-YAIR) was a clay pipe that allowed air to flow through the furnace.
3. The bellows—usually made out of an animal skin with a wooden plunger attached—increased air flow in the furnace, thus raising the temperature.
4. The intense heat would cause a chemical reaction, separating the iron from the impurities.
5. The iron would collect and form what is called a bloom. After cooling, the bloom was removed. An ironsmith then worked the bloom into the desired tool or weapon.

**Research Links**

For more information on ironworking, go to classzone.com
Iron smelting is a difficult process because the extraction of iron from rock involves a chemical process. Crushed iron ore and charcoal were placed in furnaces and lime was added. After several hours of heating, the crude iron was taken from the furnace and forged into weapons. Iron Ore is widely available in much of tropical Africa but because iron rusts easily few examples of implements have survived from the pre-historic period. Armed with this technology the Bantu then dispersed across Africa.

1. Which two groups of African peoples possessed skills of iron metallurgy (producing and working iron) before the Bantu, but probably did NOT spread knowledge of the iron-making technology to the Bantu or others in Africa?

2. If iron ore is so plentiful and easy to find, why is it so hard to make it into usable metal? What are the steps involved in the process?

**Bantu Migrations**

Armed with iron smelting technology the Bantu of west and central Africa dispersed across the continent, changing its linguistic and cultural landscape. A number of theories have been put forward to explain this migration.

**NEED TO MOVE**

"When people move they move for a reason. They move because the population has expanded. They move because the resources which support the population in the settlements have become more or less inadequate. They move because there are changes to the climate and they move for the sake of finding better areas in which to live."

—Professor Leonard Ngcongco, University of Botswana.

3. According to Professor Leonard Ngcongco, what are some possible reasons for WHY the Bantu migrated throughout Africa?

**SLOW BUT STEADY**

One theory is that there were waves of migration, one moving through the east of Africa and another making its way through the centre of the continent. In Zambia, there is evidence of at least three routes of migration - from the great lakes, from the Congo forest and from Angola. There is evidence that the Bantu ancestors of
the modern Swahili peoples mastered sailing technology and possessed canoes and boats so they could make their way along the Zambezi river.

"Chief among the reasons for migration is environmental stress and population increase in West Africa, forcing people to move. It is important to realise that these people are not moving across the landscape like bugs bunny or the energiser bunny, but essentially they are moving slowly, gradually inhabiting areas that were good for farming and livestock raising."

—Dr Chapirukha Kusimba, Field Museum, Chicago.

Most historians appear to believe that rather than arriving en masse (as one huge group) like a conquering horde, the migrations were more sporadic with small pockets of people moving from one point to another.

4. **True or False**: The Bantu Migration was when all the Bantu people from West-Central Africa got up and decided to move and travelled all together all at once and spread throughout different parts of Africa. Explain in detail.

**CONQUERORS, COLONISERS OR ADVENTURERS?**

It is not entirely clear how the Bantu reacted when they came upon existing communities but it is likely that there was considerable absorption, assimilation and displacement of other peoples during the migration period. The Bantu were armed with superior weapons and their iron implements allowed them to cultivate land and clear forests efficiently. If they came as colonisers, then it is unlikely to be in the sense we understand the term today. Historians believe there was social interaction and intermarrying and trade.

5. Based on the article, how would describe the interaction between the migrating Bantu people and existing communities?

6. Based on the article, do you think it would be accurate to say that the Bantu people REPLACED the previous inhabitants of the regions to which they migrated? Why or why not?

**EVIDENCE**

The evidence for migration is based on three main areas of research. They are:
• **Linguistic:** A comparative study of languages spoken in some parts of eastern, central and southern Africa show similarities with the mother tongues originally spoken in West Africa. There are some 450 known languages in the Bantu family from Gikuyu in the north to Setswana in the south.

• **Pottery:** There is evidence of similar pottery technology in eastern, southern and western Africa. Iron Age farmers were skilled pot makers and decorated their pots with grooves and patterns. Related groups of peoples used similar styles of decoration.

• **Iron:** There is little or no evidence of iron working in east and southern Africa before the arrival of the Bantu suggesting that new technology was spread by the migrants.

The Bantu proved enormously successful at adapting to their new environments and it has been argued by some historians that they brought not only new methods of survival but the development of the system of statehood that we still find today.

"In some areas they brought notions of government, controlling people, development of leadership, chieftaincy, statecraft and organising people for campaigns for battles and also maybe a kind of advanced religion."
—Professor Leonard Ngcongco.

**Main Text Source:** “People on The Move”, BBC World Service, *The Story of Africa*

7. What are some ways the Bantu had a lasting impact on the areas to which they migrated? How can these impacts serve as proof that this Bantu Migration took place?

8. Examine the map of language families in Africa. Before the Bantu languages (Niger-Congo family) spread throughout the continent, which two other language families can you guess probably would have been found in a wider area than they are today? How can you tell?

9. Identify another migrating group you have studied. How are the Bantu similar to or different from that group?