

**“Beyond Primordialist Myths:
The Batwa (“Pygmy”) Role in Central African History”
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ABSTRACT

In this paper I would like to share a number of historical hypotheses and conclusions I arrived at through writing a book on the history of Batwa societies in central Africa.¹ The book was entitled “*The Pygmies Were Our Compass*”: *Bantu and Batwa in the history of West-Central Africa, early times to c. 1900 C.E.* and published in 2003. Through the use of an interdisciplinary approach - one that relied on comparative historical linguistics, archeological data, oral traditions, ethnographic and written evidence, the book reconstructed a history of various Batwa or “first-comer” societies and the Bantu agriculturalist societies they interacted with over a 3000 year period.² Relying on different types of data for different eras, the work provided historical hypotheses as to the changing nature of social, economic, and religious interactions between Bantu and Batwa during the four “watershed” eras of Central African history - the Bantu expansion (c. 4000-3000 B.C.E.), the introduction and spread of both of iron-working and bananas (c. 500 B.C.E. – 500 C.E.) the rise of long-distance trade and centralized polities (c. 800-1200 C.E.), and finally, the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade (c. 1500-1900 C.E.). Although I will not have time to speak to you about each of these eras, it is important to recognize that each and every society in Central Africa was affected by these events, and that the ancestors of modern-day Batwa peoples were no exception to the rule. Indeed, my work illustrates that Batwa communities played key roles in the political and religious institutions that were developed as transformations took place, and that their role continued to be important, albeit in very altered ways, well into the Atlantic age.

This historical vision of the Batwa – as participants and sometimes even key players in the history of the Central African region - runs contrary to that held by most Westerners. The Batwa are most commonly considered to be descendants of Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers, a people whose ancestors lived isolated within the rainforest until relatively recent times. As such, studies of their societies have been relegated to the field of anthropology rather than history, and they have become the focus of research that seeks to elucidate the lifestyles of earliest humankind. Another common vision of the Batwa poses them as perpetual clients or servants to their agriculturalist neighbors. This line of thinking is rooted in Social Darwinist models and observations of Bantu/Batwa relations over the past one-hundred thirty years. It assumes that the Batwa have always been dominated and/or exploited by their Bantu neighbors, who are more “advanced” due to their practices of cultivation, iron-working, and in some cases, state-building.

Au-delà des mythes primordiales :

Le rôle des Batwa (« Pygmées ») dans l’histoire de l’Afrique Centrale

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¹ Because the term “pygmy” is not African and often carries a derogatory connotation, I use the Bantu terms Twa (singular) and Batwa (plural) as a generic referent to communities regarded as “first-comers” within the rainforest. For the etymology of this alternative term, see Klieman, *The Pygmies Were Our Compass*, p. xix.

² The complex nature of this data, as well as the arguments that follow, preclude the possibility of my citing the entirety of sources in this short paper. As a result, only direct quotes and the works of other scholars will be cited. Those interested in more data/detail will be able to access it directly in the book.

Abstrait

Cet exposé remet certaines hypothèses et conclusions historique trouvé dans ma livre de 2003, intitulé *“The Pygmies Were Our Compass”: Bantu and Batwa in the History of West Central Africa, Early Times to c. 1900 C.E.* (*“Les Pygmées Faisaient la Boussole”: Bantoue et Batwa dans l’histoire du centre-Afrique de l’ Ouest, temps anciens jusqu’à 1900 mille C.E.*) et qui était basé sur une méthode multidisciplinaire (y compris la linguistique historique, l’archéologie, l’ethnographie, et les traditions orales). Au début je soutiens que nous devons comprendre l’origine et utilisation de “l’Idée du Pygmée Légendaire” dans l’Ouest, parce que tout les idées que cette paradigm contient étaient “dechargé” sur les Batwa au premier moment du contact et continue à rendre obscur leur vrai histoire. Ensuite je propose qu’on doit étudier l’histoire du Batwa à travers la catégorie sociale du “premier-venu” au lieu de concentrer sur leur histoire biologique ou évolutioniste; celle-ci nous aidera meilleur comprendre l’histoire de leur relations avec le Bantoue. Basé sur les nouvelles données linguistique et archéologique, je soutien qu’il y avait des périodes du 600-1600 ans au commencement de l’expansion Bantoue quand les autochthons et les Bantu ont vecûs les relations très intimes; par conséquent, ils partagent les mêmes langues et traites génétiques aujourd’hui. C’était après l’introduction des bananes et fer, au moment que les Bantu ont developé une hégémonie sociale et économique sur les « premiers-venu, » que les ancêtres des Batwa ont réduit les liens avec leur voisins Bantu, développes leurs propres dialectes/langues, et commences une mode de vie plus mobile comme spécialistes dans la traite des produits forestières. Au même temps, les Bantu ont commence a créer les mythes et rituels qui posaient les Batwa comme « instituteurs » et « héros » pour négocier le fait qu’ils ont prix leur place comme « maitres de la terre ». Contrairement aux idées socio-Darwiniste des Occidentaux (qui suggère que les Batwa ont été toujours « clients » des Bantoues), les données linguistique indique qu’ils ont reste indépendants (mais pas isole!) pendant plusieurs siècles, et que dans les plupart des cas, ce n’était pas jusque les transformations de l’age du traite esclaviste que le Batwa ont était obliger de se soumettre aux Bantoue.

Enigmas of the Batwa Past

That these primordialist and Social-Darwinist myths have for so long dominated Western visions of the Batwa is somewhat perplexing, especially since there is very little evidence to suggest they are rooted in historical truths. The archeological record, for example, provides no evidence to tie modern-day Batwa to peoples of the Late Stone Age, and no Batwa society has ever been observed using stone tools. Likewise, there is no record of any Batwa society sustaining itself on the fruits of hunting and gathering alone; instead, all have been observed to live in “symbiosis” with their agriculturalist neighbors, exchanging forest products or labor for crops (largely starches) to supplement foodstuffs they obtain in the forest. The notion that the Batwa are only recently emerging from centuries of rainforest isolation is belied by two important facts: 1) genetic studies indicate most Batwa societies are genetically indistinguishable from their neighbors, and thus, are likely to have a history of intermarriage or common descent in the distant past; and 2) all Batwa communities speak languages that belong to the same language families as their neighbors (Bantu and Ubangian), a phenomena which would be unlikely to exist if they had been living in isolation for hundreds or thousands of years.³ Given this evidence, specialists on Batwa societies have long posited that the ancestors of modern-day Batwa communities must have undergone long periods of interaction with Bantu speaking agriculturalists, and that these interactions were necessarily much more intimate than those observed over the past one-hundred thirty years. Questions remained, however, as to when such interactions took place, and how and why they ceased to prevail.

³ This situation can be compared to the situation among Khoisan speakers of southern Africa, who continue to speak their own languages of a completely different phyla

Last but not least, the notion that Batwa societies have lived in a state of perpetual servitude to their agriculturalist neighbors is belied by the large body of Bantu oral traditions about the Batwa. Across the rainforest, and even south into the savanna regions of eastern and southern Africa, Bantu traditions relate that Batwa communities were not only the “first-comers” on the land, but also the first teachers and guides to Bantu societies, instructing them how to (variously) copulate, use fire, find fertile lands, grow food, and produce iron. Many of these societies also assert that their most esteemed religious specialists, territorial chiefs, and original founders/kings were (or are) descended from the ancient Batwa. Thus, there are a number of important indicators that the primordialist/social Darwinist model for understanding Batwa history are not particularly useful if we seek to understand Batwa peoples actual history, and this is the problem my book tried to solve.

Given these data, an important question arises: why is it that so many Westerners – both scholars and the general public – have continued to view the Batwa as primordial remnants, a people whose lifestyles have not changed over time, the quintessential “people without history.” I argue that to understand the reasons for this phenomenon we must analyze our own intellectual history, especially regarding the idea of the legendary pygmy, which has been used throughout centuries as a metaphor (i.e., similarity-creating device) to mediate knowledge about the nature and origins of humankind. Without an understanding of how these long-standing “intellectual habits” continue to guide our thinking, it difficult to imagine alternative realities assess historical data in unbiased ways. For this reason, I will provide an overview of what I call the Western “Pygmy Paradigm” before launching into a discussion of methods and historical conclusions regarding the history of Bantu and Batwa.

Western Ideas about the Legendary Pygmy: Impact on Visions of the Batwa

It is important to note here that when I use the term “pygmy” I am using in reference to the legendary short-statured mythical peoples that begin to appear in Greek texts and artistic depictions (on pottery, etc) in the last centuries B.C.E. The term is derived from the Greek word for the measure of one cubit (*pygmæ*), the length between the elbow and wrist. The first reference to them appears in Homer’s *Iliad* (9th-8th centuries B.C.E.), where they are depicted as a miniature (cubit-sized) people living in far off lands who fight annual battles against migrating cranes. Later references are found in Greek traveler’s accounts, a genre of writing that mixed fantasy and fact, and which located the legendary pygmies in a variety of far-off lands (Persia, Africa, India). While the majority of these texts strove to presented these populations as extreme “others” in terms of bodily traits (two cubits tall, hair long enough to be used as bodily cover, penises down to their feet, flat-nosed, black-skinned), descriptions of their society were consistently positive, as they were commonly portrayed as possessing speech, laws, and a sense of justice – these being the mark of “civilization” for the Greeks.

Artistic depictions suggest that the legendary pygmies were sometimes envisioned as human dwarfs, that is, as beings exhibiting the traits associated with the medical conditions of *achondroplasia* and *hypochondroplasia* (shortened limbs, depressed nasal bridge, normal sized trunk, pronounced pelvic tilt, bowed legs, and in the case of achondroplasia alone, a large cranium).⁴ The similarities between these bodily traits and those of newborn infants might explain why Aristotle posed the “pygmy” as an intermediary stage between the ape and the human in his theory of human gestation. This theory posited that the embryo becomes a fetus through a series of successive stages: first a fungus like form, then that of an unshaped animal, then of an ape, a pygmy, and finally, a fully formed human. Aristotle’s model of human gestation is historically significant because it presents his vision of the *scala naturae* – essentially a nascent version of the “Great Chain of Being,” which was formalized four centuries later by Plotinius

⁴ Indeed, Herodotus (485-425 B.C.E.) stated that they resembled the Greek god Hephaestus, with bent and deformed legs.

and used by Medieval scholars as a metaphor for a perceived hierarchy in the nature, function, and organization of the Universe.

With the rise of Christianity the legendary pygmy came to be seen as one of the numerous and exotic “monstrous races” living in far off lands. While the bodily form of these mythical populations continued to make them extreme “others,” the term “monstrous” was originally derived from Latin term *monstra* “portent” and they were viewed - along with children born with deformities or dwarfism - as signs of Gods creative capacity and divine will. Likewise, the Great Chain of Being came to be conceptualized in religious terms, and the objects of creation were ranked according to their resemblance to God. All of creation was viewed as a series of linked stages, from God, to Angel, to Man, to Animal, to Plant, and to Dust. The legendary pygmies occupied the same place they had in Aristotle’s theory, that is, as an intermediary between human and apes, and it is in this period that they come to take on a more formal role as similarity-creating devices for debates about the nature and origins of humankind. This can be seen rhetorical public debates (or *quodlibeta*) carried out by Scholastics such as Albertus Magnus and Peter of Croc; in the case of the latter, the *quodlibeta* posed was “Whether Pygmies Be Men.”

With the opening of trade routes in the fourteenth century Europeans began to travel the world and the belief in “monstrous races” began to decline. The figure of the legendary pygmy was largely put to rest in the late seventeenth century, when the first live specimen of a Southeast Asian *orangatang* arrived in London. Upon viewing this creature the naturalist Edward Tyson quickly set about to dissect it, in order to determine its location on The Great Chain of Being. His conclusions were published in the 1699 monograph entitled *Orang-outang sive Homo Sylvestrus, or the Anatomy of a Pygmie compared with that of a Monkey, and Ape, and a Man; to which is added a Philological Essay Concerning the Pygmies, the Cynocephali, the Satyrs, and the Sphinges of the Ancients, wherein it will appear that they were all either Apes or Monkeys; and not Men, as formerly pretended*. Historians of science have touted Tyson’s monograph as a foundational step in the development of the biological sciences, for as Marks has noted, although the relationship of humans to the natural world was a philosophical question of long standing, Tyson’s work made it an empirical one as well.⁵ What goes unrecognized, however, is the fact that Tyson simply replaced the idea of the legendary pygmy with a more “scientized” one (the “missing link”), and the major premises informing the idea of the Pygmy remained in tact. These, in turn, became naturalized in the human and biological sciences and continued to guide evolutionary research for centuries on end.

While there are a great many more twists and turns to this story than I am able to present in this short space, the gist of it is that as Westerners, we have a long intellectual history, an “intellectual habit” as Arthur Lovejoy would say, of viewing “pygmies” (be they legendary or central African) as primordial examples of earliest humankind. This goes a long way towards explaining why Westerners have clung to primordialist and Social Darwinist models in relation to the Batwa. When Europeans first entered the rainforests of Central Africa in the late nineteenth century, they assumed that the Batwa they met were the “Pygmies” of the Ancients. As a result, they unloaded centuries of accumulated ideas about a *legendary* people onto a *living* people that they had absolutely no knowledge of. Furthermore, and as will be explained below, Bantu agriculturalists had independently developed their own primordialist paradigm regarding the Batwa, one rooted in ancient Niger-Congo beliefs about “first-comers” on the land. In subsequent years elements of the two paradigms began to fuse, making them difficult to disentangle and obscuring attempts to understand the reality of the Batwa past.⁶

⁵ J. Marks, *Human Biodiversity: Genes, Race, and History*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995)

⁶ Indeed, I argue that Westerners have had little interest in reconstructing Batwa history because the Batwa, like the legendary pygmies of the ancients, have played an essential role as an “extreme other,” a foil to Western societies, a similarity-creating device that allows us to compare and evaluate our own society’s “progress” away from the “natural” (i.e., “primordial”) state of humankind. This is the very project Colin Turnbull set out to do in his book

Methods for Reconstructing the Batwa Past

Now we must turn to the real task at hand, that is, an illustration of the types of historical data one can use to reconstruct Batwa history, and a presentation of the historical conclusions and hypotheses that help us to understand the nature of their interactions with neighboring agriculturalists in past. Because a full explanation and laying out of data would require an inordinate amount of space, I have provided a brief explanation in the chart below. It presents the type of data used, the broad periods such data covered, and the nature of historical information it was able to provide.

I. Archeological Data:

Covers periods from Late Stone Age to the Early Iron Age (c. 4000 B.C.E.-1500 C.E.)

Provides information regarding:

- The arrival/lifestyles of Bantu-speaking peoples in Central Africa
- The lifestyles and subsistence practices of the people already present in the rainforest (i.e., autochthons)
- Demographic increases/changed subsistence techniques after the introduction of bananas and iron
- Evidence of increased economic specialization and long-distance trade after introduction bananas and iron

II. Linguistic Data:

Genetic classification covers period of Bantu expansion (4000 B.C.E.) to present)

Cultural vocabularies re: peoples linguistically ancestral to modern-day Batwa, covers period from c. 1500 B.C.E. – 1900 C.E.

Allows for:

- Classifications of Central African language families
(can identify when/where Batwa dialects and langs were formed)
- Identification of Trade routes - names of items can be traced across land
(can identify which routes Batwa communities participated in)
- Loanwords referring to material objects, ideas, technologies
 - Can identify words/things Batwa borrowed from Bantu
 - Can identify words/things Bantu borrowed from Batwa
 - Can identify words/things unique to Batwa societies alone
- Phonologies – can identify patterns of pronunciation/speech
unique to Batwa, infer patterns of social relations w/Bantu

III. Bantu Oral Traditions/Bantu and Batwa Ethnography

(Genesis accounts, origin/founders myths, and rituals involving the Batwa)

All collected in the past 400 years; etiological in nature, but through comparative analysis:

- Can reconstruct how traditions/rituals change over time
(illustrates how Bantu ideas about Batwa change over time)
- Can hypothesize about Batwa roles in politico-religions institutions

“The Forest People,” arguably one of the most widely read books about not only the Batwa, but Africa itself. As Curtis Keim has pointed out, Westerners have long “used Africa to think with,” and in most cases we seek to know Africa “so that we can better know ourselves.” Nowhere has this tendency been more exaggerated than in regard to the central African Batwa.

Can identify main premises: Bantu “Ideology of the Primordial Batwa”

While my work was original in that it brought together these diverse sources of data for the first time, the archeological and oral/ethnographic work was not carried out by me. My fieldwork involved collecting linguistic data from fourteen different Batwa communities, as well as the thirty-two Bantu and Ubangian-speaking agriculturalist communities that they currently interact with. This data was then integrated into a broader genetic classification of Bantu languages, and employed in comparative analysis with the much larger corpus on Bantu languages (phonologies, dictionaries, etymologies) that has been developed over the past fifty years. It must be noted that for the periods before 1500 B.C.E. the data provides no direct link to modern-day Batwa societies, but rather, information on peoples that were autochthonous, i.e., present before the Bantu arrived. We have no way of knowing their physical characteristics (short? tall? similar to modern-day Batwa?). Indeed, my work seeks to move away from longstanding Western fascination with the biological ancestry and physical traits of the Batwa by focusing on the history of the social category of the “first-comer” – a status which the Batwa, throughout central Africa, are considered to hold. Furthermore, while there are linguistic data that solidly link ancient communities to modern-day Batwa, such data provides insight into the languages and vocabularies their ancestors used, and again, provides no evidence whatsoever as to their physical traits.

Historical Hypotheses Regarding the Batwa Past

Our story begins with the Bantu expansion into the northwestern regions of the Central African rainforest, a history that has not, until present, been treated in great detail.⁷ Based on an accumulation of new archeological data, and comparison with results from my own classification of Bantu languages, I argue that Bantu settlement began to take place between 5000-4000 B.C.E., a period one to two thousand years earlier than has been previously proposed.⁸ Archeological evidence makes clear that the Bantu moved into a region already inhabited by peoples using Late Stone Age technologies, and that they had developed short-distance trade routes carrying shellfish and materials used to produce stone tools. Although the Bantu brought with them pottery, a new type of stone tool (polished stone tools) and a knowledge of cultivation, their presence did not inaugurate an “agricultural revolution” that overwhelmed local populations. Indeed, the archeological evidence suggests that for many centuries - periods ranging from 600 to 1600 years at various locations in the rainforest - Bantu societies lived lifestyles very similar to their autochthonous neighbors: they subsisted largely on hunting and gathering techniques, their settlements were temporary, and at each location, their numbers quite small. It is also clear that pottery and polished stone tools entered into local trade routes, for they are found in numerous and wide-ranging archeological sites that attested the presence of Late Stone Age societies before the Bantu arrive, and the integration of these new objects as the centuries advance on.

Archeological evidence provides information as to the material objects and economic interactions between immigrants and autochthons, but a question remains as to what the nature of their social relations might have been. To propose hypotheses in answer to this question I have built upon the work of Igor Kopytoff, who after analyzing the dynamics between “first-comers” and “late-comers” in a wide variety of social/historical contexts (i.e., across the broader Niger-Congo speaking world), proposed a model of interactions he termed the “frontier process.”⁹ Comparing what he viewed as political processes from a variety of societies in differing periods of time, Kopytoff identified common patterns regarding the manner in which “late-comers” dealt with the “first-comers” they met. On a political level these

⁷ Vansina covered this region in only a cursory manner in his seminal *Paths in the Rainforests: Towards a Political History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

⁸ Vansina proposes dates of 3000-2000 B.C.E. in *Paths in the Rainforest*.

⁹ I. Kopytoff, “The African Frontier: the Making of African Political Culture,” p. 3-84 in I. Kopytoff, *The African Frontier: The Reproduction of Traditional African Societies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987)

similarities derive from the widespread notion that only autochthons or “first-comers” can be accorded the status of “owner of the land.” This remains the case even when immigrants or “late-comers” have established political and economic hegemony, for the land is never considered to be truly their own. On a more religious level (which my work focuses on), I argue that “first-comers” retain their status primarily because of an ancient Niger-Congo belief – which the Bantu brought with them as they migrated into the rainforest – that a land belongs to those whose ancestors were originally buried in the land. More importantly, it is those ancestors - the spirits of “first-comers” -who ensure the fertility and fecundity of both peoples and land; thus, these spirits (i.e., territorial spirits) must be revered and appeased by any “late-comers” who seek flourish in new lands.

Based on the patterns of interaction Kopytoff identified for the earliest stages of interaction between immigrants and autochthons in more modern times, I have proposed that Bantu immigrants were likely to have initiated contacts and even sought to integrate numbers of autochthons into their own societies during the earliest stages of expansion in the rainforest. This would have been initiated by Bantu lineage heads (i.e., chiefs) and seen as an act of self-survival, since it was the “first-comers” who had not only knowledge of the geography/resources of the new lands, but who would also know how best to appease the territorial/fertility (i.e., ancestral) spirits that guaranteed success in the new lands. Accordingly, I have argued that it was during those earliest periods of interaction, when the archeological record attests that immigrant Bantu societies lived lifestyles much like their autochthonous neighbors, that relations between “first-comers” and “late-comers” were most intimate. Village chiefs are likely to have sought to learn both the “lay of the land” and the rituals that could appease local territorial/fertility spirits, and Batwa individuals and/or clans were likely to have been integrated into Bantu villages through the widespread technique of establishing marriage ties. In this manner, and through many instances and over long periods of time, languages, genetics, and technologies came to be shared.

It is also likely that during this earliest era, when Bantu lineage heads sought to ensure and legitimize their rule in new lands, that a conceptualization of politico-religious power unique to the Bantu world began to appear. I refer to this as “the tripartite concatenation of power,” for it posits that supernatural or transformative powers pass from the other world (and/or the Supreme Being), to Batwa “first-comers” and then, through the approval or cooperation of the latter, on to Bantu lineage heads. This conceptualization of power remained central to myth-making, religions ritual, and institution-building within central Africa for centuries on end (in centralized and non-centralized societies alike). Although the figure of the Batwa would eventually be rendered mythical and/or primordial, its presence in the linkage of power confirms the role that early “first-comer” societies played in the formation of Bantu culture itself.

The next period of major historical change was engendered by the introduction of bananas and iron. Broadly speaking, these can be said to have entered into and spread throughout the rainforest between 1500 and 500 B.C.E., with iron-working preceding banana cultivation by 500 to 1000 years. The archeological record attests dramatic changes during this period: iron production engendered not only new kinds of trade, but allowed Bantu agriculturalists to move deeper into the forest (by clearing land) and improved agricultural efficiency (through the use of iron hoes). These improvements were amplified by the cultivation of bananas, which could be planted nearly everywhere in the rainforest and required little manual labor in return for large outputs of starch. As a result, we see the florescence of village life during this period, with dramatic demographic increases, much more sedentary lifestyles, and a growing dependence on agricultural rather than hunted and gathered foods. Likewise, long-distance trade began to emerge, centers of economic production developed (involving iron, pottery, shellfish, etc.), and accordingly, economic specializations began to appear.

It is precisely during this period that we begin to see the linguistic ancestors of modern-day Batwa communities beginning to form their own dialects and languages. It is important to note that these

are developed through physical and social *separation* from the Bantu agriculturalists they formerly shared languages with. As was the case among agriculturalist societies at this time, I argue that the Batwa developed their own economic specialization or niche, that of the “forest-specialist” or expert procurer of forest products for trade in expanding economic spheres. This specialization is likely to have built upon the role that they played as members of more sedentary “mixed” societies in earlier times, but I argue that the Batwa of this time began to adapt a much more mobile and forest-oriented lifestyle. Linguistic data collected among the Batwa of the northern Congo Panhandle attest this change, such as the development a specialized tool for extracting wild yams, a new term for a settlement within the forest, and the development of a number of new words in reference to the round semi-permanent dwellings made out of leaves that are exclusively associated with Batwa communities today. As the social and economic spheres of Bantu influence expanded, those communities that had continued to carry out a true hunting and gathering lifestyle were likely to have been assimilated into either agriculturalist or forest-specialist societies. This historical scenario helps to solve a number of the enigmas of the Batwa past, such as why no Batwa society has ever been observed using stone tools, subsisting exclusively on forest products, or speaking indigenous languages unique to them alone. I argue that such is the case because modern-day Batwa communities are not the descendents of Late Stone Age hunter-gatherers, but rather, the descendents of forest-specialists, peoples that had undergone long periods of intimate interactions with Bantu agriculturalist before striking out on their own.

A question remains as to whether these ancestral Batwa were forced out of Bantu societies during this period of economic expansion or if they developed their specialization as forest-specialists of their own free will. While it is impossible to answer this question at present, an analysis of Bantu oral traditions and rituals were developed at this time provides insight into the way Bantu societies dealt with the Batwa after these transformations took place. An understanding of this phenomena hinges on Vansina’s history of cultural innovation and institution-building that accompanied the rise of a new kind of political ruler during this time, the *nkani*.¹⁰ This term developed first in those southern regions where kingdoms would later be formed (i.e., Loango, Kongo, Tio) and derives from the verb *-kan-* to judge, suggesting a new more important role in arbitration for Bantu chiefs. The *nkani* presided over larger tracts of land (i.e. multiple “districts” as Vansina has termed them), and was also referred to as the “master” or “owner of the land.” This new role can be understood in both political and religious ways; although it refers to a chiefs domination over a geographical expanse, it is also rooted in the belief that chiefs had extraordinary supernatural powers over the land. As Vansina has indicated the chiefs of these regions were considered to be a special kind of “wizard” who held knowledge of or pacts with the spirits of the land.

Vansina describes a whole host of new institutions, i.e., a “new political charter,” that accompanied the rise of the *nkani*. Among these were titled heads within the chiefs “House,” new courts of justice, new systems of tribute, and the creation of emblems and objects associated exclusively with chiefly rule. All of these elements did not appear at once, but rather, as Vansina states, were perfected and spread through “a competitive dialogue between districts over a large area.’ In this way the rise of *nkani* chieftancy “acted as a catalyst which transformed the basic institutions over a vast area.”¹¹ Building upon this logic, I have argued that one of the most important institutions to be transformed was the model of “first-comer” and late-comer relations.” This is because the creation of the *nkani* was essentially a usurpation of the “first-comer” role, and in the new political system, it was the *nkani*, rather than autochthonous Batwa, who served as expert intercessor to the spirits of the land. To deal with this reality, new genesis accounts, origin myths, and political rituals were created regarding they Batwa. These were effective because while they honored the ancestors of the Batwa – posing them as guides, teachers, the

¹⁰ For a full explanation of Vansina’s historical hypotheses regarding the rise of territorial chiefs or *nkani*, see p. 147-148 of *Paths in the Rainforest*.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

original “civilizers” or heroes, and even ancestors to *nkani* chiefs, they simultaneously relegated contemporary Bawta societies to largely symbolic roles in the expanding political and economic systems. Like the other elements of the new political charter that Vansina described, these myths and ritual served to legitimize the *nkani*’s power, and were likely to have been created through the same “competitive dialogue across large areas of land.” This is the only way to explain the amazing similarities in myths about the Batwa that are found across the expanse of Central Africa, and even into the southern and southeastern regions as well.

Although the space allotted here does not allow for a detailed account of Bantu and Batwa relations during the rise of centralized polities and into the Atlantic Age, the hypotheses presented do provide a new lens through which to interpret extant historical data regarding the Batwa. For example, linguistic data indicate that a second phase of Batwa separation from Bantu societies they shared languages with along the Middle Ogooue c. 1000 C.E. One of the new languages formed was proto-Irimba, spoken by the ancestors of the modern-day Barimba communities of Gabon. These are clearly the same communities the English traveler Battell mentioned in his travel account of 1608-1610, for he describes the “Matimba” (*sic* Barimba) as “a kind of little people...no bigger than boys of twelve”... but “very thick”...who “paid tribute” to a local ruler in elephant teeth and tails.¹² He further noted that “They will not suffer any to come where they dwell; and if by chance any Marombo or people of Loango pass where they dwell, they will forsake that place and go to another.”¹³ Although this description has traditionally been read as evidence of the timidity and/or subjugation of Batwa peoples, it can just as easily be seen as evidence of a fiercely independent people striving to maintain their role in an age of increasing economic competition and violence. Other types of linguistic evidence from Batwa communities of central Gabon - such as data to attest their participation in multiple trade routes at the same time and the retention of their own unique dialects⁰ suggest that they continued to serve as independent forest-specialists (rather than dependent clients) well into the Atlantic Age.

Understanding the importance of “first-comers” in Central Africa, as well as the origins of Bantu myths about the “primordial” or “heroic” Batwa, also helps us to re-interpret a great deal of the ethnographic data collected in Central Africa over the past 400 years. By the time of European contacts, it appears that most Bantu societies had developed their own vision of the Primordial Batwa. In non-centralized societies mythical dwarf-like Batwa figures were often posed as first-comers on earth, a tactic which inserted the ancestral Batwa figure into the human lineage itself and thereby legitimized Bantu “ownership” of the land. In centralized kingdoms Batwa figures were posed as direct ancestors to key religious figures (such as the *Mani Vunda* in Kongo) or as helpers and healers to the earliest kings, thereby legitimizing kingly rule. In those regions where actual Batwa communities no longer existed, human dwarfs were often assigned the role of expert intercessors to the spirits of the land; in Kongo, for example, they were considered to be the embodiment of territorial/fertility spirits and sacred objects themselves. We also see in many central African societies an interesting similarity with the Western Idea of the Pygmy, whereby the central African primordial dwarfs are associated with both creation and the state of infancy. While the similarities between the bodily forms of dwarfs and infants are likely at play in both the Western and the Bantu examples, central Africans are likely to have associated infants with primordial Batwa/human dwarfs because infants are considered to be especially spiritually-charged, having only just arrived from the “otherworld.” In recent works I have argued that Bantu ideas about primordial

¹² E.G. Ravenstein, *The Strange Adventures of Andrew Battell of Leigh, in Angola, and the Adjoining Regions* (Liechtenstein: Hakluyt Society, 1901), 59.

¹³ *Ibid.*

dwarfs and/or the mythical batwa are represented in the dwarf- and infant-like bodily forms of the central African reliquary figures, such as the *bieri* sculptures of the Fang and *bwiti* figurines of the Tsogho.¹⁴

It is hoped that this not-so-brief overview of historical hypotheses and conclusions generated by the use of a multidisciplinary approach will encourage readers to re-conceptualize the standard narrative of the Batwa or “Pygmy” past. At this point in time is essential that we began to divest ourselves of nineteenth century notions about race, progress, and evolution and acknowledge that all peoples in all regions of the globe have a history, regardless of how difficult or complex it might be to reconstruct.

¹⁴ K. Klieman, “Of Ancestors and Earth Spirits: New Approaches for Interpreting Equatorial African Politics, Religion, and Art,” in A. LaGamma, *Eternal Ancestors: Central African Reliquary Art*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007).