Chapter 3: Early Africa and Egypt: 3-2 Africa's Neolithic Revolution
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Printed By: Colin Morris-Moncada (006279659@coyote.csusb.edu)

3-2 Africa's Neolithic Revolution

Paleoclimatologists have determined that, between 11,000 and 3000 B.C.E., Africa entered a period of much higher rainfall levels than today; consequently, grassy steppe lands, woodlands, and abundant lakes and rivers covered what then was a "wet" Sahara. As far as human populations went, evidence from historical linguistics, archaeology, and rock paintings reveal that four separate groups of ancient Africans introduced somewhat different ways of producing food in the Sahara between 9000 and 5500 B.C.E. We do not know what they called themselves, but linguists have identified them by the languages they spoke. (see The Historian's Craft).

The Historian's Craft

Learning About History from Language

Most of what we know about history comes from language, particularly language that has survived in written form. But can the *spoken* word provide clues to the past? Oral tradition—the stories people tell about the past—is an obvious example. But where even oral traditions do not survive, the science of *linguistics* comes to the aid of the historian. **Historical linguists** (Scholars who reconstruct the relative chronology, as well as the changes in grammar, sounds, and methods of expressing ideas, in languages and families of languages.) have techniques that enable scholars to formulate at least general ideas about how past societies developed and moved about, how they lived, the peoples with whom they came into contact, and the ideas they borrowed from strangers.

To understand this, let us take the East African Swahili language as an example. Swahili is one of about eight hundred Bantu languages spoken in subequatorial Africa; that is, its grammatical structure and much of its vocabulary are closely related to other Bantu languages such as Zulu, Shona, and Luganda. The reason is because most Swahili men and women are descended from the Niger-Congo- and Proto-Bantu-speaking peoples of West Africa who were their ancestors more than 3000 years ago. (Recall that it was these peoples who migrated and settled most of subequatorial Africa by about 1 C.E. See the green migratory lines on Map 3.1.)

Moreover, because Swahili is spoken along the shorelines of the Indian Ocean, it includes a lot of vocabulary borrowed from the languages of other African and non-African peoples with whom the coastal Swahili speakers interacted over the centuries. Some of these so-called loan words come from Nilo-Saharan languages such as Lugbara and Kalenjin and Afro-Asiatic languages such as Oromo and

Somali. These are among some of the earliest word borrowings in Bantu, most of which entered their vocabularies when the ancestral Bantu-speakers first came into contact with Nilo-Saharan- and Afro-Asiatic-speaking people in the region of northeastern Congo. From them the ancestral Bantu and Swahili learned to breed cattle and to cultivate cereal crops such as millet and sorghum; consequently, Nilo-Saharan and Afro-Asiatic loan words related to these activities still survive in Swahili.

Loan words also entered Swahili from other Bantu languages such as Mijikenda, Yao, and Nyamwezi. The Mijikenda are some of the Swahili-speaking peoples' closest relatives, so they share a large number of basic vocabulary words (for example, words for numbers and body parts) that go back thousands of years. Central African Bantu-speakers such as the Yao, the Kamba, and the Nyamwezi came into contact with the Swahili much later, in the 19th century, when they began trading with coastal peoples from deep in East Africa's interior (for more, see Chapter 36).

Some of the earliest external trade contacts the Swahili had were with Persian and Arabic speakers. This began as early as the first centuries C.E., so there are a few Persian and Arabic terms related to the names of ship parts and maritime activities that entered the Swahili language at an early date, possibly as early as the first century. Swahili speakers also adopted many European words during the colonial era in the 19th century (words such as *skuli* and *motokaa*).

From this overview we get a glimpse of how linguists can use people's language—especially their *spoken* language—to provide information about their past. Naturally, such information is incomplete, and other sources need to be used carefully to supplement linguistic study to improve its precision and reliability.

Analyze and Interpret

In addition to the influences on the African Swahili languages, what different peoples have had an influence on the dialect of English spoken in your state or community? What do you know about history that explains these language effects?

The first of these groups, called the **Khoisan** ((koy-SAHN) One of the four language families of Africa. At one time Khoisan speakers were found throughout much of subequatorial Africa, but they now are confined to the deserts of southwestern Africa.) (koy-SAHN), appear originally to have inhabited the part of East Africa that includes Tanzania and parts of Kenya (see Map 3.1). Most Khoisan speakers remained hunters and foragers throughout

their history and adopted a unique technology for fashioning microlithic stone tools for a wide variety of applications, which included sewing, digging, cutting, and hafting in missile heads. They then learned to sculpt pots and bowls of stone and made net bags. In later centuries they were displaced by Neolithic food producers, forcing them to migrate into the drier regions of southern Africa, where until recently pockets of them survived as hunter-gatherers and cattle herders.

Two other groups, called the **Nilo-Saharan speakers** (People who speak one of the languages that are members of the Nilo-Saharan language family.) and the **Afro-Asiatic speakers** (People who speak a language that is a member of the Afro-Asiatic language family.) , originally inhabited regions near the Nile River valley, far south of what later became Egypt. Before the wet phase they had survived as typical hunters and gatherers, but the wet phase brought with it an abundance of wild fauna and seed grasses, which enabled them to spread westward and southward from the Nile Valley; eventually, they occupied most of the Sahara. (Around 10,000 to 11,000 B.C.E. many of them crossed the Sinai Peninsula and became known as the Semites—the people who spoke Akkadian, Arabic, Aramaic, and Hebrew.) In the ninth millennium they domesticated cattle. Within about a thousand years they began using stone pottery and cultivating indigenous seed crops such as sorghum, pearl millet, and fonio. By 5500 B.C.E. they had added watermelons, gourds, calabashes, and cotton to their crop inventories. Those who lived along the banks of rivers and lakes largely abandoned hunting in favor of settling in permanent communities of fishers and farmers.

Niger-Congo speakers (People who speak one of the member languages of the Niger-Congo language family.) , the fourth group, inhabited the southern Sahara woodlands of West Africa during the wet phase. There, around the sixth millennium B.C.E., they converted to farming native varieties of yams and rice; soon they supplemented these staples with guinea fowl and oil palm, which they used to make palm wine. In addition, they cultivated the raffia palm because they could weave its bark into an exceptionally fine textile. In later centuries these Niger-Congoans added black-eyed peas, okra, groundnuts, and kola (used in a beverage) to their crops.

The period after 5500 B.C.E. saw a slow reversal of the climatic trends of the previous 3500 years, and by the late Pre-Common Era the Sahara had reverted to desert. This set off a steady drift of peoples southward and northward. Some descendants of the Afro-Asians, the Berbers, altered their lifestyle to farming the desert fringes or to desert nomadism. Other Afro-Asians and Nilo-Saharans continued to farm and fish along the riverbanks and shores of surviving lakes. Still others wandered southward into the highlands of Ethiopia or along East Africa's two rift valleys, settling into a way of life that emphasized cattle pastoralism supplemented by the continued farming of cereals such as teff (Ethiopia) and finger millet.