



Standing Committee for the Humanities

OMLL: The Origin of Man, Language and Languages

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Language, culture, and genes in Bantu: a multidisciplinary approach of the Bantu-speaking populations of Africa (CRP 01-JA27)

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Abstract:

This interdisciplinary project on Bantu languages, cultures and genes consists of one main project submitted by the French research laboratory « Dynamique du Langage » and two joint projects submitted respectively by research teams from Germany and Spain. Its goal is to elaborate a solidly based multidisciplinary theory of the origin and expansion of Bantu and the Bantu-speaking populations.

The Bantu languages (Niger-Congo phylum) are among the best-studied languages of the world, just after the Indo-European languages. Several solid historical inferences have been made about the origin and gradual geographical expansion of this group, as well as its contacts with non Bantu speakers (Pygmies, Nilotes and Kushites) in the course of time.

For three geographically strategic zones (i.e. the Gabon area, the Kenya-Tanzania area and the Angola-Namibia area), existing solid linguistically based phylogenetic classifications will be compared with biologically based classifications, which are in the process of being constructed. Very well-defined linguistically based diachronic inferences have been submitted to population geneticists willing to collaborate with our team of linguists, for close examination. The combination of linguistics and population genetics may reveal either similarities or differences (or both) between the two disciplinary approaches. Both cases will be equally interesting. The results will subsequently be compared with those obtained in other fields of research such as cultural anthropology, archaeology and history.

Extensive fieldwork in Gabon, conducted in close collaboration with local anthropologists (LUTO) and biologists (CIRMF), observing very rigorous criteria for sampling, has allowed to collect nearly 1 000 blood samples for the analysis of a range of well-chosen MtDNA markers (team directed by Lluís Quintana-Murci) and Y-chromosome markers (team directed by Jaume Bertranpetit). These samples will give access to genetic data from more than 20 out of the 50 Gabonese populations.