

BANTUFIRST PROJECT – UGENT CENTRE FOR BANTU STUDIES

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AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE WEST-COASTAL BANTU HOMELAND

The Bantu Expansion

It has long been held that the Bantu language family developed from its proto-Bantu ancestor ~5,000 years ago in the Grassfields of modern-day Cameroon and adjacent regions of Nigeria.¹ From there, between 4,000 and 5,000 years ago, Bantu-speaking populations began a southern and eastern expansion across the majority of sub-Saharan Africa below 4°N.²

Thanks to large-scale genetic studies we know that the expansion of Bantu languages was primarily driven by the migration of Bantu-speaking newcomers of West African origin into new regions and only secondarily a matter of them being adopted by existing populations. This demic diffusion should thus be archaeologically visible.^{3,4} Indeed, the southern spread of Bantu languages has been linked, amongst other things, to the first appearance of pottery and more sedentary lifeways in Central Africa.⁵

Linguistic research suggests that ancestral West-Coastal Bantu (WCB) branched off ~2500 years ago in a homeland in the Kasai-Kamtsha region of the Democratic Republic of Congo – its speakers thus becoming the first Bantu speech communities south of the Central African rainforest.⁶ This spread southward is assumed to have coincided with a climate-driven contraction of the rainforest and an expansion of savannas. Environmental change may have been a significant driver in the overall Bantu expansion.⁷

The First Systematic Research

The BantuFirst research project is a cross-disciplinary project funded by the European Research Council (ERC Consolidator's Grant no. 724275) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program. Since 2019, the BantuFirst team has identified 140 new archaeological sites, ranging in time from the Middle Stone Age (~300,000 years ago) through the Iron Age (~2,000 years ago). 31 of these have been excavated; providing a rich reservoir of archaeological and palaeobotanical data.

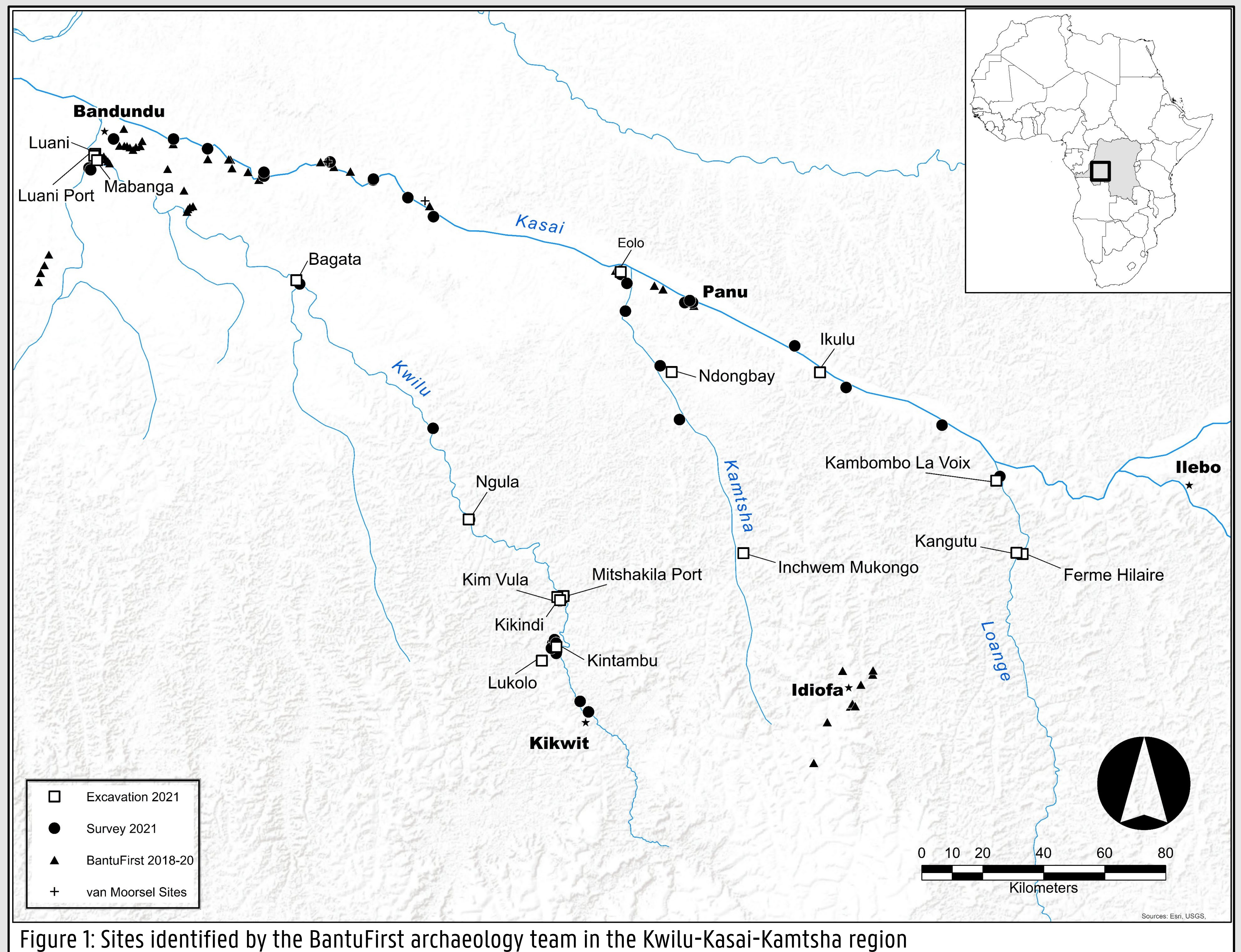


Figure 1: Sites identified by the BantuFirst archaeology team in the Kwilu-Kasai-Kamtsha region

The BantuFirst Archaeology mission 2021

During September and October 2021, the BantuFirst archaeology field team, made up of Peter Coutros (UGent), Igor Matonda Sakala (UNIKIN), Arnold Mabuaka (IMNC), and Isidore Nkanu, conducted approximately 800 km of river survey (Fig. 1). This mission, which targeted the Kwilu, Kasai, Kamtsha, and Loange Rivers, identified 64 new sites and excavated 17 (34 individual units). The team mainly targeted villages, fluvial ports, agricultural fields, and exposed profiles due to the open vegetation and surface visibility. For each site identified, preferential surface collection was conducted, focusing on diagnostic sherds (rim, base, and decorated) and lithics. When excavations were warranted at a given site – based on the amount and nature of surface and/or profile material – units were typically measured at 1x2 m and excavated to a minimum depth of 1 m.



Figure 2: a) excavation U3 at Eolo; b) complete vessel from Eolo U2; c) Lithics from Mitshakila U1.

Reconstructing the Past

Large amounts of pottery, stone tools, soil samples and the remnants of iron production were collected during both survey and excavations. The ongoing analysis will allow for a reconstruction of the social and environmental changes that occurred over the past 5 thousand years.

The Archaeological Data

During excavations, both cultural and environmental proxies were collected, including all artifacts (Fig. 2 b-c) and soil samples for isotopic analysis, charcoal identification, and flora community analysis through macro-botanical and phytolith identification (fig 3). This provides a comprehensive, and radiometrically anchored chronology of change at each excavated site. Conversely, materials collected during the large-scale survey provide a spatial map of settlements and ceramic 'type' distributions.

It is through the integration of these complimentary datasets – from survey and excavation – that it is possible to trace changes in the social and environmental landscape over space and time. Dramatic changes in technology, subsistence, or residential mobility (i.e. pottery, larger settlement, and agriculture) may feasibly be associated with the influx of WCB-speaking populations into the region. Likewise, the timing of environmental changes, when compared to social changes, may indicate a cause for or result of the WCB expansion.



Figure 3: Some examples of seeds and fruits recovered during excavations.

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