

The etymology of *mbunzú* for ‘White-man’ in Sango: Central African history

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The word **mbunzú** (occurring in literature also as **mbunju**) for a white person in Sango might have an origin in Ngbandi, the indigenous language that provided most of its linguistic material, or a Bobangi one.

A Ngbandi origin would appear to be the better one because it is indigenous and is found in a trustworthy dictionary. It occurs as *mbunzú* in Lekens 1958 with one meaning: ‘white,’ as a noun. The gloss is followed by a note, according to which the word referred to (“werd gegeven aan”) the chief (“hoofdman”) elephant, whose hide was red (“rood”). When blacks for the first time saw white persons, they compared them with the elephant (“in verwantschap met”). This seems to be a folk etymology. We note that the word is not entered as one meaning something like ‘red elephant’ or ‘the leader of a herd of elephants.’ And while the hides of elephants must always vary in color, we cannot attest to the leaders (always female, it is said) being red-skinned. In his dictionary of 1952 the word is considered a noun referring only to whites and there are four adjectives for ‘white’ as well as an ideophone. Like other words in the language, this one must have been copied from Sango. A strong argument for its origin in Sango is that (a) the first Ngbandis to have encountered whites were the riverine ones in 1887, not the ones among whom Fr Lekens was working and (b) the first language used by Catholic missionaries among them was Sango.

The hypothesis proposed here is that **mbunzu** the Sango word for a white (man or woman) is related to the *Bondjo*, an ethnic group alleged to have inhabited the region somewhere around Bangui and further south in the 1890s. They had the worst possible reputation—savages, cannibals, thieves—among whites from the very beginning of the occupation of the Upper Ubangi River Basin (Samarin 1984, 1992). It occurs in various forms in different maps of the period, as *Bonjo* in Thonner 1910, where it is located just north of the village of Imesse. It appears first as *Mboundgou* on the left bank in SRBG 1885 and then as *Mbonjo* on the right bank in a preliminary map of the intrepid missionary explorer George Grenfell, who discovered at the rapids at Bangui that the Ubangi was no longer flowing from the north but from the west. This was on a trip from October 13, 1884 to March 9, 1885 (Samarin 1992). In the form *Mon Benzo* (possibly an attempt to reproduce *mo-*, a Bantu nominal prefix, and *mbenzo*) also on the right bank, it occurs in a map (RGS 1886) listing villages Alphonse Van Gele found, exploring on the heels of Georges Grenfell after his return, along the river all the way to Zongo, right across where Bangui came to be established. (The first word of this name varies in other names between *mon* and *mou*, probably because the cartographer was working from a hand-written document. He must have been using the *mo* prefix of Bantu, not knowing what its function was.) This map was originally published as an ‘Extrait du Supplément au *Mouvement géographique* of 8 May 1887 and reappears in Cuypers 1960.

Because of the consistent location of the site or people, we know that this is the region that is alleged to be the homeland of the Bobangi, incorrectly considered an ethnic group according to Harms 1981. (For more about them see Samarin 1989.) Being the

dominant traders on the Congo River, some of whose slaves ended up at the western coast for sale, they would have had a terrible reputation. The inhabitants just south of Bangui, now known as Ngbaka-Ma'bo and Monzombo, built fortified villages along the river's banks, described in memoirs by whites. When they came up the Ubangi they brought Bobangi with them, already familiar with the territory. (Van Gele brought two on his expedition in 1888.) Screaming something like *Mbunju! Mbunju!* the locals—at least the women and children—would flee. Very easily, then, the name came to be applied to the frightful whites. In the 1950s I couldn't stop at a village without children running away, screaming with horror, their mothers smiling with amusement for having aroused this reaction to the arrival, frequently for the first time in their lives, of a white man.

Another etymology for the word may have been passed around in the Central African Republic by Jules Rémy, one of the Spiritain missionaries, in a book about Mgr. Prosper Augouard. He suggested that **mbunzu** was based on *bonjour* (Banville 1985). While not convincing on linguistic grounds, it fails completely on sociolinguistic ones. One can't imagine whites greeting everyone on the banks of the Ubangi River as one does in 'civilized' society. *Balao* (**bara o**) 'Greetings' must have been used in the 1890s. It was given as a personal name to at least one African employee, probably of Ngbandi ethnicity, in the 1890s.

Whereas the existence of *mbunzú* for 'albino' in contemporary Lingala might suggest another etymology, Sango would have adopted its word for a European, *mondele*. After all, it was being used in the Bangala lingua franca, the predecessor of what came to be called Lingala, in 1901 if not earlier (Samarin 1975). If this argument does not satisfy, one would have to date the earliest occurrences of something like *mbounzou* in documents from the 19th and early 20th century, information, alas, that has not been discovered.

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