

SOME ASPECTS OF BARI HISTORY

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*A Comparative Linguistic and
Oral Tradition Reconstruction*

Bureng G.V. Nyombe



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Foreword

Some Aspects of Bari History: A Comparative Linguistic and Oral History Reconstruction is about a history of a people known as the Bari. The Bari people are found in the Sudan but other related Bari groupings are found across the boarder in Uganda and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). The book attempts to determine the ancestry and reconstruct the history of this people using oral history and linguistic techniques.

The urge to want to know the past is not unique to the Bari. It has been an obsession of humankind since people began to live in settled groups. As Huntington (1997:21) puts it,

“The most important distinctions among peoples are not ideological, political, or economic. They are cultural”. Peoples and nations are attempting to answer the most basic question humans can face: Who are we? And they are answering that question in the traditional way human beings have answered it, by reference to the things that mean most for them. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religious communities, nations, and, at the broadest level, civilizations”.

Basing his studies on recorded oral traditions as passed down from one generation to the next and with the help of historical comparative techniques, the author attempts to define who the Bari are, trace their ancestry and their migratory routes using oral tradition, language, religion, values, customs and institutions. As the author shows, Bari is a member of a larger language family known as Nilotic spoken in six African countries, namely: the Sudan, Ethiopia, Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania and the eastern part of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC).

The Bari society is a preliterate community. Like the rest of the peoples of Africa, the history of the Bari lacks written historical tradition for all but the most recent centuries. All that exists is oral history and oral tradition. The author demonstrates that by employing linguistic and oral history methods, it is possible to write the history of a people without a written history. In that connection, in order to reconstruct the past history of the Bari, the author used comparative linguistic techniques to help corroborate the stories passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. The result has been impressive. Although a lot remains to be done, the author has helped the Bari to be aware of their history, with the help of this book.

Another merit of the study is that it is not only useful to the Bari but to the communities genetically related to the Bari as well. While talking about the Bari, the book has also shown that it is impossible to write a history of a people without having to refer to other neighbouring groups. For example, the last area the Bari left on their last push to the Nile Valley is a place called Lotuke, an area north east of lake Rudolf (present day Lake Turkana). Interestingly, the Toposa, Lango, Turkana, Lotuko and Maasai also claim this place to be their original homeland from where they dispersed to other areas.

The book also provides much needed explanation for what was a very confusing situation to me and I believe to others as well—the distinction between a Nilotic and a Nilo-Hamite. For a long time, I was made to understand that only the Dinka, Nuer, Shilluk, Dholuo, Acholi and the Anuak constituted the Nilotic language proper. Now the book shows that not only Bari but also even Lotuk and the Toposa are Nilotes! The question whether or not the so-called Nilo-Hamites were indeed also Nilotes or some other group was not clear. Indeed, are Nilotes also Hamites, or are Hamites Nilotes? The book tries to provide some answers to these difficult questions and much more. For example, the author points out that until recently, the Bari were thought to belong ethnically and culturally to a group of people known as Nilo-Hamites, a hybrid race made of half Nilotes and half Hamites. Oddly enough, the Nilotic group was itself regarded as a race of mixed affiliation. A mixture of what

racess was not clear, but probably a mixture of Semites, Hamites, Caucasians, Cushites, or Negroes.

What the author has done for Bari is commendable. One would wish that the same work were done on the other Nilotic languages in order to have a wider scope, and a comprehensive Nilotic history. It is only through doing in-depth study of the history of specific communities that one can hope to piece together what the history of these people was before dispersal. Such a study would provide the missing links in the whole jigsaw of unwritten past Nilotic history. However, until more research is conducted into the folktales, oral history, cultures and traditions of individuals to verify the veracity of these claims, they will remain just as myths.

An interesting claim made in the book is that the Bari, and by extension the other Nilotic peoples, migrated to their present site from a place further than the present day Khartoum in the Sudan; that the migration was largely from the North to the South. It is only by assuming a movement of the Nilotic peoples from the North to the South that can one account for the otherwise unexplainable linguistic, cultural and racial resemblances between these peoples. It would enable one to explain, for example, why Nubians in the far North, Bari in middle Sudan and the Maasai to the far south have remarkable racial, cultural and linguistic congruencies.

The ploy to dodge answering this question assumed two forms. One strategy was to claim that Nubian, Bari and Maasai (the so called Nilo-Hamites) borrowed heavily from a second language called 'Hemitic' which somehow then vanished without trace. The other position was to assume that these languages were, actually, originally Hamitic but then got so greatly influenced by Nilotics that they lost their unique Hamitic characteristics. Assuming any of these two positions does not require one to posit a theory of migration. To set the homeland of the Nilotic peoples further than the Bahr el Ghazal region and posit the possibility of movement of the Nilotic peoples, especially in North-South direction, is anathema to many Africanists.

The book is a huge contribution to the understanding of the history and culture of the Bari people. It shows that the Bari had a very rich

past; that they also had a very tragic past. The larger portion of the nineteenth-century was a period of monumental tragedy for the Bari people. There are very few communities that suffered more than the Bari in the process of colonization of the Sudan. Not only did the Bari lose most of its population and huge cattle wealth to the invaders, but also it was nearly wiped out.

I am sure both scholars and students of Bari culture and history will find the book extremely useful in their work. But for the first two technical chapters, the book makes very easy and interesting reading. The chaos that the Bari people went through during the one and half centuries of their history reminds one of the political and military corundum in the present day Western Upper Nile. I commend the book to you.

General Salva Kiir Mayar Dit

*The President of the Government of Southern Sudan and
The First Vice President of the Republic of the Sudan*

Khartoum, March 2007.

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My thanks also go to my colleagues and friends at the University of Nairobi, especially Godfrey Muriuki, Prof. Mohamed Abdulaziz and Kithaka Wa Mberia. Mberia for challenging me to write down something about the history of the Bari people rather than spend time doing esoteric syntax, which would not be accessible except to the most educated Bari; Godfrey Muriuki, who having read the first draft of the manuscript, literally ensured that I completed it. I thank him for the many tireless hours he took poring over the draft offering much valuable advice and making corrections. My gratitude also goes to the University of Nairobi Press for agreeing to be my publishers.

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A work of this sort must always be triggered by a motivating force. This has been the curiosity of the enquiring minds of my little girls, Rosalyn, Cathy and Vicky, who having been born in exile, wanted to know who the Bari were. They would often ask their mother and I, “if the Bari were only found in the Sudan or whether there were other Bari people elsewhere”. It is in an attempt to answer that question that I began to do some research on the question. The result is this book.

Introduction

What makes humans different from other species is their thirst to know their past. This past is important for their individual or collective self-esteem and is crucial in setting their present and future goals. The knowledge gained in the past by older generations is passed down to subsequent generations by word of mouth in preliterate societies or through the written form in literate communities.

This work is about an aspect of a people known as the Bari. The Bari society is a preliterate community. Like the rest of the peoples of Africa, the history of the Bari lacks written historical tradition for all but the most recent centuries. All that exists is oral history and oral tradition. With the rise of cultural and political chauvinism, there is a rising self-consciousness among people with unrecorded past to know what that past was. They are beginning to ask themselves soul-searching questions concerning their origins. For example, who are they? Who were their fore fathers? What were their achievements? Have they always lived in the places where they are now found, or have they come from elsewhere? If they moved to new places, what caused them to move? The Bari are also asking themselves similar questions.

Although it was a hotly contested issue until recently, it is now agreed by most scholars that the Bari belong ethnically and culturally to a people known as Nilotics. Much like the history of the rest of this people, their history is unwritten and, to all intents and purposes, buried deep in the sand dunes of history. For example, the Bari are not sure if the name Bari was the original name their ancestors used to call themselves by or not. Other than the general idea that they came to their present site from elsewhere,

generally construed to be from the east, they did know where they came from.

Thus, part of this work is an attempt to suggest an answer to this difficult and daunting question. For the purposes of answering this question, and the further equally difficult issue regarding the racial and linguistic affiliation of the Bari people, the study examines linguistic theories and methodologies used in the past by scholars to analyse and classify languages, cultures, races, and origins of the peoples of Africa. Although these theories and methodologies were purported to be scientific, they were nothing more than mere stratagems for justifying making biased judgments and opinions about other peoples. Often, the conclusions arrived at using these techniques were *ad hoc* and inconsistent with the facts. What were presented as incontrovertible scientific facts were mere conjectures. For example, what are now called Nilotics were, until recently, taken to be a race of mixed affiliation. According to this school of thought, it was not clear whether or not the Nilotes were Semites,¹ Hamites, Caucasians, Cushites, Negroes or an admixture of all these races. However, the general informed opinion finally rested on the conclusion that this race may reasonably be divided into two large linguistic and racial groups namely: 'Nilotic' proper and the so-called, 'Nilo-Hamities'.

Language and race were taken to be conterminous. They were synonymous. The claim was that two communities that spoke two different languages belonged to two different races. Based on this classification, only the Nilotic proper would qualify to be of pure Negroid origin. The Nilo-Hamites would be classified as people of mixed race; half-Nilotic and half-Hamitic. Bari, Nubian and Maasai were alleged to be members of the later group.

We shall revisit the arguments that led to misclassification or cross-classification of what are obviously the same language and the same people into different races.² It should be pointed out, however, that the argument has already been made that the pure Nilotes and the Nilo-Hamites belong to one language family called Nilotic and one racial group-Negro. What has not, however, been established, and is still being contested, is their ancestral homeland. Where was the original home of the Nilotes? There are those who believe that

the southern Sudan, especially around the Bahr el Ghazal Region, was the ancestral home of the Nilotes, at least the Luo of Kenya, (Ogot 1967).

We shall argue that this is only partly true. We shall claim that the Bahr el Ghazal region was not the epicenter of Nilotic migration. It was just another staging spot for further migration into the heart of the continent. We shall claim, contrary to established opinions, that the original home of the Nilotes, and by extension the Bari people, was further north, from the alleged Bahr el Ghazal area, but probably further north than the present northern Sudan. We shall argue that it was from this epicentre that the Nilotes swarmed out over time due to internecine wars and constant attacks by a relentless horde of marauding invaders from Asia and Europe and ecological change the drying up of the Sahara.

We shall claim further that the wide dispersal of the Nilotic peoples was due to migration; that the migration was largely from the north to the south.³ It is only by assuming a movement of the Nilotic peoples from the north to south that can one account for the otherwise unexplainable linguistic, cultural and racial resemblances between these peoples. It would enable one to account, for example, why Nubians in the far north, Bari in middle Sudan and the Maasai to the far south of the African continent have remarkable racial, cultural and linguistic congruencies.

The ploy to dodge answering this question assumed two forms. One strategy was to claim that Nubians, Bari and Maasai (the so called Nilo-Hamites) borrowed heavily from a second language called 'Hemitic' which somehow then vanished without trace. The other position was to assume that these languages were, actually, originally Hamitic but then got so greatly influenced by Nilotic languages that they lost their unique Hamitic characteristics. Assuming any of these two positions does not require one to posit a theory of migration. To set the homeland of the Nilotic peoples further than the Bahr el Ghazal region and posit the possibility of movement of the Nilotic peoples, especially in north-south direction, is anathema to many Africanists.

There are those who religiously deny that the Nilotes have ever lived anywhere further than the bogs of southern Sudan. Nearly all

scholars, and most of them western, would not hear of even a mere suggestion of a north-south migration of the Nilotes to their present homelands. If this thesis were to be admitted as a fact, what would prevent the further admission that, for example, the Luo, Dinka, Bari and the rest of their benighted lot came from, say Egypt? Now this is not such a good idea to western scholars. Egypt is the cradle of western civilization and it is unimaginable, if not outright impertinent, to suggest that such primitives as Bari or Maasai could have originated from there, let alone having participated in the development of that coveted civilization.

Although it will briefly touch on other areas of the Nilotics, the study will concentrate mainly on the Bari, especially what Spagnolo (1933) called 'proper Bari'. This is necessary because of matters of space and time. In any case, there are already important studies being done on the languages, cultures, and histories of individual Nilotic languages by scholars who belong to these languages, for example, Francis Deng on the Dinka and Bethwel Ogot on the Luo people. It is only by doing detailed work on individual Nilotic languages, histories and cultures that we shall be able to reconstruct the larger picture of Nilotics as a whole. The study of Bari is a contribution to that end.

Most of the information used in this study, particularly the part on the aspect of Bari history, come from oral and written sources. The written sources come from the early Europeans who came to Bariland in the early part of the 19th century and recorded, in writing, Bari oral history as they heard from the old speakers. These writings by explorers and missionaries, and later on the colonial administrators, have helped very greatly in the dating and the corroboration of the early history of the Bari people.