

The Bantu Dispersion Africa has about two thousand languages, which can be classified into four very different linguistic groups: Page 4
Koisian in southern Africa; Afro-Asiatic in northern Africa; Nilo-Saharan in north-central Africa; and Niger-Congo in equatorial and southern Africa. Through ancient patterns of migration, assimilation, and adaptation, each of these groups spread their respective languages and culture. The native languages of most African peoples belong to the Niger-Congo linguistic group, which comprises more than 1,400 different languages, with the majority of them (more than five hundred) being Bantu. Contemporary scholarship explains the Bantu-linguistic preponderance by positing that in approximately 2000 B.C.E. Bantu-speaking farmers in what is today eastern Nigeria and southern Cameroon began a series of many intermittent advances on foot along two regional paths: one to the south into Central Africa and the other into eastern and southeastern Africa, altogether encompassing the modern nations of the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and portions of Tanzania, and Kenya. Unlike the older Bantu-migration thesis that tended to portray a relatively rapid and continuous movement of a few homogeneous groups along the two paths, the dispersion thesis portrays many centuries of discontinuous movements by smaller groups on foot through rainforests and savannahs in search of new and fertile land to farm. Researchers in genomics, historical linguistics, and archaeology add to the historical record by offering a considerably more complex and nuanced version of Bantu speakers' encounters and interactions with the indigenous inhabitants of the new territories they entered. Their multidisciplinary findings underscore long-term migratory patterns for interpreting local diffusion of the Bantu language, similarities, and regional differences in the appearance of specific words among Bantu speakers, genetic intermixing, and agricultural innovation, such as cattle keeping and millet production in eastern and southern Africa. Not until the mid-twentieth century did archaeological methods of radiocarbon dating confirm the indigenous African origins of iron technology. Good-quality steel was produced by Africans as early as 600 B.C.E. in the Sahara desert fringe, an area today called the Jos Plateau of northern Nigeria. The iron findings, which included knife and ax blades, arrows, and fragments from an iron-smelting furnace wall, refute claims that iron smelting was introduced to Africa from an external, nonblack civilization. A preheating device, called a *tuyère*, which blasts hot air into a fiery furnace, has been shown to be indigenous to Africa and distinctively different from contemporaneous European techniques. In African societies, iron working was a highly skilled craft, one that conferred status and prestige and was usually limited to members of a particular lineage or social group. Indeed, ironworkers were often thought to possess magical-religious powers. In the Yoruba culture, the deity Ogun was believed to be the god of iron.

Iron Technology The ancient Nok people of the Jos Plateau have been identified by archeologists as an early iron-age society. Excavation sites in this region at Taruga and Samun Dukiya suggest that, as early as 500 B.C.E., the Nok lived in organized, permanent settlements that were centers of both agriculture and iron work. Numerous stone axes and iron instruments used by the Nok have been excavated, as well as beautiful terracotta figures and pottery from this early period.