

# A WEST AFRICAN WORD OF 1456

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Diogo Gomes' DE PRIMA INVENTIONE GUINEE, an early account of Portuguese discovery on the West African coast, includes a description of a voyage of exploration in 1456 led by the author. The expedition reached the River Sanctus Dominicus, i.e. the modern River Cacheo, and then 'alium fluvium magnum vocatur Fancaso utra Ryo grande', almost certainly to be emended to '... Fancaso aut Ryo grande'.<sup>1</sup> This second river was most probably one of those which flow into the estuary behind the Bissagos Islands, and may well have been the main stream, the modern Rio Jeba. Because of strong currents, the explorers decided they could sail no further. The ships lying off-shore were visited by 'Moors' who came in canoes to trade cloth, ivory and pepper. Later the explorers landed and found, beyond the palm-trees on the shore, a grassy plain.

'Et in illo campo vidimus plus quam quinque milia myongas juxta vulgare nigrorum, quae sunt bestiae parum majores cervis, quae nos videntes nil timuerunt. Et illuc vidimus exire de flumine parvo tecto arboribus quinque elephantis, tres magnicum duobus inuenibus, fugientes de animalibus supradictis.'<sup>2</sup> (And in this plain we saw more than five thousand myongas as the blacks call them, which are animals rather bigger than deer, and which were not frightened when they saw us. And we saw there, coming from a little stream covered with trees, five elephants, three large ones and two young, who were fleeing from the above animals.)

The West African term *myonga* (to which a Portuguese plural *-s* had apparently been added) may be compared with the following terms denoting 'elephant' in the Mankanya-Pepel-Mandyak group of languages of Portuguese Guinea, as recorded by J. B. Marques (M) and S. W. Koelle (K):<sup>3</sup>

Mankanya	(M) u- <i>longge</i> , pl. n-; (K) u- <i>b:ŋk</i> , pl. <i>ŋgi/ŋgu</i> -
Pepel	(M) a- <i>yogan</i> , pl. n-; (K) o- <i>yo:ga</i> , pl. <i>ŋgi</i> -
Mandyak	(M) u- <i>longge</i> , pl. n-; (K) u- <i>b:ŋga</i> <sup>4</sup>

Assuming the *m-* to be a plural class-prefix, we may consider *-yonga* to be the basic stem of our fifteenth century item, a form which is phonologically intermediate between the Pepel and Mandyak/Mankanya forms recorded above. These three languages are closely related, and *-yonga* may thus have been recorded from a language in this group (perhaps from Pepel, before loss of the homorganic nasal?).

There is of course a semantic difficulty in the comparison of this form with the modern terms for 'elephant': while elephants are specifically mentioned in the text, the term is

<sup>1</sup> For the text of Diogo Gomes, see A. Baião, O MANUSCRITO 'VALENTIM FERNANDES', Lisbon, 1940; T. Monod, R. Mauny and G. Duval, DE LA PREMIÈRE DÉCOUVERTE DE LA GUINÉE, Bissau, 1959. On the identification of the 'Fancaso utra Ryo grande', see A. Teixeira da Mota, 'A descoberta da Guiné', BOLETIM CULTURAL DA GUINÉ PORTUGUESA, 1, 1946, pp. 471-5. The emendation to 'Fancaso aut Ryo grande' is supported by V. Magalhães Godinho, DOCUMENTOS SOBRE A EXPANSÃO PORTUGUESA, III (1956), p. 225. The earliest map to give a name to the Jeba estuary, the map by Benincasa of 1468, called it 'Rio de fancaso'.

<sup>2</sup> Gomes, fol. 275 v.

<sup>3</sup> J. B. Marques, 'Aspectos do problema da semelhança da língua dos papéis, manjacos e brames', BOLETIM CULTURAL DA GUINÉ PORTUGUESA, 2, 1947, pp. 77-109; see list of animal names in 'Manjaco', 'Papel' and 'Brame' [i.e. Mankanya] on pp. 80-81. S. W. Koelle, POLYGLOTTA AFRICANA, London, 1854 (reprinted 1963); see entries for 'Bols/Sarar' [i.e. Mankanya], 'Pepel' and 'Kanyop' [i.e. Mandyak] under the rubric 'elephant' on p. 136.

<sup>4</sup> For similar forms in other languages of this area, cf. Bisfada (K) l-*yo:gha*, pl. *gu-*; and Bidyogo (K) ka-*iugua/ka-*io:ga**.

said to denote some other animal. If the *myonga* were elephants, then either Gomes' text is corrupt (which in other parts of the account it is known to be) or else the explorers of 1456 misunderstood their African informants (which is also not unlikely), or perhaps both. Gomes dictated his account in old age, probably in the 1480s or even 1490s, but the incorporation of this African term is one reason for supposing that he composed from notes made at the time of his voyage. The text as we have it undoubtedly contains some oddities: the 'more than five thousand' animals seen at once is difficult to credit, while the flight of elephants from animals only a little larger than deer is somewhat curious. It might be suggested that Gomes composed the text from vague recollections of having seen large and small animals and from the words in his notes - 'elephant' and 'myongas'. If he and the other Portuguese really thought at the time that the elephants were being pursued by the quasi-deer, some misunderstanding in question and answer between themselves and their African informants was likely, and Gomes may have got the impression in 1456 that the animals described as *myonga* were the smaller and not the larger beasts.

The equation of *myonga* with 'elephant' does not provide the only possible solution, however, and the African term may have referred not to 'elephant' but to 'hippopotamus'. In many modern West African languages, and hence perhaps in the fifteenth century language from which this word was obtained, the stem denoting 'elephant' may be used also to describe the 'hippopotamus', the latter being distinguished as the 'water-elephant' - cf. present-day usage in Terne, Mende, Twi, Ewe and Idoma, for instance.<sup>5</sup> If *myonga* could and did refer to hippopotami, then Gomes' account is more accurate than we suggested above: the *myonga* were in fact the smaller beasts (although whatever these beasts were, the 'more than five thousand' was clearly a gross exaggeration). It is not unlikely that Gomes saw hippopotami, for the rivers and creeks of Portuguese Guinea form an ideal habitat for this animal, which at times moves around in large groups. In this case the picture becomes one of a herd of hippopotami, grazing on the banks of a stream, and a family of elephants on the move (being quicker witted animals than hippopotami they were no doubt fleeing from the humans).

We have seen that Gomes encountered the *myonga* somewhere around the Rio Jéba estuary. Today the Mankanya-Pepel-Mandyak languages are spoken on the Northern islets and along the northern waterways and shores of the Rio Jéba estuary, as well as further north on the River Cacheo.<sup>6</sup> While there is evidence that linguistic units with similar names, and existing in a similar area, were distinguished from at least 1500, and therefore probably in 1456, we cannot, of course, know what were the precise forms of the languages and hence their relationship to the modern languages, or the extent to which each was distinguished from each, or the exact boundaries of each, half a millennium ago. The text is unfortunately very vague about the point where the Portuguese landed, and for the reasons just given this cannot be pinpointed from the linguistic evidence. Indeed the latter cannot do more than suggest that the Portuguese had reached by 1456 a language area whose coastal boundaries ran, in recent centuries and possibly at that time, from the Cacheo to the Rio Jéba estuary - to this extent confirming the accepted view of the terminus of Diogo Gomes' voyage.

<sup>5</sup> We should be most grateful to receive information as to whether or not the compound 'water-elephant' is used in the modern languages of Portuguese Guinea. Marques (p. 81) records Mankanya/Mandyak *u-komale* and Pepel *u-komele* as modern terms for 'hippopotamus'.

<sup>6</sup> Mankanya is also now spoken on Bulama Island and on the nearby mainland, i.e. on the southern shore of the estuary, but this almost certainly represents a nineteenth-century expansion of the language. Biafada and Bidiyogo (see footnote 4) are spoken on the southern islands and shores of the estuary.