

## AN ETHNO-ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF WATER RELATED ACTIVITIES OF MAN ALONG THE KOMADUGU YOBE VALLEY

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### Abstract

This ethno-archaeological survey of water related activities of the occupants of the Yobe valley of N.E. Nigeria seeks to investigate how important the Yobe river has been in shaping cultural developments in this comparison of fossilized archaeological data with present day activities and helps in our interpretation of how the occupants have exploited the resources of the Yobe valley to their optimum advantage through time.

In the on going investigation, research has been focused on the valley portion between the Bama ridge and the confluence of the Komadugus Yobe and Gana. Mapping of extinct and extant settlements is being carried out with a view to assessing how they were/are shaped by the Yobo river.

**Keywords:** ethno-archaeology, water, activities, Komadugu Yobo, Nigeria.

### INTRODUCTION

The Yobo river which traverses the Sahelian zone of Northeastern Nigeria and empties into Lake Chad ameliorates the harsh environmental conditions of this arid zone. By providing water for domestic use throughout the year, modifying the fauna and flora along its valley, providing easy access to Lake Chad (at least in the past), serving as a suitable cattle trade route to Hausaland from the Lake Chad and providing a port of respite for travellers from the Sahara, it is no doubt understandable why this narrow stretch of land has been an area of high concentration of population since pre-historic times.

The dessication of the Sahara coincided with the shrinking of the Chad from its Bama ridge shores. It is believed that the new lands made available by the receding water was a receptacle to peoples and cultures from different directions.

The subsequent outcome of the multidirectional influences was an adaptation of various cultural traits to the local situation. Different groups of people came to the Yobo valley for different purposes, viz, the hunters for games, the fishermen for fish, the agriculturists for farm land, while the herders came to pasture for their animals. The coming together of these otherwise disparate groups into a

very small tract of the land was bound to stimulate changes in many aspects of the lives of the new occupants of the Yobo valley. The surge in human population affected the allocation of the two scarce but very precious commodities namely land and water among the competing interests and demands. This scenario has produced a complex pattern of inter-ethnic and inter-occupational relationships that at once owe much to their antecedents and yet are remarkably different from what obtains in the not so favoured surrounding zones.

To enable us get a better understanding of the dynamic processes that produced this complex pattern, an ethno-archaeological survey of all water related activities is being conducted within a short span of the valley, between the Bama ridge near Geidam and the confluence of Komadugu Gana and Yobo, few kilometres east of Gazargamo, the fifteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century capital of Borno empire. The ethnographic survey entails studying (by a combination of participant observation and interviewing) water related activities of the present occupants of the valley. The most important of these are fishing, herding and farming, especially in the context of a favoured strip within a generally difficult area (i.e. the Sahel). The archaeological survey entails the study of the distribution of archaeological sites in this area with a view to assessing the role of the river in terms of preferred choice of location of settlements in the prehistoric and historic times. Analysis of excavated materials should enable us to measure the extent to which these occupants relied on the aquatic resources of the river for their subsistence. The combination of these research approaches (ethnographic and archaeological referred to as ethno-archaeology) should reinforce each other and help in our search for a better understanding of how the occupants have exploited the resources of the Yobo valley to their optimum advantage.

## THE ENVIRONMENT

The study area features two contrasting ecozones, namely the highly favoured Yobo valley sands / alluvial plains and the sand plains, stabilized dunes / scattered depressions. While broadly speaking the first zone is obviously along the valley and the second further away, we do not have a sort of fixed boundary between the two zones. As exemplified by Garin Gada, we do have a complex intercalation of the two ecozones. The first ecozone is characterized by recent alluvium and the land use pattern is described by TULLY (1972) as dry season rangeland with minor scattered arable cultivation and some climatically marginal cultivation. The second ecozone is characterized by aeolian sands and the land use is basically wet season rangeland and in some favourable areas we do have marginal arable cultivation.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC SURVEY

For the ethnographic survey, Garin Gada, a small Manga Kanuri settlement about ten kilometres north of Geidam was selected. This choice was propelled by various factors. It is located at a point where the river crosses the Bama ridge complex. Thus the high ground of the ridge provide suitable place for human habitation and rainfed agriculture, while at the same time, enables the exploitation of the resources of the river especially fishing and dry season farming. Garin Gada has been witnessing some changes in recent times partly due to its increasing importance as a ferry point and the increasing waves of migration into the area for the exploitation of the Yobo resources. A significant climax of such migrations is the recent shifting of the base of the Lawan of Mar to Garin Gada after he had lost a considerable number of cattle in the increasingly inhospitable Mar. Garin Gada is a small village of about fifty compounds but with a fluctuating population in response to seasonal activities. Through now featuring more permanent structures, a good number of its inhabitants have dual residences, the alternatives being Geidam and neighbouring settlements where they keep their families and use Garin Gada as occupational base.

### Fishing

Fishing constitutes a very important economic activity in Garin Gada, especially between December and May when the water level reduces considerably enough to allow fishing with ease. By this time of the year, the Yobo river becomes so low, that in fact it reduces to mere trickles in many parts. However due to geomorphological processes some portions remain deep enough to serve as a refuge for fish. Garin Gada is one such places, therefore becoming a very lucrative fishing point.

The fishermen here recognize up to nineteen species of fish which they could name in the Kanuri and Hausa languages: *kawara*, *tarwada*, *karfasa* and *hakumu*, are the dominant ones. *Musko* is the most highly valued variety, while *kaya* is recognized as a relatively new species in the area. Others are *zoa*, *lamsa*, *lulu*, *tsawaya*, *kombomi*, *kurungu*, *kariya*, *burdum* and *kausa*. Now no longer caught at Garin Gada but available in the past were *bariya*, *tsage*, *jeri* and *bargi*.

A variety of fishing methods and equipment existed in the past and some of them survive till today but with varying degree of importance. They are *tsunsia*, *kombomi*, *kugiya*, *tsankiya* and *kalli*. However today, the most efficient method is through the use of *kirda* - a long net measuring one hundred and two meters; requiring a team of 20-30 men for effective utilization. A sharing formula has

been worked out in which the owner of the fairly expensive net (*kirda*) takes 25% of the catch, the Lawan takes 25% while the team of fishermen involved share the remaining 50%. Since *kirda* was introduced to Garin Gada in 1987, it has been used averagely 7-8 times in each fishing season. The other equipments which could be operated by one to five men are used more often, as it does not involve a complex organization of men. Fishing rights are controlled by the Lawan, through he exercises more effective control on the users of *kirda* or those who hire specific portions of the river on annual bases. The small scale and lone ranger fishermen are relatively free to fish without paying dues to the Lawan. There are no full time fishermen at Garin Gada. The primary reason for this might be the fact that it is not an all year round activity and practically all settlers of Garin Gada do fish at one time or the other, including failed Fulani cattle rearers. The level of the importance of fish in Garin Gada inhabitants diet is of interest to this research. CONNAH stated that fish must have played an important role in the diet of the occupants of the Yobo valley (CONNAH 1981). This statement is probably true. However, the question is how important was it. Investigations at Garin Gada has shown that if it was really important in their diet in the past, it is becoming increasingly less so now. The reason for this is the increasing commoditization of the catch. A greater amount of money is obtained by selling off the catches than the total annual agricultural production of an average household. Thus while the grains produced by the rainfed agriculture are stored for domestic consumption, up to about 75% of the fish caught are sold out for cash. The sociocultural value of fish is limited when compared with cattle, goats and sheep. The explanation for this is the relative difficulty of preserving fish, and the fact that it cannot be stored up as wealth as one could do for cows and sheep. Also fish is considered as wild animals in the sense that no one can predict what to expect from each fishing expedition or season. However, the place of fish in the overall economy is highly appreciated, so much so that the *Sarkin ruwa* (chief of water) does not ignore his role of appeasing the god of water by making appropriate sacrifices at the beginning of each fishing season.

### Farming

Sufficient ethnographic data is yet to be obtained on all the farming activities here. However few observations could be made. It appears that in spite of the considerable amelioration of the harsh environment the Yobo river affords, farming is not an all year round activity, as by the beginning of April, there was practically no on-site farming activity going on at Garin Gada. The river affords the opportunity for receding flood farming primarily for growing rice, onions, tomatoes and other vegetables. Masakwa, the very important dry season Guinea

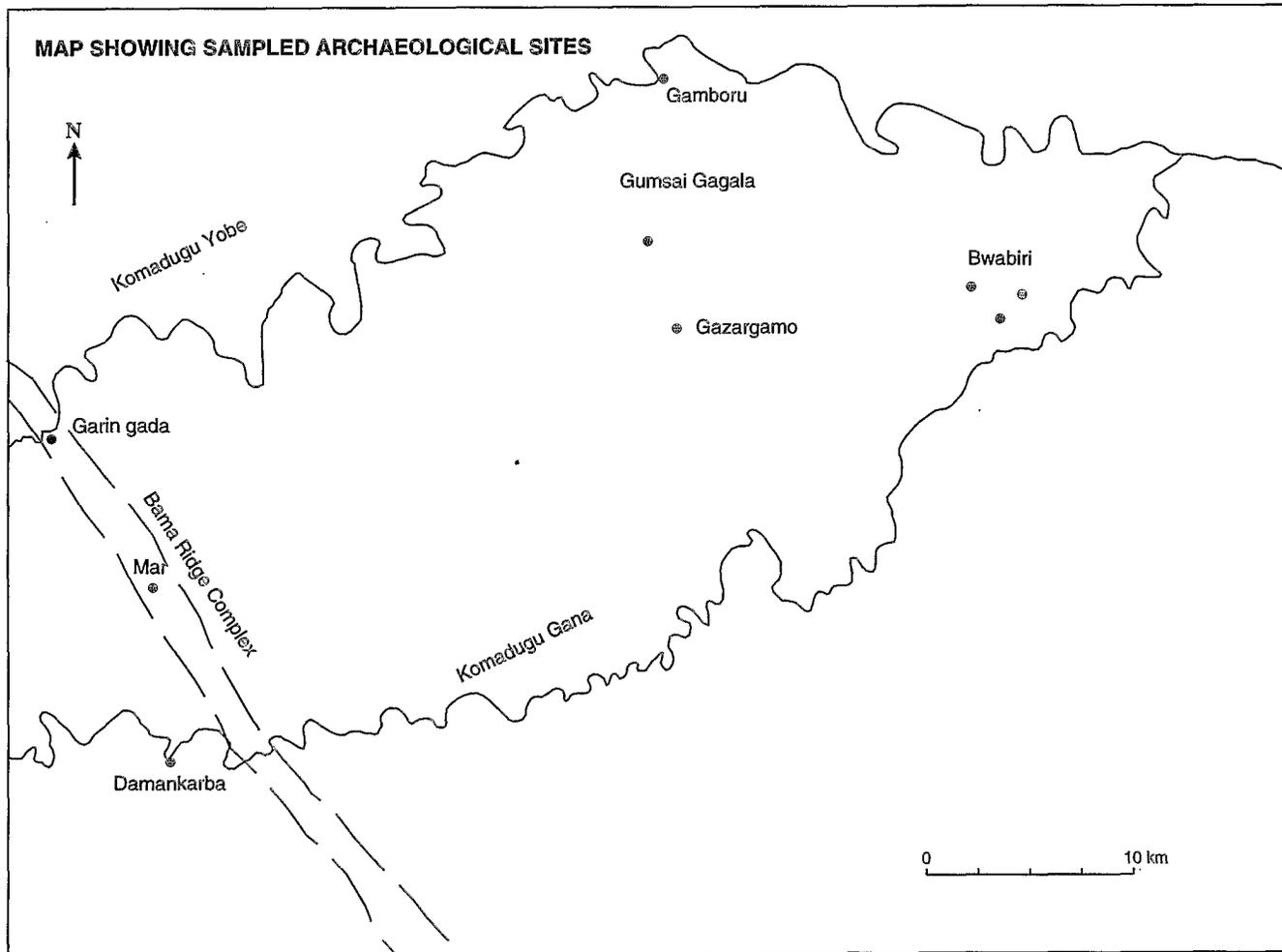
corn of the Firki (CONNAH 1981) does not grow here. Irrigation farming is yet to be properly developed here. The primary reason being that the traditional methods commonly obtainable along the Yobo river could hardly be practised here with much success because of the high level of the Ridge.

A good number of wild trees grow here, especially along the partially flooded plains. Most of these trees are put into various uses and as one informant puts it, there is no tree that can be said to be completely useless. The occupants of Garin Gada have utilized the opportunity of all year round water supply to introduce new trees to the area, which would otherwise not have been able to thrive in the Sahel.

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL DATA

Several archaeological sites have been found between Geidam and the Gazargamo area: mostly sited on mounds ranging from low to high ones, these sites are easily identifiable by the large quantity of potsherds that are either exposed by wind action or in some cases by motor road. Gazargamo and Gamboru which both fall within the study area, stand out from the rest by featuring burnt bricks. Of all the sites so far recorded virtually all are located close to active or extinct water courses. The extinct water courses are identifiable by their dry valleys and residual forests along them. Aerial photographs make their identification easier.

The archaeological sites at Garin Gada have received some attention. To the west of the settlement are scatters of potsherds which from the state of their appearances suggest that they are several centuries old. These sherds, with varying decorative patterns are concentrated on the high grounds of the ridges, while the intervening lowlands are relatively barren of archaeological materials. At the southern bank of the river, at 22.5 meters up the cliff there is a thin 3-5 cm thick cultural layer sandwiched by ridge sand. This cultural layer features a dark humus soil and contains fragments of potsherds.



A vertical section of 3 meters was prepared to enable us to have a closer look at this layer. Sample of the layer was taken and very few potsherds were recovered for analysis and possible dating. Charcoal was not recovered. It is believed that this could represent one of the earliest evidence of human occupation of the Yobo valley. Work on an elaborate scale is being contemplated.

A 2m\*2m test excavation was carried out on one of the several mounds featuring potsherd scatters on the surface. This particular mound is sort of central to the rest and seems to be least affected by the more recent aeolian deposition. The excavation however revealed that the potsherd deposit is very shallow. In fact after the first ten centimetres, the quantity of sherds reduced drastically. Digging was stopped at 40 cm, when no more sherds were being recovered. The evidence from this dig cannot be taken to be representative of the site complex, therefore further test excavation would be carried out at a higher ground.

It could be deduced on the bases of the pattern of the location of settlements, that they were located at strategic spots where they could exploit the resources of the river to their maximum advantage. It is yet to be seen the extent to which the archaeological data would reflect this.

## CONCLUSION

The ethno-archaeological approach to the research of water related activities of man along the Yobo valley promises to be very fruitful, particularly in revealing how the Yobo river was and is central to the cultural developments that took or take place here and could provide models for sustainable and people-oriented developments.

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