

THE PEOPLING OF ABUJA AREA OF NIGERIA IN THE 19TH AND 20TH CENTURIES

BY

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ABSTRACT

The Abuja area falls within the central part of Nigeria. Archaeological discoveries in the area reveal that Man inhabited this part of Nigeria as far back as the Early Stone Age period and also through the Iron Age. In spite of the archaeological evidence of early human population in this area, not much is known about the communities that inhabited this area at that early point in time. In the 19th and 20th centuries, just like the earlier period no clearer picture of the inhabitants of the area was known. To properly understand the population history of this area, this writer employed archaeological, historical and ethnographic data in throwing light on the peopling of the area in the 19th and 20th centuries. The study reveals that the area has for centuries served as an amalgam of several Nigerian cultures and civilizations. There existed several ethnic groups in the area. The migratory and settlement history of these groups have been placed in a proper historical perspective.

Keywords: Abuja area, Peopling, Early Stone Age, Blacksmithing, Kwaraafa.

INTRODUCTION

The primary focus of this paper is on the peopling or the human settlement history of the Abuja area of central Nigeria in the 19th and 20th centuries. Shortly before the establishment of Abuja as the Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria in 1976, it was erroneously believed by many that the area was a virgin land, meaning that it did not belong to any specific ethnic group.

The study of the early human population in the area debunks this view. Attempts are made here to identify and discuss the early human populations that inhabited the area particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The area in question falls within the present day Federal Capital Territory of Nigeria, the seat of the Nigerian Federal Government. It is located within the central part of Nigeria. In terms of geography, the area can be described as a transitory zone between the dense forest region of the southern part of Nigeria and the open savannah grassland of the northern part of the country. The geography of the area played a significant role in the early population movements and settings.

Archaeological research works in the Niger/Benue valley in which the area is located reveal that Man has been inhabiting the area since the Early Stone Age period. Archaeological works in the area led to the discovery of Early Stone Age tools in Keffi, Nassarawa, Izom and Jebba areas of central Nigeria. The area of study falls within this Early Stone Age Zone. The Early Stone tools discovered in the area were dated to more than forty thousand years back.¹ The Stone Age era predates the Iron Age in the history of the area of study.

Apart from the discovery of stone tools, the archaeological discovery and subsequent excavations of an iron smelting site at Taruga (Takushara) by Bernard Fagg reveal that, at about 500-200 B.C, human communities were already inhabiting the area. Iron working was carried out in the area at about this time. The iron implements or tools were in association with terracotta objects which depicted body ornaments, showing scenes of diseases and hairdo.

The terracotta objects are typical of the famous Nok culture objects which are found mainly in the central part of Nigeria.²

The archaeological discoveries in the area also indicate that Man inhabited the area at a very early point in time especially when compared to the other parts of Nigeria. Man's material Culture in the area had advanced to a point that iron smelting, agriculture, and human settlements were in existence by the 5th – 2nd centuries B.C. In spite of the significance of the archaeological discoveries in the area, little attention is paid to them by historians and archaeologists. It is anticipated that when further research work is carried out in the area, a greater picture or better knowledge of the early human population in the area will be uncovered.

Apart from archaeological sources, linguistic studies have also shed some light on the early peopling of the area. Based on genetic classifications, (dialectology) the indigenous languages in the area have been grouped into language groups.³ The studies reveal that at about 10,000 B.C., a fishing and hunting population was already in existence in the Niger/Benue valley system of which the area of study is apart. It further reveals that by 4000 B.C., the Benue/Congo proto languages of which some of the ethnic groups in the territory belong had already evolved.⁴ Like the archaeological and oral sources, this historical source also provides evidence to show that there has been the existence of human settlements in the area from the Stone Age period. A clearer picture of the antiquity of Man in the area is only possible when thematic and purposeful research efforts are conducted in the area. For now, we mainly rely on the available archaeological, linguistic and oral evidence in the understanding of the early iron working communities in the territory.

The main occupations of the early inhabitants of the area were agriculture, hunting, blacksmithing, pottery making, weaving, carving and calabash decorations. Blacksmithing stood out as an important occupation in the area. Blacksmithing occupies a central position in the economy of the people due to its contribution to agriculture and socio-cultural institutions in the territory.

Settlement Pattern

Mainly due to the need to maintain close family ties and the quest for vast agricultural lands, the indigenous population of the area lived in rural communities which were characterized by nucleated and scattered settlements. Being predominately farmers, the people preferred scattered settlements with large expanse of rich agricultural land which could sustain shifting cultivation, a popular agricultural method in the area. Also, for security reasons, the people lived close to their nuclear and extended families. Another remarkable feature of the settlement pattern in the area was the existence of city walls or defensive earth works which surrounded such settlements. These city walls cover several kilometers around settlements like Kuje, Karshi and Kawu. The settlement pattern of the area must have undergone a variety of changes due to cultural, environmental, security, and administrative factors. The colonial period in the area, for example, witnessed accelerated economic and social changes which subsequently brought about changes in the location of settlements, increase in settlement size and functions of settlements.⁵

Mainly due to the effects of factors such as the Nupe and Hausa slave raidings which were common during the pre-colonial era in the area, and the Sokoto Jihad of 1804, some of the settlements in the area were either walled, on hill tops or within forests. The hill tops or forests provided natural defensive

mechanism for the people.⁶ Typical examples of such settlements are old Karshi, old Garki and Kawu. It offered them a safer haven from slave raiders, and other external attackers.

By the beginning of the 20th century when British rule started in the area, colonial policies and the relative peace experienced made some of the people to relocate their settlements from hill tops to the foot of hills, while others moved to more clustered settlements. For example, the Gbagyi of old Garki were said to have moved from their hill top settlement in the old Garki village beside the present day Garki cemetery (near the Apo Legislative village) to the present Garki village settlement which is on the lowland. Also, the Gwandara people of old Karshi (a hill top settlement) had to move to the lowlands where they now occupy. We can now discuss the peopling of the area in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Gbagyi (Gwari) Speaking People

The Gbagyi speaking people belong to the linguistic classification called the *Kwa* group of languages.⁷ The word *Gbagyi* refers to both the people and their language. In this work *Gbagyi* is sometimes used inter-changeably with *Gwari*. Though the meaning of the word '*Gbagyi*' is obscured, the word '*Gwari*' is often used by their neighbours especially the Hausa to describe or identify the Gbagyi speaking people. The people prefer being called the Gbagyi rather than Gwari. To them, the later word (Gwari) was used by the Hausa who could not properly pronounce the word *Gbagyi*. The word *Gwari* connotes different things or meanings. The Hausa people also loosely used the word to identify non-Hausa people whom they regard as pagans or primitive people.⁸

Mainly due to the derogatory use of the word, the people prefer being called Gbagyi rather than *Gwari*.

Like many ethnic groups in Nigeria, the early history of the people is not clear mainly due to the paucity of historical documentation. However, oral sources have it that the people migrated from the *East* and later settled in the Borno area of the present day Nigeria.⁹ From there, they further migrated south west wards to parts of Hausaland particularly Kano and Zaria. According to Naibi and Hassan,

*The present chief of Madalla, Salihu, heard from his forebears that the Gwari were living with the Koro in Bornu and when the Kanuri drove them out, they scattered into Kano and Zaria provinces.*¹⁰

Though oral traditions, like other sources have several limitations as reliable sources of history, based on the recorded oral history of the people, it appears that the people migrated from the northern part of the country particular Bornu and Hausaland. After series of migrations, they arrived at their present locations. The causes and the pattern of the migrations could have been as a result of population pressure, succession disputes, trade, and other social-cultural and political reasons. The people's cultural developments especially their technology could have been enhanced or influenced through such migrations and inter-group relations. Presently, the Gbagyi are mainly found in parts of the central part of Nigeria particularly in states like Kaduna, Niger, Nassarawa, Kogi, and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

In the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja, the Gbagyi are the dominant ethnic group. The main Gbagyi settlements include Gwarimpa, Garki, Karu, Kurudu, Jikwoyi, Dutse, Igu, Bwari, Takushara, Dobi and Kwali. Being

predominantly farmers, they are found in almost all the major settlements in the territory.

In terms of occupational activities, the Gbagyi are famous for their farming activities. The main crops they cultivate are yams, maize and guinea corn. Apart from farming, the people are also known for the production of arts and crafts such as blacksmithing, weaving of straws into mats, textiles, carving and pottery. As a people whose economic mainstay was, and is still centred on farming, iron working was and is still very central to the economic and cultural developments of the people. Iron implements such as hoes, cutlasses, axes, sickles and several other tools were used by the people for farming activities.

The people were said to have mined and smelted iron (*snikna*), tin (*sni-buyi*), copper (*snibeyi*) and aluminium (*obwa*).¹¹ Amongst these metals, iron made a more tremendous impact on the people since it enhanced agricultural food production and provided the weapons needed for repelling external aggressions and maintaining internal security.

The Koro Speaking People

Like the Gbagyi, the early history of the Koro is not very clear. However, the Koro were one of the earliest ethnic groups that migrated to the area now referred to as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. According to oral traditions, the Koro trace their origin to the Jukun with whom they inhabited in the Bornu area of the present day Nigeria before they migrated south west wards to parts of Hausaland as a result of wars.¹² The Koro of the then Abuja emirate were of three different groups based on their linguistic variations. The three Koro groups are, the Koro Ganagana (those that inter-married with the Ganagana speaking people), the Koro Nulu, (a group that inter-married with

Gwandara speaking people), and the Koro Huntu, (the group that got its name from their habits of not wearing clothes (naked people). According to Naibi and Hassan,

They do not wear clothes. The chief of Zuba, Umaru, said that the Koro Ganagana and the Koro Huntu all came from the same stock. But those that came in contact with the Hausa and other tribes started wearing clothes, while those who were untouched by any outside influence continued to go about naked.¹³

The traditions relate to series of north-south migration of the Koro groups into the area of study, but the chronology of the traditions can not be easily established. The main reasons for these series of migrations were or may have been mainly centred on civil wars as a result of succession disputes, over-population resulting to more pressure on the natural resources, and search for more fertile lands for agriculture, and hunting purposes.

The Koro later migrated to the famous Zuma rock area of the present day boundary between the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja and Niger State. The rock was regarded as the custodian of their ancestral spirits and so was highly venerated.¹⁴ The Koro cult is headed by *Tukura Zuma* (the guardian of the god of the Zuma rock). After settling by the Zuma rock, some of the people further migrated to new settlements. Oral traditions have it that by 1804 when the Habe left Zaria for Abuja, they came to Zuba where they were hosted by the chief of Zuba for seven years.¹⁵ By 1900, the Koro people of Zuba came in contact with the British, and after resisting the British envoy from entering Zuba by shutting the city gates, the British threatened to attack the Koro. Through diplomatic engagements, the Koro of Zuba accepted the British rule and the British High commissioner presented a British flag to the chief, an indication that the area was under British rule.

The Gwandara Speaking People

Like the other ethnic groups in the territory, the Gwandara trace their origin outside the area they presently occupy. The Gwandara oral traditions claim that Kano in Hausaland was their original homeland before they migrated southwards to their present locations. Their migration from Kano was as a result of the pressure put on them to become muslims. According to this popular tradition, the people (Gwandara) preferred their traditional religion to the Islamic religion which they were introduced to. Rather than being converted to islam, they resisted by migrating from Kano as a protest. This group of people who resisted Islam and opted for their traditional practices were referred to as Gwandara, a word derived from Hausa language, *gwanda-rawa da sallah*, meaning, *we rather dance, than to pray*.¹⁶ *The main Gwandara settlements in the territory are, Gwagwa and Karshi.*

Other oral sources also indicate that those that resisted Islam migrated from Kano in protest against their chief who accepted Islam.¹⁷ They further migrated from Zaria towards Wukari in the then Muri province. From there, there were a series of migrations before they reached their present locations in the central part of Nigeria. A major town in the territory occupied dominantly by the Gwandara is Gwagwa, a settlement close to the Nnamdi Azikiwe Internatioal Airport, Abuja.

The Gwandara are noted for their love for their traditional music and dances; even though majority of them have accepted Islam, a religion which they hitherto rejected. They are known for using iron objects as grave goods as shown by their royal burial site in old Karshi, an abandoned hill top settlement.

The Gade Speaking People

The Gade speaking people, mainly occupy settlements like Kuje, Gwargwada, Gaube, and Kusaki. Tradition has it that they migrated from Doma in the present day Nassarawa state as a result of hunting expeditions. According to Naibi and Hassan, the migration of the Gade to the Abuja area was around 1750 A.D., because according to the authors, the Gade by 1825 when the Hausa of Zaria migrated to Abuja, they just had their second chief called Tsayi.¹⁸ From this oral source, Hassan and Naibi counted backward and arrived at 1804 as the year the Gade migrated to Abuja area.

The word Gade is said to be derived from a word in their language which refers to a kind of rat which the children hunted for, and used for treating nose breeding.¹⁹ Another Gade tradition asserts that during a hunting expedition by the first set of the Gade to migrate to the Abuja area, a hairless animal which was later identified as buffalo (*Kuzazaje*) was killed by them at a place now called Kuje. In reference to where the hairless animal (*Kuzazaje*) was killed, the people named the place *Kuzazaje*, a word which was adulterated to Kuje, a major Gade settlement. The Kuje settlement survives till date. The old Kuje settlement was surrounded by defensive earthworks (ramparts) covering not less than 5 kilometers in radius. Iron tools and implements were used for the construction of the defensive earthworks which oral tradition dates to the 18th and 19th centuries.

The people established a chieftaincy institution in the town of Kuje. The institution survives till date. They are known for their elaborate masquerades and traditional festivals.

The Bassa Speaking People

The Bassa are one of the major ethnic groups in the territory. Bassa oral tradition indicates that they migrated from Egypt through East Africa, then crossing the Nigeria/Cameroun borders to the central part of Nigeria where they presently occupy.²⁰ Another tradition claims that the Bassa are a stock of the Fulani Bororo (cattle Fulani), who were given cattle to raise but failed in the enterprise. Because of the failure, they are termed, *the people without goodluck*, which is Hausa language is, *ba sa'a*.

Another Bassa tradition also claims that the Bassa of Abuja area migrated from Kwonwoma, an area said to be located within the Zazzau kingdom and extending to Zamfara areas.²¹ The people further migrated southwards to the central parts of Nigeria especially the present day Kogi, Nassarawa, Niger states and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

Gwagwalada, in the Federal Capital Territory is one of the major Bassa settlements. Gwagwalada was said to have been established as a settlement about 1683 by a Bassa man called Gbajo Daruwana.²² Though the Bassa and the Gbagyi are not linguistically related, the two are mutually very close. They share settlements without conflicts. Apart from linguistic differences, they both have similar cultures especially the practice of carrying load on their shoulders.²³ They (the Bassa) are famous for their fishing activities and as such inhabit areas close to streams or rivers. They use fishing nets with iron hooks for fishing activities.

The Ebira Koto Speaking People

The Ebira Koto (Ebira Abaji) mainly occupy the south eastern flank of the territory bordering the present day Kogi and Nassarawa states. Their major town is Abaji and they live with other ethnic groups especially the Bassa, Ganagana and the Gbagyi. Oral traditions indicate that the Ebira together with the Igala and some other ethnic groups in the Niger Benue valley belonged to the so called Kwararafa confederacy which was claimed to be located on the upper Benue. The tradition also claims that the Ebira together with other ethnic groups especially the Igala migrated from the Kwararafa area as a result of chieftaincy disputes and population explosion. They migrated southwards along the Benue and settled briefly with the Igala at Idah before crossing over the Niger to their present day locations such as Umaisha, Toto, Igu (later named Koton karfi by the Hausa) and Abaji area of the present day Federal Capital Territory, Abuja.

The Ebira Koto, as they are popularly called are well known for blacksmithing activities. They produced the iron tools they needed and even sold to the Bassa and Gbagyi, their neighbours. They established the Igu and Opanda kingdoms in the 18th and 20th centuries.²⁴ These kingdoms were later attacked by the Bassa and later the Fulani jihadists.

The Hausa Speaking People

The Hausa (Habe) of Abuja, according to oral tradition recorded by Naibi and Hassan, migrated from Zaria as a result of the Fulani or the Sokoto jihad of the 19th century. According to this tradition, Muhammed Makau was reported to be the grandson of Bayajida. Makau was the ruler of Zazzau who was

attacked while on a prayer ground in Zaria his capital on the 10th day of the month of Zulhaji in 1804.²⁵ He was not prepared to fight back since he was caught unawares. He together with some of his men subsequently ran (migrated) south-west wards to the present day Suleja area (then Abuja). Makau was said to have met the Gbagyi, Koro, Gede, Ganagana and Bassa in the area on his arrival. It should be noted that before Makau and his men arrived the area, the people paid tributes to the Habe of Zaria.

In 1807, the Fulani jihadists pushed further southwards and attacked Zuba which was then inhabited by the Koro who hosted Makau and his men. The Fulani jihadists attacked Makau and his men at the gates of Zuba. With the assistance of the Koro who were great warriors, the Fulani jihadists were repelled. After the defeat of the Fulani, Mohammed Makau and his men in their bid to establish an area of political and economic control, attacked Opanda, Toto, Izom, Jiwa and Lapai. Makau died in 1825 in a battle and his brother, Abu ja (*the light complexioned Abu*), replaced him. He was made the first Emir of Abuja (now Suleja) on Sunday night, 10th of Sha'aban, 1825.²⁶ He made Abuja (Suleja) his capital from where he embarked on territorial expansions conquering parts of the present day Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. By 1902, the British forcefully attacked Abuja (Suleja) and killed the reigning King (*Sarki*), Ibrahim. This marked the formal British occupation or rule in the area.

Though this tradition is mainly centered on the Habe ruling dynasty in Abuja (Suleja), it should be noted that the area was a corridor of population movements between Hausaland and parts of central Nigeria. Factors such as the trans-Saharan trade, internal conflicts, the Sokoto jihad and the Nupe slave raiding activities in the area enhanced inter-group relations in the area in the 18th and 19th centuries A.D.

Conclusion

This paper discussed the geographical and cultural settings of the early inhabitants of the area now referred to as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Archaeological, historical, linguistic and oral sources support the antiquity of Man in this area dating to the Early Stone Age period.

The area of study for centuries was inhabited by different ethnic groups principally the Gbagyi (Gwari), Koro, Ganagana, Gwandara, Gade, Bassa and Ebira koto and the Hausa (Habe). The demographic landscape of the area changed in the 19th century mainly as a result of the Sokoto jihad of 1804. From the demographic history of the area, one could discern that the area of study experienced cross-fertilization of ideas which significantly affected the cultural milieu or settings of the area. The interplay between Man and his environmental settings significantly contributed to the evolution of Man's cultural and technological developments in the area.

The available archeological and historical evidence are not enough to conclude that there has been a continuity in human habitation in the area from the Early Stone Age to the 19th and 20th centuries to the poor state of archeological and historical research works in the area. There is the need for a thematic research effort in the early peopling of the area up to the 20th century so as to established the continuity or otherwise of the inhabitation of the area.

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