NIGERIA

The social and cultural habits of hunters in various parts of Niger State: An ethnoarchaeological study

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Introduction

This paper presents the social and cultural habits of hunters in various parts of Niger State in relation to the animals killed, butchery practices, and social relations of meat use. This is part of a study investigating aspects of subsistence among several different linguistically distinct rural communities, including the Nupe, Hausa, Gwari, Kambari, Kamuku, Dakkakari and Bassa in Niger State. Related information on fishing and farming practices has been published elsewhere (Aiyedun 1994, 1995a, 1995b).

The location of Niger State and its vegetation have been described elsewhere (Aiyedun 1994, 1995, 1995c). Here, I describe other aspects of hunting such as location, technique and mode, equipment and weapons used, people involved, and the species of animals, birds and snakes hunted. This also includes use, disposal and discard of animal by-products, described elsewhere (Aiyedun 1991). In Niger State, hunting is practiced in Zhigun, Yazhi and Doko in the Lavum Local Government Area; Batagi, Kanba, Katcha, Kowongi, and Kamberi in the Gbako Local Government Area; Essangi in the Agaie Local Government Area; Kuta, Godna, Kuchere; Zaidape in the Shiroro Local Government Area; Kontagora, Mariga, Bangi, Shadadi, Kumbashi, Lifari, Maundu, Kabogi, Sahun-Ramni, Ibi-Zurguma, Eged, Ragada, Masegu, Masuga in the Mariga Local Governmenmt Area; Yakila in the Rafi Local Government Area; and Masamagu, Rijau and Auna in the Magama Local Government Area (Figure 1 and Aiyedun 1995:30). The author studied hunting for subsistence among the Nupe at Kamberi, Katcha, and Essangi, among the Bassa at Yakila, among the Hausa at Katcha, Mariga, Sahun Rami, Masamagu and Kontagora, among the Kambari at Kontagora, Masamagu and Auna, among the Gwari at Kuta, among the Mamuku and Mariga, and among the Dakkakari at Sahun-Rami (Figure 1). In some places in Niger state, hunters are full-time specialists, obtaining animals year-round, by day or night. But more animals are killed in the dry season. In other places, hunting is done on a part-time basis, in the day time, and only during the dry season. Hunting is carried out individually, *ma halbi* or in groups of people, *ma farautu*, who are sometimes related, but usually not. Artifacts carried for bush hunting include bows and arrows, guns, knives, cutlasses and machetes, and dogs are used during the day. Although hunting is rarely the primary source of food, it does make a remarkably stable contribution to the diet. Societies of all kinds derive at least 20% of their diet from hunting of mammals (Lee 1968:42).

The net and trap (wire or iron framed) has the advantage in that prey need not be spotted visually to be snared. The net, *esa*, is much used by the Nupe hunters at Essangi while wire traps, *guru*, are very popular among the Hausa and Kambari hunters at Kontagora, Mariga and Sahun-Rami. Bows can bring down game over long distances or heights, as long as the prey is not visually obscured or the arrow impeded (Roscoe 1991:694). The dog is used for hunting, either for *ma halbi* in the day time and *ma farautu* in the dry season. Dogs are used for locating, tracking, bringing to bay or even killing; they are also important for hunting even very large animals (Washburn and Lancaster 1968:294). In the last seventy years, the gun has increasingly been used, in places in combination with the bow and arrow (eg. among the Nupe and Hausa at Katcha). The Nupe hunters at Kamberis combine gun use with trap hunting, as there is no tradition of bow and arrow hunting here.

Individual hunting (*ma halbi* among the Hausa, *fadai* among the Gwari, *ndache* among the Nupe and *mata* among the Kambari) is recognized as a family occupation practiced throughout the year. But group hunting (*ma farautu* among the Hausa, *ndachezhi* among the Nupe, *fwada* among the Gwari and as *ulingo* among the Kambari) is done occasionally, often in the dry season. Among the Nupe and Hausa at Katcha, individu-

Figure 1: Selected villages and towns studied for hunting in Niger State.

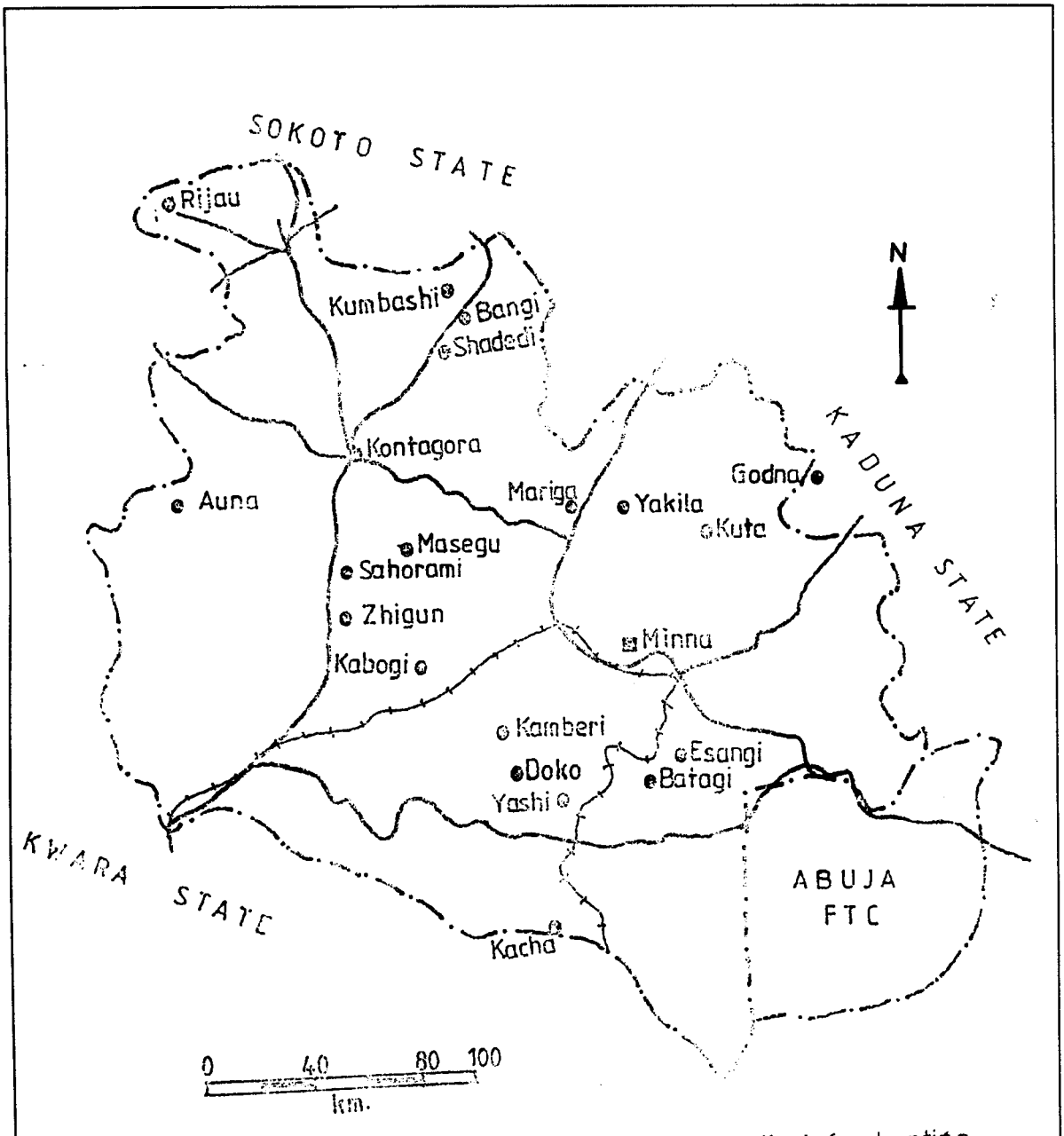

FIG. 1 Selected villages and towns studied for hunting in Niger State.

als hunt by day or night with bow and arrow or gun. Day hunting with bow and arrow among the Nupe and Dakkakari hunters at Sahun-Rami always involves one or two people, but night hunting involves at least five, who are often related. Among the Bassa at Yakia, bow and arrow hunting during the day need only involve one person, but could also be done collectively by up to ten people, who may or may no be related. Day hunting with bow and arrow among the Nupe of Essangi is done by individuals and groups of people numbering about thirty, relatives or non-relatives. Among the Kombari hunters at Auna, day hunting with bow and arrow is done by both individuals and groups during the dry season, while night hunting is usually done by individuals. Among the Gwari hunters at Kuta, bow and arrow hunting by day usually involves a very large group, not necessarily related, often combining a number of villages.

Individual hunting could take a person away for home for a day or serveral days. Group hunting takes hunters to distances ranging from 10 to 20 km away from home, but more often than not hunters return home the same day. The largest number of animals killed by a single hunter varies by group (one to two for Dakkakari and Nupe and Sahun-Rami, about three according to Gwari hunters at Kuta, three or four according to Nupe at Essangi and six to seven animals according to Nupe at Kamberi).

Rituals performed by Kambari hunters at Masamagu before hunting include: those that will enable the hunter to locate animals more easily, those which enable the hunter to kill highly prized animals such as *kanki, batsiya, bauna, maje, gwonki* and *gada (Table 1), and th*ose that enable him to get within range without being observed by the quarry.

Hunters in Niger State recognized more than 55 species of animals, birds and snakes. The animals are listed in Table 1. Snakes hunted include *mesa* (python), *gajera* (viper), *kasa* (puff adder), *kububuwa* (viper), *kummurci* (black hooded cobra), *kataba, bakoya* (water snake), *janasuri, miyaruwa* (water snake), *danyanhaki, teremasugi, biyarana* and *gadu* (boar). Birds include *kparo, shellu, gira, gbangba, enu-won, woshewoshe, godo, yiwayiwa, lungoi, gbalu* and *korokoro.*

Ways in which meat is butchered, prepared and shared vary from group to group. All animals killed are treated and processed before they are shared and butchered, as is done elsewhere (Lee 1982:219-226; Yellen 1991:1-26). This treatment, usually carried out in the bush, involved either skinning or burning animals. The method of sharing is dependent on a number of factors, including the number of hunters, method and technique of hunting, and the customs of the hunters involved. In most cases, animals are shared in the bush, but occasionally, depending on the species killed, they are shared out at home.

Among the Nupe net hunters of Essangi, sharing of animals is always done at home on an equal basis between the (up to) ten hunters involved. But the head goes to the leader of the group. An entire limb goes to whoever brings information about the animal in the first instance, which prompts the setting of the net. Animals are also shared with older male relations who remain at home; the intestines, liver and all other internal organs are reserved for them, and they can also choose which skins they want from all the animals killed.

Among the Nupe at Kamberi, who hunt in groups of five using iron-framed traps, the animals killed are shared equally after burning or skinning. If five skinned animals are not killed for equal sharing, the skins goes to the owner of the trap or farm on which the animal was killed. Sharing of certain animals takes place on the farm or at home, usually in the home of the oldest hunter. Skinned animals shared at home include *edu, ekogi, elogi,* and *gbakun,* while burnt animals shared at gome include *kana, ebe, etsuko,* and *kurege.* All other animals are shared in the bush once they are trapped and killed.

Virtually everywhere in Niger State where the *ma halbi* form of hunting is practices, the single hunter owns all the animals he kills; but he acknowledges the assistance and participation of family members and others in transporting carcasses home as well as help given by a guide when unfamiliar terrain is travelled. Among Kambari and Hausa hunters at Auna, when animals are brought home to be shared, one hind leg is given to the Sarki, ruler of the area whoch is recognized as the owner of the land; the intestines, liver and other internal organs are cut into pieces and shared among those who assisted in transporting carcasses home, while the lower part of the spinal column and innominate is shared by the

hunter's wives. Among Nupe hunters at Essangi, the ribs of animals killed are reserved as presents for neighbours, the internal organs are shared by the hunter's wives, the lower spinal column and innominate, *konkoso*, is given to the hunter's mother, and the head to the hunter's father. A single Gwari hunter will give the lower part of the back of the animal, *konkoso*, to his wife or wives; the animal's head goes to the hunter's oldest sister, or if he hasn't one, to his immediate junior sister, because she, by tradition, provides the money for him to buy his hunting weapons. A hind leg of any large game is given to the rule of the territory where the hunting took place (Saidu 1973:15); the rest of the animal belongs to the hunter's father who will then cut the animal into pieces. Among the Bassa hunters at Yakila, if a single hunter kills one large animal, he takes two hind legs removed from the femur and the innominate joint, *chinya*; the liver is usually reserved for the hunter's father, the lower part of the spinal column, *konkoso*, is shared by the hunter's wives. The head of the village is also given one entire front limb; the guide who shows that *ma halbi* the way gets the ribs removed from half the chest, *jarzo*, or the neck, *wuya*; the person who prepared the poison used on the arrowheads is given the heart; the head is uaully stripped open and cut, the fired and cooked and eaten by children and other relations in the compound.

Among Dakkakari and Nupe hunters at Sahun-Rami, when two people are involved in day time hunting with bow and arrow, sharing is often done in the bush, depending on a number of factors, such as number and species of animals killed. When only one is killed, it will be divided into three equal parts; the senior hunter (a title given to whoever acually killed the animal) takes two parts, while his partner takes the third. If the same species of animal is killed by both hunters,each will give the other some part of his own beast, usually an entire limb, so that an intact carcass will not be taken home by either hunter. If one hunter kills two animals and the other killed one, the first will share or butcher one into two halves to be taken by each. In night hunting at Sahun-Rami, which involves a group of five hunters, animals killed are shared or butchered into five portions. But those who did the actual killing will get a larger share. Among Bassa hunters at Yakila, bow and arrow hunting involving up to ten participants, leads to sharing kills in the bush. Each animal is usually divided into two parts; the actual killer takes the head, *kai*, as well as the lower part of the animal from the end of the ribs, including the hind legs, chinyoyi. The upper part including the ribs, chest and forelimbs, *jarzo da kafada*, is shared equally by the other hunters. Internal organs are often roasted immediately, and eaten in the bush by all hunters involved. Among Kambari and Hausa hunters at Auna practising *ma farauta* hunting, animals are shared and divided into two. One hind and one fore limb are given to those who participated in the hunt, while the killer takes the rest of the animal gome, regardless of number of animals a single hunter may have killed.

Among the Nupe and Kambari, animals killed by gun are all treated in the bush and shared. Regardless of number killed, the person who does the actual killing will take the head, entire hind quarters, skin, chest, and internal organs. The rest of the meat is then cut into smaller pieces and divided into four non-equal parts. They will be distributed so that the most senior hunters will receive the largest portions.

Other customs reflect perceived health hazards. In antelopes, the small intestines are discarded because people believe that eating them causes epilepsy; once antelopes are exhausted, they are observed to behave in an epileptic manner. Blood bladders of all animals are carefully removed and thrown away. Killing of animals such as deer is often avoided when hunters' wives are pregnant, in the belief that killing a deer will lead to the still-birth of the hunter's child. The heart and liver of lion, leopard and tiger are considered poisonous, as is the hair of the tiger and bush cat. These are always thorn away, and special care is taken when handling hair of tigers and bush cats.

In *ma halbi* hunting, practices of sharing the lwoer part of the spinal column and innominate with wives are similar in Gwari hunters at Kutu, Hausa and Kambari at Auna, Bassa at Yakila. Wives of Nupe hunters at Essangi share internal organs, but the *konkoso* is reserved for the hunter's mother. The head of the animal killed is reserved for the hunter's father, but for the hunter's oldest sister among Gwari hunters at Kuta. Among Gwari at Kuta, Kambari and Hausa hunters at Auna, one hind leg belongs to the *Sarki*, while among Bassa hunters at Yakila, one front

Table 1: Animals recognized and hunted in Niger State

Local Name	Common Name	Taxon
giwa	Elephant	*Loxodonta africana*
bauna	dwarf buffalo	*Syncerus caffer planiceros*
kanki	West African hartebeest	*Alcelaphus buselaphus*
gwanki	roan antelope	*Hippotragus equinus*
dodoka		
keji		
maraya	Western cob	*Anadonta kob*
maje		
gada	Grimm's duiker	*Sylvicapra grimmia*
kura	spotted hyena	*Crocuta crocuta*
jangada		
zaki	lion	*Panthera leo*
batsiya	oribi	*Ourebia ourebi*
damisa	leopard	*Panthera pardus*
tunku	slender mongoose	*Herpestes sanguineus*
bushiya		
begwa	porcupine	*Hystrix africaeustralis*
debgi		
kunkuru	tortoise	
gyanji		
zomo	Crawshay's hare	*Leous crashayi*
kurege	squirrel	*Heliescuirus gambianus*
kada	crocodile	
sari		
shinaki		
messa		
barewa	gazelle	*Gazelle rufifron*
dorina	hippopotamus	*Hippopotamus amphibius*
gyado	warthog	*Phacochoerus aethiopicus*
karen ruwa	wild dog	*Lycaon pictus*

limb is also given, since he his the owner of the hunting territory. In *ma farautu* hunting, animals killed are shared on an equal basis.

Nupe hunters at Kamberi provided a full description of butchering practices. The head of an antelope, *edu*, is first cut off with a knife; the animal is then placed on its back and an incision is made from the neck to the anus. A similar incision is made from the humerus-scapula joint of the right forelimb through to the hock. Next, the left forelimb is cut in the same way, then the two hind legs is cut from the femur-innomiate joint to

the toe. Removal of skin is done from the right forelimb to the left one, then the chest skin from the neck is stripped off down to the anus. Next the skin is strpped from the hind legs, by which time the whole skin is removed. This usually involves two people, one of make the incisions, the other to hold the carcass. This process usually takes about thirty minutes. Knife, axe, and cutlass are then used for butchering the animal. Links are first removed whole, then chest and stomach are opened to remove the internal organs. The cascass is now placed on its side with the neck on the left hand side of the butcher and the innominate to his right. Ribs are hacked form the vertebral column with an axe similar to that described by Yellen (1991:1) for the !Kung San. Pieces of meat will then be cut out with a cutlass or axe along lines drawn with the knife to determine portion sizes. When this initial butchering is completed, an entire forelimb, skin, head and internal organs will be given to the person who actually killed the animal. The remaining meat witll then be divided into four unequal parts. Before this happens, all the meat will be butchered a second time into smaller pieces, during which an entire limb is divided into four parts, the limb bones are further divided into two, each split with an axe across the midshaft. The pelvis is cut from the spinal column and the two halves of the innominate are separated (Yellen 1991:13). Then the remaining meat is divided into four unequal parts; the oldest hunter will take the biggest portion, while the youngest will take the smallest. The same procedure us used for burnt animals which can be eaten, such as *etsuko*, the grass cutter. The butchering of burned animals such as a warthog, *gyado*, which is sold rather than eaten, is performed as follows. The head is cut off before burning, but will also be burned. After burning, the chest is opened to remove the internal organs. The whole animal is then put over a fire for drying, which could take two days, then taken to market for sale. These is often done by the men themselves, and the proceeds are shared among the hunters.

Conclusions

This paper has been an attempt to document the social and cultural habits of hunters in various rural parts of Niger State. This state is one of the most rural ones in the Federation. Out of an estimated population (1979) of 1,623,704, 90.3% (n=1,601,779) are rural, while the remainder (n=171,474 or 9.6%) are urban (Idachaba 1985:631). On account of the dominance of rural people, cultural systems are still intact, so traditional knowledge should be recorded before informants disappear. Hunters recognize over 55 species of animals, snales and birds. This information can provide clues to native understanding of animals, and therefore aid archaeological classifications.

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