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# History of Archaeology in the Lake Chad region of Northeast Nigeria

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# Introduction

This paper attempts to examine the history of archaeology and its practice in the Lake Chad region of Northeast Nigeria. Archaeological practice is best understood within its methodological context. Based on this premise, one should ask, how do past methods contrast with the present, and what do we envisage for the future? In a nutshell, this study is aimed at describing past practices, and charting a course for the future archaeological practice in the region. The paper also focuses on the development of the discipline, its practitioners and their various methods of excavation, analysis and interpretation. The paper is organized into the following periods to reflect the various stages of the growth and development of the discipline: AD 1850-1960, 1960-1990, and 1990 to present.

# AD 1850-1960 (Colonial Period)

The colonial period in most regions in Africa lasted from about at least AD 1850 to 1960. This period set the stage for pioneering archaeological activities in the Chad Basin. While on exploration in Borno in 1857, Dr. Heinrich Barth, a geographer and a scientist, recorded mounds in the Firki<sup>1</sup>, particularly at Ndufu (Connah 1975:48). This became the bedrock of future archaeological reconnaissance in the region. Associated with the numerous mounds are massive sized pots, now referred to as "Sao pots", reminiscent of the legendary spurious Sao tribal group (Cohen 1962). In 1909 Boyd Alexander identified the Sao pots at Ngala and described their size, height, width and functional utility. Attracted by their massive size, A.J. Lethem, a British District Officer in Dikwa in 1922, described them in "modest excavations begun at Kaza"

(Connah 1975:49). He went further to give a general remark about the archaeology of the area; and mentioned several discoveries such as grindstones with a distinctive basal point, referred to by the local people as the "Sao hat"<sup>2</sup>.

The archaeology of the Chad Basin was brought in to the limelight in 1957 when A. Rosman and R. Cohen excavated at Birnin Ngazargamu, but the results were never published and the materials recovered were stored in the Jos Museum (Connah 1975:51) in central Nigeria. In 1959 A.D.H. Bivar and P.L. Shinnie conducted an archaeological field survey directed at studying the evolution of settlements<sup>3</sup> in the Yobe Valley. Sites include the most celebrated Sayfawa capital of Birnin Ngazargamu, Gambaru, Nguru and Garoumele. The year 1960 marked the end of colonialism in Nigeria and the emergence of nationalistic activities. Archaeological work continued in some parts of Nigeria such as Nok (Fagg 1962), Ita Yemoo, Old Oyo (Willett 1960) and Igbo Ukwu (Shaw 1970).

The general trend in the methodology and practice of archaeology of this period was the prevalent tradition of description of artifacts and sites. Another major concern was the identification and recording of monuments and impressive buildings; the data collected were used to locate ancient political centers and capitals (Holl 1990:298). Most practitioners were not trained as archaeologists, but they succeeded in making descriptive analysis and explanation of stone artifacts and river terraces. They included tradesmen such as military officers, administrators, school teachers, priests who recorded various kinds of information about peoples, languages, customs, geography, geology and archaeological finds (Holl 1990).

#### AD 1960-1990

No serious archaeological investigation had taken place in the Lake Chad region, other than the enormous surveys and excavations conducted by Graham Connah. In 1965 he excavated at Daima, and dug a few test pits at Yau, Borno 38 and Kursakata. Connah identified six types of sites in the northeast region of Nigeria. The tirst is the settlement mound found in clay areas (Firki), Lijelije (Borno 27) and Daima (Borno 29) and Kursakata (Borno 24) belong to this group. The second type is

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mound settlement in the sandy areas, such as Mufio (Borno 2), Yau (Borno 6) and Ajere (Borno 9). The third type is the flat settlement, consists of urban sites like Birnin Ngazargamo (Borno 16), Birnin Kafela (Borno 3) Shilma (Borno 70) Sadugomo (Borno 57), Seachawa (Borno 51) Ardoram (Borno 55) and Maidbe (Borno 89). The fourth type of site is usually a quarry site from which stones were procured for the production of grinding stones or ground stone axes. The fifth type is usually a burial within a settlement such as Gwoza (Borno 36) and the sixth is a surface exposure of stone age lithic material (Connah 1975:25-55).

Connah's (1975) Lake Chad work included the 1969 excavation of Borno 38. The site was first noticed by R.C. Soper in January 1964. The excavation consisted of two cuttings each of 3 x 2 m surface area. Artifacts recovered include ground stone axes, fragments of grindstones, and pottery made up of sgraffito, and roulette decorations. The excavation at Kursakata consisted of a single cutting 2.13 m<sup>2</sup>. The Daima excavation was on a massive scale with an overall dimension of 6 x 50 m at ground level and a depth of 11.50 m.

The year 1966 up to 1970 witnessed a turbulent period, due to the civil war fought as a result of the eastern region of Nigeria attempting to secede from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Archaeological undertakings in the whole country became paralysed as the chaotic situation was not conducive for any meaningful scientific research. The war came to an end in 1970 and in 1980, archaeological investigations were resumed in the Chad region by Graham Connah, in collaboration with Joseph Jemkur of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria (Connah and Jemkur 1982).

John E. Laver, formerly of Bayero University, Kano, and Wilhelm Seidensticker, formerly of University of Maiduguri, were able to identify and map sites which became useful compendium for researchers in the Chad Basin. They at one point published materials on the same region, with similar interest but with a different focus, Seidensticker and Garba<sup>4</sup> individually mapped Daniski.

In 1987 a canoe was reported to have been discovered by a cattle rearer Mallam Ya'u while digging a well, in the outskirts of a village named Dufuna. A preliminary excavation was conducted

by Abubakar Garba in collaboration with Joseph Jemkur of the Centre for Nigerian Cultural Studies, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria and Musa Hambolu of the National Museum Maiduguri. A chipped sample obtained from the canoe- was radiocarbon dated at the University of Kiel in Germany to 8,500 years.

### AD 1990 to Present

This period witnessed the involvement of German researchers in this region on a multidisciplinary scope and focus. In 1988 both the Universities of Maiduguri and Frankfurt am Main, Germany, signed a bilateral agreement of academic cooperation. The theme of the project is the history of culture and language in the natural environment of the West African savanna. In 1990-1991 the archaeology subproject headed by Prof. Dr. Breunig commenced reconnaissance survey of the North-East region of Nigeria. The work is a supplement and continuation of Graham Connah's efforts in the 1960s. Numerous sites were identified, but only Gajiganna A and B were excavated. The site revealed rockerstamped or rocked zig-zag decorative pottery, ground stone axes, stone arrowheads, etc.

In 1992 two pits were sunk in Galaga, a village visited in 1876 by a German traveller named Gerhard Rohlfs. The finds represent a recent settlement, as single brick and clay pipes were found in situ (Ozanne 1969; Phillips 1983). In 1993 Detler Gronenborn conducted excavations around the Kala-Balge areas in sites such as Mige, Ndufu, and Kursakata.

In March 1994 under the Maiduguri-Frankfurt joint Research Project, the Dufuna canoe was re-excavated by the archaeology team under the leadership of Prof. Dr. Peter Breunig. In 1995 an ethnoarchaeological inquiry was begun with the commissioning of a carver to recreate the canoe. It was thought that the knowledge of canoe making would soon die out, since plank canoes have gradually taken over the dugouts. In August 1996 the team made a reconnaissance survey of the Manga plains which yielded few results. Starting in September 1996, the team conducted an area excavation of 10 x 3 ms of Connah's Borno 38. Another mound close to Borno 38 is slated for excavation in February 1997. The team intends to pursue further the investigation along the Ngadda river and the Jere Bowl NYAME AKUMA No. 47 June 1997

as well as the Bin Plateau in search of ancestors of the Gajiganna Culture. If the above areas look promising, excavations will be shifted to these areas. The Dufuna canoe will be finally removed, preserved and permanently exhibited in Damaturu, the Yobe State capital.

# Methods and goals

Pioneering work was mostly carried out by travellers and art connoisseurs, people with little or no background in archaeology. The aesthetic properties of artifacts generated considerable interest, to the extent that in some parts of Africa archaeological finds were plundered and looted to Europe. During the colonial era, military personnel, administrators, anthropologists, etc. were involved in the excavation of finds, largely using unsystematic methods. In the Lake Chad region of northeast Nigeria, surveys, excavation and analysis of finds by Graham Connah in the 1960s was unique. Despite the paucity of facilities, Connah was able to describe a compendium of data for future archaeologists in the region.

Investigations and excavations conducted in the 1990s ushered in various technical skills of mapping, surveying and application of computers in archaeological analysis and reconstruction. All materials obtained from excavations during this period were subjected to specialist analysis. For instance, the stone raw materials were analyzed by Abubakar Garba (University of Maiduguri), skeletal remains by F. Van Noten (Belgium), pollen samples by Katharina Newmann (Frankfurt AM), pottery analysis by Karl-Peter Wendt (Frankfurt AM), ethnoarchaeology by Detlef Gronenborn (Frankfurt AM) and the general co-ordination by Prof. Peter Breunig (Frankfurt AM).

# Conclusion

The systematic study of archaeology in Nigeria is very recent. The pioneering works of the 19th century, though rudimentary and fragmentary, formed the bedrock for the stimulation of archaeological interest, which helped in the documentation and understanding of early Nigerian history in general and the Chad Basin in particular.

#### **Footnotes**

- 1. It is the Shuwa Arab and Kanuri name for the black clay of the plains south of Lake Chad. The word originated from an Arabic word Farak meaning to split (Connah 1975). The split nature of the black soil manifests itself after the rain water has receded.
- 2. A detailed illustration was made in 1959 by M.C. English in his book, *An Outline of Nigerian History*.
- 3. The study of these settlements resulted in the publication of an article in the *Journal of African History*, Vol.III(1), 1962, and in book edited by J.D. Fage and R.A. Oliver (*Papers in African Prehistory*). The title of Bivar and Shinnie's article is "Old Kanuri Capitals".
- 4. Laver's work was titled, "A note on Birni Gazargamo and Burnt brick sites in Borno Caliphate" while Seidensticker's paper is titled: "Borno and the East. Notes and hypotheses on the technology of burnt bricks", 1980. Seidensticker's work resulted in the publication entitled "Architectural survey of settlement on Daniski Plateau; Fika local government area, in *Annals of Borno*, the University of Maiduguri Journal. A. Garba excavated some test pits and analyzed their contents for a Master of Science degree in 1985.

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