

■ NIGERIA

Cultural Landscape Adaptation and Management among the Berom of Central Nigeria

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Introduction

This paper reports preliminary investigations conducted in April and May 2009, of archaeological and oral traditions among the Berom of Shen in the Du District of Plateau State, Nigeria. Berom people are one of the most populous ethnicities in Nigeria. Some of the districts in Beromland are Du, Bachi, Fan, Foron, Gashish, Gyel, Kuru, Riyom and Ropp. Each of these districts has a head that manages the affairs in his area of jurisdiction. He does this with the assistance of the village chiefs in the districts. Our study area is Shen in the Du District. Some of the villages or settlements forming this district (apart from Shen) are Gigirim, Kabong, She, Delimim and Zawan (Da Kim 2009 personal communication; Gwom 1992) (Figures 1 and 2).

The study area is located within the tropical savanna grassland vegetation. The landscape, usually characterized by scenic hills and valleys, is dotted with such savanna trees as baobab and acacia. The rainy season falls between mid-April and late August/early September. On the other hand, the dry season sets in around late September and ends in March. Tin, zinc, columbite and clay are some of the prominent mineral resources in Beromland (Adejuwon 1979).

Farming is the most common occupation of the people, just as in other rural societies in Nigeria. The people use hoes and cutlasses that are locally produced. The farmers often work on a cooperative basis in preparing pieces of land for cultivation purposes. This exercise involves cutting down the bush, allowing it to dry after which it is set ablaze. This is followed by mounding. Mounding is a laborious aspect of farming. Consequently, a lot of food is prepared for the hoeing party by the wife or wives of the

owner of the new farm. Berom men do this in turns until everyone has his own farm. But apart from providing food for the work party, the wife or wives is/are usually responsible for subsequent weeding in order to ensure good harvests. The Berom people practice both cereal and tuber forms of agriculture. Local crops include millets, sorghum, cocoyam, potato, cassava and yam. Berom farmers – men and women – usually fence their farms with cacti. This is an attempt to prevent the menace of domestic animals such as goats and sheep that often destroy crops.

Apart from farming, the Berom men do practice hunting to obtain protein. Much of this game meat is also sold at the local markets. Hunting can be done on an individual or group basis. Some of the locally available game includes cane rats, monkeys, antelopes and porcupines. According to the available oral tradition, Beromland was very rich in animal resources including tigers, elephants, lions and buffalos in the olden days. However, over-killing or indiscriminate hunting methods using bows and arrows and spears have led to the near total disappearance of these endangered animals. Local traps are fabricated by blacksmiths and are used to catch cane rats and antelopes among others. Although the Berom get the greater amount of their protein from game meat, parts of these animals are used in conjunction with other plant resources for medicinal purposes.

This underscores the reason why the local hunters generally are still held in high esteem by the people. Berom hunters normally celebrate the killing of dangerous animals like lions, hyenas and tigers. This is not a common occurrence in the face of environmental depletion. Skulls of such animals are fixed to the walls of stores found in each compound. The store is called *bwam* in the local language. The number of skulls of such animals is a reflection of the degree of bravery of a given hunter and the amount of respect he commands in the community. Indeed, they (the skulls) are complex metaphors to be appreciated beyond the sphere of aesthetics (Meek 1925). Other livelihoods of the Berom of Shen include blacksmithing, pottery making and wood carving. Smoking with the aid of locally made clay pipes constitutes an important component of the social life of the people. Tobacco is commonly smoked by both the elderly ones (males and females) as well as young adults. The bowl of a pipe is made of clay, while the stem or handle is carved wood.

Figure 1: Map of Plateau State showing Jos South Local Government Area (Source: Plateau State Government).



Understanding Human Settlements

Human settlement is principally about the conceptualization of, and use of, terrestrial space by a group of people in order to effectively address issues bordering on variables such as economy, security, peaceful co-existence, aesthetics and symbolism either in one time period or several time periods. It is the end product of a set of conscious efforts by a group of people to transform a natural space to a cultural experience in order to survive and make progress rooted in the world-view and social history of its members. A careful study of a given human spatial order, either at the archaeological level or in an ethnographic context, is capable of deepening or clarifying our understanding of the internal organization of the settlers as they adapt and re-adapt (whenever there is need to do so) with the passage of time to a set of environmental challenges (Ogundele 2004).

Settlement as a component part of human culture is highly encyclopaedic in character and scope because it straddles the spheres of material and non-material worlds. Not unexpectedly, studies of human settlements are robustly embedded in the domains of such subjects as archaeology, cultural/social anthropology, and geography. However, each of these subjects has its own array of methodological approaches

and perspectives for capturing the essence of human settlements. It is a truism that while the archaeologist examines settlements from a macro-time perspective (diachronic orientation), the remaining specialists describe and explain them (settlements) within a micro-time scale or synchronic framework.

The aim of this project is to develop an understanding of aspects of the settlement history and culture of the Berom of Shen from the pre-colonial/colonial/early post-colonial period to the ethnographic present. In this regard, the objectives are as follows:

1. To embark on a reconnaissance survey of the site, with the assistance of some local guides in order to identify the various categories of the cultural/material resources on the hilltop and their social and symbolic meanings.
2. To clarify our understanding of the people's settlement patterns and how these are linked to the all important subject of landscape adaptation and management through time.

Reconnaissance Survey

In Beromland, oral historiography and archaeology have been used to investigate the Shen hilltop site. Oral tradition has it that this hilltop site was settled by the Berom people who came to occupy the place from different directions and at different points in time in antiquity. The founding fathers of these people were known as Worom or Orom from which Berom derives as a unique nation or ethnicity. Indeed, Berom simply means "the migrating people". The occupation of the Shen hill complex was due to security reasons. One of the ethnicities or peoples constituting a security threat to lives and property in the region between the 18th and 19th centuries was the Fulani. The Fulani were generally more advanced in warfare strategies among other things than were the Berom (Gwom 1992).

The reconnaissance survey of the abandoned hilltop site was carried out with the assistance of some local Berom from the contemporary village in April, and a follow-up exercise took place in May 2009. Some bush clearing was done by the research team in order to improve the visibility of the hill complex. Suffice it to say that the ideal period to do archaeological fieldwork in the region is between late September and late March. This is the normal dry season when the vegetal cover is low, thus paving

Figure 2: Vegetation on the Shen Hilltop.



the way for thorough archaeological field research. However, we did the limited work we could in April and May 2009, given the tight academic calendar of the University of Ibadan. So far, only a section (the southern part) of the hill complex was surveyed. The exercise enabled us to have some insight into the nature and scope of the material expressions of the Berom of Shen in the Du district of Plateau State, Nigeria. The results (though preliminary in nature) will help us to embark on a full-scale survey coupled with excavations during the dry season. But in the meantime, five main categories of material evidence (aside from pottery) with respect to spatial behaviour have been identified as follows:

1. Local prison yard/house
2. Circular residential buildings
3. Rectangular buildings
4. Communal huts
5. Graves

One prison yard or house was discovered in the site. It is situated within the hilltop settlement and not at the periphery. This was where criminals were kept before they were finally sent to the paramount king of Beromland in Jos, the modern capital of Plateau State. Jos also doubles as the traditional headquarters of Beromland. However, available oral tradition has it that not all cases were referred to the Gbong Gwom, the supreme head of the people. It is pertinent to note that the concept of supreme headship was a colonial heritage. Such an institution never existed in the pre-colonial past in the region. The village head and his assistants working closely with the Du chief (the district head of Du) could easily settle many cases without the involvement of the overall king of Beromland. Offenders were usually tied to the strong wooden post/pole at the centre of the structure (building). This heavy pole carried the roof of the building. The roof did not rest on the walls in order to create some space for ventilation.

Figure 3: General Overview of a Section of the Shen Hilltop.

Judgements were based on fair hearing in order to ensure that peace reigned supreme in the community.

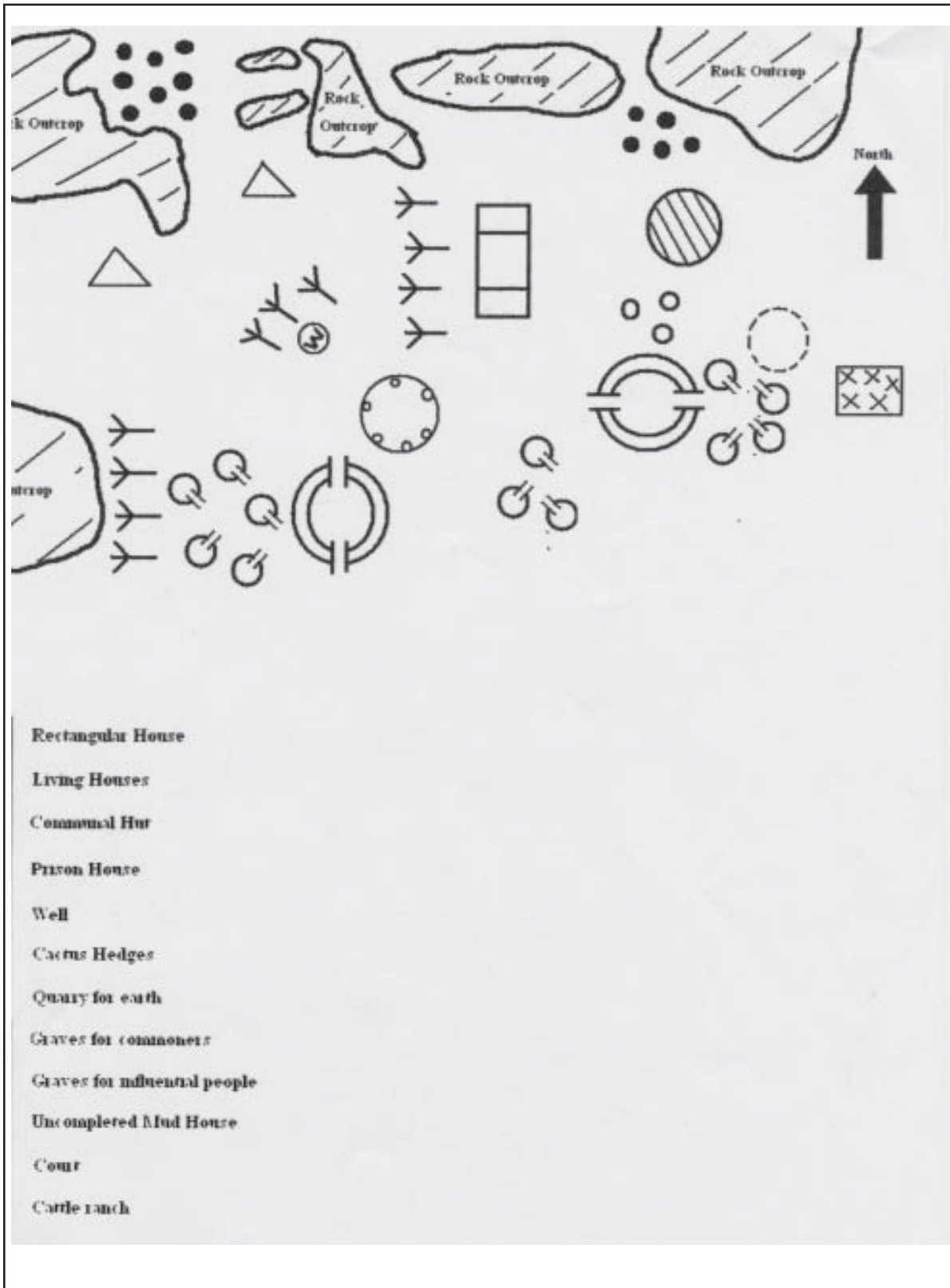
Every village or settlement has this kind of judicial system up to now in Beromland (Da Kim 2009 personal communication). This is a holy alliance between an indigenous heritage and a British value system. This indigenous public building is a symbol of social order, respect for human rights and the collective discipline of the people. The building is a bit isolated (about 8 miles away) from the residential structures. The architecture of this building is unique in order to ensure durability. Thus for example, both stones/boulders and mud were used to form the walls in an alternate fashion. The diameter was larger than that of the circular residential buildings.

One of the challenges for the archaeologist in the settlement site is how to accurately decipher the different occupation phases based on the surface and sub-surface material evidence. The relics of buildings and/or structures including the graves appear not to belong to one single occupation phase. For instance, the indigenous prison house on the Shen hilltop was a phenomenon that started during the

colonial period and it continues up to now (although with slight modifications). This was an adaptation of an aspect of a Western value or value-system (with regard to peace and conflict resolution as well as justice) to the Berom cultural behaviour. Indeed, the Shen archaeological hilltop settlement is a typical example of how facets of foreign ways of life could be profitably and by extension, critically embedded into a Nigerian culture.

The second category of structures has a circular form. Our informants claim that structures belonging to this group were used as living houses. They were normally single-roomed with a diameter ranging between 2.60 to 2.76 m. New couples among other categories of settlers could live inside such houses. At least 80% of structures (aside from graves) located on the hilltop were in clusters representing an extended polygynous and patrilineal family setting. Despite the constraint of habitable space on the hilltop, kinship system remains very significant to spatial configuration and/or patterning. The identified household clusters were usually fenced with cacti. There was no evidence of stone or mud walling systems at all in the site.

Figure 4: Southern section of the Shen Hilltop.



Rectangular buildings belong to another type of material evidence on the Shen archaeological hilltop complex. Relics of two such buildings were discovered on the surveyed portion of the site (Figures 3 and 4). One of them was a three-roomed apartment constructed with mud blocks. Oral tradition indicates that this very building had three doors – one for each of the rooms. This was the residence of the chief clerk of the community's court, where the head of Shen held sway to some degree. The second rectangular building was not completed before the final abandonment of the hilltop in 1962. This architectural mode is another good example of European (British to be specific) influence on the cultural landscape of the Berom of Shen in central Nigeria. Mud brick constructions (though a common feature in the indigenous architectural ways of life of most rural Nigerian societies), are a reflection of Nigeria's entanglements or contacts with the Western world.

The fourth building type was the communal or central hut for the members of a given extended polygynous family. This hut was larger (diameter-wise) than the living houses. Apart from serving as a resting place, the communal hut was also used for resolving minor conflicts among others. Members usually withdrew to the living houses to sleep at night. Only one communal hut was constructed for a given extended family, represented by the cluster of houses and kitchens on the hilltop.

Last but not necessarily least is the fifth category. This refers to graves. Graves are one of the prominent features of spatial patterning on the Shen hilltop. Two main types were identified and studied by us. For example, both archaeological field observations and oral historiography have enabled us to have some glimpses about the meanings and significance of these graves to the settlers' world-view, adaptation and landscape management. Suffice it to say that there is no ethnographic knowledge of this, because almost every Berom is now a Christian with different burial practices or traditions. In other words, the indigenous mortuary practices, with particular reference to grave architecture, have almost totally gone into extinction. Most contemporary Berom of Shen buries their dead relatives in cemented graves with crosses of different sizes in order to register their relatively new faith.

The first category of indigenous graves on the hilltop is called earth-cut or tunnelled burial chambers (Izumi and Motoki 1995). The mouth of this grave is represented or marked by an arrangement of circu-

lar stones with an average diameter of 85 cm. These stones were quarried from the Shen hilltop and slopes. Several such circular stone arrangements were discovered in the site during the archaeological fieldwork. The fairly dressed stones on top of these graves are called caps. Among some Berom communities, digging graves with iron implements like picks, cutlasses and hoes, is a taboo (Meek 1925). This shows that there are some slight variations in the Berom cultural behaviours despite the fact that the group belongs to a single ethnicity. For example, our informants in Shen claim that it is not a taboo to dig graves with iron implements in their locality.

Such a development could be a testimony to the oral tradition that says that different Berom subgroups came from different areas to settle on the Shen hilltop in antiquity. Influential members of the community like chiefs, elderly people, blacksmiths and adults generally were buried in earth-cut chambers in pre-colonial/colonial/early post-colonial times. At times, two or more chiefs were buried in the same chamber. One or two large boulders were used to cover the mouth of the grave after interment. It was after this, that some slightly dressed stones were used to mark it (mouth of the grave is about 85 cm in diameter). The second category of graves was usually located in between two rock outcrops on the hilltop. It has a broadly rectangular shape. According to the available oral tradition, only children were buried in such graves that lacked elaboration in several ways (Da Kim 2009 personal communication).

Was There Social Hierarchy in Pre-colonial Beromland?

The limited oral tradition and archaeological evidence suggest that the early Berom embraced communalism as a way of life. This knowledge was gleaned from the material evidence of their domestic spatial behaviour that is indeed, a complex metaphor. Houses were usually constructed on a cooperative basis and this philosophical orientation to survival and progress seemed to have enabled the hilltop settlers to construct a unique quality for themselves as a group. But despite this communalistic culture, semblance of non-egalitarianism can still be seen with particular reference to facets of the peoples' burial practices and use(s) of domestic space. Thus for example, influential or wealthy members, regardless of their gender, were buried within the living area(s) of the hilltop, whereas the poor ones had their graves located at the peripheries of the settlement.

These locations were symbolic – the former stood for success in life, while the latter is reminiscent of failure in terms of social and economic essence. This analysis shows that the Berom burial practices and use of domestic space are a world away from innocence. There is no gainsaying the fact that full-scale archaeological surveys and excavations of the Shen hilltop and slopes are most desirable in order to unlock aspects of the cultural adaptation and landscape management of the Berom of yester years.

Conclusion

The Berom of Shen in the Du District of Plateau State, Nigeria has a history of hilltop occupation. The contemporary Berom are mainly subsistence farmers growing such crops as millets, sorghum and a variety of yams in the adjoining plains. A preliminary archaeological field study was conducted on the Shen hilltop and slopes in April and May 2009. This was with a view to developing an understanding of the indigenous strategies put in place by the early settlers of this locality for cultural adaptation and landscape management through time. Prominent settlement features include graves, a prison yard/house, circular residences and two rectangular buildings. The Shen hilltop is certainly a landscape of entanglement or exchange beyond the shores of Nigeria. This is reflected in some of the material (cultural) evidence such as the prison yard/house and rectangular buildings. The picture shows that this site spans several chronological levels or strata – pre-colonial, colonial and early post-colonial. There is also good evidence of class distinction even in the face of communalism and a collective orientation. The preferential treatments of the dead, with respect to the architecture and location of graves, are an epitome of some degree of class consciousness among the ancestors of the contemporary Berom. It seems to us, that only detailed and thoroughgoing archaeological surveys and excavations in the region, can throw sufficient glimmers of light on the Berom landscape management strategies among other facets of the people's spatial behaviour (Kottak 2004).

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