AN ETHNO-HISTORICAL APPRAISAL OF THE CIRCULAR STONE HEAPS OF DUTSE DAWADI IN THE MAMBILLA PLATEAU, TARABA STATE OF NIGERIA

Richard, Tanto Talla

Department of History, University of Buea, Cameroon.

Accepted 29th September, 2013

ABSTRACT

The history of early settlements in this part of the world is fraught with a lot of constraints because of the prevalent activities of nature and man which have destroyed the evidence needed for such studies. This study appraises the circularly arranged stone heaps, found on some of the flat hill tops in the Mambilla plateau of Nigeria with a focus on the Dutse Dawadi Hill. This is meant to find out their origin; why the stones were arranged in a circular manner; and what they were used for? A reconnaissance survey of the site, helped in the identification of 47 of these stone heaps and some associated cultural materials such as broken pieces of pot or pot sherds, iron slag and a hollow stone. Oral traditions and ethnographic investigations conducted in the nearby town of Yelwa did not seriously assist in our understanding of the origin and function of the circular stone heaps. This was because, traditions of the five ethnic groups-Mambilla, Fulani, Kaka, Kambu, and Panso, which presently occupy this plateau, do not actually possess any information about these stone features. This raises the possibility that they knew nothing about the stone heaps, which were certainly erected and used as homes by the hitherto unknown inhabitants. On the whole, the study revealed that the hill tops were probably settled in times of war and the rocky hills provided the stones used in constructing the circular stone heaps.

KEYWORDS: Mambilla, Dutse Dawadi hill, Ethnography, Stone and Circular.
INTRODUCTION

The Mambilla Plateau (former ‘Mambilla Local Authority’ and ‘Mambilla Local Government Area’), occupies the southernmost part of Sardauna Local Government Area of Taraba State, Nigeria. It is bounded to the south and south east by the Republic of Cameroon. According to a 1990 publication of the then Military Governor's office in Yola, there are five main ethnic groups with both different and similar cultural heritages, which presently inhabit the Mambilla plateau. They include most importantly, the Mambilla, which is the most dominant ethnic group and after which, the plateau is named. Others are the Fulani, Kaka, Kambu and Panso.

The principal vegetation is generally, savannah and pastoralism is the main economic activity of the Fulani; while subsistence farming is largely practiced by other four ethnic groups. These two economic groups have always been at each others' throat as they compete for space for their activities. The plateau is also characterised by a series of undulating hills, which are intersected by narrow plains and valleys. These hills are an extension of the Bamenda Highlands, which stretch into Nigeria from the neighbouring Republic of Cameroon. It is evident that, at one point in the past, some of the flat hill tops in this Plateau were settled by man. A good example is the hill called Dutse Dawadi located on the southern environs of the village of Yelwa. This study therefore attempt an assessment of these circularly arranged stone heaps, found on this flat hill top in the Mambilla plateau of Nigeria. This is meant to find out their origin or source; why the stones were arranged in a circular manner; and what they were used for? A reconnaissance survey of the site, helped in the identification of 47 of these stone heaps and some associated cultural materials such as pot shards, iron slag and a hollow stone. Oral traditions and ethnographic investigations conducted amongst the present population in the nearby town of Yelwa did not seriously assist in our understanding of the origin and function of these circular stone heaps.

The Dutse Dawadi Hill

This hill is located about one kilometre south of Yelwa village, which lies on the trunk 'A' road that runs southwards from the Taraba State Capital, Jalingo, to the Sardauna Local Government headquarters in Gembu. Dutse Dawadi, which is about 250 metres in height, is a Hausa word which means "the hill of animals". Our survey of Dutse Dawadi revealed a total of 47 of stone heaps which seemed to have been intentionally arranged in a circular manner with some of them joined to one another. The western end of the hill top had a total of 29, the eastern part 15, while the remaining 3 were located to the north. The south had none of the circular heaps. The centre of the flat hill top was bare of the stone heaps except for scattered pot shards.

The circular stone heaps were not of the same size. In terms of diameter and height. 14 heaps with an average diameter of two metres were grouped as small. The remaining 33 with an average diameter of 3 metres were classified as big. These big ones were concentrated closer to the centre of the hill top which was more flattish, while the small ones were on the sloped edges of the hill top.

As mentioned earlier, ost of the circular stone heaps were joined to each other. In other words, some of the heaps did not exist as an entity but shared walls with the other heaps. The thickness of the walls depended on the size of the stones used, and it varied between 70cm to 80cm. There was also a stone wall which encloses the hill top on the western and eastern ends. These edges are easily accessible by foot, while the northern and southern edges are too steep for a man to climb. Other cultural features found on the site include stone pillars, hollow stones, iron slag and potsherds, which were randomly spread at different points on the hill top and even on the slopes of the hill.

For better comprehension of the circular stone heaps, we needed to understand the history of origin of the five ethnic groups, which presently inhabit the Mambilla Plateau and especially, the village of Yelwa.

Brief History of Origin

The Mambilla people are found in the Mambilla Plateau of Nigeria and the Tikar Plains of Cameroon. In Nigeria they consider themselves as the original inhabitants of this plateau, which is named after them. This is believed to have been their homeland for about 4,000 years. They are said to represent the Bantu who chose to stay back home following the Great Bantu Split of pre-historic times meaning they had their origin at the place.


This hypothesis therefore discards the theory of the Mambilla being one of the Tikar groups which migrated into the area from the east. Except for the Fulani, the other three ethnic groups generally have traditions, which claim their origin to the east, specifically, in Cameroon and even beyond.

Other three, which are Kaka, Kambu, and Panso, are part of the Tikar conglomerate of ethnic groups, which are believed to have originated from Ndobo, Kimi or Rifum in the Upper Mbam River of the Adamawa Region of Cameroon. They are said to have reached the area in successive waves. Their claim of a common origin or homeland is further strengthened by the existence of common socio-cultural institutions like princely societies, kingship and kinship relationships and similarities in language and marriage institutions amongst them.

Nfor a Kambu elder, on the other hand, maintains that the Kaka people who occupy the border villages of Inkiri and Antere, together with the Kambu and Panso are recent arrivals in the Plateau from the neighbouring Cameroon. They are believed to have settled in the area in their numbers, for economic reasons, as from the end of the First World War when the area came under colonial British administration as a mandated territory of the League of Nations. A greater number of the Kambu and Panso people are found in Cameroon, while the opposite is true of the Mambilla. The Kaka people are evenly spread on both sides of the Cameroon-Nigeria border to the south and south east.

On the other hand, Monod believes that the Fulani moved to the Mambilla Plateau from the Jos Plateau in Central Nigeria, after the discovery of tin mines in the early 1920s, which disturbed their pastoral activities. Fanso on his part argues that some of the Fulani entered the area and northern Cameroon, from the Chad Basin and Benue Valley during the Fulani Jihads which were led by Modibbo Adama in the 19th Century.

Nfor again, maintains that there was a sixth ethnic group on the plateau called Ndoro. Today, they are concentrated in a village called Duchiri located on the western flanks of the Mambilla Plateau and are in active trading contact with all the other ethnic groups on the Plateau. This assertion, however, lacks any tangible evidence. Interestingly, none of the traditions of these ethnic groups say anything about the circularly arranged stone heaps. This encouraged us to seek for ethnographic data to see whether it could contribute to the understanding of these circularly arranged stone heaps.

Ethnographic survey at Yelwa

Yelwa is a Hausa word not a word from any of the five ethnic groups presently inhabiting the plateau. The ethnographic survey of this nearby village did not reveal any evidence of circular stone structures, although, we identified circular buildings constructed with dried rectangular mud bricks. Such circular structures are particularly common amongst Muslims in towns and villages on the Mambilla Plateau and generally, in the Islamic northern part of Nigeria.

The circular structures in present day Yelwa village also contain single rooms, which exist as separate entities but are not joined to each other like some of the circular stone heaps on the hill top. These circular mud structures have foundations which are dug to between 50cm and 100cm deep, some of which are built with either shaped or unshaped stones.

DISCUSSION

It is unfortunate that, none of the traditions and ethnographic data provided any useful information on the circularly arranged stone heaps. Most of the circular stone heaps as earlier mentioned were joined to each other. In other words, some of the heaps did not exist as an entity but shared walls with the other heaps. The thickness of the walls depended on the size of the stones used, and it varied between 70cm to 80cm. Their heights also varied from one circular heap to another and this was principally caused by human activities such as cattle grazing and people criss-crossing the hills and its environs for hunting and farming.

Such activities have also contributed seriously in destroying some of the heaps. This is attested to by the series of footpaths and bare surfaces which are common on the hill. There is no evidence that foundations were dug before the construction of the circular stone heaps.

9S.Nfor Personal Communication. December 20, 2010
14S.Nfor December 20, 2010
15This is common with names of villages in the area which were changed especially by non-indigenes who had the instruments of documentation, for example, the neighbouring northern village of Benene is today known as Maisamari, a Hausa word meaning “owner of young boys”
Today, parts of the wall have been destroyed by cattle graziers. No wall was constructed at the northern and southern ends of the hill top because they have very steep slopes and the occurrence of large rock boulders which certainly, made human access by foot difficult. The stone wall enclosed the circular stone heaps on the eastern and western ends of the hill top. Those points seemed to have provided easy human access to the hill top by foot. No evidence also exists of any substance like mud or cement used to bond the stones which were carefully laid on each other.

Members of the five ethnic groups occupying the Mambilla plateau agree that the stone heaps are remains of homes. Yawi (Personal Communication July 26, 2010), maintains that it was the "white man" and specifically the Germans who constructed the stone structures as their homes. This claim is questionable, considering that the Germans came into the area in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when people especially the Mambilla group had long settled there. Tarla suggests that the Fulani, who were also recent arrivals in the area, were responsible for the stone structures. To him, they built the enclosing stone walls to prevent their cattle from falling off the slopes of the hill top. This is not convincing if we understand that pastoral economy generally requires vast land for the grazing of cattle. It is therefore obvious that the nature and size of this hill top could not have conveniently accommodated the Fulani and their cattle. It is clear that by the time the Fulani pastoralists arrived the area with their cattle from the 1920s, people had long been settled there.

Nfor claims that the Ndoro, who now occupy Duchiri village in Kurmi District, south west of the Mambilla Plateau, might have been responsible for the circular stone heaps. His claim is based on the probability that the potsherds found on the sites, are of Ndoro pots since the Ndoro people till date, are known for producing and supplying pottery products to most parts of the Mambilla Plateau, particularly, the villages of Yelwa and Maisamari.

Yawi, a former Mambilla potter questioned this claim. According to him, a group of the Mambilla people who live to the extreme south east of the Plateau along the River Donga, on the border with Cameroon are also pottery makers and could have been responsible for the potsherds ascribed to the Ndoro. He also argues that even if the potsherds are of the Ndoro pots, they are pots, which the Ndoro produced in their present location of Duchiri and sold to people on the Mambilla Plateau. He goes further to maintain that, there are even no good clayey soils in and around Yelwa village, which could have supported the production of pottery. This therefore means the source of the pottery products on Dutse Dawadi lies out of Yelwa village and its immediate environs.

It is common knowledge that in the early parts of human history, groups were involved in wars over land and its resources with each other. Hill tops then, offered one of the best secured places for habitation because from such a position, one could see the approaching enemy and be better prepared. Dogo, a Mambilla elder, believes that Dutse Dawadi hill was settled in times of war but fails to say exactly who the settlers were. However, according to him, who so ever were the settlers, took advantage of the availability of stones to erect these stone structures which they used as homes. Each circular heap served as a bedroom and a kitchen for a family. The maximum height of the walls of these stone homes according to him was about one meter. Wooden poles obtained from a small natural forest on the northern edge of the hill, were then planted into the walls. The ends of the poles were jointly tied at the top and thatched with grass to form the roof. It is understandable that no foundations were dug because of the stony nature of hill top.

Gambo is of the opinion that mud was certainly used to fill the openings in the stone walls. He also argued further that, when the wars were over and peace came to the area, the site was abandoned and the (perishable) poles and grass decayed. This exposed the circular stone structures to the natural forces of erosion, which washed away the mud that was used to close the openings and bond the stones. However, Ringah of the Kaka ethnic group is of the view that small sized stones and not mud were used to fill the openings, since soil was scarce or not available on the stony hill.

On the question why the structures were compacted, Ogundele, in a similar case in the Tiv land of Central Nigeria argues that this was a reflection of the local topographic realities and was meant to maximise the use of space up the hill top. We believe this explanation is also applicable to the Mambilla Plateau. The compacted nature of the settlement might have also given the inhabitants of this hill top, a sense of security which was certainly paramount in the settlement of the hill top. Nfor maintains that because of the compact nature, information, for example, about an approaching enemy could be easily spread from one person to another. This falls in line with the argument that the stone walls which were constructed to the western and eastern edges of the hill were amongst others, principally, for security or defensive purposes.

It is worth noting that in a similar vein, the earth walls of early Islamic or Hausa Kingdoms of Northern Nigeria, such as Kano and Zaria also served both the security and cultural needs of the people. In present day settlements in Yelwa, there are no stone or earth walls around homes, which are instead fenced with weaved grass called Zana in Hausa. Many still believe the Zana fence serves more as a cultural/Islamic religious need. The Islamic religion cherishes the privacy of homes of its members. Although, the grass fence satisfies the cultural/religious needs of the people, there is no doubt that, to an extent, it also serves to secure compounds. However, its effectiveness as a security implementing instrument is limited, because of its fragility. It can easily be broken through by enemies. Today, wealthy families are using moulded blocks and even zinc to fence and secure their compounds.

CONCLUSION

The Mambilla people, who are believed to have been on the Mambilla plateau for about 4,000 years, are regarded as the original inhabitants of the region. As noted earlier, they are said to represent the Bantu who did not leave their homeland following the Great Bantu Split of early times. However, the issue of who amongst the five ethnic groups “owns” the Mambilla plateau had some time in the past, been exploited by politicians to cause social/political unrest, which led to fatalities and destruction of property in the area in the 1980s.

It was hope that this study will clearly reveal who constructed these circular stone features and by extension, why and how they were constructed. However, traditions collected from the ethnic groups in the area are silent on them. Ethnographic data, and ethnoarchaeological analysis, have not also fully helped in the reconstruction of these circular stone heaps. It is for this reason that one can conveniently say that the issues of origin and chronology of these stone features have not been answered yet. Could it then be that the origins of these circularly arranged stone features date very far back in time; and as far as the Mambilla ethnic group, believed to be the original settlers of this Plateau, are concerned, knowledge of it has disappeared over the years as the traditions are transmitted from one generation to another?. Until this is determined, there could therefore, be a hidden possibility somewhere out there that, there were people on this Plateau before the Mambilla group that dominates the area at present.

This seems to logically fall in line with what Tata, now a retired high school history teacher once told me in a conversation in 1990. He was of the opinion then that, the circular stone heaps were probably the product of the first or original settlers of the Plateau other than the Mambilla, whose identity we do not know for now. He maintained further that the group certainly operated a centralised system of government with socio-political structures which coordinated the construction of the circular stone structures as homes. According to him, the group either became extinct before the “emergence” or coming of the Mambilla group to the area or, was defeated by the Mambilla and forcefully absorbed into a new socio-political order-the Mambilla order. With time, these original settlers started practicing the culture of their Mambilla masters, and as a consequence, their culture gradually waned over the years. To him, this might explain why all the traditions of present day occupants especially, that of the Mambilla ethnic group are silent on the circular stone heaps because they were not the makers.

I thought then that his conclusions were sentimental, but today and after this study, I feel a bit reluctant to think so anymore.

However, we all know that, stories of wars fought and won occupy a central place in the oral/migratory histories or traditions of most ethnic groups in indigenous Africa. They usually pride themselves especially, in how they won war battles, and against whom such victories were obtained. If any of the five ethnic groups especially, Mambilla, defeated and subjugated the authors of these stone structures such information should have been proudly, part of their traditions of origin. Unfortunately, this is not the case as none of the tradition of origin collected from this ethnic group and others, has said anything about the origin, authorship and chronology of these circularly arranged stone heaps.

A site called Mbajeng with similar stone features also exists amongst the Mbom ethnic group who inhabit the Nkambe plateau. Information on the authorship and origin of these circularly arranged stone features on the hill top of Mbajeng does not also constitute part of their traditions of origin.

Unfortunately, these circular stone features on both sides of the Bamenda Highlands, are being destroyed daily especially by pastoral activities, which are prevalent on hill tops in the area.

26 Abdullah Saki, Personal Communication. September 22, 2011. He is a 69 year old Mambilla of Muslim faith and resident in Yelwa village. His compound is fenced with Zana more to ensure the privacy of his compound and his three wives.
27 See D.Zeitlyn & B. Connell, 2003
29 Ibid
It is therefore obligatory for the Nigerian government and its Ministries of Culture and Tourism to seek immediate ways of protecting these archaeological/cultural sites before they are completely destroyed. This is because they do not only constitute part of the cultural heritage of the people of this region, but if well preserved, they will certainly serve as tourist sites in this largely unexploited area of Nigeria.

Most urgently, the State and Federal governments need to financially, sponsor archaeologists, anthropologists, linguists, ethnographers and historians to undertake more research in the whole of the Bamenda Highlands so as to ascertain the true authorship, origin and chronology of these circularly arranged stone features in the region. This will definitely go a long way to augment the historiography on early settlement history of this region. Until this is done, it is prudent for all the principal ethnic groups in the Mambilla Plateau and the neighboring part of the Bamenda Highland in Cameroon, to continue to live as one by showing love to each other and refuse to be manipulated by those who want to use the issue of autochthony to achieve their selfish aims.

Although, we cannot for now categorically, say who was responsible for the circular stone heaps, it is certain that it was not the Germans as some informants claimed, and whoever erected them, used them as houses. The presence of hollow stones on the site is evidence of food grinding activities by the people who settled on this hill top. Above all, there is no doubt that, amongst the five ethnic groups in the Mambilla Plateau today, the Mambilla ethnic group after which the plateau is named was the first to have occupied the area. This, unquestionably, explains why they are widespread in the area and why some few months ago, they rightfully took over the paramount leadership of the Plateau from the Fulani who had held it since the jihads of the 19th century. The rest of the ethnic groups are recent arrivals who came in especially, during the Colonial period.

REFERENCES

Interviews

1. Abdullah Sali, Personal Communication. September 22, 2011. He is a 69 year old Mambilla man Ardo Goni March 27, 2010. 76 years old, present day local Fulani chief.
2. Dogo Ibrahim, July 26, 2010. 82 years old, former Mambilla hunter.

Secondary Sources


Figures

Fig. 1: A cross section of the circularly arranged stone on part of the Dutse Dawadi hill top.

Fig.2: A section of the stone wall on the eastern side of the hill top.

Fig.3: A hollow stone in the midst of one of the stone circles.