

**Prospects and Challenges of Oral Traditions and Ethnography for
Archaeological Reconstructions
A Case Study of Tivland, Nigeria**

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Abstract

An archaeological reconstruction of the history and aspects of the culture of the Tiv of Central Nigeria has benefitted enormously from the systematic use of models generated from oral traditions and ethnography. Suffice it to say that oral traditions are up to now a very important means of storing and disseminating information in all its ramifications among the Tiv. Similarly, there is a great degree of continuity in the material culture of the people through time and space. This makes ethnography an indispensable area of knowledge for culture-historical reconstructions in Tivland. The ancestors of the present-day Tiv of Benue State of Nigeria entered the region from the northwestern part of Cameroon at least five hundred years ago according to the limited dates at our disposal. Our representative approach to the collection, sifting and interpretation of oral traditional and ethnographic data was aimed at reducing the minuses of these areas of anthropological scholarship to the barest minimum.

Key words: Tivland; Oral Traditions; Ethnography; Hilltop settlements; Planetabling; Pottery.

Introduction

This piece of work examines critically oral traditions and ethnography for archaeological reconstructions in Tivland. It shows that oral traditions and ethnography even though have some weaknesses, are very useful for peeping into the past lifeways of a people. But the conceptual and methodological frameworks must be rigorous in a scientific sense! Many historians, anthropologists and other scholars in related subjects are making great efforts to restructure their current mode(s) of inquiry. The target of all these activities, is to make the past come more alive than hitherto (Peoples and Bailey 1999: 64-73; Andah and Okpoko 1979: 201-224; Ogundele 1989: 20-30). It is pertinent to note here that the human past is basically too remote to be reconstructed in its entirety. This explains the reason why models are usually generated from subjects such as botany, zoology and geography. Most archaeologists working in Africa (where there is a considerable amount of continuity between the past and present behavioural traits) are becoming more aware of the need to proceed from the known to the unknown. That is to proceed from the known (ethnographic level) to the unknown. This involves comparing archaeological discoveries or artifacts with the closest analogous system. By so doing, the archaeologist can reduce racial or other types of prejudice to the barest minimum. Indeed, this methodological approach has been very helpful in clarifying our understanding and appreciation of the socio-cultural life of the Tiv of Nigeria. But despite all these efforts, the archaeologist must remember that he is only constructing a past that is still largely meaningful to him. In other words, it is impossible to “know” the past culture of a people in a holistic way. Our reconstructions are only glimpses of the past (Orser and Fagan 1995: 12-20; Gamble 2001: 8-40).

Oral Traditions and Ethnoarchaeology: A Definition

Oral traditions are a body of social, economic, political, religious and demographic experiences of a human group, preserved and transmitted from generation to generation by

word of mouth. These testimonies of the past are never in their final form until they have undergone some rigorous scientific refinement. This means that oral traditional data if not methodically gathered and analysed cannot be a valid source of history. Indeed, oral traditions are a combination of chaff and grains. The chaff arises from errors of omission and commission. The grains represent the “truths” that remain after the “winnowing”. But as an important communication strategy in most African societies up to now, oral traditions cannot be totally jettisoned simply because they have some weaknesses. A great deal of messages about African values, value systems and history would certainly be missed if oral traditions are not given pride of place (Ogundele 1990: 15-50; Andah 1983: 1-22; 1988: 20-30; Law 1973: 13-15; Afigbo 2002: 11-14; Trigger 1968: 11-28).

Ethnoarchaeology

Ethnoarchaeology is a specialism of anthropology. It means the ethnography of a people for archaeological reconstructions. Given the fact that archaeology is a material science to a great degree, ethnoarchaeology focuses more on the tangible aspect of a human culture. This involves such things as settlement, pottery, storage structures and burials. But ethnoarchaeology if properly handled can effectively address issues like ideology and symbolism through their material correlates (Hall 1996: 33-69; Ogundele 2004: 20-50). Tivland offers a lot of ethnoarchaeological opportunities largely because of the high degree of continuity in the material behaviour of the people from the archaeological past to the ethnographic present. This is in addition to geographical contiguity.

Oral Traditions: A Methodological Perspective

This study which benefits to a great extent, from the pioneering works of scholars such as Bohannan (1954), Downes (1971), Makar (1975), Abraham (1933) and Gbor (1974), is an attempt to address the issue of oral traditions in Tivland primarily from a representative

perspective. This is with a view to reducing defects or weaknesses of Tiv oral traditions to the barest minimum. However, the representative model used for collecting aspects of Tiv oral traditions is not exactly in terms of number. This is because of the constraints of time, money and human resources. This sampling is to be understood basically from the point of view of age and status (position/rank in the investigated community) of each interviewee (Ogundele 2004: 18-30).

As a result of the investigations of oral traditions and field walking in the study area, we have been able to do the following:

- (a) locate sites of archaeological importance, especially with regard to Tiv settlements. These settlements were located on the local granitic hilltops and slopes.
- (b) test the reliability of oral traditions as a historical source of information particularly for identifying and locating sites. This is in addition to delimiting different kinds of settlements purportedly established by the Tiv from the archaeological past to the ethnographic present.
- (c) test the reliability of explanations proffered in these traditions about the factors responsible for the socio-cultural arrangements reflected on the landscape, particularly technological and subsistence arrangements.
- (d) determine to some extent, the amount of continuity and/or change that has taken place through time in these settlement arrangements.
- (e) formulate hypotheses about how long and how far back in time various Tiv groups have lived in the identified settlement units and then test them archaeologically through such activities as planetableling and excavations.

Tentative site sequences have been established as a result of the above efforts. The data collected from Binda, Ikurav-Ya, Nnanev and Shan-gev-Ya areas indicate that Binda, Kpe and Bako were the first set of hills occupied by the Tiv groups on their arrival from the

northwestern part of Cameroon in pre-colonial times. The exact location of this original homeland is yet to be known. However, Swem or Wo-son Kwala within the Bamenda hill complex in north-west Cameroon, has been suggested by available oral traditional data as the point of dispersal of the Tiv into the Benue Valley (Ndera 1991 – personal communication). Kpe and Bako hills are located within the Ikurav-Ya clan – the nearest neighbours of the Turan people on the extreme south-south east of Tivland. Other hills like Mwomomdo, Ushongo, Tse-Dura, Mkar and Ikyuen are thought to have been occupied later by the Tiv (Andah 1983: 23-27). Most of the people interviewed said that from the time their ancestors entered the Benue Valley, they migrated from one hilltop to another, until they finally settled down in the plains in the early part of the 20th century. They explained that their constant movements from one hilltop to another was due to attacks from their neighbours such as the Jukun and the Fulani.

Locations were chosen at random for these interviews. In the Binda area, interviews were held in seven settlement units, while in Tse-Dura/Adikpo area, six settlements were investigated. This exercise was aimed at obtaining a good representation of the opinions of the people about their settlement history. Throughout, we made use of an open, minimally structured method of approach. This was to enable the interviewees to relate their local histories as freely as possible. At Tse-Dura in the Adikpo area as well as at Adzegeer and Wombo in the Binda locality, over five people responded to my questions almost simultaneously. This was an attempt to check exaggerations or errors of omission. The younger ones (between 17 and 24 years of age) also served as checks and balances in some instances.

On the issue of when a man or woman could get married, they all seemed to agree that the age might range between 25 and 30 years. However, there is no law restraining anybody from getting married earlier than the age range just mentioned. On the basis of the above-

mentioned information, we have ascribed thirty years (30 years) to a generation. So far, seven genealogical charts have been constructed for the two localities (Adikpo and Binda). It is pertinent to note that these genealogical charts can only give us some idea about how long the specific Tiv lineages or sub-class under investigation settled. Thus, for example, a date approximately 240 years ago (18th century A.D.) was obtained for Tse-Dura/Adikpo area, while for Binda area, we have a date going as far back as about 210 years. So far, the genealogical data have not provided us with dates about the earliest Tiv settlement history, but rather a reasonably good picture of minimum time-depth. Such relative chronology can be tested archaeologically later by radio-carbon dating.

Tiv Ethnographic Settlement: A Methodological Perspective

Two present-day compounds namely: Tse-Agwa and Tse-Dura in Adikpo area and five in Binda were plane-tabled. The present-day settlement units investigated in the latter locality were as follows: Wombo, Tse-Gbashanam, Adzege, Lukposo and Alumuku. All these compounds are located in the plains around the Tse-Dura and Binda hill complexes. The ethnographic work was done principally from the standpoint of spatial arrangements of various structures like houses, granaries and burials, in our efforts to infer social organization and duration of occupation of the historic sites. Indeed, archaeological situations were formerly ethnographic settlements. In the latter case, we were, in addition to planetabing the settlement units, able to observe the economic, social, and political set-up of the group of people being studied. The organization of the Tiv on the ground was studied at the individual, family and inter-family levels. A knowledge of how the people conceive space is necessary for the proper understanding of the archaeological settlements of the hilltops and slopes. From the planetabing exercise, we can learn a lot about how the people in a given settlement arrange themselves on the ground as well as how they make, use and dispose of some of their material items such as pottery and houses.

In addition to the ethnographic studies which were to establish site and artifact distributions, patterning and trends, purely archaeological investigations were also carried out. This involved the reporting of the location of sites, their sizes, composition and the nature of the distribution of artifacts, among other things. Thus, for example, we now know that all the present-day settlements grade in shape from circular to oval. Similarly, settlement lengths ranged from 36 to 72 metres, while the average width was 38 metres. All the houses in each of these settlements were also circular in shape with the exception of Tse-Agwa, Tse-Dura, Lukposo and Adzege, which had one or two rectangular, non-traditional houses. These houses were constructed of sun-dried mud bricks. Only Tse-Gbashaan had one of the houses constructed of mud using the coiling method. This is the technique of house construction immediately the ancestors of the contemporary Tiv descended from the hilltops to the plains. We identified 3 house size categories as determined by the diameters of their floors as follows:

- (a) houses ranging between 4 and 5 metres (small).
- (b) houses ranging from 6 and 7 metres (medium or intermediate).
- (c) houses (which serve as central meeting places) ranging between 7.5 and 9.5 metres (large).

In all these settlement units, the medium-sized houses were more in number than the other two categories.

One of the common features of Tiv settlement is the central meeting or resting place found in each compound. Each central meeting place was represented by a big circular hut. Newer houses were usually located farther away from the others. All the settlements, with the exception of Adzege, had fowl coops attached to some of the circular houses in addition to separate coops which were fewer in number. Adzege's compound had only separate

coops (3). The separate coops were circular in shape, while the ones attached to living houses were either square or rectangular in shape.

Burial sites were usually located inside settlement units. A burial site was located to the north-east of Tse-Gbashaanam compound. This burial site was about one metre from the nearest dwelling house and fifteen metres from the central or communal hut. In Adikpo and Binda at least 3 hearths (a hearth is an arrangement of 3 stones used as a cooking place) were located outside the dwelling houses, while some were situated inside the houses. In addition to all these, Tse-Gbashaanam and Wombo in the Binda locality had house structures being used as kitchens. Investigations revealed also that two circular bathplaces – spaces fenced round with sticks and mats, but without built-up walls or roofs – were found in each of these compounds and their diameters ranged between 2 and 2.5 metres. Each bathplace had a boulder of an average size of 32cm at the centre for standing the bucket on, or for the person bathing to stand or squat on.

Pottery Technology and Functions

Aspects of modern Tiv pottery technology especially modes of manufacture and decoration, were also studied in an effort to gain some idea of the technology of manufacture and stylistic traits of the historic Tiv populations. The decision to utilize this approach, as the nearest fitting system for the analysis of finds, was based on our recognition of the fact that the assumption that artifacts can speak on their own is wrong. In fact, artifacts are silent and it is hardly surprising that many investigators who hold to the assumption that the artifacts can speak on their own tend to impose a system which is derived usually from their own cultural and educational background, and thus presume a universality to artifact types.

Ethnographic work carried out at Tse-Dura near Adikpo and Adia approximately 6 kilometres north-west of Katsina-Ala has also revealed that not all the particles or quartzite found inside potsherds were deliberately added to clay to serve as temper. Some of them

entered the clay accidentally during the process of manufacture, i.e., when the women are treading on the mass of clay to soften it. Therefore it was difficult to separate those quartz particles that were deliberately added to clay to reduce its plasticity from those that were incorporated by accident. This remains a knotty issue for the archaeologist to solve when analysing excavated pottery from this study area.

The Tiv divide up their vessels into categories on the basis of function and/or morphology. Thus far, we have been able to identify six pottery types. They are as follows:-

1. ***Tie-ki-tashi*** – they are globular long-necked pots either with everted rims or slightly out-turned rims. Such vessels are used for preparing *burukutu* (local beer from guinea-corn) or occasionally for storing water. Mat-impression appears to be the predominant decorative motif on *tie-ki-tashi* pottery. *Tashi* is the Tiv word for *burukutu*.
2. ***Shawa*** – these usually have everted rims and are used mainly for fetching and/or storing water. This category of pots is usually decorated with mat-impression.
3. ***Gbande*** – are vessels used among other things for serving food as well as drinking water. They usually have slightly in-turned or slightly up-turned rims. Carved wooden and string roulettes as well as composite decorations are commonly used on small vessels like *gbande*.
4. ***Buufu*** – are perforated pots. They are used for smoking fish and drying meat. They are usually short-necked globular vessels.
5. ***Chenge*** – are large bowls for frying groundnuts (occasionally) and garri, a local Nigerian food, prepared from cassava. The rims are usually slightly in-turned.
6. ***Tsua*** – refers to pots used principally for cooking food such as yams and groundnuts. *Tsua* vessels are also used for cooking/preparing medicinal drinks. They are generally small vessels without turned rims.

Investigations have shown that such vessels as *tie-ki-tashi*, *shawa* and *change* are normally thick-walled, while *gbande* and *tsua* are *thin-walled*. It is pertinent to note, however, that the level of expertise of each potter, especially with regard to handling clay, may give the archaeologist a wrong impression in his reconstruction of past pottery. Thus for example, a *gbande* pot which is normally thin-walled may be produced as a thick-walled vessel by a learner potter or dabbler, given her little knowledge of handling clay (Ogundele 1990: 20-70). Such a situation when found in an archaeological context, is capable of distorting the facts of history of the Tiv (Ogundele 2004: 10-30).

Four main vessel types and two sub-types have been identified from the excavated material from Adikpo and Binda archaeological sites. These include:

- Type 1.a. Globular short-necked pots with everted rims (length of neck ranges between 14 and 25mm)
- Type 1.b. Globular long-necked vessels with everted rims (length of neck ranges between 26 and 32mm)
- Type 2.a. Globular pots with slightly in-turned rims
- Type 2.b. Vessels with slightly out-turned rims
- Type 3. Vessels with slightly up-turned rims
- Type 4. Vessels with out-turned rims

These ancient vessels appear to match, at least in morphology and thickness, the ethnographic pottery which we have studied so far. It is difficult to ascribe particular decorations to certain vessel types in the archaeological context. This can be explained against the background of the fact that the rims from which vessel types could be reconstructed were not decorated. However, *shawa* and *gbande* which are for fetching/storing water and serving/eating food respectively composed the largest number of finds. These vessel types are referred to in the archaeological classifications as Types 1(a)

and 2(a). It is most probable that the reconstructed vessel forms from the archaeological excavations were used generally for similar purposes as those of the present-day. However, there is the possibility of slight changes in function through time. One can say that there is some considerable degree of continuity in potting traditions from the proto-historic/historic times to the ethnographic present among the Tiv. Potsherd and charcoal samples from two of the excavated trenches were dated. The potsherds were dated by the pre-dose technique, while the charcoal samples were dated by C-14 methods. The results show that the oldest vessels from the site, from the lower cultural phase, were about 450 years old (16th century A.D.), while the pottery belonging to the upper phase ranges between 180 and 160 years old (18th century A.D.) (Sanni 1989: 59-64).

Similarly, studies on present-day settlement units have helped to clarify our understanding of the archaeological situations despite the lack of adequate structural remains. It is important to mention here that in spite of the limited habitable space on the local hilltops, a considerable degree of non-randomness was still observed with regard to setting up house structures and by extension, social organization. Each of the clusters, made up of at least six structures of different sizes within a large walled enclosure, appears to be the equivalent of a present-day compound/settlement unit. This shows that the Tiv who settled on these hilltops still maintained their separate extended family identities as reflected on the ground by the spatial configuration of house clusters. This is the backbone of the Tiv essence in all its ramifications (Ogundele 2004: 10-25; Alagoa 1973: 10-18).

Conclusion

Investigations have revealed that a considerable amount of knowledge can be derived from the oral traditional and ethno-archaeological opportunities, which are in abundance in Tivland. Thus for example, we have succeeded in unraveling some of the knowledge systems of the ancient Tiv, via this methodological approach. In the sphere of pottery technology, a

considerable amount of information has been obtained with respect to morphology and function from the archaeological past to the ethnographic present. Similarly, some light has been shed on aspects of the kinship system or organization of the ancient Tiv, to a large extent, from a model generated from extant ethnographic situations. We now know more certainly than hitherto that settlements in ancient times were nucleated or at least semi-nucleated as opposed to the dispersed mode of settlement arrangements which obtains today among the Tiv. The ancient settlement arrangement is directly a result of prevailing socio-economic and ecological challenges. Those challenges necessitated the living together of a number of families and/or super-families (sub-lineages), on a given hilltop. Such groups could easily mobilize in the face of external aggression. It is now evident that a multidimensional approach to the study of aspects of Tiv culture history has proved very rewarding with particular emphasis on analysis and interpretation.

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