Some Indigenous Knowledge Systems in parts of Central Nigeria

Samuel Oluwole Ogundele
Deptartment of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria
E-mail: oluwoleogundele@yahoo.com

Received 5 January 2004; revised 25 October 2004

The paper deals with the mechanisms (social and technological), responsible for landscape transformation through time among the Tiv, Ungwai and Gwari of Central Nigeria. The research methods adopted are enshrined in oral history, ethnography and archaeology. The methods have enabled to develop an understanding and appreciation of such cultural traits or knowledge systems as architecture, building and subsistence practices particularly soil conservation. Research findings have also revealed that despite the fact that the peoples are located in the same Guinea Savanna zone, they differ to some degree, in terms of spatial behaviour and ecological adaptation. It seems that this development is connected to their different social values as well as histories. It is against this backdrop that research gains its relevance as a crossroads of social value systems, histories and ecology.

Keywords: Central Nigeria, Ethnography, Oral traditions, Archaeology, Granaries, Traditional storage structures, Traditional cultivation, Traditional houses

IPC Int. Cl.: A01G1/00, A01F1/00, A01F13/00

Ethnographic and archaeological investigations from 1982 till-date in parts of Central Nigeria have shed more light on aspects of settlement patterns, architectural traditions and farming behaviour among the Tiv, Ungwai and Gwari peoples. Tivland is located in the middle Benue Valley region that stretches from about 6°30’N to 8°N and from 8°E to 10°E. The area is well watered by rivers and streams such as Benue, Katsina-Ala, Amire-Tamen, Amire-Kiriki and Ambighir. Tivland in the southeast shares a boundary with northwest Cameroun1,2.

On the other hand, Ungwailand is located in the Kaduna river valley. The Ungwai are one of the major ethnic groups in the area. The Ungwai live interspersed with peoples like Kamuku, Gwari and Hausa. Some of the local rivers and streams are Kaduna, Koriga and Mariga3,4. The area is to the North of Minna – the capital of Niger state. They also have a tradition of hilltop occupation like the Tiv. On the other hand, the Gwari like the Ungwai – their neighbour, are basically subsistence farmers growing crops such as sorghum, beans and yams.

All the three ethnic groups are located in the Guinea Savanna region which is transitional between tropical forest and drier savanna e.g. Sudan Savanna. Rainfall is the most vital element of the broad research area, as indeed elsewhere in the tropics. This has a direct bearing on the nature of vegetation, the people’s agricultural practices, their modes of settlement and some other facets of culture.

The Tiv, Ungwai and Gwari have some common cultural traits as well as variations. The similarities and dissimilarities in the management and utilization of the natural resources available in their environment same as their ethos can be explained against the background of their specific social histories, challenges and expectations. Therefore, the mode of research – a crossroads of anthropology, archaeology, environment and tourism will go a long way in reshaping our perception and interpretation of the present with respect to sustainable development in Nigeria same as other parts of the global village.

The indigenous ways of life, which we generally malign as a result of ignorance or truncated education about heritage issues, are central to ecologically sustainable development in all its ramifications. Nigeria and other parts of the world with viable indigenous knowledge systems have to link up with their roots in order to avoid the danger of being swallowed up by the ravaging stream of history and modernization. The need to appreciate and appropriate the past in the present more than ever before cannot be contested in the face of environmental degradation and cultural disorientation that threaten our planet generally. It is against this backdrop that the paper gains its relevance.
Methodology

The research methods were rooted in oral history, ethnography and archaeology. The present-day Tiv live in the plains or lowland areas, unlike their ancestors, who occupied the local hilltops and slopes. The most distinctive feature of these people is that they migrate a lot within the broad territory (Fig. 1). But despite this mobile mode of settlement behaviour, the Tiv has a comparatively stable socio-political organisation and well developed oral traditions. Oral traditions are transmitted from one generation to another. In this context, oral traditions were used for locating archaeological sites and for making inferences about when such settlements were occupied and how they were constructed. That is to say that the oral traditions – an indigenous Tiv knowledge system, were used among other things for establishing site sequences.

This study area, (Tivland) was divided into four parts – East, West, North and South, for the purpose of collecting oral historical, ethnographic and to some extent, archaeological data. In each part, six settlements were investigated.

The study populations cutting across age, sex and social status for oral history or traditions included:

1. Heads of settlements/compounds
2. Priests/religious leaders
3. Elders – males and females within the age of 50 - 90 years.
4. Young adults – males and females between the ages of 8 - 49 years.

At least 5 elders were interviewed on aspects of their history and culture in each of the above settlements. Similarly, all the priests and/or religious leaders in each of the sampled settlements were interviewed. An open system (minimally structured approach) was used for collecting oral traditional data. No tape recorders or questionnaire methods were used to collect the data, which allowed the interviewees to mix up as freely as possible and to reduce mistrusts or suspicions to the barest minimum.

Each of the settlements was revisited for crosschecking. Ethnographic data were also collected from each of the above settlements, using at least two local informants. This exercise focused on the use of space including farming. Six settlements or compounds from each zone (four in number) were mapped using the planetable method. Such settlement features as living houses, storage structures, kitchens, bath places, communal meeting huts, compound gardens, burials and drying racks were mapped. Distribution of household utensils in some of the structures was also taken into account during the plane tabling exercise. Archaeological reconnaissance and excavations of parts of Tivland were based on the available oral traditional and ethnographic data. Local informants took part in this exercise. Reconnaissance was done by climbing up and traversing the local hilltops and slopes settled by the ancestors of the Tiv. Prismatic compasses, tapes and rulers were among the main items of equipment used.

The average elevation of the study area is 500 m above sea level. The local informants/guides (usually local hunters) helped a great deal in locating some hill forts among other important archaeological artifacts. So far only two localities, Tse-Dura/Adikpo and Binda complexes have been intensively mapped and excavated out of the numerous sites.

Research work in Ungwailand commenced in 1991 is still going on. The methods used were broadly similar to those of Tivland. Data were obtained from relevant oral traditions, ethnography and hard archaeology. This was after dividing the region into northern and southern zones.

Three settlements were investigated in each of these two zones. This involved visiting the most paramount leader of the area – the Emir of Kagara. He and his high chiefs were properly briefed about the mission in Ungwailand. The Emir sent messages to the local community heads about the research work in order to pave the way for cooperation and support.

In the northern part, Tanko Wakili, Yelwa Kabitu and Katako were examined, while in the southern section, Daji, Dodo and Yaya Koriga was examined. The Ungwai, just like the Tiv of the Benue Valley region, also have a tradition of hilltop occupation in ancient times. The interviews, unstructured open approach, were informal making it possible for the younger members of each settlement to participate. Some of these local communities were revisited after a year for rechecking the information earlier collected.

This zoning was also used for collecting ethnographic data about aspects of the spatial behaviour of the people with respect to the location of storage facilities (yam stores and granaries). The exercise involved the recording of settlement features like pots and other household utensils inside some structures. A participant-observation method was
adopted for such activities as roof making, soil conservation and granary construction.

Fieldwork was limited to oral history and ethnography among the Gwari people who live interspersed with the Ungwai. This was because the Gwari people have no tradition of hilltop occupation. They moved to that part of the Kaduna river valley relatively recently. Apart from Niger State, the Gwari are also located in other places like Kaduna and Nasarawa states as well as the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. Very limited fieldwork was carried out in the settlements of Bako, Kuyi, Gomna and Pago. These sites were randomly chosen in order to have some fairly representative picture of the settlement patterns and general culture of the Gwari. The study populations for collecting ethnographic data and limited oral traditions are similar to those of the preceding two ethnic groups (the Tiv and Ungwai).

These people, late immigrant communities in the region provided maximum information about how they use and manage space. As usual, an unstructured open system was adopted for collecting data. Similarly, a planetable method was used for mapping some of the ethnographic settlements. This was with a view to clarifying our understanding of the patterns of distribution of features in each settlement. Settlement features such as living houses, granaries, goat and bird shelters, kitchens and burials were mapped for a better understanding of the internal spatial organization of the Gwari.

Results

Oral historical investigations among the Tiv show that their ancestors came from the direction of northwest Cameroon and entered the Middle Benue Valley in ancient times. They occupied the local hilltops for security reasons. Tiv later descended to the adjoining planes when relative peace began to reign supreme in the land towards the end of the 19th century.

The houses of the Tiv were circular in shape with each settlement having a central or communal hut called Ate. The central hut usually has a very low mud wall or wooden supports/posts. The living houses have their roofs resting on the walls, but with no wooden posts. The general morphology of the Tiv settlement ranges from circular to oval shape. The roof frame constructed on the ground is then lifted on the house wall like an inverted cone.

After this, the braided sword grass is wound around the conical roof from bottom to top. This roof projects out. The walls of the Tiv houses are usually made of sun-dried mud bricks using plastic mud as a mortar. A settlement hives off from the old stock when a member of the compound wants to get married and is rich. Such a new settlement is very close to the mother compound (settlement) usually between 10 - 30 m.

All forms of construction particularly granaries, living houses and communal huts are done on a cooperative basis. The head of the settlement presides over this exercise. Every building material is locally sourced. All the Tiv indigenous houses are circular in shape, single-roomed with single entrance. Some of the living houses have coops attached to them (Plate 1). Yam stores are usually located at the periphery of a settlement (Fig. 2 & 3).

Three house size types, based on the diameters of their floors, identified in the area are as follows:

1. Small houses ranging between 4 - 5 m
2. Medium or intermediate houses ranging between 6 - 7 m
3. Large houses, which serve as central meeting places ranging between 7.5 - 9.5 m

The medium-sized houses are more numerous than the other categories. Burials are usually located at the peripheries of a settlement, although occasionally, a dynamic head is buried inside the central hut. Drying racks are located inside the open space within a settlement and they (racks) are sometimes also used as kitchens. In other words, a drying rack can have a dual function. A tripod of stones serves as the cooking structure (Plate 2). Every settlement has a kitchen garden with crops like groundnuts, cotton and different types of vegetables. Poultry droppings and animal wastes are mixed with the soil in the garden.

Mapping of some of the archaeological hilltop settlements shows that the features were in clusters. The houses circular in shape were constructed with granitic boulders quarried from the hilltops and slopes. The ancestors of the present-day Ungwai migrated from Niger Republic to the Kabitu hill complex and its environs. They first settled on the Kabitu hills before the downhill migrations much later (about early 20th century A D). The date for the initial settlement in the Kaduna river valley might not have been later than about 18th century A D.

Ethnographic surveys have shown that the indigenous houses are round in shape and are
constructed with sun-dried mud bricks. The thatched roof projects out. Each settlement has an enclosure for cattle located at the periphery of the village, which is fenced round with dry guinea-corn stalks. Some Ungwai settlements are also fenced round with dry guinea-corn stalks. Cooking hearths are usually located outside living houses. Similarly, the base of a granary serves as a coop. This base or stand made up of about three or four boulders is covered with mud leaving one entrance for fowls. Some bases are not covered with mud. These granaries are either globular or angular in shape. Each of them has a clay lid lined with a mixture of cow dung and a local plant.

The Gwari settled in the area, in the early 20th century A.D. The Gwari adult male apart from being a farmer, is also an architect cum builder. He relies on the locally sourced materials for obtaining a built environment. These materials include stones, mud, grass, sticks and ropes. Ungwai settlements are generally oval or circular in shape. The houses at the peripheries are incorporated into the compound fence. Among the architectural forms of these people are granaries, goat houses/shelters and living houses. It takes up to two or three weeks to complete the construction of a granary and at least, two men are involved in this exercise. A granary has three main parts, base, superstructure and roof. The roof structure is made separately on the ground and then lifted on the walls of a granary (Fig. 4). At least three people are needed at a time to do roofing.

All the living houses among the Gwari are single-roomed, the floors are plastered with clay. Clay flooring is done after a house has been roofed. The thickness of clay floors range 3–4 cm. Goat houses are similar in construction techniques to those of living houses. Occasionally, a structure made of sticks and ropes (usually rectangular or square-like) is made directly at the back of the goat house. Bird shelters are generally smaller in diameter.

Most Ungwai settlements have antechambers. Each antechamber has two entrances – one leads people inside the chamber and the other directly into the compound or settlement. The antechamber is the largest structure in a given settlement averaging 4 metres in diameter.

Discussion

Despite the general ecological similarity, there are some variations in the spatial and technological behaviour of the three ethnic groups. That is the Tiv, Ungwai and Gwari. The present-day Tiv are the descendants of the hilltop settlers in ancient times at least some 500 years ago. This interpretation is based on the available C-14 dates. The use of mud bricks today (in the lowland) as opposed to stones (on the hilltops) in building houses is a reflection of different local topographic conditions. But despite this, the round concept is still maintained. The identified clusters (representing family groupings) and the archaeological hilltop sites such as Binda and Tse-Dura were most probably the equivalent of compound or settlement units today in the plains. Direct archaeological information about the roof structure could not be known in the face of the vagaries of environment as well as passage of time. But oral traditional information same as ethnographic evidence suggests that the roofs of houses and granaries among other structures in the past were similar to what obtains today. The projecting thatched roofs were for preventing rain and sun from entering the houses.

The mapped tripods of stones on the hilltops were cooking structures while the roughly oval shape were probably burials. A powerful and highly respected settlement/compound head is buried in the central/communal hut when he dies. This is a mark of honour. The use of poultry droppings enriches the soils especially kitchen gardens and farms that are not too far away from a settlement13,14.

Soil maintenance strategy among the Tiv is same as the Ungwai and Gwari. The granary supports show that cultivation of cereals in Ungwailand has some considerable antiquity. The Tiv on the other hand, have few granaries. In Ungwailand, the numbers of granaries are larger in some settlements reflecting the fact that cereal cultivation is much more prominent there than Tivland. Similarly, the small-sized stone structures might have been used as goat/sheep houses – a phenomenon that is still common today in the area. The Ungwai have no central huts for relaxation or meetings. Meetings and relaxation among other things take place under a tree or trees within the courtyard or at the back of a settlement.

The Gwari of the Kaduna river valley, often fence round their settlements with mud for security reasons and privacy. The houses, granaries and goat houses located on the edges of a settlement are incorporated into this fence that has an antechamber. The antechamber with 2 entrances enables the settlers to maintain great privacy and security. This is a spatial behavioural trait unique to the Gwari. Both clay and
Fig 1 Tiv Living House with a Coop

Fig 2 Drying Rack being used as a kitchen in Tivland

Fig 3 Evolutionary model of Tiv settlement systems

A - Drying rack outside a hut
B - Drying rack inside a hut
C - Granary showing a raised platform
D - A yam store

Fig 4 Tiv Storage Structures

1 - Central meeting hut without wall
2 - Central meeting hut with wall
3 - Kitchen with two cooking structures
4 - Living house

Fig 5 Granaries among the Gwari and Ungwai

Fig 6 Circular foundations of major Tiv structures
potsherd floors are devised for keeping their houses neat. All the three ethnic groups (the Tiv, Ungwai and Gwari) have roughly circular settlements (with circular houses) reflecting their cosmic view. They believe that the universe is round and therefore each settlement or compound is a microcosm of the world.

Acknowledgement

Author is thankful to Professor Bassey Andah for introducing to the Benue Valley Research Project. Author is also indebted to the Niger state Council for Arts and Culture for sponsoring the Kaduna Valley research project. In addition, wholeheartedly thanks are due to Miss Nike Oguntokun for her enormous assistance in the field, my wife (Olajumoke Ayodeji) and children for holding the fort during several field trips.

References