

A Critique of Some Ethnographic Reports on the Peoples of the Central Jos, Plateau, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This Paper critically examines some of the ethnographic reports on the peoples of the Central Plateau area in the Jos Plateau region of Nigeria. The report, largely influenced by the perspectives and motivations of colonial administrators, grouped various ethnic groups, including the Angas, Mwaghavul, Pyem, Ron Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip Tal, Fier, among others, based on their perceived migration histories, linguistic similarities, and cultural influences. However, this critique interrogates the accuracy and validity of such groupings and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the region's socio-cultural dynamics. Drawing on alternative sources and perspectives such as Genetics, this critique challenges the assumption of a single ancestral stock for these tribes, as suggested by the ethnographic report. It argues that the colonial administrators' categorization may have been driven by administrative convenience rather than a comprehensive understanding of the complex migration patterns and cultural interactions in the region. Furthermore, the critique emphasizes the limitations of relying solely on linguistic evidence to establish cultural affinities and connections among these tribes. While linguistic similarities can provide important insights, they do not necessarily indicate a shared cultural heritage or a singular ancestral lineage. The socio-cultural behaviors and practices of these tribes, despite demonstrating certain similarities, also exhibit distinctive features that challenge the notion of a homogeneous group.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Studies on the indigenous peoples of the Jos Plateau in Nigeria have evolved through three main phases: early archaeological investigations, colonial-era ethnographic compilations and the emergence of Plateau-born scholars from the mid-1970s onward. While the third group of scholars challenged the biases and inaccuracies found in colonial accounts, particularly the over-simplified and stereotypical representations of Plateau societies, many of the earlier ethnographic reports continue to influence academic and popular understandings of the region's history and cultures.

Despite significant strides made by indigenous scholars in reconstructing more accurate and comprehensive histories, there remains a gap in the systematic critique of colonial and ethnographic narratives using contemporary theoretical frameworks. Further critical engagement is required to reassess earlier ethnographies through lenses such as postcolonial theory and ethnoarchaeology. This paper, therefore, seeks to address the persistent impact of reductive colonial representations by critically examining select ethnographic reports on the Central Jos Plateau using these theoretical approaches.

INTRODUCTION

The Jos Plateau is located in Central Nigeria and Information about the area is derived from archaeological, historical, oral tradition, Linguistic, and ethnographic, studies. The various accounts provide some form of collaborative information that aids our understanding of the entire region however, there were historiographical issues surrounding the early history of the study of the Jos Plateau (Mangut 2015). Early writings on the Plateau, such as those by European travelers in the 19th century, relied heavily on information provided by Hausa traders. The accounts of early 19th-century travelers, traders, Islamic historians, and ethnographers were mostly misrepresented. For example, the works of Vogel (1855), Schauenburg (1859), Rohlf's (1871), Orr (1911), and Barth (1965), were based on second-hand information obtained from the Hausa traders and cannot be solely

relied upon for a comprehensive understanding of the region's history (Mangut 2015).

Indigenous Studies on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria could be conveniently divided into three categories. The first category is the early archaeological studies conducted by people like Fagg, (1942); Soper (1964) and York (1968). The second category is the early colonial compilations by the likes of Temple, (1922); Meek, (1925 and Ames, (1934). The third category is what could be described as the rise of Plateau scholars from the mid-1970s by the likes of Aliyu (1972); Gonyok, (1973), Agi (1975), Tambo (1978), Banfa, (1981), Isichei (1981), Mangvwat (1984), Nengel (1990), among others. Most of these third category of scholars who were indigenes and examining Plateau societies from their own perspectives argued that a lot was left to be desired, particularly with regard to the second category of researchers. They argued that the stereotype description of the peopling of the region was inaccurate and demanded serious revision. Their contributions laid the foundation for the critical study of Plateau history which has greatly improved our understanding of the peopling and cultures of the Jos Plateau. However, Mangvwat (1984) was the first to attempt the novelty of periodization and categorization of the history of the Jos Plateau peoples.

According to oral and colonial sources, it is estimated that there were around four hundred chiefdoms in the Central Nigerian Highlands during the colonial conquest period. Each chiefdom represents a distinct entity for research purposes, highlighting the complexity and diversity of the region. Interestingly, evidence suggests that certain parts of the region had experienced little change since ancient times by the end of the 19th century (Mangvwat 2010). Archaeological research on the Jos Plateau has not only focused on material remains but has also incorporated inter-disciplinary approaches. Ethnographic studies, oral traditions, and written sources have been utilized to complement the archaeological findings, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the region's cultural history (Mangut, 2023). These diverse sources of information have facilitated the interpretation of archaeological features and the reconstruction of past lifeways, social organization, and technological practices. While ethnographic sources have provided information, the ethnographic report on the peoples of the Central Plateau was largely influenced by the perspectives and motivations of colonial administrators, who grouped various ethnic groups including the Ngas, Mwaghavul, Ron Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip Tal, Fier, among others, based on their perceived migration histories, linguistic similarities, and cultural influences. However, the accuracy and validity of such groupings highlight the need for a more nuanced understanding of the region's socio-cultural dynamics. Drawing on alternative sources and perspectives such as genetics studies, this critique challenges the assumption of a single ancestral stock for these tribes, as suggested by the ethnographic report. It argues that the colonial administrators' categorization may have been driven by administrative convenience rather than a comprehensive understanding of the complex migration patterns and cultural interactions in the region. Furthermore, the critique emphasizes the limitations of relying solely on linguistic evidence to establish cultural affinities and connections among these tribes. While linguistic similarities can provide important insights, they do not necessarily indicate a shared cultural heritage or a singular ancestral lineage which has become widely accepted. The socio-cultural behaviors and practices of these tribes, despite demonstrating certain similarities, also exhibit distinctive features that challenge the notion of a homogeneous group. The paper reviews the report of J. H. Molyneux on the Sura tribe (also known as the Mwaghavul people), the report of H. M. Frewen on the Pyemawa tribe, and the reports of Major Edgar, H. S. W. Edwards, and Col. Foulkes on the Angas tribe, as well as the paper by Murray Last on "The Early kingdoms of the Nigerian Savanna".

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative methodology, combining critical textual analysis of colonial-era ethnographies with secondary literature, oral traditions, and archaeological interpretations. Sources reviewed include reports by J. H. Molyneux, H. M. Frewen, Major Edgar, H. S. W. Edwards, Col. Foulkes, and Murray Last's seminal work on the early kingdoms of the Nigerian Savanna. The study also proposes the integration of future genetic research to substantiate or refute historical claims of common ancestry.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the critique of selected ethnographic reports on the peoples of the Central Jos Plateau, Nigeria, this study employed Post-colonial Theory and Ethno-archaeology as its theoretical framework.

Post-colonial Theory, particularly as advanced by scholars like Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, interrogates the authority, neutrality, and motivations of colonial narratives. Within this critique, it is used to expose how colonial and early ethnographic accounts tended to group distinct and diverse communities into homogenized categories which is an act that oversimplified their internal diversity and obscured their unique historical experiences.

Ethno-archaeology, on the other hand, serves as a complementary lens through which the relationship between material culture and contemporary social practices is examined. In critiquing the ethnographic texts, this approach helps highlight how archaeological findings when interpreted alongside oral traditions and ethnographic observations, offer a comprehensive reconstruction of the social structures, settlement patterns, and technological developments of the peoples of the Jos Plateau. Together, these theories facilitate a critical reassessment of ethnographic representations, challenging reductive portrayals and advocating for more contextually-grounded interpretations.

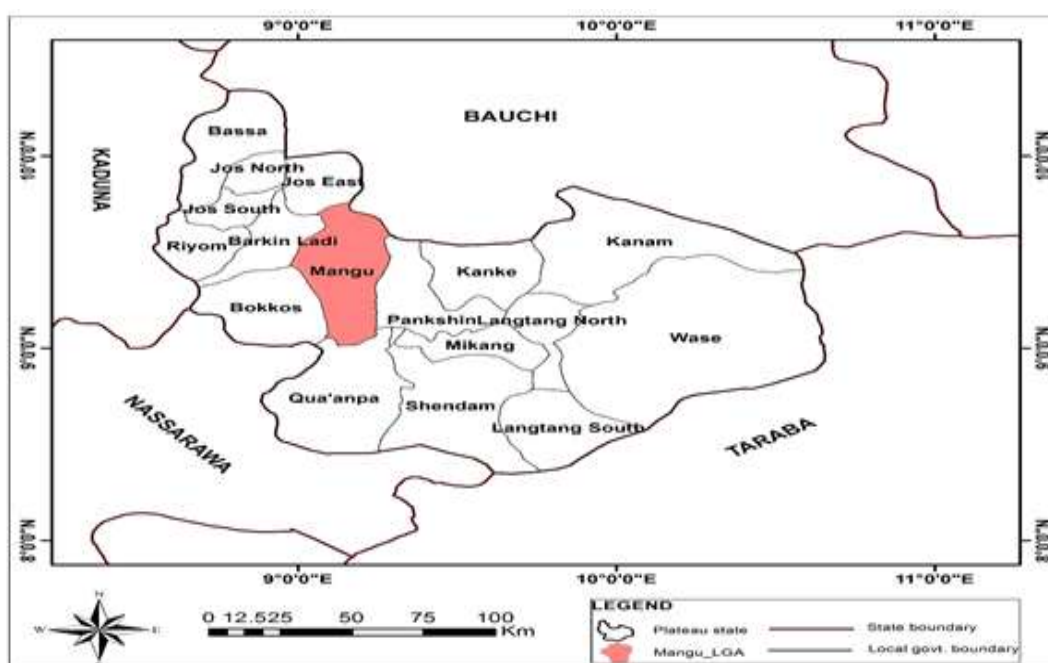
History Of the People

The Jos Plateau in Central Nigeria is home to a diverse array of ethnic groups, primarily characterized by two major language groups, namely:

- The Benue-Congo speakers, which include the Berom, Anaguta, Afizere, Pyem, Tarok, Amo, Buji, and others; and
- The Chadic speakers, comprising the Ngas, Goemai, Mwaghavul, Chip, Tal, Mupun, Kofyar, and others (Barnabas, 2011).

The historical origins of the Chadic-speaking groups on the Plateau, such as the Ngas, Tal, Goemai, Chip, Mupun, Montol, Kofyar, among others, remain a subject of intrigue. According to local traditions, these groups migrated from the Lake Chad basin to settle in the Ngung-Tal-Chip escarpments in Ngas territory, which seems to represent a central point from which many Chadic-speaking communities dispersed.

Adjacent to the Jos Plateau, on the surrounding lowlands within areas delineated by the political boundaries of Mangu, Kanke, Bokkos, Pankshin, and Kanam Local Government Areas, one finds ethnic groups like the Angas, Mwaghavul, Pyem, Ron Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip, Tal, and Fier. These communities have unique traditions, languages, and histories, yet they are assumed to have been from the same origin (see plate 1).



Map of Plateau State indicating Mangu, Kanke, Bokkos, and Pankshin Local Government Area

Source: Google Earth and Global Administrative Boundary

LITERATURE REVIEW

Written histories of the Plateau peoples, largely derived from the accounts of early European travellers, traders, Islamic historians, ethnographers, colonial administrators, and Christian missionaries, are riddled with historiographical challenges. Indigenous historians such as Aliyu (1972), Gonyok (1973), Agi (1975), Tambo (1978), Banfa (1981), Mangvwat (1984), Mangut (1986), and Nengel (1990) have critically examined these sources, identifying numerous inaccuracies and biases. Their work has laid the groundwork for a more critical and contextually grounded study of Plateau history, leading to a deeper and more accurate understanding of the region's peoples and cultures. Despite the limitations of earlier records, they continue to serve as valuable reference points in reconstructing the history of the Jos Plateau. African archaeologists such as Mangut (2023), and Jemkur (2005) have emphasized that, despite the evident flaws in early written historical accounts, the Jos Plateau has attracted extensive archaeological attention due to its rich cultural heritage and evidence of early human occupation. Although the archaeological records are often fragmentary, they remain crucial reference points for understanding the region's past (Mangvwat, 2010).

The sustained efforts of African historians including Mangvwat (1986, 2001, 2010, 2015), Fwatshak (2005), and Nengel (2015) have further enriched this understanding by focusing on the early communal settlements of various Plateau ethnic groups. These scholars highlight how the Plateau peoples have retained many "archaic" forms of social, political, and economic organization that may reflect patterns once widespread across the African continent (Tambo, 2014).

Review Of Colonial Ethnographic Records

Murray Last's landmark work, "Early Kingdoms of the Nigerian Savanna," presents a reassessment of the pre-sixteenth-century history of the Nigerian savanna. In his research, Last challenges the prevailing notion put forth by B. Usman of a new political style known as the Sarauta system. He critiques the flawed textual interpretation and sociological assumptions that underpin this idea. Through his meticulous analysis, Last identifies several overlooked kingdoms in the historical records such as some of those found in central Nigeria. Importantly, he highlights that not all of these kingdoms spoke the Hausa language, contrary to previous assumptions. Moreover, Last argues that while the Sarauta system had centralized systems and magnificent city centers, in some of the non-Hausa kingdoms, there were traditional cults, and that traditional cults in these regions served as mediation centers rather than centers of government, providing a permanent neutral meeting place for various groups. Interestingly, he suggested that these sites initially developed as settlements for foreign traders and only much later evolved into governmental cities. Also, he postulated that if the list of names associated with these sites corresponds to a description of a trader's route, it implies that groups residing south or east of the Plateau, along the Benue River, were part of the trading system by the 19th century.

Last brings attention to a significant power in the region during the late 13th century that is not mentioned in al-Maqrizi's source. This power, referred to as Yam, may have been a kingdom or simply a system of cult centers. It is believed that Yam was located at Yam Hill, just south of Tafawa Balewa, and there were other centers in Kanam and Duguri to the southeast. Another possible center could have been Yam Hill near Bauchi to the north. Speakers of Chadic and Benue-Congo languages in the area, such as the Angas, claim to originate from Yam, further reinforcing its historical significance.

In summary, Last's re-analysis of the early kingdoms in the Nigerian savanna challenges prevailing narratives and provides new insights into the region's history. His work highlights the complexity of political systems, the role of mediation centers, and the influence of trade networks in shaping the social and political landscape of the Nigerian savanna.

According to the reports of Major Edgar, H. S. W. Edwards, and Col. Foulkes, the migration history of the Angas tribe can be traced back to Koropan, then Bornu, and finally to Yam, where they likely settled for an extended period. The Angas people, who follow pagan beliefs, have a strong association with Yam in their cultural practices. For instance, when sowing crops, they consistently invoke the name of Yam, and when burying their deceased, they position them in a sitting posture facing towards Yam. After leaving Yam, their journey takes them to Jaka, then Baksala, and finally to Suwa.

These historical records suggest that approximately three hundred years ago, the Angas experienced an infusion of new influences and people. The settlement of the Gobirawa was followed by Beri Beri (also known as Kanuri) immigrants, who integrated themselves among the Angas. Over time, they adopted Angas culture and intermarried with the local population. The men of these immigrant groups were typically attired in tanned goat's or sheep's skin, and were known as skilled warriors, proficient in fighting with knives, spears, bows, and arrows. While they were considered intelligent, it was noted that with age, their mental faculties became clouded due to alcohol consumption.

Notably, the Angas residing in the hilly regions demonstrated industriousness in various crafts. They excelled in pottery-making, creating earthenware bowls for smoking pipes, and were skilled in iron smelting from the red sandstone found in the area.

In summary, the historical accounts of Major Edgar, H. S. W. Edwards, and Col. Foulkes on the Angas tribe provide general information into the migration history of the Angas tribe, their cultural practices, and the infusion of new influences through the settlement of Gobirawa and Beri Beri immigrants. While these records are not verifiable, and, they have been accepted as the cultural history of the Angas tribe and these records also shed light on the Angas' proficiency in crafting pottery, and their expertise in iron smelting.

Murray Last's reference to Yam collaborates report of Major Edgar, H. S. W. Edwards, and Col. Foulkes. Understandably so, because Murray Last was not a primary source.

FINDINGS

Colonial ethnographers historically categorized the Angas, Mwaghval, Pyem, Ron Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip, Tal, and Fier groups as a unified cultural entity, primarily due to linguistic affinities. This oversimplified classification continues to influence how ethnic groups are delineated on the Jos Plateau, and within scholarly works. Nevertheless, these classifications overlooked substantial variations in social customs, oral traditions, and material cultures among these groups.

Migration narratives from diverse ethnic groups in the central Plateau region identify Yam as a significant cultural hub. Colonial records and oral traditions suggest that many Chadic-speaking communities trace their roots back to Yam, which served as a key cultural and potentially political center. Murray Last's studies strengthen Yam's position as a vital junction in precolonial trade and religious networks. Despite this, the precise location of Yam remain unidentified, shrouding it in an aura of mystery.

DISCUSSION

Colonial ethnographic classifications in the Central Jos Plateau prioritized administrative efficiency over cultural accuracy. These categorizations imposed rigid ethnic boundaries that obscured the fluid, dynamic nature of indigenous identities. Post-colonial theory offers a lens through which to critique this process, exposing the ways in which colonial power structures produced knowledge that served imperial governance rather than reflecting the lived realities of local populations. Simultaneously, ethno-archaeology provides methodological tools for reconstructing indigenous lifeways from the material and intangible remnants of the past, enabling a more grounded understanding of cultural continuity and transformation.

The Central Plateau of the Jos region is home to a mosaic of ethnic groups, including the Angas, Mwaghavul, Pyem, Ron, Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip, Tal, Fier, among others; all classified under the Chadic language group (Nengel 2015). Among these, the Angas possess a relatively well-documented historical record, while many of the other groups remain under-represented in academic and historical discourse. This asymmetry raises questions about the foundations of ethno-linguistic classifications, which have often relied heavily on colonial era administrative and missionary records.

While linguistic evidence is valuable in identifying language families and potential lines of communication, it is insufficient as a stand-alone measure for determining shared ancestry or cultural homogeneity. Similarities in language do not necessarily imply uniformity in origin or socio-cultural evolution. Furthermore, cultural

expressions such as rituals, material culture, and social organization, must be considered alongside linguistic data, to reconstruct a more holistic picture of historical relationships.

Ethno-historical accounts, for instance, reveal that the Mwaghavul and Angas once shared religious practices and participated in overlapping ritual systems, often referred to as "cults" in colonial literature (Last 1985). These shared traditions point toward historical interaction and mutual influence, supporting arguments for cultural inter-connectedness. However, British colonial administrators frequently categorized Plateau communities in ways that reflected external assumptions and strategic imperatives. Some were deemed to have migrated from the northeast, possibly influenced by Semitic cultures, while others were aligned with Bantu traditions (Ames 1937). Such classifications were often speculative, based on perceived cultural traits rather than empirical evidence.

To date, no comprehensive genetic studies have been undertaken to verify claims of common ancestry among these groups. Genetic research has the potential to offer a more scientifically-grounded understanding of population histories, migration patterns, and ancestral affiliations. By analyzing DNA markers across different groups in the Central Plateau, researchers could uncover evidence of shared heritage, distinct lineages, and historical interactions with other populations. These findings would significantly enhance our understanding of the demographic and cultural dynamics that have shaped the region.

Nonetheless, any such genetic research must be pursued with caution and conducted within ethical frameworks that prioritize the agency, consent, and cultural sensitivities of local communities. Engaging with these communities through participatory research models is crucial for ensuring that scientific inquiry aligns with indigenous values and priorities.

In conclusion, the history and identity of the Central Plateau peoples cannot be fully understood through colonial ethnographic records or linguistic classification alone. A more nuanced, multidisciplinary approach, one that integrates post-colonial critique, ethno-archaeological methods, and, where appropriate, genetic analysis, is essential for reconstructing the complex narratives of migration, interaction, and identity in the region. This approach not only corrects the epistemic biases of earlier research but also affirms the diverse and dynamic heritage of Plateau communities on their own terms.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

Generally speaking, a critique of the ethnographic report on the peoples of the Central Plateau highlights the over-reliance on linguistic sources in explaining migration patterns. It draws attention to the colonial bias in the classification of tribes as either Semitic-influenced or Bantu-influenced, based on perceived cultural traits. This critique emphasizes the need for a more nuanced and culturally-sensitive approach that recognizes the diversity and fluidity of cultural influences within these communities.

The critique calls for a critical examination of historical classifications and groupings, acknowledging their limitations and potential inaccuracies. It emphasizes the importance of conducting further research and analysis to better understand the complexities of migration, cultural interactions, and the socio-cultural identities of the tribes in the Central Nigerian Highlands.

In conclusion, the critique underscores the significance of adopting a comprehensive and inclusive perspective that goes beyond simplistic categorizations. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the people inhabiting the Central Plateau and their rich cultural heritage.

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