

## NOTES ON THE HISTORY OF ABUJA, CENTRAL NIGERIA

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**ABSTRACT** This paper is concerned with aspects of the history of Abuja in the Central Nigerian region—an area designated as the new Federal capital of Nigeria. We examine some aspects of inter-group relations and then reflect on technological and economic development in the area. In the course of discussion, we reflect on aspects of iron technology, textile, leather processing and pottery and comment on issues related to trade in the region.

**Key Words:** Abuja emirate; Ethnic diversity; Sokoto jihad; Technological development; Occupational groupings; Dependent relations.

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper we reflect on aspects of the pre-colonial history of Abuja, Central Nigeria.<sup>(1)</sup> First of all, we focus on the location of Abuja and then proceed to reflect on the question of ethnic diversity in the region. We then examine aspects of the economic and technological development of the area in the pre-colonial period. We argue that the region is in dire need of archaeological research at the present time, given the fact that it is still relatively accessible to large scale excavation, a feature that is temporary to a great extent given the ongoing transformation of the region into the Federal capital of Nigeria.

### THE LOCATION OF ABUJA

Abuja has been associated with territorial units of varied dimensions. There is first of all the town Abuja, founded by one Abu Ja, a son of the 54th Sarkin of Zaria (Temple, 1965). The town, named after its founder, was located close to one of the tributaries of the River Iku, 13 miles south of Izom. By the end of the 19th century, Abuja emirate consisted of an area much greater than that delineated by the local officials who met Lugard in 1904 (Hassan & Na'ibi, 1952). If we were to examine the schedule of the Federal capital territory, Abuja, we observe that the latter is smaller than Abuja Emirate at the height of its expansion and much larger than the old Abuja town which falls on the outskirts of the new Federal capital territory (FCDA, 1979). In this paper we use the term Abuja to refer to the territory associated with the Abuja Emirate by the end of the 19th century—Abuja at the height of its territorial expanse with an area which includes the present federal capital territory. See Appendix.

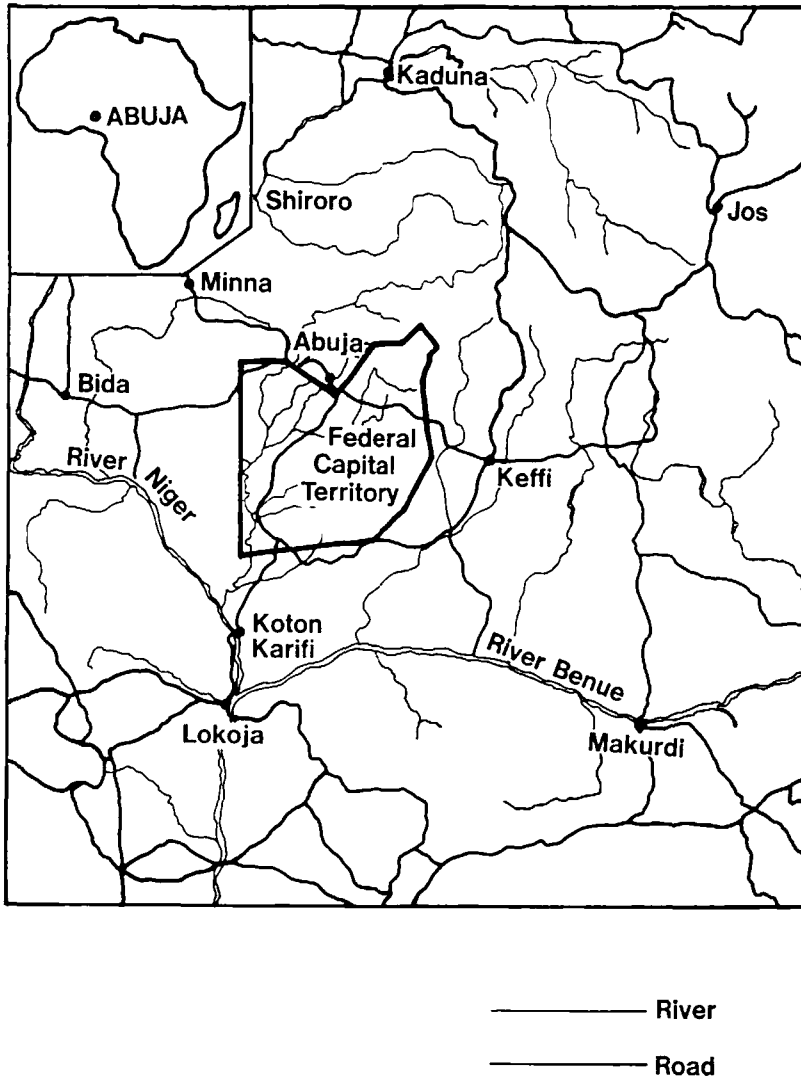


Fig. 1. The location of Abuja.

### ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN ABUJA

P. Thurley identified more than a dozen ethnic groups in Abuja Province in his 1931 report, and although his ethnic categories are at times fluid and artificial, some of these may be upheld on the basis of their distinct socio-cultural identity (Thurley, 1931). Principal amongst these nationalities in terms of political significance and population size are the Gbagyi, the Koro, the Arago, the Ganagana and the Hausa, with the Gbagyi and the Koro constituting some of the earliest inhabitants in the region (Morgan, 1914). On the eve of the British conquest of the area in 1900, the struggle for power in the region involved the ruling circles of the Hausa, the Fulani,

the Gbagyi and the Koro principally (Kirk Greene & Ryan, 1975). As we would see, this development had a great deal to do with the nature of conflict in areas adjacent to the region and the extent to which the dominant ruling factions in these groups succeeded in wielding effective military power. Equally important, the influx of immigrants into the Abuja region was related to the economic viability of the area. We, however, first of all, reflect on the circumstances of some of these varied nationalities which led to the migration into Abuja.

It has been claimed that the Gbagyi migrated from Borno into the Abuja region (Thurley, 1931) due to conflict with the Kanuri. Additionally, Gbagyi familiarity with the *lapis lazuli* stone has been taken in some quarters as indication of Egyptian origin. The question of Gbagyi origin is farther complicated by the fact that the Nupe and Gbagyi languages have recognised affinity and the Koro, whose history seems to have been intricately linked with that of the Gbagyi, actually claim linkage with Wukari and the Kwarafara empire (Cadman, 1913). If the Gbagyi and the Koro have connections with Kwarafara as sometimes claimed, then the early history of the Gbagyi and the Jukun is perhaps intricately interwoven. One eagerly awaits archaeological investigation and research with respect to this particular issue. Traditional accounts suggest that the Gbagyi and the Koro were the earliest inhabitants of the Abuja region (Shekwo, 1986) particularly with respect to the districts of Diko, Ushafa, Gerki and Zuba in the central and northerly parts and in the case of Kare district settlement dates back to the 15th century.<sup>(2)</sup>

The Hausa presence in the region is more recent and relates to the Sokoto jihad and the Hausa/Fulani power struggle in Zaria in the early 19th century. The exile of a faction of the ruling house of Zaria and their settlement at Zuba in 1807 preceded the establishment of the Abuja emirate which was clearly an offshoot of Zaria administratively speaking (Hogben & Kirk Greene, 1966). By the 1890's, the Abuja region became the target of another batch of invaders from Zaria, namely, Fulani forces under Emir Usman Yaro (Na'ibi & Hassan, n.d.).

In the discussion which follows, it is argued that the region was attractive to 19th century migrants cum invaders primarily because of the wide range of its resources and the feasibility of surplus appropriation on the part of the victorious ruling groups.

## ECONOMIC AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT IN ABUJA

If we are to take note of oral tradition, archaeological research in the Abuja region should yield substantial findings on iron working with respect to the Kao, Ushafa, Diko, Shingere and Wako districts. It has been reported that traders from Katsina habitually came to the area in search of the iron ore of Kao. Gbagyi blacksmiths were renowned for the high quality of the iron implements they produced and an account dated to the early years of the colonial period has described the process of smelting as follows:

A pit of 4' deep by 3' wide is dug and filled within 6' of the surface with equal layers of charcoal and iron ore. Two sections are cut off the top of the pit at either side and perforated holes made from the floor of the section running down obliquely to the pit. Into the two sections thus made two earthen-ware pots open at the bottom end....

(*Minprof*, 194, 1925).

We may note that the earthenware pots served as bellows and when struck on the skin-covering forced the air down by way of perforated holes, igniting the charcoal in the process and facilitating the process of liquefaction. It is useful to know how far back in the history of the region we may identify this particular method and technique, whether there are any significant variations in iron-working skills within the region, and the varied distinctions with respect to production techniques and labour organization, over time and spatially. Archaeological research should be of vital assistance for some of these issues.

Different types of cloth were produced in the region, amongst them Gbagyiye, Saki, Farkin Saka, Kakugi and Abumu. What distinguished one from the other was largely the colour of the threads used and variation in design. Kakugi, for example, was a mixture of black, white and blue threads, whilst Abumu consisted of black and blue strips with white lines. Cotton was grown and processed locally, so, too, the indigo which was pounded in a wooden mortar, dried in the sun and rolled into balls after fermentation. The dyers of cloth were able to obtain a fairly wide variety of colours (Thomas-Emeagwali, 1988). It was the women who were engaged in ginning and spinning whilst as a rule the men wove. The British, at the beginning of the colonial period in the first decade of the 20th century, met well-established dyers, thread makers, weavers, cloth beaters and tailors in the Abuja region (Morgan, 1914).

In addition to iron working and textile, there were other important sectors. The weaving of baskets and mats, leather working, carving and pottery were the most significant of these. With the exception of pottery, most of these were customarily done by men. It is important to note, however, that there was a high level of specialization with respect to these varied occupational activities. There were diverse types of mats, such as the Maje, Gwagwa, Juva, Zuba, Afutu, Alkilla, Shingere and Gwazunu varieties. Some were patterned and others plain white, with wide diversity in terms of size, weight and overall finish. The heavier mats were made on a loom in some cases. Naturally the type of dried and raw material used had direct effect on all of these basic features (Oliphant, 1945). Leather workers were generally divided into varied types. These included the makers of sandals, satchets, knife handles, sword scabbards, arrow holders, leather baskets and bridles. Some of the leather was imported from Kano and Zaria. Raw materials utilized in the processing of skins included woodash and leaves of the Gabaruwa tree. After undergoing the dyeing process, the skin was dried in the shade, pulled, stretched and softened by kneading. It was then ready for the leather worker.

A few words should be said about pottery because the Abuja region was in fact renowned for this particular technology. The basic materials used consisted of clay, decorating tools such as wooden roulettes for cutting patterns and short lengths of string. These tools constituted the instruments of production and were in most cases owned by the producer since they did not really entail large-scale capital investment. The clay was easily available and so too the copious water needed during the exercise (Hassan & Na'ibi, 1952). In the process of firing, sticks and stones were utilized in

addition to dry grass. The red liquor from locust bean pods was used to baste the pots and improve their durability. With these tools the Abuja potter was able to produce domestic utensils for storage of water, beer making, cooking and other such activities. Moreover, the end products had the advantage of porosity, were useful for water storage in the hot climate, and were of high thermal shock resistance. They could be expected not to crack in frying (Cardew, 1950).

Abuja was the centre of extensive trading in the days preceding British colonization. Several donkey loads of goods passed through the region which was located along the Zaria-Lokoja trade route. There were trading links with Jos, Keffi, Bida, Minna, Baro, Kachia and Katsina (Kirk Greene & Ryan, 1975). The large volume of items in circulation in the various trading centres reflect the high degree of surplus production in the area in general terms. We may note as well the high level of taxation worked out by the British in the second decade of colonial rule since this gives some idea of surplus generation in the preceding years. In the case of Gerki, for example, with its population of 8,406 adult males and females, £1,840 was exacted for the 1928/9 period whilst Abuja emirate on the whole yielded approximately £10,000.<sup>(3)</sup>

A wide range of products were involved in the intense trading activity, attesting to the degree of diversification in the economy which, though largely agrarian, had a vibrant manufacturing sector whereby sheanut oil, honey, benniseed, locust bean cakes, ginger, peppers, kola nuts and hungry rice were complemented by iron products, textile, mats leather items and pottery. These items were traded in Bida, Katsina and other towns through the trading complex earlier referred to. The major imports from these regions were fish, salt, sheep, goats and dogs. Pastoral farming in the region was relatively restricted (Cartland, 1938).

The Abuja region was well watered by the Usman and Gurara Rivers and their tributaries, some of which are navigable. The early 20th century decline of the area as a centre of trade was not un-related to the introduction of the railway and the consequent diversion of trade during the colonial period. In the pre-colonial period, the region was a trading centre located as it were between North and South. It seems that a complex network of dependent relations emerged in the region with respect to the Gbagyi and the Koro and the dominant Hausa ruling group and other nationalities in the 19th century (Meek, 1925). It is important to note, however, that as elsewhere in the Middle belt, the process of class formation was in progress and a wide range of surplus appropriators of varied ethnic background were emerging as they did elsewhere (Thomas-Emeagwali, 1987). We may note the observations of Hassan & Na'ibi (1952) in the Abuja chronicle in this regard:

In olden times the people of Abuja worked under conditions very different from those of today, for then there were slaves who did all kinds of work for their masters and so it was necessary to earn a living in the modern way. Every master of a compound whether he were Hausa or Koro, Gwari or Gade or any other tribe, had a farm on which the men of his compound would go out to work every day from early morning until noon....

It is hoped that future historical and archaeological research should shed more light on this issue as well as other aspects of technological development in the region.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we focused on aspects of ethnic relations in the Abuja region. We then proceeded to examine briefly the economic and technological development of the area in terms of iron technology, textile, leather working and pottery. We pointed out that the area was a centre of extensive trade in the pre-colonial period. It has been suggested that archaeological research should prove useful for our greater understanding of the nature of early settlement in the region and the question of economic and technological change over time.

## NOTES

- (1) Abuja is located in Central Nigeria or the Nigerian Middle Belt although for administrative and political reasons, it has been historically affiliated with the North.
- (2) This date has to be corroborated by archaeological research and is based on oral tradition.
- (3) Details on this issue are available in the *Gazetteers of the Northern Provinces of Nigeria*: National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Minprof AB 279 and National Archives Kaduna (NAK) Minprof AB 280.

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