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Settlement patterns change in Central Cameroon

Introduction

Human settlements have been distributed in various landscapes across time and space. The distribution of human settlements in a specific region and landscape is not a random phenomenon, throughout time and space settlement location has been influenced by different factors. It should be noted that settlement location is specific to each region and is shaped by the history of the region. In case of the Yoko subdivision in Central Cameroon lying between the 5° of latitude North and the 12° of longitude East (Fig. 1), the long history of human migrations spanning the pre-colonial and colonial periods (Mohammadou 1971; 1999; Von Morgen 1972; Martin 1973; Barbier 1977; Siran 1981; Ghomsy and Bah 1987; Kadomura 1994), and the natural setting characterized by a contact zone between the Savanna and the Rainforest with natural features as dome-shaped massifs, undulating hills, overhangs and caves, were two important factors favouring the establishment of human settlements.

Research in the Yoko region

In the above perspective, an archaeological settlement patterns study was carried out in the Yoko region with the aim of analyzing the type of archaeological sites, their layout in the landscape, the factors influencing settlement patterns and the catalysts of settlement patterns change. It should be underlined that this research was archaeologically based, however, it was supplemented by oral tra-

ditions, historical, geographical, ethnographic and sociological data. Taking the above into account, the following questions underlying this research work:

- a) what are the site types
- b) how are they distributed in the landscape
- c) what are the factors behind settlement choice
- d) how have the settlement patterns changed through time

Archaeological surveys were conducted in the villages of Fouiy, Matshari and the subdivisional town of Yoko. To discover sites we applied the following surveys: foot survey, toponymic survey, vegetation formations survey (Chard 1968; White and Abernethy 1996; Edwards and Bell 2000). Oral interviews with local informants were also relied upon in order to identify archaeological sites. Altogether, fourteen sites (Fig. 2) were identified and classified into three main categories: habitation, cave/rock shelter and iron workshop sites. These are as follows:

- 10 habitation sites (4 at Fouiy, 4 at Matshari, 1 at Nein and 1 at Yoko),
- 2 cave sites (1 at Fouiy, 1 at Matshari) and 1 rock shelter (1 at Matshari)
- 1 iron workshop (Mangay).

The sites were further subdivided into surveyed and non surveyed sites. Mt. Fouiy, Mbang cave, Lom, Mt. Ngihini and Yoko fall under the first category, while the reverse is true for Mvori, Fouiy 1, Fouiy 2, Mt. Mbere, Matshari 1 and Mt. Matshari. The second category was either reported to us by local informants or earlier identified by previous researchers, like Mangay (Elouga 1993) and Fouiy (Tueche 1996).

Traces of ancient human activities were characterized by surface finds like stone tools (Fig. 3), potsherds (Fig. 4) and grinding hollows (Fig. 5).

Settlement pattern structure and dynamics

Subsequently we proceeded with the analysis of settlement pattern dynamics. Out of the fourteen sites identified and reported, 71.43% constituted habitation sites, 21.43% caves and rock shelters, 7.14% iron workshops. 78.57% represented open air sites as opposed to 21.43% for caves and rock shelters. The spatial distribution of sites revealed that they were either concentrated or isolated (Fig. 6). The German explorer and army officer Kurt Von Morgen (1972) who explored the area noticed that most of the time settlements were isolated and fortified. The distribution of sites in relation to the topography revealed that 57.14% were upland settlements as against 42.86% lowland settlements with altitudes ranging between 600-900 m (Fig. 7). In most cases, sites are located in a predominantly savannah vegetation with patches of forest galleries (Fig. 6) and with water courses in the vicinity.

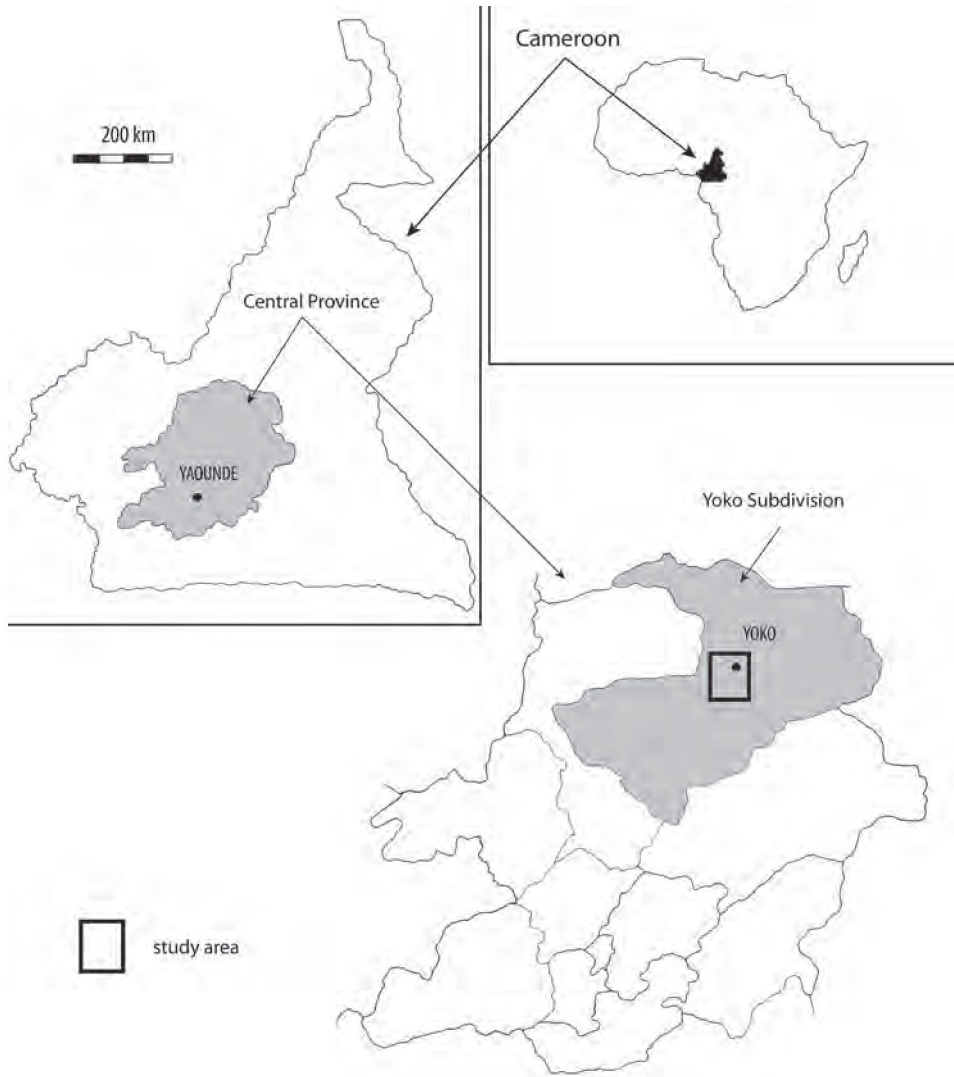


Fig. 1. Location of the study area

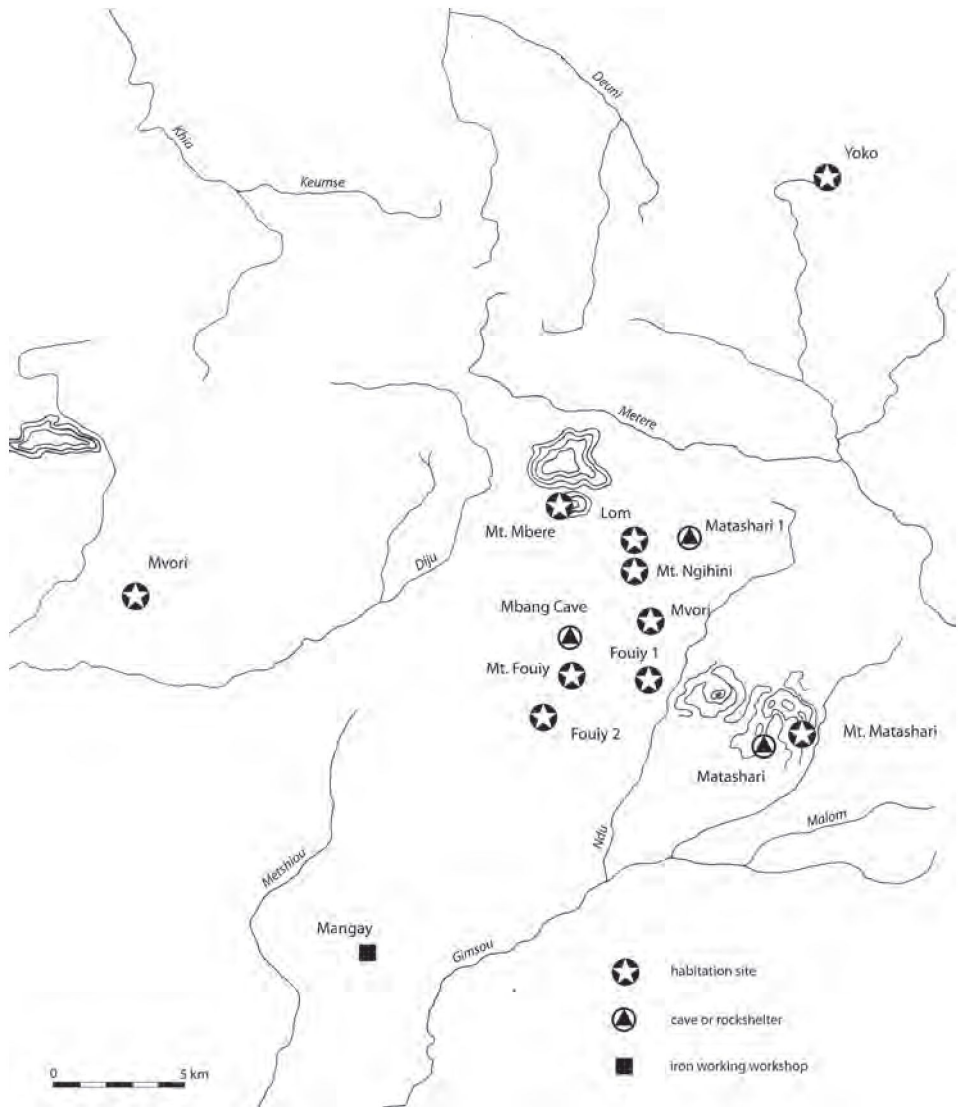


Fig. 2. Distribution of archaeological sites



Fig. 3. stone tool



Fig. 4. Potsherds



Fig. 5. Grinding hollows

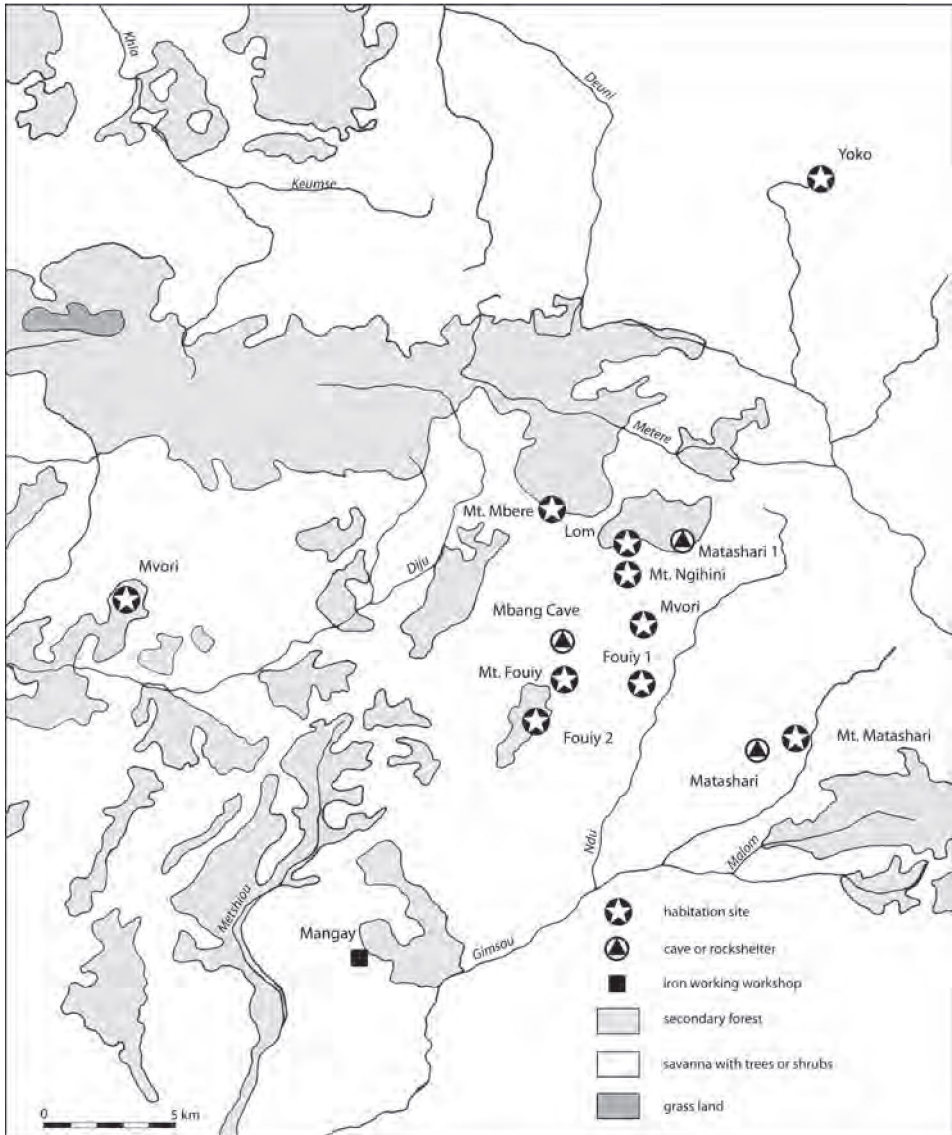


Fig. 6. Vegetation and distribution of sites

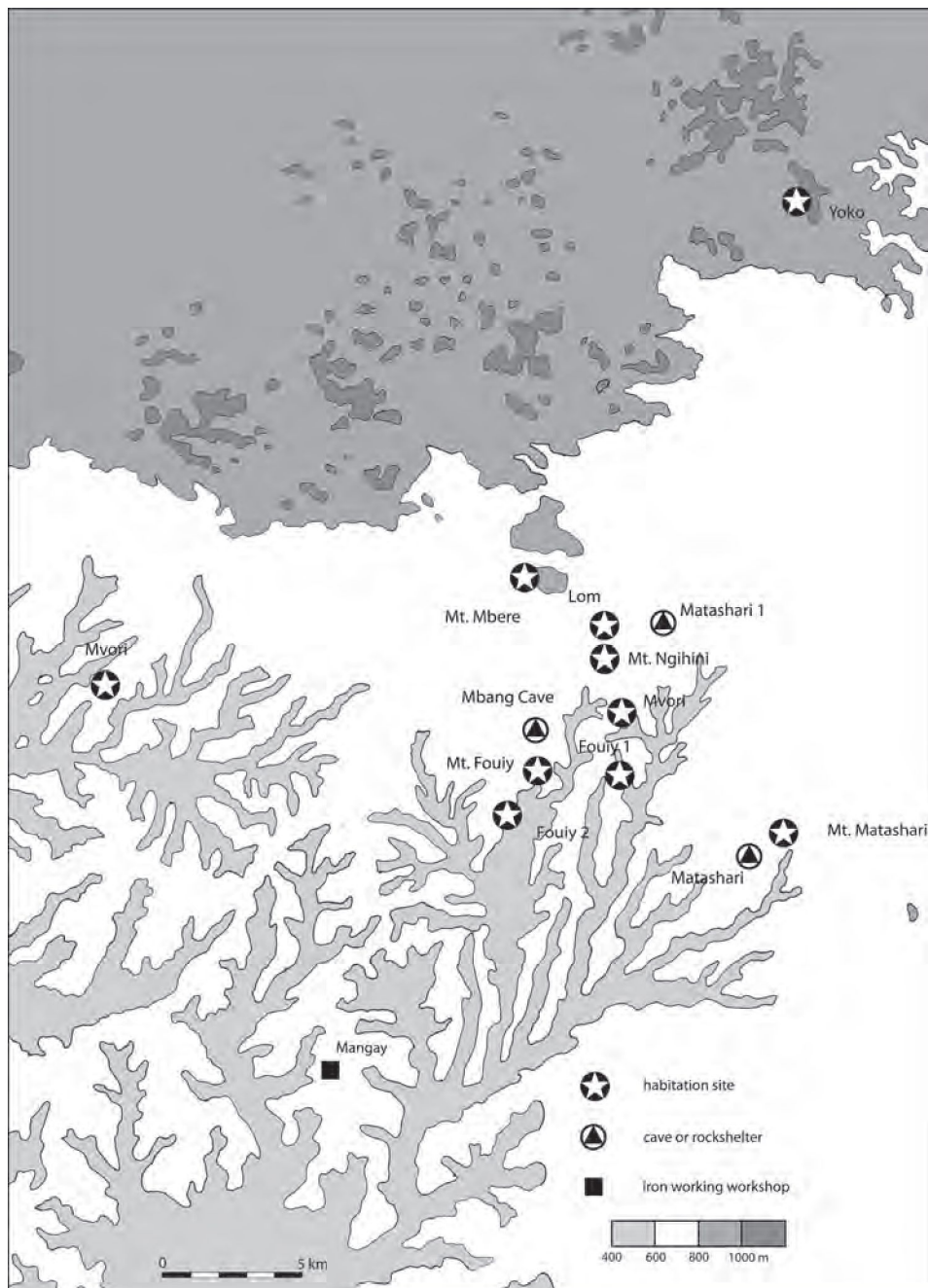


Fig. 7. Relief and distribution of sites

Up to this point, the only traces of habitation were identified at loam. These habitations were characterized by the outline of six circular features laid out in a nucleated pattern and spaced 2 to 3m apart. In one of the structures the floor was covered with burnt clay, hearth fragments (Fig. 8) and daub remains (Fig. 9).

The distribution of sites in relation to the topography, relief and other natural features provided interesting information regarding the settlement pattern dynamics. It was observed that the most recurrent pattern was upland settlements in a predominantly savannah vegetation with patches of forest galleries and a water course in the vicinity. The alternative pattern was characterized by lowland settlements lying close to mountainous areas. The vegetation and water course pattern is similar to the upland settlement. The settlements were more or less dispersed and in some cases habitation structures were nucleated.

The implication of the above observations and analysis is that sites were not randomly selected. Upland settlements were foremost connected to safety reasons. We learned from Von Morgen (1972) that back in time, populations regrouped either upland or deep in forest galleries into large isolated and fortified villages. Von Morgen (1972), Ghomsi and Bah (1987) and Mohammadou (1971; 1999) further advanced that the drift of populations in the second half of the 18th century from the Adamawa southward and Fulani pressure led to a state of constant warfare thereby reinforcing the idea of upland settlements as defensive units. The locals put forward the same explanation.

Climatic considerations can also be held accountable for the prevalence of upland settlements over lowland settlements. Kadomura's work (1994) revealed that the climate prevailing during the 16th, 17th and 18th century in the Sahara-Sahel area was generally humid. If we take into consideration the fact that it affected the Guinea-Savannah domain, then it would have been highly probable that living conditions in the marshy lowlands were unfavourable because of heavy rainfalls causing erosion and flooding. As a result it was infested with insects, unsuitable for farming and building.

On the other hand, we observed that lowland settlements were in close proximity of mountainous areas. This pattern also had defensive connotations as the mountainsides and caves served as a retreat in time of war or danger. When lowland settlements were not in close proximity of the mountains they were set deep in the forest as Von Morgen (1972) noticed.

Natural resources can also account for the location of sites both uphill and downhill. Soils in the study area are clayey in nature with high concentration of ferralitic components. This may explain why pottery is the most represented

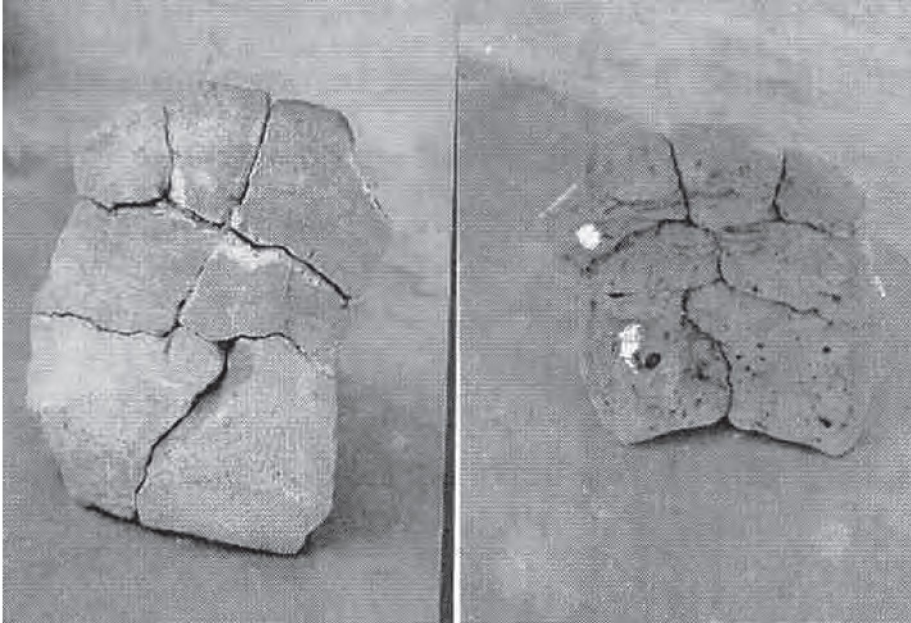


Fig. 8. Burnt clay.

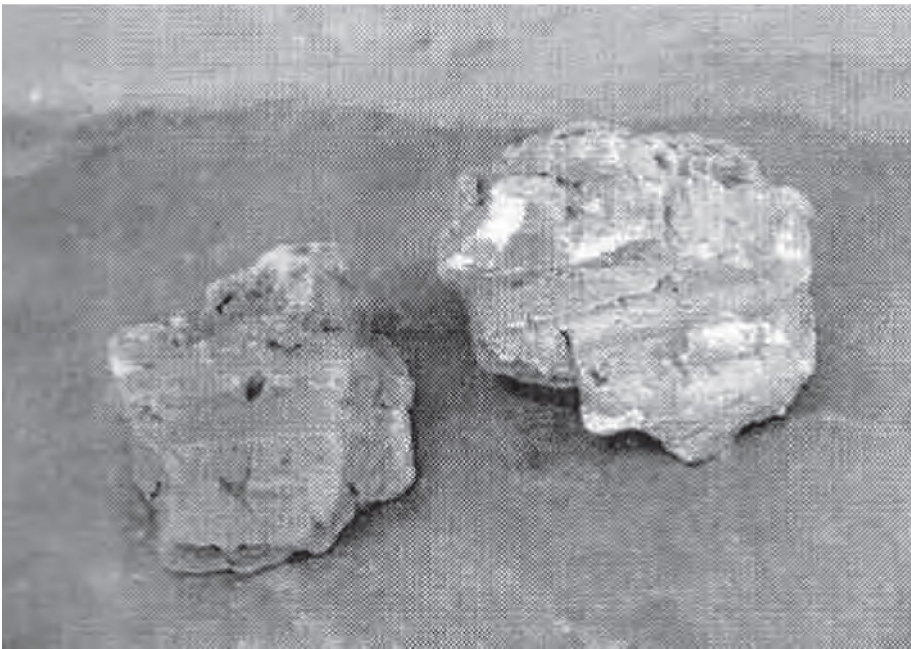


Fig. 9. Daub

assemblage. Von Morgen (1972) also indicated that iron working was the most flourishing activity then, so red ferralitic soils together with forest galleries constituted a good source of raw material thereby influencing settlement choice. The same holds for massifs and the lithic assemblage. Similarly, water was also a vital element as well as fertile land. The idea was further fostered by locals who stated that areas where water courses did not completely dry up during the dry season were the most suitable areas for settlement. The same is true for areas which could support farming activities as locals live in farming communities.

Earlier, we learned that settlements were organized in large isolated villages. This implies large populations or large number of people. Hence the carrying capacity of the study area may have also played a role in favoring settlement implantations. This view of carrying capacity is highlighted in Von Morgen (1972) account when he described 1000 huts in the Ndumba Mountains site in Nguilla village. Siran (1981) on the basis of Dominik's (1896) and Von Stettens (1893) accounts supported the same claim- mentioning 1500 circular huts at Linté and about 6000 people living in then Nguilla. The archaeological work conducted by Elouga (2001) in this area confirmed the above claims. This is in line with the surveys and test-excavations we conducted at Mt. Fouiy and Lom sites where high concentration of surface scatters was observed.

Discussion

As seen above, factors as natural resources, carrying capacity and defensive considerations greatly influenced ancient communities when establishing their settlements in the Yoko region and its environs. Three settlement patterns have been identified so far: upland settlements, lowland settlements in proximity of mountainsides, lowland settlements nestled deep in forest galleries. In the absence of dates it would be tentative to suggest whether these patterns are coeval or one preceded the other. It should be underscored that the ancient settlement patterns identified till now is different from the way local settlements are organized and laid out nowadays.

From what we have observed, all ancient upland and lowland settlements have been abandoned and in some cases lowland settlements have been transformed into burying grounds and caves turned into ritual/ceremonial places. All settlements nowadays are concentrated along the main road and the ancient architecture has receded in favour of modern forms. How and when these changes took place is still unclear. However, in the light of results obtained so far, we will attempt to account for these changes.

Of the two sites test-excavated, Mt. Fouiy (Upland) and Lom (Lowland), deposits of the former were thicker than those of the latter, indicating that the first site might be older than the second. Potsherds further supported this view as Fouiy pottery was rather coarse and less decorated than the pottery of Lom. This suggests that upland and lowland settlements may not be coeval and according to local informants upland settlements date far back in time as compared to lowland settlements. Hence, the probability that a switch from upland to lowland settlements may have occurred is high. This change may have occurred for several reasons.

Population density may have triggered the relocation of upland settlements downhill. Historical accounts and archaeological surveys provided valuable information regarding the densely populated Mountainsides, this has been corroborated by local informants. The high population density may have had a significant impact on the carrying capacity and land sustainability. Archaeological remains and features such as grinders, grinding stones and grinding hollows suggest we are dealing with agrarian communities. Consequently, the high population density and agriculture put pressure on land and water resources, thereby making it difficult to meet agricultural needs. As a result of this settlements were relocated downhill.

Another aspect examined is the competition for land by different communities. The North-South migratory movements which took place in the 17th, 18th and 19th century, coupled with Fulani pressure between 1825 and 1830 was marked by constant tension and warfare as communities vied for land and resources (Kadomura 1994; Mohammadou 1999). This state of affairs led many communities to redefine their settlement strategy. The Fulani for example had a great advantage over other communities because they possessed horses which enabled them to cover long distances, move more easily, subdue and conquer new areas and people. In this light, some communities relocated downhill deep in the forest or marshy areas in response to the incessant raids launched by Fulani horse-mounted cavaliers.

A close link can also be established between settlement patterns change and climatic changes. In his study of "climatic changes, droughts, desertification and land degradation in the Sudano-Sahelian region" Kadomura (1994) pointed out that a severe drought occurred in the 1680's throughout the central Sahara to the Sudano-Sahelian region of West Africa. This severe drought had great consequences on Cameroon; where a cavalry warfare and raiding reached as far as the Guinea savanna domain thereby dislocating agrarian populations from hill-tops and forested areas to the south. Mohammadou (1999) also makes mention about a similar episode of drought and famine which occurred between the 1750's and the 1850's in the Adamawa region. This led to the violent drift of many popula-

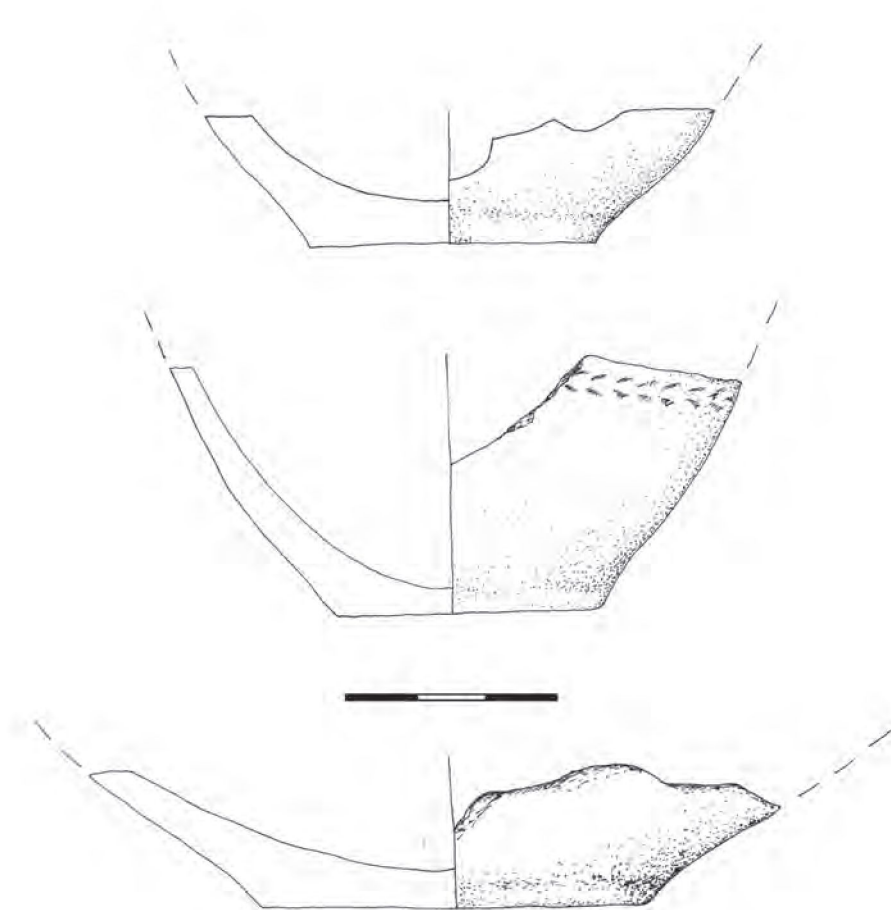


Fig. 10. Potsherds from Mt Fouiy site

tions from the Adamawa area southward. Climatic changes that set in motion the violent drift of populations southward eventually resulted in the dislocation agrarian peoples from their hilly settlements.

The German colonization of Cameroon was followed by upheavals on the economic, political, social and cultural viewpoints. In order to control and administer

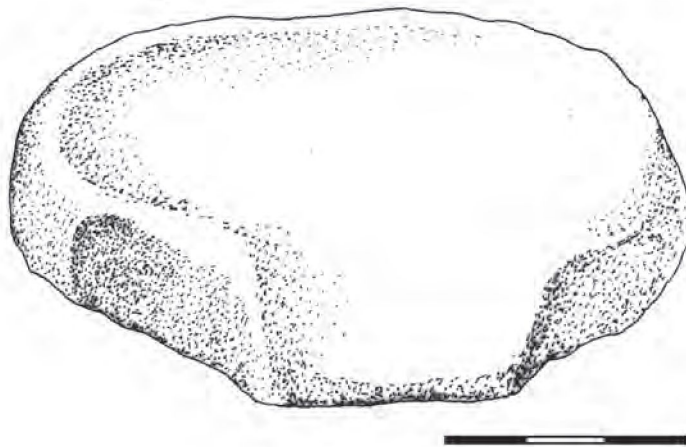


Fig. 11. Grinder from Lom site

Cameroon effectively, the Germans had to penetrate in the heartland of the territory. This achieved, they engaged in several infrastructure constructions all over the country (Ngoh 1987). As such, the locals were dislodged from their upland settlements and forced to relocate downhill along the main roads constructed by Germans. Consequently, a shift from nucleated villages to linear or elongated ones occurred under German impulsion.

This shift was also felt on architecture as circular huts with conical thatched roofs and clayey earth walls were abandoned in favour of quadrilateral forms characterized by rectangular huts with raffia roofs at first, and then to rectangular houses with modern building material such as bricks and corrugated metal roofs. It should be underscored that local informants reported copying the quadrilateral style form the Beti (one of the largest ethnic groups inhabiting the Centre-South Cameroon region).

The two sites test-excavated - Lom and Mt. Fouiy - mainly yielded ceramics (Fig. 10), lithic tools (Fig. 11), very few animal bone remains, snails and charcoal. Plus some iron items handed to us by locals. As none of the sites have been dated, it is therefore very difficult to place the sites within a chronological time scale.

Nonetheless, we have clues in pottery decorative motifs such as grooves, pontates, fishbone patterns, knotted string, chevrons, wavy lines and lozenges/pineapple skin designs which have been dated in neighbouring sites. These designs are associated to sites dated to the Early Iron Age and sub-recent periods (Wirmann and Elouga 1998; Mbida 1998). In addition, historical sources examining migratory movements in this area place them around the 16th and 19th century A. D. and sometimes even earlier. One can tentatively suggest the chronology spans the early Iron age and recent periods.

To conclude, this preliminary research provided insights into settlement patterns change. However, some aspects still remain unclear and an in-depth study is required to fully understand settlement pattern and kindred issues in this region of Cameroon.

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