

■ CAMEROON

Preliminary Analysis of the Distribution of Archaeological Sites in the Yoko Subdivision of Cameroon

Yannick Fouda
 Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology
 Polish Academy of Sciences
 Al. Solidarnosci 105
 00-140 Warsaw
 Poland

province of Cameroon lies between the 5°N latitude and 12°E longitude (Figure 1). It is a contact zone between the rainforest and the savannah. The climate is characterized by high humidity and precipitation with rainfall averaging 1000-2000mm per year. Temperatures are high and constant, averaging 25°C. The characteristic relief of the research area is one of alternating depressions and granitic massifs, undulating hills of convex shapes and dome-shaped massifs with altitudes ranging from 800-900m. Red ferralitic soils cover most of the research area and the geological substratum has a crystalline facies (Ghomsy and Bah 1987; Letouzey 1968; Neba 1982; Ngwa 1967).

Introduction

This paper reports on MA thesis research carried out in the Yoko subdivision of Cameroon in 2005. This research mainly focused on settlement patterns from an archaeological standpoint with some input noted from history and geography. This research sought to answer three questions:

- What are the characteristics of the former settlement patterns in the study area?
- What factors influenced settlement and how did these change through time?
- With which chrono-cultural sequences can the material culture be affiliated?

This paper will only focus on the preliminary analysis of the spatial distribution of archaeological sites in relation to natural features in the study area. First of all, we shall present the natural setting of the study area, the methodology applied, then the presentation of sites and finally the preliminary analysis of the spatial distribution of archaeological sites.

The Study Area

The Yoko Subdivision located in the Centre

The main inhabitants of the research area are the Vute. Linguistically they are classified in the Mambiloid branch affiliated to the Benue-Congo family (Dieu and Renaud 1983). Oral traditions state that they originated from the present-day Republic of Sudan and migrated into the Lake Chad region around the 15th or 16th centuries. In the 17th century, these migratory movements spread west and south, stimulated by demographic factors, warfare and famine. The southbound group eventually conquered and populated the study area between the first and the last decades of the 19th century (Ghomsy and Bah 1987; Kadomura 1994; Mohammadou 1996; Siran 1981).

Methodology

The first step of our research consisted in identifying sites, e.g., looking out for any archaeological traces or features. Hence, we relied on the following survey techniques: foot survey, toponymic survey, vegetation formation survey, and interviews with local informants.

The discovery of archaeological sites was subsequently followed by the excavation phase. The sites selected for excavation were divided into excavating units with 1 x 2m test pits. Deposits were excavated in arbitrary 10cm spits, and finds were collected level by level and put into plastic

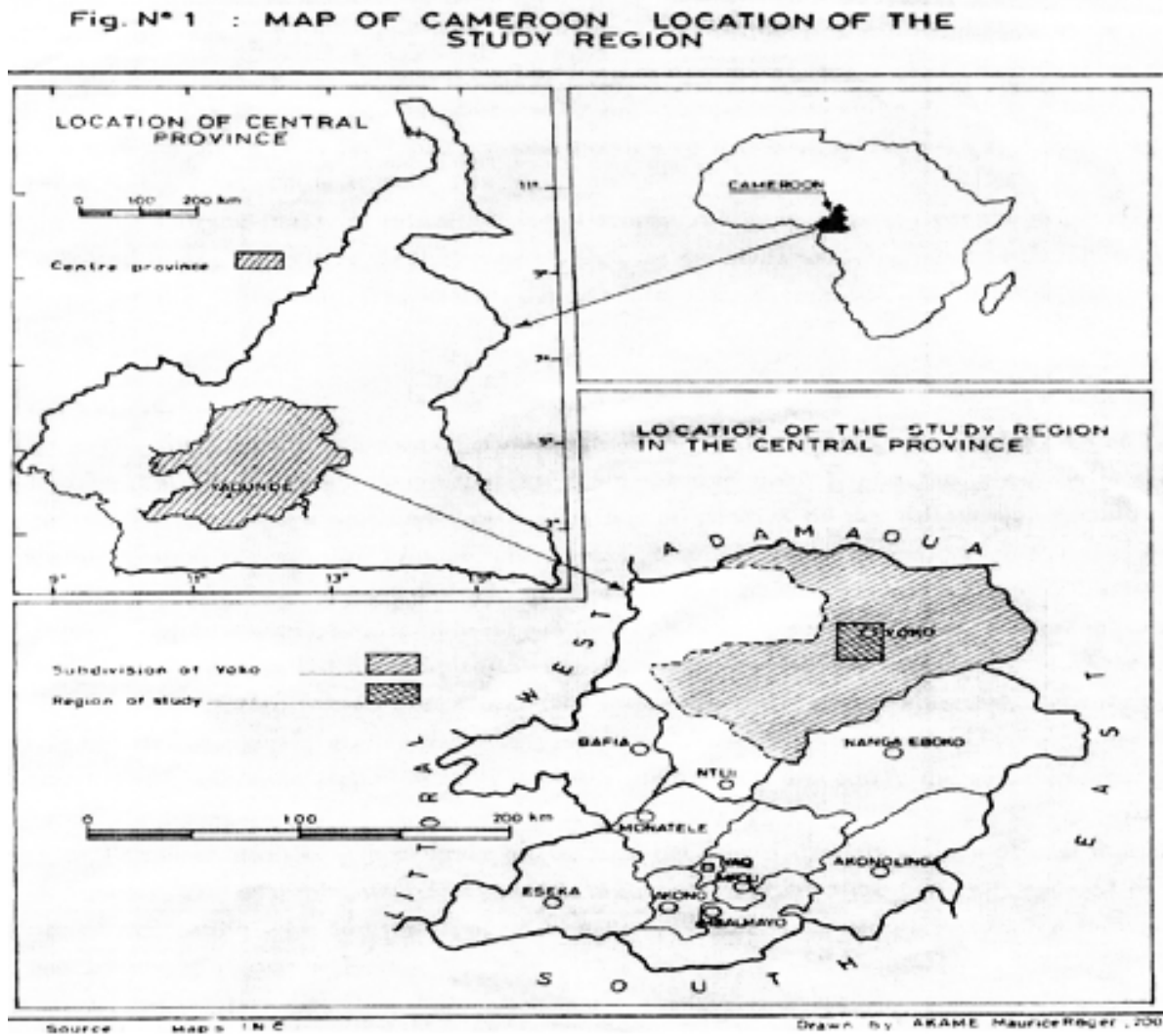


Figure 1: Map of Cameroon showing the location of the study area.

bags. All features were recorded and photographed.

Data analysis was based on the description and classification of finds. Description was based on the physical and visual attributes of finds including length, width, height, thickness and colour. Classification was based on the composition of assemblages: ceramic, stone, metal and bone.

Finally we analyzed the factors influencing settlement pattern and settlement pattern change by gathering and comparing various sources of data including archaeological and historical information, local informant testimony, and information from geography, anthropology and sociology.

Presentation of Archaeological Sites

In total, 14 sites were identified (Figure 2) and classified into three main categories:

- Ten habitation sites (four located at Fouiy; four located at Matshari; one located at Nein; one located at Yoko)
- Two caves (one located at Fouiy, one located at Matshari)/ and one rock shelter (one located at Matshari)
- Iron workshops (one located at Mangay).

The sites were further subdivided into

surveyed and not surveyed sites. Mt. Fouiy (5°19'56"N 12°13'34"E), Mbang cave (5°19'N 12°14'E), Lom (5°22'N 12°14'E), Mt. Ngihini (5°22'N 12°14'E) and Yoko (5°32'N 12°18'E) are surveyed sites, while the following were not surveyed: Mvori (5°20'N 12°2'E), Fouiy 1 (5°19'N 12°13'E), Fouiy 2 (5°19'N 12°13'E), Mt. Mbere (5°23'N 12°13'E), Matshari 1 (5°21'N 12°13'E), Mt. Matshari (5°18'N 12°18'E). The sites not surveyed were either reported to us or were identified by previous researchers.

Lom (5°22'N 12°14'E) culminates at an altitude of 665m and is located along the main road between Matshari and Yoko (Figure 3). The predominant vegetation here is shrub savannah with patches of forest galleries. There are two watercourses present to the west and north of the site. About 1km to the west of Lom lies Mt. Ngihini (Figures 3 and 4). Past human occupation in Lom was evidenced by the concentration of circular huts near a mound. Surface scatters included potsherds, daub, and grindstones. However, it should be noted that cassava has been grown on this site and therefore the site has been disturbed.

Mt. Fouiy site (5°19'56' N 12°13'34'E) is a dome-like shaped massif culminating at an altitude of 736m with shrub savannah and patches of forest vegetation. Three water sources are associated with this site: one is located uphill and two are located downhill. Archaeological remains primarily consist of abundant potsherds strewn across the site and grinding hollow features.

Mbang cave (5°19'N 12°14'E) is located on the southern flank of Mt. Fouiy site. The immediate vicinity of the site is subject to farming activities, and the area is characterized by shrub savannah vegetation. Two fissures called "male" and "female" by the locals constitute the entrances to the cave. The male fissure on which our attention was focused has a 20m high opening

with a chamber beneath. A striking aspect of this cave is the layout of big rocks in the form of a staircase. Four bamboo-like arrow heads were collected in the chamber. A complete vessel serving ritual purposes was also found at the entrance of the cave.

Mt. Ngihini (5°22'N 12°14'E), as already indicated, is located 1km to the west of Lom. The site culminates at an altitude of 890m in a predominant forest vegetation type. Savannah vegetation and a watercourse are present at the foot of the mountain. Grindstones, grinding hollows and potsherds constitute the archaeological remains.

Yoko (5°32'N 12°18'E) culminates at an altitude of 900m. The predominant vegetation is the savannah type but it has been degraded by human activity. This site is located in the administrative centre of Yoko. It has been disturbed seriously by construction work but potsherds still lie on the surface. According to Ghomsu and Bah (1987) it was a fortified settlement in the past.

Preliminary Analysis of the Spatial Distribution of Archaeological Sites

Out of the 14 sites identified and reported, 71.43% constituted habitation sites, 21.43% are caves and rock shelters, and 7.14% are iron workshops. A total of 78.57% represented open-air sites and 21.43% were caves and rock shelters. The spatial distribution of sites revealed that they were either concentrated or isolated (Figure 3). The German explorer and officer Kurt Von Morgen (1972), who explored this area in the late 1880s and early 1890s, noticed that most settlements were isolated and fortified. The distribution of sites in relation to the topography revealed that 57.14% were upland settlements and 42.86% lowland settlements with altitudes ranging between 600-900m (Figure 4). In most cases, sites are located in a predominantly savannah vegetation with patches

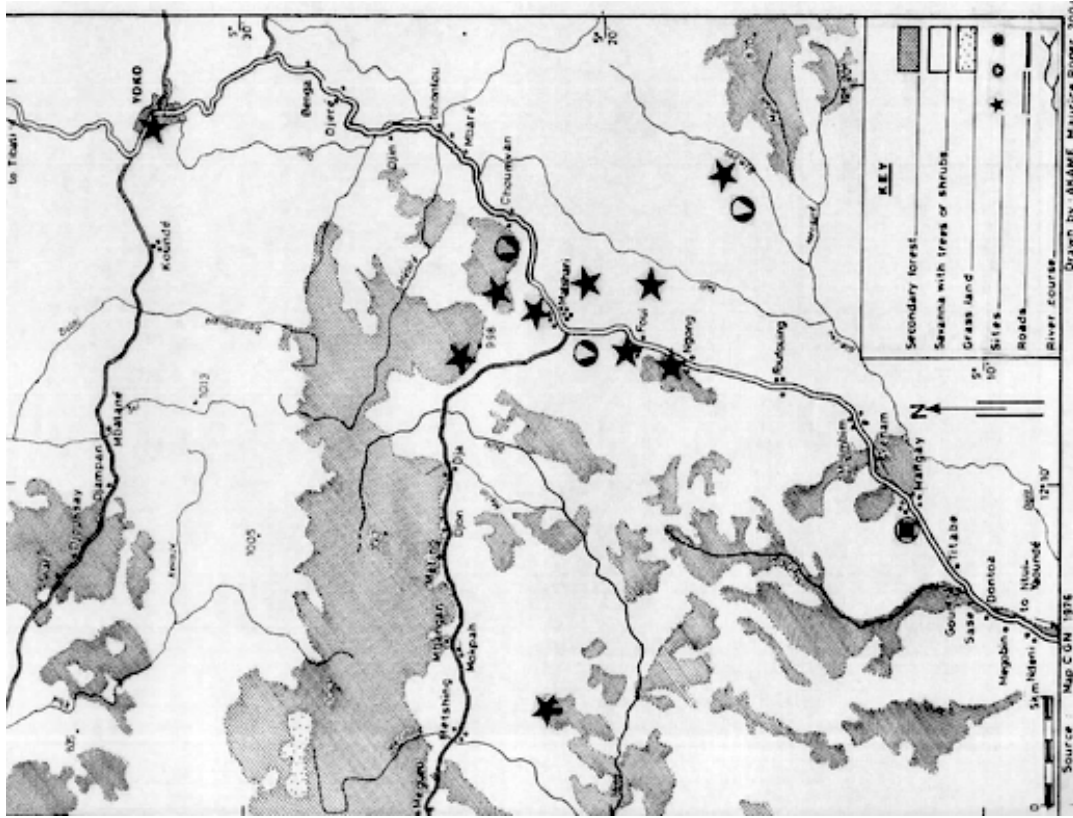


Figure 3: Vegetation and distribution of sites in the study area.

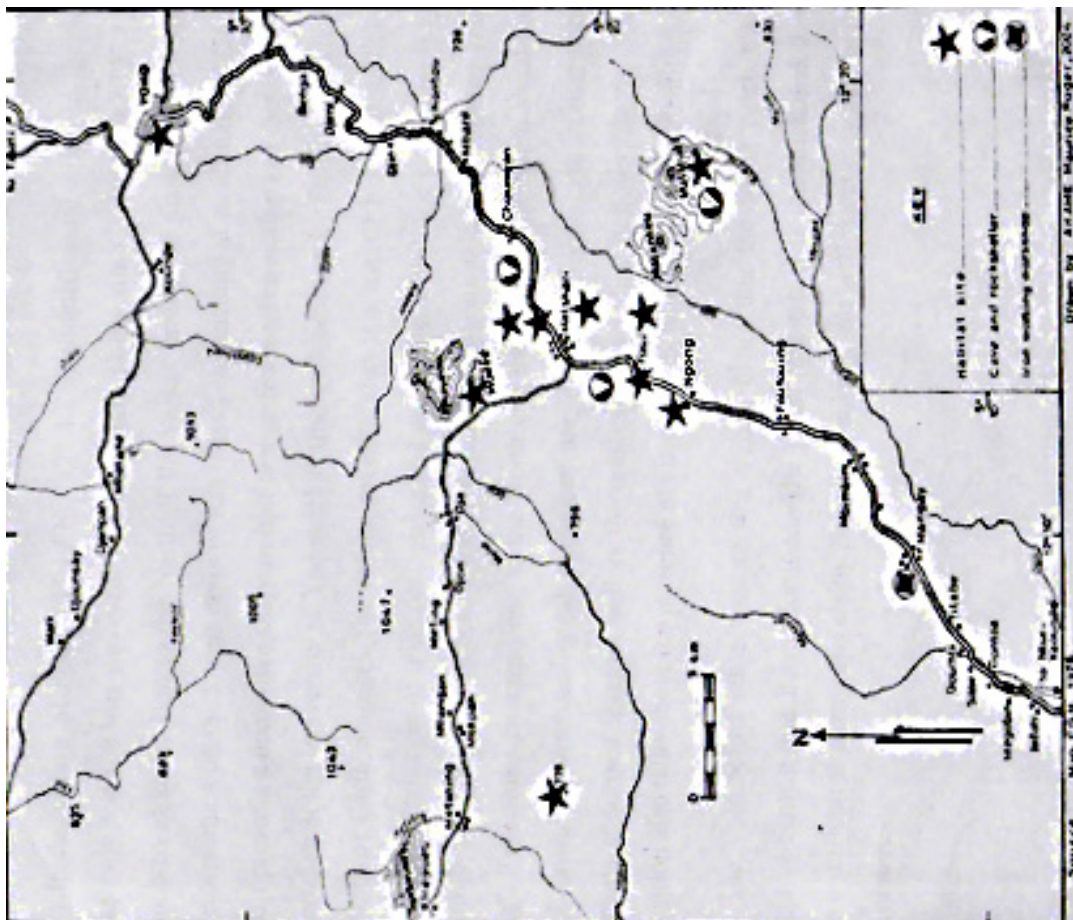


Figure 2: Distribution of archaeological sites in the study area.

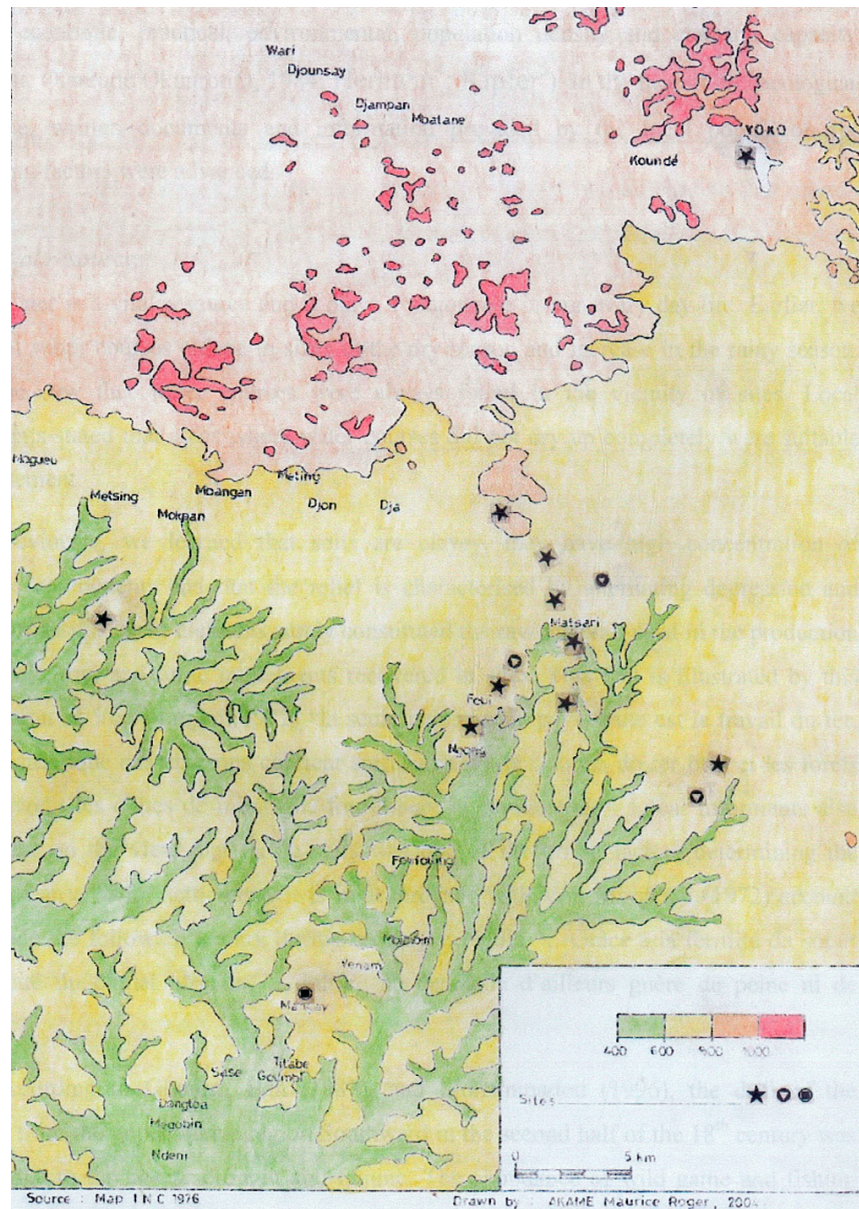


Figure 4: Relief and distribution of sites in the study area.

of forest galleries (Figure 3) with watercourses in the vicinity.

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

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 settlement in a predominantly savannah vegetation with patches of forest galleries with a watercourse 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 pattern. The settlements were more or less dispersed and in some cases habitation

structures were nucleated.

To conclude, this preliminary research gave us some insight into ancient settlement patterns. However, many aspects still remain unclear and an in-depth study is required to fully understand settlement pattern and kindred issues in this region.

Bibliography

Dieu, M., and P. Renaud

1983 *Atlas linguistique de l'Afrique Centrale: inventaire préliminaire, le Cameroun*. Paris/Yaounde: ACCT, CERDOTOLA, DGRST.

Ghoms, E., and T. Bah

1987 *Collecte des Traditions Orales Historique des Populations du Mbam*. Les Vouté, Yaoundé: MESRES/CREA, vol. 1.

Kadomura, H.

1994 Climatic changes, droughts, desertification and land degradation in the Sudano-Sahelian region--a historico-geographical perspective. In H. Kadomura, editor, *Savannization Processes in Tropical Africa II*. Tokyo: Tokyo Metropolitan University, pp. 203-228.

Letouzey, R.

1968 *Étude Phyto-géographique du Cameroun*. Paris: Lechevalier.

Mohammadou, E.

1996 *Nouvelles Perspectives de Recherche sur l'Histoire du Cameroun Centrale au Tournant du 18e Siècle (1750-1850): l'invasion Baare-Tchamba*. Colloque du FENAC tenu a Ngaoundéré du 7-9 Decembre 1996.

Neba, A.S.

1982 *Modern Geography of the United Republic of Cameroon*. New York: Hamilton Printing Company.

Ngwa, J.A.

1967 *An Outline Geography of the Federal Republic of Cameroon*. London: Longman.

Siran, J.L.

1981 Elements d'ethnographic voute pour servir a l'histoire du Cameroun Central. In Claude Tardits, editor, *Contribution de la Recherche Ethnologie a l'Histoire du Cameroun, vol.1*. Paris: Colloques internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique N°551, p. 24-28.