

Interaction and Cultural Affinity Among the Kulere and Their Western Neighbours

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Abstract

On the shelves of the south-western Jos Plateau escarpment of Nigeria, are the Kulere people, occupying an area of only about 30 km², while to the west of them, also occupying a relatively small area, are the Arum, Chessu and Turkwam. Early historical researches on these groups suggested that the Kulere were related to these in origin and migrations and that all of them descended to the escarpment and the western lowland because of the migrant Ron populations. However, recent investigations in the area give a different picture of the relationship between the Kulere and their western neighbours. Whereas the Kulere belong to the Chadic language family, their western neighbours belong to the Bantoid sub-family of the Benue-Congo. The paper therefore concludes that the seeming similarity between the Kulere and their western neighbours is only as a result of close interaction over time.

Key Words: Interaction, Chadic, Bantoid and Benue-Congo.

Introduction

The Kulere area is located between longitudes 8° 46' and 9° 00' east and latitudes 9° 00' and 9° 10' north. It is about 120 kilometres south-west of Jos, occupying part of the South-western Jos Plateau escarpment, which is characterised by what might be referred to as shelves. These are rough and rocky tracts of land between the escarpment ridges which in some areas could be up to three kilometres wide.

On one of the shelves live the Kulere people within a geographical area of about 15 by 10 kilometres (see figure 1). The shelves are characterised by very rocky terrain, lower altitude and higher rainfall than the high plateau, which favours the flourishing of oil palm trees (Isichei 1981: 80). The terrain of Kulere land is a very difficult one. With rocky hills and deep gullies it could take over an hour to walk from one settlement to the other, which may only be a kilometre apart. For example, Ambang is only about 1.5 kilometres away from Barkul, but it would take over two hours of walking and climbing to get there.

Within this small area are eleven settlements whose inhabitants maintain political autonomy and in precolonial times were from time to time engaged in one conflict or the other. These settlements are: Toff, Richa, Kamwai, Ambul, Karkwa, Tukwe, Ambang, Kangil, Barkul, Mabo and Horom. All of them except the last have a common history of origin and migration, referring to themselves as the children of Akandi who arrived at their present homeland from somewhere in the east, around Bauchi, passing through Lankang and through Ron (who are their neighbours to the north). The other three settlements claim to have no other homeland except their present one.

In spite of the obvious difference in language and history of origin, they all refer to themselves as Kulere.

Meanwhile on the forested plains, at the foot of the escarpment, are another group of people generally referred to as the Kantana. The group is made up of the Arum, Chessu, Turkwam, Marhai Mama and Mangar. These are the western neighbours to the Kulere. Like the Kulere these settlements maintain their individual political autonomy and like the Kulere were from time to time in feud. While the Turkwam and the Chessu claim to have migrated from the Ron area, the other settlements claim to have come from the Bauchi area.

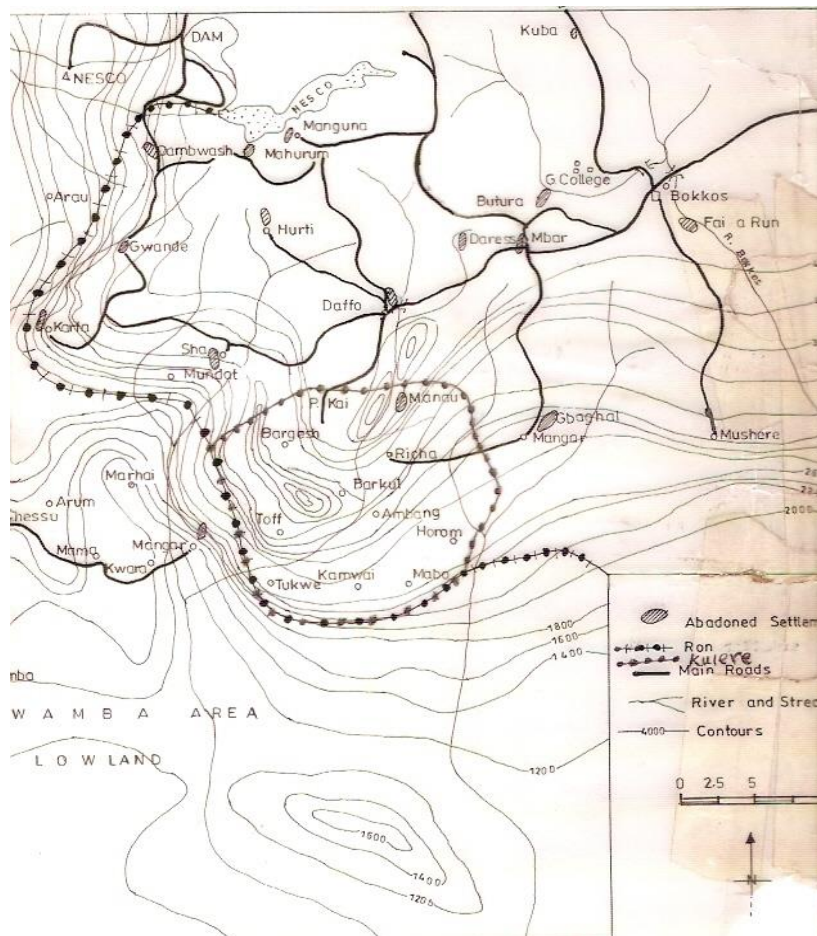


Fig. 1: The South-western Jos Plateau showing the Ron, the Kulere and their western neighbours

The Kulere and Their Western Neighbours

The Kulere and their western neighbours have many common cultural practices. The most important was house construction; both groups built

distinctive two-storeyed round houses, with the granary above the living quarters. The villages are either situated on hill-tops, with stone wall fortifications or they are hidden away among groves of oil palms. The houses are round and peculiarly high, having lofts which are accessible only from outside by means of ladders. The mud used for the building is very bright red in colour and both walls and doorways are ornamented.

Each of these peoples had extremely complex religious and political structures, the most important element being the masquerade organisations or cults. In this set up quite a number of the cults were mainly concerned with protecting the life and property of their members, and with healing diseases. For example anyone who stole from a member's farm would contract a specific disease, but it is only the cult that could provide a cure as it controlled the herbs and other remedies for such disease. The cult was so exclusive that you could only join it by providing a feast.

The three most important cults were *kama*, *arikil* and *mundja*. *Kama* was concerned with keeping the peace, *arikil* with legal processes including trial by ordeal and *mundja* with protecting the crops. The first two played an important role in boy's initiation ceremonies. Each clan had its own common shrine. The cults are represented in public appearances by masks, and specific musical instruments and voice-disguisers. All initiated members belong to the *ma-ka-kama* (pl, *ka-kama*) and can attend meetings at the shrine. But only individuals from certain clans can become true members of *kama*, by a process of giving feasts. It was perhaps because of these similarities that Frank (1978) and Mangut J. (2006) suggested that the Kulere and their western neighbours are most likely to have been part of the indigenous population in the area. Morrison is also of the same opinion as he claims that the Kulere are among the earliest settlers on the Plateau, that the Biron came later, and the Ron later still.



Plate 1: A typical Kulere and Wamba area traditional architecture

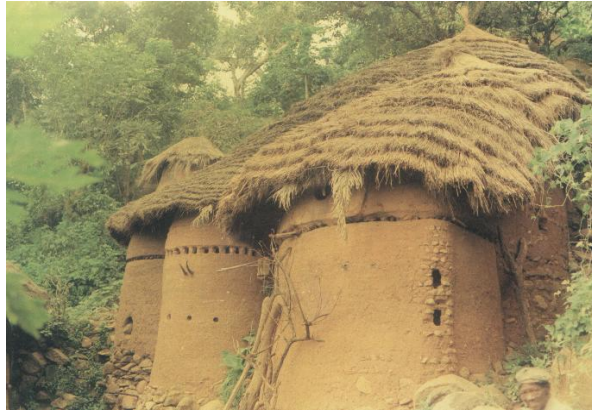


Plate 2: A typical Kulere house structure. Note the ornaments on the walls

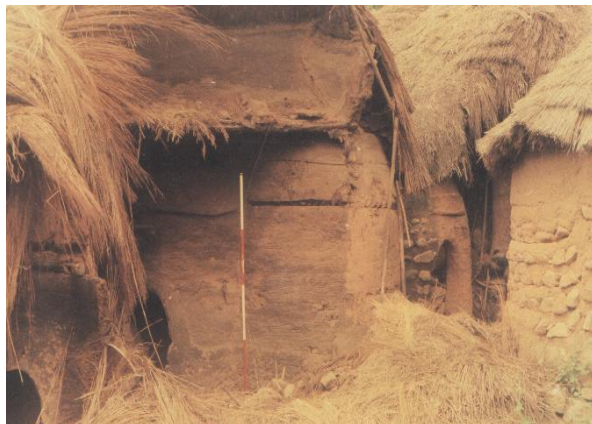


Plate 3: A similar structure to the one seen on plate 4 collapsed and the inner structure of such a house can thus be seen.



Plate 4: Kulere masquerades: *Kama*, *Arikil* and *Mundja* representing the various cults.

From the late 1980s, with the assistance of Joseph Mangut, this author has been undertaking archaeological and ethnographic studies in the Kulere and the Wamba areas. During the course of some of her interviews she noticed certain variants in their traditions of origin and migrations which led her into exploring other studies, particularly linguistics, conducted in the area for collaboration. It was interesting to note that much as the Kulere and their western neighbours have many cultural practices in common which has brought about the suggestions of their common origin, there were certain obvious differences in their language.

For example Jungraithmayr's linguistic studies in the general area suggest that whereas the Kulere languages belong to the Chadic family, their western neighbours speak a Bantoid language, related to the Bantoid languages of Bauchi area (Jungraithmayr 1970). It was based on such discoveries that further archaeological investigations of the Kulere and the Ron were undertaken by this author and Joseph Mangut in an attempt to trace their areas of origin.

An interesting discovery made by this author during the course of her investigation was that the antiquity of the Kulere in the area was not as long as earlier suggested by Morrison (1976), Frank (1978) and Mangut J. (1986). Her excavations in the Kulere area showed that their settlements were of a relatively recent period when compared to the Ron area (see Mangut B. N. 2008). Further archaeological investigations of the Kulere and the Ron now revealed that their origin was most likely from the Southern Bauchi area between the 16th and the 17th centuries (Mangut and Mangut 2009). Going by the above conclusions one should have expected the Kulere and the Ron people to share common traditions which is interestingly not the case. This is because the Kulere's traditions are more closely related to those of their western neighbours who belong to a totally different language family, in this case the Benue-Congo family.

Further ethnoarchaeological investigations by this author, following the observation above, showed that the most likely reason why the Kulere and their western neighbours share such common practices was as a result of exchange and trade mechanisms which brought about external influence and internal changes among the Kulere. This fact can better be appreciated if we note that the whole of the region in pre-colonial times was engaged in inter-ethnic warfares and slave raiding as contained in the colonial records on the area. With the establishment of the Colonial Administration in the region there was relative peace and advancement of trade and exchange in the area (Mangut and Mangut (2006).

The exchange mechanism of Kulere land involved specialized traders who had what was referred to as *matyer* (Ron for path). This *matyer* meant that the trader had a trading friend or partner in another locality. And the role of the *matyer* was to identify what the requirements of one locality were and what they would need in exchange. His job was therefore to facilitate such exchanges.

The business transaction could start from eastern Ronland, say Bokkos. This Bokkos man would normally have a friend in Daffo. If he wanted palm oil, he brought, say a goat to the Daffo man. He would leave the goat with the Daffo man and go back to Bokkos. It was now the job of the Daffo man to take this goat to his own *matyer* in Kulere land. The Kulere man would give a pot of palm oil to the Daffo man after entertaining him as a friend. On getting back the Daffo man would get a smaller pot of palm oil for the Bokkos man and what was left, probably a quarter would now be the Daffo man's *sakur* (Ron for leg), for going down to Kulere land. In actual sense that would be the Daffo man's commission

Furthermore, if the Kulere man would have to go further to the lowland to get palm oil or honey or even pots, he would slaughter the goat and remove a part, say a limb which was his own commission and the rest would be taken to his own *matyer*. By so doing both the Daffo man and the Kulere man could save their commissions enough to afford them their own business. For example, the Daffo man could save enough of the palm oil to enable him get a goat from the Bokkos man. There was no limit to the number of *matyer* in any locality. It depended on how buoyant the business was. And the exchange items had no specific value attached to them save what the *matyer* in both localities agreed upon. However, a slave for instance in Kulere land usually attracted a cow. It is very important to note that there is no way that such an intricate trading network would not bring about a gradual integration of the peoples of the region and this appears to have happened among the Kulere and their southern neighbours.

On the reason for the closer cultural tie between the Kulere and their western neighbours and not with the Ron that they share a common origin, the author discovered that it was mainly because of the geographical location of the Kulere. All the informants suggested that it was easier for the Kulere man to go to his western neighbour who was just at the foot of the escarpment than to ascend the plateau to go to the Ron man and with time these geographical features appear to have conveniently divided the region into the Ron on one side and the Kulere and their western neighbours on the other.

It can therefore be seen that the internal changes that have taken place among the Kulere which has made them to appear as if they were totally different from the Ron has largely been as a result of external influence from their western neighbours.

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