

# **Preliminary Investigations of the Origin and Historical Traditions of the Borgu in Niger State of Nigeria**

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## **Abstract**

*Oral traditions of the Borgu claim that they originated from the Middle East under the leadership of Kisra, passing through several places before finally settling in their present-day place. Using the historical archaeology approach this study investigates the traditions of origin and migrations as well as language relationships of the Borgu of Niger State. Preliminary findings however suggest that the claims of eastern origin could have been later creations as most of their historical traditions seem to indicate a relationship with the other Mande language speakers around them. This work therefore attempts to highlight the early history and traditions of the people and suggests that a multidisciplinary approach involving linguistics, geology and related disciplines is required if we are to understand the origin, historical traditions and the peopling of the Borgu area as a whole.*

*Key Terms: Borgu, Bussa, Historical archaeology, Kisra and Mande.*

## **Introduction**

Borgu refers to both a group of people and an area. As a people they see themselves as the descendants of the three sons of a legendary leader known as Kisra. As an area Borgu once developed into a kingdom that stretched from the north-western part of present-day Nigeria to the north-eastern part of present-day Benin Republic. Figure 1 gives an idea of the extent of Borgu Kingdom as it stretched from Illo to the north in present-day Kebbi State of Nigeria, to Nikki to the west in present-day Benin Republic; and to the south the kingdom stretched to as far as the frontiers of the Old Oyo Empire. The kingdom became so powerful towards the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that it was able to resist the invasion of the Fulani Jihads of Sokoto and Gwandu until the establishment of the British colonial rule (Jones, 2005).

Borgu people still share similarity in cultural traits and language despite their divergent domiciliation. Westermann and Bryan (1952), recognised the Borgu language as belonging to the Boko/Busa dialect of the Eastern Mande sub-group of the Niger-Congo with estimated 27,000 speakers; about 11,000 of whom are in the Nigerian area and about 16,000 in the Benin Republic area. Jones (2005) on the other hand, using data supplied by Welmers (1971), gave a much higher figure of 178,000 for both countries. If these figures were correct, and going by the population upsurge following the economic boom that the region witnessed from the 1970s the figures should be by far higher now.

The breaking up of Borgu Kingdom into smaller units started from the partition of Africa following the Berlin Conference of 1884 and 1885. Thus France secured Nikki and almost two-thirds of Borgu Kingdom territories in

the present-day Benin Republic while the remaining portion went to the British in present-day Nigeria (Faurite 1987). The British on their part named their own portion as Borgu Province and further split it into a northern and a southern division. While Kaima administered the Southern Division, Bussa administered the Northern Division both in an area that later became part of Kwara State. It was however in the administrative reorganisation of 1991 that the Northern Division was excised from Kwara State and it became Borgu and Agwara Local Government Areas in Niger State while Illo and Kaoje became Bagudo Local Government Areas in Kebbi State. The Southern Division in the reorganisation became Kaima and Baruten Local Government Areas in Kwara State as seen in figure 2, (Mohammed and Nze 2004).



Figure 1: Pre-colonial Borgu Kingdom (Source: Mohammed and Nze 2009).

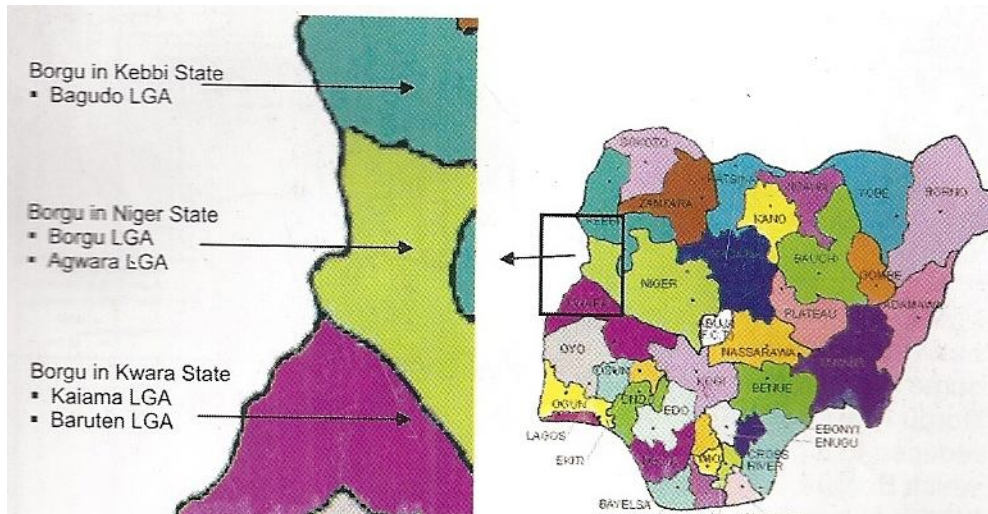


Figure 2: Borgu in the Nigerian Area (Source: Mohammed and Nze 2009).

### Origin and Migrations of the Borgu People

According to Borgu oral history (Mohammed and Nze 2004), the people are said to have arrived and settled in the land from the Middle East around the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD under the leadership of Kisra, a prince from Persia (in present-day Iran), who refused to accept the Islamic reforms by Prophet Mohammed. In the establishment of Borgu, Woru the eldest son established Bussa in present-day Borgu Local Government Area of Niger State of Nigeria while Sabi the younger son established Nikki in present-day Benin Republic. The youngest son Biyo, on the other hand moved only a little to the north of Bussa and established Illo which is in present-day Kebbi State of Nigeria as indicated in figure one.

Another version of the origin of the Borgu people is the one given by Frobenius (1913) in which he claims that the Borgu people under Kisra migrated from Badar, near Mecca in protest to Prophet Mohammed and travelled across the Sudan to Asben, where they broke off into many sections. While the Bedde settled at Bornu the others under Kisra's descendants came further west and a large body settled under the chieftainship of three brothers at Bussa, Illo and Nikki. It is said in this version that Bussa being the oldest of the brothers received presents from the other two and so shared common rituals.

Temple (1919) in his own report claims that the Bussa's origin was from Badar, in the vicinity of Mecca but had to migrate under Kisra when they fell out with Prophet Mohammed's intentions to dominate them. It is further said in Temple's account that on reaching the River Niger they decided to settle down and the town of Bussa on its right bank became their headquarters. From there many of them wandered further and the Kingdom of Nikki was

founded by the Bussa chief's brother-in-law, Sheru, while Illo was founded by his brother Wuru and both states regularly send tribute to Bussa.

Jones (2005), in his findings about the origin of the Borgu claims that Kisra, may have been derived from the popular name of an ancient Persian ruler. In most of the legends it is said that Kisra was the head of a small lineage or clan in Mecca or somewhere in Arabia who refused to accept Prophet Mohammed's plan for reform and stoutly resisted conversion to Islam. In the face of defeat by the forces of the Prophet, he fled with his people to Africa and across the Sahara, coming eventually to the River Niger. The river was then miraculously widened to its present size, apparently to foil the pursuing Muslims. Some accounts suggest that they may have been Berbers from North Africa.

The legend has also been recorded in a number of literature. For example, mention of this legend is found in the Songhai sources (Jones 2005: 8), which claim that at about AD 600 there was a great migration from east to west across the Sudan called the Kisra Migration. The Kisra themselves are said to be Persians who fought against the Byzantines and were driven west, entering Nigeria through the Lake Chad area. Palmer (1967) seems to agree with such a migration in the 7<sup>th</sup> century when he traces the Kisra migration from Dafur to Bald Mountains in the Marua area through Adamawa before the group split up. As some went to Zaria, others to Wukari, others to Gwamna and still others further to the west and founded Wawa and Boku, the last two areas which happened to be in Borgu. In some places where the legend exists, Kisra is regarded as having been merely a visitor, while in others he, or his descendants, are positively regarded as founders of the state (Jones 2005). Kisra relics have been recorded in certain villages where they are acknowledged as the original, hence sacred articles of kingship. In all areas where the legend of Kisra exists, the associated relics are held as evidence of the people's claim of Eastern ancestry, or at least, Eastern connections (Jones 2005).

Matthews (1950), in his accounts of a relationship between Kisra and Prophet Mohammed, suggests that these may be later accretions added by peoples who inherited the Kisra legend and wished to give it the cachet which Islam has won for itself, even among pagans in the Western Sudan. Matthews in addition agrees with Meek's conclusion (Meek 1925) that some of these written records may embody genuine tradition and be based on historical facts, but it is obvious that no reliance can be placed on the details given as any imaginative Muslim who could write was capable of manufacturing history for the unlettered.

All informants interviewed in and around New Bussa (primary sources), relating to the origin of the Borgu people only provided information relating to the origin of the ruling aristocracy popularly known as Wasangari. It therefore appears as if there were certain indigenous groups in which oral traditions relating to them have been deliberately ignored or have since been lost to time. Levzion (1968) seems to follow this postulation after analysing

the various legends as obtained in the area. He suggests that the founder or founders of the Bussa and indeed the Borgu as a whole might be a typical situation of a group of invaders, who were horsemen with political and military superiority that imposed their authority over the indigenous peoples, but being inferior in numbers, they adopted the language of the indigenous population. Linguistic studies on the area also seem to support Levtzions assertion. For example the general area occupied by Borgu kingdom in prehistoric times was occupied by the Eastern Mande group of languages known as Boko/Busa in Welmer's classification of the Eastern Niger-Congo languages (Welmer 1971), spoken by people living in the north-east of Benin Republic and the mid-west of Nigeria between the Niger River and the Benin border. To the east are the Plateau languages which belong to the Benue-Congo sub-group dominating the centre of Nigeria, spreading from Lake Kainji to the region south of Bauchi (Blench 2009). Figure 1 gives an idea of the nature of the various groupings in the Central Sudan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century which is long after the said Kisra Migrations.

Going by the above observation it would therefore appear that the new comers mixed with the local Mande ethnic groups to form a well-organised kingdom, superior to those of surrounding groups. The new comers thus became the rulers, god-kings rather than priest kings, because of their different ancestry. This might explain the extreme reverence given to Emirs to this day as they were responsible for politics and warfare and because of their background, responsible for their monotheistic tradition and circumcision. The original Mande people on the other hand were owners of the land, responsible for the worship of local bush or nature spirits. The owners of the land still play an important part in the installation and burial of the Kisra kings and in the government of the state. The principal chief of the land is called the "*Ba Karabonde*" (Jones 2005). However, these legends as they are, give us an idea of the general westward migrations of ethnic groups of the Western Sudan due to social and political developments in the Lake Chad area as suggested by Mangvwat (1984).

It has also been suggested that following the desiccation of the Mega Chad between the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium B.C. and the beginning of the 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium AD there were southward and westward migrations of Chadic speaking populations into the area occupied by the Niger-Congo groups in the Central Sudan (Mangut, J. and Mangut B. 2012). Smith (1987:79) further postulates that the processes of state formations in Hausaland, Bornu and Kwararafa which lasted from the 12<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> centuries AD dislocated populations in the Central Sudan, which could have affected other groups in the whole sub-region. Figure 3 gives an idea of what the various groups in the region could have looked like in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.

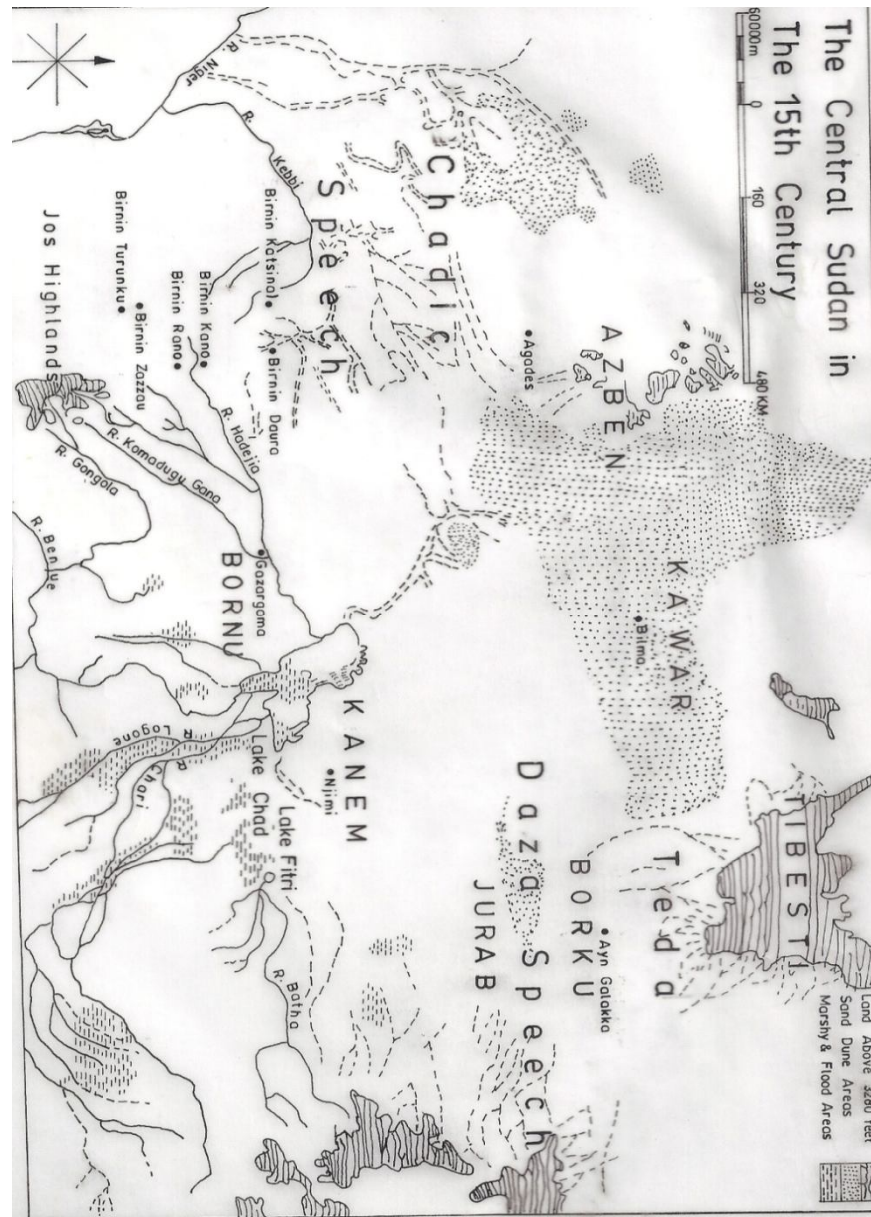


Figure 3: Central Sudan in the 15<sup>th</sup> century showing language families and groups. (Source: Smith 1978)

### Old Bussa Abandoned Settlement

To the east of New Bussa, about 15 kilometres as the crow flies, and in the middle of the Kainji Dam is the Old Bussa, now an abandoned settlement safe for a small community of fishermen. To get to the abandoned settlement one would have to make a risky journey of about five hours or more by speed boat, when leaving directly from the present-day settlement, or travel

by road to Wara, a village at the extreme eastern edge of the dam, and then for about thirty minutes by speed boat to get to the island. The settlement initially could have been on a flat-topped hill, surrounded by the arms of the River Niger, but the dam has made the place to be an island stretching for about one and a half kilometres in all directions, when the dam is at its fullest. The vegetation of the island, where the seasonal flooding of the dam does not get to, appears sparse with more shrubs than tree plants. It is only around the abandoned settlement that the vegetation is much thicker.

It would be appropriate to categorise the abandoned settlements into two. The first one is the older settlement and historical settlement that was said to have been established by the Kisra descendants. It is said that the place was on a forested hill with a clear view of the surrounding area. But then with the establishment of the colonial administration the people had to move to the plain area which is about 500 metres to the north-east (Yau Mohammed, per. com. May 2012). The older settlement could therefore be categorised as Settlement A while the second one categorised as B.

### **Settlement A**

On getting to the island from Wara the first feature spotted right from the dam is the present-day fishermen's settlement, (Plate 1). From the fishermen's settlement, the abandoned settlement A is about 150 metres due west, making it to fall almost in the centre of the island. It is about 250 metres wide, south-east to north-west and about 100 metres north to south and demarcated by five large baobab trees arranged almost in a semi-circular form (Plate 2).

The soil in the area is dark and loamy which is quite different from the rocky sandy soils of the surrounding area. Perhaps it is the fertile nature of the soil that has encouraged the fishermen currently residing in the area to intensively cultivate the land, hence rendering the site partially destructive for archaeological investigations. However, a casual exploration of the area reveals the heavy presence of potsherds, grinding stones and burnt clay which give the indication that the area could have once been settled and could also provide ideal spots for major archaeological excavations.

### **Settlement B**

About 500 metres north-east of settlement A is Settlement B, most of which is submerged by the dam. What is left is only an area of about 200 metres north-west to south-east, along the dam. The area is sandy in some places and rocky in others. Seen on the surface are pieces of pottery, glass, nails and other materials associated with present-day settlements. Also conspicuously seen are remnants of a market place, the Divisional Officer's house, and the strong room where official colonial records were kept as well as a public well.



Plate 1: Present-day Fishermen Settlement at Old Bussa viewed from the east.



Plate 2: The central area of the abandoned settlement A, surrounded by baobab trees viewed from the south-east.



Plate 3: The northernmost and largest baobab trees in settlement A, viewed from the north-east. The one to the left is held in high esteem by the people because of its unique twin trunks.



Plate 4: Remnants of the Divisional Officer's residence. To the left was the market place while far ahead; almost submerged by water was a public well.

### **Historical Traditions: The Jekanna Hill**

The Jekanna Hill is the most important ritual hill to all the Borgu people. The hill is found near Leshigbe about 12 kilometres to the north-west of New Bussa Town. It is believed that a deity referred to as Jekanna lived in a cave on this hill, the chief priest who catered for the deity was known as *Ba – Maso*.

Before getting to the Jekanna Hill a number of rituals must be observed. These commenced with drinking water as well as bathing at a place called *Kwasogbe* at the foot of the hill. The water was kept in a calabash with locust in it. The essence of this cleansing was to purify men who had gone to bed with foreign women or from any form of adultery. The deity is said to be intolerant of evil doers, consequently, culprits were therefore attacked by bees.

The inner part of the cave where the deity lived had two portions. The Chief priest lived in the inner portion while his assistants stayed at the outer section. Messages from the deity were relayed through the chief priest. The surrounding villagers maintain that the deity occasionally made loud fearful sounds that could be heard kilometres away.

People seeking for child birth used to go to the deity for a solution. The deity was also consulted during epidemic outbreak and clients also came from as far away as Benin Republic. In most cases the results of such visits were usually positive. Following a successful delivery, in the case of a barren woman, the new mother appeased the deity with a sheep, a goat and a chicken. The hair of the child was not shaved until he or she attained the age of four years when the child was taken to the deity and, for the first time, shaved. Such children were named after the deity and that explains such names as Kana for a male child and Kina for a female.



Plate 5: The Jekanna Hill Viewed from the South-East.



Plate 6: Approaching the *Kwasogbe* at the Foot of the Hill Where the Purifying Water was Kept.

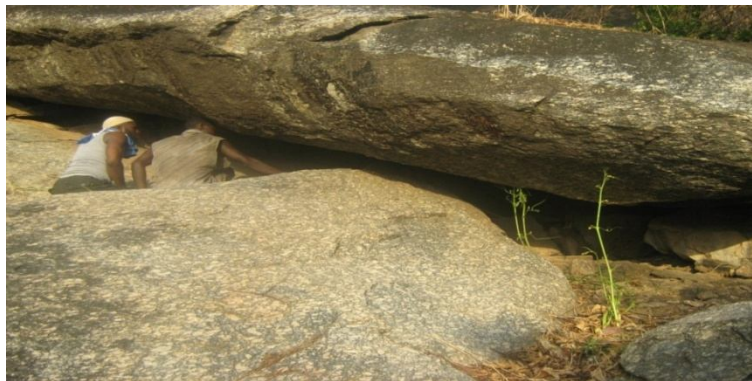


Plate 7: The Outer Part of the Cave in which the Jekanna Deity Lived.



Plate 8: The Inner Chamber of the Cave in which lived the Jekana Deity.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Although there are quite a number of literatures on the Borgu kingdom and the Kiswa legend, not much archaeological investigations relating to the legends or the peopling of the area have been undertaken. A few of the attempts were mainly linked to the salvage projects in the 1960s at the instance of the construction of the Kainji dam which culminated in the rescue archaeological project (KRAP). The project hurriedly reconnoitred the area between Old Bussa and Yelwa leading to the excavation of over twenty sites among which were Baha Mound and Yelwa tagged RS 63/32 (Hartle 1972; Priddy 1970).

The excavations revealed rich archaeological materials which ranged from stone artefacts to terracotta figurines, clay smoking pipes, pottery vessels, ivory, bronze and iron artefacts; architectural remains, burial sites and objects from shrines among others (Breternitz 1975; Shaw 1978; Nzewunwa 1983). In the 1980s some other excavations were undertaken in this area at the sites of Ulaira and Sawuni on the shores of the lake. These excavations yielded a great array of materials such as ornaments, iron slag, domestic and agricultural tools, pottery, beads among other finds (Nzenwa 1993).

In all these excavations the dates arrived at ranged from about 2140 BP to post 1400AD (Hartle 1972; Priddy 1970; Breternitz 1975; Nzewunwa 1983, 1993). Yet based on questionable evidence Mohammed and Nze (2004:2) claim that archaeological excavations carried out in the area near Old Bussa in the early 1960s

...produced the oldest known tools made by man in Nigeria, dating from the Earlier African Stone age period. These are pebble tools, which are believed to date back to c 60,000 BC (i.e. 62,000 years ago). Such tools were shaped by percussion to form crude chopping and cutting implements with edges extending from 3 cm to 12 cm in length; the early men who made them are believed to have spread over the Savannah and bushy grasslands of Africa.<sup>1</sup>

It is however my strong opinion that such unverified claims should not form the basis for determining the peopling of such an area. There is relatively absence of dated sites in West Africa compared to eastern and southern Africa and available evidence so far suggest that the region was sparsely populated until the end of the Pleistocene, some 12,000 years ago and with the coming of the Holocene when lakes and rivers across West Africa began to refill, providing more evidence of human settlements (Blench 2006: 124).

Borgu history no doubt presents an interesting area for further research in which archaeology, geology, linguistics, genetics and related disciplines should come into play. Since it is known that the area in question had had an interplay of the Mande sub language family of the Niger-Congo and an intrusion of new comers such geographical expansion could never have been unmotivated; there must have been some social or economic innovations to account for such fusion and expansion which should be of interest to us. In doing so we would be providing a better approach in the study of our history by making sense of cultures in the present to reconstruct past processes of evolution and change.

## Notes

1. Nze P. Nze claims in his joint publication, Mohammed and Nze (2004: 2) that this information is contained in his work titled "Historic Nation of Borgu: A Goldmine of Human and Material Resources (1998: pp. 18-19)". Publication details were not however included in the bibliography.

## A. Primary Sources

List of Informants Interviewed on Oral Traditions in May 2012.

| Name of Informant       | App. Age | Address    | Occupation               | Type of Information               |
|-------------------------|----------|------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Bani Mohammed Ibraim | 55       | Kabe, Town | H / M, Kabe Primary Sch. | Origin and migrations             |
| 2. Mohammed Makeri      | 65       | Kabe Town  | Blacksmith               | Origin and migrations             |
| 3. Aliyu Bio            | 70       | Kabe Town  | Farmer                   | Origin and migrations             |
| 4. Yau Mohammed         | 67       | New Bussa  | Jakadan Borgu            | Origins and historical traditions |
| 5. Haruna M. Mamood     | 45       | New Bussa  | Civil servant            | Origin and migrations             |
| 6. Ahmed A. Nengo       | 50       | Pissa      | Civil Servant            | Origin and historical traditions  |
| 7. Dahiru Mohammed      | 75       | New Bussa  | Retired                  | Origin and historical traditions  |

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