

A Reconsideration of the Origin and Migrations of the Atyap People of Zangon Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State, Nigeria.

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Abstract

This paper attempts to highlight and reappraise the various versions of oral traditions that provided information for the understanding of the Traditions of origin and migrations of the Atyap people of Zangon Kataf Local Government of Nigeria. Given the paucity of direct archaeological evidence with regards to the origin of the Atyap people, however, we accept the view that oral tradition remains a viable option. There are three versions of oral tradition all of which attest to the fact that the entire Atyap people originated from one source, but migrated to their present settlement through different routes.

Key Terms: Oral Traditions, Atyap People, and Zagon Kataf.

Introduction

The Atyap are a group of people who are predominantly located in the present day Zangon-Kataf Local Government Area of Kaduna State, North western Nigeria. They derive their name from their language – “Tyap” which is a descriptive name meaning “the people who speak Tyap”. The Atyap people are surrounded by lands and villages belonging to their neighbours among whom are the Bajju, Moroa, Kagoro, Ikulu, Jaba, Kamanton and Chawai.

The vegetation type recognizable in the area is the Guinea Savanna or Savanna woodland type which is dotted or characterized by short and medium size trees, shrubs and perennial mesophytic grasses derived from semi-deciduous forest (Gandu 1985, Jemkur 1991) and the soil type is predominantly sandstones with little gravels. This type of vegetation is usually considered suitable for the habitation of less harmful animals while the soil type is suitable for farming. This perhaps also explains why the dominant occupation of the people is farming.

A Reconsideration of the Tradition of Origin and Migrations of the Atyap People

The account of the history and migration of the Atyap people which has several versions is preserved largely through oral traditions and a few written records. This is mainly because oral tradition has been considered by many scholars to be very important and useful in archaeological and historical research especially in the area of site location, identification of ancient places and tracing the migrations of peoples (Vansina 1965, Andah and Okpoko 1994, Schmidt 1978).

One of the versions of the oral tradition that explains the tradition of origin and migration of the Atyap people states that “the Atyap reached where they presently occupy from the direction of the East or North a long time ago” (Daye, Pers. Comm. 2008). This claim however, seems ambiguous because it gives no idea about chronology or account of when the migration of the people took place. Even where dates are given, they are so recent that it becomes very difficult to accept them as the exact time when the people occupied the area.

Nevertheless, Meek (1931), Achi (1981) and Dauke (2004) also captured and largely documented other versions of oral tradition that also explain the origin and migration of the entire Atyap people. In one of these versions, Dauke (2004) asserts that the entire Atyap people once lived in Bauchi before migrating to Kano and later to the present day Atyap land. Before leaving Kano, it is said that the people divided themselves into two groups – the *Agba'ad* and *Minyam* groups. The two groups took different routes: the *Agba'ad* passed through Kadara land while the *Minyam* went through Kargi.

Meek (1931) on the other hand presented another version which states that from the Bauchi area where the Atyap people once lived, they moved to Kalla near Kauru in Kaduna State, Nigeria and eventually to their present settlement. While in Kalla, it is said that the burden of taxation imposed on them by the Kauru chief became impossible for them to pay. This however, forced them to migrate further in 1846 to a thinly populated area then occupied by the Chawai and Kachechere people whom they drove to the west.

Another version of the tradition, as pointed out by Dauke (2004), states that from the Bauchi area, the Atyap people moved in small parties towards the northwest to the Kurama area in Kargi district and settled at Abuyap, Kanai and Zonzon area. This was in an attempt for them to move further away from the slave raiding expeditions from the Zazzau emirate.

In reconsidering the history, tradition of origin and migration of the Atyap people, it is indeed noteworthy that these traditions of origin appear to have claimed a single source of origin from where the Atyap people migrated; however, Dauke (2004), further argued that linguistic studies on the Bantu Language Group seem to show some doubt about the origin of the Atyap people being directly from Bauchi. He also claimed that the Tyap language spoken by the Atyap people belong to the Jarawan Bantu Language Group which is seen to be only dominant around the southeastern part of Bauchi and that the Atyap people could not have descended directly from Bauchi simply because most language groups along west of Bauchi dominating the Jos Plateau and southern part of Kaduna belong to the Benue-Congo Plateau Language Groups which Tyap language does not fall into. This therefore is a major limitation of oral tradition and it calls for further and thorough investigation.

As part of the history and tradition of the entire Atyap people, oral tradition has it that the people are socially well organized and are made up

of four clans namely the *Agba'ad*, the *Minyam*, the *Aku* and the *Ashokwa* (also seen as "rainmakers"). These clans form an integral aspect of the people's history. Oral tradition further has it that two of these clans have other sub-divisions hitherto referred to as sub-clans.

The *Agba'ad* clan is sub-divided into three sub-clans namely the *Akpaisa*, the *Je*i and the *Akwak*. All of these sub-clans are considered to be the descendants of the *Agba'ad*. The *Minyam* clan on the other hand has two sub-clans: the *Afakan* and the *Ason* while the *Aku* and *Ashokwa* clans have no sub-clans probably because they chose not to emphasize the issue of sub-divisions amongst themselves. According to Gaje and Daye (Pers. Comm. 2008), the *Aku* and *Ashokwa* clans share closer affinity in contradistinction with their relationship with the other clans and sub-clans. This close relationship is traceable to their early arrival to their present settlement; the *Aku* and the *Ashokwa* were said to have arrived their present abode before the other clans and sub-clans. Dauke (2004) further pointed out that the *Aku* and the *Ashokwa* were legendarily "discovered" because they were "met" there by the other Atyap people who arrived later.

Several other legendary versions of oral tradition also exist on Atyap history of migration and settlement. First, it is said that after the *Agba'ad* clan came and settled in their new place, one of the sub-clans of the *Agba'ad* went on a hunting expedition and accidentally "came across" the *Ashokwa* clan along the River Kaduna performing certain religious rites. When the *Ashokwa* saw the *Agba'ad* coming their way, they fled out of fear and the *Agba'ad* pursued them. When the *Agba'ad* finally caught the *Ashokwa*, they discovered that they speak the same (Tyap) language and share the same belief and thus accepted them as their brothers. Dauke (2004) also gave another version of the tradition on the "discovery" of the *Aku* and *Ashokwa* clans. According to him, the *Aku* were proverbially said to have "sprung out" from the hoof marks of the *Agba'ad* horsemen as they pursued the *Ashokwa*. In other words, while the *Agba'ad* were pursuing the *Ashokwa*, the hoofs of their horsemen opened a termite's mound from where the *Aku* emanated. This explains why the *Aku* to date bear the nickname of "*Bin Chio*", which means, "relatives of the termites".

The above traditions and stories of the "discovery" of the *Aku* and *Ashokwa* clans, portray the fact that these two clans can likely be reconsidered as those representing the earlier migrants who first came and occupied the present Atyap land. However, oral tradition also has it that all the four clans and sub-clans of the Atyap people are presently found in their large number in many villages within the Atyap Chiefdom largely due to population increase and the need to stay closer to farmlands. They also inter-mingle with one another within most of the villages in Atyap land where the *Akpaisa*, the *Je*i and the *Akwak* sub-clans of the *Agba'ad* clan are found, including the *Minyam* villages.

The possession of totems, taboos and emblems which come in form of designs, structures and animals is another important aspect in the history

and tradition of the Atyap people. According to oral tradition, all the four clans of the Atyap people have different emblems, totems and taboos and they vary from clan to clan and from sub-clan to sub-clan. This is considered as a common practice among the people because they most of the time used these emblems as a way of identification. Apart from the emblems and totems, some clans have certain animals or plants which they also consider as taboos and in some cases also used them for rituals. Oral tradition further has it that such animals are usually reverend in the area till date.

For the *Aku* clan, oral tradition has it that their emblem or totem is the 'Male' Shea Tree (locally called *Nensham*). The people's belief about this tree was that the tree can be felled down, but its wood is not be used for making fire for cooking. It is believed that if an *Aku* man eats food cooked with *Nensham* wood his body would develop sores. Also, if a bunch of *Nensham* leaves was placed at the door of a house, no *Aku* woman dared entered into such house because it was also considered a serious taboo. Nevertheless, if these inevitably happen, Dauke (2004) explained that certain rituals would be performed to cleanse the victims from such curses otherwise they would die.

According to Achi (1981), the emblem or totem of the *Ashokwa* clan was a lizard known as *Tatong*. This lizard was also highly respected by the people and the association of the *Ashokwa* with the *Tatong* started as a result of a legendary incident that happened in the early settlement phase of the clan. According to them, *Shokwa*, the founder of the clan, was trying to lit his house, when suddenly the *Tatong* (appeared and asked) whom he was and where his relatives were. *Shokwa* told the *Tatong* that he had no relatives or kindred. The *Tatong* sympathized with *Shokwa* and assured him that 'God' would increase his family. This prophesy later came true, and *Shokwa* ordered all his children to rever the *Tatong* at all time. Henceforth, tradition also has it that the *Ashokwa* clan began to regard the *Tatong* as a 'relative', and if they found its dead body anywhere they would bury it and give it all the respect it deserves, holding funeral for it as they do for their elderly persons.

Oral tradition further confirmed that, should an *Ashokwa* man kill a *Tatong* accidentally, rain would fall, even in the middle of the dry season. This respect shown to the *Tatong* by the *Ashokwa* is shared by most of the Atyap clans, these members of another clan who lived near the *Ashokwa* and who accidentally killed a *Tatong* took its body to the *Ashokwa* people for burial. It is claimed that the most binding oath an *Ashokwa* can make is by the *Tatong* and they also do not name their siblings after their emblem animal.

The totem for the *Agba'ad* clan is the large crocodile (locally called *Tsang*). Oral tradition has it that the *Agba'ad* consider the *Tsang* as their 'friend' and 'brother' and the relationship is also said to have developed when the Atyap people were fleeing from their enemies. As they moved, they got to a very big river which they could not cross and suddenly crocodiles appeared and formed a bridge for them to cross. When the other clans tried to cross by the same means, the crocodile swam away. This, according to oral tradition,

explains why today, it is said that the *Abga'ad* people can play with a crocodile without being harmed and given the respect the *Agba'ad* people have for the crocodile, they bury its dead body when they find it killed anywhere. Similarly, when an *Agba'ad* man accidentally kills a crocodile (*Tsang*), he must hurriedly run to a forest for some special medicine and ritual. But if the killing is by design, then it is believed that the entire clan will perish.

Cows are considered as the *Minyam's* totem but the people have mystified a cow by seeing it as a hare with its ear as horns. These "horns" of the hare are locally called *Tam'asom* and the *Minyam* clan members have high respect for them because they always touch the "horns" and swear by them when an offence is committed. Once the accused person swears, then nothing will be said or done again but to just wait for the outcome.

Conclusion

Although some scholars have argued that these various versions of tradition of origin and migration of the Atyap people are not authentic historical facts in themselves, as abstruse as they may be, they can still be considered as pointers to revealing the probable tradition of origin and migration of the people.

Also, as argued by some other scholars that the traditions of origin are interwoven in myths and the various versions seem to contradict themselves, the stories are thus quite clear despite the contradictions because one can still infer from them that the entire Atyap people did not come from a place that is very far from where they settled.

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