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TOWARDS A HISTORY OF PLATEAU STATE



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INAUGURAL LECTURE

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WHEN I was invited to deliver an inaugural lecture at this time, my first thoughts were of some fairly abstract and ambitious theme – such as an assessment of the present state of African historiography. But then it occurred to me that one advantage in delivering an inaugural lecture some two and a half years after one actually starts work is that one is enabled to some degree at least, to report on what has actually been done. In my own case, whatever time and energy I have had to spare from my routine duties have been devoted to the history of Plateau State in particular, and central Nigeria in general. By definition, all of us here this evening are united whatever the diversity of our interests and occupations, by a special interest in or commitment to this particular University, and this particular area. I feel a certain hesitation in quoting Birom proverbs before the Chief of Jos, but there is, nevertheless, one to the effect that "anyone who prepares the village while his house is still not prepared has done the wrong job." Accordingly, I offer no apologies for the rather parochial scope of this lecture. The analysis which follows is in three sections. First, I shall attempt to look briefly at the reasons why historians have tended to neglect central Nigerian history, and especially those parts of central Nigeria – like the whole of Plateau State – which were organised into small scale polities. Secondly, I shall give a brief resume of the research that we have carried out over the past two and a half years. Thirdly, I shall attempt to delineate a few of the outstanding characteristics of that history, as we are now beginning to understand it.

Anyone who attempts to write or lecture on the history of Plateau State must tackle a problem of terminology. Most peoples and many places have at least two names – the one by which the people call themselves, and which they normally prefer, and a more widely known one, often of Hausa provenance. Thus, one has to choose between Sura and Mwahavul, Yergam and Tarok, Ankwe and Goemai, Jaba and Ham, Gbari and Gbagyi, and so on. With place names, one has to choose between Shendam and Muduut, between Ampan and Pan, between Kurgwi and Nnagan, and so on. Since the purpose of speech is to communicate, I have used, on the whole, the better known version.

The present state of historical research in Nigeria is one of great imbalances, both in geographic coverage and thematically. The strikingly uneven coverage of the country – which means, for instance, that the history of the peoples of Plateau State, or of southern Kaduna State is an almost unknown land, and that we know almost nothing of the history of such major Nigerian peoples as the Chamba, or the Gbari, is due to a number of factors. Historians very naturally, are drawn to those fields where written sources are most abundant. Those, who like the vast majority of indigenous and expatriate scholars who have studied Nigerian history, have no knowledge of Arabic, are naturally drawn to the amply documented southern coastline. There are very many books – and innumerable articles – dealing with the sparsely populated coastal territory between Brass and Calabar, and a vast amount of research has been devoted to the history of Benin. Ijebu-Ode, which was also near the sea, but is little documented in European records, has been naturally drawn to the history of Borno and Hausaland, and especially to the momentous events of the nineteenth century history. But for the history of Plateau State, before the beginning of this

century, the written documentation is meagre indeed. From the Arabic sources, one has a striking account of southern Zazzau, from the much travelled Al-Hasan ibn Muhammad in the 1520s, which seems to speak unmistakeably of the Jos Plateau.

Some part of this kingdom is plain and the

> "Some part of this kingdom is plain, and the residue mountainous, but the mountains are extremely cold... And because they can hardly endure the sharpness of winter, they kindle great fires in the midst of their houses, laying the coles thereof under their high bedsteads..."

This form of central heating is amply documented in the area in modern times. European travellers' accounts are sparse, until the beginning of this century, apart from the records of a series of European visitors to the Benue.

But the neglect of whole peoples in historical writing is not only due to the paucity of source material. To some extent, the focus of historical writing reflects a set of prejudices and presuppositions, which have a venerable albeit dubious ancestry.

In the colonial period, those who wrote about Nigerian history and ethnography tended to be either colonial officials – like Temple, Meek, and so on, or closely associated with the official viewpoint, like Lugard's wife, Flora Shaw. These arranged Nigeria's peoples into a kind of hierarchy, which is described most explicitly in Lugard's THE DUAL MANDATE. He divided Nigeria into "Advanced" and "Primitive" communities. To avoid misunderstanding, I should say explicitly that he was wholly right in the admiration he felt for the achievements of the "advanced" communities but wrong in the way in which he explained their achievements, and equally wrong in his denigration of the others. He – and many other writers during the colonial period and after it – explained the glories of, for instance, Borno and Hausaland, by the invasion of "white", "Hamitic" invaders from the north. Since the concern of this paper is with central Nigerian history, I cannot go into the many absurdities of this hypothesis, which have been analysed most convincingly by a man who chose to become a Nigerian – Abdullahi Smith. Briefly, if "Hamitic" is an ethnic or linguistic category, it cannot embrace both the leading candidates, the Berbers and Fulani, whose totally different languages reflect their totally different origins. The great states of the north canot have been the work of the nearest Berbers – the Taureg – who themselves never achieved this kind of centralised political organisation (the so-called Sultanate of Ahir was a loose confederacy, where the ruler was essentially a figure head). Clearly, the whole Hamitic hypothesis evolved out of a subconscious need, by the colonial invaders, to find a precedent for their own role and to explain the great achievements of civilisations they had overthrown, and in part destroyed. Hence their need to invent creative white invaders from outside – a hypothesis which survived in learned journals well beyond the colonial era, and is still not wholly dead. To explain the incontestable achievements of certain other Nigerian peoples, various devices were used. The Jukun became "half-Hamites". The system of government and the art of the Edo and Yoruba became simply exceptions to a categorisation of the African too appalling to be quoted, even for the purposes of attack.

The whole idea of advanced and primitive communities rested in itself on a series of presuppositions which it would be difficult to defend, but which have had a long and flourishing existence. One is that large scale states are more advanced than small states – but who has ever called Switzerland or Luxemburg uncivilised because they were small? In the modern world, large scale states have real advantages, for instance in the achievement of political autonomy, and economic growth. Many of

these advantages were less apparent in a pre-colonial context, and small scale states offer other advantages to their citizens – such as that high level of participatory democracy which is praised in the city states of Ancient Greece, but overlooked in the small polities of the Birom and Ngas. Lugard had other criteria for "advanced communities"; one was the adoption of Islam, which he characterised as "an alien... religion" – rather oddly for a faith which has flourished in Nigeria since the fourteenth century. He identified literacy with literacy in Arabic, overlooking the many forms of indigenous writing, such as the nsibidi script which was independently invented on the Cross River, and widely found in the south-east, or that literacy in European languages which is so widely documented – a sixteenth century Oba of Benin could write Portuguese, and the Efik of eighteenth century Calabar perpetuated literacy in English in their own schools.

Few contemporary historians would explicitly affirm that large scale states are more worthy of study than small scale states. But actual books on African history are overwhelmingly concerned with them, and the values and presuppositions of Africanists are revealed, with all the cruel clarity of caricature, in the textbooks. Any school boy can write an essay on the reasons for the decline of the Oyo Empire, or the structure of its government. But if a WAEC examiner had the temerity to set a question on the traditional government or traditions of migration of the Goemai or Gwandara – or, for that matter, of the small scale Yoruba polities of Kabba, he would probably have a riot on his hands. But Kabba has just as much history, and is just as intrinsically worthy of study, as Oyo – in fact it may well be the original focus of settlement of the whole Yoruba people. How have these imbalances developed?

There are a number of reasons why historians have tended to focus on large scale states. The emphasis has, as we have seen, a genesis in colonial historiography. It is sometimes explained in terms of the preoccupations of the 1960s, when so much African historical writing took shape, and when the maintenance of the unity and stability of large political units rightly seemed one of the most pressing of all preoccupations. But there is a simpler explanation – and I describe it from the standpoint of one who has devoted the best energies of her adult life to the study of small scale polities – it is, simply, much easier. Not only do large states tend to be more amply documented, and to maintain a level of specialisation which extends to traditional historians and rememberancers – but the historian of a kingdom has a ready made focus for his narative in the adventures of the dynasty, and capital (whether this focus does justice to the provinces is another question, which cannot be explored here). But the historian of, for instance, the Igbo, is faced with, not scores, but hundreds of small scale polities each with its own history. To wield the mass of information available for them into a unified narrative is a task of formidable magnitude. And it is no coincidence that where historians have come seriously to grips with the very real problems of this kind of study they have tended to be those who have themselves sprung up from the societies they study, and thus bring to it a special kind of understanding and a special intensity of commitment. Into this category would come Dr. Makar's unpublished thesis on the Tiv, or Dr. Erim's on the Idoma, or Mr. Obayemi's long series of conference papers on the Kabba Yoruba. Perhaps my own long labour of love on the Igbo could come into this category.

Perhaps I may be permitted, at this point, a personal note. My work on Igbo history was essentially undertaken as an individual. In all, it took me twelve years of incessant work, partly because I was heavily involved in university teaching. But even then, I came increasingly to understand how much historical research gains by co-operation, and one of the three books in this field for which I was responsible was, in fact, a historical anthology, half of it consisted

The best is the enemy of the good, and one tries to do what one can in both fields. But the fact of the matter is that most of Nigeria's most creative historians have become administrators. Many have duties much more enormous than my own. However inevitable all this may be, the sum loss to learning is formidable, and the scholar's continuing nostalgia for a quiet and undisturbed study is very real.

For the rest of this lecture, I shall attempt to distill as briefly as possible, some of the salient characteristics of Plateau State history. I shall concentrate on the precolonial period, although I have written two articles on the period since 1900, and I have, myself, an especial interest in the way in which change is perceived by, and modifies, the individual sensibility – hence an especial interest in the actual historical experience of the living.

Those of you who are not historians should not be surprised by the fact that the account which follows rests as much on the evidence revealed by archaeology and linguistics as on, for instance, archival materials. It is at once the glory and the challenge of history that it is concerned with the whole past of man, and that nothing human is alien to it. Most branches of the humanities – these last broadly defined – are relevant to history, and the historian's ability to profit by them is limited only by his own capacities.

About three years ago, the history of this part of the world was in a rather curious situation. Thanks to the exertions of archaeologists – and the chance discoveries of tin miners – the prehistory of the area was very well known indeed. It was known that human settlement on the Plateau was extremely ancient, and continuous. Men were living on the Jos Plateau during the almost inconceivably remote Early Stone Age, at the time when a vast Lake Chad covered the plains of Borno as far as Maiduguri, and beyond. The characteristic stone tools of the Acheulian phase have been found on the northern edge of the Plateau, beautifully crafted out of chalcedony, basalt and felsite. Further west, at Nok near Kafanchan, similar tools have been found which yielded a minimum date of 39,000 B.C.

The Acheulian phase was followed by the Sangoan, which may have ended in about 35,000 B.C. Its characteristic tools are heavier in form. Many have been found around Keffi and Nassarawa. The Middle Stone Age lasted from about 35,000 to 10,000 B.C. Its characteristic technology consisted of stone flakes, struck off a carefully prepared core, and used for arrow heads, knife blades and so on. These have been found on the Plateau, at Rop and north of it, at Zenebi. The Late Stone Age lasted from about 10,000 B.C. until the introduction of iron working. The men of this period had embarked on that long transition from the life of the hunter and gatherer to that of the settled farmer which is so crucial in the growth of human civilisations. Late Stone Age man liked to live in the caves and rock shelters which abound on the Plateau. Two of these – at Rop and Dutsen Kongba – have been excavated. The excavations revealed ground stone axes, a variety of stone tools made from opaque and clear quartz, and quartz crystals, and from jasper, chert and chalcedony, as well as pottery, decorated both by incision and by the use of roulettes.

Plateau peoples still preserve memories of this remote past, embedded in ritual. Thus, among the Birom, iron may not be used on land sacred to **chi** spirits, and if a tree must be felled it is done with a stone axe. Both the Birom and Mwahavul have traditions describing the invention of farming – especiallyof acha cultivation – and of the use of fire.

The introduction of metal working is always great watershed in human history, because it so vastly enhances man's capacity both for production and destruction. The earliest known

evidences of iron smelting are found in that great cultural complex we call the Nok culture, which extended over a great sweep of territory from Kagara in the north to Katsina-Ala, far to the south, in Benue State. Historians are still, in some spheres, curiously reluctant to admit the role of independent invention in sub-Saharan Africa. At the moment, it is assumed that the knowledge of iron working was imported from outside. The favoured point of origin was once Meroe, an industrial city on the Nile. It has now been established that iron smelting in the Nok culture area was earlier than that of Meroe. The received wisdom is now that it came from Carthage. But just as historians, over the last few years have abandoned the theory that Subsaharan Africa's political institutions came from outside (whether from Egypt, or brought by mythical Hamites) and that agriculture was invented only in the near East – so, I suspect, will it come to be seen that the iron smelting of Nok may well have been an independent innovation. The Nok complex is as celebrated for its art as for its technology – those extraordinary terracottas which suggest so many more questions than they answer. How was the striking stylistic unity of the complex preserved over such vast distances, at a time when population were much sparser? Certain stylistic and thematic parallels have been pointed out with the superficially dissimilar art of Ife. Both complexes, for instance, show a remarkable interest in portraying the symptoms of disease and deformity. Both provide the only instances of near life size sculpture in terracotta in sub-Saharan Africa. But here we are in the realm of speculation. Many parallels have been pointed out with the cultures and art of the modern inhabitants of central Nigeria; one figure is wearing an adornment strikingly like the traditional dress of a Ganawuri woman. The corpus has been compared with the pottery finials which adorn the thatched roofs of the Ham or Jaba, the modern inhabitants of Nok – whose domestic architecture, incidentally, displays an almost sculptural feeling for form, and the potentials of its material. Parallels have been drawn, too, with the pottery grave sculpture of the Dakakari, further west. But if one takes any array of cultures as rich and various as those of central Nigeria, and any corpus of sculpture emanating from the same physical environment, parallels are bound to exist.

My own feeling is that specific parallels of this kind may well be wide off the mark, but that there is, as it were, a basic continuity in lifestyle between the civilisation mirrored darkly in the Nok terracottas, and the way of life of many central Nigerian peoples before the impact of twentieth century change – a concern for physical appearance, mirrored in the elaborate hairstyles, the mass of jewellery, the use of various forms of body decoration, and a strong cultural preference for a particular dress style which made bold use of materials other than textiles, such as metals – a preference found among people who mastered weaving, and actually exported cloth. It was a civilisation which valued decoration greatly – the Nok people adorned the underside of their pottery food graters, and modern central Nigerians painted bold murals on their house walls and grannaries.

But in the state of historical knowledge as it existed about three years ago, there was a curious hiatus after the Nok culture vanishes from the scene, some time in the first millenium A.D. Whole historical areas have a curious way of appearing in the history books and disappearing again – the most extreme example being the way in which the whole of the Western Sudan has been known to disappear in the textbooks with the fall of the Songhay Empire in 1591, and reappear again with the jihads of the nineteenth century. It was much like this with the Jos Plateau and the area of the Nok culture.

Stranger still, it was widely assumed – despite the overwhelming evidence of ancient and continuous occupation – that the Jos Plateau

was uninhabited, or virtually so, until relatively recent times, and that it was inhaited by refugees from kingdoms further north. This view is not confined to colonial historiography, though it is often found there. An eminent historical geographer stated in an article published in 1965 (and the very words he used and the curious identification of might and political sophistication imply many of the attitudes I spoke of earlier), "The northern portions of the Middle Belt were the home of a large number of small pagan tribes that lacked the political sophistication, and therefore the military strength of their northern neighbours. Consequently they suffered during the slave raids of the Zaria Hausa state and the Fulani **Jihad**... As a result the remnants of the pagans withdrew into large uplands such as the Jos Plateau." A recent Ph.D. thesis on Jos Division gives a similar picture of recent immigration, claiming that the first Birom settlements date from the seventeenth century, and that most are later, that the first Mwahavul reached the Plateau 250 years ago, that the Ron came later, and that the Rukuba, and most of the other peoples of northern Jos, considerably later still.

It is easy to see how these theories evolved. Some population movements undoubtedly did occur in the nineteenth century, though they tended to be over short distances. The Birom of Gyell moved from Rayfield to Bukuru shortly before the British arrived, and the Ganawuri undoubtedly moved, again over a short distance, from Takwot. The relatively recent dates for the Birom and Mwahavul are derived in the orthodox way for dating events described in oral histories – by evaluating the number of generations which have elapsed since a given event, a generation being the time which expires between a man's birth and that of his eldest son. But the human memory is limited and the practical result is sometimes a date more recent than other kinds of evidence would suggest – even when historians, as often happens, take a figure like 27 for a generation – which is probably higher than the actual customs many traditional societies warrant. To take an example from another context – if one takes the traditions of migration and origin of many Igbo communities, and dates them by this kind of technique, one finds that a suspiciously large number of states were founded in the late sixteenth or early seventeenth century – and that much of the population of Igboland, at that time, was on the move in an anti-clockwise direction. This is clearly not true of Igboland, and I do not think it is true of the Plateau either.

But it is not enough simply to assert an impression of ancient and continuous settlement. One needs some solid evidence as to where the various people both of the High Plateau and of the Lowlands actually came from. There is probably no more reliable guide than the comparative study of language. Traditions of origin can be fabricated to suit a political or other purpose. Peoples do change their language – as witness the way in which the Lafia Berebere speak Hausa, but not Kanuri – but such changes are exceptional.

Gbari and Alago are members of the great Kwa family of languages, related to Igbirra, Idoma, Igala, Nupe, Yoruba, Edo, and a large number of other West African languages. But most of the peoples of Plateau State speak languages belonging to one of two language families – Benue Congo and Chadic. The Birom, Pyem, Afusare, Jaba, Rukuba, Irigwe, Katab and Mada speak closely related Benue Congo languages. This means, of course, that they are likely to have lived within the general area of their present homeland for a very long period of time, and that one of them is most unlikely to have migrated to the area from a remote homeland. (Thus the Fulani, who did migrate centuries ago from a very distant homeland speak a language closely related to that of the Wolof of Senegal). Within this general area, oral traditions describe patterns of population movement. It is clear that Riyom was an ancient focus of settlement, which is why it preserves,

among the Birom, something of the sacred primacy which Ife enjoys among the Yoruba. The patterns of migration – to the east and north – are mirrored in ritual. The two great festivals of the Birom year – **Woroungoun,** the acha planting festival, and **Mandieng,** the season of marriages, moved across Biromland in an orderly sequence, following the original lines of migration. Further north, Afusare is closely related to Irigwe, Jaba and Katab, though their speakers no longer live side by side. This suggests – what oral traditions also reveal – that Birom migrants from the south, and Anaguta migrants from a variety of directions drove a wedge between them. An Ngas tradition recorded in 1907 states that when they reached their present homeland they met a people called Kibyen, and displaced them westward. Kibyen, of course, is the Hausa name for the Birom.

Some of the peoples of Plateau State speak Bantoid languages. The Tiv provide a particularly clear case of the coalescence of linguistic evidence and tradition – their oral histories speak of a homeland far to the south east, in a place called Swem, and their language is closely related to that of several small peoples in Obudu. They crossed the Benue at some time in the nineteenth century and were still continuing to expand in the twentieth. The Jarawa of Bauchi State – whose essential unity is concealed under a multitude of different ethonyms – also speak a Bantoid language. (They do **not,** however, include the Afusare of northern Jos, who are sometimes erroneously called Jarawa). The Kantana ("Mama"), who now live to the south-east of the Plateau escarpment, speak a language which is essentially the same as that of their brethren in Bauchi State – and their oral histories precisely confirm it, telling of a migration from Kantana in Kanam, and how they crossed the Plateau and came down the steep escarpment to their present home.

Many Nigerian languages belong to the Chadic family. Hausa is the most widely spoken of these; there are also pockets of Chadic languages all around Borno, presumably mirroring the identity of the original inhabitants of the area before the Kanembu incursion of the late fourteenth century.

In Plateau State, Chadic language speakers fall into two groups, each with a distinct and very interesting history.

The Gwandara of the Latia area, like their brethren further west, and like the Abakwariga who live in many scattered settlements in the Benue valley, speak a language which is actually a dialect of Hausa. Their own traditions claim that they are descended from non-Muslim Hausa who left Kano centuries ago to avoid religious persecution. Some may have been religious dissidents, but the whole genesis of the Hausa presence in the Benue valley is much more complex. As early as the fourteenth century, trade followed the flag, and the Kano Chronicle describes both wars between Kano and "Kwararafa" and trade exchanges. Many Hausa migrated to the south – attracted by its rich economic resources, such as its salt and lead mines (by the nineteenth century, Awe, for instance, was a Hausa speaking town). Biepi, the Jukun capital, abandoned in the late seventeenth century, was an Abakwariga foundation. Many Hausa iron smelters – among them many Maguzawa – migrated seasonally or permanently in search of iron deposits, such as those in Gbariland. Kanam, like the better known states of Yawuri and Birnin Gwari, was founded by an immigrant Hausa minority in the eighteenth century. The Gwandara and Abakwariga insistence on religious dissent – and their claim that they were among the first inhabitants of Kano – may, perhaps spring from a certain problem of identity. They saw themselves as Hausa, but in Hausa eyes, lacked the essential dimensions of Hausa identity – Islamic faith, and flawless Hausa speech, for their language, which the Hausa call **zaurance,** has diverged considerably from the Hausa of, for instance, Kano.

It is worth noting that the Hausa were not the only migrants to the area. There were some Nupe traders in the Benue valley, and the Nupe presence has left its imprint in art, in the fine carved doors of Nupe provenance, preserved in Alagoland. There were also Kanuri (or Kambari, or Berebere) migrants, some of whom founded the state of Lafia.

We have looked at the Chadic speakers so far in terms of the Hausa, or Hausa-related peoples. But a large bloc of peoples in Plateau speak different Chadic languages, which are closely related to each other. These include the Ngas, Mwahavul, Goemai, and other smaller peoples such as the Chip and Tal. Their linguistic relationships and traditions of origin, provide us with a fascinating problem of historical interpretation. Some versions of Ngas tradition state that they came from Borno and settled in Yam, in Kanam, before they moved first to the present home of the plain Ngas, and later to the high Plateau. This version, found in all the colonial intelligence reports, is confirmed by some, but not all, present day informants. It is not impossible that the Ngas came from Borno, and were among the Chadic speakers displaced by the Kanembu incursion that I spoke of earlier The Lafia Berebere travelled a greater distance in the late eighteenth century. The regularity with which Yam – now inhabited by the Duguri Jarawa – appears in their traditions and the way in which it is also of great cultural importance to the Boghom, or Burrum, suggests that it was an early focus of settlement. The fact that the Plains Ngas settlements came first, suggested by both geography and oral tradition, seems to be confirmed by the fact that they hold the original **tsafi,** or sacred images.

The Mwahavul do not have a single orthodox tradition of origin But just as Yam looms large in Ngas narrations of their past, so Gun, or Ngung, eleven miles south east of Pankshin, and near Chip, plays a central role in their oral history texts. One finds the tradition that some – not all – Mwahavul polities came from Ngung first recorded in 1907, and confirmed by present day informants. Their traditions, too, point to that ultimate common origin with the Ngas which the linguistic evidence also suggests.

Tal, which is not far from Ngung, also figures as a nucleus of original settlement. Data collected in 1931 suggests that the name Montol means "we are Tal", and the Yergam's name for themselves, Tarok or Talok, is interpreted in the same way. Both Montol and Goemai traditions state that the Montol were already in their present home when the later migrated from the Plateau to the Benue valley. They relate how the Goemai founding ancestor Lekni met a Montol girl in the bush, and married her. Lekni was buried in Montol-land, and his descendants held periodic gatherings at his grave until the reign of Adamu, a nineteenth century Long Muduut (King of Shendam). Shendam itself is a relatively recent settlement, and its people have a long history of earlier movements – from Shendam to Yelwa, to Shemankar, to Kurgwi, back to Montol-land, and finally, back to Shendam. The Goemai language is so closely related to Montol, Ngas and so on that they are mutually intelligble.

The general picture one has from all this is of an original nucleus of Chadic speakers on the south-eastern Plateau, in the Tal-Chip-Ngung area, who had originally come from further north. Some of these settled in other parts of the high Plateau, like the Mwahavul, while others, like the Goemai – or Namu – moved south to the Benue plains.

Up to now, there has been a strikingly close correlation between the linguistic evidence and the patterns suggested by oral histories. A problem, however, arises with the Yergam, or Tarok. Their own traditions claim that they came from Tal, and are ultimately cognate with the Chadic speaking groups who once settled

there. But their language, belonging to the Benue-Congo family, is completely different from Ngas, Goemai and so on. It is most closely related to Bashar, spoken by the Yargam's immediate eastern neighbour, and next most closely to a cluster of languages spoken far to the west, in the Akwanga area – Arum, Chessu, Turkwan, Rindre and Eggon – and to Eloyi (Afo) spoken still further to the west. The obvious inference is that these Benue-Congo populations once lived side by side, and were separated by the later incursion of the Goemai and Namu, and of other peoples. It is possible that proto-Yergam and proto-Goemai once lived side by side at Tal. Alternatively, the tradition of a common origin may have been elaborated to explain the very real links which bind the Yergam to their Chadic speaking neighbours.

Another difficulty is that the Mwahavul king lists are much shorter than those of the Goemai and Yergam. Jenuan, whom I mentioned earlier, who died in British hands, was the fifth Miskaham of Kerang; Punshak, the Miskaham of Panyam who was deposed in 1908 was either the sixth or the eighth. But Donkwap, who became Long Goemai in 1906, was the nineteenth of his line, and Miri Sadun, who succeeded in 1916, was the fifteenth Ponzhi of Langtang. Does this mean that the Mwahavul kingdoms were established much later than those of the Goemai? Did the institution of kingship evolve later among them, or have more names been elided? This last seems unlikely, for all Mwahavul king lists known to me are of roughly comparable length. It is difficult to be sure.

Up to this point, I have been concerned with the origins of peoples. Asking this kind of question means using the categories of ethnic identity – even if only to show that many peoples customarily regarded as quite distinct are actually brothers, historically. But ethnic categories have been used too much in African history. The traditional textbook is arranged on ethnic lines – discussing the Kanuri Empire, the Oyo Empire and so on – and is also overwhelmingly concerned with rulers and wars. One of my main concerns as a working historian, over the last three years or so – has been to break away, as much as possible, from the prison of these categories. Political history, in the pre-colonial context, is often concerned with what divides peoples; the conventional analysis of the relationship between the states of Oyo and Dahomey, for instance, focusses on war and tribute. But to analyse the past in ethnic categories is to overlook the many parallels between the situation of rulers, traders, craftsmen, farmers and so on in different ethnic groups. And in Plateau State as elsewhere, when one begins to explore the variables of economic and cultural history, the overwhelming impression one has, again, is of the bonds which unite peoples. One has the economic interdependence of the Benue lowlands and the high Plateau, which exchanged salt for iron. Kantana villages, at the foot of the escarpment, had a system of pairing, for trade purposes, with the Kulere villages on the Plateau. The Kantana bought cattle, goats, sheep and chickens, in return for their palm oil, guinea corn, acha and honey.

Culturally, one can discern many continuities. The characteristic institution of government was sacred but limited kingship. Within this general framework, one has certain constallations of particular cultural features. One of the most striking symbols of Jukun kingship is the sacred hair-lock, fastened with an ivory pin and disc. The King of Shendam, the Long Muduut, had the same hairlock, which held pebbles, symbolising the various crops his people cultivate. The rulers of Chip, and of the Ngas polity of Garrma, had it too. The detailed comparison, of, for instance, Alago and Goemai kingship, reveals many striking similarities.

The masquerade, or masque, is phenomenon which gives us clues to past configurations of human relationships. The Magiro masque embraces much of Hausaland and central Nigeria. The Abwai complex is of great import-

ance in sothern Kaduna State. One particular masque style, with a very district iconography – a basketwork helmet mask enrusted with abrus – is found among the Pyem and Ribina, who call it **wuchichiri,** among the Jarawa of Dass, and of Warji, and among the Jukun of Wukari, who call it **Dodo.** There is a very striking similarity between the extremely abstract Kontana mask, Mangam, the Goemai mask, Mangap, and the Jukun masque, Aku Maga. Each is a very striking piece of sculpture, possibly inspired ultimately by the bush cow.

One could go on almost indefinitely, isolating and describing these cultural constellations. But instead, I would like to draw attention to another kind of continuum – in what one might call life style. The peoples of the area exploited the natural resources of their homeland with great technical efficiency and industry. All early European visitors commented on the skill and dedication of the farmers of the high Plateau and of the lowland, the drystone walling, of the Kofyar or Hill Ngas (the work of generations) or the elaborate terracing and ridging which preserved water and prevented erosion. An early visitor to the Birom said, "I have looked over dozens of plots without finding a single weed in any. The Hausa is a skilled agriculturalist, who has nothing to learn in that respect from any white race. He, however, is distanced considerably by the Pagan..." The peoples of the high Plateau smelted iron, and made hoes, knives, spears and equipment for horses. Like farming, iron smelting had a central economic significance which was mirrored in traditional and in cultural practices – the Birom elder were iron greaves, and the Ngas made giánt ceremonial hoes which were used for bride wealth. In the lowlands, there were many salt springs and marshes, such as Awe, Keana and Azare. They became flourishing commercial centres, attracting a labour force from far field and proliferating a number of secondary industries. Merchants from Hausaland travelled to the Benue to buy salt, bringing cloth, garments and horses in exchange. It has been estimated that at its peak of productivity, in the nineteenth century, Awe exported four thousand tons of salt a year, Azare four thousand five hundred, and Keana three thousand – and these figures do not include the many less celebrated centres which often catered mainly to a local market. Some peoples of the high Platea also made vegetable salt.

The lead mines of the Benue produced less, because of a restricted demand, lead being used mainly for antimony. Tin ore was collected in streams such as the Delimi River – which crosses the permanent site of the University – and smelted at Diruein Kano and Liruein Delma. It was used for soldering, for decorative purposes, and in producing alloys, the coppersmiths of Bida being among the industry's leading customers. The colonial era was to lead to deindustrialization, for while traditional producers smelted the tin, expatriate tin miners exported unprocessed cassiterite until the end of the colonial period.

There were many different forms of craftsmanship. The Ngas grew cotton on their hill farms and exported cloth to their neighbours. They solved the imbalance between the productivity of spinners and weavers – a worldwide problem of preindustrial textile – by holding parties, where the guests came to spin as well as to drink! Cloth production was so important among the Goemai that they paid tax in cloth at the beginning of the colonial era. Clothes were made in other materials – such as leather kilts and capes, and elaborate metal adornments. Mats, baskets and raincoats were woven from various substances. Wood carvers produced both works of art and utilitarian objects such as mortars and pestles. The Ngas carved chairs and beds from a single block of wood – a missionary in 1908, said that they had the polish of mahogany. Some centres specialised in pottery, and others in growing and carving calabashes.

The most characteristic form of architecture was the roundhouse, which itself had many local variants. Many observers have praised the beauty of the roundhouse, which harmonises superbly with the landscape, and sometimes – as among the Jaba – crosses the borderline between utility and art. They have praised, too, the remarkable symmetry and balance of the clay granary, moulded by eye and hand alone. Probably because of technical problems of arching, traditional builders achieved enlargement of scale, not by expanding the roundhouse, but by building them in large clusters – the palace of the Ngas king, for instance could comprise as many as 400 individual buildings.

One of the most attractive features of traditional Plateau life was its recreation. After the intense labour of the rainy season, the dry season was devoted, partly to craftsmanship, and partly to festivities – the great festivals, which neighbours of different ethnic groups were sometimes invited to take part, the great dances, sometimes held only every seven years, which temporarily ended all local conflicts, the communal hunts, the horse races, and so on. In fact, they had a great deal in common with the cultural values of the British invaders, the soldiers and administrators of the early twentieth century on the esteem for courage, the love of horses and hunting, and racing, and convivial gatherings – but neither realised it.

A brief lecture on a vast subject must leave most of it untouched. I have not even mentioned many of its most striking aspects – such as the creation of new Islamic states in the lowlands, in the nineteenth century – Wase, Keffi and Nassarawa.

But even the briefest overview of the history of this area has much to teach us. It gives at least a little understanding of the rich and various achievements of the past, and of the underlying unities among what, at first sight, appears a bewildering multiplicity of ethnicities.

History is an analytic, not a prescriptive discipline. Nevertheless, I shall end, as I began, with Birom proverbs. Proverbs encapsulate the cummulative wisdom of traditional communities. These Birom proverbs, speaking of truth and justice, retain a lasting relevance to the organisation of communities – including Universities. "Truth never rots". "Truth never rusts". "Justice is worth more than beauty". "Justice sweeps cleaner than a new broom" "Justice is the life of the community".