

A PRE-COLONIAL INFLUENCE MOUNTAIN-TOP REMINANTS OF SUKUR, SETTLEMENT: NIGERIA.

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ABSTRACT

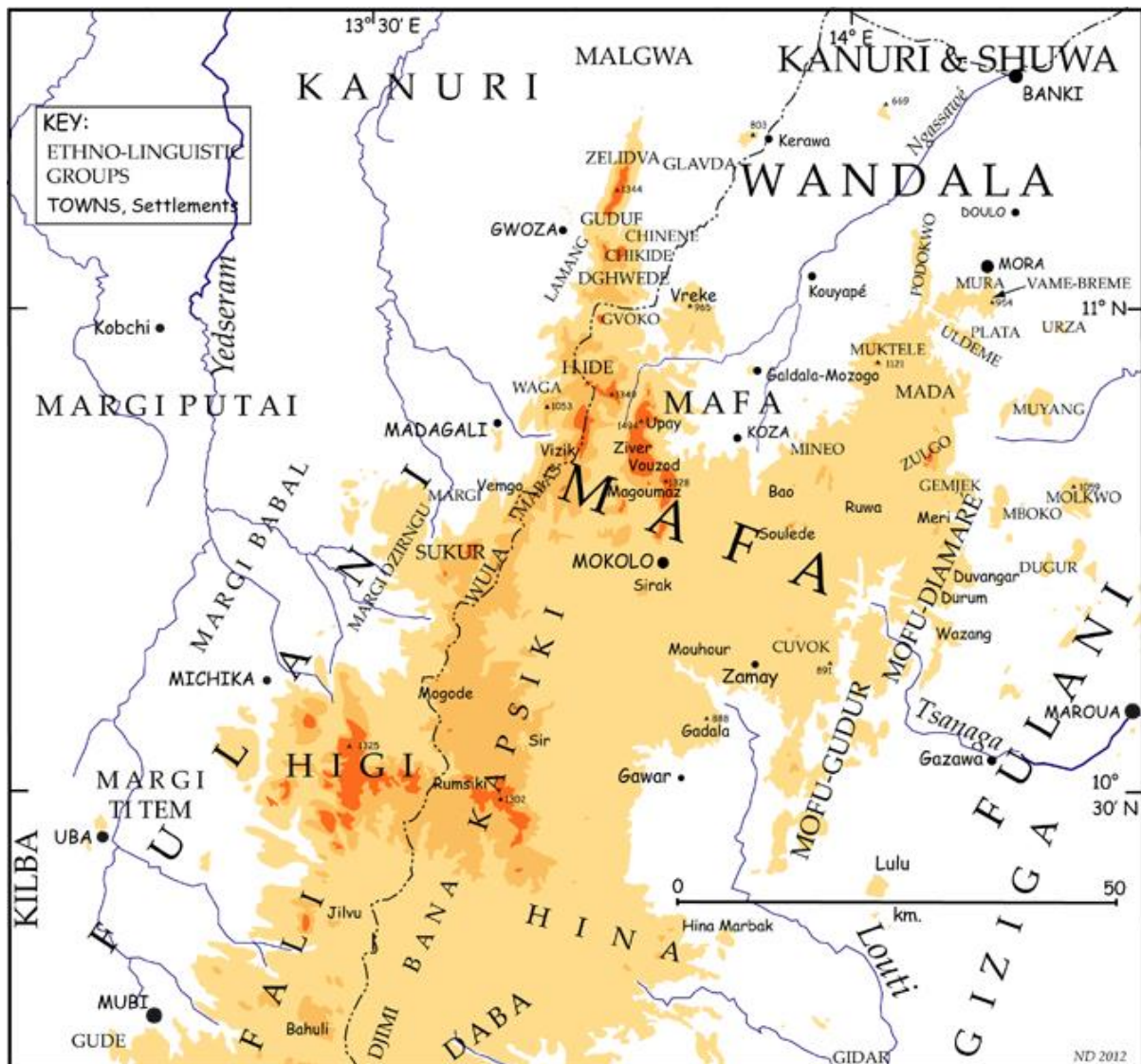
This article is set out to examine the pre-colonial influence of what was known as the “Sukur kingdom”, which was presumably to have held sway over various inhabitants and neighbouring villages around the Yadseram valley. This account of holding sway by this ethnic extraction may not be valid from the face value, as it is doubtful. Because the evidence was not only less than conclusive but raised more fundamental questions than they supposed to have answered. One of this is that there is no tangible explanation about the circumstances that gave rise to the conflict between them, that led to holding sway. Now this picture of a centralized Political Power which through militarism succeeded in holding sway over the neighbouring peoples in the Yadseram Valley and the plains would appear to have been stretched too far. In the first place, the one underpinning of political Power or domination, that is military Power, was conspicuously lacking. Sukur was never a formidable military Power or even a petty state. Not only was it bereft of a cavalry, the usual equipment of a predatory state in these parts, but the only known long distance raid it ever carried out ended in defeat. It is believed to have emerged as a spiritual kingdom at least not far from the beginning eighteenth century.

Key words: Sukur Adamawa Nigeria.

INTRODUCTION

This paper is concerned with what had remained of the erstwhile centre of influence known as the Sukur “kingdom”, in Nigeria, were largely decentralized and, more importantly, spiritual in character. This kingdom does not seem to have come into deliberate policy of expansion, it appears to have begun as a small decentralized nucleus which as a result largely of spiritual pre-eminence, exercised considerable influence over the surroundings people and policies.

There is very little more concrete than that exercised over other tiny ethnic stocks in the region. The present condition of the mountain-top settlement that the goes by the name. the settlement is a place of interest not only because of rich in culture and tradition which have turned it into a centre of attraction for many an archaeologist and anthropologists but on account of what is thought to have been its historical antecedents. It is, therefore, necessary to, first set the stage by examining its past.



Source: Nicholas David. (2012)

The above map shows towns the settlements of various ethnic extractions including the Sukur settlement between the Wula and Margi Ozir-ngu.

Migratory Drift of the Sukur People

The history of migration of the Sukur people, is so scanty. But available evidence tends to suggest that they might have come from Cameroon. Lending from Sylvester Papka, believes that the Sukur people came from Mchekili, a village in Mucholo on the soil of Cameroon republic. This tradition maintains that the Sukur people, after moving into Mchelili, settled at Masanari still in Cameroon, and later moved to Fumalili in Nigeria. We may infer that it was the movement from Fumalil that took to them to Mova, then to Muka where their leader was said to have settled and established his kingdom.

However, available evidence suggests that the first settlers on the Sukur Plateau, were the Habuga and Mithilin ethnic extractions, later joined the Zughin and Tura. The first three settlers were known as great hunters and farmers, while the Tura and Zughi “forged and funerary smith”, similarly, they “acted as diviner barbers, midwives and potters”. The kingdom of Sukur was built around the Hidi family, but the date the kingdom was built and the evolution of the Hidi people, remained largely unknown. But the tradition believes that an unknown person came to Gudur, who later married the daughter of the “black-smith” ethnic extraction, and who happened to be magician and welded powers to bring down rains, and was considered a hero. (mini god), and thus, became their saviour. He was positioned the king of Sukur, from the Dur family. By implication, the Dur, became the royal family from which the kingship emerged.

The Antecedent of Sukur

It is believed that Sukur emerged as a chiefdom at least from the beginning of the eighteenth century.¹ The chiefdom is thought to have held political sway over the inhabitants of the surrounding plains and the Yadseram Valley based on militarism.

It seems that it is either as a result or by way of evidence that D. F. H. MacBride, a one-time colonial officer in Northern Nigeria states that ‘when the Sukur was in its prime about the end of the eighteenth century, it was perhaps, the most important state in the Yedseram basin by reason of its spiritual supremacy of its ‘divine king’ and of the military power which it wielded’.² In contrast of the above, Saad Abubakar, was more explicit, arguing thus:

With its cavalry and effective iron weapons, Sukur extended
Its control eastwards to Gudu and westwards along the northern
And eastern slopes of the Mandara highlands and the Margi groups
Of the Yedseram basin were subdued. Migili, the Yedseram strong
Hold was overshadowed and Sukur Prince were stationed in Gulak.³

However, the migili, referred to above by Saad, are the Mijili of Hong and not migili. Now this picture of a centralized Political Power which through militarism succeeded in holding sway over the neighbouring peoples in the Yedseram Valley and the plains would appear to have been stretched too far. In the first place, the one underpinning of political Power or domination, that is military Power, was conspicuously lacking. Sukur was never a formidable military Power or even a petty state. Not only was it bereft of a cavalry, the usual equipment of a predatory state in these parts, but the only known long distance raid it ever carried out ended

¹ Adam, S. and Nicholas, D. “The Production of Space and the House of Xidi Sukur”. *Current Anthropology*, Vol.36, No.3(1955), p. 443.

² NAK/J21: Yola Prof., “Mandre District Village histories”, D. H. F. MacBride, p. 2

³ Saad Abubakar, *The Lamibe of Fombina* (Zaria, 1977), p. 17

in defeat.⁴ It is not surprising therefore, that the people of Sukur could not have even a vague recollection, of most things connected with their past let alone the so-called campaigns that they waged against their neighbours. But this is not because they had been turned into *tabula rasa*, by their defeat at the hands of the Fulani of Madagali under an independent ruler Mamma Yaji, as we would have been made to believe. It is simply because there was no much in the past to recollect. Secondly, namely divine kingship has been discounted in the case of Sukur. Although the Zidi (chief for want of a better term) may have been held in awe, he has never been a divine ruler, he only possessed the right to negotiate for rain with the Wula rainmaker.⁵

In the light of foregoing, it would appear reasonable to assume at least for the time being that the Sukur polity was not anything more than a community government⁶ with the leadership wielding some authority and not power based on privileged claim a variety of political, economic and symbolic resources and therefore, subject to constant negotiation in line with a culturally acceptable principle of seniority.⁷ This form of political organization could hardly have, and certainly did not, lead to an imperial ambition or accomplishment in the case of Sukur. Therefore, what seemed to have obtained in terms of relationship between Sukur and the surrounding peoples was the show of deference to the former by the later.

The basis of this informal empire are rather indeterminate but it is not unlikely that the prerogative of negotiating for rain with the Wulka rainmaker, pre-eminence in iron production and the status of being an emporium to which long distance trade from Borno repaired for the exchange of a range of luxury and subsistence products for iron currency⁸ had much to do with

⁴ Adam S. and Nicholas., P. 445

⁵ This term is preferred to the prejudicial words stateless societies which seems to suggest some measure of chaos.

⁶ Adam S. and Nicholas., P. 446

⁷ Ibid., p. 445

⁸ NAK/J21: Yola Prof., "Notes taken on a tour in Madagali District in Company with the Touring Officer, Mr. W. R. Shidney", June 14-22 1935

it. Other aspects of this relationship that are also quite hazy relate the time when it was forged and its duration. But nevertheless, according to Reverend Kulp Stove, who worked among the Margi about whom he collected a lot of information in the 1930s, all over Margi land, people heard of the greatness of the Sukur whose ruler they referred to as *Sili ginda tiddibee* literally meaning (his glory is great!).⁹ However, all these was to change in the course of the nineteenth century.

The transformation of Sukur Settlement

The establishment of Madagali as a sub-emirate of the Fombina (south) which in turn formed part of the Sokoto Caliphate throughout the nineteenth century *jihad* by the third decade of the nineteenth century was to transform the political landscape of the surrounding plains and the basin of the Yadseram. The main purpose or impact of the foundation of the Madagali would have been a sever whatever form of political relationship that was though to subsist between Sukur and some of the surrounding peoples as they were brought under the domination of the new sub-emirate. This development would also have made those who may not have been subjugated but were constantly harassed to realize that not only would Sukur not be able to defend them but was itself under threat. It is not known when attacks were launched against Sukur itself, but it appears that they had gone on for some time before Hamma Yaji, the independent ruler of Madagali from 1898 to 1927, who was by this period in possession of guns and rifles which he had acquired from his German overlords ostensibly, to fight the British, defeated the mountain-top kingdom in 1920.¹⁰ Undoubtedly, by that date both Hamma Yaji and Sukur had become part of the British colony of Northern Nigeria, heralding not only

⁹ James Vaughan, "Culture and History Grassroots Politics in a Northern Cameroon Kingdom", *American Anthropologist*. Vol. 66, No. 1 (1964)

¹⁰ Adam S. and Nicholas., P. 445

the end of the independence of both but subjecting the latter to the former. The full import of this development for Sukur was reflected in the deposition of its *xidis* by the British through the indigenous authorities of Madagali and subjection to taxation and such other policies of the colonial administration. It was also during colonial rule that some of the mountain-top inhabitants numbering about 1500 were persuaded to leave their original abode for the plains. But no sooner had they established the new settlements of Mildu and Hudum than majority of the group which was dissatisfied with the condition of the new settlements returned to the mountain-top.

Present-Day Sukur

Despite the efforts by the British colonial administration in the 1950s to persuade the people of Sukur to relocate to the plains and the creation of a Sukur districts in 1992, the original mountain-top settlement had not been altogether abandoned. Although many parts of the mountain fastness are in ruins, it still contains a considerable number of inhabitants; and what is more virtually all the historical sites and culture are still largely intact. But both the settlement and the traditional institutions have lost their glory. It would appear that Sukur became famous in the Yadseram basin and the plains on account of its pre-eminence in iron production. The existence of abundant iron ore deposits in the Mandara mountains and knowledge metallurgy enabled the people of Sukur to produce more iron than the neighbouring Higi and, possibly, many other inhabitants of the surrounding area, with perhaps, with the exception of the Kilba or Huba of Hong chiefdom. It is estimated that under normal condition Sukur was exporting sufficient iron to manufacture over 50.000 hoes, as a result, the Higi, rather than make futile attempts at competitions, opted to rely on Sukur for their supplies of iron while limiting

themselves to trading in food and craft items.¹¹ But this fame for iron production was completely lost by the 1950s with the result that nowadays, not only is iron not produced at all, but even the secondary industry blacksmithing is in a pitiable state.

Sukur's past greatness also had much to do with commerce. The mountain fastness was an emporium to which a large number of traders, many of whom coming from as far afield as Borno, travelled to exchange their commodities for iron. It's measure of the importance which Sukur attached to the trade with the surrounding peoples that they constructed the paved way leading up to the mountain from the north so as to ease access for visitors and their beasts. But nowadays the Sukur mountain fastness does not possess a simple market let alone attract a large concourse of traders. A traditional weekly market is held in the Sukur settlement of the plains.

The last but not the least source of Sukur's fame are still abiding. This is particularly so in respect of the traditional institutions.¹² To begin with, the traditional authority among the Sukur, the Xidiship, still exists even though shorn of all its powers which have been transformed to the District head of new Sukur settlements at the foot of the mountain following the creation of the new administrative unit. As a result, the Xidi of the mountain-top Sukur today performs only traditional functions which the Xidi are largely spiritual in nature. These include directing the religious festivals of Yawal, Zeku and Hun-thu which hold in the months of February, August and April every year. The respective purpose of the festivals is to mark the end the cropping season, honour the departed and ward off evil. The Xidi also presides over the Bull ceremony during which a bull which has been fattened by being kept in a specially

¹¹ The following discussions are based on information collected about Sukur in the course of a day's visit by the authors and report on various aspects of the life of the people by a Sukur, Usman Isah, see Usman Isah Field trip to Sukur 19th Nov. 2004

¹² Ibid.

duh rectangular hole is sacrificed and eaten by very body and looks after the shrine and the religious cults.

With regards to secular responsibilities, the Xidi runs a court for the trial of minor civil offences such as theft, rape, elopement with somebody else wife and land disputes which can be settled amicably. In addition, he convenes an annual gathering of all eligible members, known as the assembly for the purpose performing initiative rites connected with the attainment of adulthood and more importantly, with a view to affording every member of the community who may have been wronged or aggrieved either by the chief, any of the traditional authorities or any person the opportunity to be heard. Last but not the least among the functions of the Xidi is the maintenance of public institutions such as prison, the gates and the hostel which provides temporary accommodations for those in need. The discharge of these responsibilities, require support and assistance and it is with this end in view that the Xidi has council of titleholders known as the Peshesheli. Each of the twelve ort so titleholders have a particular function assigned to him for the discharge of which he is answerable tom the Xidi. The Xidi is in turn responsible to the District head of Sukur for maintenance of peace and order in the mountain fastness.

But it was not so much the survival of the traditional authority that is fascinating about the mountain-top Sukur settlement. On the contrary, it is the existence of such ingenious and rare public institutions as the prison, the Xidi's house, the shrine, the Assembly, the gates, the paved roads and many others that leaves a strong and lasting impression on the mind to the effect that it is the evidence of a rich cultural heritage. In dedeed, it is for this reason that visiting United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization team led by Dr Dawson Manager of Zimbabwe recommended in 1997 that the mountain fastness of Sukur be designated a world heritage sites. This has promptly been accepted by the Nigerian government with the result that

Sukur has been declared a state monument and tourist's sites. But it seems this declaration may not have been considered seriously.

Conclusion

It may be contended that whatever may have been Sukur's past influence in the Yadseram basin and the plains, which was apparently informal and unconstructed, and vanished without trace reducing it into a very tiny and inconsequential settlements. But then what Sukur may have lost in terms of past glory, she has more than made up for it in getting recognized for her rare and ingenious monuments by the United Nations Organization.

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