

# The uses of the past: the restructuring of ethnicity in Nigeria

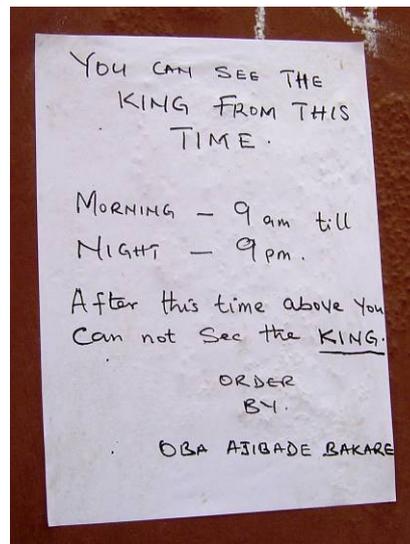
CHAPTER FOR:

*FROM INVENTION TO AMBIGUITY: THE PERSISTENCE OF ETHNICITY  
IN AFRICA*

François G. Richard and Kevin C. MacDonald eds.

Left Coast [but not left wing] Press

[FINAL VERSION SUBMITTED POST EDITORS COMMENTS]



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## ABSTRACT

One of the more curious intellectual detours in academic recountings of African history is the common idea that ethnicity was a colonial creation and that the records of colonial officials and the like were some sort of construct with only a tenuous relationship to reality. Even while these assertions were being published, African communities were disseminating accounts of themselves, largely defined by ethnicity. From a trickle in the 1960s and 1970s, this has grown to a torrent, in particular in larger Sub-Saharan economies where globalisation can be expected to hit hardest. Moreover, the publications of the despised colonial officials are now being regularly republished within the communities they describe, unlike the arid (and rapidly bypassed) utterances of academia. Indeed, new ethnographic surveys are being undertaken to explore and define ethnicity where it was overlooked in the colonial records. A key feature of local publications (and indeed other cultural manifestations such as almanacs, DVDs and the like) is an appeal to the past. Not only a past that could feasibly be reflected in oral traditions, but deep time, as manifested in archaeology or a purported migration from the Near East. Where archaeology has been undertaken, for example, in the Nok area, or Yorubaland, it is enthusiastically incorporated into the narrative. The paper explores the content and characteristics of local publications in Nigeria, focusing on ethnicity, to explain why such publications have grown in volume and ambition, and why ascribing origins to historical or archaeological cultures has gathered in importance.

[Historians] have to free themselves from the illusion that the African customs recorded by officials or by many anthropologists is any sort of guide to the African past.

(Ranger 1983: 262)

Before colonization, so the argument goes, Africans belonged simultaneously to a bewildering variety of social networks – nuclear and extended families, lineages, age sets, secret societies, village communities, diasporas, chiefdoms, states and empires. Loyalties and identities were complex, flexible and relatively amorphous, and certainly did not add up to clearly demarcated tribes living in well-defined and bounded territories

(Lentz and Nugent 2000: 5).

### **‘Boko Haram has saved our language’**

aMap Community Representative  
Jos, April 2013.

## **1. Introduction: the growth of indigenous ethnography**

One of the complacent assumptions that permeates early-period social anthropology is that none of its subjects would ever read what was written about them, with a critical or indeed any other eye. A connected assumption was that once an anthropologist had marked out a terrain, it was unlikely that another anthropologist would have the temerity to trespass on it. After the Second World War, this began to be less tenable; and by the 1960s, when most African countries had gained independence and similar processes were under way in Oceania, anthropologists had to be much more careful about naming individuals and describing political situations. The expansion of academic anthropology also meant that restudies were at least conceivable, enforcing a greater level of descriptive accuracy.

At the same period, university systems were expanding in developing countries and buying anthropology monographs for libraries. Gradually, past ethnographic publications did begin to make their way back to their subjects. Academics and intellectuals in these countries often found this patronising and remote writing a poor reflection of their own experience. Moreover, the convention of the ethnographic present suggested a ‘backwardness’ very much at odds with both their actual experience and aspirations for development. The consequences were both stinging criticisms of anthropology for its association with colonialism and a very low level of interest in the subject as a university discipline. This is probably less true in India and the New World for reasons connected with their very different histories, but within Africa, only South Africa, for predictable reasons, maintained a western-style tradition of social anthropology. As a result, the growth of a rich ethnographic literature written by ‘the people themselves’, a common coffee-room fantasy of anthropologists, perhaps along the lines of ‘Facing Mount Kenya’ (Kenyatta 1938), never really came to pass. African scholars, even when trained in anthropology, have tended to divert their energies towards political history, or otherwise move sideways. Although doctoral theses undertaken in developed world universities have been published as books, they have not generally been the precursors of more profound and long-term ethnographic tradition.

Nonetheless, there has been a response, the evolution of indigenous ethnography. Nigeria, because of its relative wealth and high degree of ethnolinguistic diversity has seen a distinctive growth of this type of publication. Locally published booklets describe single groups in order to promote an awareness of the exclusion of minorities from the political process and the growth of ethnic identity in a period when it is threatened by homogenising forces from the centre. They reflect more directly the interests of the populations concerned, since they are published outside the academic system. Being cheap, readily available and expressed in a language that can be generally understood, they also tap an underlying model of ethnographic discourse shown the door with the triumph of mainstream social anthropology. It suggests, implicitly, that academic anthropology has become unresponsive and disconnected from the people it studies. Africanists should perhaps ask whether there is an ethical dimension to this; if their work contributes so little, perhaps they should revise their methods or go home.

This chapter<sup>1</sup> explores the mechanisms by which ethnolinguistic minorities of Nigeria draw attention to their language and culture, both to reinforce ethnic unity and to present that culture to outsiders. In particular it focuses on locally published books, which began to appear slowly in the 1950s, but which have recently undergone major expansion. It looks at the content and motivation of ethnographic surveys locally commissioned in recent years and the structural models they follow. Oral traditions are being restructured to include appeals to the remote past and thus linked with presumed archaeological findings. Finally it considers the denial of African ethnicity in the academic sphere and the possible motivation for this, as well as overall models of ethnogenesis implied by these very different approaches.

## **2. Anthropologists and the changing nature of ethnography**

If the justice behind the complaints of developing-country intellectuals was recognised by anthropologists in the west, it at least had the effect making them feel guilty (see Schadeberg & Blench 2013 for a description of the trajectory of anthropological writing about the Nuba Mountains in Sudan). There was a strong feeling that fieldwork should be more interactive, that it should respond more to the communities' needs and that anthropologists should leave something behind. However, at the same time, from the 1960s onwards, anthropologists were encouraged to become ever more theoretically sophisticated, sometimes to the point where fieldwork became an unfortunate necessity rather than a key formative experience. Ethnography, contemptuously dismissed as 'butterfly-collecting', became more difficult to publish. As a consequence, anthropological writing became more difficult to read and of ever decreasing relevance to the communities it purported to describe. Thus even if the anthropologist did make an effort to distribute copies of their work among his or her informants, the chances were that it would seem irrelevant and would in practice gather dust.

Related to this however, has been the changing nature of academic book purchasing. The evolution of publishing technology has caused an efflorescence in numbers of books and journals, so much that even well-funded libraries in major institutions find it difficult to be comprehensive. At the same time, the cost of physical books has risen to a point where they are beyond the reach of library budgets in many developing countries. The irony is thus that at a point in history where more people than ever *could* read and respond to anthropological writing from the viewpoint of insiders, economics has acted to make such writing effectively inaccessible.

Another irony with much appeal for western scholars, is the notion that well-known monographs are in wide distribution in the communities they purport to describe and are much consulted for 'correct' data on local culture. In the classic version of this, researchers visiting the Trobriand Islands pose questions and the 'native' goes out the back to consult a dog-eared copy of Malinowski rather than answering from his or her own knowledge (see some of the essays in Leach & Leach 1983). In parallel with this is the 'native' picture of the ethnographer, a well-remembered character, eccentric perhaps, but somehow loveable. Obviously this image feeds into notions of the invention of culture, as well as providing tacit support for the seminar-room platitude that fieldwork is a largely outmoded activity.

I cannot speak for the Trobriand Islands, but in the two cases where I have direct knowledge, this appears to be completely false. The Nupe of west-central Nigeria were described in two classic monographs by Nadel (1941, 1954), often on undergraduate reading lists in the past. During fieldwork among the Nupe in 1979-1982, I found no copies of any work by Nadel in circulation and never encountered any individual who clearly remembered him. Somewhat later in time (1996-1997) in Northern Ghana, I did not encounter any Tallensi who had treasured copies of the works of Meyer Fortes (1945, 1949), or indeed who definitely remembered him. Unflattering as it is to the image of social anthropologists, they soon merge into the large pool of outsiders who ask stupid and intrusive questions, or become confused with missionaries and others who made

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<sup>1</sup> The core of this paper is my collection of local Nigerian publications focusing on ethnographic traditions. I have been collecting these since 1980, and I am particularly grateful to friends and colleagues over the years who have provided me originals and photocopies of these hard-to-obtain publications. Selbut Longtau, Barau Kato and Daniel Gya have all kindly sought out examples from their region. Patience Ahmed of CAPRO allowed me to xerox pamphlets collected by her, and Rick Shain assisted me with copies of pamphlets published in Northern Nigeria. Kay Williamson (†) kindly brought me over the years copies of similar documents published in the Delta region of Southern Nigeria. Thanks to Thomas Geider (†) for drawing my attention to scholarly German publications focusing on this material.

some attempt to speak the local language<sup>2</sup>. Despite this, there is some counter-evidence that more descriptive texts do circulate. Jörg Adelberger (p.c.), working among the Kulung of the Lau area on the Benue, found that a missionary typescript, Ira McBride's 'Stories of long ago Kulung history' was widely in circulation and indeed regarded as a source on Kulung customs. Similarly, I have found photocopied extracts from Meek's (1931a) 'Tribal Studies' in circulation among the Vere people, south of Yola.

A consequence of rising literacy and a more-or-less formed perception of the impact of globalisation on local cultures has, however, stimulated a need for indigenous ethnography. The classical transmission of cultural knowledge through oral modes is breaking down and an inchoate feeling that the past ought to be recorded is on the increase. Written models are widespread in dominant cultures; for smaller ethnic groups to compete in the social and cultural arena, historico-ethnographic accounts are much in demand. Such accounts are not produced in the pursuit of disinterested scholarship; there are current political realities to address. The production of such ethnographies appears in rather scattered forms in different regions of Africa. The literary traditions of the East African coast were easily adapted to the production of historical texts and narratives and more recently, ethnographic descriptions of various peoples published in Swahili (Geider 1998).

In Nigeria, the publications that result from this have a lineage going back to Tepowa's (1907) account of Brass, in the Niger Delta, followed by histories of Yoruba towns. Due to the earlier impact of Western education, these publications typically first appear in the South, with Egharevba's (1936, 1968) much revised and republished history of Benin. The Igbo peoples have also written quite extensively in this vein and Isichei's (1976) synthesis of Igbo history compiles a useful bibliography of these writings up to the date of publication. In Northern Nigeria, Hausa was initially the usual language (Machunga n.d., Garbosa n.d.) although translations by sympathetic colonial officers made some accounts available in English (Hassan & Na'ibi 1952). From the 1960s, almost all of these books were in English, and a trickle has now swollen to a substantial output, as more peoples produce graduates and printing technology has become relatively cheap.

As this publishing tradition developed, ethnography began to creep in. Chapters on 'local customs' are embedded in the historical material and eventually publications appear that are essentially principally ethnography. A good example of this is the history of Abuja published by Hassan and Na'ibi (1952). Originally a historical chronicle with glancing references to ethnography, interest in the accounts of the Gbari, Koro and Bassa peoples was such that these sections were later expanded and published as a separate booklet. The additional interest of this text is that it is one of the first accounts of 'other' tribes by a local outsiders, a beginning of ethnography. These 'first level' texts continue to be published; the trend is towards greater length and a more book-like appearance, and some even have colour frontispieces (Augi & Lawal 1990). There have been attempts at 'heritage' journals, for example among the Tangale (Anakrumba 1989). Typical examples are (Asodati 1990; Dabup 2009; Datok 1983; Diko 1986; Dong et al. [1992]; ECWA Miango 2012; Gocha 1994; Habi 1987; Jacobs 1995; Mgbe 1973, 1981; Neher & Neher 2011; Nengel et al. 2002; Nyam 1988; Okwoli 1973; Omo-Ananigie 1949; Omoņukanrin 1942; Tantile 1984; Wanai 1988).

These books are a bibliographer's nightmare. Nigeria has no central register of books published, and even if they appear to be under the imprint of university press, this is often commercial work, and no record is kept. Print runs are small, and copies are often sold only within the local community. These early period publications are extremely fugitive; published by small presses with flimsy covers they were nowhere systematically collected and as far as I can discover have never been the subject of a comprehensive bibliography. Publication details are often sketchy and the dates and authors given may thus be tentative.

The type of discourse favoured by these accounts is quite striking. They typically consist of strings of assertions concerning beliefs or practices, without much in the way of a connecting thread. The model is almost certainly the type of ethnography from the early colonial period, which reached its apogee in the work of Charles Meek (e.g. 1931a,b). Meek was the government anthropologist in Nigeria in the 1920s and produced voluminous descriptive accounts of different peoples, as well as summaries of statistical and

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<sup>2</sup> For obvious reasons, anthropologists remain very protective about their capacity to speak the language of the peoples among whom they work. Only subsequent interviews can illuminate their sometimes very low levels of competence. Empirical evidence for this is however provided by the numerous Africanists who appear quite unable to grasp or transcribe the tones of the languages they 'spoke'.

geographical information (Meek 1925). The underlying assumption is that culture is an accumulation of practices, and once a sufficient number have been enumerated a type of culture history will be possible. This model in turn goes back Sir James Frazer (1912), whose 'Golden Bough' seeks to prove its thesis by this sort of energetic accumulation.

Local authors of ethnographies are not generally aware of this backstory, but they do not publish in a vacuum. They can be of an antiquarian bent, but they can also be applied to the service of blatantly political goals (Blench 2011). This can be seen at its clearest in Egharevba's (1968 but editions go back to 1936) narrative of the dynastic myths of the Benin kingdom. His account was regularly expanded and re-edited over more than half a century to take account of changing political dynamics within the present ruling house. Even so, curiously, Egharevba 'borrowed' text from Roth's (1903) account of Benin while adding significant glosses (Eisenhofer 1995, 1998).

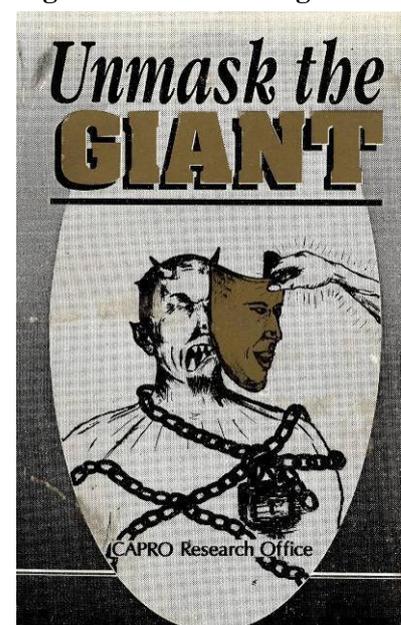
Another example of how ethnic history is rewritten in response to current political goals comes from the Middle Belt of Nigeria. The peoples of Southern Zaria, effectively the non-Muslim populations of Southern Kaduna State, are in the process of redefining their identity to the exclusion of the Hausa Muslim values of those who controlled their economic and political life for most of the colonial era and subsequently. A key aspect of this process is the changing of ethnonyms from Hausaised (and often pejorative) formulations to those used or adopted by the people themselves. More crucial still, however, is the shuffling of Local Government and State administrative divisions to correspond better to local self-images of ethnic divisions. An example of this is Ibrahim (1997a) which segues from a historical and ethnographic survey, to long lists of Native Authority officials and thence to a series of pleas for a 'New Kaduna State' and the re-assignment of various local government boundaries. Although supplied with a framework of scholarly apparatus, the overt purposes of the text inevitably means that the ethnographic data must be treated in the same light as the pamphlets discussed earlier.

Nigeria has an academic historical tradition which, by and large, has proceeded in parallel, largely ignoring these accounts in favour of directly recorded oral tradition or archive documents. In the case of ethnography, anthropological research in Nigeria is now too fragmentary and sparse for there to be much interaction between the academic community and the indigenous ethnographer, although some interesting hybrid texts have emerged blending academic apparatus with frank mythography (Ejituwu 1991). Historical writing is not exempt from a certain amount of magical realism as shown by the essays in 'Groundwork of Nigerian History' (Ikime 1980) which mostly discuss events that occurred prior to the existence of an entity such as Nigeria.

### 3. Indigenous ethnographic survey: the CAPRO texts

The complex ethnolinguistic patterning of the Middle Belt of Nigeria has also resulted in a need to provide a revised overview of the ethnic map. A series of publications from CAPRO, Calvary Ministries, based in Jos, Northern Nigeria, has the ambition to provide a comprehensive survey of the peoples of Northern Nigeria covering various aspects of their culture, as well as the status and history of Christian churches. The immediate motivation is to assess the potential for evangelisation, but the mode has been ethnological survey, very much in the tradition of Temple and Meek. The motives for producing this series are nowhere explicitly set out. Although each volume has a preface, the main concern is to warn the reader of the problems of accuracy, especially in relation to population figures, and to mention forthcoming titles. Seven volumes has so far been published (CAPRO Research Office, 1992, 1993, n.d. [1994], 1995, 2004, 2009) organised on the geographical basis of Nigerian states. The Nigerian penchant for continually splitting administrative units, both States and Local Governments, has made this organisational schema problematic and some volumes had to be re-edited in the proof stage to take account of these changes. The CAPRO texts represent the most comprehensive effort to carry out ethnographic survey in north-central Nigeria and respond to local needs in a way that is very remote from

Figure 1. Unmask the giant



present-day anthropology.

The first aspect of these books that strikes the general reader is the lurid style of the titles and cover illustrations. 'Unmask the Giant', covering Bauchi State, shows a chained demon with an aggressive expression having a smiling face-mask removed (Figure 1). The exact interpretation of this is not given, but the back cover exhorts the reader;

We pray as you read this book you will be moved not only to *Unmask the Giant* but also to deliver these nations.

The back-cover text describes the process of Islamisation and Hausaisation of the minority peoples of Bauchi and it would be hard not to conclude that the demon illustrated is this process, blandishing defenceless populations with well... blandishments. Christians are thus exhorted to expose this for what it is and 'deliver these nations'. The blurb for 'Kingdoms at War', covering Niger and Kebbi States, says 'The wars of the earthly kingdoms have abated. The war of the spiritual kingdoms rages on'.

This rather over-the-top outer cover is strongly in contrast with most of the content, which seeks an unembellished descriptive style, both when describing what are presumably abhorrent 'pagan' practices and frankly narrating conflicts and failures in the history of missionisation. The sensational cover probably arises from the need to attract readers; development charities are similarly familiar with the need to emphasise the 'emergency' aspects of their work rather than the unglamorous grind of community development.

The core of each volume are separate entries describing each ethnic group. Each entry covers the following topics;

- a) Introduction: name, population, location, other languages spoken, infrastructure of the area, principal elements of subsistence and a summary of historical traditions.
- b) Culture: general social anthropological topics such as birth, marriage, mortuary rituals, system of authority
- c) Religion: conceptions of God and other spirits, witchcraft, divination and other ceremonies not described under culture
- d) Christian witness: covering the history and presence of missions in the area, with commentaries on 'immorality' and other social problems
- e) Prayer points: topics for prayer

Stylistically, the entries have a number of common points.

- a) there is no analytical commentary. Each piece of data is presented in sequence, not as part of an argument, but simply as a sort of bullet point. Thus in the entry for Awak people;

'At the age of ten, a boy is taken to the priest to be blessed. Relations bring foodstuff for a feast. Young men look for a wife of their choice. A suitor has to pay a goat, a necklace, five pieces of metal *sar* money, (as in Kaltungo), and seven fowls. He must also do farmwork.'

CAPRO 1995a:36

- b) there is no sense of contextual behaviour. Customs are enumerated as if all members of that ethnic group followed them implicitly on all occasions.
- c) social change is mentioned, if at all, through the introductory word 'Nowadays' and a comment either on the waywardness of youth or rituals no longer performed by Christians.
- d) despite the avowed purpose of enlightening Christians to the Islamic 'threat' there is little or no account of Islam, either in statistical terms, or in terms of reasons for conversion. The account of the Tala people (CAPRO 1995a:311-314), who live in villages close to Bauchi town, a centre for extreme theology, hardly mentions Islam at all.
- e) demeanours are attributed to these peoples which would have given pleasure to Linnaeus but hardly any ethnographer since, such as 'friendly to strangers', 'hostile', 'not keen on modern life', which

are given equal space with cultural traits once beloved of German ethnologists, such as shoulder-carrying.

- f) they are based almost entirely on original information. Although each book contains a short list of references, the texts describe the findings of the researchers on site even when they conflict with previously published material<sup>3</sup>.

As the series has developed, the number of photographs included has increased. All the portraits are full-length, face-on and are usually not linked directly to the text. The other type of illustration shows ritual places, notably in 'Kingdoms at War'. This emphasis on portraiture is very characteristic of the ethnographies from which the CAPRO surveys derive and certainly is a direct descendant of the recording of 'physical types' in early period anthropology.

To anyone who works in the Middle Belt of Nigeria this style will be immediately familiar. If there is a single author to whom the researchers of CAPRO are indebted it is C.K. Meek, author of two monumental surveys of North-Central Nigeria (Meek 1925, 1931a) as well as a monograph on the Jukun peoples (Meek 1931b). Sir Richmond Palmer, then Governor of Northern Nigeria, and an enthusiast for history and ethnology, had not only commissioned the anthropological survey of Northern Nigeria but also published translations of historical chronicles. Palmer (1936) was then preparing a vast and obscure compendium of the history and culture of northeast Nigeria, was entirely deaf to Meek's sceptical remarks about exotic origins. Meek undertook his fieldwork just as the first generation of British social anthropologists was setting off for West Africa, and his later publications show that he was influenced by their rather different approach. However, at the time, his surveys represent the final flowering of an older tradition, combining Frazer's appetite for mountains of barely connected ethnographic fragments and the enthusiasm for cultural layering that came from Germanic cultural ethnology.

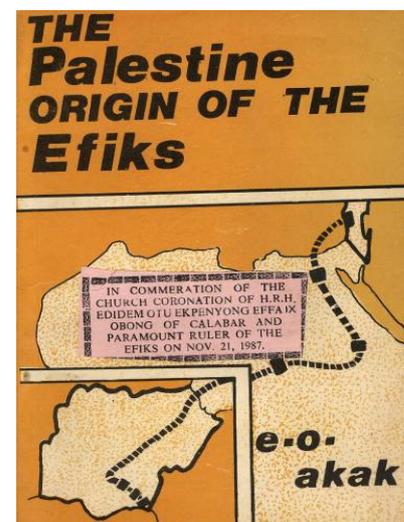
Although the impact of colonialism and the enforced peace that it entailed had by that time made an enormous impact on economic life and indeed social institutions, this is barely mentioned. Meek also largely eschews groups with pre-colonial polities, preferring acephalous societies, a common bias in Nigeria among political officers, as the comments in Charles Temple (1919) illustrate. Temple clearly saw that the colonial administration was regularly outwitted and misled by the Muslim courts of Northern Nigeria – behaviour which put them implicitly on an equal footing with their erstwhile masters. On the other hand, 'pagans' functioned to re-affirm relations of dominance, the underlying reality of colonialism. Order could be brought into their cultures by classification and categorisation, while eliminating 'repugnant' customs. It is no accident that this approach has its clearest parallels in Soviet surveys of Siberian cultures, immensely detailed ethnographic surveys combined with moralistic encomia on 'backward' customs (e.g. Slezkine 1994).

CAPRO researchers would no doubt reject these political subtexts; their work is being produced long after the ending of colonial rule, serving a different agenda. But the structural similarities remain; Christianity is about centre-periphery relations and encouraging diverse ethnolinguistic groups with heterogeneous beliefs to conform to a central model. Ethnographic surveys such as those of CAPRO combine the agenda of the centre with a growth of intellectual curiosity concerning the larger sociological picture of Nigerian society. And yet the publications display the same ambiguity that lies at the core of all ethnographic surveys, a fascination with detail for its own sake and a desire to transmit the richness of individual cultures. Neglected populations seize the opportunity to speak back through texts such as these as they gradually hone their self-presentation skills.

#### 4. Remote origins and claims to identity

One feature these accounts all share is reference to exotic origins in a remote past, although these are undoubtedly recent and spurious accretions. Claims to originate from the Near East, Palestine, Mecca or

**Figure 2. Palestine origin of the Efiks**



<sup>3</sup> This is in marked contrast with Nigerian academic publications which show an exaggerated respect for written sources to the detriment of collection of original data.

Egypt abound, while more proximate homelands include Borno, Hausaland and the Mandara kingdoms. For example, the 'Palestine origin of the Efiks' (Akak 1986) claims that the Efik people were originally resident in the Middle East, indeed Canaan (Figure 2). Expelled from their homeland, they crossed the desert and made their way to SE Nigeria. They named their capital city 'Calabar', a respelt version of Canaan. So convincing has this narrative been, Calabar city council has been induced to erect a ceremonial gate at the entrance of the town inscribed 'Welcome to Canaan City'. Similar migration motifs occur in many of the books listed in this chapter. A division is evident between peoples of Muslim orientation, where Egypt or Saudi Arabia are favoured starting points, and Christians, who prefer Palestine or Israel. But most crucially, these are all recent additions, the result of a combination of literacy and the 'exotic origins' models favoured by colonial officers<sup>4</sup>. They reflect a desire for rootedness in deep time, much as the Gawain author begins his account of the challenge of the Green Knight with the migration of Brutus to the British Isles. As more sources become available, so the migration narratives ramify, and in some cases, replace more interesting localist accounts. The Yoruba represent one of the more interesting cases, where traditional origin in Ife has been largely displaced by migration from Egypt, even in schoolbooks (Law 1984; Horton 1992).

These accretions respond to a significant need within the community, but can obscure the fact that the main narrative usually includes a much more credible migration account, usually of hunters pursuing game or farmers seeking fresh land for planting (Boston 1964). In a subsistence system combining both wild resources and shifting cultivation, these are wholly plausible motivations. Additional subnarratives often include disputes within a village or clan, believable enough given a knowledge of current Nigerian politics. It is notable that the volumes of the Jos Oral History and Literature series which deal with minorities of Plateau State, and consist entirely of unedited field interviews, do not contain any references to remote origins and only name local sites (Isichei & Yearwood 1981).

The agenda for these fabricated narratives of deep time represents the intersection between classic origin myths and the imperatives of the educational system. In Amazonia, SE Asia or Australia, origin myths recount ethnic origins in terms of cosmic entities, whereas African narratives tend to be more down-to-earth, with their quarrels between brothers. The structural parallel is with the epic poetry of medieval Europe, existing on the boundary between oracy and literacy. Writers such as Chrétien de Troyes, Wolfram von Eschenbach and the Gawain poet incorporated into their verse oral traditions which combined religious and classical narratives, grounding them in a fabricated history which must have satisfied their audiences in the same way the combats of deities are entertained in Amazonia. So when a Nigerian author wishes to anchor his account in a history more prestigious than the aliquot wanderings of a hunter, he (and authors *are* always male) turns to the available Christian or Muslim narratives, combined with their traditional geography.

## **5. Correlations with the archaeological record**

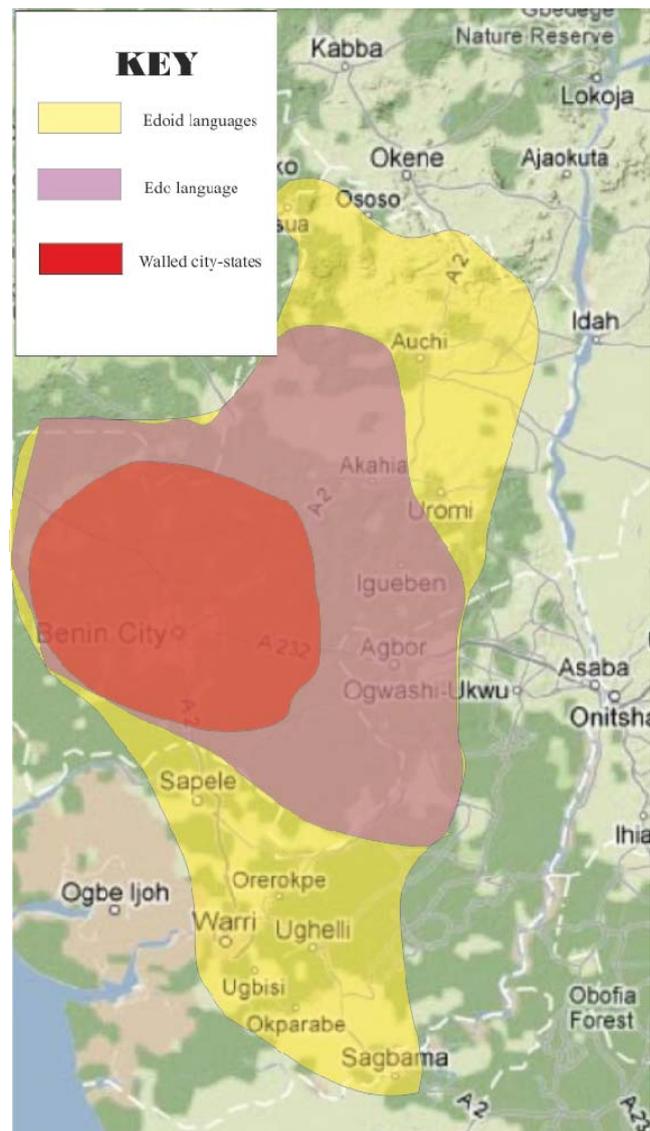
Given the quest for deep time, the lack of reference to an actual archaeological record constitutes a striking lacuna. Claims to antiquity are better rooted in the uncheckable past. Only in the case of Nok has there been some attempt to link the record of excavation with the ethnographic present (Jemkur 1992) and this was prior to the recent discoveries by the Frankfurt archaeological team. In some ways this is surprising, as there *are* examples where ethnicity and archaeology would appear to intersect rather neatly. Archaeology in Nigeria has been on a downhill trajectory since the great period of the 1960s, which produced Connah's (1975, 1981) accounts of Benin and Daima, Shaw's Igbo-Ukwu (1970) and the results of the Frankfurt SFB in NE Nigeria (Rupp et al. 2008). Modern stratified sites are few and well-dated materials scarcer still (Ogundiran 2005). Archaeology departments continue to produce students, whose dissertations are archived, but few are exposed to international scrutiny. Although excavations in the Nok region have begun to produce fascinating results (Rupp 2010), these observations remain isolated. Nonetheless, the potential to correlate archaeological understanding of certain areas with ethnicity remains significant, especially when considering the growth of city-states in southwest Nigeria. This section provides some examples of hypothetical correlations between ethnogenesis, linguistics and archaeology which have been little-explored.

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<sup>4</sup> There has been a startling reprise of some of these theories in the work of previously respected academic, Dirk Lange (2011), who now traces the origins of Kanuri culture to Babylon and Sumeria.

The complexity of the rammed-earth walls surrounding the Benin kingdom has long been known and was first studied by Connah (1975) and later Darling (1984, 1997), who mapped their extent in some detail. Edo, the language of the Bini people, is also the administrative language of the Benin Kingdom. Edo is one branch of the Edoid languages, a Niger-Congo family spoken west of the Niger (Elugbe 1989). The linguistic map of Edoid shows a highly distinctive pattern, with great internal diversity both north and south of Benin city, while the Edo language itself occupies a homogeneous swathe of the central region, in an area almost exactly corresponding to the extent of the earthworks. Map 1 shows the overall distribution of Edoid languages as reflected in Elugbe (1989). The extent of the Edo language itself and the walls surrounding the kingdom are from Darling (1984). It would be difficult to argue that the overlap is a coincidence. The expansion of the Bini polity over the last millennium is reflected in the spread of the Edo language through assimilation of minority Edoid languages (Bondarenko & Roese 1999).

**Map 1. Edoid languages and the extent of rammed-earth walls**

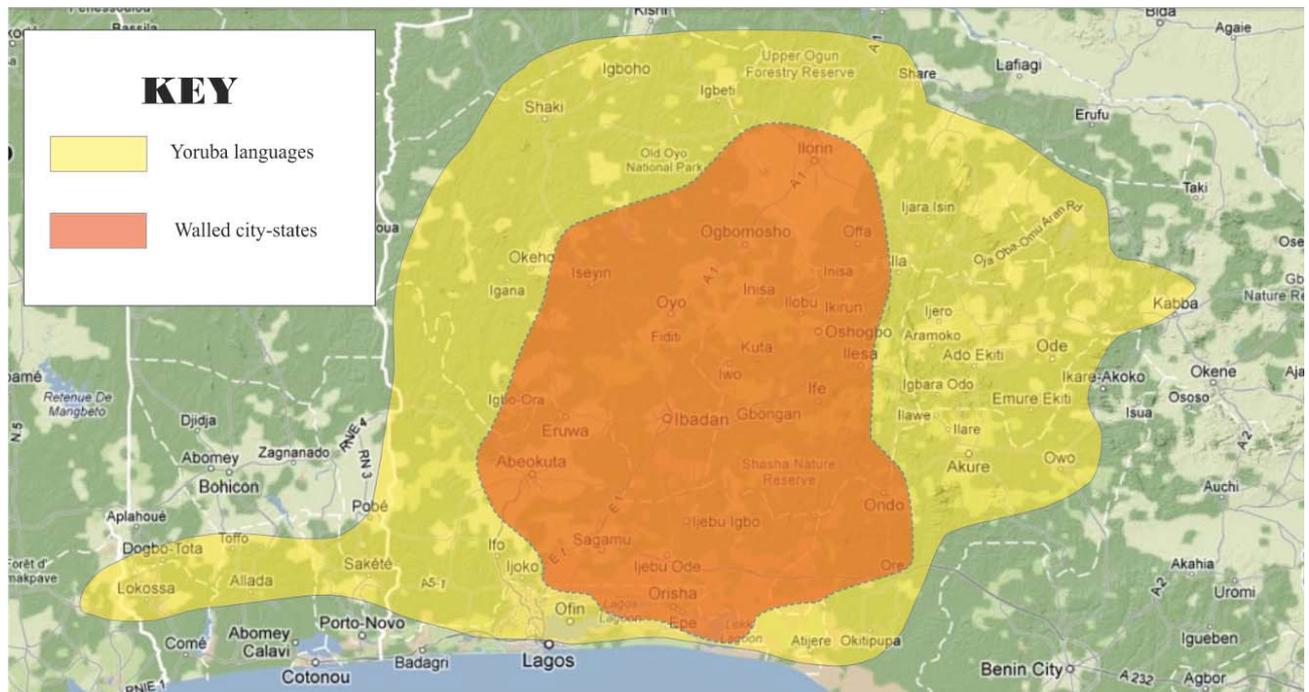


A not dissimilar scenario can be posited for the Yoruba language. Yoruba is the principal language of the Yoruboid group (Capo 1998) which also includes Igala and Isekiri. Yoruba is divided into a very large number of distinct dialects, which spread from the Niger-Benue confluence as far as the border of Togo. There is, however, a core Yoruba language which is documented in standard dictionaries and which serves as a language of intercommunication between local dialects, rather as Mandarin functioned as an interlanguage in China (Ramsey 1987). We know that a series of city-states arose in the Yoruba-speaking area, probably from 1000 AD onwards, marked by earth walls (Willett 1973; Eyo 1974; Soper & Darling 1980; Ogundiran 2003). Map 2 shows the extent of the Yoruba language group, and an approximate outline of the zone where the earth walls are found. The Sungbo Eredo, focusing on Ijebu-Ode, is the most well-known of these (Darling 1998), but there are many others, still to be properly traced, excavated and dated. As with Edo, there is every reason to suppose that the expansion of common Yoruba correlates with the growth of the city-states. Reports of Sungbo Eredo have made the Nigerian press, and there has been an incipient move to link this to nationalist claims, through an application for World Heritage status. This may not advance the scientific agenda, but this is hardly the point; it is intended to provide historical underpinnings for a re-integrated assertion of Yoruba ethnicity.

In the case of much small ethnic groups, this type of correlation is much harder to make, due both to a lack of adequately dated sites and less well recorded historical traditions (see discussion in Blench 2010, 2012, in press). Unlike larger political entities with historical traditions and some sense of the relationship between the visible archaeology and those traditions, peoples in areas of high linguistic diversity generally are unable to relate to make a link to archaeological sites. However, this process can occur as a result of academic intervention. For example, the 'Nok' culture was named for the village of Nok, which is in the territory of the Hyamic [= Jaba, Kwoi in older literature] peoples (Ibrahim 1997b). A museum has been established at Nok and the Hyam now incorporate the Nok culture into the narrative of their origins. But the core area of the sites

is today inhabited not by the Hyam but by the Koro peoples, a cover term for six related languages which form a subgroup of Plateau.

**Map 2. Yoruba language and extent of rammed-earth walls**



The Nok tradition has been known since 1928, mostly due to chance surface finds and its characteristic terracottas occur across a wide span of Central Nigeria. A programme of formal excavation in the core Nok area has been underway since the early 2000s, and many finds of Nok ceramics and terracottas in context have come to light (Rupp et al. 2008). Nok images include fantastical representations as well as scenes which presumably represent daily life. They have only been found far away from settlement sites, surrounded by large amounts of millet seeds, interpreted as a religious offering. Moreover, all those which have been excavated in situ seem to have been intentionally smashed. It is unlikely the terracottas represent the products of a hierarchical polity, but rather some type of cult or religious practice, reflected in the highly specific ceramic styles. Blench (2013) focuses on a terracotta of a drummer recently excavated, which can be exactly correlated with ethnographic practice among the Koro Waci people today, demonstrating an apparent material and cultural continuity over a period of some 2500 years. Although Nok terracottas were widely traded, and have been found well outside the core area, for example in Katsina Ala, their core area can be superimposed quite neatly on the Koro-speaking area. Nok settlement itself is in fact off-centre in terms of the density of sites and it is more likely Nok should be correlated with the Koro cluster. The Hyam people have thus incorporated Nok into their traditions following early and now misleading academic results.

Examples where material culture, language and ethnicity correlate with single acephalous groups also exist. For example, the Tiv people, who occupy a substantial terrain in southeastern Nigeria, are completely decentralised, yet they have constructed powerful ethnic and religious boundaries which constitute a distinctive bounded cultural area. Tiv also have a highly distinctive material culture and architecture (Okogwu 2008). This is partly achieved through a particular pattern of religion, partly through wilful monolingualism<sup>5</sup> and marital practice which allows outside women to be incorporated within Tiv society, but does not permit Tiv women to marry outside. Projecting their region forward to an imagined future archaeology, discerning a strong correlation between language, ethnicity and archaeology would be entirely reasonable. A similar explanation has been proposed for the short but dramatic expansion of Lapita pottery in the Pacific (Spriggs 2011). An ethnographic parallel to such a cult would be the 'Long Juju' of Aro Chukwu, which exercised spiritual and economic power in a large area of Igboland, without being explicitly political (Ohadike 1998).

<sup>5</sup> In addition, the Tiv language is not dialectically diverse, another indicator of strong cultural unity.

There are then examples where such a correlation seems credible, and it seems likely that this agenda will gain more prominence as oral traditions are better documented and archaeology expands its remit. However, an important result from these examples is that under certain circumstances, the correlation between language, ethnicity and archaeological identity is very good and we can project ethnicity back into the past without participating in some colonial conspiracy. The analytic issue remains to determine the conditions under which this is reasonable. The most credible correlations are with rising polities. States may have specific policies to promote the language of the centre, or it may simply be to the advantage of incorporated citizens and groups to switch language, as the Yoruba and Edo examples suggest. Broadly speaking, among acephalous societies without obvious political centres, languages tend to diversify and boundaries between them are more fluid. A key indicator of this is the prevalence of multilingualism. Citizens of a centralised polity tend towards monolingualism, both because everyone in their immediate social environment speaks a single language and because it is not in the interest of the centre that multiple languages are tolerated. Highly diversified language groups, such as the Igbo, not only form complex chains of languages with varying degrees of intelligibility, but speakers are often fluent in a variety of lects, creating conditions for cultural ebb and flow, which is damaging to the unity of the state.

## 6. The denial of ethnicity in the academic sphere and some counter-examples

The introduction to this book focuses on one of the more curious intellectual detours in academic recountings of African history, the idea that ethnicity was a colonial creation and that the records of colonial officials and the like were a construct with only a tenuous relationship to reality. Even while these assertions were being published, African communities were disseminating accounts of themselves, largely defined by ethnicity. In East Africa, where Ranger and his colleagues have tended to focus, these accounts were in Swahili (Geider 1998) but elsewhere in Africa they were commonly in Hausa and English. The previous sections of this chapter have explored both the growth of self-presentations by ethnolinguistic groups, and the potential for archaeological correlation with ethnogenesis.

If it is the case, how can it be that ethnicity is a colonial-era invention? The answer of the Ranger camp was presumably that Africans have meekly accepted European constructs. This is not entirely false; there are regions of Africa where there was no perceived ethnic unity, merely chains of villages each speaking similar languages, where a colonial or outsiders' name was fixed on the map and generated an administrative reality. For Nigeria, the name 'Koro' is a good example. Gunn & Conant (1960) list no fewer than fourteen 'Koro' groups, none of whom actually call themselves 'Koro' and some of whom, including those today who use the term 'Waci' clearly had no underlying name or sense of ethnic unity. But this is hardly the rule; indeed the early identification of named ethnic groups by mapmakers and travellers from the fifteenth century onwards points to a continuity in this arena which certainly precedes the colonial era.

One of the most striking examples of ethnic persistence are the legends on

**Figure 3. Fra Mauro's Map of the Lake Chad region (1450)**



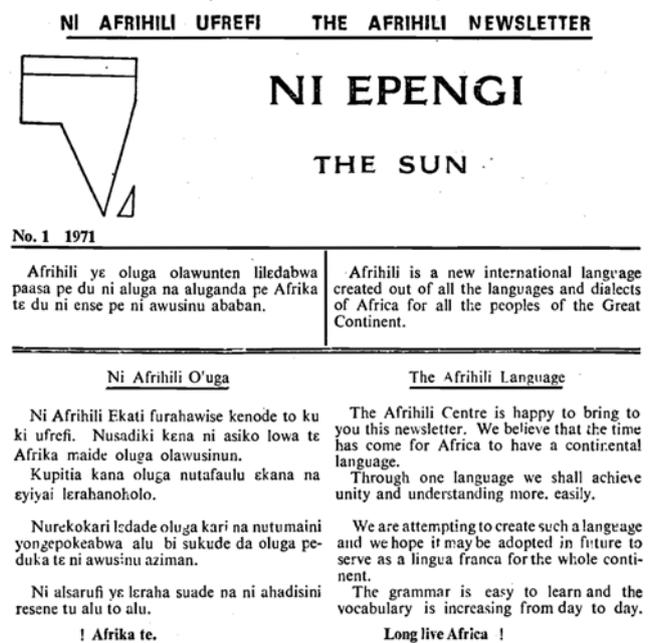
Source: Falchetta (2006)

the 1450 world map of Fra Mauro, republished by Falchetta (2006). Fra Mauro identifies three ethnic groups in the Mandara mountains south of Lake Chad, the Margi, Bagirmi and Wandala, whose names are recognisably the same today. Figure 3 shows an extract from the Fra Mauro map, covering the region south of Lake Chad. If African ethnic groups are indeed colonial constructs, then this persistence over six hundred years would be a rather remarkable coincidence.

Ethnicity has made a comeback in the anthropological literature, driven, one suspects, by concerns about migration in developed economies. But it is ethnicity transmogrified, driven by post-modern concerns about its use and manipulation within the political and social process. Bloody ethnic conflicts have ensured it has now risen high on the agenda, and in Nigeria in particular it has been the subject of a ponderous literature reflecting on the intersection of ethnic and religious agendas (see references in Higazi 2008). But this conception of ethnicity is strikingly at variance with the model underlying the publications described here. For the communities themselves, ethnicity is about cultural specificity, about customs and artefacts, kinship and relations with the wider world, as well as historical underpinnings, however imagined. Seen from the ground, the theoretical sophistication that informs modern academic publication about ethnicity is at best irrelevant.

In the light of these examples, what can explain the denial of ethnicity by the academic establishment and its enthusiastic adoption by the archaeological community? To ignore or bypass these local accounts is surely the height of arrogance, although that is hardly incredible given a knowledge of Oxford academics. But its origins may well lie in the intellectual climate in the decade following African Independence, and contemporaneous social changes in Europe. The liberal ideas which characterised the 1960s, and the left-of-centre paradigms adopted in the universities suggested to many that the older descriptive models of African society were flawed by a desire to bolster colonial rule. Picturing Africa as a divided continent, peopled by backward tribes had justified the benevolent rule of empire. As the empire was revealed to be hollow sham, so its intellectual scaffolding could be dismantled in parallel. As the old certainties of class and hierarchy were being questioned in Britain, it made sense if this were so elsewhere as well. The notion that an ‘African’ personality would develop was very strong in many leaders in the immediate post-colonial era. Kwame Nkrumah, for example, seriously considered that Swahili might become the language of the entire continent (Chebet-Choge 2012). Figure 4 shows the first (and only) issue of the Afrihili newsletter, published in West Africa, an attempt to bring about this happy state of affairs.

Figure 4. The Afrihili Newsletter, Issue No. 1



## 7. Reinventing ethnicity in the current political climate

The notion of ethnicity represented in the publications described here might be described as ‘traditional’, depending as it does on the style of colonial ethnography, which in turn traces its lineage back to Frazer. The immediate concerns of minorities are linked to globalisation, the understandable fear that cultural specificity will be lost with urbanisation, labour migration and access to large-focus media. In modern times, the forces of globalisation have probably been as much an element in language and cultural loss as deliberate conspiracy. The significance of different factors can be debated, but the perception of erosion is pervasive (McGill & Blench 2012). The response has been very striking; a massive growth of associations to promote particular ethnolinguistic groups through publication, cultural celebrations, political lobbying and media of all sorts. This can generally seem a positive trend, but it has a darker side.

Since the 1990s, ethnicity has been forced to negotiate a second meaning, separation between groups defining

security and access to resources. It is in this context the introductory quote from the TiMap speaker is cited. Boko Haram is one of the most destabilising terror groups in West Africa, apparently dedicated to the introduction of an Islamic state in Nigeria, and seeking to bring this about by near-random acts of terror against a wide variety of targets. Moreover, it has spawned even less ideological movements, such as the Yusuffiya Islamic Movement (YIM) and Jama'at Ansar al- Muslimin fi Bilad al-Sudan, who are using kidnapping and assassination to raise funds and create chaos in the North of Nigeria. The aMap [who speak the tiMap language] are a small population of non-Muslim agriculturalists living in a rural area northwest of Jos and their immediate connection with Boko Haram is far from apparent. During the periodic outbursts of civil strife which now characterise Northern Nigeria (Higazi 2008), the ability to speak a minority language is a key icon of non-Muslim identity. Violent attacks on communities and individuals who are unable to respond in a relevant language are now commonplace in Central Nigeria. This has provided a powerful incentive for 'indigenes' to rebuild their linguistic and cultural participation. The TiMap speaker quoted above reflects this reality; possession of a cultural identity previously perceived to be of limited value in the modern world has become a key tool to ensure security in a climate of pervasive civil strife.

Nigeria has never had any very coherent policy on minority languages, and the political dominance of representatives of the largest groups reinforces the suspicion of less numerous peoples that the intention of the state is to repress and assimilate them. The sympathy for small populations evinced by many colonial officers, a trend which goes back as early as Olive Temple (1922), inevitably continues to resonate with the modern situation. But historically, the colonial government in Northern Nigeria promoted the use of Hausa as a language of communication and administration among the many ethnic minorities of the region. Cheerleaders of the colonial system such as Kirk-Greene (1980) continued to provide support to this system long after Nigerian Independence, and Hausa has continued to spread, as both a market language and because Hausa-speakers remained in effective power in many locations of the Middle Belt [the ethnically diverse region of Nigeria south of Hausaland proper]. Large ethnolinguistic groups in the south, such as the Yoruba, Igbo, Ibibio and Ijo, have never felt comparably threatened by language shift and assimilation. However, across the Middle Belt there has been a strong feeling since the 1950s that part of the agenda of northerners was a covert attack on its culture and language (Bagudu 2003). Pressure on the colonial government to provide reassurances resulted in the Willink Report (Willink et al. 1958) which clearly recognised this threat. Needless to say, this report has been republished within Nigeria many times and is also now available as a download<sup>6</sup> and other authors have also started compiling unedited colonial records in relation to particular ethnic groups (e.g. Gofwen 2007 for the Ngas). This in itself is quite striking, ethnic minorities appealing to a colonial-era report which can have no legal validity today.

## 8. Conclusions

The 1990s witnessed the diffusion of seminar room construct, propagated by European academics and eagerly adopted by anthropologists and archaeologists, that ethnolinguistic groups in Africa were a colonial creation. Historical traditions were reinventions, an unholy collaboration between informants and misguided officials. This was evidently sometimes true, as was the forcing of populations not defined by strong ethnolinguistic boundaries into a collective nomenclature, often subsequently adopted by those populations. However, in many cases this was simply false; most African peoples have a self-definition stretching far beyond the colonial era and marked by distinctive language and culture. Historical documentation can in some cases provide evidence for striking long-term continuity. To think otherwise is to impose western concepts onto peoples whose voice is limited by the exigencies of the publishing system. Two important responses ignored by this view are the republication in Nigeria of colonial ethnographic texts and the printing of ethnic histories by local authors. In an exceptional case, ethnographic survey almost exactly reproducing the manner of those conducted in the 1930s has been undertaken. There is every reason for taking these materials seriously, both in terms of the data they contain and in terms of the aspirations they express. These accounts strongly challenge current western academic practice by providing ethnographies more responsive to local needs. They function to draw attention to minority cultures in a world where the focus is inevitably on large populations with more direct access to international publication. Anthropologists may feel able to dismiss this material for its lack of theoretical sophistication, but those who remain concerned with the local might feel at least challenged by the failure of the discipline to address its needs. A weak archaeological base has meant that linking ethnolinguistic groups to archaeological horizons in Nigeria remains an ambition.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.adakaboro.org/thewillinkcomm>

Examples can be multiplied, and are expanded elsewhere in this book, but the notion that ethnicity is a colonial construct or a slavish reproduction of an imperial agenda seems contrary to common sense. Africa is certainly a mosaic, where ethnicity is constantly subject to change and reinvention, but which is undoubtedly a reality in many places and has a clear time-depth. Examples abound in the ethnographic literature, especially that describing African state systems, but they are not usually tied to the pattern of languages and even more rarely to the archaeological horizons. However, increasingly we do have the data to construct a comparative model and provide a more nuanced picture of these relationships. The task of the historian is to unpick these subtleties, not to take a bulldozer to them. In addition, a reframed ethnicity has become a rather urgent matter in modern-day Nigeria, as a result of civil insecurity and the growth the Muslim/non-Muslim division. Badges of indigeneity can keep members of minority cultures safe, while at the same time sharpening distinctions which had been growing increasingly hazy with the progress of globalisation.

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<sup>7</sup> [N.B. Many of these texts have defective or hard to interpret publication details and I have therefore tried to give as much information as possible, including full names of authors. Without further information it is not always easy to determine the format in which personal names are cited]

<sup>8</sup> Somewhat eccentrically, the volume accidentally omitted the section on the largest ethnic group in Plateau State, the Berom. This was subsequently published as a separate section without a binding.

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