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THE EXAMPLE OF THE NIGERIAN SAVANNA

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The Middle Belt concept

In Nigeria terrace agriculture can mainly be found in the so called "Middle Belt Economy" as FORDE (1946)¹ coined this type which lies between the grain economy of males in the north and tuber cultivation of females in the south. The people - lacking a hierarchically social and territorial organisation - are called acephalous or segmentary societies (SIGRIST 1967). From the geographical point of view the Middle Belt is seen as a zone of transition (GLEAVE & WHITE 1969).

Because of the variability of the climate (sometimes it is too wet for grains, sometimes too dry for tubers) a strategy of mixed cropping enables the farmers to overcome these hazards. Their strategy can be seen in the frame of the game theory (GOULD 1963). A low population density and a lack of sufficient accessibility limited the innovation of cash crops at that time.

Another serious obstacle of the Middle Belt climate and vegetation even today is the high rate of infestation by Tsetse flies, in the low lying humid plains and riverines. Lack of humidity and shade in intensively farmed areas - both necessary for the survival of the fly during dry season - and lower temperature on the plateaus make both areas more healthy.

Furthermore the steep relief of plateaus and inselbergs gave a better chance to defend their site against competing neighbouring acephalous people as well as against the mounted slave raiders from hierarchical organized states.

Those were the large northern emirates with the predominant "Hausa Economy" of FORDE (1946). In the 1950s the pure Middle Belt Economy was indicated by Native Authorities which did not show a hierarchically social organisation by tradition. Most of them were federations of various ethnic groups, so Middle Belt means a highly fragmented, heterogeneous ethnical and political structure and a minority of Moslem population (FRICKE 1993, 55).

Because of the isolated existence of some smaller emirates in the Middle Belt and broader influence of Christian missions the administrative units include heterogeneous territories in which nowadays Animists, Christians, and Moslems are living together.

¹ For the references see p. 172

Resettlement

A map published by GLEAVE in 1965 shows the process of down settlement from those retreat areas in parts of northern Nigeria mainly near the northern boundary of the Middle Belt at the end of the colonial period in the late fifties.

GLEAVE indicates the areas where to his knowledge mountainous regions and inselberg landscapes were abandoned - many of them with agricultural terraces. A small number of officially registered resettlement schemes lie beyond the northern boundary of the Middle Belt. The British administration was aware of the problem that these small ethnic groups may soon lose their land to the encroaching emirates. The area our papers deal with is marked by GLEAVE just by one single dot, in spite of the fact that many people lived or farmed there on terraces and were settling down already during that time. In contrast to this the Gwoza area is marked in that map.

The Tangale-Waja Region

When focusing on the "Tangale-Waja Region", a historical term is used as the former "Independent District" of Gombe Division in Bauchi State and was renamed several times (BRUNK 1994). The numerous peoples of different ethnical background could not agree even on a federation. Later it became a Local Government Area which was subdivided in the meantime.

The mountainous landscape with hills of about 600-900 m in a chain north of the river Benue was settled by more than a dozen of very different ethnic groups, belonging to different language families, indicating that they have been attracted by the natural conditions or pushed to by force from the plains or river valleys - as we learned by the foregoing paper of DINSLAGE & LEGER - into that hilly relief which gave them shelter in a very specific natural environment.

The general pattern of down settlement in our area of investigation is shown by a map of BRUNK (1994). Under the influence of British administration and Protestant missions an innovation process started in some places in the twenties. The bulk of the villages got some advice for the layout of their new settlements by British surveyors after World War II. Some others are still today in the process of settling down. Half a dozen modern market towns and minor central places with periodic markets have sprung up since.

The down-hill migrations show a centrifugal tendency in general as the plains around the hills were traditionally claimed as territory for temporary farming and hunting, as the example of Tula shows.

Until today, a part of the Tula people live in their traditional compounds on a plateau of cretaceous sandstone. They reside on the hill tops surrounded by their farms on stone terraces, extremely carefully built on the slopes. These inner fields are intensively manured and planted by women. Before the farming season the women transport bundles of grass cut in the bush and spread it carefully on the fields. Most of the outer fields on the plains - in former days farmed by the men under shifting cultivation and without any terraces - are now occupied by the compounds of the settlers and surrounded by permanent farmed land. At the beginning of the moving down process, which started here to a larger extent after World War II, some pioneers settled on their former bush farms in that sector of the plain belonging to their clan. By this the new settlements are structured by predominant clans. Some settlers left one part of the polygynous family with their terraced farms on the plateau, others leave their land to relatives.

The down-hill migration changed the settlement pattern rapidly since my first visit in 1961 as indicated by the figures collected then. The population of the new settlements grew between 1961 and 1989 about 324%. The number of lowland settlements doubled from 6 to 12. Special attention has to be paid to the rapid growth of the new Hausa town Dogon Ruwa since 1965, the result of heavy immigration of Hausa-Fulani from the north. The push into modernization by the influence of the missionaries in Tula has been counteracted by the poor accessibility of this place till today.

The old settlements preferred sites on a hill top with cultivable slopes, but still the sites of the new type of settlement reveal the influence of environmental conditions when drawn on a geo-ecological map of FRITSCHER (1995), as the soils of this area are of very different value to the farmers.

The papers on the Tangale-Waja Region will reveal manifold facets of the culture and agriculture. In a first step we learn by the research of J. Heinrich that the natural environment is - from the genetic point of view - a prerequisite for the establishing of terraces, but it is still today an important provision to the modern farmers in their resettlement areas.

