

RE-INVESTIGATING SHUM LAKA

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Résumé:

Il est largement entendu que les Grassfields du nord-ouest Cameroun sont une partie de la zone nucléaire des locuteurs bantu. Les recherches archéologiques faites dans cette région n'ont pas reflété par le passé cette importance. Ce n'est pas avant 1980 que des recherches modernes ont été entamées par P.de Maret d'abord, par R.Asombang ensuite. Ces travaux échelonnés de 1980 à 1988 ne peuvent être considérés que comme des recherches préliminaires. C'est pourquoi P.de Maret et moi-même avons décidé de monter un projet de fouilles dans les deux abris-sous-roche les plus intéressants sur le plan du potentiel archéologique: le cratère de Mbi et Shum Laka.

De Décembre 1991 à Mars 1992 une première campagne a eu lieu à Shum Laka.

Nous y avons étudiés 48 mètres carrés. Des échantillons de sol pour l'analyse de la micro-faune et la palynologie ont été prélevés tous les 10 centimètres. Comme prévu les pierres taillées consistent en grande partie de débitage. Des concentrations ont été identifiées. L'intérêt de cette campagne réside surtout dans la découverte de meules et de haches en forme de houe ainsi que d'inhumations d'enfants et d'inhumations collectives. Un nouveau type de poterie a aussi été découvert dans ce qui semble être un niveau antérieur à ceux connus des fouilles précédentes.

De nouvelles dates radiocarbone sont attendues et étant donné l'analyse géomorphologique indiquant un remplissage de la cavité de peut-être 2 à 3 mètres d'épaisseur, il est certain que l'étude de l'abri demandera plusieurs campagnes de fouilles.

Déjà, des débuts de réponses ont été fournies aux deux principales questions à l'origine de notre projet: la transition chasse/collecte-production de nourriture et le type humain responsable de cette transition.

Un nouvel abri-sous-roche, Shum Laka II, a été découvert à proximité; il est étudié dans le cadre d'un mémoire de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles.

The Cameroon-Nigeria border region between the Cross and Bénoué Rivers, has in the last decade or so, come to be generally accepted as the homeland of the Bantu people. These people are believed to have migrated from here to Central, East and Southern Africa about 4,000 to 5,000 years ago (Ehret, 1982; Vansina, 1984).

However, the focus of archaeological investigations in Central Africa in general and Cameroon in particular has until the last few years, not reflected this apparent importance which the Cameroon western Grassfields region portray. It was not until 1980 that P.de Maret test excavated the rockshelters of Abeke and Shum Laka near Bamenda with varying degrees of success (de Maret, e.a., 1987) More substantial work was done at the rockshelters of Mbi Crater, Fiye Nkwi as well as Shum Laka in 1982 by R.Asombang (Asombang, 1988) (fig.1).

The results are summarized in the following paragraphs.

The excavations yielded large quantities of animal bone food remains, pottery and stone artefacts. The pottery is hand-made, low-fired and decorated with rouletted, stamped and incised motifs. The clays generally contain in different proportions, polycrystalline and monocrystalline quartz, feldspars and mica.

The lithic artefacts are dominated by secondary flakes and blades which led to the conclusion that the primary flaking was done outside the shelters. They are made by a technique which emphasizes triangularly shaped pieces with straight converging lateral edges.

As for the faunal assemblages, these represent avian predators, reptiles and mammalian fauna. The taphonomy suggests they were to a large extent, accumulated by human agencies. The identification suggests the strong presence of forest species (e.g., bush pig, buffalo, chimpanzee and other monkeys), a fact which is interpreted as meaning that the site was in a forest environment when the deposits were made. This is in contrast to the present day vegetation of the area which is largely woodland savanna. There is need here for close collaboration with palaeoclimatologists in order to better understand the nature and effects of palaeoclimatic changes in this region.

All these developments are dated between 20,000 and 3,000 BP at Mbi Crater and from 9,000 BP at Shum Laka, but without unequivocal

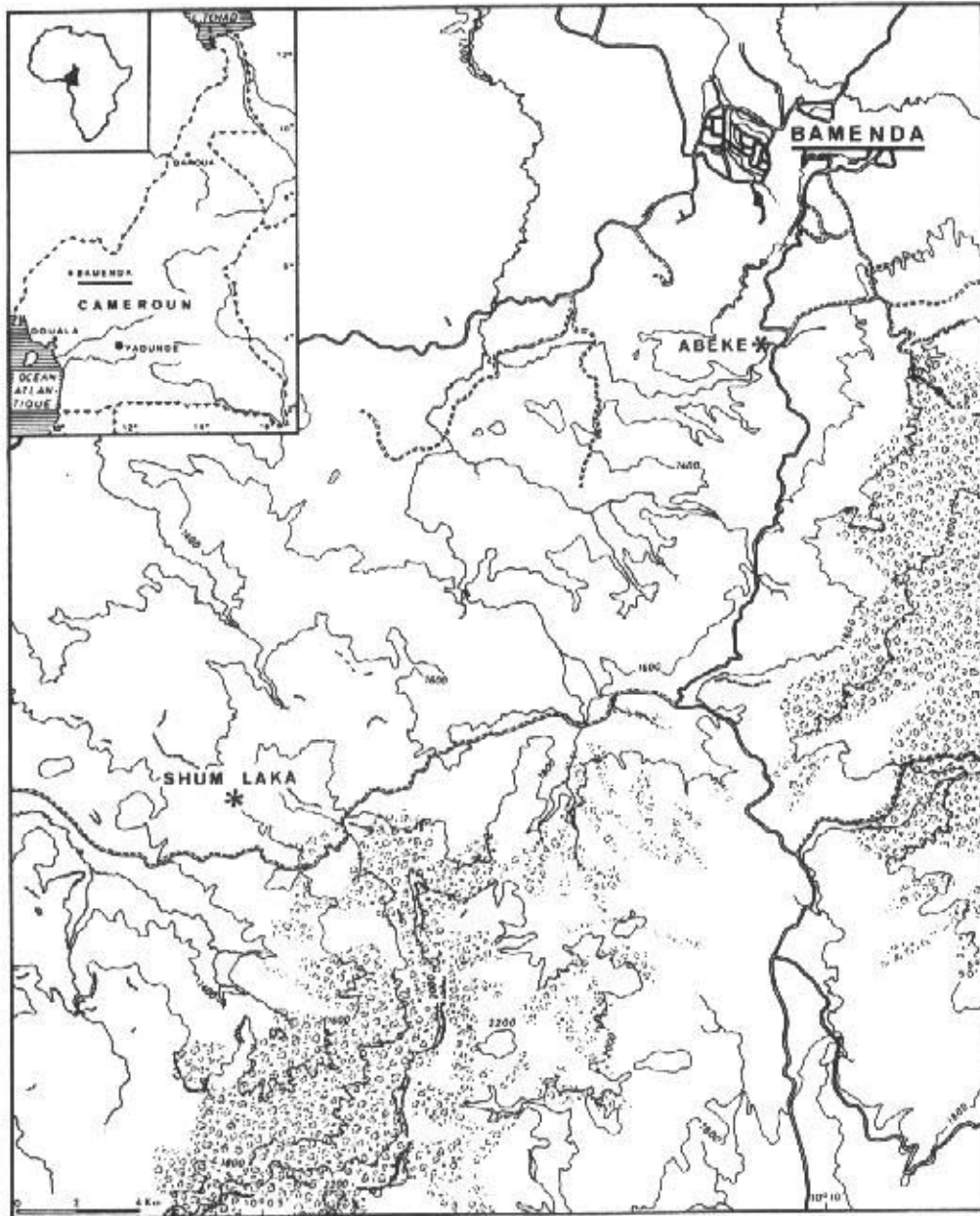


FIG. 1. — Localisation des abris sous roche de Shum Laka et Abeke (équidistances : 200 m).

FIG. 1. — Location of Shum Laka and Abeke rock shelters (contour intervals : 200 m).

evidence for domestication, even though some settled life and intensive exploitation of resources about the end of the 5th millennium BP is suggested by elaborately worked snail shell beads and bone pendants (Asombang, 1988).

It should be noted that although Asombang's work was more substantial than de Maret's, it was still exploratory and success depended very much on the vagaries of fortune. The result was that the data obtained, even though very exciting, still proved inconclusive. It is against this background therefore, that P.de Maret of the Free University in Brussels (Belgium) and R.Asombang of the Yaoundé University (Cameroon) decided in 1990 to mount a major multi-disciplinary project to re-investigate two of the previously investigated rockshelters, i.e. Mbi Crater and Shum Laka.

The purpose was to undertake more systematic large scale excavations in the hope that these would allow us to determine more precisely the nature of cultural and environmental changes in this part of Africa during the last 20,000 years. In particular, we hoped to better explain the timing and nature of the transition from hunting/gathering and fishing to food production and the human types associated with these changes.

One needs to stress here that the two rockshelters of Mbi Crater and Shum Laka are rare sites in all of Central Africa where faunal, lithic, floral and ceramic deposits relevant to the Late Stone Age are well stratified in primary contexts. The discovery so far of two human skeletons, finds that are not so common in the whole of Central Africa, is significant. So too is the presence of chimpanzee and the extinct gorilla remains in these deposits. The discovery of large quantities of these materials should allow for significant statistical comparisons.

Due to local problems the first season was restricted to the Shum Laka rockshelter.

Effective work started on December 15 1991 and went on to March 6 1992. We opened a total of 48 square metres which were taken down to various depths before the site was closed on March 6. Soil samples for micro-faunal analysis and palynology were taken at every 10 cm.

As for the artifacts recovered during this first campaign, the lithic industry was as expected, largely made up of secondary flakes. However, there were definite levels and areas of concentration which neither de Maret nor Asombang noticed during the test excavations. We

were also able to find for the first time in the history of archaeological research in this part of Africa, hoe-like stone axes and lower grindstones in stratigraphy.

The faunal remains at Shum Laka also showed areas of concentration but more importantly, large human remains were recovered. These consist of infant burials in foetal positions and others in what seems to represent mass burials. A stone arrow-head was found imbedded in the pelvic bone of one young individual. Hopefully, forensic analysis should tell us whether or not that weapon was the cause of death.

Finally, a kind of thick and largely undecorated pottery was noticed for the first time on this site. Its size suggests a storage vessel and we suspect from its stratigraphic location that it might well be earlier than the pottery already known to us on this site. Given that more charcoal samples were collected during this campaign, we hope to be able to correctly date and separate these developments in this part of Cameroon. We need to mention that it has now become clear to us, from the revelations of the geo-orphologist, that these deposits may be as much as 2 to 3 metres thick. This would mean several seasons of work on this single site.

With these preliminary results, we believe that we are on course for providing satisfactory answers to the questions which the project set out to answer; namely, a) the timing and nature of the transition from hunting and gathering to food production and b) the human types associated with these developments.

We closed the site on March 6 1992 because a) we run out of money and b) the rainy season was soon going to set in, thereby making it difficult for the team to camp and work on the site. We are currently soliciting more funds from sponsors for another campaign which should begin next December. Meanwhile, we hope to begin analysing the artifacts collected during the first phase of the project this summer.

To our greatest surprise, we discovered another but smaller rockshelter (Shum Laka II) about one kilometre down the valley. This was a knapping site similar to Abeke which de Maret test excavated in 1980. Flaked pieces cover the surface of the shelter and continue on a vertical axis for about 50 cm. Four square metres were test excavated to different depths by one of P.de Maret's students for a dissertation.

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