FIRST VILLAGE COMMUNITIES IN THE SOUTHERN LITTORAL REGION OF CAMEROON

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Summary.

The archaeological research which we carried out since June 2001 along the layout of the pipeline Chad-Cameroon (Lavachery et al., 2005; Lavachery & MacEachern, 2006), and in its immediate surroundings (Gouem Gouem, 2005, 2006), resulted in the discovery of a large number of sites in the southernmost coastal zone of Cameroon (in the Ocean Department). These sites composed mostly of pit features, would be the remains of the first village population that settled the forest in southern Cameroon.

The first analyses were conducted on ceramics and the material associated of the sites of Bissieng, Dobé, Tala and Mpoengu, not far from the Atlantic Ocean. Some are the oldest pit sites known on all of the whole coastal zone of Cameroon, with dates ranging between 1000 and 500 BC.

In addition, the furnaces of the site of Makouré dated between 400 and 100 BC currently represent the first and the oldest evidence of production of iron ever found near the Cameroonian coast.

These results reveal important elements for a better understanding of the process of ancient settlement of the southern half of Cameroon, and even of the whole Central African forest.
Research Goals:

establish the chrono-typology of the material culture of the populations having lived in the southern coastal area of Cameroon since 3000 BP.

The preliminary results presented here were completed within two frameworks:

1. The archaeological program of the Chad-Cameroon Pipeline Project in Cameroon (2001-2003), and

This presentation has THREE PARTS:

1. PRESENTATION OF THE CHAD EXPORT PROJECT AND ITS ARCHAEOLOGICAL PROGRAM,

2. B. GOUEM’S Ph.D RESEARCH IN THE COASTAL AREA OF CAMEROON,

3. DISCUSSION AND HYPOTHESIS.
THE CHAD EXPORT PROJECT
The project comprised:

- The development of several oil fields in the Komé area (southern Chad);

- The construction of a 1100 km underground pipeline from Komé to Kribi to export the oil.
FROM KOME TO KRIBI: four ecological zones, three linguistic families.

Wide Bantu languages

Adamawa-Ubangui languages

Soudanic languages
Largest archaeological program ever undertaken in Central Africa: 472 sites discovered, 80 sites excavated 85 C14 dates obtained.
Site types from Chad to Cameroon

- Open air surface sites
- Rock shelters
- Pit sites
- Iron furnaces
Comb decorated pottery
Numerous pit features

Roulette decorated pottery
Rare pit features (Kome)

Two Archaeological areas: 3000-1000 BP

Nanga Group
Littoral Group
Yaoundé Group
Kome Group
PhD RESEARCH IN THE LITTORAL AREA OF CAMEROON.
1- Little is known, except for pioneer field work by Kadomura (1977), Oslisly (2001 & 2006) and Eggert (2002);

2- Pits seem to be older than anywhere else in Cameroon;

3- Possibility of establishing the limits of the area of extension of the Obobogo pottery group defined by P. de Maret (1980, 1992); see also Claes, 1985; Essomba, 1992 and Mbida, 1996);

4- Comparisons can be made with other Central African countries (Guinea, Gabon and Congo) that yielded substantial information on the ancient populations in the sub-continent (Assoko, 2001; Clist, 2005).
BISSIANG pits site (ECA 138)*

- **Three pits** in the pipeline trench, average depth of 2.5m and diameter of 1.20m, U-shaped profile;

- **Material excavated**: mostly potsherds; a few lithics (flakes, upper grinding stones); charcoal of *Coula edulis* and *Elaeis guineensis*.

- **Two dates** obtained: 2550+/-60 BP (800-400 cal BC) & 2770+/-70 BP (1100-800 cal BC).

*ECA= Exxon Cameroon Archaeology*
Pottery of BISSIANG (1100-400 cal BC).

**Characteristics of pottery:**

- **Decoration:** is dominated by rocker blade stamping & comb tracing.
- **Shape:** rim mostly rounded or straight; necks mostly concave. All bottom are flat; presence of some handles.
DOMBE pits site (ECA 130)

- Two pit features exposed in the trench of the pipeline, depth of 2.5m and diameter of 1.5m.

- **materials excavated:** mostly potsherds; lithics (flakes, upper grinding stones, lower grinding stone, hammerstone); charcoal of *Coula edulis* and *Elaeis guineensis*

- **Two C14 dates obtained:**
  - 2440 +/- 60 BP &
  - 2540 +/- 60 BP
  (815-390 cal BC).
DOMBE Pits site Pottery (800-400 cal BC)

Characteristics of Pottery:

- **Shape**: globular belly, bevelled or rounded rims; pointed lip; concave necks, flat or rounded base.

- **Decoration**: Dominated by comb stamping & stick tracing.
MAKOURE I, iron-working site (ECA 124)

- **Iron furnace** exposed in the pipeline grading, 50 cm below surface.
- **Material** excavated: fragments of tuyere, fragments of furnace walls, slag.
- Absence of pottery or other domestic objects
- **One C14 date** obtained: 2210±60 BP (400-100 BC).
Material excavated: mostly pottery; lithic tools; iron objects; charcoal of *Coula edulis* and *Elaeis guineensis*.

- **Pottery decoration:** dominated by comb tracing & comb and stick stamping.

- **Shape of pots:** all bottom flat, typically concave necks, rounded, bevelled and grooved rims.

- **No dating available.**
BIDOU II (ECA 146) and BIDJOKA PITS (ECA 160)

- **Nine pits** exposed in the trench of the pipeline.
- **Material** excavated: only Pottery (3.6 Kg).
- **Decoration**: Tracing stick; comb and stick stamping & tracing.
- **Three C14 dates**:
  - 1530+/-70 BP (cal. 400-655AD),
  - 1480+/-70 BP (cal. 425-670AD),
  - 1580+/-80 BP (cal. 265-640AD).
Material excavated: mostly pottery; some lithic tools (flakes, fragment of lower grinding stone, smoothing tools, etc.); iron objects; slag; charcoal of *Coula edulis* and *Elaeis guineensis*.

Pottery style (decoration and shapes) is very similar to Bidou and Bidjoka assemblages.

Pottery style point to a date of 1400-1500 BP (300-700 cal AD).
MPOEN GU Pits Pottery

- **Decoration:** Dominated by comb tracing & stamping; rare roulette stamping.

- **Shape:** mostly open vessels; concave necks; carinated rounded or carinated bellies, flat bottoms.
A similar phenomenon was observed at Campo, (140 km southeast of our study zone) and dated to 1830+/-70 BP (Oslisly & al, 2001; Oslisly, 2006), and at Akonetye, dated to 245-340 cal AD (Meister, C. this volume).
Two main settlement phases:

**Phase 2:** 1800-1600 BP, cal 265-670AD: Bidou, Bidjouka, (and Mpoengu?)

**Phase 1:** 3000-2200 BP, cal 1105-100BC: Bissiang, Dombé, Makouré I (and Talla I?)

C14 dates and Iron Age settlement phases in the Southern Littoral Area of Cameroon.
Evolution of pottery decorative techniques in the Southern Littoral, Cameroon (3 000-1 500 BP).

Bissiang (3 000 BP)

Dombè (2 500 BP)

Talla I (2 000 BP?)

Mpoengu (1 500 BP?)
### Preliminary interpretation of settlement phases in Southern Littoral in the Iron Age.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SETTLEMENT PHASES</th>
<th>SITES/ SITES TYPES</th>
<th>ARTIFACTS CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>DATES BP (uncalibrated)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LATE STONE ÂGE (hunter-gathers)</td>
<td>Nдуoua /Rockshelter</td>
<td>Microlithic tools (LSA)</td>
<td>6000 - 5000 BP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITTORAL I GROUP (Sedentary-farmers?)</td>
<td>Bissiang, Dumbé / pit sites</td>
<td>Pottery decoration dominated by comb/blade rocker stamping &amp; comb tracing</td>
<td>3 000- 2 200 BP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Makouré I / Iron working site</td>
<td>Iron production</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LITTORAL II GROUP (Sedentary-farmers)</td>
<td>Bidjoka, Bidou II, Talla I, Mpoengu / pit sites and horizons</td>
<td>Pottery dominated by comb tracing, some carinated profiles, overturned vessels in pits</td>
<td>1 600- 1 400 BP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
As in other areas of western central Africa, the first villages in south Littoral Cameroon appear some time after 3 000 BP (Bissiang and Dombe) and are characterised by the presence of large pit features.

The pottery fascies of the first village communities in this zone present some resemblances with the “Obobogo ceramic tradition” of the Yaoundé region, dated to 3 000-2 400 BP (Maret 1980, 1992) or with the ceramic of Gabon of the same period (2 500 BP) (Assoko, 2001; Clist, 2005).

For the first time we have found iron smelting furnaces in the forest zone (Makoure). They are dated to around 2 200 BP. As no lithic industry was found in the earliest pit sites (Bissiang, Dombe), was the iron technology already known since 3 000 BP?

Towards 1600-1400 BP another pottery tradition appears, characterised by comb tracing and carinated profiles. Iron seems to be much more common as iron objects deposits are found, probably part of some rituals (along with the overturned vessels).
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