



ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF CULTURAL INTERACTIONS: A STUDY OF DIKIBIN SETTLEMENT, NIGERIA

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Abstract

*This study investigates the settlement history and cultural dynamics of **Dikibin**, an ancient hilltop site in Mangu Local Government Area of Plateau State, Nigeria. By employing archaeological survey and excavations of both a Rock Shelter and an Open Field Settlement within the abandoned Dikibin hill top settlement, the study reconstructs a multi-phase chronology of human occupation. Findings reveal an initial period of insular, utilitarian pottery production, which was later disrupted by a significant "horizon of change" marked by the sudden appearance of complex decorative motifs, specifically **Incision and strip roulette**. This shift suggests that external cultural interactions potentially through trade, migration, or intermarriage acted as catalysts for settlement reorganization and technological changes. The study concludes that the Dikibin community was a dynamic society that strategically utilized its landscape, transitioning from a cautious, vertically organized rock shelter-based life to an integrated, multifaceted settlement system.*

Keywords: *Cultural interactions, archaeological evidence, decorative motifs and Dikibin*

Introduction

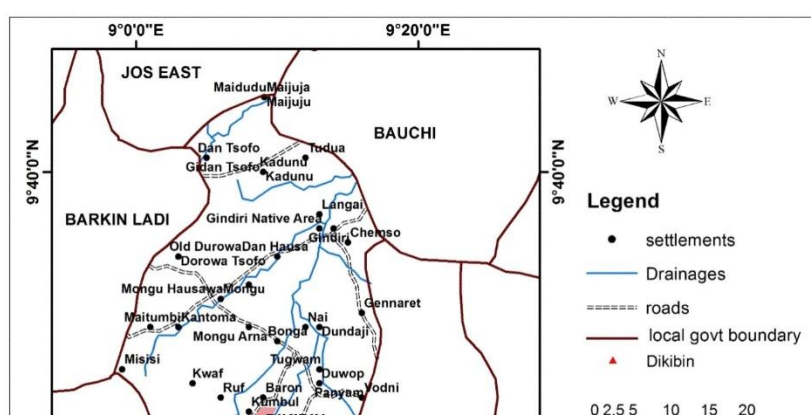
Early culture-historical archaeology heavily favoured diffusionist theory by attributing regional advancements to the movement of ideas or populations which often downplayed local innovation. However, processual archaeology rejected this narrative, by utilizing systems theory to interpret cultural shifts as internal, functional adaptations to environmental changes. Modern post-processual and decolonial frameworks challenge both extremes by introducing network theory and human agency (Peixoto, 2025). Instead of viewing ancient interactions as one-way impositions, contemporary theorists treat trade zones and borders as spaces of hybridity, where local populations actively selected, rejected, or reinterpreted foreign elements (Keach, 2023). Contemporary academic debates regarding archaeological cultural interactions centre on the tension between internal social evolution and external mechanisms of change.

Additionally, sub-Saharan African archaeology faces intense debate over the integration of empirical material science with intangible heritage (Folorunso, 2021). Scholars frequently clash over the reliability of oral traditions and ethnoarchaeological analogies when cross-examining physical datasets, questioning how to balance indigenous historical memory with quantitative stratigraphic records without subordinating one to the other (Glatz et al., 2024).

The aim of this study is to systematically document and analyse the archaeological record of Dikibin settlement site to reconstruct the nature, scale, and socio-economic dynamics of historical cultural interactions in the region. The inquiry is driven by three core research questions: What specific material evidence within Dikibin indicates interaction with neighbouring or distant contemporary polities? What socio-economic drivers such as trade, warfare, migration, and environmental adaptation initiated and sustained these networks? and how do local oral traditions and ethnoarchaeological data corroborate or contest the excavated material evidence? This is significant because, it fills a critical geographic gap in Nigerian archaeology by providing vital primary empirical data. Furthermore, it offers a robust framework for using material artifacts to scientifically cross-examine oral histories concerning migration and regional, multi-ethnic ritual cycles.

Dikibin is an ancient settlement located in Kerang District of Mangu Local Government Area (LGA) in Plateau State that is considered one of the oldest human settlements in Mangu. It falls within Latitude 8° 30' 00''N Longitude 10° 10' 00'' E and Latitude 8°-06'00''N, Longitude 10° 00' 00'' E (Gowon, 2011). Mangu Local Government Area covers 1,653km square and has a population of about 294,931 people of which 151,930 are women that represents 50.6%

of the total population (2006 Census of Nigeria). Dikibin is bordered by Kombun and Mper to the north, Koyal and Jing to the south, Bokkos to the west and Kerang to the east (see Map). The inhabitants of this area are known as the Mwaghavul-speaking people. According to Barnabas (2011), the Mwaghavul speaking people came from different places and directions at various times to establish a common culture, language, and identity, which is now known as the Mwaghavul. Before they adopted the general name “Mwaghavul”, they referred to each other according to the names of their settlements, such as Krang, Mpang, and Dikibin, among others (Milaham, 2011). The early Dikibin settlement, now an abandoned settlement, is located on a hilltop, nestled between rock outcrops known as the *Krom*, which is approximately five kilometers away from the currently inhabited settlement. The settlement shares borders with Kombun and Mper to the north, Koyal and Jing to the south, Bokkos to the west, and Kerang to the east (Ladan, 2021). According to oral tradition, historical and ethnographic notes, the Mwaghavul people, along with other Plateau communities, were known as "hill pagans" because they were predominantly settled on hills and mountains in the area (Tambo, 1978). Oral tradition states that their ancestors established the Dikibin settlement following their movement from Jipal and Difiri after their arrival from the East. Dikibin early settlement had its members move into other settlements within Mangu LGA such as Kerang, Panyam, Kogui, Bwai, Ampang, Kombun and Pushit, respectively (Ladan, 2021). Recent archaeological research on the Jos Plateau has begun to establish baseline pottery chronologies and typologies for the region. Mangut (2024) documented pottery styles from Fier, Lankan, and Daffo sites in the central/southern Plateau, identifying rim form variations, decorative motif distributions, and paste characteristics spanning the late first millennium CE to modern periods. These studies reveal considerable diversity in pottery traditions across relatively short distances, suggesting complex patterns of local production, stylistic conservatism, and selective adoption of external influences. Excavations at Jivum in Mangu LGA documented local pottery production and evidence for inter-settlement contacts among Plateau communities (M.Ya'u, 2023)]. However, comprehensive pottery seriations with absolute chronological control remain limited for the region (Wesler, 1999), hindering efforts to trace the timing and directionality of cultural interactions across the Plateau.



Map showing Dikibin

Source: Researcher's Field Work 2024

Method of Study

The study utilized a dual-site archaeological approach to capture the full spectrum of settlement life in Dikibin: Archaeological Survey: A comprehensive survey was conducted across approximately 1.5 square kilometers, identifying dense surface scatters of pottery and stone house foundations. Excavation Strategy: Two primary units were excavated:

Unit 1 (Open Field Settlement): Targeted to understand later expansions and specialized activities. Unit 2 (Rock Shelter): An excavation of ten stratigraphic levels provided a deep chronological sequence of human debris and pottery evolution. Material Analysis: Recovered artifacts, dominated by high volumes of pottery sherds, were analyzed for technological advancement, stylistic variation, and utilitarian versus decorative functions. Relative dating techniques were applied to establish the site's chronological phases.

The rationale behind surface surveys with excavations bridges macroscopic landscape trends with microscopic artifact data. The survey maps the overall layout and spatial boundaries of the settlement, while the excavations uncover hidden chronological layers. These methods directly map physical evidence to socio-economic interactions. Stratigraphic excavation tracks cultural shifts over time, while ceramic analysis reveals stylistic links to external regional groups. Together, these methods generate empirical primary data that grounds oral traditions of migration in clear, physical evidence.

Literature Review

The Jos Plateau is one of the most ethnically and linguistically diverse regions in Nigeria, and this diversity has shaped complex patterns of cultural interaction over time. Existing scholarship spans precolonial history, colonial ethnography, contemporary ethno-religious conflict, language use, material culture and peacebuilding.

Historical and ethnographic foundations of early and mid-20th-century scholarship constructed the Plateau as a set of small, isolated “hill refuge” communities, presumed culturally conservative and minimally connected to surrounding lowlands (Tambo, 1978). More recent critique shows that such colonial and early ethnographic representations oversimplified migration histories and intergroup relations, grouping numerous Central Plateau peoples (Angas/Ngas, Mwaghavul, Pyem, Ron-Kulere, Mushere, Bogghom, Mupun, Chip, Fier, etc.) into a single ancestral stock largely for administrative convenience rather than empirical accuracy (Ladan, 2025). Archaeological and historical studies further challenge isolationist narratives. Ceramic analysis from Fier, Lankan and Daffo reveals stylistic continuities and differences from the 9th/10th to 19th/20th centuries, suggesting long-term regional networks of production, exchange and shared domestic practices across southern Plateau communities (Mangut, 2024). Urbanisation, migration and territoriality colonial tin mining transformed Jos from a highland frontier into a multiethnic city. Policies of sociospatial differentiation divided “Jos Township” (Europeans and skilled migrants) from “Jos Native Town” (migrants from across Nigeria), while surrounding rural areas remained home to Plateau “indigenes”. This residential pattern formalized ethnic boundaries in space, helping to turn group identity into territorial claims. Subsequent waves of migration layered new cultural interactions onto older Plateau societies, creating dense networks of trade, labour and everyday coexistence (Madueke, 2018).

Sociolinguistic study of cross-lingual interactions in central plateau shows that in mixed marriages, changes occur showcasing these communities as sites of intense cultural and linguistic interaction. Oral tradition, research on animated Plateau proverbs (Tarok, Berom, Ngas, Mwaghavul) demonstrates how proverbial wisdom encodes long-standing norms of tolerance and harmonious coexistence, embedding of healing practices, apprenticeship and material culture, illustrating how communities’ structure intra- and intergroup relations (Nkwap, 2022). Peacebuilding, governance and intergroup engagement scholarship on the other hand links cultural interaction to questions of federalism, citizenship and governance.

This study views cultural interactions from an archaeological perspective using the archaeological data to establish interactions.

Data

Part of the data recovered and recorded during the archaeological investigation of the early Dikibin settlement serves as the empirical for this paper. The data is derived from survey of the study area, excavations at selected locations, and analysis of the recovered materials. The archaeological study at the ancestral Dikibin settlements, revealed a range of cultural materials, ecofacts, and features. The survey of the abandoned hilltop settlements uncovered diagnostic surface materials indicative of long-term habitation. At Yilum, the earliest settlement, surface scatters included pottery sherds and lithic fragments. Krom, the second settlement, yielded a wider array of cultural materials, such as clusters of potsherds, lithic fragments, lower grinding stones, rock hollows, house foundations, and building ruins. Although no quantitative counts of surface finds were recorded, spatial mapping documented the extent and intensity of past occupation across the uneven granite bedrock terrain.

Excavation Unit 1 (EU1) – Open Hilltop Settlement A 2 m × 2 m excavation unit was dug to bedrock (~67 cm maximum depth) in seven arbitrary 10 cm levels, resulting in the recovery of a total of 274 potsherds which were classified and analyzed.. Botanical ecofacts, including African bush candle seeds (*Canarium schweinfurthii*) found in Levels 1, 2, and Charcoal fragments present in Levels 3, 4, and 5, with a high concentration noted along the southwestern wall in Level 5. Features such as house foundations observed from Level 1, becoming more defined by Level 4 and continuing through Level 6, aligned with the uneven bedrock topography. Excavation Unit 2 (EU2) – Rock Shelter A 2 m × 1 m unit excavated to a depth of 100 cm within an ash-coloured silty clay matrix yielded a total of 859 potsherds, along with one lithic tool recovered from Level 8 (dark ash horizon).

Overall, the combined inventory of cultural materials recovered from the excavation comprises 1,132 pottery sherds (EU1: 274; EU2: 859), one lithic tool, recurring charcoal, and seed remains, along with features such as house foundations in EU1 and possible hearth-related stone features in EU2. Notably, no faunal remains, metal artifacts, or beads were reported. The assemblage is predominantly composed of pottery, and one radiocarbon determination from EU2 Level 8 serves as the absolute chronological anchor. The stratigraphic integrity varies

between units: EU1 shows shallower, disturbed deposits ending at bedrock, while EU2 maintains a deeper sequence extending to 100 cm.

Findings

The archaeological survey and subsequent excavation of the Dikibin site revealed a multi-component abandoned hill top settlement covering approximately 1.5 square kilometers. The presence of dense surface pottery scatters and stone house foundations indicates a period of prolonged and intensive human occupation. Through the analysis of excavated material and stratigraphic sequences, a clear chronological framework emerges, transitioning from an insular, shelter-based community to a more complex, expansive social organization.

The Foundational Phase: Insular Stability The initial occupation phase (Phase I) is characterized by a stable, sedentary settlement pattern heavily centered on the long-term use of the Rock Shelter and it is dominated by pottery. While the lower stratigraphic levels are dominated by undecorated, utilitarian pottery, suggesting a strong continuity in technological knowledge and daily practices. This era reflects an inward-facing cultural tradition, well-adapted to the immediate environment but largely detached from wider regional exchange networks. The settlement system was likely compact and vertically organized around the rock shelter, with economic activities such as foraging and small-scale horticulture radiating from this secure, central base. The absence of a contemporaneous open-field settlement further reinforces a model of a consolidated, cautious settlement strategy.

A transformative shift is recorded in the middle levels of the Rock Shelter sequence, specifically Level 8, in the excavated site where a "horizon of cultural change" is identified. The sudden and intense appearance of the decorative motif ("Incision and strip roulette") represents a clear departure from previous styles. This technically distinct decoration serves as a classic archaeological indicator of external contact, likely driven by trade networks, intermarriage, or the influx of new populations. This cultural innovation acted as a catalyst for significant spatial reorganization. The subsequent levels show a marked increase in decorated wares, coinciding with the establishment of the Open Field Settlement (Unit 1).

The later occupation phases demonstrate a dynamic relationship between external interaction and internal adaptation which was observed from the layout of house foundations in the open settlement suggesting the emergence of a more complex social organization and potential social

differentiation. The shift toward an open-field site likely accommodated new technologies, crops, or increased population density that the confines of the rock shelter could no longer support. The adoption of highly decorative pottery styles often correlates with changes in social practices, such as feasting or communal displays. The open area may have served as a dedicated space for these visible social gatherings, which were impractical within the limited space of the rock shelter.

Discussion

The settlement history of Dikibin reflects a dynamic and strategic use of the landscape. The Rock Shelter served as a long-term habitation site, while the Open Field Settlement indicated a more flexible, resource-oriented approach. This spatial organization reveals the community's adaptability to changing needs and opportunities over time. Therefore, the data suggests that the early inhabitants of Dikibin were not a static culture. Their history through the material evidence reveals that the earliest settlers established a community with a strong tradition of practical, undecorated pottery that grew, reaching its peak population and beginning to experiment with more complex pottery decoration. A distinct period emerged where a single, complex decorative style became overwhelmingly popular and the society settled into a long-lasting tradition where decorated pottery became the standard, moving away from its earlier utilitarian roots. Cultural interactions with neighboring communities were pivotal in shaping the settlement patterns and pottery traditions at Dikibin. The presence of both plain and decorated wares signifies a robust local tradition, while the brief appearance of complex decorative styles indicates periods of active engagement with possible external influences. These findings underscore the intricate relationships between local traditions and external interactions, contributing to a richer understanding of the cultural synthesis that characterized the Dikibin community.

The cultural landscape of the Mwaghavul people in Dikibin through the lens of comparative ethnography, is a remarkable bridge between the ancient past and the present, where contemporary craftsmanship serves as a living fossil of archaeological tradition. The modern Mwaghavul pottery is not merely a functional craft but a direct descendant of ancestral techniques. Excavations and ethnographic studies reveal a striking morphological continuity. The shapes and structures used today are nearly identical to those found in the archaeological record. The persistence of coil-building (layering ropes of clay) and traditional open-pit firing

suggests a specialized knowledge passed down through generations without significant structural deviation.

Historically, Dikibin potters traded specialized containers, such as those designed for local alcohol, for essential goods, cementing their role in the inter-community trade networks of the Jos Plateau. The decorative language of Dikibin pottery features motifs that resonate with broader regional styles such as those found among the peoples in Fier, Lakan and Ron. Also, while the core of the craft remains traditional, it is not stagnant. The introduction of angular punctate a specific style of stamped decoration marks a period of cultural exchange, this stylistic shift hints at a "melting pot" effect on the interactions with the neighbouring Angas (Ngas) people likely led to the adoption of their decorative tools and methods. Rather than replacing Mwaghavul styles, these external influences were integrated, creating hybrid styles that reflect a history of coexistence and mutual cultural borrowing.

Conclusion

The study at Dikibin provides an understanding of cultural interactions from the archaeological evidence. The comprehensive analysis of the archaeological assemblages and stratigraphic sequences of the Dikibin settlement, offers critical insights into the history and cultural evolution. By conducting a comparative study of the material culture from the Open Field Settlement (Unit 1) and the Rock Shelter (Unit 2), this investigation establishes a multi-phase chronology defined by shifting technological capabilities and social practices. The findings underscore that Dikibin was not an isolated entity but a participant in a broader network. The shift from an "inward-facing" tradition to one influenced by external motifs suggests a dynamic synthesis where new ideas, technologies, and perhaps new populations were integrated into the existing Mwaghavul cultural framework. The study ultimately reveals that the Dikibin community was a resilient and adaptable society that successfully navigated internal growth and external influences to shape their unique cultural landscape.

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