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Wright, David, MacEachern, Scott, Choi, Jungyu et al. (3 more authors) (2017) Iron Age Landscapes of the Benue River Valley, Cameroon. *Journal of Field Archaeology*. pp. 1-15. ISSN 2042-4582

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00934690.2017.1358017>

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Journal of Field Archaeology

Iron Age Landscapes of the Benue River Valley, Cameroon

--Manuscript Draft--

Manuscript Number:	JFA281R1
Full Title:	Iron Age Landscapes of the Benue River Valley, Cameroon
Article Type:	Unsolicited Original Research Paper
Keywords:	Iron Age Africa; Settlement Mounds; Sedimentology; Micromorphology; OSL dating
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Abstract:	Iron Age settlements of northern Cameroon were dispersed across the landscape, taking advantage of different eco-climatic zones to exploit a variety of natural resources. Situated at the cusp of high and low terraces of the Benue River, mound sites in the area around Garoua have occupation histories spanning multiple centuries. The site of Langui-Tchéboua displays evidence for rapid accumulation of sediments approximately 700 years ago, which may have been a deliberate construction strategy that would have allowed the site's inhabitants to exploit resources in both floodplain and dryland contexts. The combined use of multiple dating methods and micromorphology provide novel insights into both the mechanisms of anthropogenic landscape change and possible motivations governing those choices.
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Funding Information:	National Geographic Society (9404-13)	Scott MacEachern
	Seoul National University (International Faculty Research Grant)	Dr. David K. Wright

Iron Age Landscapes of the Benue River Valley, Cameroon

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1 Iron Age Landscapes of the Benue River Valley, Cameroon

2

3 **Abstract**

4 Iron Age settlements of northern Cameroon were dispersed across the
5 landscape, taking advantage of different eco-climatic zones to exploit a variety of
6 natural resources. Situated at the cusp of high and low terraces of the Benue
7 River, mound sites in the area around Garoua have occupation histories
8 spanning multiple centuries. The site of Langui-Tchéboua displays evidence for
9 rapid accumulation of sediments approximately 700 years ago, which may have
10 been a deliberate construction strategy that would have allowed the site's
11 inhabitants to exploit resources in both floodplain and dryland contexts. The
12 combined use of multiple dating methods and micromorphology provide novel
13 insights into both the mechanisms of anthropogenic landscape change and
14 possible motivations governing those choices.

15

16 **Introduction**

17 Settlement mounds and mound clusters are widely distributed across
18 western Africa (FIG. 1), in circumstances that seem to be associated with
19 increasing sedentism and intensive forms of land management during the Iron
20 Age (Connah 1981; Klee and Zach 1999). Mounds are variable physically,
21 encompassing a wide variety of different sizes and shapes, and occurring singly
22 or in clusters that may include many smaller mounds. The dynamics of this
23 differentiation is not well-understood, although it probably relates to local
24 settlement patterns, architectural forms and soil types (Connah 1981: 53-56;
25 Holl 2014: 3-10; McIntosh 1999).

26 In the late 1960s, Nicholas David undertook an intensive archaeological
27 survey and series of excavations in the Benue River Valley of northern Cameroon
28 (David 1968, 1981). Thirty-nine settlement mounds and mound complexes were
29 identified during the survey (FIG. 2; David 1968, 1981) and three of these,
30 Nassarao, Douloumi and Bé, were subject to screened excavations and
31 radiometric dating. Unfortunately, most of the radiocarbon samples were
32 destroyed in transit from Cameroon to the USA (David 1968), so little is known
33 of the chronology of settlement in this area. Two radiocarbon ages analyzed
34 place the initial occupation of Douloumi at 538 ± 50 ^{14}C B.P. (505–650 CAL B.P.; P-
35 1764) and an occupation at Bé at 150 cm above the initial settlement of the
36 mound dated to 1061 ± 35 ^{14}C B.P. (930–1055 CAL B.P.; P-1767) (David 1981).
37 Subsistence foods were reported as including sorghum (*Sorghum* sp.), eleusine
38 (*Eleusine* sp.), cattle (*Bos taurus*), goats (*Capra hircus*) and various species of fish
39 (David 1981).

40 Cultural sequences from the Benue River Valley have not been examined
41 over the 35 years since David's (1981) work. Given this region's potentially
42 important role as a line of communication between the Niger River and Lake
43 Chad-Logone-Chari hydrographic systems, thus articulating riverine access
44 through much of West and Central Africa, its prehistoric chronology of human
45 settlement deserves more archaeological research. In this article, we present the
46 results of further research in the Middle Benue River Valley, focusing on
47 formation processes of one of the mounds bisected by an ephemeral stream. We
48 argue for purposeful aggradation of mound sediments at the site of Langu-
49 Tschéboua (GRA-4) in a relatively short time-span, possibly in an attempt to
50 elevate the settlement above the floodplain and to improve access to a diverse

51 array of resources within the two geomorphic zones. This sequence represents a
52 significantly different formation process than the traditionally espoused model
53 of slow aggradation through repeated occupation and housing melting (e.g.,
54 Friedel 1978; Van Beek and Van Beek 2013). Optimal settlement proximal to
55 Vertisols that supported *karal* agriculture (a subsistence strategy still practiced
56 in the region today) is hypothesized to be a crucial factor in the construction of
57 anthropogenic mounds.

58

59 **The Study Region**

60 The project area is located in the Benue River Valley, which drains the
61 Mandara Mountains to the north and the Adamawa Plateau to the south (FIG. 1).
62 The Benue River forms the lowland trough of the Yola Rift, with headwaters
63 originating more than 200 km to the south of the project area in the Adamawa
64 Plateau. Two fluvial terraces were identified in the area directly east of the city of
65 Garoua, one of which was partially flooded at the time of the investigation. The
66 first terrace (T-1) is located at approximately 200 m.a.s.l. and is comprised of
67 seasonally-inundated, clay-dominant sediments in strongly-developed Vertisol
68 (clay-rich grassland) soils. The second terrace (T-2) crests approximately 5 m
69 above the first terrace and is comprised of a sandier fraction (mostly well-sorted
70 fine to medium sands); it is currently being episodically incised by secondary
71 drainages feeding the Benue River. T-2 articulates into the pediment zone of the
72 Fali Mountains that lie to the north of the floodplain, and is variably overlain by
73 associated alluvial fan sediments with weak, lateritic soils that can generally be
74 classified as Lixisols (FAO)/Alfisols (USDA). Laterites (FAO)/plinthites (USDA)
75 typically form in subhumid tropical ecosystems in which native tree species have

76 been removed, mobilizing iron precipitates and indurating the subsoil.
77 Anthropogenic mounds were located along the Middle Benue River floodplain
78 and adjacent terraces (FIG. 2).

79 Throughout the Iron Age, sorghum and millet (*Pennisetum glaucum*) were
80 important staple crops of the inhabitants of the subhumid regions in the
81 southern Sahel where the Benue River is located (Kahlheber and Neumann
82 2007). Farming systems introduced during the Iron Age concentrated settlement
83 in the valley bottomlands of the Benue River, which remains the most densely
84 populated ecozone of the region as a whole. Today, the region is occupied by a
85 great diversity of ethnic groups. In precolonial times, this included a large
86 number of different farming populations (including the Fali, Mbum, Mambay,
87 Dama and Sara), as well as Islamic populations that included both pastoralists
88 (Fulani/Mbororo, along with some Shuwa Arabs), and farmers and traders
89 (Kanuri and Hausa) (Gauthier 1969). In the last half of the 20th century, the
90 availability of unclaimed land around the Benue Valley attracted immigrants
91 from other areas of northern Cameroon, increasing ethnic diversity still further.
92 The abundance of fertile soil and available water continues to draw people to the
93 region today.

94 The local farming economy engage in variants of *karal* agriculture, in
95 which *mouskwari* and related forms of sorghum are seasonally cultivated in the
96 dry soils during the rainy season, then transplanted to the clay-rich Vertisols
97 located on the lower aspects of the floodplain during the dry season (Kenga *et al.*
98 2003). Pastoralism and other extensive forms of land management switch
99 accordingly from flooded to dry landforms based on the *karal* rotation. This form

100 of economic diversification buffers subsistence systems against crop failures
101 associated with extremes in precipitation availability.

102

103 **Survey methods and results**

104 Archaeological research undertaken northeast of Garoua, Cameroon in June
105 and July 2014 was focused on locating and evaluating archaeological sites for
106 longer-term research, and providing more detailed data for reconstructing Iron
107 Age settlement of the region. (Our initial plan was to evaluate terrace systems in
108 the Mandara Mountains further to the north in Cameroon (MacEachern 2012a,
109 2012b), but the Boko Haram insurgency directly across the border in Nigeria
110 made that impossible.) The research project focused on revisiting an area of
111 archaeological interest initially investigated by Nicholas David along the Benue
112 River, and potentially adding more sites to the inventory that he produced.
113 Documentation of site locations and attributes were made using a Trimble XH
114 GPS unit.

115 David's (1981) map was georectified in ArcGIS 10.1 against satellite
116 imagery and vector-based points were created in a database identifying the
117 locations of mound sites. Nine archaeological sites in the Benue River floodplain
118 were recorded, of which four sites were relocated from David's (1981) study
119 (FIG. 2). Following the 2014 field season, buffers of 100 m, 200 m, 300 m and
120 500 m were created in ArcGIS around the T-1/T-2 interface in order to
121 determine the numbers of sites that occur within each buffer. Based on the
122 georectified image (and the four redundantly mapped sites from our field
123 reconnaissance), six sites fall within 100 m, 12 within 200 m, 16 within 300 m

124 and 28 out of a total of 39 mound sites occur within 500 m of the T-1/T-2
125 interface.

126 Four of these sites are particularly worthy of attention in the context of
127 the project objectives. Percussion auger samples of the sediments from T-1 and
128 T-2 of each site were taken for geochemical and botanical analysis, which are
129 presently in progress, but the focus of the present paper will be on formation
130 processes of the Langui-Tchéboua mound and connections between past and
131 present agricultural systems. Brief descriptions of the three largest sites follows.

132 *Langui Tchéboua (GRA-4).* Langui-Tchéboua is a mound feature bisected
133 by the shifting course of the Mayo Badjouma seasonal stream (FIGS. 3, 4). It
134 appears that the original elevated area of the mound was approximately 100 m
135 in diameter, although cultural materials interpreted as secondary deposits were
136 found protruding from the cut bank beyond that elevated area as well. The
137 fluvial incision appears to have removed approximately half of the total area of
138 the mound, leaving a flat scarp face, with continuous cultural deposits exposed to
139 a depth of up to 5.4 m along the approximately 100 m of exposure. The mound
140 unconformably articulates into an adjacent fluvial terrace, which is also exposed
141 in section. Our research team took the opportunity to document the stratigraphy
142 and soils and collect samples from three distinct areas of this site. A total of five
143 sub-features were documented in the mound fill, including the remains of a pot
144 burial eroding from near the base.

145 *Bé.* Originally documented by Nic David (1981), this site is comprised of a
146 minimum 25 ha area that extends from a ~10 m high anthropogenic fill zone of
147 definite archaeological provenience into the eponymous modern settlement, in
148 which mound construction continues unabated by the modern inhabitants. All

149 portions of the mounds are currently under cultivation. One 2 m deep core was
150 extracted 14.2 m NW of David's (1981) unit, and two 2-m deep percussion cores
151 were extracted from the clayey sediments on the adjacent lower terrace
152 floodplain, where seasonal floodplain (*karal*) sorghum farming is still taking
153 place. Laminated clays within the cores extracted from T-1 are consistent with
154 slackwater, overbank flooding and almost no sandy intraclasts were recorded in
155 the sediments.

156 *Loumbou (GRA-8)*. This site was originally mapped by Nic David (1981),
157 but a detailed description was not made. Minimally measuring 20 ha, this site is
158 also currently occupied and extensively farmed, and is positioned at the
159 intersection of the upper and lower terraces of the Benue River. The
160 anthropogenic fill provides relief to the site in relation to the lower terrace, and,
161 as at Bé, a mixed regime of dry (upper terrace) and *karal* (lower terrace)
162 agriculture is practiced today. This site warrants further investigation, with
163 potentially equal stratigraphic complexity and cultural-historical significance to
164 that of Langui-Tchéboua and Bé.

165

166 **Langui-Tchéboua (GRA-4): Methods**

167 *Documentation.*

168 Profiling and sampling of the Langui-Tchéboua mound and field site were
169 undertaken by cleaning the scarp face with sharp tools sufficient to expose and
170 systematically map the stratigraphic positions of soils and sediment fractions
171 within the profile. Our team collected sediment samples for Optically Stimulated
172 Luminescence (OSL) and charcoal for accelerator mass spectrometry
173 radiocarbon (AMS ¹⁴C) dating during the profiling. The mound was subjected to

174 three-dimensional mapping to record lateral and vertical distribution of material
175 culture remains. Archaeological features were documented in the site fill, and
176 lithological units traced across the site area and to the surrounding terrace
177 surface exposures. Artifacts were not systematically collected, but were
178 photographed and documented when disturbed from *in situ* contexts during
179 profiling. Site documentation extended to the adjacent terrace regions to connect
180 mound activity areas with possible concurrent agricultural activity areas.

181 *Sampling.*

182 Seven sediment samples were collected from the profile for OSL dating.
183 OSL dating measures the last time that sand grains were exposed to light vis-à-
184 vis the accumulation of beta radiation in the defects of the crystal matrix of
185 minerals. Samples are collected in light-free containers and when extracted and
186 exposed to light in controlled laboratory circumstances, accumulated electrons
187 are counted in a photomultiplier tube later followed by experiments to
188 reconstruct the time it took to accumulate the stored energy (a simplified
189 explanation of the method can be found in Wright 2016).

190 For Langui-Tchéboua, quartz grains with diameters of 180-250 μm were
191 prepared in the laboratory using wet sieving, acid treatments (10% HCl, 10%
192 H₂O₂ and 40% HF) and density separation and were analyzed using a TL/OSL-
193 DA-20 Risø reader. The Single Aliquot Regeneration (SAR) protocol (Murray and
194 Wintle 2000; Murray and Wintle 2003) was followed. The measured equivalent
195 dose (D_e), which is the reconstructed total amount of stored energy, was
196 determined to be independent of the preheat temperatures between 250 and
197 295°C based on plateau tests (FIG. 6). Dose rates (D_r) of the samples, which are
198 the rates of radioactive decay within the minerals' environment, were estimated

199 using a Canberra BEGe 5030 low-level high-resolution gamma spectrometer. OSL
200 signals were measured based on aliquots composed of several tens of quartz
201 grains (small aliquots), and the final ages were derived using the central age
202 model (Galbraith and Roberts 2012; Galbraith *et al.* 1999a).

203 Undisturbed soil samples were also collected for micromorphological
204 analysis. All water was removed from the samples through acetone exchange.
205 The samples were then impregnated using polyester 'polylite 32032-00' resin.
206 Impregnated soils were cured, and then sliced, bonded to a glass slide and
207 precision lapped to 30µm thickness to produce a soil thin section. By following
208 procedures laid out in the International Handbook for Thin Section Description
209 (Bullock *et al.* 1985) and Stoops (2003), soil properties were recorded semi-
210 quantitatively. The thin sections were analyzed using a Zeiss' AxioLab.A1 with
211 rotary stage, plane polarised light (PPL), crossed polarized light (XPL) and
212 oblique incident light (OIL). Each of these instruments allow identification of
213 specific microscopic features, such as mineral and organic components,
214 pedofeatures and burnt residues.

215

216 **Langui-Tchéboua (GRA-4): Results**

217 A total of five sub-features were documented in the Langui-Tchéboua
218 mound fill, including the remains of a pot burial eroding from near the bottom of
219 the mound (FIG. 4c). Sediments in the mound were primarily comprised of
220 alternating lenses of poorly sorted sandy loam and loamy sand devoid of bedding
221 structures. Clay-rich lenses in Units 12, 17 and 24 as well as ashy fill layers in
222 Units 10, 12 (within the sandy clay loam matrix), 20, 26 and 28 indicate that the
223 sources of anthropogenic fill were variable (FIG. 5). A full description of the

224 sedimentology of the mound fill and adjacent floodplain deposits are provided in
225 Supplementary Material 1.

226 An OSL sample was analyzed from the burial sub-feature fill in order to
227 constrain the early occupation of the site and yielded an age of 1100 ± 100 years
228 (FIG. 5; TABLE 1). Radiocarbon ages on charcoal from the stratigraphic section
229 with dates constrain ~ 1.5 m of primary mound fill as aggrading between 670-
230 730 cal. B.P. (FIG. 5; TABLE 2), indicating rapid accumulation of mound
231 sediments during this time. An OSL age at 900 ± 100 years from approximately 90
232 cm below the modern ground surface overlaps the radiocarbon chronology when
233 factored to $2\text{-}\sigma$ (FIG. 5). Investigation of the adjacent exposed terraces showed
234 that the floodplain deposits post-date habitation of the mound by more than 500
235 years. We infer that significant scouring and filling by fluvial channels in a
236 dynamic floodplain environment have eroded Anthrosols from the Iron Age that
237 may have existed south of the site.

238 Over-dispersion tendencies of OSL of small aliquots (Arnold and Roberts
239 2009) demonstrate centrality in dispersion and mixing thresholds below 35%
240 (TABLE 1). Such distributions of data have been used to argue for sample
241 efficacy and relatively low stratigraphic mixing of grains in a variety of
242 depositional settings (Alexanderson and Murray 2007; Armitage and King 2013;
243 Duller 2003; Forman 2015; Rowan *et al.* 2012). The highest over-dispersion
244 measures from the project came from paleosols interpreted as anthropic in
245 origin and likely had some degree of intentional mixing associated with plant
246 cultivation, which was confirmed by micromorphological analysis of the soils
247 (see below). The low over-dispersion (22.3%) for CAM-GRA14-OSL6 is
248 consistent with alluvial sediments that underlie the primary mound, because the

249 measure is similar to the natural value of 17.4% taken from the channel bottom
250 sediments for CAM-GRA14-OSL7. This could also account for the anomalous age
251 (5800±400 years) of the sample, if it had not been subjected to solar reset.

252 Micromorphologic analysis of Langui-Tchéboua mound sediments
253 demonstrates three primary taphonomic features of mound accumulation
254 (TABLE 3). First, the primary occupation of the mound included small fragments
255 of bone associated with Sub-feature 1, supporting the field interpretation of a
256 burial feature (FIG. 7a). The sedimentology shows a clear stratigraphic
257 unconformity consistent with an excavated pit. Second, there is little evidence for
258 post-depositional mixing of sediments within the mound, and the strata are in
259 their primary depositional aspect (FIG. 7a, b). Third, accumulation of the primary
260 occupation of the site that occurred ca. 700 years ago was rapid, containing no
261 evidence for burning, daub or other structural materials in the analyzed samples
262 (FIG. 7b). Micromorphological sampling also appears to have not captured the
263 charcoal present in the fill.

264 Although the adjacent terrace tested in 2014 post-dated the occupation of
265 the mound by >500 years, the micromorphology informs land management from
266 the last 140 years (TABLE 3). The evidence shows that some fields were burned
267 with microscopic flecks of charcoal in the soil (MM3A, MM5), but another soil
268 showed no evidence for agricultural activity (MM4) and may have been used
269 more extensively by pastoralists. As is typical for floodplains, redoximorphic
270 (iron-rich, water-logging) features in the sediments are indicative of fluctuating
271 groundwater conditions (MM3, MM3A, MM4, MM5). Limited burrowing by
272 microfauna also disturbed the primary depositional context, confirming the high
273 over-dispersion results derived from OSL analysis.

274

275 **Discussion**

276 On the Langui-Tchéboua site in the Benue River floodplain, archaeological
277 settlement is recorded from the end of the first millennium A.D. and appears to
278 have focused on use of the upper to lower terrace ecotones for agricultural
279 purposes. A human burial excavated into the basal cultural fill zone at the site
280 was approximately 25 cm above the floodplain. Following initial site occupation,
281 rapid sedimentation of the mound feature is indicated by both radiometric ages
282 and micromorphology, suggesting an intent to raise the elevational aspect of the
283 site above the floodplain around 700 years ago. Unlike settlement mounds
284 documented in southwest Asia and Mesoamerica (e.g., Friedel 1978; Van Beek
285 and Van Beek 2013), at least a significant proportion of the cultural fill at Langui
286 Tchéboua was not the byproduct of incremental weathering, destruction and
287 reconstruction of habitation structures. Instead, much of the sediments on the
288 mound feature appear to have been dredged from adjacent alluvium, as is
289 indicated by the OSL age of sample CAM-GRA14-OSL6 (5800±400 years),
290 corresponding very closely to the OSL age for the sandy substratum of the
291 mound (5900±300 years; CAM-GRA14-OSL7). The CAM-GRA14-OSL6 sample is
292 interpreted as not having undergone solar reset during transport and deposition,
293 which probably occurred as basket fill. Although there may have been alternative
294 means of constructing the mound, the data suggest at least one episode of
295 deliberate and rapid accumulation of sediments above the floodplain.

296 The paired use of micromorphology and OSL as tools for understanding the
297 formation of anthropogenic landforms can provide archaeologists with
298 exceptional insights into the timing and methods associated with mound

299 construction. Selection of sampling locations differ for the two methods: OSL
300 samples should normally only be collected from homogenous, non-pedogenic
301 horizons with solid evidence for solar resetting prior to burial and
302 micromorphological samples are best collected in heterogeneous depositional
303 and/or pedogenic contexts. In some cases, OSL and micromorphological samples
304 should be collected in tandem when depositional and/or taphonomic
305 circumstances are enigmatic. In other West African Iron Age mound sites such as
306 Gao Saney (Cissé *et al.* 2013) and Mouyssam II (Togola 1996), rapid formation
307 processes are inferred from radiocarbon dates. However, radiocarbon ages do
308 not date sediment deposition events and in the absence of datasets such as OSL
309 or micromorphology that explain post-depositional disturbance agents, the
310 mechanisms and trace inclusions associated with formation are not apparent.

311 Based on the results of David's (1968, 1981) survey, augmented with a
312 better understanding of the formation processes associated with mound
313 construction from Langui-Tchéboua and satellite reconnaissance of the Benue
314 River Valley more broadly, the locations of Iron Age mounds appear to be
315 situated to take advantage of variable resources within adjacent dryland and
316 seasonally flooded landforms. Although it is not known whether the mound sites
317 documented by David (1981) were occupied simultaneously, there appears to
318 have been dense Iron Age settlement of the middle Benue River region, which
319 would explain why local labor resources would be invested in situating a site in
320 an optimal environmental context. This raises the question of placement of this
321 region in a broader regional cultural history, a process that has at this point
322 barely begun.

323 Early settlement of the Benue River Valley has been hypothesized to have
324 been the result of migrations of Iron Age agro-pastoralists arriving from the
325 north (David 1981). The different forms of roulettes and burnished red slips
326 (FIG. 8) on surface ceramics examined during 2014 fieldwork are generally
327 similar to pottery documented in the southern Lake Chad Basin (FIG. 9;
328 MacEachern 2012b). The presence of the pot burial at Langui-Tchéboua (FIG.
329 4c), as well as what appears to be a Type 1 ceramic tamper used in pot-forming
330 (FIG. 8d; Sterner and David 2003) on the surface at Bé, hitherto known only in
331 the Lake Chad Basin, provide more specific northern links. Cultural
332 developments in the southern Lake Chad Basin during the first millennium A.D.
333 may have led to the spread of farming populations to the south (Magnavita *et al.*
334 2010). It is quite possible that one axis of such a population expansion would
335 have been riverine populations moving down the Logone and from there into the
336 Benue drainage and so to the survey area.

337 **Conclusions**

338 Iron Age habitation of the Middle Benue River region is identified initially in
339 the form of a pot burial at the site of Langui-Tchéboua occurring 1100±100 years
340 ago and then took the form of a rapid accumulation of sediments around 700
341 years ago. These ages are in general temporal agreement with David's (1981)
342 report of Iron Age occupations at Douloumi (ca. 600 years ago) and Bé (ca. 1000
343 years ago). The degree to which the builders of these sites were ethnically
344 and/or economically interrelated is difficult to ascertain at this point. However,
345 the presence of similar pottery types at all locations studied implies that none of
346 these settlements existed in isolation.

347 The rapid later-phase construction of Langui-Tchéboua challenges traditional
348 understandings of mound sediment accumulation. Instead of being the
349 byproduct of centuries or millennia of aggrading habitation debris, this mound
350 appears to have been quickly, and presumably thus deliberately, raised above
351 the floodplain. Distinct fill zones and cultural debris in the sediments attest to
352 variable sources of materials besides sandy channel alluvium. Ultimately, the
353 motivations behind this intentional building up of a mound are not known.
354 However, the present-day *karal* crop rotation system of the region provides a
355 reference point for understanding the value of flexible land management
356 practices, which is supported by the more recent archaeological evidence from
357 the floodplain deposits adjacent to the Langui-Tschéboua mound. Regional
358 paleoclimatic reconstructions show variable precipitation during the early-/mid-
359 first millennium B.P. related to the transition from the so-called Medieval Warm
360 Period to the Little Ice Age (Maley and Vernet 2013, 2015).

361 Thus, the accumulation of the mound at the beginning of the Little Ice Age,
362 probably associated with lake-level increases and riverine flooding, may be a
363 cultural response to maintain productive *karal* (or precedent) farming within a
364 fluctuating ecosystem. At the very least, mounded locations overlooking
365 floodplains provided a wide range of economic opportunities, from fishing to
366 pastoralism to diverse modes of agriculture and foraging, as evidenced in the
367 archaeological data recovered by David (1968, 1981). Strategic mound
368 settlement in relation to diverse resource bases have been identified elsewhere
369 in western Africa (Connah 1981; Höhn and Neumann 2012; Holl *et al.* 1991; Klee
370 and Zach 1999; Van Neer 2008), but the formation model of Langui-Tchéboua
371 presented in this paper using multiple sedimentological proxies highlights

372 purposefulness in the creation of mound features that involved mobilization of
373 large amounts of labor for some perceived economic or social benefit.

374 The Iron Age in western Africa is characterized by the evolution of greater
375 social interconnections, agricultural intensification associated with population
376 increases and forms of political complexity to manage these systems
377 (MacEachern 2005; McIntosh 1999). The Middle Benue River Valley was clearly
378 a component of this wider system and warrants significantly more research than
379 it has received. The density and diversity of settlements suggest the presence of
380 large prehistoric populations engaged in variable economic activities (see also
381 David 1981). We look forward to undertaking more research along the Middle
382 Benue, to further elucidate the trajectory of settlement patterning, economic
383 change and political developments in this fascinating region.

384

385 **Acknowledgments**

386 Permission to conduct this research project was granted by Ministère de la
387 Recherche Scientifique et de l'Innovation in Cameroon. A National Geographic
388 Committee for Research and Exploration grant (9404-13) and Seoul National
389 University faculty research grant funded the fieldwork and sample analyses. The
390 write-up of this work was supported by 'Overseas Training Expenses for
391 Humanities' through College of Humanities Seoul National University (SNU). We
392 would particularly like to thank the Lamido of Bé, Abdurahman Aman Saly, and
393 the Lawan of Langui for their assistance and support. We would also like to
394 thank our field assistants Kankaou Dirna and Haman Oumarou for help in
395 preparing the sections for profiling at Langui-Tchéboua. George MacLeod at the
396 University of Stirling, Scotland, prepared the thin sections for

397 micromorphological analysis. Seoyoung Huh at the Korea Basic Science Institute
398 assisted in preparing and running the OSL samples.

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598

Figures

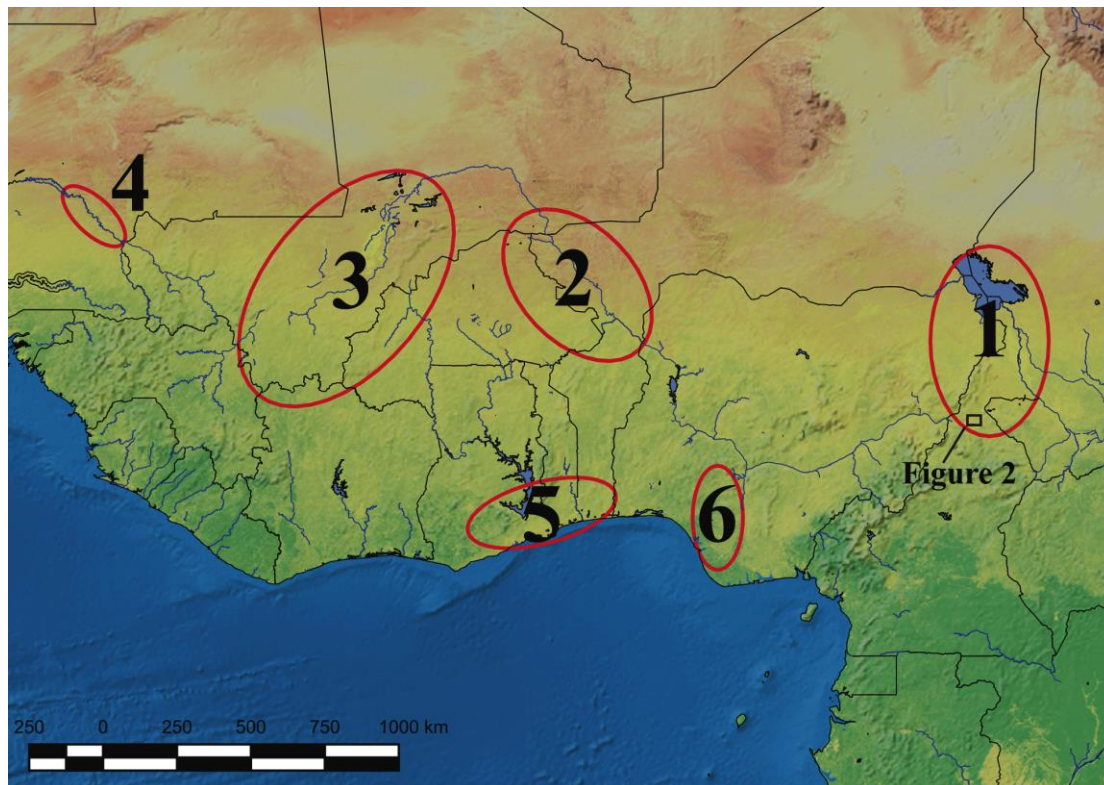


Figure 1 Location of mound sites across western Africa. (1) Lake Chad Basin and Benue Valley (Connah 1981; David 1968, 1981; Holl 2002; MacEachern 2012a); (2) Middle Niger River Valley and Oudalan Province (Albert *et al.* 2000; Cissé *et al.* 2013; Gado 1993, 2004; Mayor *et al.* 2005; Neumann *et al.* 2001); (3) Inland and Upper Niger and Mouhoun Bend (Filipowiak 1979; Holl 2014; McIntosh 2005; McIntosh and McIntosh 1981; McIntosh 1995; Raimbault and Sanogo 1991; Togola 1996); (4) Middle Senegal River Valley (McIntosh *et al.* 2015; McIntosh 1999; McIntosh *et al.* 1992; Van Neer 2008); (5) coastal Ghana-Togo-Benin (Monroe 2014); (6) Ife-Benin (Ogundiran 2002).

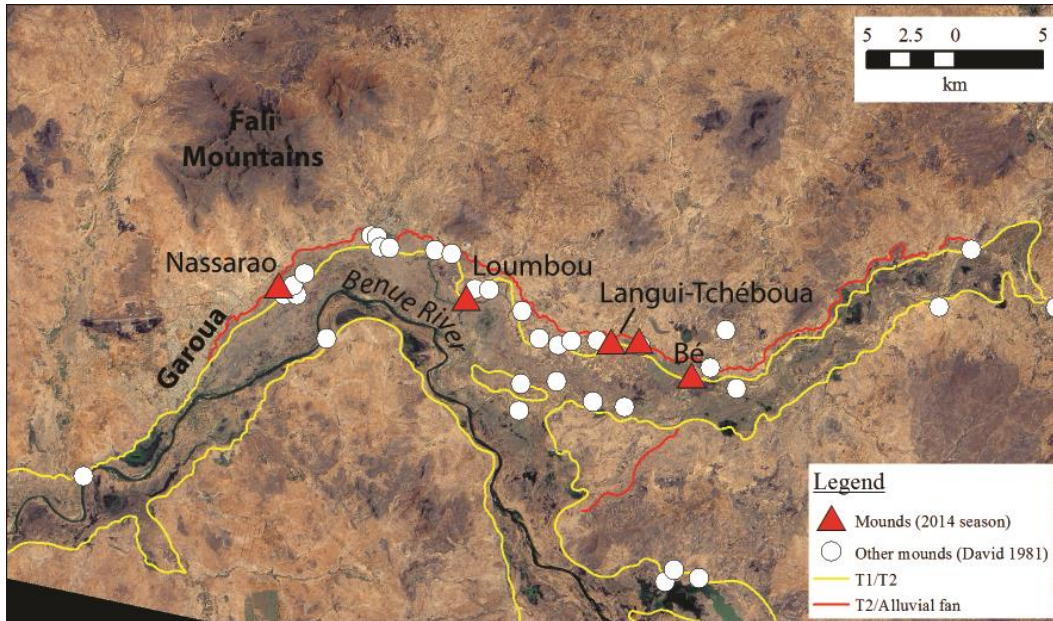


Figure 2 Project area showing locations of sites mentioned in the text. Landsat 8 satellite image downloaded from USGS (<http://earthexplorer.usgs.gov>). Mound locations plotted from georectified image (David 1981: Map 1).

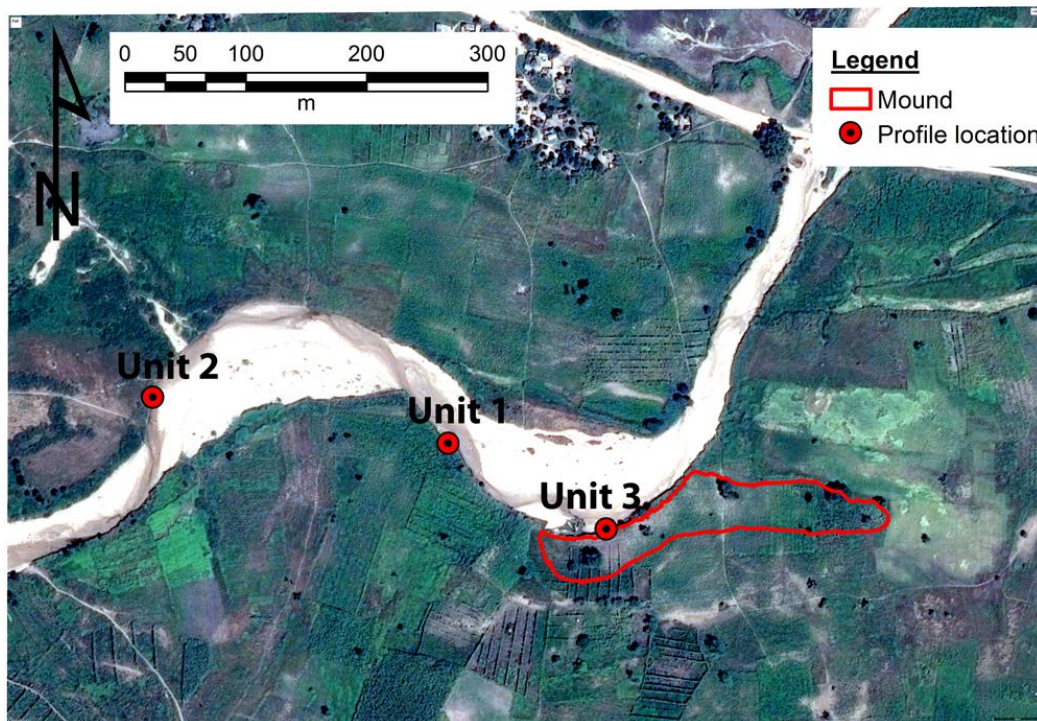


Figure 3 Plan map of Langui-Tchéboua.

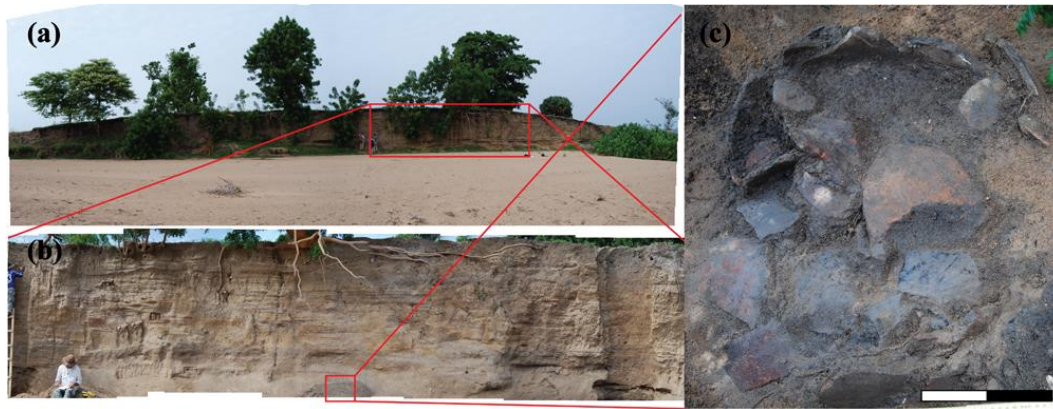


Figure 4 Photos of Langui-Tchéboua. (a) View of Feature 1 (mound) looking south; (b) Close view of mound sediments with profiled (Unit 3) on the far left; (c) Close up of pot burial with 20-cm scale.

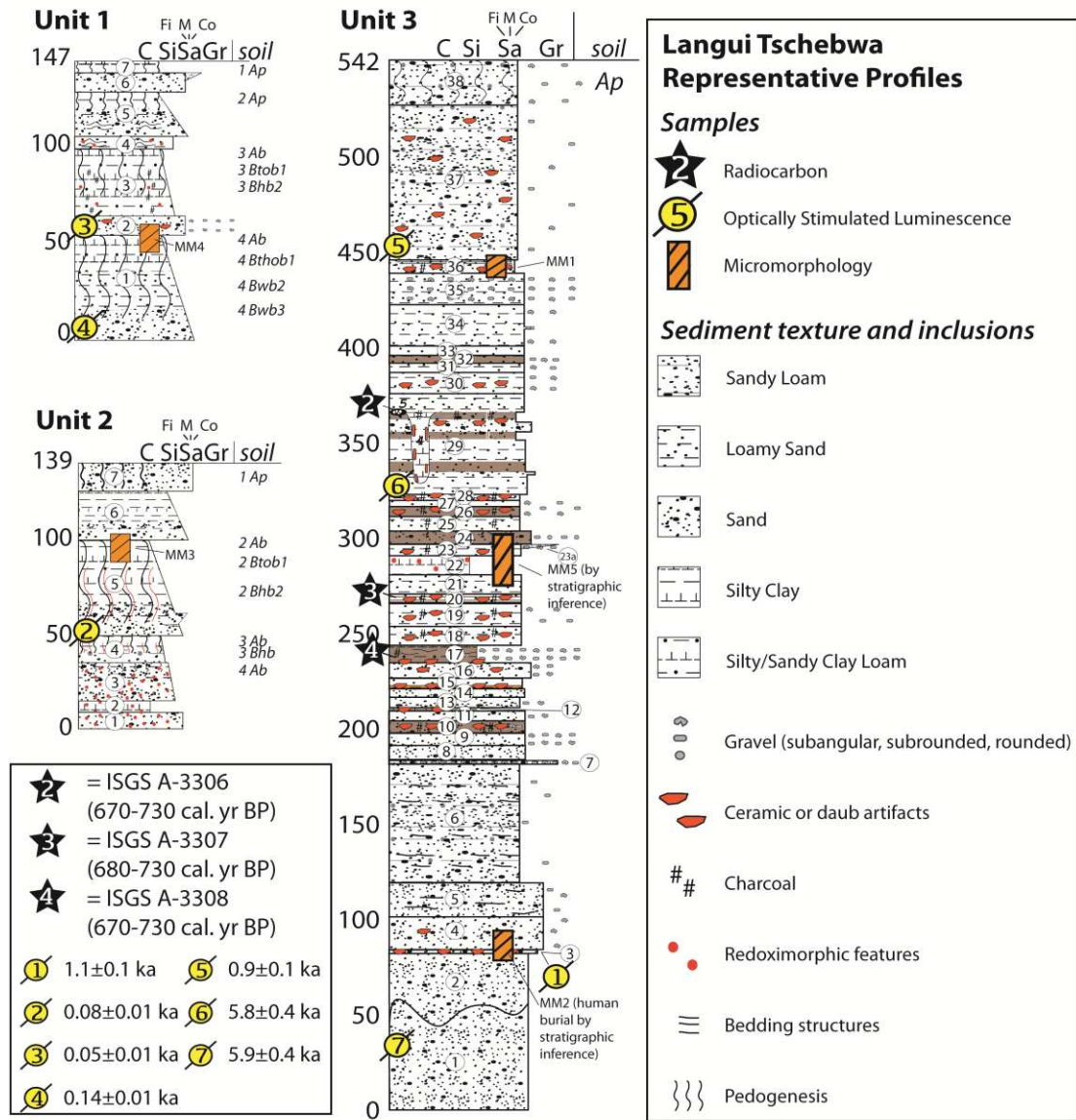


Figure 5 Preheat tests from CAM-GRA14-OSL3 and CAM-GRA14-OSL7. Relative proportions of clay (C), silt (Si), Sand (Sa, separated into Fine, Medium and Coarse fraction) and gravel (Gr) are shown for each test unit. Soil formation properties and pedofeatures are classified according to Schoeneberger *et al.* (2012).

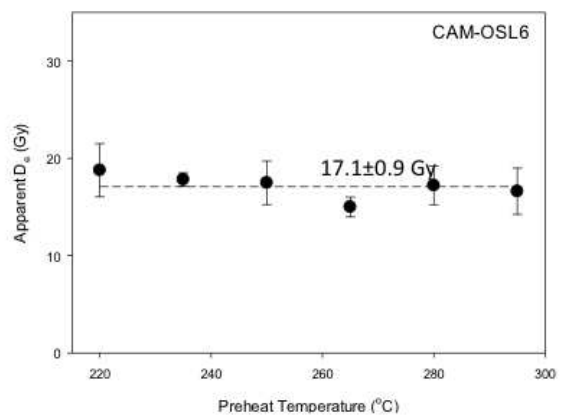
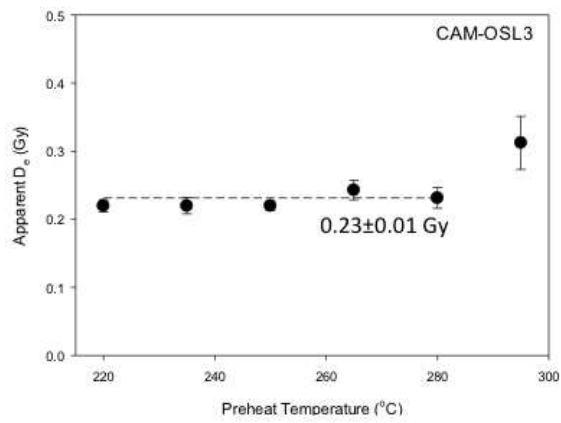


Figure 6 Profile of Langui-Tchéboua and adjacent fields showing sampling locations.

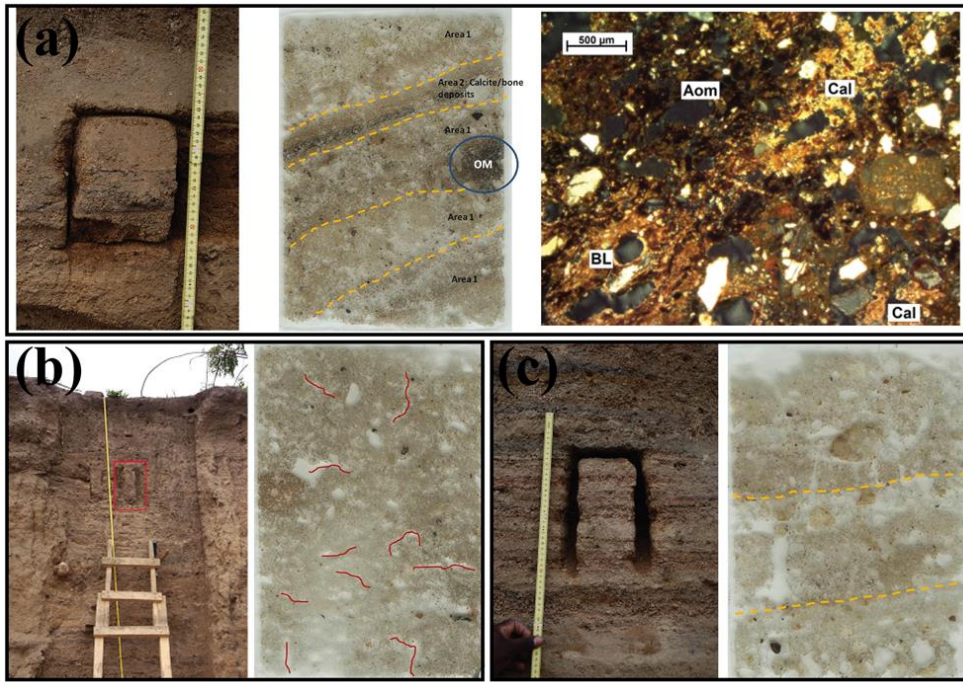


Figure 7 Location of the undisturbed soil samples with soil thin sections and micrograph: (a) Sub-feature 3 (burial) displayed alternating micro-laminations, Area 1 with organic matter (OM) and Area 2 containing calcitic bone deposits, the micrograph displaying bone (BL), calcitic intercalations and coatings (Cal) and amorphous organic matter (Aom) identified in cross-polarized light (XPL); (b) Aggraded sediments in Unit 3, Feature 1 exhibiting a weakly developed microstructure in soil thin section; (c) Easily identified micro-lamination at the sample site and weakly defined micro-laminations in the soil thin section.

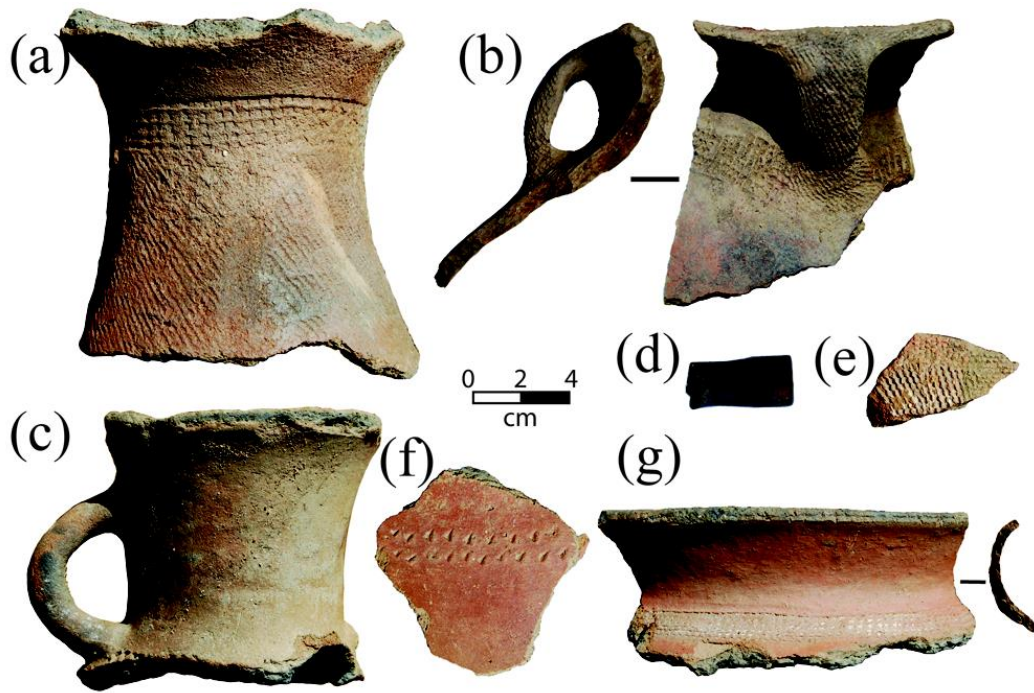


Figure 8 Selected ceramics from Langui-Tchéboua. (a) Cord-marked jar neck, with a band of comb-stamping; (b) jar rim with lug handle, with braided-strip roulette on handle and comb-stamped band on body; (c) bottle neck and rim with lug handle, with punctate design at the base of the neck; (d) incised pipe stem, possibly burnished, with multiple incised lines around circumference; (e) braided-strip roulette decorated body sherd; (f) body sherd with a linear punctate design; (g) comb-stamped neck and rim of a jar.

*NOTE: This image looks much darker when pasted into the word processing document than the original tiff.

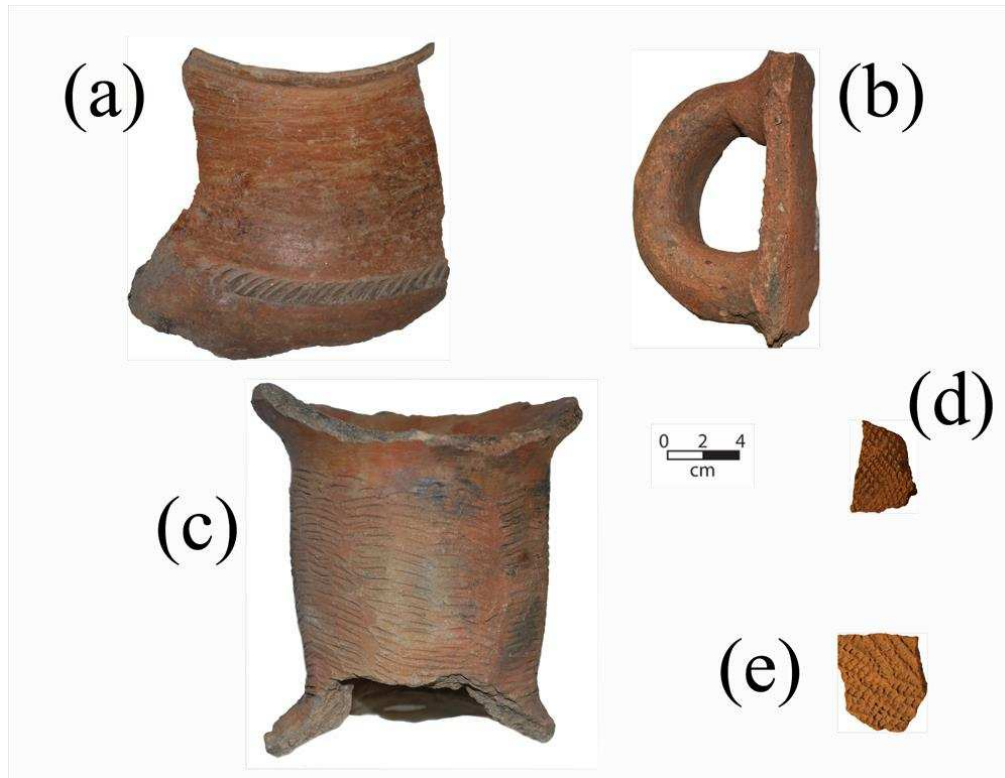


Figure 9 Ceramics from the southern Lake Chad Basin, with similar decorative styles to Benue ceramics (FIG. 8). Originating sites: (a), (b) and (d) Ghwa Kiva (PMW-744); (c) Liga SW (PMW-710); (e) Dugjé Gaya (PMW-761).

Tables

Table 1 Equivalent dose, dose rate and OSL ages of samples from Langui-Tschéboua, Cameroon

Sample	Depth* (cm)	Water content† (wt. %)	²³⁸ U (Bq·kg ⁻¹)	²²⁶ Ra (Bq·kg ⁻¹)	²³² Th (Bq·kg ⁻¹)	⁴⁰ K (Bq·kg ⁻¹)	Dry beta‡ (Gy·ka ⁻¹)	Dry gamma§ (Gy·ka ⁻¹)	Cosmic ray** (Gy·ka ⁻¹)	Total dose rate (Gy·ka ⁻¹)	D _e (Gy)	<i>n</i>	Over- dispersion (OD) % ^c	Age†† (ka)	Context
CAM-GRA-14-OSL1	410	1.3	10.9±3.3	11.0±0.4	20.8±1.2	776±16	2.14±0.08	0.95±0.02	0.10±0.01	3.14±0.08	3.3±0.2	24	23.3	1.1±0.1	Human burial fill
CAM-GRA-14-OSL2	88	15.5	21.1±6.2	18.6±0.6	65.8±1.6	1075±22	3.26±0.12	1.79±0.03	0.18±0.02	4.43±0.11	0.36±0.03	21	30.4	0.08±0.01	Fluvial terrace
CAM-GRA-14-OSL3	86	1.6	12.8±5.5	14.2±0.6	35.0±1.5	1283±23	3.50±0.13	1.55±0.03	0.18±0.02	5.14±0.13	0.23±0.01	20	9.0	0.05±0.01	Fluvial terrace
CAM-GRA-14-OSL4	147	8.1	7.8±3.4	7.0±0.4	16.3±1.1	967±20	2.55±0.10	1.02±0.02	0.16±0.02	3.41±0.09	0.49±0.04	22	35.3	0.14±0.01	Fluvial terrace
CAM-GRA-14-OSL5	96	3.0	18.9±5.9	18.8±0.5	34.3±1.5	869±17	2.52±0.10	1.24±0.02	0.18±0.02	3.81±0.10	3.5±0.2	22	23.2	0.9±0.1	Mound sediment
CAM-GRA-14-OSL6	221	1.8	9.5±3.7	10.9±0.5	17.9±1.2	719±17	1.98±0.08	0.87±0.02	0.14±0.01	2.93±0.08	17.1±0.9	23	22.3	5.8±0.4	Mound sediment
CAM-GRA-14-OSL7	511	13.5	7.4±3.0	8.4±0.4	14.9±1.0	607±14	1.66±0.07	0.72±0.02	0.09±0.01	2.14±0.06	12.6±0.6	24	17.4	5.9±0.3	Fluvial terrace

* Depths of the samples are the vertical distance from the modern ground surface.

† Present water content.

‡ Data from high-resolution low level gamma spectrometer were converted to infinite matrix dose rates using conversion factors given in Olley *et al.* (1996).

§ Cosmic ray dose rates were calculated using the equations provided by Prescott and Hutton (1994).

** Over-dispersion calculated according to Galbraith *et al.* (1999b)

†† Central age ($\pm 1\text{-}\sigma$ error).

Table 2 Radiocarbon ages from Langui-Tchéboua.

Sample (ISGS #)	Depth (cm)	Material	$\delta^{13}\text{C}$	Fraction MC	\pm	$\Delta^{14}\text{C}$	\pm	^{14}C B.P.	cal. B.P. ^{*, †}	Context
A-3306	189	charcoal	-10.9	0.9091	0.0019	-90.9	1.9	765 \pm 20	670-730	Mound sediment
A-3307	270	charcoal	-25.4	0.9070	0.0018	-93.0	1.8	785 \pm 20	680-730	Mound sediment
A-3308	307	charcoal	-22.6	0.9074	0.0023	-92.6	2.3	780 \pm 25	670-730	Mound sediment

* Radiocarbon ages calibrated using CALIB 7.1 (Reimer *et al.* 2013)

† Ages $\pm 2\text{-}\sigma$ error

Table 3 Summary of micromorphological analysis.

Thin Section	Related distribution	c/f (50 μ m) distribution (ratio)*	Coarse material*		Limpidity/ <i>b</i> -fabric	Microstructure	Pedofeatures
			Mineral	Organic			
MM1	Chitonic	2:3	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%), Feldspar (5%)	Plant (5%), Charcoal (5%)	Cloudy/speckled	Channel	Irregular shaped aggregate redoximorphic nodules in the fine matrix (50-1000 μ m).
MM2							
<i>Area 1</i>	Chitonic	2:3	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (30%), Microcline (10%), Feldspar (10%), Quartzite (5%), Hornblende (2%)	Plant (5%), Charcoal (5%), Bone (2%)	Dotted/grano-, poro- and partial striations	Channel	Typic and aggregate redoximorphic nodules (5%) in the fine matrix, with calcite coatings (5%) on the surface of the channel voids (looks like link coatings).
<i>Area 2</i>	Gefuric	3:2	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (30%), Microcline (10%), Feldspar (10%), Quartzite (5%), Hornblende (2%)		Dotted/ speckled	Channel/chamber	Calcite coatings (5%) within the vughs and chamber voids.
MM3							
<i>Area 1</i>	Enaulic	1:4	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%)	Plant (5%), Charcoal (10%)	Dotted/speckled	Channel/chamber	Typic redoximorphic nodules located in the fine material (5%). Hypo-coatings around the edges of thee sub-angular peds.
<i>Area 2</i>	Chitonic	7:3	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%), Feldspar (5%)	Charcoal (5%)	Dotted/speckled	Granular	Dense, complete infillings
MM3A							
<i>Area 1</i>	Enaulic	7:3	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (30%), Microcline (10%), Feldspar (5%)	Plant (2%), Charcoal (5%)	Dotted/speckled and partial striations	Channel/chamber	Typic redoximorphic nodules in the fine matrix (2%).
<i>Area 2</i>	Chitonic	1:4	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%),	Charcoal (5%)	Dotted/speckled	Channel	Hypo-coatings formed at the edges of the sub-angular peds
<i>Area 3</i>	Chitonic	1:4	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%),		Dotted/speckled	Granular	Typic redoximorphic nodules in the fine matrix (2%).
MM4							
<i>Area 1</i>	Chitonic	4:1	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%), Quartzite (5%)	Charcoal (5%)	Speckled/speckled	Granular/chamber	Rounded aggregate redoximorphic nodules in the fine material (100-2000 μ m).
<i>Area 2</i>	Enaulic	1:4	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%)		Dotted/speckled	Channel/chamber	Hypo-coatings formed at the edges of the sub-angular peds
<i>Area 3</i>	Gefuric	3:2	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%),	Plant (2%), Charcoal (5%)	Speckled/speckled	Channel	Rounded aggregate redoximorphic nodules in the fine material (100-2000 μ m). Hypo-coatings formed at the

			Quartzite (5%), Feldspar (5%)				edges of the sub-angular peds
MM5	Gefuric	1:1	Quartz (50%), Plagioclase (10%), Microcline (5%), Quartzite (5%), Feldspar (5%), Quartzite (5%), Biotite (5%), Glauconite (2%)	Plant (2%), Charcoal (5%)	Cloudy/grano-, poro- and partial striations	Channel	Typic and aggregate redoximorphic nodules (5%) in the fine matrix, with calcite coatings (5%) on the surface of the channel voids.

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