13C Cultural Context for West Africa and Guinea

13C.1 Introduction

The country of Guinea forms part of West Africa, an area whose prehistoric past witnessed large-scale population migrations, interregional trade, organised warfare and the rise of urbanism in prehistoric times. There is archaeological evidence that iron smelting technology actually originated in West Africa and was later adopted in the Mediterranean and beyond in the first century BC. In historic times, Guinea's location between the three great medieval empires: Ghana, Mali and Songhai, would have fostered sweeping cultural shifts as Islam first took root and spread within the African continent. Stone Age remains in West Africa may hold clues to the development and expansion of early human populations, and the iron-rich southern regions of Guinea would have provided an important resource for Iron Age populations of the region. Guinea's coastline has also made it an attractive place to settle and trade from prehistoric times to the present, and even today the ruins of French colonial plantations dot the coast.

Despite the wealth of historical texts detailing the Islamic Medieval period and the availability of colonial-period documents, very few archaeological studies have actually been conducted within Guinea's borders, so relatively little is known of Guinea's prehistory. West Africa has probably received the least amount of archaeological research of any region of the world and as such, the following cultural chronology set out in Table 13C-1 below, relies on archaeological information from surrounding regions in order to fill in the gaps in Guinean cultural history.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Examples of Best Known Sites and Cities</th>
<th>Historical and Socioeconomic Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>200,000 – 100,000 BC</td>
<td>Early Stone Age (ESA)</td>
<td>El Beyyed, Yapei, Jos Plateau</td>
<td>Expansion of fully modern Homo erectus into Western Africa and beyond, reliance on basic stone tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100,000 – 30,000 BC</td>
<td>Middle Stone Age (MSA)</td>
<td>Southern Ivory Coast, near Abidjan</td>
<td>First diversification of stone tool sets: Mousterian and Aterian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30,000 – 500 BC</td>
<td>Late Stone Age (LSA)</td>
<td>Tichitt Tradition, Tintan, Iwo Eleru, Kintampo, Dutsen Kongba</td>
<td>Earliest use of pottery in West Africa, trend toward specialised subsistence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>500 BC – AD 1000</td>
<td>Iron Age (IA)</td>
<td>Koubi Saleh, Niani, Jenne-Jeno, Tombouze, Gao, Sinthiou Bara, Igbo Ukwu</td>
<td>Development of iron smelting technology, Ghana Empire, urbanisation, expansion of trade, emergence of elites, construction of burial mounds (tumuli).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1000 – 1591</td>
<td>Medieval Period</td>
<td>Timbuktu, Gao, Jenne, Kano, Tuareg, Kong, Begho</td>
<td>Mande empires: Ghana, Mali and Songhai, control of gold and iron resources, West African hero epics such as the story of Soundiata Ketia, increased trade, promotion of Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1591 – 1895</td>
<td>Post-Medieval Period</td>
<td>Goree Island, Fouta Djalon</td>
<td>European disputes over land, slave trade, Fulani empire, Wassouloou Empire, foreign ethnic groups settle in Guinea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1878 – 1898</td>
<td>Pre-Colonial</td>
<td>Kérouané</td>
<td>Wassouloou Empire: resistance of French invasion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AD 1898 – 1958</td>
<td>Colonial Period</td>
<td>Benty Island</td>
<td>French control of Guinea.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
13C.2  Detailed Cultural Chronology (1)

The following overview of cultural history and prehistory in West Africa was developed from standard published sources as part of the desk study for the cultural heritage assessment. It provides a context for understanding and evaluating archaeological sites present in the study area. Archaeological sites and historic monuments of the described prehistoric and historic periods are the tangible record of human developments and as such have both universal scientific and cultural value. Cultural Heritage sites are also sometimes associated with intangible aspects of Guinea’s traditional cultures and thus may hold deep significance to the local people.

The following cultural chronology is divided into two broad periods: Prehistoric (200 000 BC – AD 1 000) and Historic (AD 1 000 – Present). This division reflects the significant changes that occurred around AD 1 000 with the rise of the Ghana Empire (sub-Saharan Africa’s first empire), the influence of Islam, the appearance of detailed historical texts, and the general inclusion of West Africa into the global arena through European and Mediterranean trade networks.

13C.2.1  Prehistoric Periods: 200 000 BC – AD 1 000

13C.2.1.1  Early Stone Age (ESA): 200 000 – 100 000 BC

This is the time period of the expansion of Homo erectus out of South and East Africa to other points on the globe, including West Africa. Remains from early Homo erectus are composed purely of stone tool technologies. Acheulian stone tools, which become wide-spread during the ESA, are found in fairly high densities in the western Sahara and are found in small numbers across West Africa. Plant and animal remains from these sites suggest a grassland / scattered woodland habitat (2). Sites such as El Beyyed in Mauritania, with thousands of stone bi-face tools, indicate that favorable Saharan climates may have supported stable populations over a long period of time.

Oldowan lithics have been identified at a scatter of sites from the present forest region in Nigeria to the Sahara. At Yapei in Northern Ghana a number of pebble-choppers have been found which may suggest habitation dating to the Oldowan Period (ca. 2.5-1.5 m.y.ago (3)). During this period, human societies probably practiced a range of scavenging and hunting / gathering activities. Population numbers were likely quite small.

South of the Sahara, there are few ESA sites and none are known in Liberia, Sierra Leone, or in Lowland Ivory Coast or Guinea (4). Sites in Senegal (5) and southeastern Ghana and Togo (6) contain possible remains from the ESA. The best known area with ESA remains in western sub-Saharan Africa is the Jos Plateau in central Nigeria where hundreds of bifaces were discovered as a result of tin mining in alluvial deposits (7).

Overall, there is a low potential for the Project encountering ESA sites in Guinea.

13C.2.1.2  Middle Stone Age (MSA): 100 000 – 30 000 BC

Much like the ESA, most of the archaeological evidence for this period is found in the western Sahara. MSA remains are also identifiable by their specific stone tool technologies. Two types of stone tool technologies exist during the MSA: Mousterian and Aterian. These technologies are quite similar, most likely contemporary, and probably represent slight variations in hunting and other subsistence activities (8). The

(1) French or Anglo-American archaeologists who have worked in West Africa have employed different terminologies. This document uses the Anglo-American terminology.
(4) Swartz, B. K. (1980). The status of Guinea Coast paleoarchaeological knowledge as seen from Legon. See Ref. 15, pp. 37-40
(8) Clark, J. D. (1982). The cultures of the Middle Palaeolithic/Middle Stone Age. See Ref. 48, pp. 248-340
differentiation of these tools is significant because it represents an early human innovation in West Africa as societies begin to diversify their toolsets to exploit a wider variety of environments and resources.

MSA tools have been located in Nigeria (1) and Northern Cameroon (2), but in secondary deposits, which makes them difficult to date. Better documented studies from southern Ivory Coast near Abidjan present unique deposits of MSA tools which provide important information about the diversification of the early toolsets used by West African people.

MSA sites have a slightly higher potential of being uncovered in Guinea than ESA sites. However, these sites still pose an overall low potential risk of being found in the study area.

13C.2.1.3 Late Stone Age (LSA): 30 000 – 500 BC

As in the previous periods, most of the known LSA sites are located in the Western Sahara. This period is significant archaeologically because it is the first period in West Africa where knowledge of the presence of humans is no longer based solely on stone tools; in this era, wide-spread rock art appears in the sub-continent (3).

The earliest part of the LSA (30 000 – 8 000 BC) is known as the pre-ceramic LSA. At around 20 000 BC, West Africa entered into a hyper-arid climatic period in which most of the population in West Africa would have probably lived south of 11 degrees north (4), an area which includes Guinea. Between 10 000 and 8 000 BC, humid conditions returned. Archaeological traces are quite rare during the pre-ceramic LSA.

The ceramic LSA (8 000 – 500 BC) witnesses a significant increase in recognised sites in West Africa. The earliest use of pottery in West Africa coincides with a humid period in the eighth and seventh millennia BC when now extinct Saharan lakes reached their highest Holocene levels. The earliest known examples of the ceramic LSA occur in the western Sahara along valleys or dry riverbeds, known as wadis in the central plateau (5). The archaeologist’s reliance on stone tools persists, with the addition of grinding stones thought to be used for the processing of wild grains, a sure precursor to the later indigenous development of agriculture around 2 000 BC. High quantities of bone harpoons in the lower western Sahara near Timbuktu point to specialised fishing activities. Evidence for herding of Barbary sheep also occurs by 8 000 BC and domestic cattle appear sometime between 5 000 and 2 500 BC, pointing to an ever increasing trend in specialised subsistence (6). The development of cattle husbandry required large amounts of water and so seasonal movement of populations became a necessary aspect in the lives of early West Africans (7).

Beginning around 2 500 BC, West Africa entered into another extremely arid period in which many previously inhabited sites were abandoned, and those that remained tended to be located near permanent water sources such as rivers and near plateaus containing seasonal pools. During this period, the ancestors of the Ghana Empire in southern Mauritania, known as the Tichitt Tradition, developed a highly resilient society of cliff dwelling cities with lowland resource gathering camps.

Closer to Guinea, coastal sites from Mauritania, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast and Ghana during the LSA possess massive arca shell middens created between 4 500 and 1 500 BC. The best known of these sites are Tintan on the southern Mauritanian coast (1) and Gao Lagoon in Ghana (2). Looking inward from the West African coast to the forested regions of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria, the LSA is represented by a microlithic tool technology which appears in the Nigerian forest around 9 200 BC (3). The best known site for the microlithic LSA is Iwo Eleru in central Nigeria. It is clear from the types of small lithic tools that these tools form a totally different technology than what was being used in the more northern regions (4). Other sites from the microlithic LSA come from the forest site of Shum Laka in Cameroon, the rock shelter sites of Bosumpra (5) and Kintampo (6) in Ghana, and the plateau site of Dutsen Kongba in central Nigeria (7).

The appearance of rounded bowls and grinding stones that are typical of more northern regions have been found in Liberia, Nigeria and Cameroon, suggesting a population migration from the Malian and Senegalese Sahel region to the forested regions between Guinea and Nigeria, which probably occurred around 2 500 BC during the great arid phase described above. The technologies of these populations endured into the first millennium AD as evidenced by finds at rock shelter sites in the forests of Liberia (8) and Sierra Leone (9).

Overall, there is a moderate potential in Guinea for archaeological sites from the late LSA since there are multiple instances of contemporary archaeological sites in neighboring countries with similar forested environments. The migration from the North around 2 500 BC would have increased the general population levels and the number of LSA sites in Guinea.

13C.2.1.4 Iron Age (IA): 500 BC – AD 1 000

Sub-Saharan Africa’s first civilisation develops in this period, marking a major turning point in the cultural history of the African continent in general. During the IA, the first full-blown urban societies emerged in West Africa and major trading relations across the entire subcontinent developed. Standing armies in Mali and Mauritania patrolled the landscape and extracted taxes and goods from surrounding populations. Artistic styles developed and decorative ceramics and jewelry were offered to the dead as exotic grave goods. Thousands of megalithic circles dot the landscape from Senegal to eastern Mali and down to the northern part of Guinea at the archaeological site of Niani (10). Walled cities have been found from Ghana to northern Mali and thousands of tumuli can be found throughout the subcontinent.

Unlike other parts of the world that slowly transitioned to iron-use though the usual trajectory of stone-copper-bronze-iron, West Africa jumps directly from the use of stone to iron tools. The rapid and expansive transition from stone to iron represents a sort of technological revolution which brought about significant accompanying developments in social structure and complexity of West African prehistoric society. The origins of early iron technology in West Africa are not well known. There are three competing theories: 1) it was indigenously invented in Nigeria around 600 BC; 2) it was brought in across the Sahel from the Moere cultures from Sudan; or, 3) it was brought in from Phoenician traders from North Africa. Regardless of how the technology arrived, its first appearance in the archaeological record of West Africa is in the Nok Valley in Nigeria and northern Niger by 500 BC. Within two or three centuries most of West Africa had set aside their stone tools for more durable iron products.

From 500 BC to about AD 500, an expansive increase in population and settlement size occurs, which is reflected in the density and cultural richness of archaeological remains. Some of the best known archaeological sites from this period come from the Middle Niger Delta in Mali. The impressive 15 meter tall tumuli near Timbuktu in the Malian Lakes region known as El-Oualedji contained an extremely rich burial

chamber accompanied by human sacrifice, iron weaponry, exotic goods, and ceramics (1). Just 50 km west, at the site of Tondidaro, dated to the 7th century AD, massive tumuli are associated with megalithic circles carved with phallic and geometric motifs (2). The site of Tombouze, 10 km from Timbuktu, is an urban site measuring over 100 ha; a scale rarely reached by any prehistoric society worldwide (3). Other important sites during this period include Jenne-Jeno (4), Koumbi Saleh (the ancient capital of the Ghana Empire) (5), Niani (the possible ancient capital of the Mali Empire in Guinea) (6), Gao (the ancient capital of the Songhai Empire) (7), Sinthiou Bara on the Senegal River (8), and the expansive distribution of 6 800 known tumuli / monuments and 16 000+ megalithic stone circles in southern Senegal (9). One of the best illustrations of the existence of an elite class during the Iron Age in West Africa comes from the site of Igbo Ukwu in eastern Nigeria (10). Excavations uncovered an array of cast bronze vessels and finely crafted copper objects. One of the excavation units revealed the burial chamber of a high-ranking individual, whose regalia included a bronze staff and whisk, chased copper pectoral and crown, and over 100 000 glass beads. Wood from the burial chamber has been dated to the ninth century AD.

Perhaps the most widely known civilisation of the IA is the ancient Ghana Empire located in southern Mauritania at Koumbi Saleh. Rising to power sometime around AD 700, Ghana attracted the attention of Islamic writers and travelers. Ghana is the first mention in any textual source of a West African society. Ghana’s influence over the gold, slave and iron trade propelled West Africa onto the world stage.

Overall, there is a high potential for discovering archaeological sites in the study area dating to the IA. The iron-rich southern regions of Guinea surely would have attracted the attention of Ancient Ghana among other iron using cultures in West Africa, and there are various known ancient iron smelting sites located within Guinean borders. Further, the presence of thousands of tumuli and megalithic circles in southern Senegal as well as the massive IA site of Niani in northern Guinea implies other instances of tumuli and settlements in the country are probable.

13C.2.2 Historic Periods: AD 1 000 – Present

13C.2.2.1 Medieval Period: AD 1 000 – 1591

This period well known for the succession of three related Mande empires: Ghana, Mali and Songhai. Ghana, which had emerged in the IA, prospered through the 11th century AD as it expanded its influence as far south as Guinea, and as far east as the Timbuktu area. Nomadic tribes of North Africa starting early on in the 9th century and increasing at the end of the 10th century gained control of the gold trade putting Ghana into decline. When Ghana collapsed in the mid13th century, the Mali Empire arose after initial wars with the Soso tribes. The founder of the Mali Empire, Soundiata Ketia, forcefully combined the loose confederation of Mande states in West Africa under his rule. Much like the Ghana Empire, Mali’s source of wealth and influence came from its control of trade in metals, goods and slaves from the southern regions of West Africa. Its sphere of influence extended well beyond the northern border of Guinea, down to modern day Liberia and Sierra Leone. During this time, Timbuktu, Goa, Jenne and Niani (in Guinea) became powerful and influential cities. In the 15th century AD the Songhai Empire, based in modern day Gao, rose up and overthrew the Malian Empire. Trade was also important for the stability and power of this empire. Under this empire, Islam was actively promoted for the first time in West Africa. The Songhai Empire encompassed the largest amount of land out of the three Mande empires and may have been the first to actually control the gold and iron sources to the south. In 1591, however, a Moroccan invasion of Timbuktu and other important cities effectively dissolved the Songhai Empire, ending the Medieval Period. Shortly thereafter, Portuguese

(2) ibid
traders and slavers set up an Atlantic shipping route from various points on the west coast, diminishing the importance of the trans-Saharan trade (1).

The country of Guinea and surrounding regions would have acted as an extremely important transportation route between the Medieval Empires and the gold fields in northern Akanland, located in modern-day Ghana. Between the famous gold trading cities of Begho in Ghana and Jenne in Mali lies the famed trading city of Kong (in northern Ivory Coast, close to the Guinea border) (2). Guinea’s proximity to major Medieval empires and the presence of known sites from the period point to a high probability for Medieval period sites throughout Guinea, including large-scale settlements and especially trading outposts.

**13C.2.2.2 Post-Medieval Period: AD 1591 – 1895**

This is the first period in which there is substantial information on the cultural events and groups within Guinea, which is probably the result of both European record keeping and local oral tradition that still exists in living memory. Immediately following the collapse of the West African Medieval empires in 1591, the West African region began a long period of cultural and economic decline. Initially Portuguese slavers, and later the French and British all battled for control over costal ports. Goree Island off the coast of Dakar is perhaps the best known slaving port, over which European powers were constantly fighting for control. A number of known cultural heritage sites of historical importance are located near the Island of Benty on the Guinean southern coast. They are associated with the slave trade and include a slaver’s outpost and a jail dating between the 18th and 19th centuries. Other historical sites near Benty include: 1) the imposing tomb of Monsieur Maridet (the first French plantation owner on Benty); 2) the white colonial cemetery; 3) the remains of a slave point of embarkation; and, 4) an underground slave prison, among a few other sites of interest.

While regional trade in West Africa continued, it never reached the scale that it achieved in earlier periods. A short-lived Fulani Empire overran large areas of West Africa, but didn’t fully take control or assert its influence very far outside of captured cities. Over the period from the 14th to 17th centuries AD, the Dyula, Malinke and other Mandingo-related groups from Mali gradually settled in Guinea. From the 15th to the 18th centuries, the Fulani (aka Peul) settled in the Fouta Djallon and established it as a base for their pastoral lifestyle. During the 18th and 19th centuries, the Koniake, Toma and Guerze ethnic groups in Guinea organised a medium-sized trading confederacy in slaves, ivory, cloth, iron, arms, and kola nuts. This economic activity largely came to an end by 1900, when the French established a presence in the Guinea forest regions.

Perhaps one of the more interesting historical figures during this time period was that of Samoury Touré, founder and ruler of the short-lived Wassoulou Empire (1878-1898). He is known for resisting the French penetration until his capture in 1882 (3). Touré had an important base in the Project area town of Kérouané where there are historical sites associated with him. As of 2006 one of his descendants still lived in the town (4).

It is likely that there will be a Project Area contains a high number of habitation sites from this time period in Guinea, although probably not as many as from the earlier Medieval Period, since the practice of slaving may have reduced the population of the entire West Africa region by as much as one half.

**13C.2.2.3 Colonial Period: AD 1895 – 1958**

The post of Governor General of French West Africa was created in 1885 in Saint-Louis, Senegal. After finally defeating Samoury Touré in 1898, the French expanded their influence to control over Guinea. Although plantations were set up along the coast of Guinea, the French never gained full control over the interior forest regions. The remnants of these plantations can still be seen along the coast. Benty Island on the Guinean south coast also has a colonial past with three docks built by the French. French colonialists also operated a number of plantations that produced fruit for export out of Benty.

---

The Port area of the Project Area in particular may have a higher potential for archaeological remains from the Colonial period because of the importance of sea trade during this period. If any of these historical structures remain in the Port area, they would be expected to be above-ground and thus fairly easy to identify. Aside from the coastal areas, there will probably be few archaeological sites from the French occupation of this period. Historical and abandoned villages not associated with French occupation also probably exist in the forested regions of the country and it should be relatively straightforward to locate these by interviewing modern villagers.

13C.2.2.4 The Modern Era: AD 1958 – Present

Under the rule of Ahmed Sekou Touré (AD 1958-1984), Guinea remained isolated from the West, a fact that prevented western-trained archaeologists from working in the country. The Marxist-oriented government of Sekou Touré also discouraged the practice and teaching of indigenous belief systems, rituals and history (1), which in effect prevented the investigation into Guinea’s pre-Islamic period. So, while most of the major discoveries in West African archaeology occurred in the 1970’s and 1980’s in places such as Sierra Leone, Liberia, Senegal and Mali, the country of Guinea remained terra incognita in terms of West African archaeology and cultural heritage.

While some of the local knowledge of the past was lost during the years following independence, a resurgence of traditional culture has occurred in Guinea in recent decades. Due to the general ubiquity of living cultural heritage in traditional societies and the expansive nature of the Project Area, there is a very high potential for living cultural heritage sites to be found within the Project Area beyond those already identified.

(1) A Guinean government report from 1979 on cultural policy, for example, condemns the “backward ways and customs” of the past, including such diverse characteristics as “religious mystification, polygamy, ignorance, alcoholism, dissolute living, lying, laziness, theft, the rural exodus, parasitism, intellectualism, the undue power of griots, etc”. See Pp. 74 of Ministry of Education and Culture of Guinea. (1979). Cultural Policy in the Revolution People’s Republic of Guinea. Paris.