

PROTOHISTORIC HABITATION SITES IN NORTHEASTERN SIERRA LEONE

by

J. H. ATHERTON (*)

Before the intervention of the British at the beginning of this century, Northeastern Sierra Leone was for hundreds of years the scene of frequent inter- and intra-tribal fighting — primarily for the acquisition of captives to be sold as slaves to the people to the north, who in turn sold them on the coast. The slaves were used to buy trade goods — primarily guns and gunpowder, but also 'luxury goods' — made available by merchants dealing in the vigorous and profitable trade in men, women and children whose final destination was usually the new world for use as slave labor on plantations.

One of the groups often attacked in order to get captives was the Limba. Not having sufficient numbers or firepower to repel these raids, the Limba, like some of their neighbours, established means of defending themselves. This paper will describe some of these means of defense, and how the Limba made maximum use of both natural physical features of the area and locally available trees and bushes for this purpose.

Most of the area under consideration is covered by savannah/ woodland vegetation and is characterized by numerous steep granite mountains, often bare in places where there are outcroppings of rock. This is especially true of the tops of the mountains. Other areas, most often near streams or where water can accumulate, are covered with dense vegetation. Also characteristic of the region is a large number of 'caves' and rock shelters. The 'caves' are actually just open spaces between large boulders and outcroppings of granite, but often go very deep below the surface or into the side of a mountain. The rock shelters are usually under overhanging granite boulders.

The Limba, according to their traditions, have always lived in

(*) Communication présentée le 28 juin 1971.

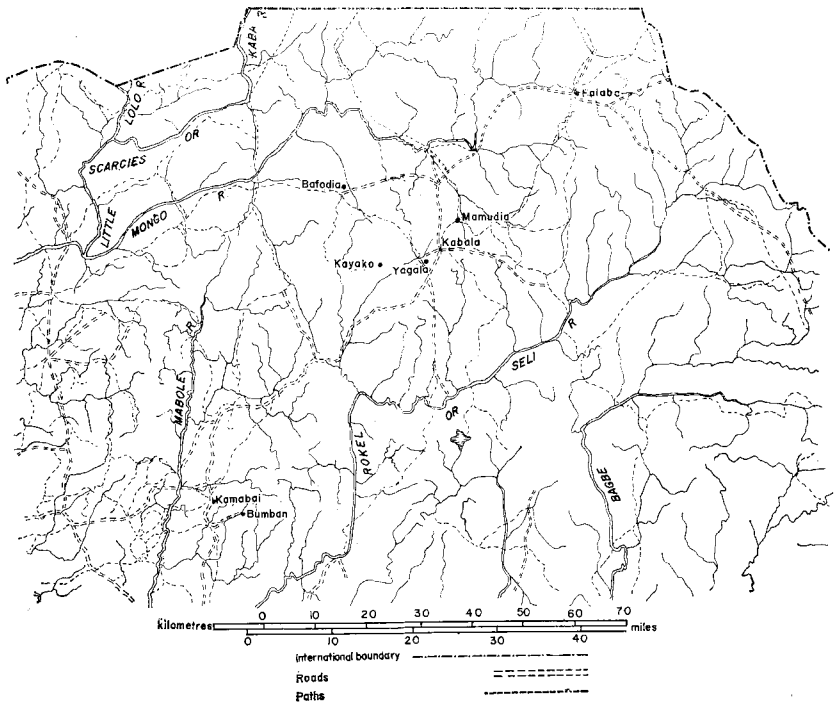


FIG. 1

this mountainous region. They are primarily farmers, growing upland rice (as opposed to the sometimes more productive swamp varieties), groundnuts, and an inferior millet known as 'hungry rice'. The land is not good; the mostly savannah-like vegetation is on very mountainous land, necessitating the building of farms on steep slopes. The soil is not fertile and is easily exhausted; immediately under it is a layer of laterite. Although the rainfall is heavy, ranging from 80 to well over 100 inches per year, it falls mostly during June, July, August, and September, leaving a long dry season with almost no precipitation.

There is very little reference to the area in the literature. The region seems to have been avoided by early travellers because of the very difficult terrain and the unfriendly reputation of the inhabitants.

The modern towns and villages in the area are usually laid out along roads in easily accessible places and often have regular streets



FIG. 2. — Granite boulders on a hill above the Limba town of Bafodia.

rather than the clusters of huts which characterized the earlier towns. The changes were brought about mainly by modern-minded Limba, sometimes aided by the government or missionaries. There was often great difficulty in doing this because of the association of the old towns with the ancestors. The buildings in these new towns are usually rectangular, divided into rooms and covered with 'pan' roofs. The floors and walls are usually carefully plastered, and cement is used when possible. These contrast markedly with the usually round, thatch-roofed, wattle and daub traditional homes which are cooler but much more cramped and susceptible to fires.

The Limba say that many centuries ago there was a time when, as now, everything was peaceful, and a man did not have to worry about his harvested food being destroyed or stolen. During this time, habitations (some of which were probably in caves) were located, as they are now, near water supplies and at no great distance from farms. Due to the numerous slave raids, the Limba had to move

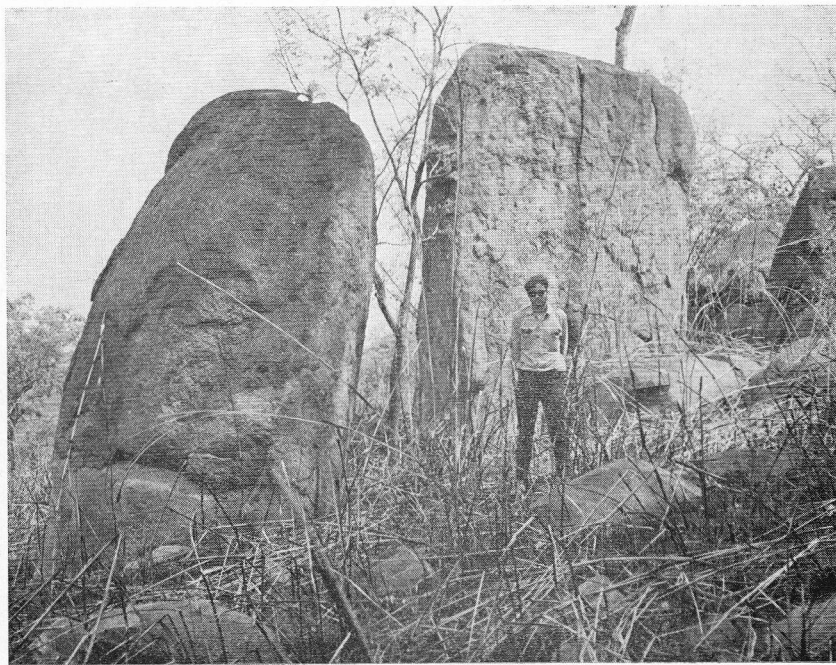


FIG. 3. — Granite boulders on a hill above the Limba town of Bafodia. The women and children would sometimes hide among these boulders when the town was under attack.

into places that could be defended or in which they could hide. In the lowland areas of Limba country, mud walls appear to have been used for this purpose, as they were in other parts of Sierra Leone and in Liberia and Guinea. In the mountainous regions, other types of defenses were constructed.

Three major types of defenses were used by the mountain-dwelling Limba and by some of the surrounding groups : (1) Towns using trees — usually cotton trees — as a major part of the defense ; (2) Towns using thorn bushes ; (3) Towns using mountaintop sites. These three types are not mutually exclusive, two or even all three of the defense systems sometimes being incorporated in a single town.

The first type of war town was built in areas where no or only minimal use could be made of the physical features of the environment for defense purposes. Such towns were surrounded by cotton trees planted in a circle and usually joined together by interlocking



FIG. 4. — Stone and mud-mortar wall remains at old town of Yagala (note how the granite boulder was incorporated into the wall).

branches and vines. Often there were two or more walls forming concentric circles around the village. At least in one case, the village was surrounded by a ditch as well as walls, though this was a town built not by the Limba, but by the neighbouring Yalunka.

The second type was usually in an area of fairly difficult access and surrounded by groves of thorn bushes, known as *inthiri* in Limba. These bushes were usually planted several hundred feet thick around the village and access was possible only along a very narrow, easily defensible path. One of these towns, Kayako, relying only on the *inthiri* for defense, was never defeated even though subjected to very heavy attacks during the last part of the nineteenth century by a greatly superior military force.

A fascinating, though not necessarily typical, example of this type of war town was Bafodia (first called Kawoya), one of the major early trading centers in Limba country. The old site of Bafodia was deserted in 1950 for a new town built with the aid of missionaries.



FIG. 5. — Remains of stone and mud-mortar walls at old town of Yagala. Note this house was built entirely on a granite boulder.

The old site, hidden against the side of a hill and partially protected by *inthiri*, had remarkable features until recently known only to the inhabitants. The main feature was a spectacular series of subterranean caves directly under the town in which warriors would hide and from which they could emerge to ambush the occupying enemy. Examination of these caves showed them to be supplied with perennially flowing streams which provided water for the inhabitants. Remains of pottery vessels were also found.

The women and children were usually hidden on an adjoining hill, the top of which was surrounded by huge upright granite boulders. From this position they could watch what was happening in Bafodia, but according to informants, could not be heard by the enemy. Many of the large boulders on top of this hill have been given individual names.

The third type of settlement used during the wars was the mountaintop village. It was this type of village that especially attracted



FIG. 6. — Close-up of remains of stone-walled house
at old mountaintop village of Yagala.

the attention of the first explorers in the country because it was in these settlements that the stone-walled houses were usually found.

According to the Limba, the reason that the houses were built of stone rather than of conventional materials is not that there was a shortage of materials, as was presumed by these early visitors, but that the tops of the mountains were for the most part solid granite into which the wooden support stakes necessary for a regular house could not be driven. These stone-walled houses varied greatly in size, some being as large and thick-walled as normal stick and mud huts, and others being very large, sometimes oval and often in the form of two interlocking round huts. Some had walls two feet or more thick.

A representative war town using a mountaintop location as its primary defense was the old town of Yagala (also known as Kayagala or Yakala). Though collectively known as Yagala, the mountaintop was the site of four adjoining villages built in the following order :



FIG. 7. — Close-up of stonework at old mountaintop village of Yagala.

(1) Kayagala ; (2) Kathonbon ; (3) Kathonbon Badegede ; (4) Kathonthieh.

According to oral histories, the town was only destroyed by war once — by the troops of the famous Mandingo warrior of the late 19th century, Samori (pronounced Samordi by the Limba), and then only on the fourth attempt. Many people were killed in the fighting and, as was usual in these raids, all the food and livestock was taken. Although later rebuilt, the old town now lies deserted. The former inhabitants have moved into the new town of Yagala, located at the base of the mountain on which the old town stood.

The raffia roofs having decomposed along with all the rest of the organic material in the town, the site at present is scattered with remains of stone and mud-mortar walls which in places give it the look of a miniature Zimbabwe. The houses were very close together, sometimes even interconnected, which was dangerous because of the threat of fire in their thatch roofs. On the ground, under



FIG. 8. — Arrows (iron tipped) used by “the old people”, saved as “souvenirs” by Mamadou Monsavay, town chief of Bafodia, who is holding them while local children look on. Note that they are featherless; the point is designed so that the arrows will rotate in flight. According to the Limba, this will stabilize them in flight.

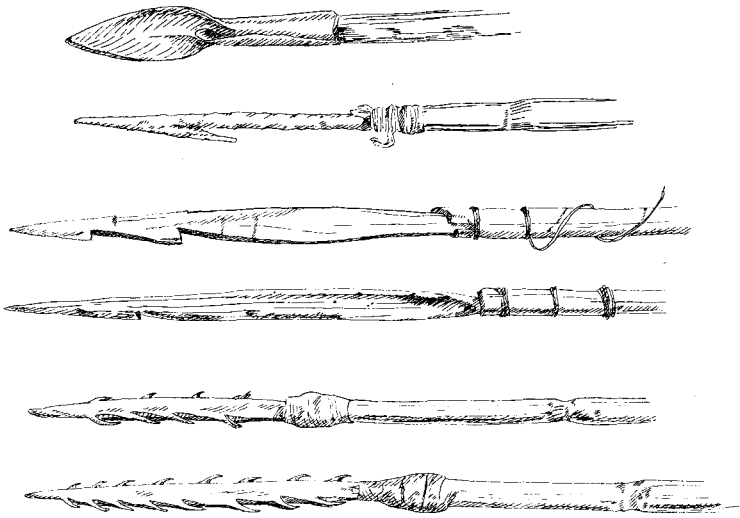


FIG. 9. — Examples of arrow points from N. E. Sierra Leone
(collections of the Sierra Leone Museum).

some of the granite boulders and in some rock shelters on the Western side of the mountain are remains of the pottery vessels used by the inhabitants. In one place, now completely covered by vegetation, is a stone slab, set upright, which, according to the old inhabitants of the town, was the place where the leader of the town would sit when there was a meeting of elders.

In addition to these three types of defense settlements, caves and rock shelters were often used, either as an integral part of the defense system, as in Bafodia, or as a temporary retreat when the main defenses were not successful. In the latter case, the caves and rock shelters which were used were usually those situated near food and water supplies and which were well hidden, often with planted *inthiri* or stone walls. When necessary, the women, children and old men would be taken to a suitable cave or rock shelter to hide while their town was occupied by the enemy or while the younger men were engaged in fighting; one or more of the latter, depending on the size of the group, would stay at the hiding site to help the people gather and hunt food. If there had been sufficient warning, stores of food would be put into the caves — not only food for eating, but also any stored food that they had a chance to transport there in order

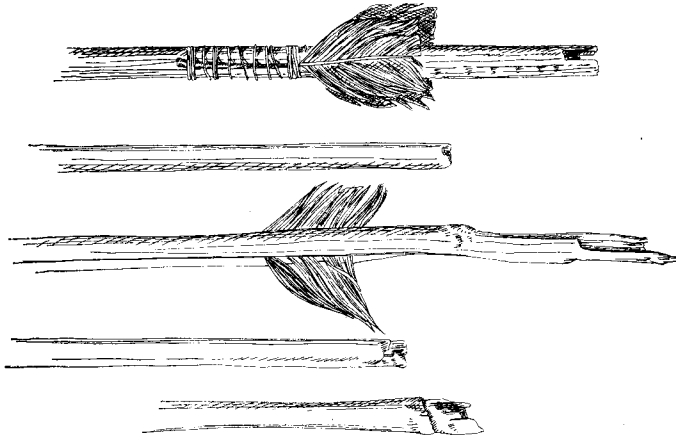


FIG. 10. — Examples of arrow ends from N. E. Sierra Leone (collections of the Sierra Leone Museum).

to keep it out of the hands of the enemy. Only the men would venture out of the caves and then only at night to collect food or to fetch water which they carried in gourds and stored in large clay pots. Fires for cooking were built only at night; the fire was made by striking sparks into a cotton-like material found on some trees with a piece of metal and a hard stone.

A surface collection over nine square meters of one of the rock shelters used during the wars produced 135 palm kernel fragments, 42 sherds of pottery, 21 quartz flakes, 7 unidentified fruit seeds, 2 large fragments of carbonized wood, 2 porcupine quills and one small piece of iron. Though some of the debris might have been due to animals, most is probably due to human activities.

Life was not pleasant during the wars. Since there were very large concentrations of populations in the villages, it often took hours to walk to farms and there was no way to defend the unharvested crops. This was mainly a problem at harvest time, since wars seldom if ever occurred during the rainy season when crops were growing. The mountaintop villages were especially difficult to supply. Water was the main problem, since none, of course, was available at the top of an almost bare granite peak except during the rains. It therefore had to be hauled from a valley stream or spring, either in gourds (*nabijor* in Limba) or in large containers (*natunki*) made from cotton tree trunks. It was stored in large, covered clay pots.

Food also was very scarce since the Limba would often be raided, their fields burned and their livestock confiscated. In situations such as these, all possible uses of wild plants and animals had to be made. Many types of wild roots were available, albeit in small quantity, the main type being known as a 'bush yam' (*nyoro*). When trade routes were cut off, salt became very scarce and was obtained from a pepper-like plant called *theren*. The salt was not extracted from the plant as is sometimes done, but instead the plant's fruit was mixed into sauces. Although a few large animals used to be available in the area, such as pygmy hippos, elephants, antelopes (*tikili*), and leopards, these became rare in most areas of Limba country at an early date due to overhunting. Most of the wild game available during the wars were smaller animals such as civets, monkeys, porcupines, deer, bats and 'cutting grass', a large rodent.

Guns were introduced in the later years of the wars, but when they were not available traditional weapons were used. These consisted of bows made out of split bamboo and notched, featherless, iron-tipped arrows with elephant grass stalk shafts, slings with which stones were hurled, and cutlasses called *kuthkarié*. These latter weapons were distinguished by their shape and the fact that they were made from locally smelted iron; tools and weapons from imported iron were much preferred.

The Limba seem to have made full use of their environment in adapting to war-like conditions in the area. Not only were they able to live in almost impregnable towns, but were able to adapt their material culture to new and unusual conditions. More important, they were able to make these changes without making significant changes in the complexity of the materials they used. Although some specialization of labor was present, the Limba in the 19th century knew how to make everything that was in daily use in their lives. The same is true for Limba living in 'traditional' villages today.

Résumé

Avant l'intervention des Anglais au commencement du siècle présent, le nord-ouest de la Sierra Leone fut, pendant des centaines d'années, le lieu de fréquentes luttes, tant au sein d'une seule tribu qu'entre tribus différentes. Toutes avaient pour but l'acquisition de captifs à vendre comme esclaves aux

peuples du Nord, qui, à leur tour, les vendaient sur la côte. Un des groupes souvent attaqués pour obtenir des captifs fut les Limba. Tout en étant trop peu nombreux et insuffisamment armés pour repousser ces razzias, les Limba, comme plusieurs de leurs voisins, établirent des moyens pour se défendre. Cet article décrit quelques-uns de ces moyens de défense, et comment les Limba se servirent, de façon optimum, des éléments physiques naturels de la région et aussi des arbres et des buissons disponibles aux alentours pour réaliser ce but.

Trois genres principaux de défense furent employés par les Limba montagnards et par quelques autres des groupes de la région : (1) certains villages utilisèrent des arbres — normalement des cotonniers — comme élément principal de leur défense ; (2) d'autres utilisèrent des buissons d'épines ; (3) d'autres utilisèrent des sites montagnards. Ces trois genres ne furent pas mutuellement exclusifs, deux ou même trois des systèmes de défense se mélangeant quelquefois dans un village unique. De plus, des cavernes souterraines furent employées de temps en temps : ceci explique les récits anciens des Limba qui décrivaient leur capacité de disparaître sous la terre. Les sites montagnards furent difficiles à attaquer à cause des pentes abruptes, à cause des cotonniers placés autour des villages comme des murs vivants de défense et à cause des buissons d'épines parsemés partout autour des lieux d'habitation pour empêcher des attaques inattendues.

Les Limba se servirent de façon totale de leur environnement pour s'adapter aux conditions de guerre dans leur région. Ils furent non seulement capables de vivre dans des villages presque inaccessibles, mais ils surent aussi adapter leur culture matérielle à des conditions nouvelles et insolites. Ce qui est plus important encore, ils purent s'adapter ainsi sans modifier les matières premières dont ils se servaient.

Adresse de l'auteur : John H. ATHERTON,
Ass. Prof. of Anthropology,
Portland State University,
Portland, Oregon, U.S.A. 97207