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Archaeological Research at the temporary settlement site of Sikang in the West region of Cameroon

Abstract

Human being in search of places for settlement sometimes occupy sites temporarily before moving to other places. This was the case in Sikang where archaeological survey revealed very few material remains over the area and generally on surface. A series of test pits were dug on the site and the general trend was material remains found only in the first layers of the ground. These material remains were *Canarium schweinfurthii* and potsherds. Analysis of them showed that the site was not a permanent settlement. People settled there just for a short period of time and later migrated elsewhere. This is uncommon on archaeological sites since sites where potsherds are found are usually permanent settlement sites. An indepth analysis of the material remains, supported by interview of informants revealed that the site was used as a refuge shelter during the decolonization war by Cameroonian nationalists against France.

Key words: Archaeological research, temporary settlement, site, Sikang, West region of Cameroon.

Résumé

Dans le processus de trouver des lieux pour son installation, l'être humain occupe souvent des sites momentanément avant de migrer vers d'autres lieux. C'est ce qui se passa à Sikang où la prospection archéologique a mis au jour peu de vestiges et surtout en surface. Une série de sondages a été effectuée sur le site et la tendance générale fut la collecte des vestiges juste dans les premiers niveaux du sol. Ces vestiges sont du *Canarium schweinfurthii* et des tessons de poterie. Leurs analyses ont montré que ce n'était pas un site d'occupation permanente. Les gens qui y ont vécu n'y ont fait qu'une brève halte avant de migrer ailleurs. Ceci est inhabituel en archéologie puisque la plupart des sites où sont collectés les tessons de poterie sont généralement des sites d'occupation permanente. Une analyse détaillée des restes matériels, complétée par des entretiens avec des informateurs ont révélé que le site fut utilisé comme un refuge pendant la guerre de décolonisation qui opposa les nationalistes camerounais à la France.

Mots clés : Recherche archéologique, occupation temporaire, site, Sikang, la région de l'Ouest Cameroun.

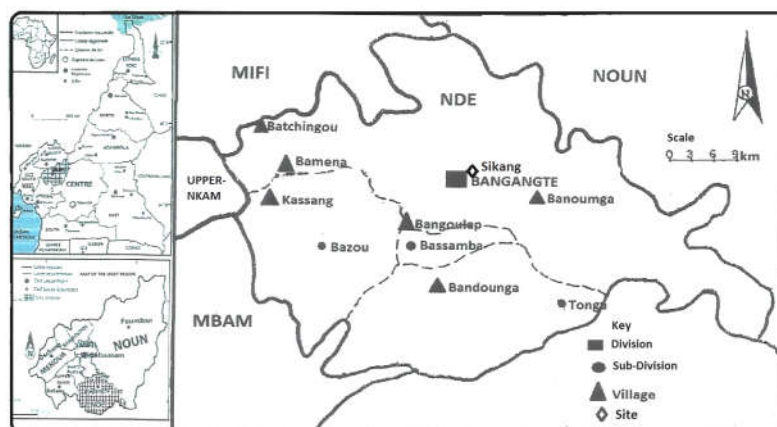
Introduction

In the past, in order to meet their needs, human beings struggled to find places where they could live. Generally, two types of settlements existed: temporary and permanent. Until now, the research conducted in Nde has mostly provided permanent settlements (Yakam, 2015). The situation is different with the site of Sikang. The nature of the site, according to results from the test pits excavations conducted there, gave the impression that the site was not occupied for a long period of time. This shows that it was a temporal settlement. Questions now arise as to what are the archaeological data of that site? Beyond the above question, are others, such as the origin of the people who settled there, the reason that brought them and why they stopped in Sikang just for a while. Elements for answering the above questions are provided first, by the location of the site, the archaeological data collected, its analysis and the interpretation of the plausible events that occurred there.

1. Location of the site of Sikang

The site of Sikang is located 5 km from the town of Bangangte, the capital of the Nde Division. At the vicinity of the site is a government primary school. To the North-West are farms in a valley and on the opposite site, to the South we find a forest used by the local population as a shrine for animal sacrifices and offerings to deities. To North are huge rocks.

Figure 1: Location of the Site of Sikang



2. Natural Environment of the Site

The site is located under a tropical climate with two seasons of unequal length, one rainy season (from April to November) and one dry

season (from December to March) (Olivry, 1986: 30). During the rainy season, it is totally impossible to conduct any survey in the area. Grasses that grow there are *Pennisetum pupureum* and *Imperata cylindrica*. Research was done during the dry season (February) because there was no vegetation on the surface. This situation allowed a clear observation of the whole area. Absence or reduction of vegetation also revealed a ground with grey colour (10 YR 3/2). The rocky nature of the site is not comfortable for settlement. This explains why it is surprising to observe traces of settlement as depicted by the artifacts collected.

Figure 2: Some Natural Features of the site of Sikang

Rocks of different sizes scattered over the site Termite mound



Source: snapped by the author, February 2021

Also visible are many termite mounds. It is under some rocks and roots of grasses that material remains were noticed. We first thought of current material remains but a close analysis of what appeared on surface showed that they were ancient human tools. The present day traces of human occupation are plastic papers and plastic buckets, pens and pencils, parts of vehicles, etc.

3. Human Environment of the Site

Despite the rocky nature of the site, people have tried to settle there. In fact, the settlement was at the edge of the area where the scattered or dispersed nature of rocks made it possible for wooden poles to be planted or any foundation to be constructed. In the North-West we noticed a primary school and some houses. This scenario extends to North-East and East. The South East and South does not have any evidence of human settlement. Some of the rocks with flat tops were used to dry crops, particularly cassava (*Manihot utilissima*). In the southern part of the site, trees are visible, in the valley. According to the people living beside the site, that place is a sacred forest dedicated to religious practices such as rituals of sacrifices and offerings to the Sikang's deities¹³⁸. There are bones of chickens, goats, salt, palm oil and few potsherds which were deposited there two or three weeks ago according to informants living

¹³⁸ Interview with Ngatcha honoré, 57 years, Farmer, 20/02/2021 at Bandiangseu.

beside the site¹³⁹. Since these objects were recent deposits, they were not studied. We therefore focused on the material remains found dispersed in the rocky area.

4. Archaeological Data of the Site of Sikang

Pedestrian survey on the site revealed, clues of archaeological data such as *Canarium schweinfurthii* and potsherds visible on the surface of the site.

Figure 3: Mapping out of Space for Excavation



Source: snapped by the author, February 2021

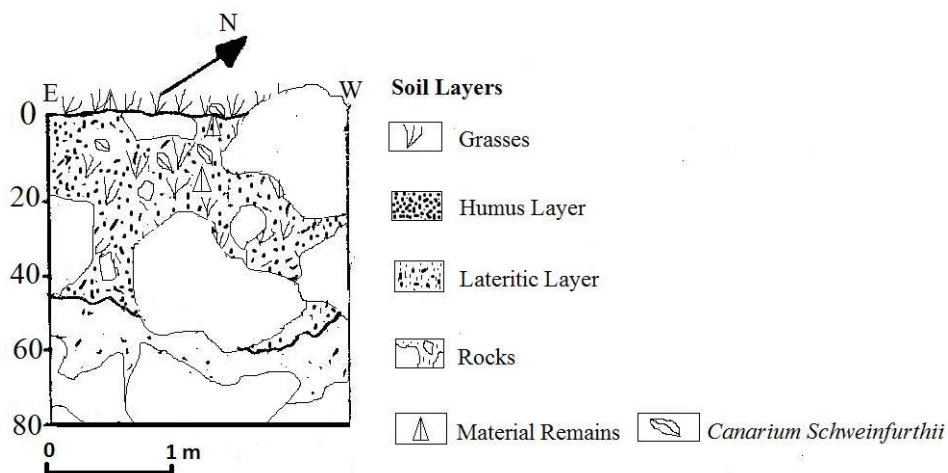
Where ever traces of material remains were noticed on the surface, poles with white cord were fixed to delimit a square for excavation. Because of the presence of many rocks, we did test pits. Each test pit was delimited on 1 m² (Figure 3). With this method of test pits, we succeeded to dig 27 pits over an area of 300 m².

Stratigraphic Distribution of Material Remains

Among the 27 test pits that were dug, only 19 provided material remains made of *Canarium schweinfurthii* and potsherds as mentioned above. One pot that was damaged only on the base was also collected.

¹³⁹ Interview with Tchoumkeu Joseph, 55 years, 07/01/2021 at Sikang.

Figure 4: Stratigraphic Layer of Sikang



Generally it was on surface or in the first centimeters of the ground that most material remains were collected. It means that in terms of layers of the top soil, only the humus layer had material remains. Excavating beyond 80 cm was difficult because of the presence of small rocks in the stratigraphy (figure 4). From the test pits dug, we finally collected 33 kgs of *Canarium schweinfurthii*, a damaged pot and 159 potsherds.

Analysis of material remains

Canarium schweinfurthii

These are the cores of nuts consumed by human being. They had brown colour (figure 5) and measure 10 cm length, 3 to 5 cm width and 7 cm in thickness.

Figure 5: *Canarium schweinfurthii*



Source: snapped by the author, February 2021

The long period of abandonment damaged them and therefore, many were broken. The inner side showed very dark colour (5 Y 3 / 1).

Pot

A pot, damaged on the base was also located on the site. That pot measures 35 cm in length and 20 cm in width. It has a concave rim with a

thin lip. This upper side was smooth and the thickness of the wall here is small. The thickness varies between 3 to 5 cm (figure 6).

Figure 6: The damaged pot



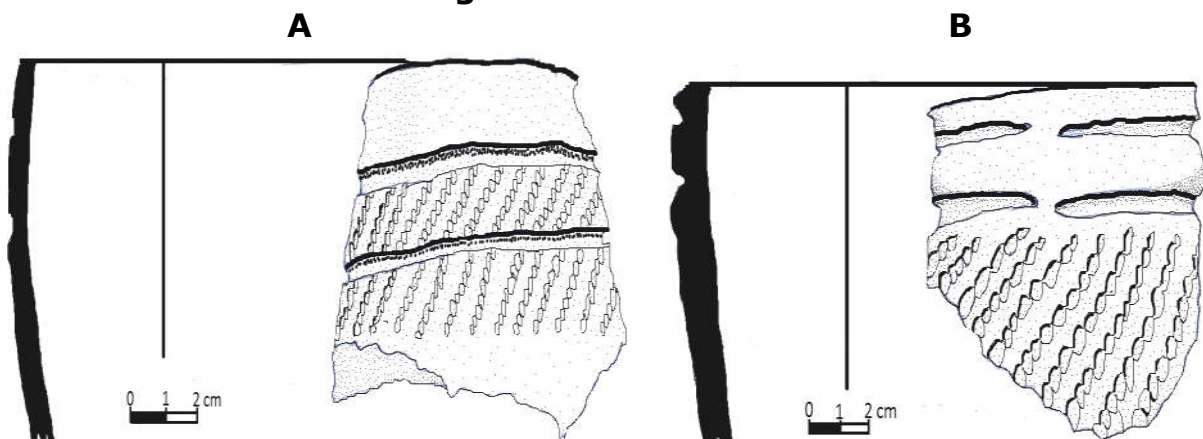
Source: snapped by the author, February 2021

The body of the pot is thicker than the rim. It shows a spherical shape and motifs (small circles) of decoration made by pressing. The thickness of the wall varies from 5 cm (rim) to 9 cm (body). It is almost the same measures with the base side. It is also spherical but it shows no decorative motif and a dark grey colour (5 Y 3 / 1).

Potsherds

The 159 potsherds were divided into 47 rim sherds, 69 body sherds and 43 base sherds. They show two types of rim. The first one is spherical with a rounded lip (figure 7, A) while the second looks straight with flat lip (figure 7, B).

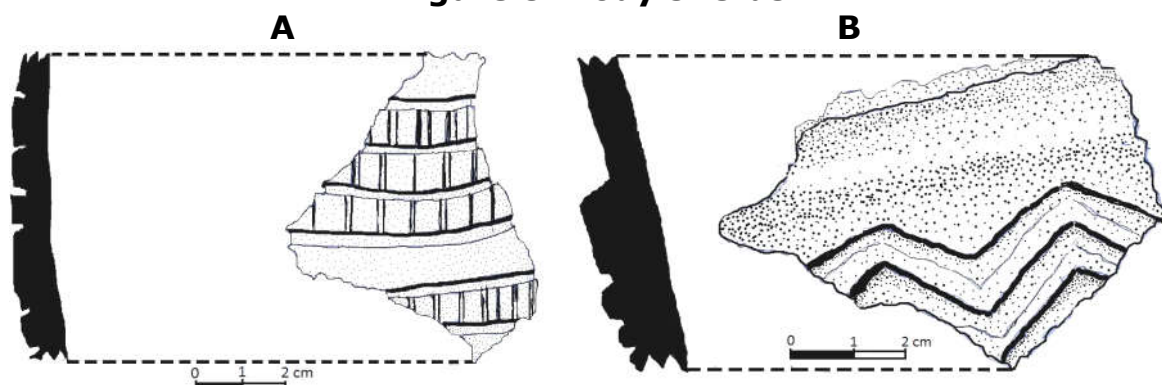
Figure 7: Rim sherds



Designer: A Juma.

As far as the body part is concerned, two types were observed: a spherical shape (figure 8, A) and an oblique shape (figure 8, B). The second type has the peculiarity of added clay to increase the thickness of the wall. This part is where decorative motifs are found (figure 8, B).

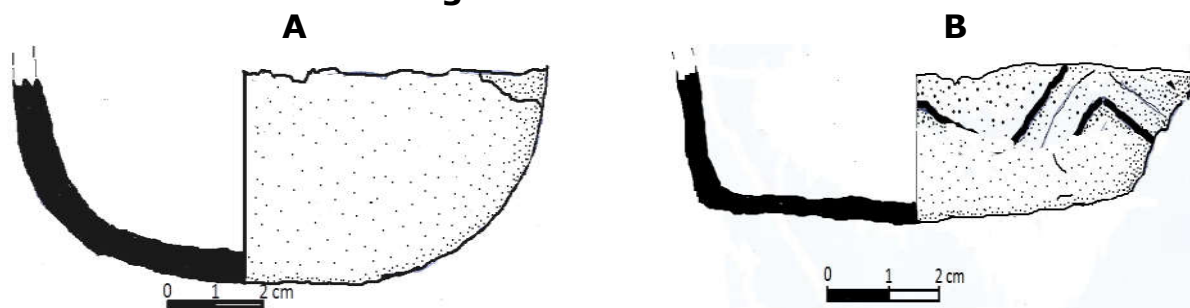
Figure 8: Body sherds



Designer: A Juma.

The base parts are oval for the first type (figure 9, A) and flat for the second (figure 9, B). They don't carry any decorative motifs (figure 9).

Figure 9: Base sherds



Designer: A Juma.

State of conservation

Since material remains were exposed to the natural elements, they were damaged to some extent. On the body of the sherds are visible scratches caused by stones or the action of water weathering. In fact, during the rainy season, rain water transports sherds from the hilly surface into the valley. In the process of that movement, they crash with other obstacles such as small rocks, *Canarium schweinfurthii*, roots of trees, etc.

Reconstruction

Attempts at reconstructing material remains succeeded only for the pot that was collected. As seen on the above picture (figure 6), only one part was damaged. This piece of potsherd was found and fitted in the base of the pot. Concerning other sherds, attempts to find the missing parts failed. Therefore, it became impossible to reconstitute the whole containers.

Typological analysis

The shape of potsherds suggests that the objects used by the people who temporarily stopped at Sikang were pots of different size. Some natural stones were used as grinding stones. Remains of corn flour, spices and pepper were observed on them. As mentioned above, even the population settling currently at the vicinity of the site uses them for other purposes such as drying cassava, corn, dress, etc.

Technological analysis

The technological analysis provides knowledge about how the material remains were manufactured but there is no clue that could permit to guess the source of the raw material. Concerning the pottery, clay used to mould it was not found on the site, nor in its vicinity. The ground is rocky and even in the spots where the ground without stone is available, the thickness of the first layer is very small (less than 10 cm) and made of humus. This means that the raw material for pottery was collected elsewhere. It was also moulded elsewhere and brought here after. The moulding process consisted of putting the clay in the water and pounding it. Once it was ready, the potters mounted the object by pressing. This operation produced scratches and an irregular surface inside the pots. This activity took place far from the site where it was collected, perhaps in Bakong where we did an ethnographic study (Yakam 2001: 77).

This was not the case with the grinding stone. It was produced out of the granite rock common on the site. This activity took place on the site. Indeed, the rocks available there are granite and basalt. It is therefore possible that it was shaped there. The technique the producer used for carving was the rubbing of the selected stone after a series of hitting to reduce the size. Once finished, the grinding stone was used for many purposes such as grinding spices as mentioned above.

The lifestyle of the people of Sikang

A survey of the site showed that the site was not comfortable for the settlement of human beings. As mentioned above, the surface is mostly rocky. Even though some places have humus, the thickness is too thin to support the growth of plants. This led to conclusion that we were dealing with a temporary settlement site. This situation made us to interview people living currently at the vicinity of the site and others, including some elders and others not in the vicinity who know about the site. This was done in the Nde Division. The interpretation proposed here is therefore the combination of the interpretation of material remains collected with theories such as the processual theory, completed with ethnoarchaeological investigations. The first theory is the processual theory which stipulates that any object has a function which is common to every culture (Renfrew and Bahn, 1996: 36-37). All the collected potsherds were parts of vessels which were used for many functions. To determine what was put in the vessels, the surface of the inner part of potsherds was scraped and analyzed at the laboratory of the Faculty of

Agronomy and Agricultural Sciences (FAAS) of the University of Dschang. The analysis revealed that: water, yams (*Dioscorea cayenensis*), palm oil (*Elaeis guineensis*), plantain (*Musa*), several species of tubers (*Dioscorea abyssinia*, *Dioscorea praehensilis*, *dioscorea rotundata* *Dioscorea sansibarensis pax*) corn flour (*Zea maize*), salt, groundnuts (*Kerstingiella geocarpa*), pepper (*Capsicum annum*) and cassava flour (*Manihot utilissima*) were some of the items stored in the pots

Water was stored for drinking and for kneading. Flour was cooked and eaten with vegetables. Some black spots visible at the base of some potsherds are traces of the contact with fire. Since the area is not favourable for a long term settlement, it means that people who settled here came with their objects and lived there for a while. This also means that something pushed them to migrate from their place of origin to this uncomfortable site. We undertook ethnoarchaeological investigations to understand what happened on the site. This was done through interview of the population living at the vicinity of the site. We extended interviews to the whole Division of Nde¹⁴⁰.

It was hard to find any clue for dating. Material remains collected are generally proof of permanent settlement. This means that clay containers were used for cooking and many other activities. So we were expecting to collect charcoal for absolute dating. Unfortunately, either in the pits or on surface, no sample of charcoal was noticed. This absence can be explained by the rocky nature and the rain water that could have removed charcoal on surface by carrying it away. Because of that difficulty, we decided to propose a relative dating by relying on information gathered from the informants. This comprises two dates: the date of acquiring of pots that have become material remains and the date of occupation of the site.

From the previous research, the main centre for the production of pottery was Bakong (Yakam, 2001). It is the closest place to the site of Sikang. However, it is possible that other centres provided it (Tchamo, 2003). But, at the current state of research, it is hard to identify the clay from Bakong and that of other places using pot sherds. According to the informants, the potsherds collected came from vessels transmitted to them¹⁴¹, by their grand-parents. Since some of the informants had about 70 years old¹⁴², we concluded that the vessels would have been acquired approximately in the early XXth century.

If the above date is relative and therefore doubtful, the second one is trustworthy since it concerns a period full of written documents. Many historians have written knowledge about what happened in the West region of Cameroon from 1957 to 1971. Both dates mark the official beginning and end of the nationalist war in the area (Kenne, 2022). The

¹⁴⁰ See "oral sources".

¹⁴¹ Tchatchoua Marie, 69 years, farmer, 11/03/2021 at Banekane.

¹⁴² See "oral sources".

survivors¹⁴³ who sought refuge on this site are still alive and they have described how they lived there from 3 years? From the answers gathered from them, the site was a refugee camp¹⁴⁴. People abandoned places where they lived to find shelter in Sikang. They were running away from the massacre perpetuated by the French president, General de Gaulle, from 1960s till 1970s. This event is associated to the Cameroonian contemporary history of the decolonization process.

After being banned officially by the French authorities in 1955, the nationalist leaders decided to continue fighting officiously in the bush. Their first headquarter was in the Bassa land where one of the leader, Ruben Um Nyobe, was killed in 1958 (Eyinga, 1991: 97). His assassination marked the end of the war in that area since many fighters decided to drop their weapons. War moved to Bamileke land and broke out in 1957 (Kenne, 2022). Unlike the case in the Bassa land, the situation got complicated in the Bamileke land since the warriors were much stronger. Their resistance before the French army forced General de Gaulle to mobilize a lot of military and weapons to fight the nationalists.

He came to power in France in 1958 and created the "Communauté Française", an association whereby he intended to maintain and control the former French colonies. In fact, many African French colonies asked for independence and since General de Gaulle noticed that the idea was supported by the United Nations, USA, and USSR (Topor, 1993: 151, 152), he understood that he could not impede the French territories to gain their full autonomy. He therefore created the "Communauté Française" and forced all the French colonies to adhere to it. The texts of "la Communauté" were coined to give him the same power the colonial leaders had over the area (Kum'a and Loude, 1989: 117-119). Among the laws of the "Communauté", it was clearly stated that the president of France was in charge of defense and security. On behave of it, General de Gaulle mobilized a lot of men and arms to fight the nationalists.

When the war moved from the Bassa land to the Bamileke land, it looked like a war against a particular ethnic group. General de Gaulle decided to use all means to crush and eradicate any trace of resistance to the Bamileke land. The war turn into a *genocide*¹⁴⁵ as mentioned by one of the French military, Max Bardet, who took part to the massive killing of the population (Eyinga, 1991: 124). In fact, on the field, the French military did not try to identify the nationalist fighters from the innocent people. At the beginning, they killed everyone they came across (Deltombe et al, 2019: 119). The worse was the use of planes that were flying and shot the population down without any distinction (Kenne, 2022:

¹⁴³ Our sample of informants was made of 54 men and 43 women. This gives a total of 97 persons with ages varying between 53 years to 81 years old. They were interviewed in Bandiangseu, Bangangte, Banekane, Bangoua and Feutap. These villages are closer to Sikang of 1 km (Bandiangseu) to 10 km (Banekane).

¹⁴⁴ Tounzi Marcel, 77 years, Farmer, 10/02/2021 at Bangangte.

¹⁴⁵ My emphasis.

236). Many people abandoned their houses and ran into the bush seeking for shelter.

In the Bangangte area, one of that refuge place was Sikang. Each time people saw the French military coming, they ran to hide within the rocks. The site was also a nest for people when military flew over the area¹⁴⁶. The time they spent there depended of the time also used by the French military to stay around the region. At the beginning, from 1963, they were going there just for a few hours. With the continuation of war, this time was extended to days, weeks, months and years. Finally from 1966, they spent years there¹⁴⁷. The settlement lasted for about three years before they were asked by the government to leave the place and moved to the gathering camps, established by the neocolonial power to isolate the population from the nationalist fighters (Kenne, 2022: 218).

Material remains found during the survey were part of utensils they used there. Since the spot was a temporary site used only for a brief protection, the refugees did not undertake serious activities there such as farming¹⁴⁸. This statement confirmed the hypothesis of a temporary settlement archaeological site. It seems as the place was effective as a hidden camp. In fact, at the current state of research, no French gun bullet, nor any human skeleton and grave were found. This situation reduced interpretation and knowledge about any specific lifestyle of the people who abandoned the material remains on the site of Sikang.

Conclusion

Archaeological research reveals different types of sites. Generally, sites discovered are permanent sites, which means that people settle there for years. Because of that permanent settlement, material remains found provide information about people who occupied such sites. This was not the case in Sikang. Material remains collected were identified on a very uncomfortable site for human settlement. Even though artifacts found there were potsherds and *Canarium schweinfurtii*, the rocky nature clearly showed that people did not intentionally choose Sikang as a place to live for long. Efforts to understand what happened on the site revealed that it served only as a refuge place during the decolonization war that opposed the Cameroonian nationalists to the French country. Few people sought shelter there and material remains they brought there was just for the time they were hiding before going back to their former homes located at Bangangte, Feutap, Bandiangseu and Banekane.

Oral Sources

N°	Names	Age	Occupation	Place of interview	Date of interview
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¹⁴⁶ Interview with Djatou Mélanie, 73 years old, Farmer, 05/11/2020 at Feutap.

¹⁴⁷ Interview with Tchawa Gertrude, 69 years old, Farmer, 10/10/2020 at Bandiangseu.

¹⁴⁸ Interview with Bawenkeu Idriss, 59 years old, Farmer, 02/02/2021 at Bangangte.

01	Djatou Mélanie	73	Farmer	Feutap	05/11/2020
02	Ngatcha honoré	57	Farmer	Bandiangseu	20/02/2021
03	Tchatchoua Marie	69	farmer	Banekane	11/03/2021
04	Tchawa Gertrude	69	Farmer	Bandiangseu	10/10/2020
05	Tchoumkeu Joseph	55	Farmer	Sikang	07/01/2021
06	Tounzi Marcel	77	Farmer	Bangangte	10/02/2021

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