

# Reassessing Biblical Archaeology through an Afrocentric Perspective: An Intercultural Study of Qumran Caves, Israel, and West African Rock Shelters

Tubi, Paul-Kolade; Ibrahim Joel and Dauji-Ekpu, Zankawon Mercy

*Department of Archaeology and Museum Studies, Federal University Lokoja, Nigeria.*

Corresponding author: [paul.tubi@fulokojia.edu.ng](mailto:paul.tubi@fulokojia.edu.ng)

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## Abstract

This study aims to critically reassess the archaeological discoveries at Qumran Caves, Israel, and selected West African rock shelters with an Afrocentric perspective. It highlights the value of caves/rock shelters as ancient cultural spaces. Previous studies have shown the significance of the Qumran caves, but none has been written from an Afrocentric perspective, and while scholars have investigated the signal roles of rock shelters in West Africa, they have not been discussed in a cross-cultural context with the Middle East. The study adopts a polymethodic approach incorporating physical participation in archaeological excavations in West Africa and Israel. It also includes a literature review. Data collation was primarily through field-based archaeological recoveries in Israel and West Africa and relevant literatures. Analysis of data was done by physical examination of artefacts and review of published research. Theoretically, the study adopts an Afrocentric intercultural perspective, which offers a rigorous theoretical basis which provides a more inclusive and contextual approach. While noting differences, the study reveals similar cultural attributes, convergences in site functions, artefact symbolism, serving as loci for ritual services, communal identity, and social gathering in both regions. It also notes differences in cultural contexts. By foregrounding data from West Africa and Qumran, the study calls for integration of biblical archaeology into West African educational curricula and intercultural study of West Africa and the Middle East. Building on this study, future research should consider the relevance of intercultural archaeological study of West Africa and the Middle East.

**Keywords:** Afrocentric, Archaeology, Caves/Rock Shelters, Intercultural Study, Qumran, West Africa.

## Introduction

This study seeks to engender Afrocentric intercultural study of West African rock shelters and the Qumran caves of Israel. The ethnoarchaeological research of Agnolin (2021) reveals that caves and rock shelters have played significant roles in different cultures from prehistoric times across climes, which have proved highly valuable in archaeology. They have played pivotal roles in human history from the earliest times to the present, serving as shelters from invasion and religious spaces; also, they have served for habitation, burial and industrial purposes. Archaeologists have long discovered the usefulness of caves/rock shelters as sites that preserve relevant artefacts and ecofacts that are crucial for the

reconstruction of history, understanding of human behaviour, cultural developments and environmental adaptations in Israel and West Africa (Allsworth-Jones et al., 2012; Lim, 2024; Picardo, 2021). The study highlights that archaeological data from various caves/rockshelters at Qumran and West Africa provide chronology, cultural materials, cultural patterns and social-religious trends that characterised human behaviours and cultural developments in the two regions. Scholars have assessed Qumran caves (Vainstub, 2023; Sala, 2023; Nongbri, 2022) and West African rock shelters (Allsworth-Jones et al., 2012; Tubi, 2020; Cerasoni et. al 2023; Goldstein et. al., 2025) independently, but there is a gap in cross-cultural study. This study, by attempting to synthesise data from Qumran and West Africa, provides an overview of the archaeology of the sites and highlights the cultural significance of excavated findings and the impact on our understanding of ancient Jewish and West African cultures.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The study confronts a gap in knowledge and the consequences of an unaddressed gap in aspects of intercultural studies of West Africa and the Middle East by addressing the absence of comparative archaeological studies. To address this problem, the study engages in a discussion of Israel and archaeological data from Qumran and rock shelters in West Africa. Although intercultural studies have increased in scholarship, not much has been done to bridge the gap between Israelites and West African archaeology. This lacuna has restricted advances in intercultural inquiry into biblical studies, and constrained the development of intercultural study to biblical archaeology, which limits the integration of archaeological knowledge into Christian religious education in West Africa. Archaeological research of Qumran in Israel has significantly influenced biblical studies by making meaningful contributions to historical, liturgical, chronological and cultural contexts of ancient Israel in the Second Temple era. By contrast, archaeological research on West African rock shelters has focused mainly on prehistoric settlement, subsistence, material culture and environmental adaptations. This disparity created a gap in knowledge. Though both sites preserve evidence of human activities, they have been examined as separate disciplinary traditions, which results in limited scholarly engagement between the two cultures. The study therefore addresses the problem of insufficient intercultural study of Qumran caves and West African rock shelters.

### **Methodology of Research**

Methodologically, the study presents an Afrocentric intercultural analysis of archaeological data of Qumran caves in Israel and selected West African rock shelters. Importantly, it includes an on-the-spot archaeological survey of Qumran and several sites in Israel, including participation in international archaeological excavations in Israel (Tubi, 2018). The research team also has been engaged in archaeological research in Nigeria with excavations on rock shelters (Tubi, 2020). This background gives room for comparative analysis. The methodology also engages in a literature review. By using these methods, the study makes

critical use of sources and draws relevant conclusions. The methods were considered germane because they help to understand how ancient sociocultural systems worked in Israel and West Africa and how they differ from each other.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretically, the study adopts an Afrocentric intercultural study. The framework is grounded in the epistemologies of Asante (2021) within the broader field of African-focused study. Expounded by scholars like Falola (2022), Mazama (2021), NdlovuGatsheni (2022) and others, it argues for the centrality of African ways of life in the interpretation of history and reconstruction of data. The theoretical framework was adopted because it reveals the complex phenomena that characterised cultural settings within a broader range, helps to understand cultural limitations, highlights our understanding of universals, and contextualises cultural traits. It also emphasises indigenous knowledge systems and decolonialisation. Archaeological Afrocentricity offers a rigorous theoretical basis for intercultural study of Qumran caves and West African rockshelters in indicating that archaeological materials can only be properly reconstructed within their cultural, social, religious, environmental and historical contexts, but not in isolation. Thus, it interprets archaeological data by seeking to understand the contexts of past societies which created and used them. In this context, it provides a suitable framework that allows Qumran caves and West African rockshelters to be interpreted within their respective cultural settings rather than assuming they served identical purposes. This theoretical approach supports comparison while respecting their differences. As an archaeological paradigm, intercultural study focuses on understanding the relationship between human behaviour and material culture. It holds that cultural materials are products of humans and that they can be properly interpreted if we understand human behaviour in general. The approach argues that African archaeological sites deserve equal analytical attention without being measured solely against biblical or Western data. Thus, when comparing Qumran with West African sites, Afrocentric intercultural study rejects unidirectional evaluation but encourages intercultural dialogue between two civilisations. It identifies similarities and dissimilarities and also cautions against assuming direct cultural relationships where evidence is lacking; rather, similarities should be interpreted as examples of how different societies respond to comparable challenges. Been useful in intercultural dialogue; it encourages engagement in biblical archaeology without condemning African heritage. By applying Afrocentricity, the study affirms that West African archaeological scholarship possesses intrinsic educational, historical, cultural and religious values which are independent of foreign impositions and offers epistemic balance, contextual parity and symmetrical comparison to artefacts from Qumran and West Africa. In providing interpretive tools for deciphering symbols and traditional structures, it supports African archaeology as integral to global history. In this context, it underscores the point that West African rock shelters are not mere peripheral archaeological spaces, but essential depositories of African symbolism comparable to Qumran caves.

### Research Objectives

Research objectives determined the trajectory of this study. The research objectives are focused interrogations which guided the design, scope, methodology, collection, analysis and interpretation of data. By offering specific steps which the research team took to provide meaningful answers to the research questions, the objectives provided focused guidelines on how the research was conducted. The objectives were specific, measurable, relevant and achievable within the time scope of the study.

The following are the research objectives:

- i. To assess archaeological data from Qumran caves and West African rock shelters.
- ii. To engage Afrocentricity as a theoretical tool in intercultural study of Qumran and West African caves/rockshelters.
- iii. To demonstrate the relevance of Afrocentric perspectives in broader discussions in biblical archaeology and intercultural studies.

### Literature Review

Agnolin's (2021) recent treatise on caves and rockshelters gives scholarly background to the issue. Also, scholars have called for interpretation of archaeological sites, including caves and rockshelters, within their environmental contexts and have assessed rock formations as archaeological spaces. According to Atienza et al. (2021) and MacDonald (2020), natural rock formations have proved to be of immense value to humanity from the earliest times. Their studies caution archaeologists against interpreting caves solely as residential sites and encourages analysing them within their wider environments and cultural contexts. From recent researches details emerged that caves and rock shelters are unique environments that house and conserve evidence of past lifestyles in a more secure way than open-air sites. They are exceptionally good at protecting artefacts from inclement weather and animal intrusions. Because of this, organic materials like textiles, plant remains, wood, bones and others that often degenerate faster can be preserved in them for extensive periods. They are particularly useful as storage sites, art-making surfaces, burials and ritual centres. Through these spaces, we are able to decipher ancient daily life ways, diets, religious beliefs, symbolic communication, artistic traditions, technology, sociocultural patterns, human interactions, environmental changes, accurate dating of cultural layers, and cultural identity.

This fact plays out in the Judean Valley and West Africa, which have yielded huge data. Data from Israel, especially Qumran among many others, have yielded immense data that are useful in the reconstruction of history (Sala, 2023; Vainstub, 2023), and they bear similarities with West Africa, where important data have been retrieved from selected rock shelters (MacDonald, 2020). In these sites, artefacts such as stone tools, potsherds, beads, rock art, and faunal remains provide evidence for prehistoric settlement, technological advancement, ritual activities and adaptation to emerging environments (Allsworth-Jones et al., 2012; Cerasoni et al., 2023). However, an intercultural study of the two regions has

not been attempted. This study therefore seeks to establish a systematisation of discussion on the issue.

Khirbet Qumran, as it is called, literally means “the ruins of Qumran”. It is located near the northwest corner of the Dead Sea, where there are many caves which have yielded the most sensational archaeological materials on the Bible. From one obscure cave discovered by a Bedouin in 1947, archaeologists have counted 39 of these caves which have been investigated and analysed. Studies have shown that the site is of prime importance for biblical study. As pointed out by Mizzi (2022) and Nongbri (2022), Qumran caves during the Hellenistic period exhibited various data. The site consists of a series of natural and artificial caves that date back to the Second Temple period. During this period, the site was occupied by a Jewish sect, often identified as the Essenes, or an Essene-like community that lived in a communal settlement and engaged in ritual practices, including the production of scrolls called the Dead Sea Scrolls; a collection of ancient papyri that included biblical manuscripts, apocryphal works, and sectarian writings. Early scholarship focused on the religious themes shedding light on the history of Judaism, early Christianity, and the cultural context of the ancient Near East. Data from the site have also aided the adequate description of the history and religion, social and economic life ways of the occupants. Other notable discoveries include aquatic system, cisterns and conduits, scriptorium, potters’ factory, kitchen, dining room, store room, jars, scriptural texts, extra biblical documents, community manual and a large cemetery of over one thousand graves. In addition, the site housed scriptorium, baptismal font, prayer room, bakery, among others and archaeologists have also recovered artefacts like copper coins, and phylacteries.

More recent scholarship has shifted from asking solely the religious identity to examining the context of the sites. Thus, studies now emphasise landscape, cave formation, storage practices and settlement patterns. There is an increase in environmental studies and a multidisciplinary approach (Cerasoni et al. 2023). Also studies now focused on preservation of archaeological data of the site. A recent study by Nongbri (2022) revealed that archaeological data recovered from Cave 1 is less than previously assumed. His analysis highlights the role of the antiquities market and the complex circumstances surrounding archaeological materials. Technological methods have also brought new methods into Qumran studies. Artificial intelligence, multispectral imaging and improved radiocarbon dating are now being employed to identify scribes, reconstruct fragmentary manuscripts and refine chronology (Jones, 2023; Magness, 2022). Overall, literatures demonstrate that Qumran caves remain central to biblical archaeology because they illuminate the religious diversity and scribal traditions of ancient Israel. Debates continue on the identity of the Qumran community; however, there is broad agreement in scholarship that caves constitute one of the most important archaeological contexts for understanding ancient humans in the Middle East.

In West Africa, dedicated studies on rock shelters continue with Ndiaye, Huysecom and Douze (2023), Niang et al. (2023), Schmid et al. (2022) and Lianres-Matas (2022) producing fresh data. One important gap in the literature is that very few archaeological excavations of caves/rock shelters have been published from West Africa in recent times. Well-known

earlier excavations are Iwo Eleru, Iffe-Ijumu and Rop in Nigeria, Bosumpra and Kintampo in Ghana, Yagala Sierra Leone and Ounjougou Mali. Available data indicate that more recent excavations of rock shelters have been conducted in Eastern and Southern Africa, while West African studies have mainly engaged in updated analyses of earlier classic sites such as Iwo Eleru, Itaakpa (Nigeria) and Shum Laka (Cameroon). This scarcity itself supports the argument for expanding archaeological research and training in the region.

A general overview of West African sites provides valuable insights into early humans in the region. Iwo Eleru, Nigeria, which remains one of the most important archaeological sites in the region, was excavated in 1965. Dating to circa 13,000 years ago, it is so far the earliest human remains in the region (a human skull with teeth of about a 20-year-old male). It shows continuous use by humans from antiquity to the present (Shaw and Daniels, 1984). Analysis of the skull indicates an overlap of modern humans with a more archaic form in the region (Cerasoni et al., 2023). Similarly, excavations at Northeast Yoruba land in Iffe Ijumu produced human skeletal remains (Asakitipi, 2001; Allworths-Jones, et al. 2012). The most recent excavation took place at Ebeni rock shelter, in Ogidi Ijumu community which yielded datable evidence of human habitation dating to the ceramic Late Stone Age of West Africa (Tubi, 2020). These sites yielded over one thousand potsherds and numerous quartz stone tools consisting of microliths, burins, awls and side scrapers, another site, Rop Rock shelter in central Nigeria dated to circa over 2,000 years was excavated in 1944 and it also yielded partial skeleton which was the first prehistoric human remains excavated in the region, which consisted of a single equid tooth, potteries, microliths, bore stones, ground axes, hematites. These rock shelters give insights into the distant past of West Africa revealing clear evidence of human morphology, cultural adaptation, technological prowess and the lives of ancient humans in the region.

Recent scholarship expands the focus on archaeological investigation of caves/rockshelters. Early writings see them as habitation sites, but emerging data regard them as serving multiple purposes, which has implications for reconstructing prehistoric settlement systems in West Africa. Environmental data have also come from these rockshelters, shedding light on climatic fluctuations in the region, which affect subsistence practices involving hunting, gathering, fishing and eventually the development of organised farming. Early data on pottery from the region challenge assumptions that pottery technology diffused into the region across the Sahara.

Although archaeological work on rockshelters continues to grow, there remains a major research gap. There are no reported new excavations many sites lack carbon dating, isotope analysis, residue analysis, and high-resolution dating, and DNA has been applied in a few sites. This literature review demonstrates that while West African rockshelters have been examined primarily from prehistoric, environmental, and technological perspectives, very few investigate their broader intercultural symbolic dimensions. The gap provides a strong scholarly justification for an intercultural study that explores similarities and differences in the use of caves/rockshelters for human beings.

## Research Findings

The research findings support recent research by the scholars Ndiaye et al. (2023), Niang et al. (2023), Schmid et al. (2022), and Linares-Mata (2022) on West African caves/rock shelters which provide valuable methodological and interpretative perspectives that are employed in this study. Their works support interpreting rock shelters not simply as habitation sites but as components of wider cultural landscapes. Rather than cataloguing these sites, they encourage researchers to involve local communities, respect indigenous knowledge and ensure ethical management. Along this line of thought, a critical intercultural analysis of West African and Qumran sites indicates that overall, material data across the two archaeological loci point to convergence on critical areas, similar cultural attributes, convergences in site functions, artefact symbolism, serving as loci for ritual services, communal identity, and social gathering in both regions. We shall examine salient themes that are germane to the study.

**Religion:** The caves at Qumran and West African rock shelters appeared at different geographical, historical and cultural settings, both functioned as sacred landscapes where ritual practices and spiritual experiences were expressed. However, the two regions have distinct sets of data. On one hand, Qumran was inhabited by an ancient apocalyptic Jewish religious community that has benefited from concerted archaeological explorations. On the other hand, West African sites were inhabited by ancient clusters of diverse inhabitants and our data are derived from non-uniform archaeological investigations; while our analysis revealed religious themes, yet none was truly a religious community. Examination of rock shelters in the West African region revealed that several were centres of religious practices with evidence of a sacred spot of libation, ritual stone arrangements, as well as evidence of bodily ornamentation and engraved objects with religious symbolism. While Qumran represents alliterate scriptural community, West African rock shelters illustrate equally sophisticated indigenous religious system expressed through archaeological remains and living traditions (Holl, 2020). This intercultural study broadens the understanding that religious traditions are preserved not only through written documents but also through cultural materials.

**Chronology:** Findings also revealed huge chronological differences between the two. There is no single age for West African rockshelters because they were occupied at different times in different regions. Thus West African sites represent a much longer archaeological sequence, preserving evidence from prehistoric hunter-gathers through Iron Age societies and into the historic era (Asakitipi, 2001; Holl, 2020). By contrast, Qumran provides an intensive snapshot of a relatively short but historically crucial period of Israel. The chronological ordering for West African sites extends several thousand years into the past (Allsworth-Jones, 2012; Shaw and Daniels, 1984), with the Iwo Eleru site in Nigeria pointing to circa 13,000 years ago. This particular site made a fundamental contribution to our understanding of the human evolutionary tree this is in juxtaposition with the community of Qumran, which was dated to about 2,000 years ago (Magness, 2021). Chronologically, the Qumran data fit into 250 BC to AD 68. During this period, the land of Israel passed through the Persian, Greek, Hasmonean and Roman rule, which shaped Jewish identity.

Qumran provides a focused chronological window which represents a relatively short chronological sequence whereas West African rock shelters preserve evidence spanning from the Late Pleistocene through the Holocene into the historical era. From a comparative perspective, the chronology of Qumran reflects a specific historical religious community whose occupation lasted roughly two centuries, while West African rock shelters offer a long-term archaeological record of cultural continuity, document tens of thousands of years of changing human adaptations, cultural development and religious practices

**Habitation:** From a comparative perspective the two regions adapted their environment to meet their needs. In both, caves/rockshelters served as places of habitation and refuge. Qumran was a specialised permanent and religiously regulated community while West African sites reveal flexible, multi-period and multifunctional habitation spanning millennia. At Qumran nearby caves were used to preserve manuscripts and for shelter during upheavals. In West Africa, rockshelters often provided seasonal or permanent habitation, protection from harsh weather and security during wars. West African sites exhibit a deep-time record of human settlement spanning roughly 20,000 years, whereas the Qumran caves represent a specialised settlement and manuscript repository dating mainly from the second century BC to AD 68. Despite this chronological disparity, both sites preserve valuable archaeological evidence of human adaptation and interaction with environments. An Afrocentric perspective reinforces that both contexts embody complex forms of human settlement and social organisation, which challenges the assumption that permanent architecture alone signifies advanced habitation.

**Cultural materials:** A synthesis of the cultural materials recovered from Qumran and West African sites demonstrates that both preserve rich archaeological data useful for reconstructing past human societies. However, circumstances of the Qumran caves and West African rock shelters are dissimilar, especially in cultural context and historical setting. West African site data include art, beads, ochre, and very scant ancient human remains (Allsworth-Jones, et al. 2012; Andah, 1993), while Qumran possessed textual data, coins and buildings. Archaeological findings at Qumran revealed extra biblical data consisting of several large pots, numerous sacred texts that are not included in modern Jewish canon such as Apocalypse of Jerusalem, Wars of the Children of Light, Thanksgiving Psalms, Book of Noah, and Testament of Levi. There are hagiographies found at Qumran such as the Book of Jubilees, the Manual of Discipline/Rule of the Community, and the Document of the Sons of Zadok. These shed light on the complex nature of ancient Israelite religion. Moreover, the cultural materials discovered in West African sites are more diverse in chronology and function which illustrate the evolution of technology, social organisation and indigenous beliefs over thousands of years. In Qumran, texts represent the most distinctive data, in West Africa archaeological interpretation relies primarily on cultural materials, environmental evidence and oral traditions. In summary, Qumran and West African sites demonstrate that cultural materials are fundamental to reconstruction of history. At Qumran emphasis came from textual, architectural and ritual artefacts, whereas

in West Africa emphasis came from ritual artefacts, environmental, artistic and technological data.

The study also identifies dissimilarities between the two regions namely;

**Differences in interpretative frame work:** Since West African and Qumran possessed different kinds of data our interpretative frameworks differed. Qumran provides both written and material evidence and has benefits of textual data inform of manuscripts that give direct narratives of the community, its beliefs and ethos, and coins, potteries buildings and cemeteries, while West African sites rely on tangible artefacts that were used to make inference in line with standard archaeological norm. In Qumran scripts help to give direct interpretation to cultural materials, while in West Africa the absence of written record make interpretation to rely heavily on archaeological context. Importantly, Qumran caves contribute text-rich historically specific evidence that shed light on literacy and religion, the West African rockshelters contribute material-rich long-term evidence of human adaption, and cultural continuity. Thus, Qumran archaeology is characterized by the integration of textual and material evidence within a narrow historical frame, while West African rockshelters are materials accumulated over a much longer chronological span.

**Cultural continuity:** The human identity issue in the archaeology of both regions concerns the challenge of determining who occupied these sites and what their cultural materials revealed about them. At Qumran, we encountered a definite set of religious people who lived in a very close community. However, there are uncertainties about the identity of individuals in the community. Importantly, we don't know anything about the preceding and succeeding generations. Evidence point to a group of messianic community, properly the Essenes, who made a sharp intrusion into Qumran from circa 250 BC and disappeared by AD 68. Alternatively, in West Africa, there are cultural markers which indicate continuity of cultural successions from the ancient rock shelter dwellers to the present surrounding communities because these communities around the rock shelters have traditions linking them together.

### Summary, Conclusion and Recommendations

In summary, this study provides a comprehensive overview of the archaeology of the Qumran Caves and West African rock shelters highlighting their significance and the impact of the discoveries on our understanding of ancient life ways. Comparatively, the archaeological data and settings differ, however, they complement one another in demonstrating how humans use caves/rockshelters. Qumran Caves are a treasure trove of archaeological significance, offering insights into ancient Jewish history, culture, and textual traditions while West African rock shelters contribute to human evolution, cultural adaptation and continuity. The study reveals striking similarities and dissimilarities between the two regions, and the study has far-reaching implications for African-Middle East studies. The study concludes that natural caves/rockshelters have served ancient communities of Israel and West Africa and are archaeological sites of tremendous significance, which shed illumination on fundamental ancient cultural practices. The study recommends further intercultural studies of African and Middle Eastern archaeological data

in a bid to discover human cultural progression in both regions. It also recommends integration of biblical archaeology into West African studies.

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