

In Search of the Ancestors

A Preliminary Archaeological Reconnaissance of Orile-Owu, Nigeria

(rev. 1/2014 with Acknowledgments added)

Abstract

This paper, originally presented at the 7th World Archaeological Conference held at the Dead Sea, Jordan, 2013, describes a preliminary archaeological reconnaissance of Orile-Owu, carried out in the context of a broad research programme designed to investigate the culture history and development of Owu communities in south-western, Nigeria. Orile-Owu in the past was an ancient forest kingdom which is believed to be the first settlement outside Ile-Ife, the popularly acclaimed traditional homeland of the Yoruba people. Several notions about this ancient kingdom regarding its status as the cradle of all other Owu communities have led to some generated heated controversies. This preliminary work is an attempt to contribute to the fascinating socio-historical debate.

Introduction

Orile-Owu is located in Ayedaade Local Government Area of Osun State, Nigeria. It is within latitude 7°10' and 7°15'N and longitude 4°25'E. This region is bounded in the south by Ijebu-Igbo in Ogun State; in the east by Ife South Local Government Area; in the north by Gbongan – one of the prominent towns in Osun State and in the west by Irewole/Isokan Local Government Area. The study area is situated in the tropics, where the sun is overhead almost every day of the year. The annual temperature is about 28°C. Rainfall is heavy, averaging 1300mm per annum reaching its peak between April and late September. Orile-Owu is sunny throughout the year. The relative humidity coincides with months with low rainfall – December to March (Adejobi 1997; Adejuwon 1974, Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010). In terms of accessibility, Orile-Owu is about 46km from Ibadan. There is a well-tarred motorable road from Ibadan to Orile-Owu and within the town are short footpaths, which make Orile-Owu very accessible. (See fig. 1 and 2).

The vegetation type in this area is a secondary forest. The vegetation has been greatly impacted by increase in human population and activities. Orile-Owu was an ancient forest kingdom with varieties of plant species. The predominant plants that exist in this locality comprise of tree species such as oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), iroko (*Milicia excelsa*), mahogany (*Entadrophragma cylindricum*), arere (*Triplocyton scleroxylon*), and teak (*Tectona grandis*). The area is well drained by rivers and streams including the Obalufon, Omu, Ope, Oranran, Osun and Shasha rivers. The availability of these rivers and streams has some positive impact on local agriculture and other livelihood including palm oil production (Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010). The soil is fertile thereby allowing the cultivation of various cash and subsistence crops. The availability of the essential natural resource at the site made it a suitable place for the ancient population to settle.

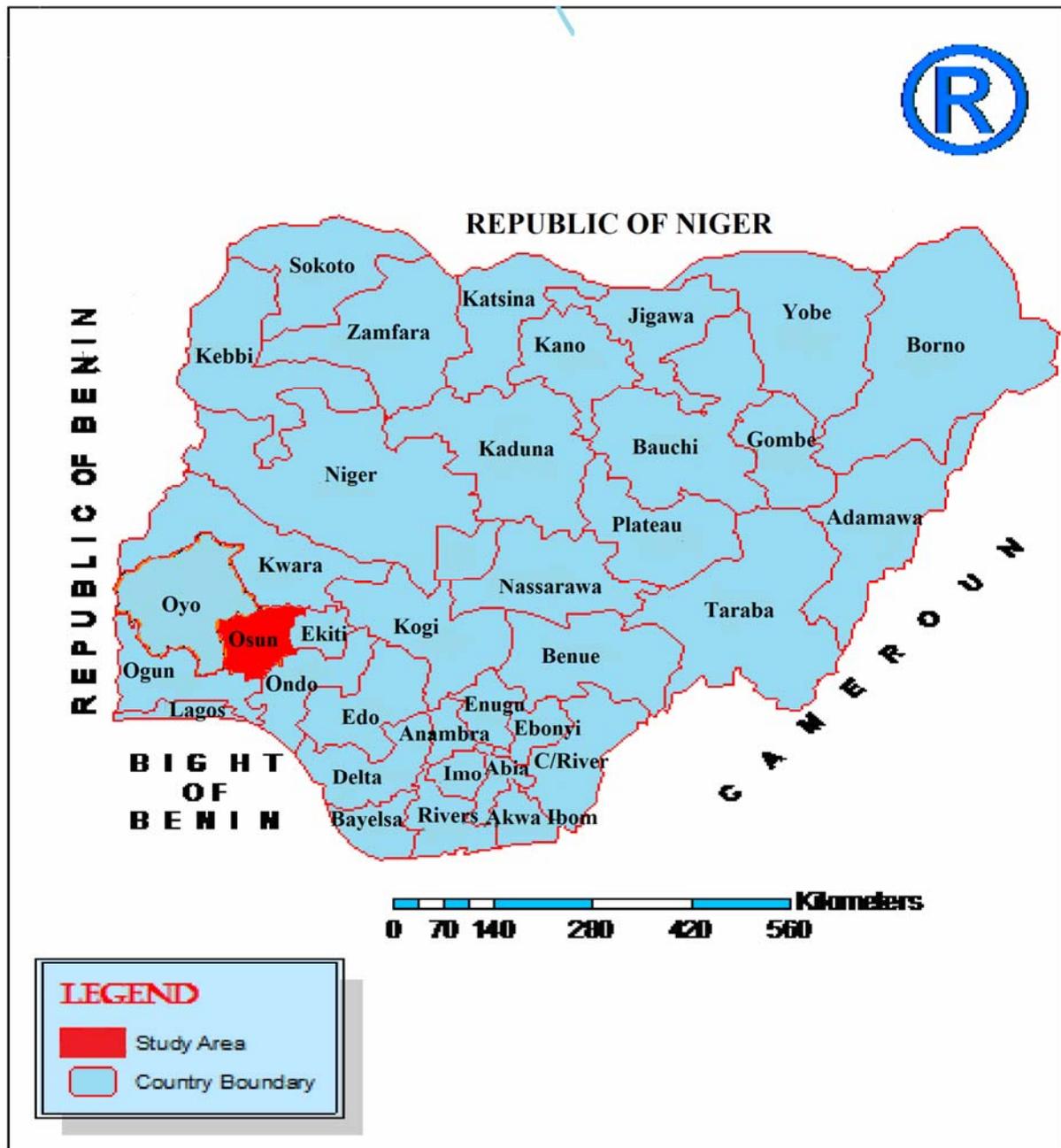


Figure 1: Study area location within modern Osun State, Nigeria.

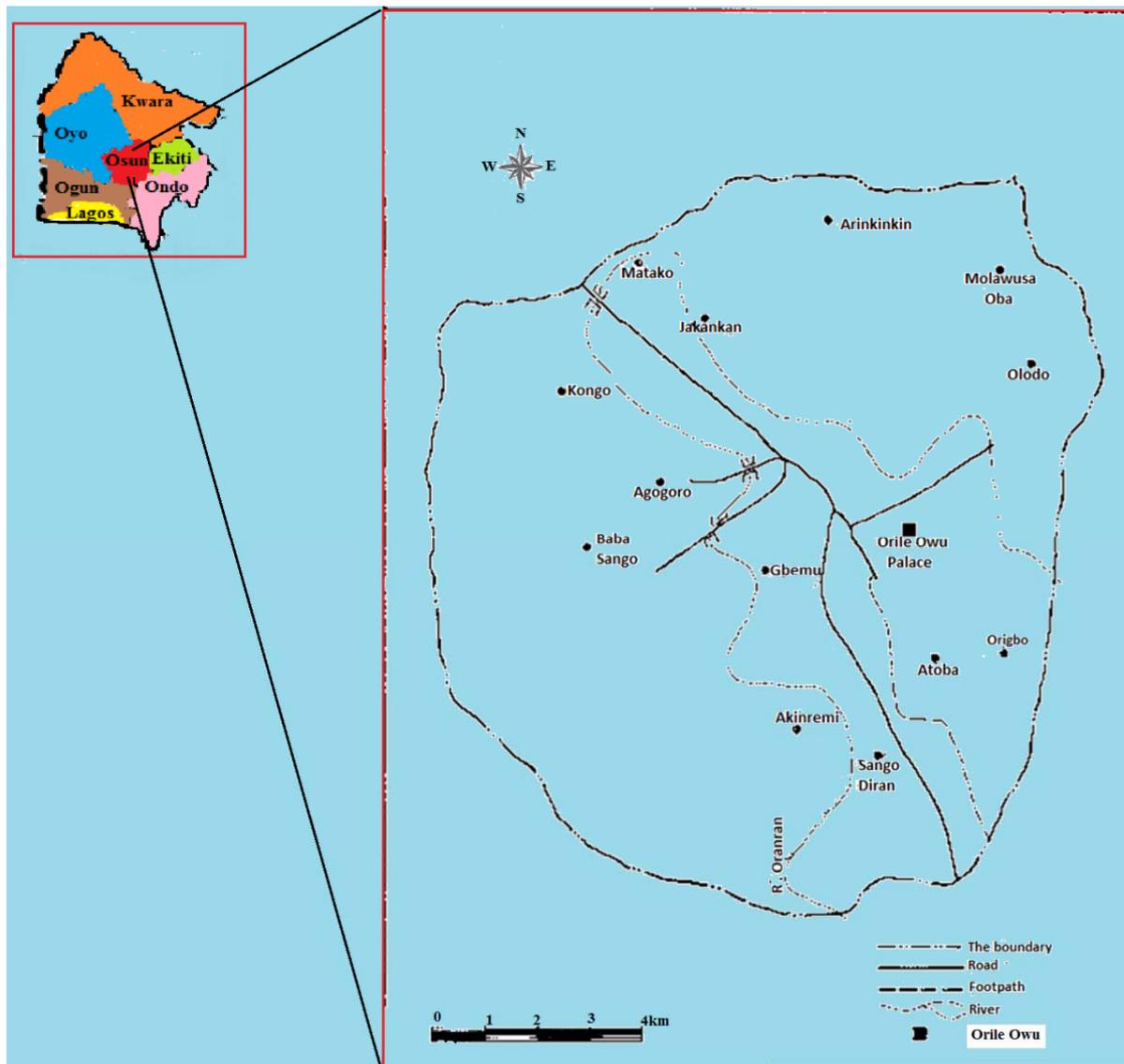


Figure 2: Study area within southwest Nigeria in closer scale, including numerous settlements and location of Orile-Owu Palace.

The people of Owu (*Owus*) are a part of the Yoruba ethnicity in Nigeria. The Yoruba Kingdom extends beyond the boundaries of Nigeria and Republic of Benin. These Yoruba societies constitute a large percent of the total Nigerian population, cutting across numerous cities and states in southwestern, Nigeria. Owu settlements are found throughout the Yoruba Kingdom all of which have historical and cultural affinity to the homeland – that is Orile-Owu. In the Yoruba language, “Orile” means an ancestral home or settlement while the word “Owu” is derived from a cotton plant belonging to the genus *Gossypium*. This plant is called *owu* by the Yoruba. Therefore, “Orile-Owu” means the original settlement site of the Owu people. The early settlers of this kingdom planted and traded in cotton. Hence, this place was called “Igbo Owu” i.e Cotton Forest.

There are a lot of abandoned historical and cultural heritage resources in Orile-Owu. This attests to the heritage of the Owu people as a great kingdom in the past. Moreover, for several years that the ancient town has been in existence, settlement features such as ditches and embankments, refuse mounds, historic buildings, and pottery scatters within the ancient

town (site) are yet to be fully understood especially within the context of how they reflect the antiquity of the settlement on one hand, and how they stand a good chance to investigating the connection between the homeland and outlier Owu settlements in the Yoruba region, on the other hand.

Therefore, the major goal of this preliminary archaeological reconnaissance at Orile-Owu was to identify the existence and occurrence of archaeological features in the study area making use of extensive oral traditions and archaeological reconnaissance survey. This is with a view to explaining and ascertaining the socio-cultural tradition and historical linkages that may exist between Orile-Owu and other Owu communities across Yorubaland. However, more emphasis is laid on Orile-Owu than any other surviving Owu communities because of its abundant archaeological resources such as earthworks and settlement mounds.

Historical and Archaeological Background

According to written sources, The establishment or founding of Owu Ipole (as Orile-Owu was formerly referred to) was shortly after the settlement of Oduduwa in Ile – Ife, therefore they said “Owu Lakoda” meaning Owu was the first to be founded after Ile – Ife is a popular saying among the Yoruba (Mabogunje,1997). It is believed from oral tradition that the Owu occupied an area directly along and below Niger River in the present country of Nigeria. Orile-Owu later expanded and became a very popular and powerful Yoruba settlement, which eventually attained the status of a kingdom of great repute. It became a force to be reckoned with within Yoruba land, particularly between the late 18th and early 19th centuries.

By the second decade of the 19th century, Orile-Owu began to wane down as a result of food shortage, war, and consequently, insecurity of lives and properties resulting from slave raiding. Thus the settlers had to go in search of better economic opportunities, as this was important in ensuring their survival. The Owus therefore abandoned their heavily fortified city and escaped southwest in groups for safety in the face of heavy external aggression (Chief Olalere per comm., 2011).The destruction of the heavily fortified city was caused by the late 19th century intra-sub-ethnic wars. This destruction had its consequences on the people and it is believed to be the reason behind their wide dispersal all over the country. Owu settlements are found today in most Yoruba communities including Abeokuta and Lagos, and as far afield as Igbomina land in Kwara State of Nigeria. The collapse of Old Oyo (in the northern part of Yoruba land), a powerful capital of the Oyo empire in the early 19th century, coupled with the final sack of Orile-Owu in 1825 was instrumental to the demographic changes in southern Yoruba land (Ogundele and Babalola, 2007:60; Ogundele and Ebonine: 2010).

For several years that this ancient town has been in existence, settlement features and artifacts located within the ancient town (site) are yet to be fully investigated. In recent times, a number of research works have been carried out on the history of the Owu by some scholars, but it will be out of place to assume that the whole history of the Owu have been fully researched and documented. This is because some archaeological resources in this area still remain silent under the thick secondary forest vegetation. Therefore, “the newly established interdisciplinary project at Orile-Owu by the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria which engages archaeologists, anthropologists, historians, and palynologists provides an opportunity not just to collect artifacts via excavations, but also to empower such cultural resources to speak of their own with respect to the Owu social life and materiality.

Archaeological research

As mentioned earlier, the archaeological investigation at Orile-Owu is part of the recently initiated interdisciplinary project by the Department of Archaeology and

Anthropology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. This is a long-term project that engages scholars in several historical sciences to address diverse issues regarding the early history of Orile-Owu and the diasporic Owu settlements. However, this paper is only responsible for the preliminary result of the archaeological aspect of the project. Although the archaeological investigation is to carry out both surveys and excavations of the site, so far we have focused almost entirely on the former.

A reconnaissance survey of the settlement of Orile-Owu in Osun State started in the month of May, 2011 by the student of the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology and we returned in July of 2012 for a follow-up survey. This is a follow-up exercise to the limited surveys and excavations earlier carried out (Ogundele and Ebonine: 2010). This exercise is meant to properly identify the location of archaeological sites and features. The writer working with some other researchers took a long field walk noting and documenting archaeological features. We walked over the whole settlement site on foot. The site is a little bit forested but in some parts farming activities were taking place. Heavy vegetation cover led to poor visibility and mobility and this made the reconnaissance very difficult and painstaking. However, some parts were cleared to allow for easy passage with the aim of knowing which artifacts were on the surface of the site. Local informants and guides (numbering four, one of which is the princess of Orile-Owu kingdom) assisted us during this survey. Items of equipment used included prismatic compasses, ranging poles measuring tapes of different lengths, cameras and Global Positioning System (GPS).

The reconnaissance which started from the palace (*afin*) was within the inner defensive ditches and embankments (walls) that surrounded the ancient kingdom. The site was divided into four sections, the North, East, West, and South and all these areas of the settlement site were transverse and mapped. The site was measured to know the total area being studied. Settlement features of archaeological significance such as houses, refuse dumps, palace, pottery scatters and ramparts were discovered on the site. The prominent features were mapped with the use of a GPS (Global Positioning System) and a manual drawing indicating sites and features was also made while moving around the study area.

The surface artifacts discovered were largely potsherds with various decorations and sizes. These were collected as surface collections and were properly bagged and labelled.

FINDINGS

During the course of the research, several relics of the ancient civilization were discovered and studied. This is in addition to the few previously known archaeological features and material remains in Orile-Owu, These findings are as follows:

Refuse/Cultural Mounds

Several ancient refuse/cultural mounds were discovered within the resettlement area and the abandoned part of the site. These reflect past activities done by the Owu people. The mounds were located in an uninhabited part of the contemporary settlement (Fig. 3). Total of four mounds were identified. They are namely Ile-Ejemu, about 200 metres northeast of the palace, and Omokuajo, approximately 250 metres, north/northeast of the palace. Other loci are Ile Apena, ca. 600 metres northwest, and Alagbede, some 500 metres southwest of the palace. One of these mounds had earlier been located and excavated (Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010: 6).



Figure 3: One of the Refuse mounds located at Ile Apena in Orile Owu

Among the materials recovered are potsherds, grinding stones, fragments of metal objects, fragments of chinaware, bone fragments, earrings, stone beads, cowries, snail shells, charred palm kernels and charcoal samples all of which demonstrate the richness of the mound/site. Archaeological process has been used to understand the formation of ancient mounds and their constituent in West Africa (Ogundele and Odunbakun 2006). Following these processes most of the mounds appear to have been formed by collapsed structures and accumulation of garbage in ancient Orile-Owu.

Pottery

One of the signatures of the archaeological potential of Orile-Owu is pottery scatter. Pottery scatter littered the entire site. While many were laying on the surface of the untarred floor, some were intruding out of the ground to the surface. Since it is unethical to uproot those stocked to the ground, some of the surface littered was collected randomly during our reconnaissance survey. This pottery includes both bodysherds and rimsherds. (See fig. 4 and 5).



Figure 4: Scatter of potsherds discovered on the soil surface of the study area.



Figure 5: A close view of one of the scattered potsherds.

Although analysis is in progress, preliminary observation shows that most of the decorative motifs include incision, impression, burnished, string rolling, and stamping. (See figure 6 and 7).



Figure 6: Double twisted cord decoration



Figure 7: Grooves decoration

It should be noted that our pottery analysis is slowed down because of lack of existing pottery typology for ancient Orile-Owu. We plan to develop a typology in near future.

House relics

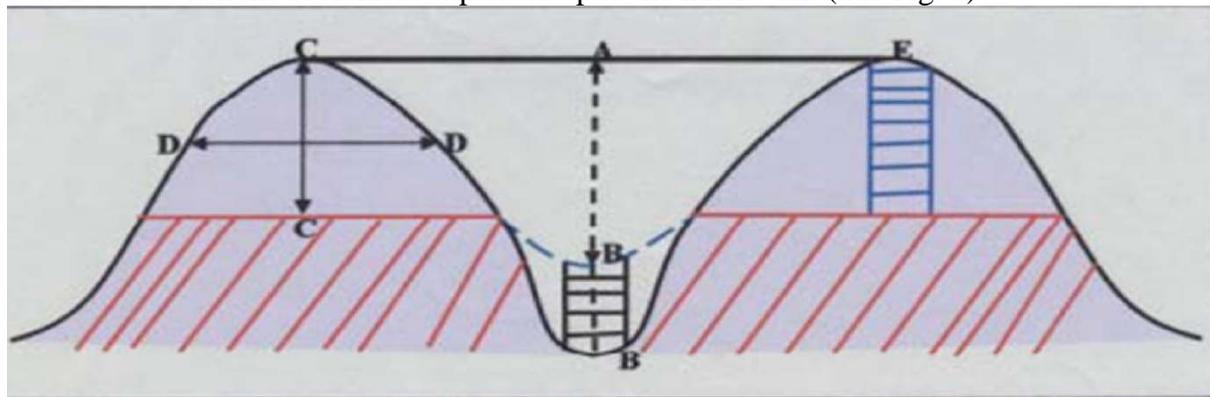
In the study area, a large number of mud houses of historic significance were located during the reconnaissance survey. These ancient buildings are constructed with mud. Among the relics located is the old palace of Orile-Owu. It is located 80 metres north east of the

modern palace. Remnants of wall buildings forming heaps of soil were discovered under the thick forest vegetation. These heaps were covered by numerous cocoa trees and leaves stretching south of the Modern Palace. Most of these heaps are rectangular in shape and are of varying sizes, which suggest collapsed structures.

Defensive ditches and Embankments

There are two circles of the earthworks surrounding the Orile-Owu town. One is the inner one, which is closer to the present settlement area for the Orile-Owu people and the other is the outer one which is much farther away from the centre of the current settlement. The exact or appropriate circumference and hectares of these fortifications could not be clearly seen by the researchers due to the hindrances caused by the large secondary vegetation cover. Only some small sections of the inner wall which has a less vegetation cover was observable during the reconnaissance survey. This was achieved with the help of cutlasses and machetes.

However, from the previous research carried out on Orile-Owu defensive ditches and embankments (Olojede, O.S, 2008), it was recorded that these fortifications vary in height between 7 and 8 m. Along the inner and outer ditches are silk-cotton trees (*Ceiba pentandra*) planted at regular intervals of about 150 metres. In addition, the inner wall covers a small land area, around hundreds of hectares of land while the outer and larger wall was constructed when the settlement expanded up to the inner wall. (See Fig. 8)



AB1 - Current Height of Ditch
 AB2 - Original Height Ditch (Before siltation)
 B1B2 - Depth of Siltation to be excavated to get AB2
 C1AE - Hypothetical Foot-bridge
 C1C2 - Height of Embankment above Ground Surface
 D1D2 - Width of Embankment

 Hypothetical Excavation of Ditch

 Hypothetical Excavation of the Height

Ogundele (2004)

Figure 8: Orile-Owu ancient city walls and ditches

Discussion

Part of the objectives of the reconnaissance at Orile-Owu was to directly observe the nature and patterns of construction of the walls and ditches, the actual widths and heights of the banks, as well as the depth of the ditch. It is uncertain how long it took the people of Orile-Owu to construct such a great edifice. But it was ascertained that the innerwall was built first and the outer one was constructed to cope with the expansion of the settlement later. Kingdoms, in history are known to have built different kinds of fortifications for several reasons. Walls have been built around the territories of towns for demarcating boundaries, to maintain group coercion or to assert local hegemony. The ditches and embankments constructed at Orile-Owu were a defensive mechanism (even though in recent times it has been used as a mean to settle boundary dispute.). This defensive mechanism was said to have been very effective as enemies were not able to penetrate the town in times of war. Even during the war that led to the sacking of ancient Orile-Owu, the enemies could not gain access into the town until the gates were opened due to the intensity of famine that took over the town.

The Orile-Owu fortifications were constructed *circa* the 18th century as the Owu kingdom was growing rapidly in popularity in the midst of enemy communities and neighbours such as the Ife and Ijebu (Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010). According to Soper and Darling (1980), Ditches and embankments were a popular phenomenon in ancient Yoruba land. Such settlements as Old Oyo, Old Ijaye, Orile-Owu, Orile-keesi, Ile-Ife, Okemesi, Ilesa and Ikija had defensive ditches and banks / walls round them in pre-colonial / early colonial times (Soper and Darling 1980; Soper 1993, Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010). Some of these settlements have double walls (inner and outer) while others were single-walled. Ijaye-Orile is a good example of a single-walled kingdom in ancient Yoruba land.

After the destruction of the ancient town, the Owu people migrated southward reaching as far afield as Abeokuta and Lagos. The combined military forces of Ife and Ijebu finally sacked the Owu kingdom in 1825, having started the campaign in 1820. Suffice it to say that the use of superior weapons, known as muskets by the Ijebu, was not the only magic wand that brought the Owu to their knees. Famine and the outbreak of disease were also instrumental in the collapse of the ancient kingdom (Ogundele and Ebonine, 2010). Agricultural activities came to a total halt when the Owu settlers withdrew to their shells (the city walls) for safety in the face of heavy external aggression (Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper 1971). From the outskirts, they marched on and across Osun River and dispersed to several places. The Owu abandoned their heavily fortified city and escaped southwest ward in groups towards Ibadan in about 1826.

In terms of the affinity of Orile-Owu with other pre-18th century larger and important polities such as Ile-Ife, Ijebu and Old Oyo, material culture seems to be significant. Then pottery becomes the number one material culture for seriating social connections and cultural flows. The use of pottery design distribution and levels of similarity to measure interaction is not new in archaeology (Deetz, 1965; Engelbrecht, 1974; Eyo, 1974; Hill, 1970; Ogundiran, 2000; Whallon, 1968). The main assumption underlying these studies is that design distribution patterns directly reflect the nature and intensity of social interaction. Although the use of ceramic stylistic similarity as a measure of the intensity of interaction intensity has been questioned (Plog, 1976, 1980) it appears that if pottery designs were related to interaction, then it would be expected that the degree of design similarity should vary directly with the "physical" and "social" distance between societies.

Archaeologists working on materials culture from major Yoruba archaeological sites have attempted to create Yoruba pottery typologies for understanding migration and cultural affinity among groups. Popular among these works is the one carried out by Willet (1960) at Old Oyo, which established two types of "Yoruba ware" "Diogun" and "Mejiro." Robert

Soper's excavations at Old Oyo from 1973 to 1979 further divided "diogun" and "mejiro" wares into early and late ceramic types based on decoration (Okpoko, 1987; Soper, 1975).

According to these studies, the diogun pottery type is considered to be earlier (dating to AD 1100 \pm 110), and is characterized by brush or broom-marking incisions, rocked-comb impressions, impressed arcs (scallops), knotted roulette, and frond roulette. The mejiro pottery type (dating to AD 1300 \pm 80) is a late ceramic, characterized by carved roulette, snail shell markings, and maize cob roulette (Soper, 1983). Straight thin incisions, twisted string roulettes, and comb stamping are common to both diogun and mejiro wares (Agbaje-Williams, 1983).

Based on the above Yoruba pottery typologies, mejiro pottery type decorations such as carved roulette, maize cob roulette, incision, and twisted sting roulettes were the major decorative motifs found on the surface material at Orile-Owu during the reconnaissance survey. These potsherds belong to the late ceramic decorations. No diogun pottery decoration was discovered during the reconnaissance survey but the mejiro pottery decorations continue to feature in the scheme of things.

If oral tradition suggests that they originated from Ile Ife and migrated southwards to Ibadan as a result of tribal wars and conflict, then the material culture of Orile-Owu and its other neighbouring settlements should show a close relationship. Therefore, the occurrence of the same pottery types in the study area and some other neighbouring settlements suggest greater affinity with other Yoruba metropolises such as Ife and Old Oyo. This reflected resemblance probably suggests or implies a much early contact with Ife-Oyo elements. Currently, much cannot be said of Orile-Owu material affinity because the analysis of the recovered potsherds is still in progress. Further investigation in terms of excavation and laboratory analysis is expected to reveal more about the material evidence of this ancient kingdom.

The nature of the interaction that existed between Orile-Owu and the diasporic Owu settlements is yet to be convincingly established. This is due to a lack of archaeological investigation in most of the outlier Owu communities. To achieve this, the research team would also have to intensify their effort in the collection of oral traditional data in the broad region. This would form the foundation of further archaeological investigations in the near future. That is, an attempt to construct a historical narrative of the Owu from the perspective of diasporic discourse.

Conclusion

The corpus of data analysed and used for preparing this paper derives from the preliminary archaeological survey conducted in Orile-Owu two years ago. This sets the stage for a long-term, intensive and extensive research. Orile-Owu (originally known as Owu-Ipole) occupies a prominent position in early Yoruba history. The kingdom was probably founded about the 10th century AD, given the oral historiographic evidence at our disposal (Johnson 1921; Mabogunje 1971). Oral traditions and reconnaissance survey among other methods were adopted for this research.

Accounts of oral traditions collected tell a lot about the settlement history of the inhabitants. It also broadens our knowledge of the location of archaeological features. Similarly, the reconnaissance survey was able to reveal some of the prominent features on the site. This led to the discovery of several material remains and features associated with human occupation like fortifications, palace complex, rectangular house structures, pottery, stone remains, and mounds among other things.

Much is yet to be done in terms of surveying, mapping and excavation on the site with the respect to the development of a greater understanding of the place of Orile-Owu in the context of Owu migrations and hegemony.

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