

■ NIGERIA

An ethnoarchaeological and archaeological project in Orile-Keesi, Abeokuta, Southwestern Nigeria: A Preliminary report

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Introduction

Research in settlement archaeology is gaining more prominence in Nigeria. This emanates from the awareness of the fact that much can be gleaned from the past cultural, and by extension, social, environment of a people, through rigorous and multi-faceted analyses of artifacts such as pottery, walling systems and iron furnaces. All of these derive from either surface collections and/or excavations (Ogundele 2004). Through this mode of academic discourse, we can begin to deepen our understanding and appreciation of aspects of inter-group relations, of flows and interconnections. This study area, Orile-Keesi and its environs, provides an excellent opportunity for testing this hypothesis.

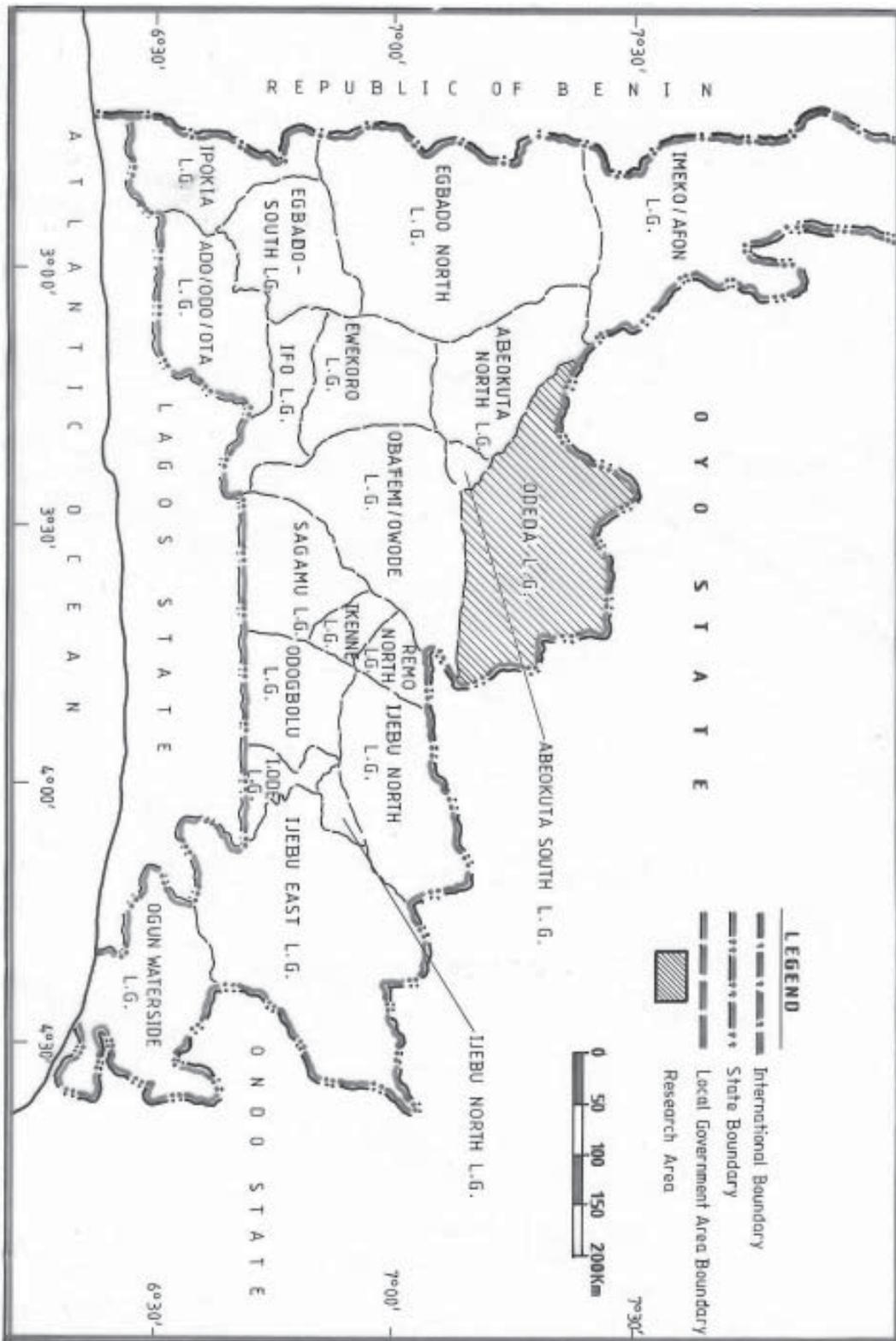
Orile-Keesi is located within the Egba forest in the southeastern part of Abeokuta, the capital of Ogun State. Abeokuta is one of the prominent cities in southwestern Nigeria (Figure 1). "Orile" in Yoruba language means the original homeland of a group of people. Orile-Keesi was an influential settlement until about the first quarter of the 19th century when it fell as a result of internecine struggles and intermittent warfare. Such wars plagued almost every part of the Yoruba nation and shook it to its solid

foundations in terms of politics, economy and world-views (Law 1973; Oguntomisin 1991).

A small portion of this original settlement was re-occupied by some of the descendants of the Egba-Keesi sub-Yoruba group. This re-occupation took place about the latter part of the 19th century AD. The Orile-Keesi experience of warfare, abandonment and eventual re-occupation of a section of the walled kingdom is similar to that of other major ancient Yoruba towns as Orile-Ijaiye near Ibadan and Orile-Owu near Apomu (Agbaje-Williams 2005). Indeed, all these kingdoms among others were victims of the same kind of power struggle. The present-day settlers of Orile-Keesi are basically farmers growing such crops as cocoyam, water yam, yellow yam, white yam, cassava and rice. This is in addition to such tree crops such as oil palm, oranges and mangoes. Palm oil production and pottery making are also important occupations being practiced only by the women. Hunting of game is also an important element of the subsistence economy. The most common animals in the local terrain include canerats and antelopes. The Orile-Keesi hunters use dane-guns, cutlasses and dogs for hunting, although some are more interested in setting traps to catch animals. These iron traps locally called "takute" are produced locally and are of different sizes and shapes. Local deities like "Shango" (god of lightning and thunder), "Ogun" (god of iron and warfare) and "Orisa oko" (god of agriculture) are worshipped by most (if not all) of the people. In addition to this traditional belief system, Islam is still a popular religion. Indeed, devotees of the local deities still practice Islam whenever it is convenient for them to do so.

The goal of the research is to reconstruct, explain and situate the settlement history, spatial behaviour and world-view of the Orile-Keesi settlers in historic/proto-historic times within the broad cultural framework of the entire Yoruba nation (Ogundiran 2005). This goal has necessitated the generation of specific research questions or objectives. They include (1) finding out the history of occupation of the site complex through excavations in order to determine whether or not the site was settled more than once. This is the basis for testing the usefulness of oral traditions for archaeological operations; (2) clarifying our understanding of the significance of the artifacts retrieved from surface collections and excavations. This includes their technology, function and symbolism and their connec-

Figure 1: Map of Ogun State, Nigeria showing the general research area (After Ogun State Tourism Board, 1999).



tions to those of neighbors within and outside of the Egba forest, and (3) developing a clearer understanding of the technology, chronology and sociology of the earthworks in Orile-Keesi.

Reconnaissance Surveys and Excavations

Archaeological reconnaissance and excavations began in this region less than a decade ago. The initial archaeological work benefited enormously from written sources gathered by scholars like Biobaku (1965), Law (1973), Oguntomisin (1991) and Johnson (1921). This is in addition to the relatively rich oral history of the study area. Oral traditions provided information about the circumstances surrounding the rise and fall of the kingdom (Orile-Keesi) in ancient times. The role of the joint forces of Ife, Oyo and Ijebu in destroying Orile-Keesi and the eventual migration of the survivors of several wars to Abeokuta in 1830 are some of the major themes in the history of the region that the oral traditions have enabled us to understand. Our local informants also provided useful information about how the settlers of Orile-Keesi adapted to the challenges of the time. This was by constructing both inner and outer defensive ditches and embankments.

The preliminary survey which began in 1997 involved the use of local guides, informants and some archaeology students, as well as Dr. R. A. Alabi from the University of Ibadan. The local guides led the crew members through the thick forest and farms that dominated the large site. This led to the discovery of remains of defensive ditches and embankments (both inner and outer walls). Several pottery scatters were noticed and a few samples were brought to the laboratory in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Ibadan for analysis. Other artifacts discovered during this initial reconnaissance include iron objects, broken tuyeres and fragments of iron slag. Several mounds were discovered; these were initially erroneously interpreted as defensive ditches, but further survey begun in 2001 revealed that these were indeed mounds produced from collapsed ancient mud buildings.

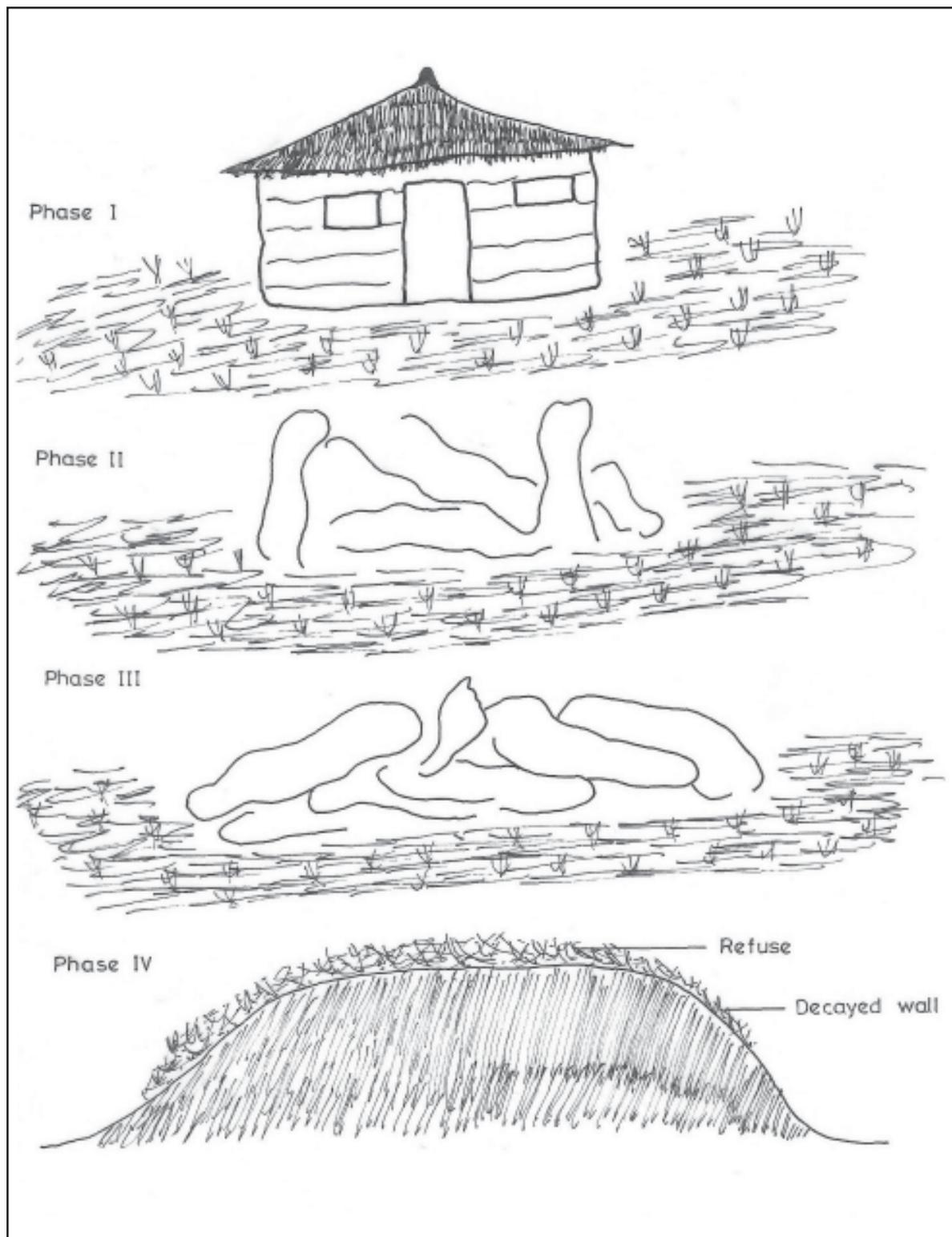
The ditches and embankments were better preserved in the northwestern, southern and western parts of the complex site than in the eastern section. According to the local people interviewed by us, these

earthworks are called "odi". The inner wall is known as "amonu". This was the area of concentration of houses and other numerous activities. The outer wall was basically for security and residential houses were hardly ever erected between the inner and outer walls. However, activities such as iron working (smelting, smithing) and farming were carried out there. According to local information, the outer wall had three gates before the kingdom fell around AD 1830. These city gates linked Orile-Keesi with some of its neighbors such as Erunwon, Ikija and Kemta. But we have not yet discovered these gates due to poor site visibility (resulting from heavy vegetation cover) and poor preservation of the ramparts due to modern human activities like farming and road construction. Poor visibility appears to be a common problem preventing large-scale lateral excavations and surveys of most early urban settlements with ditches and embankments in Yorubaland (southwestern Nigeria). Such walled kingdoms include Orile-Ijaiye, Orile-Oyo (Old Oyo) and Orile-Owu (Owu Ipole or Old Owu). These remain largely hidden under thick tropical forest. This is one of the problems of the archaeology of defensive ditches and embankments in southwestern Nigeria.

The current depths of the ditches vary between 1 and 1.50 meters, while the heights of the embankments range from 1.30 to 2 meters. According to local information, these are a far cry from their original situation. Over time, sand has silted up the ditches, thereby making them much shallower today. The problem of silting up was addressed in ancient times by re-digging the ditches. Actual digging of some sections of these ditches and embankments will soon begin. Such an exercise would enable us to know whether or not these ditches were actually re-dug more than once during the occupation period(s). We are hopeful that some dateable materials would be got from the ditches and banks during the next field season. This would enable us to put the earthworks in their proper chronological order.

Over forty mounds were identified during the reconnaissance. These were originally collapsed mud walls of houses. They gradually decayed to form mounds. According to oral information, ethnographic data and field observations, a collapsed mud house could be used as a refuse mound later by the members of a given compound. Three collapsed mud houses have been located in the contemporary village of Orile-Keesi and each one is now being turned

Figure 2: Mud architecture of Orile Keesi mound showing mound formation and decay processes.



into a refuse dump. We have been closely monitoring these with a view to developing an understanding and appreciation of the nature and rate of decay of mud architecture in the study area (Figure 2).

Suffice it to say that the southern part of Nigeria is well known for mud architecture ranging from the pre-colonial past to the ethnographic present. This is in sharp contrast to northern Nigeria where stone constructions were prominent in the past. Archaeologists working on pre-colonial settlements in southern Nigeria have to be conversant with the rate and pattern of decay of mud buildings today. Such an approach would enable them to disentangle the web of spatial relationships in the pre-colonial past. This exercise derives from our knowledge of the high-profile research of the McIntoshes in Mali (McIntosh 1974; Hodder 1982; Denyer 1978).

Other artifacts recovered or identified during the reconnaissance survey include fragments of iron slag and broken tuyeres. This is in addition to the evidence of blacksmithing in form of hammerstones locally called "omo owu" and stone anvil ("ogun agbede"). The abundant remains of all these objects show that iron metallurgy was intensively practiced in the locality in ancient times. Numerous potsherds with elaborate decorations were seen. These decorations include maize cob, twisted cord roulette, incision and groves.

Excavations

Between 2001 and 2004, two test-pits of 2 by 1 m were sunk on two of the identified mounds, using a 10 cm spit method (TP1 in Mound 1 and TP2 in Mound 2). The first excavation unit was located within an orange orchard which also contains cocoa and oil palm trees. The depth of this deposit was 140 cm. Artifacts recovered during this exercise include potsherds with different shapes and decorations, clay smoking pipes (also with elaborate decorations), local clay lamps, cowrie shells, and metal objects including slag fragments. The excavation at Mound 2 was not as deep as the first one, as it reached the sterile level at 100 cm. But the remains recovered were similar. Detailed analysis of these materials remains to be done. Items recovered include potsherds, iron slag, tuyeres, cowrie shells, grinding stones, clay smoking pipes, local clay lamps and fragments of human and animal bones. A radio-carbon

date of AD 1640 (Beta Analytic) has been obtained from the basal level of one of the excavation units.

Conclusion

The Orile-Keesi archaeological and anthropological project is long-term and broad-based in character. It is aimed at clarifying aspects of inter-group relations in ancient Yorubaland. This ancient Egba kingdom had earthworks that are suggestive of socio-economic insecurity at the time. It fell shortly before AD 1830 as a result of the attacks of the combined forces of the Ife, Oyo and Ijebu sub-groups of the Yoruba. The age of these earthworks and the nature as well as scope of their technology are some of the research questions that we intend to answer as work progresses.

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