

■ NIGERIA

Sociology and Archaeology of Defensive Ditches and Embankments in Orile-Keesi, Abeokuta, Nigeria

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Introduction

Orile-Keesi is in the Odeda Local Government council area of Ogun state in Nigeria. In the Yoruba language, "Orile" means an ancestral home or settlement. Towns and villages formally under the Orile-Keesi kingdom include Olodo, Orile-Ilugun, Kila, Baagbon, Odeda, Sadu and Olugbo. Orile-Keesi is a component part of Egbaland with its headquarters at Abeokuta that also doubles as the capital of Ogun State (Figure 1). The mean monthly rainfall in this region varies from less than 50 mm in January to more than 200 mm in June and July. The climate of the area is a product of the North-South movement of the Inter-tropical Discontinuity (ITD). This can be explained against the background of the hot wet tropical maritime (MT) and the hot dry tropical continental (CT) air masses. The effects of the CT air mass are felt basically between December and January. This brings about dry cold conditions otherwise known as the Harmattan. On the other hand, the effects of the MT dominate the remaining part of the year. However, June and July have the greatest amount of rainfall. The vegetation of Ogun state in general and the study area in particular is divisible into two - forest and savanna. But the combined factors of farming (involving annual bush burning), lumbering and erosion have turned the Orile-Keesi archaeological settlement and its environs into a secondary forest or derived savanna (Gbadegesin 1992; Akanni 1992; Odunbaku 2006).

The ancient kingdom of Orile-Keesi was abandoned before the middle of the 19th century. The

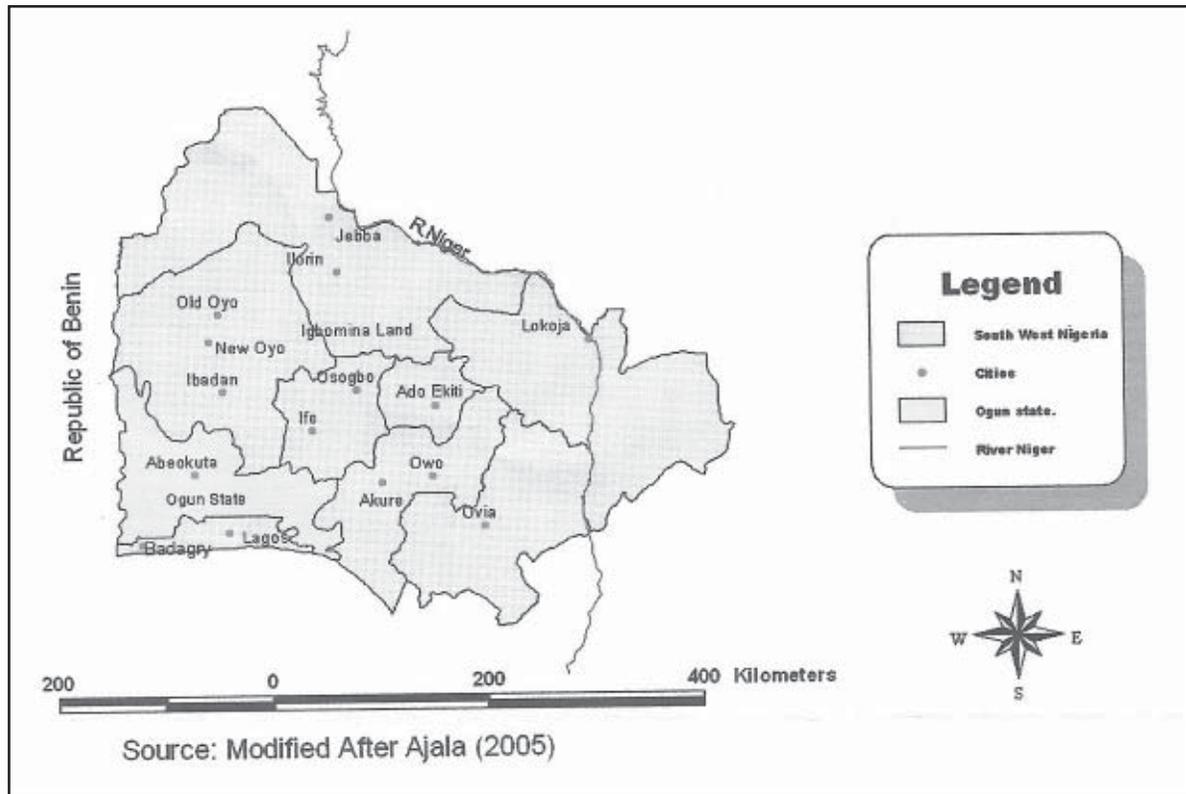
actual factors responsible for this development are still being investigated by scholars in archaeology, cultural anthropology and history (Biobaku 1981; Odunbaku 2006). One thing that is certain, however, is that by 1830, a new settlement had been founded, made up of some people from the Egba forests to the north and as far afield as Old Oyo, Old Ijaye and Orile-Owu. The collapse of Old Oyo (in the northern part of Yorubaland), a powerful capital of the Oyo empire in the early 19th century, coupled with the final sack of Orile-Owu (another kingdom of great repute) in 1825 was instrumental to the demographic changes in southern Yorubaland.

The fleeing refugees and warriors from these troubled Yoruba settlements contributed to the demographic changes and politics in the Egba forests and even beyond. The Orile-Keesi kingdom to the south of Old Oyo was a victim of this socio-political upheaval that reached its apex in Yorubaland in the early 19th century. A small section of this large and walled kingdom (Orile-Keesi) was later resettled by a handful of the descendants of the original settlers. Oral information and written evidence have it that the re-occupation of this ancient kingdom was from about the tail end of the 19th century (Oni 2005, personal communication; Biobaku 1981). By this time, the entire Yorubaland had begun to experience the phenomenon of peace.

The contemporary people of Orile-Keesi are both subsistence and cash-crop farmers. They cultivate such crops as cocoa, kola nut, cassava, maize and a variety of yams. The nearby markets where a lot of these crops are sold include Olodo, Kila, Orile-Ilugun and Odeda. In addition, the people keep domestic animals like goats, sheep and dogs. The religions of the settlers are Christianity, Islam and traditional belief systems. This paper attempts to clarify our understanding and appreciation of the myths, gender issues and the techniques of construction of the defensive ditches and banks (both inner and outer walls) that surround the ancient settlement site. In order to achieve this broad goal, our methods of approach involved the following:

Oral traditional surveys within Orile-Keesi and its environs. These entailed interviewing the head of Orile-keesi and some of his chiefs as well as elders. Both male and female members between the ages of 60 and 90 years were interviewed. Even the younger ones (between the ages of 20 and 59 years)

Figure 1. Southwestern Nigeria showing Abeokuta and some settlements (modified after Ajala 2005).



were not left out. The heads of Olodo and Orile-Ilugun settlements as well as some elders were also interviewed. We used an unstructured (open) approach. The questions that were raised include the following: Are you aware of ditches and embankments within your locality? What are these earthworks for? Who built them and when? When and why did the early settlers of this kingdom abandon the site? Where did they go to after leaving Orile-Keesi? Did they leave Orile-Keesi at once or in batches?

Reconnaissance survey of the region was done by walking over the entire cultural landscape. The first preliminary reconnaissance work was done in October 2001. This exercise was to familiarize ourselves with the area in terms of its archaeological and others related features. More detailed reconnaissance survey and mapping were carried out in December 2001. The exercise was not too difficult to carry out because of the assistance given us by the two local

guides coupled with the information gathered during the preliminary oral traditional survey. In 2005 and 2006, a more problem-oriented reconnaissance survey of the site complex was done. This involved GPS mapping the inner wall and to a lesser degree, the few remains of the outer wall. Some surface material remains, mainly potsherds and iron slag fragments among others were collected. Ethnoarchaeological investigations were also carried out with a view to deepening our knowledge of the local use of space or artifact distribution patterns. Excavations of a section of the inner wall were conducted with a view to developing an understanding of the following issues: techniques of construction of the walls and ditches; establishing the widths and heights of the banks as well as the depth of the ditch at that section; determining the original depth of the ditch through excavation and finding out whether or not it was reduced as a result of silting during its life-span.

Figure 2. Plan of the gridded area and excavation units at Orile Keesi.

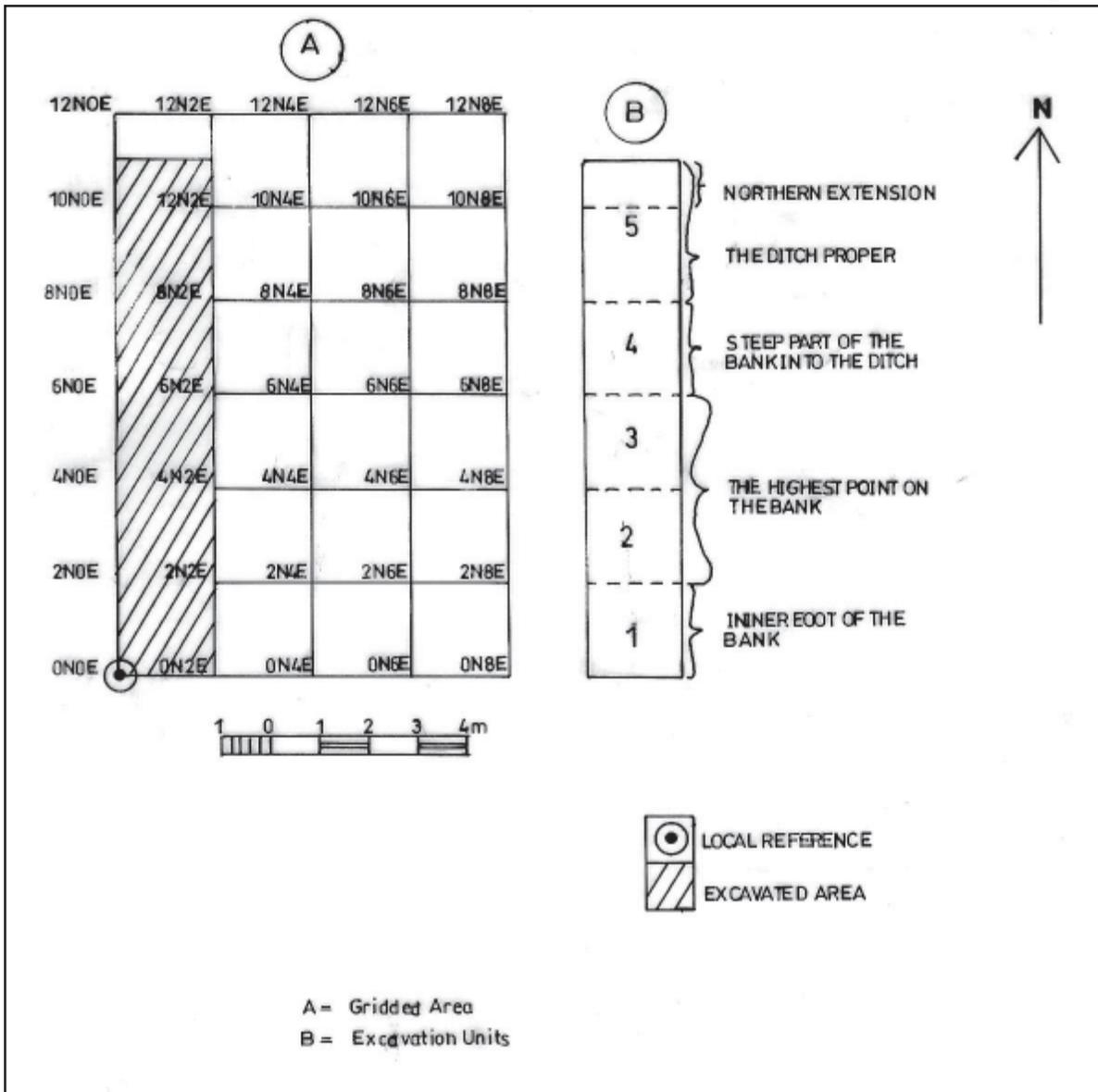
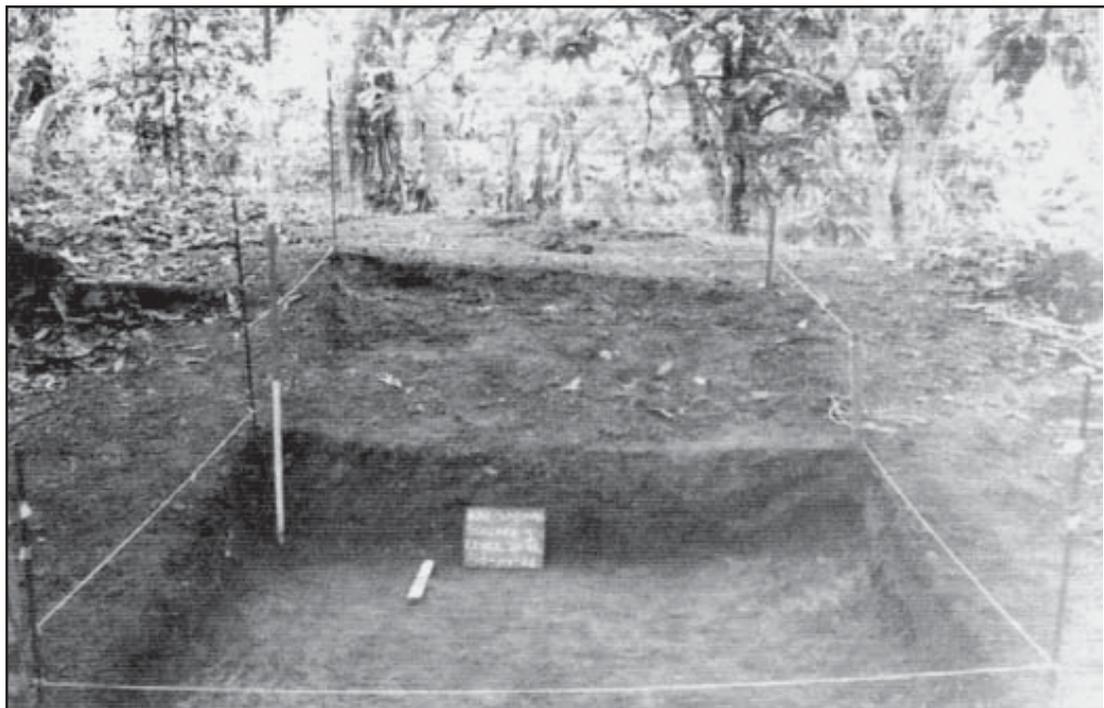


Figure 3. Excavation of the northern inner wall of Orile-Keesi.



Figure 4. Excavation of Squares 1 and 2.



Ditches and Embankments - A Social Context

Ditches and embankments were a popular phenomenon in ancient Yorubaland. 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). 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 Yorubaland. The earth resulting from the digging of the ditch was piled up on both sides to form walls. The spaces between the inner and outer walls were usually the main areas of economic activities like blacksmithing, palm oil production, pottery making and farming. On the other hand, residential area was usually restricted to the inner wall. Both the inner and outer walls had gates usually guarded by local soldiers at night and even during the day. These guards according to local information had both offensive and defensive weapons in readiness for human predatory incursions, a common phenomenon in Yorubaland in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Defensive weapons included charms of different kinds, often sewn to their jackets, caps and underwear. The offensive weapons included cutlasses, swords, bows and arrows as well as catapults. All these were locally produced. However, by the first half of the 19th century, European guns (Danish guns to be specific) and gun powder had been embedded into the Keesi defensive systems. According to oral information, over five guards were in charge of each of the four entrances or gates of the inner wall. The same numbers of gates were made for the outer wall, although poor preservation due to the passage of time and human activities (by later settlers) robbed us of the opportunity of seeing them (gates). The inner wall gates were located to the northern, southern, western and south-eastern corners of the settlement. Construction of motor roads and farming has made it impossible for us to map these gates in their original state.

The Orile-keesi earthworks were a reflection of the territorial consciousness of the settlers arising from socio-political insecurity at the time. In other words, ditches and embankments among other defensive constructions like mud and stone walls mainly in the savanna part of Nigeria are suggestive of mili-

tarism. This is in addition to the peoples' adaptation to the challenges in the pre-colonial / early colonial past. Most prominent towns and villages had ditches and banks round them. These constructions are inseparable from the people's belief systems.

Oral interviews conducted in Orile-keesi and its environs revealed that there are myths surrounding such constructions. This made it compulsory for the head or king to consult Ifa-the oracle for divination about how to embark upon the project and the sacrifices to make to the gods or goddesses as the case may be. Most elders interviewed in the study area, were of the opinion that such a massive project could never be embarked upon without consulting the Ifa oracle. The permission of the gods must be sought to have a success story. Both physical and spiritual powers would be needed. Construction exercise was usually done in the night so that the techniques are not known to outsiders. According to one of the interviewees, this was a military intelligence strategy in ancient Orile-keesi.

Women were not allowed to take part in direct construction work because they were a weaker sex (in terms of physical power) and more importantly, they were in charge of food preparation and drinks for the work party. This food was kept in a designated place where the men would go to eat it. This is a reflection of gender roles. By this arrangement, the women were also indirectly involved in the building of earthworks in Orile-keesi in antiquity. In some Yoruba communities, slave labor was used in the construction. Oral information obtained from Orile-Owu about 150 km north of Orile-keesi, has it that male slaves were used in pre-colonial times for building the defensive earthworks that surrounded the kingdom (M. O. Adejobi 2004, personal communication). The Owu walls and ditches were more massive than those of Orile-keesi. The walls vary in height between 7 and 8 m, whereas the Orile-keesi walls range from 2 to 2.5 m.

The contemporary people still see ditches and banks as the abode of spirits or deities. This explains the reason why some traditional medicine men and women use some sections of them for ritual purposes with respect to healing the sick. In this connection, sacrifices are usually dumped inside the ditches to appease the gods or goddesses. Most of the interviewees were not prepared to share the secrets of these sacrifices to us. It is a taboo for them to do so (Oni 2005, personal communication). All able-bodied

men were made to take part in the construction work because it was their collective responsibility to defend the territorial integrity of Orile-keesi. The king having appeased the gods or ancestral spirits as directed by the Ifa oracle, would then mobilize the entire community. Roles were assigned to males and females. The message was normally sent through the lesser chiefs or “Kabiyesi” (kings) within the kingdom. They ordered the town or village criers to beat gongs around each settlement in order to inform all and sundry about the project and the time of commencement of construction work. This was a good example of community development strategies and mass communication in ancient Yoruba land. Absenteeism was not common according to our local informants. The above explanation shows that indeed, defensive ditches and banks in Yorubaland, like all other categories of human artefacts, are not just about the physical world. They are also connected to the non-measurable world.

Ditches and Embankments – An Archaeological Context

The results of previous reconnaissance involving oral history and ethnography enabled us to decide on where to conduct excavations in January 2006. Our target was not directly about artifact recovery, but basically to excavate sections of the inner ditches and banks. The outer wall was not well preserved, due to human activities in contemporary times. The hard archaeological fieldwork was with a view to finding answers (if possible) to the nature and patterns of construction of these earthworks. Such questions can be broken down as follows. What was the estimated height of the bank? What was the average width of the bank? What was the original depth of the ditch before siltation? What was the average width of the ditch? Was this ditch re-dug or not?

Some artifacts (predominantly potsherds) were recovered during the excavations. They are currently

Figure 5. Stratigraphic profile of Orile-Keesi excavated ditch.

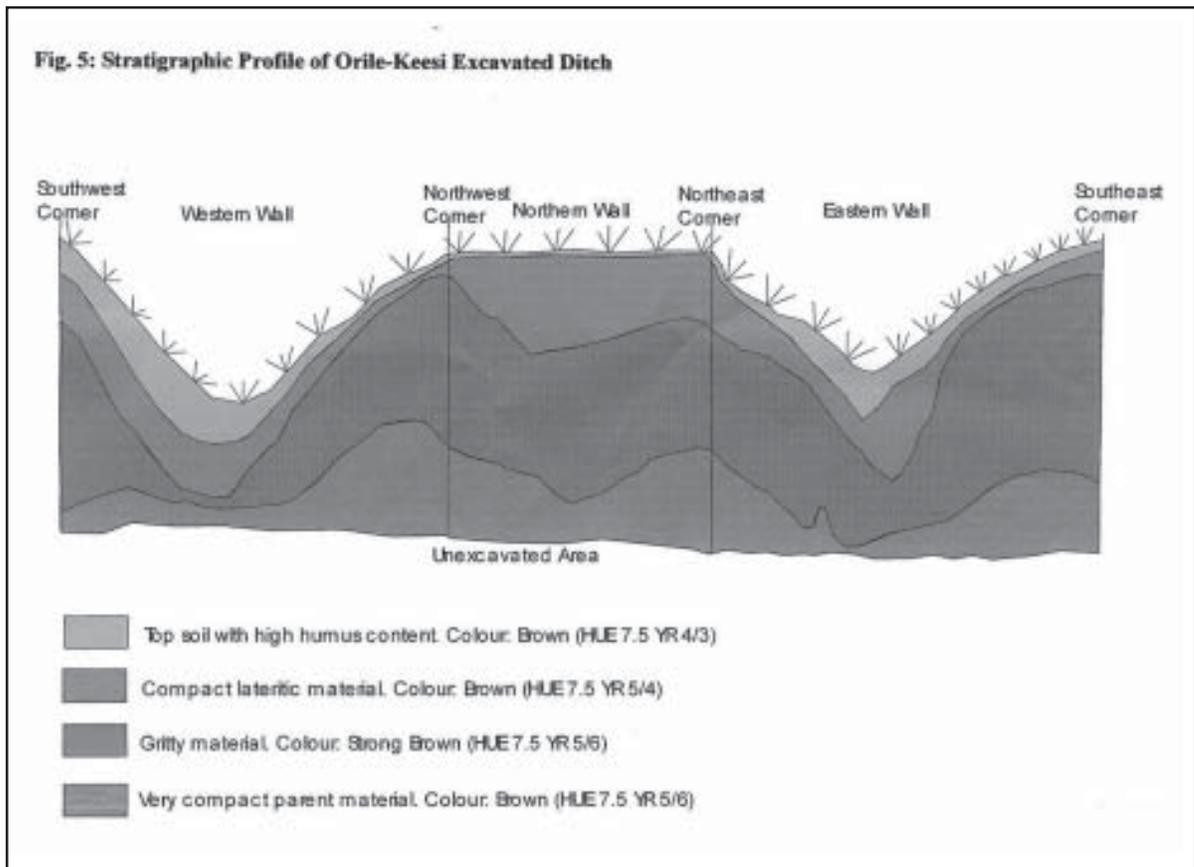


Figure 6. A section of the Orile-Keesi walls showing the ditch and the bank.



being analyzed in the laboratory with a view to throwing more light on the settlement history and technologies of the ancient Orile-keesi people.

The north-western corner of the Baale's (the paramount ruler's) house in Orile-keesi was used as our datum point since there was no feature of greater permanence around. By using the pacing method and prismatic compasses among other items of equipment, we got to a section of the northern part of the inner wall, about 610 m north of the datum point. We decided to carry out excavations here because of the fact that it was relatively better preserved.

An area of 10 m by 12 m was gridded after a local reference point has been established. A big nail (about 6 cm long) was hammered into a cocoa tree nearby. However, we intend to replace this local reference point with a concrete pillar before the next field season. This is to ensure greater permanence. The primary baseline (north-south) was got using

the local datum point as our guide. A set of five 2 m² squares was established in a linear form in the gridded area. In other words, this was a 2-metre interval grid system. The squares were designated 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 (Figures 2, 3 and 4). All were 2 m² except for square 5 which was later extended to cover the entire ditch (2 by 3m). In effect, squares 1-5 cover the entire cross-section of the ditch and banks in that part of the settlement.

Excavation was by 20 cm spit level. This was to get information about the techniques of construction among other things very quickly. Square 1 is the inner gentle slope of the earthwork. Squares 2 and 3 represent the peak of the bank while square 4 is very close to the ditch. The greatest number of artifacts, mainly potsherds (82% of the total), were recovered from this unit. These material remains might have been washed down the pit (or ditch) from the slopes of the banks. Therefore, their usefulness for constructing relative chronology among other things is

very doubtful (Figure 5).

The charcoal samples collected are yet to be dated due to a lack of funds. The only radio-carbon date obtained from the basal level of one of the test-pits in the settlement is AD 1640 (Odunbaku 2006). We need radio-carbon dates from several sections and horizons of excavation units, to obtain a clear picture of Orile-keesi. Such an effort would enable us to have an idea of the time(s) the walls and ditches were constructed, used and abandoned. But so far, we have some knowledge of the construction of these earthworks. The original depth of the ditch was at least 2.60 m (from the bottom of the ditch, before the process of siltation began). However, the depth before excavation was 1.85 m to the peak of the bank. On the other hand, the width of the bank was 8 m. Accumulation of silt in the ditch as a result of water action and to a lesser degree, anthropogenic factors, was 75 cm. The excavation has not shown any evidence of re-digging of the ditch (at least, at the section so far investigated) (Figures 6 and 7).

Conclusion

Sociological and technical factors are very important in developing an understanding of the ancient earthworks of Orile-keesi located in south western Yorubaland. Orile-keesi was one of the major Yoruba kingdoms that fell in the 19th century due to a chain of crises that rocked Old Oyo and Orile-Owu in the northern and central parts of Yoruba land respectively. The role of women cannot also be wished away, even though this is indirect in nature. The women provided support for men by supplying food while the construction work lasted. Similarly, the importance of the gods or goddesses cannot be glossed over in the scheme of things. Oral history and ethnography have been profitably used as adjuncts to archaeology in order to shed more glimmers of light on the gargantuan human artifacts called ditches and embankments at Orile-keesi. However, more archaeological investigations in the study area are needed. For example, there is need for more charcoal samples for dating. This situation

Figure 7. Northern entrance through the inner wall at Orile-keesi.



would improve our understanding of the chronological perspective of the ditches and embankments as well as the entire kingdom.

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