

■ NIGERIA

A Hunter-Gatherer Community in the Rain Forest Belt of Southwestern Nigeria

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Introduction

Since Thurstan Shaw's work at Iwo Eleru in the 1960s, published in 1984 (Shaw and Daniels 1984), there has been only one major piece of work carried out to examine the peopling and subsistence strategies in the forest zone of Nigeria during the Late Stone Age (LSA). This is the work of Fatunsin (1996) at Ifetedo in Osun State, Southwestern Nigeria. Shaw's excavation at Iwo Eleru was a celebrated piece of work. It produced the skeletal remains of the Iwo Eleru man, dated to 11,000 years before present (Shaw and Daniels 1984) supposedly the oldest man in West Africa.

Prior to Shaw's work at Iwo Eleru, it was believed that the forest zone of West Africa would have been uninhabitable for a non-metal using community. However, Shaw's work debunked this erroneous be-

lief. This present work is aimed at providing further data on the nature of the environment, the peopling of the forest zone of West Africa, as well as the cultural dynamics and subsistence strategies in the forest zone during the LSA.

The Site

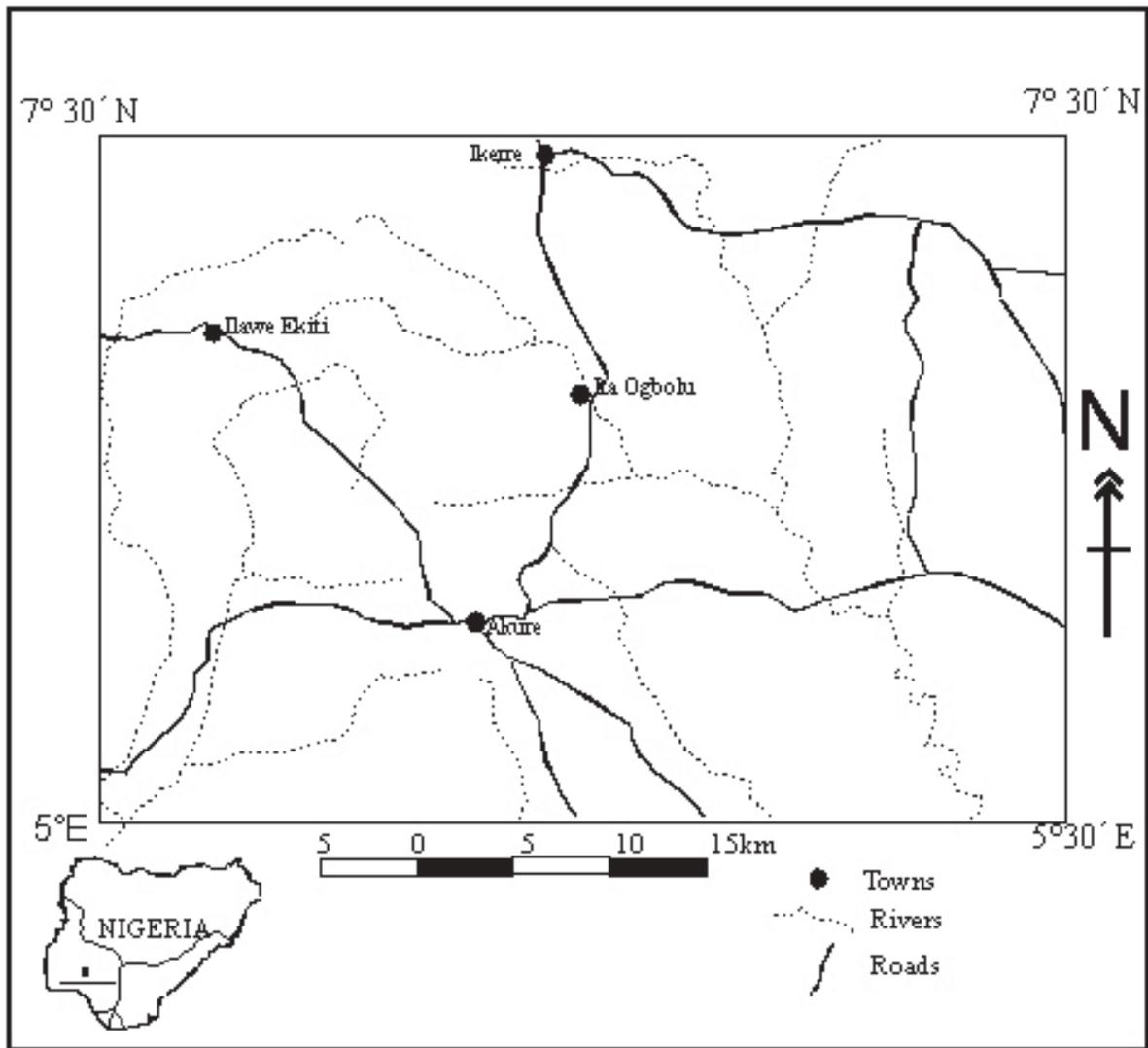
The rock shelter reported here is located at Ita-Ogbolu in the rain forest belt of Southwestern Nigeria. Ita-Ogbolu is situated on the Akure – Ikere-Ekiti road (Figure 1). The rock shelter itself is located opposite the Ondo State Local Government Staff Training School on the outskirts of the town. It is located within the high forest belt. The vegetation of the area is made up of a variety of forest species, although anthropogenic factors (high rural population density, shifting cultivation annual bush burning) would appear to have contributed to the degradation of the original forest vegetation, leading to the occurrence of patches of what could be described as 'derived savanna' within the forest milieu. The most important forest tree species in the area include *Elaeis guineensis*, *Milicia excelsa* and *Adansonia digitata* (Baobab), *Azalia africana* (Mahogany bean), *Alcornea cordifolia*, *Ceiba pentandra* and *Triplochiton scleroxylon*. *Raphia* palm (*Raphia vinifera*, *R. suderica* and *R. hookeri*) occur at the flooded stream beds. The most prominent weed is *Chromolaena odorata* (syn. *Eupatorium odoratum*) while the most abundant grasses are 'eekon' (*Panicum maximum*) and *Andropogon ctenium*.

The occurrence of the rock shelter was first reported by a team of researchers from the Nigerian National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Two rock shelters were identified at the site: a bigger one, which contained substantial surface materials especially microliths and pottery, and a smaller one, which contained no surface materials. They are both separated by a distance of some few metres.

Excavation

The bigger rock shelter, which measured about 30 m by 4 m in extent, was selected for excavation. It was selected because of the presence of substantial surface materials, notably microliths and potsherds. A 1.5 m by 1 m test pit was laid out very close to the lower end of the outcrop, within the drip line. The test pit could not be bigger due to the presence of

Figure 1: Map showing the position of Ita Ogbolu.



boulders. But the possibility of expanding this should be considered during another round of work at the shelter. The smaller rock shelter should also be excavated. Digging was done at 10 cm spit intervals, and a maximum depth of 90 cm was reached. Ash was present from the surface to 40 cm at the northern end of the test pit.

Materials Recovered

Microliths and ceramic materials constituted the highest proportion of materials recovered from the site. Microliths and other core tools were recovered from all levels and they totaled 2,498 items in-

cluding pieces of fallen rock debris. The total number of ceramics was 1,381 (Table 1).

Other artifacts include charcoal, palm kernel, metal pieces, animal bones, snail shell, cowrie shell, beads, petrified wood and plant seeds. The highest proportion of lithic material came from level 30 cm – 40 cm and, of the lithic materials from all the levels, microliths constitute over 80% of the total. Three major raw materials were used for the manufacture of the lithic tools. These are quartz, chalcedony and rhyolite; the foremost however constitute a very small fraction. More than 80% of the tools are points and triangles. Ground stone axes were not common; the only piece of ground stone axe was recovered from

Table 1: Ita Ogbolu rock shelter – inventory of finds.

	Sur-face	0-10 cm	10-20 cm	20-30 cm	30-40 cm	40-50 cm	50-60 cm	60-70 cm	70-80 cm	80-90 cm	Total	%
Ceramics	25	119	173	603	276	74	89	9	13		1381	91.2
Metal pieces		4	3	6		3	1				17	1.1
Animal Bone		2	30	17	15	32	*	*	*	*	96	6.3
Charcoal		+	+	+	+	+	+					
Cowrie Shell			2								2	0.1
Snail shell			+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+		
Bead			2	3						1	6	0.4
Palm kernel							1				1	0.06
Clay lump			2	1							3	0.2
Seed				1				1	1		3	0.2
Cast of an object				1							1	0.06
Petrified wood (?)				1		3					4	0.3
Total	25	125	212	633	276	112	91	10	14	1	1514	

Note : + = present * = Abundant (over 32)

level 30 cm – 40 cm. Recovered along with this ground stone axe are two upper grinding stones and some pieces of ground or polished haematite (jasper).

The greatest proportion of ceramics came from levels 0 cm – 50 cm and there was a considerable decrease in ceramic proportion from level 40 cm – 50 cm. Animal bones and snail shell were recovered from all levels. The bones seem to be from small and medium-sized animals. The snail shells are those of giant land snails (*Archachatina Sp.*) and small sized snails. Cowries occurred from levels 0 cm – 30 cm whilst pieces of metal, which were probably arrow heads/harpoons were restricted to the upper 50 cm. The beads recovered from these levels were quartz beads, and they ranged in colour from colourless/white to pink. The cast of a yet to be identified object came from level 20 cm – 30 cm.

Flakes formed the highest number of finds at the site (42.0%) followed by wastes. Of all, the flake tools, triangles or points formed about 15.0% of the total finds. This shows that the most common tool

type was the triangle/points. In order of significance, this is followed by side scrapers.

Discussion and Conclusion

Two phases of occupation are delineable from the excavation of the Ita-Ogbolu rock shelter. This is a lower aceramic phase, which can roughly be estimated as spanning levels 50 cm – 90 cm, and an upper ceramic phase, occurring from levels 0 cm – 50 cm. Microliths dominated the aceramic level. It is evident that the main subsistence economy of the occupants of the rockshelter was hunting and possibly gathering. The animals hunted seem to have been more of small and medium-sized ones. The people possibly gathered the fruits of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*), although the palm kernel recovered is minimal. The environment then was probably not densely forested, probably similar to the present. This is because the oil palm is said to regenerate and grow well in an environment where the forest is not dense or where the forest has been opened (Sowunmi 1999).

That the environment was wet and the vegetation forested is not in doubt. In addition to the above suggestion, the occurrence of snail shells throughout the levels supports this claim. Such land snails also suggest a wet environment (snails are known to thrive well within the forest proper or at river valleys with forest vegetation (gallery forest).

It appears there was a change in the niche and subsistence of the people from a predominantly hunting and gathering economy to that of food production and processing from level 30 cm – 40 cm onwards, although hunting was still very important. By this time, pottery had become important in food processing. Of significance is the presence of ground stone axes and two upper grinding stones at this level. Both are known to have been important in food production/ processing in prehistoric times. Ground stone axes are also believed to have been used for the clearing of the forest preparatory to planting, as well as for other activities such as digging of tubers, rituals and other religious purposes, and trading, (Alabi 1998). This site shows close affinity and similarities in many respects to Iwo Eleru, which is found within the same geographical region. One such similarity is in pottery decorations. For instance, circle impression combined with short inclined grooves, and comb stamping. However, while comb stamping is most common at Iwo Eleru, double string roulette is most common at the present site.

No radiometric date is yet to be obtained for this site. But we are hoping to obtain dates in the near future. It is nevertheless evident that we are dealing with a Late Stone Age site. Tentatively, recourse is made to relative dating. Rouletting has been associated with the later part of the Late Stone Age (LSA), which is the first millennium BC, whilst comb stamping is associated with dates in the second half of the 4th millennium BC (Shaw and Daniels 1984). At the present site, sherds with comb stamping and wavy line impression occur from level 40 cm - 50 cm. At that level too, pieces of metal (arrowheads or harpoons?) also appear, while pottery became more abundant. Thus, tentatively, we suggest that level 40 cm – 50 cm possibly marks the transition from Stone Age to Iron Age and probably ranges in date from the 1st millennium BC to the 2nd millennium BC.

In conclusion, the present site has both aceramic and ceramic levels of occupation, like Iwo Eleru and Ifetedo in the rain forest, Afikpo, Dutsen

Kongba, Mejiro cave and Rop rockshelter in the savanna, and Kagoro in the Sahel.

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