

■ NIGERIA

Owu History in an Ethnoarchaeological Perspective

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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 mean temperature is about 28°C. Rainfall is high, 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; Adejobi, personal communication 2001; Adejuwon 1974).

The vegetation type in this area is rainforest, although it is secondary in character. The locally available tree species include oilpalm (*Elaeis guineensis*), iroko (*Milicia excels*), mahogany (*Entadrophragma cylindricum*), arere (*Triplocyton scleroxylon*), and teak (*Tectona grandis*). This underscores the reason why a forest reserve was established here more than four decades ago by the government. 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 (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

The Owu are a sub-ethnicity of the Yoruba in the southwestern region of Nigeria. Orile-Owu (mean-

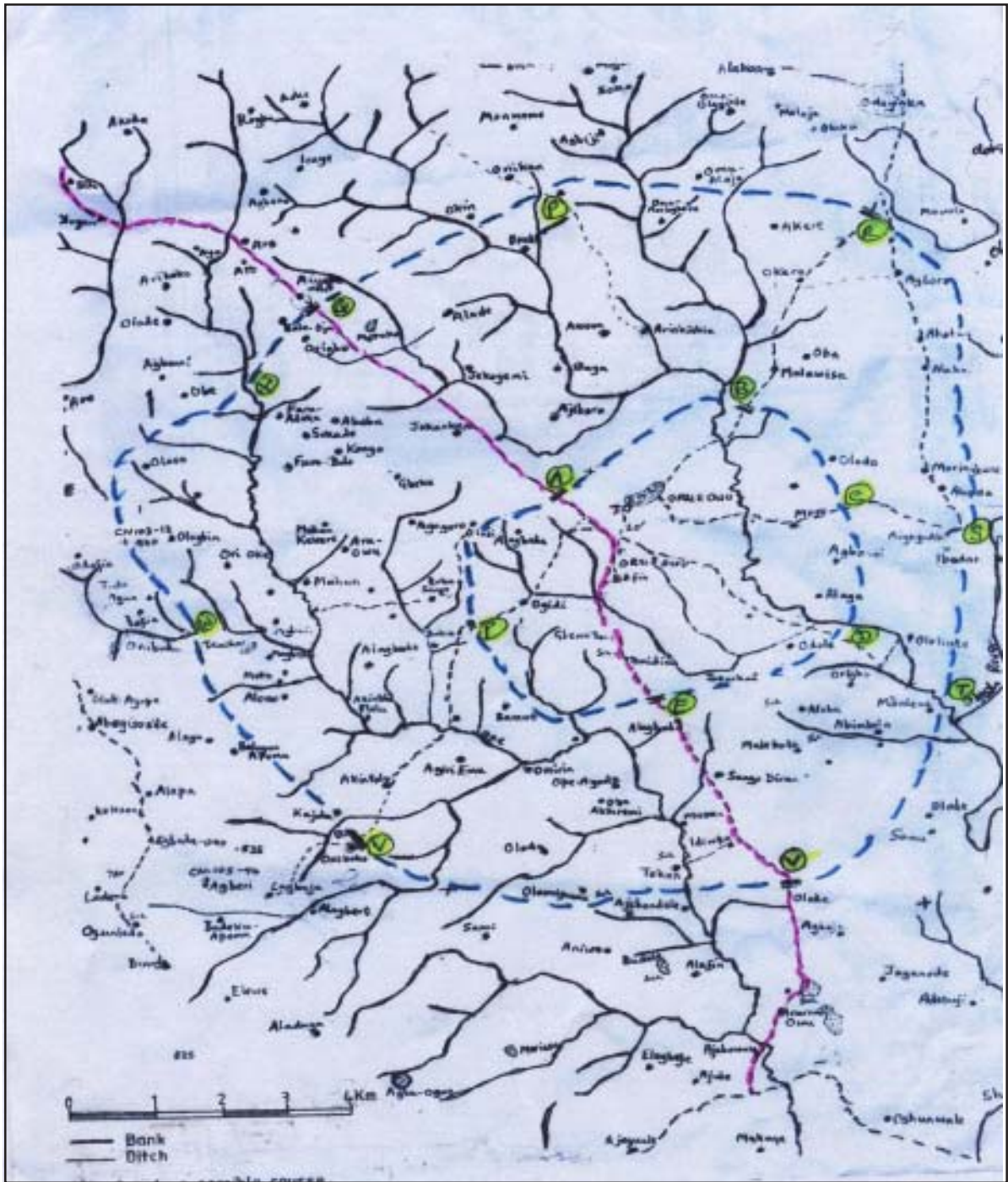
ing the original settlement site of Owu) derives its name from a cotton plant belonging to the genus *Gossypium*. This plant is called *owu* by the Yoruba (Oseni, personal communication 2010; Omowunmi, personal communication 2010). The early settlers of this kingdom were well known for cotton production. However, the region was originally known as Owu-Ipole before it was changed to Orile-Owu (Adedeji, personal communication 2010; Babarinde, personal communication 2010).

According to oral traditions and written sources, Orile-Owu was founded *circa* the 10th century AD (Johnson 1921; Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper 1971). It grew gradually in population and later became a force to be reckoned with within Yorubaland, particularly between the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Economic prosperity arising mainly from large-scale cotton and palm oil production, as well as military prowess, was responsible for the great reputation of the Owu people during the that period. Not unexpectedly, Owu neighbours such as Ife and Ijebu became envious and afraid of the growing power of this kingdom. The Owu kingdom was made up of numerous settlements including Ajiboro, Arosun, Jakankan, Alade, Jekoyemi, Akere, Olodo, Alaga, Mahun, Sangodiran, Origbo and Atoba. These fortifications represent an indigenous knowledge system of earth engineering (Darling 1998). They were in the form of ditches and embankments for defence and are well preserved up to the present day. Only a few sections have been seriously obliterated as a result of modernization actions, e.g. road construction. The inner and outer walls as well as ditches can be admired, reflected upon and scientifically studied in order to engender knowledge (Ogundele 2004; Ogundele and Babalola 2007: 60-69).

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. 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).

The Owu army, under the leadership of such great generals as Anlugbua and Sakula, depended

Figure 1: The inner and outer walls of Orile-Owu Kingdom.



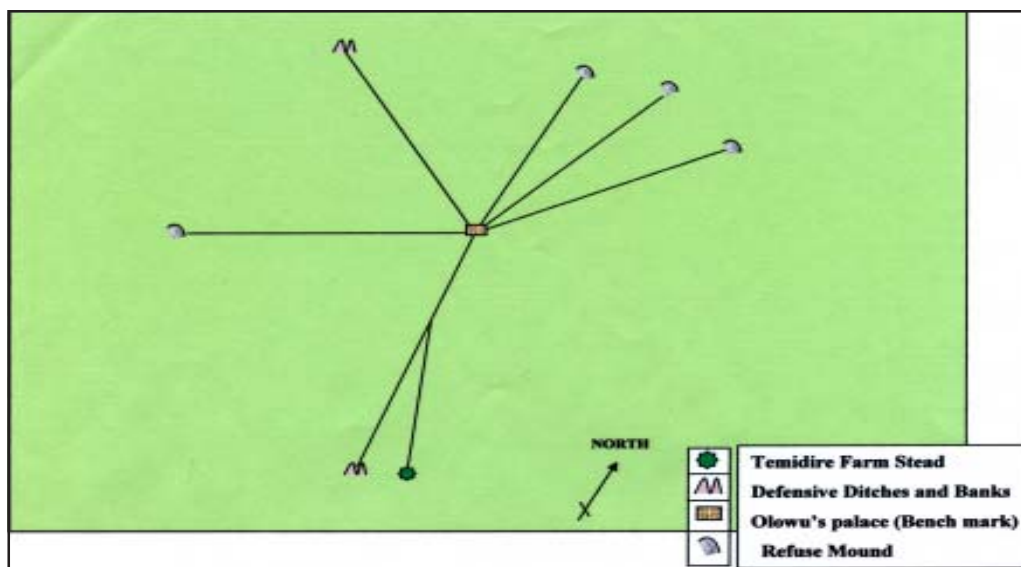
mainly on offensive weapons such as cutlasses and swords. This was in addition to the use of amulets or charms for defensive purposes. These warlords were later deified and up to now, annual festivals are or-

ganized in their honour. The Ijebu, following their close contact with the European traders on the coast, were the first sub-group to use muskets in Yoruba warfare. By and large, this turbulent situation in much

Figure 2: Vegetation cover of Orile-Owu.



Figure 3: Obalufon River.



(if not all) of Yorubaland, particularly in the 19th century, was not unconnected with transoceanic entanglements (Uya 2003). One consequence of the above development was the change in demographic patterns of Yorubaland.

The Owu survivors moved in different directions for refuge, particularly to southern Yorubaland. This explains the reason why Owu settlements are found today in most Yoruba communities including Abeokuta and Lagos, and as far afield as Igbominaland in Kwara State of Nigeria. Notwithstanding the relatively recent occupation of Owu indigenes in these localities (a post-1825 phenomenon), these Owu continue to maintain their distinctive cultural identities including their kingship system (Oseni, personal communication 2010).

However, some descendants of the early Owu people, who left their ancestral homeland near Apomu in the Ayedaade Local Government Area of Osun State, returned later to settle within the abandoned geopolity. These contemporary Owu maintain their loyalty to the Olowu of Orile-Owu, the paramount ruler of the territory. The Olowu represents the heart and soul of the Owu kingdom. Some efforts are being made gradually by us to transform relics of this ancient civilisation (with emphasis on the defensive ditches and embankments, refuse dumps, houses and palaces) into tourist attractions (Odunbaku 2008; Ogundele 2004, 2006: 115-120).

But despite the abundant historical and cultural heritage resources of this region (Owuland), it is still a rural and a sleepy backwater. The archaeological resources remain silent under the thick secondary forest vegetation. It is an irony that the Owu kingdom, which according to oral traditions and written sources was second among the Yoruba only to Ile-Ife in terms of its considerable antiquity and greatness, it is largely under-researched. This is with regard to the reconstruction of its history and civilization (Mabogunje and Omer-Cooper 1971). A popular Yoruba adage, which is stated below, is an epitaph to Owu's considerable antiquity:

*“Owu la ko da
Bi e ba de Ife
Ki e bere wo.”*

It is translated thus:

*“Owu was the first city to be founded
after Ile-Ife.
When you get to Ife, please find out.”*

Therefore, the major goal of this preliminary archaeological and ethnographic research in Orile-Owu in February 2010, was to reconstruct and explain aspects of the people's material life including their use of space through time. This is with a view to engender, among other things, archaeo-tourism development in the region in the near future.

Methodology

1. Oral tradition

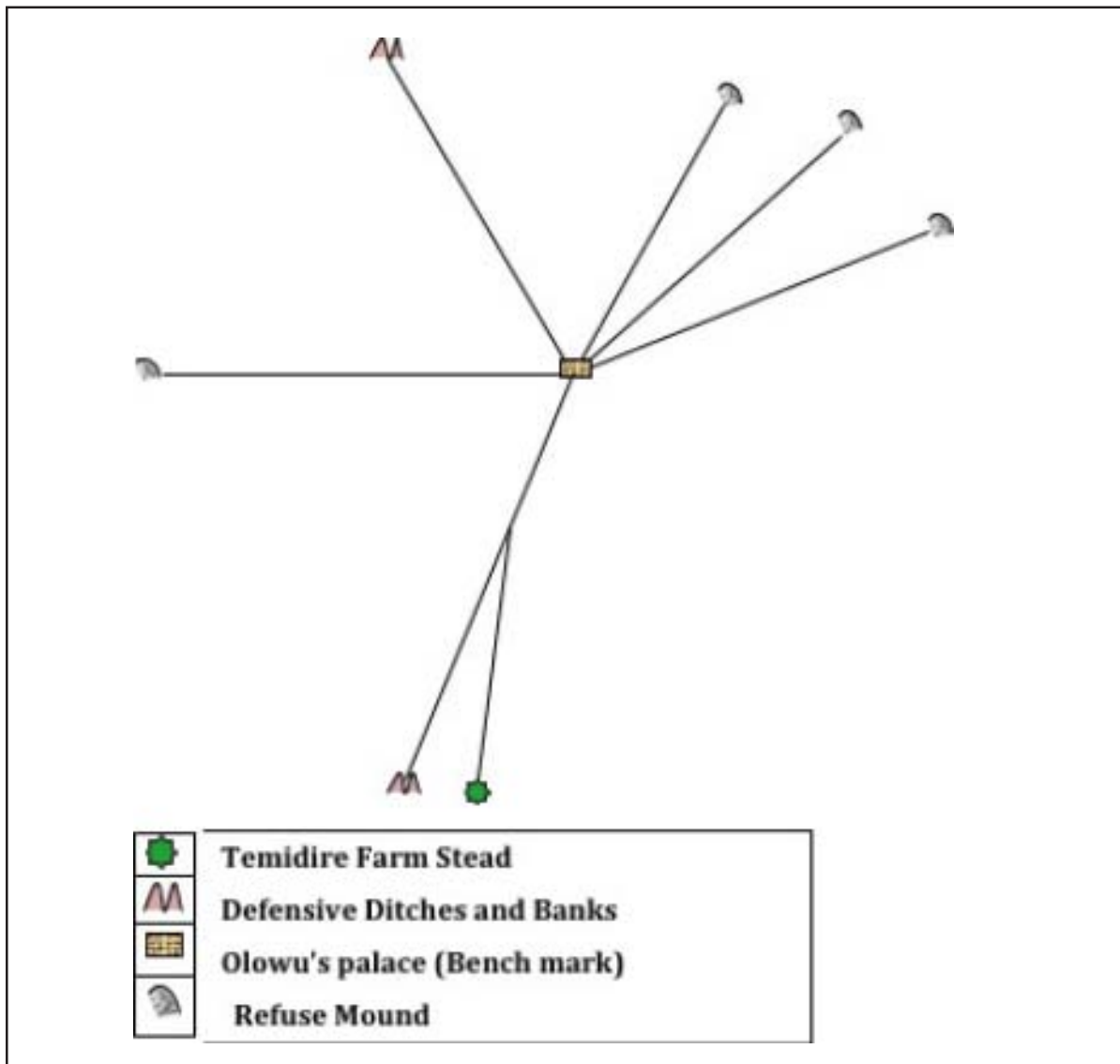
This entailed interviewing (using an unstructured approach) a broad range of people in Orile-Owu and its environs. These interviews included the Olowu (paramount ruler), local chiefs, farmers, blacksmiths, hunters, pottery makers/sellers and traders. The informants belonged to different age brackets. The youngest interviewees ranged from 20 to 25 years of age, while the oldest category was between 25 and 85 years. Apart from collecting data from the locals based on their different livelihoods and ages, gender was also addressed.

Some of these interviewees were revisited with a view of checking the authenticity of their earlier claims concerning Owu settlement history and material life in general. On two occasions, the palace served as a locus for Focus Group Interviews. The assistance rendered by the Olowu – His Royal Majesty, Oba M.O.A. Adejobi, paved the way for smooth interview sessions with a cross-section of the indigenes. These indigenes came to the palace to do one thing or the other. All the above efforts were an attempt to collect oral tradition data that are as close to reality as possible. This was as a result of our conviction, that representativeness is central to sound oral historiographic research.

2. Ethnography

This branch of anthropology is useful for archaeological purposes and consequently, it puts enormous emphasis on the systematic study of facets of the material correlates of the contemporary Owu culture. This is with a view to enabling us to better understand, appreciate, and explain a given set of archaeological occurrences or data. In this connection, we critically examined the use, re-use and discard of pottery among the present-day people of the Orile-Owu community. The minimum study of ethno-

Figure 4: Compass traverse map of settlement features at Orile-Owu. Scale: 1: 4000cm.



graphic pottery was done so as to shed more light on the available archaeological potsherds. This is with regard to aesthetics and functionality. The exercise also entails a close study of mud architecture including its processes and/or patterns of decay through time. An attempt was also made to deepen our knowledge of how grinding stones could have been used in the archaeological context, based on ethnographic findings.

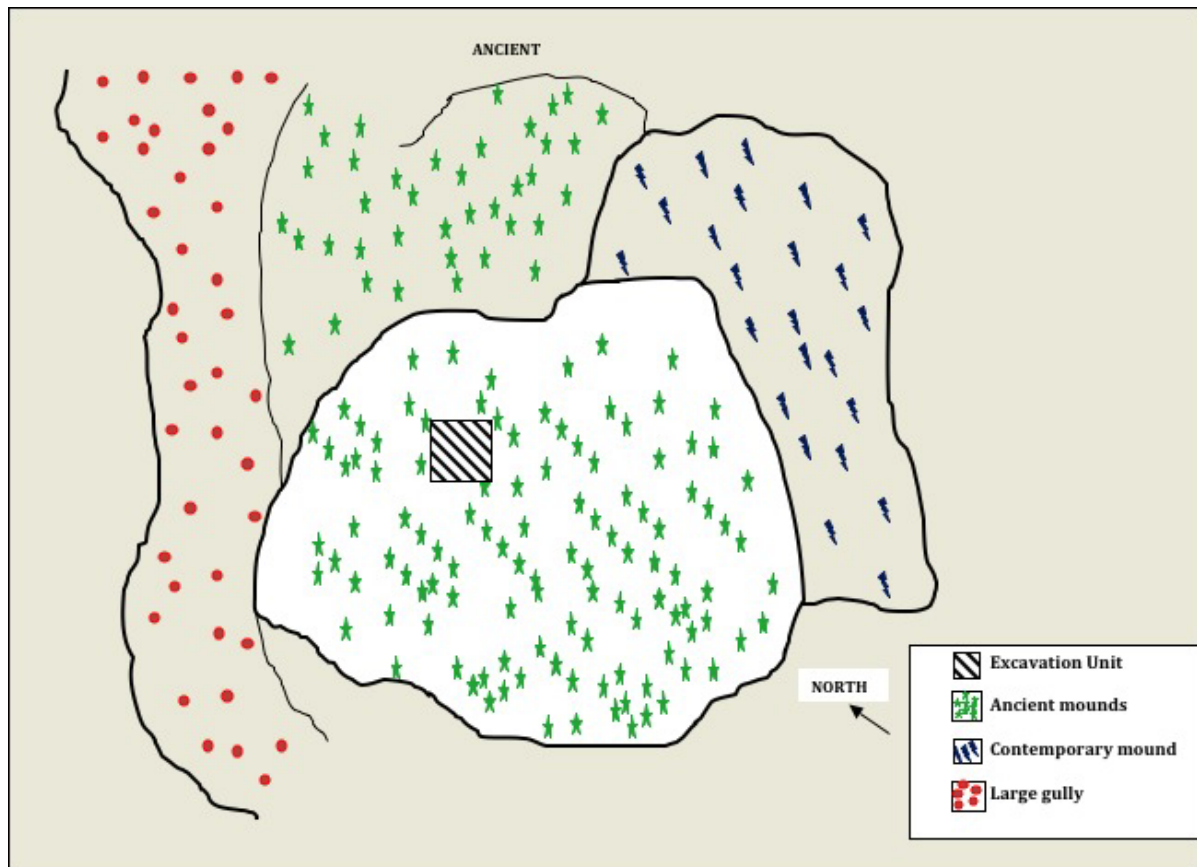
A considerable amount of success was made in this connection. There was no communication gap between the researchers and local community

members, whose household artifacts and the ways they were used, re-used, and discarded, were being investigated. The ethnographic survey revealed a great deal of continuity in the material behaviour/expressions of the Owu people through time. In other words, oral historiographic possibilities, ethnography, and archaeological realities mesh (Bentley and Ziegler 2003; Kottak 2004; Oke 1984).

3. Reconnaissance/archaeological surveying

This is a follow-up exercise to the above two methods. Site survey is basically the process of sys-

Figure 5: Orile-Owu 2010. 00/IW/Mound 1 and the adjoining features. Scale: 1:100cm.



tematically locating and recording settlement features of archaeological significance such as houses, refuse dumps, pottery scatters and ramparts within a site. Local informants and guides (numbering five) assisted us during this survey, which involved reconnaissance of the broad territory. Items of equipment used included prismatic compasses, ranging poles, measuring tapes of different lengths and cameras. The reconnaissance which started from the palace (*afin*) was within the inner defensive ditches and embankments (walls) that surrounded the ancient kingdom.

The bottom line of our efforts is to gain a better understanding and knowledge of the archaeological situation of the area. Suffice it to say, that the knowledge of how the early settlers of the region conceptualized space, was a pre-condition for deciding profitably on where to carry out some excavations later. However, heavy vegetation coverage led to poor visibility and mobility. These two conditions made reconnaissance very difficult. Ancient refuse mounds

were discovered within the re-settlement area. The loci include 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 (Figures 4 and 5).

Excavation Methods and Procedures

The Alagbede refuse mound was covered in a one-metre interval grid after a local datum point had been established. To achieve this, a north-south baseline was determined with the aid of a prismatic compass, ranging poles, and a quick-set. The ancient refuse dump and the adjoining area were also mapped. After this, a 2 x 2m trench was opened on the mound. This was designated OO/IW/MD1/TP1 (Figure 6). It means Orile-Owu, Inner Wall, Mound 1, Test Pit 1. Items of equipment used for this excavation include trowels, head pans, hand pans, 3.5 metre tape, ranging poles and brushes.

Figure 6: Sterile layer.



Figure 7: 00/IW/MDI/TPI. Stratigraphy of the northern wall. Scale: 1:10cm.

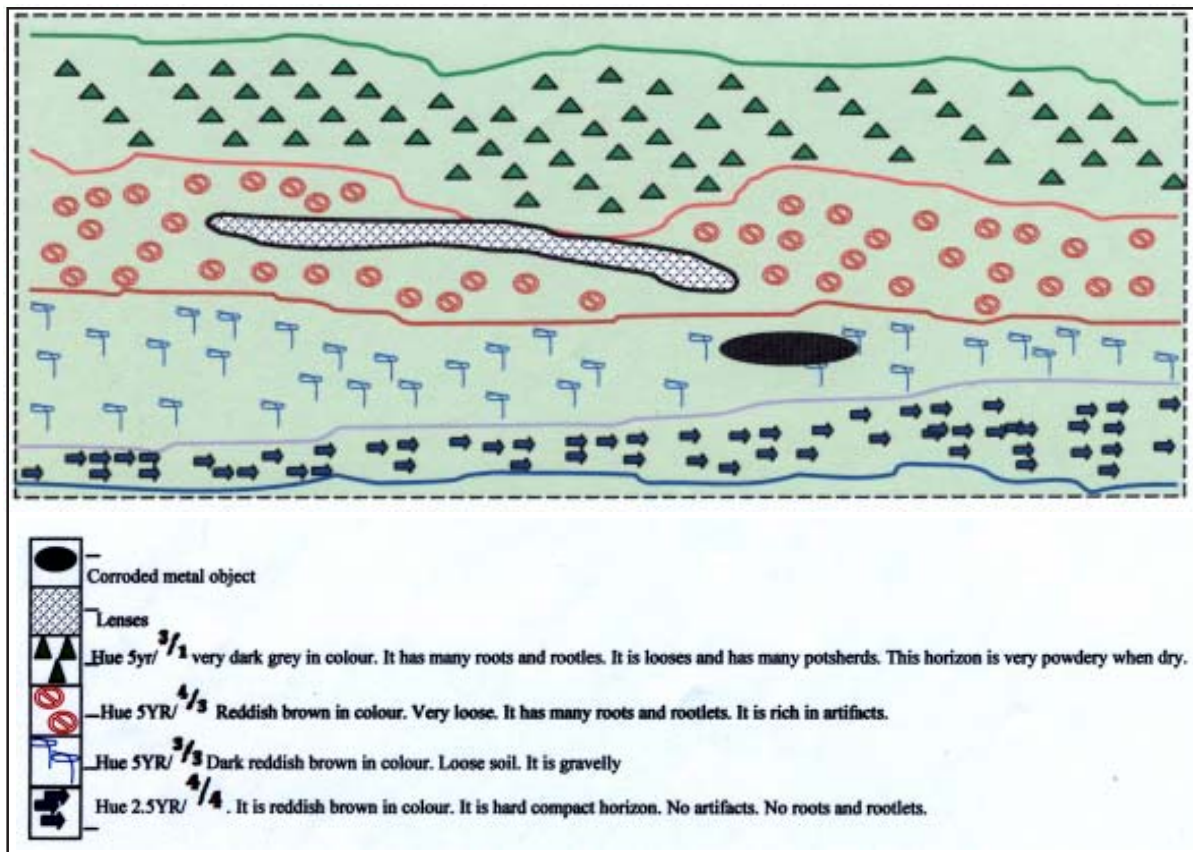
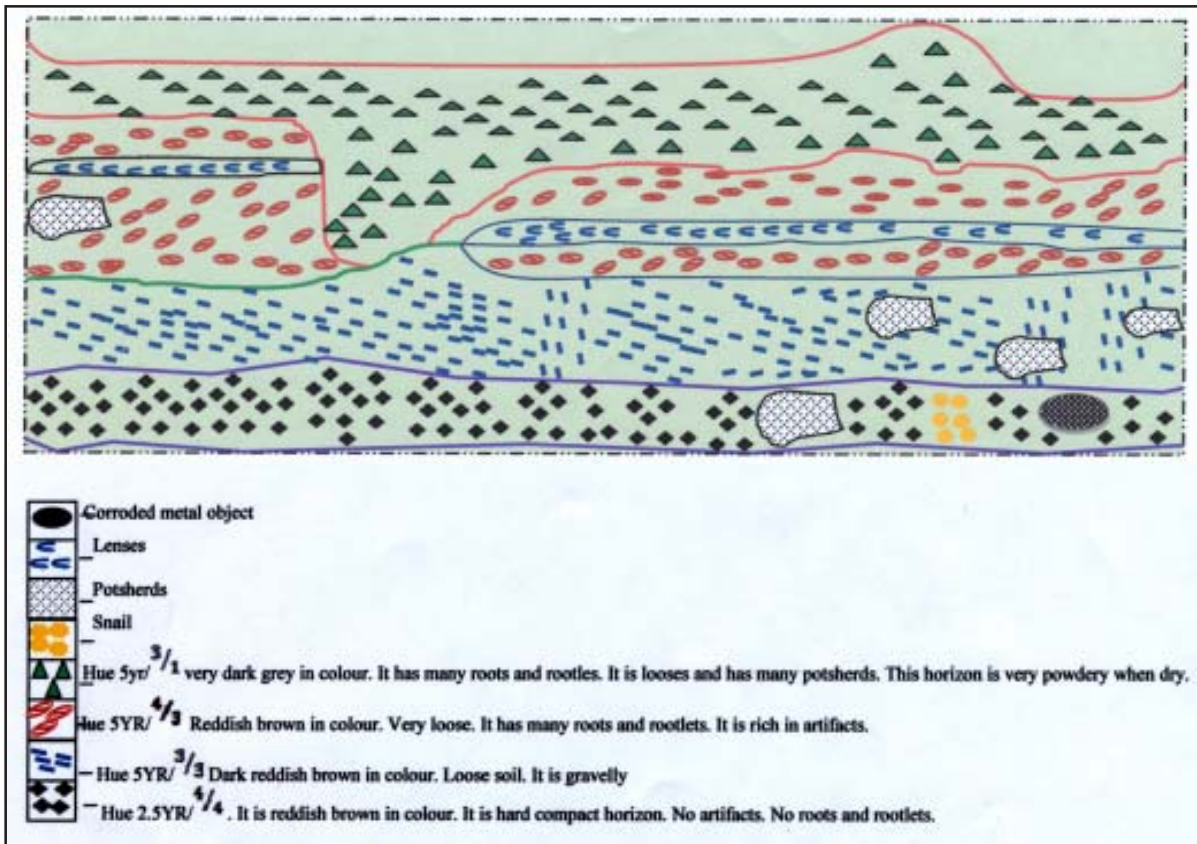


Figure 8: 00/IW/MDI/TPI. Stratigraphy of the western wall.



The position of the trench in relation to the entire gridded area was recorded. This falls within E4/E6 and S2/E4 as well as S2/E6. We started digging from the western corner in a 10cm spit level method. The sterile level was reached at 80cm. Excavated earth, including the incorporated artifacts, was sieved throughout the excavation and according to spit levels in order to retrieve all tiny artifacts such as beads. Artifacts and ecofacts, such as potsherds of varying sizes, grinding stones, fragments of metals, broken pieces of china, bone fragments, earrings, different types of beads (flat and round ones), cowries, snail shells, charred palm kernels and charcoal samples were recovered from this excavation. Aside from this, many photographs were taken at different points in the course of excavation.

Stratigraphy

Stratigraphy is a model highly cherished by archaeologists amongst other professionals. It is

the scientific description of layers based mainly on such indices as colour and texture (Ogundele 2000). In this regard, a Munsell colour chart was used for identifying and describing the stratigraphic walls of the excavated portion of Refuse Mound I, in the Alagbede area of Orile-Owu. Four stratigraphic units were established. The first one belongs to Hue 5YR/ . It has many roots and rootlets. This horizon is also powdery when dry. The unit underlying it (Hue 5YR/ 4/3), is reddish brown in colour. It is very loose with a lot of roots and rootlets. The third stratigraphic region (Hue 5YR/3/3) is dark reddish brown in colour and also gravelly. The last one (2.5YR/4/4) is deeply reddish brown. It is a hard/compact unit without artifacts (see figs. 7 and 8).

Analysis of Finds and Interpretation

After artifacts and ecofacts were collected on the basis of spit levels in cloth and polythene bags, they were taken to the camp. The potsherds were

Figure 9: A local lamp.



carefully washed and dried in the sun. This was after the material had been sorted into two broad categories: pottery and non-pottery.

Detailed classification of the Orile-Owu archaeological material was done in the laboratory in the Department of Archaeology and Anthropology. This material was mainly characterized by ceramics of different sizes, shapes and techniques of production. The highest number (197) of body sherds came from spit level 60–70cm. This was followed by level 50–60cm (with a total number of 187). The smallest number came from level 0–10cm with 32.

The highest number of rim sherds came from spit level 60–70cm with a total number of 65. Spit level 70–80cm had 52 rims, while the lowest number came from 0–10cm. This level (0–10cm) had 8 rim sherds. The rim sherds show that both pots and bowls were represented in the archaeological record. Decorations on the potsherds from this excavated trench include string rouletting, incision and maize cob rouletting. However, string rouletting had the highest frequency.

Based on the local classification system, two sub-types (A-B) of pots were identified and studied by us. They are as follows:

- * *Sub-type A: Amu* is sub-type A (large-sized pots for storing water, fermenting cassava tubers for preparation into a flour called *lafun*). This type of pottery is also used in local soap and palm oil factories.

The diameters vary from about 30 to 40cm.

- * *Sub-type B: Ape* is sub-type B. It is used mainly for cooking such items as yam and cocoyam. Diameters of pots in this category range from about 20 to 25cm.

Bowls are the second category of archaeological pottery from Orile-Owu. Four sub-types (A-D) have been identified as follows:

- * *Sub-type A: Isaasun* are for cooking soups. Unlike the pot types described above, *isaasun* have everted rims. The everted rims are functional as they make it easy to remove the vessels from the hearth. The everted rims serve as handles based on the ethnographic information at our disposal. The mouths/diameters vary from about 15 to 20cm, with depths ranging from nine to 12cm. According to ethnographic findings, some Owu people still prefer using *isaasun* to enamel bowls. They claim that soups remain warm for a longer time in *isaasun* than enamel bowls. This reflects the centrality of social history and culture to modernity or modern material life.
- * *Sub-type B: Awo ifa* are divination bowls. They range in diameter from 10 to 14cm. *Awo ifa* have in-turned rims. *Awo ifa* have ritual functions (Asakitikpi 2007).

Figure 10: Contemporary upper and lower grinding stones.



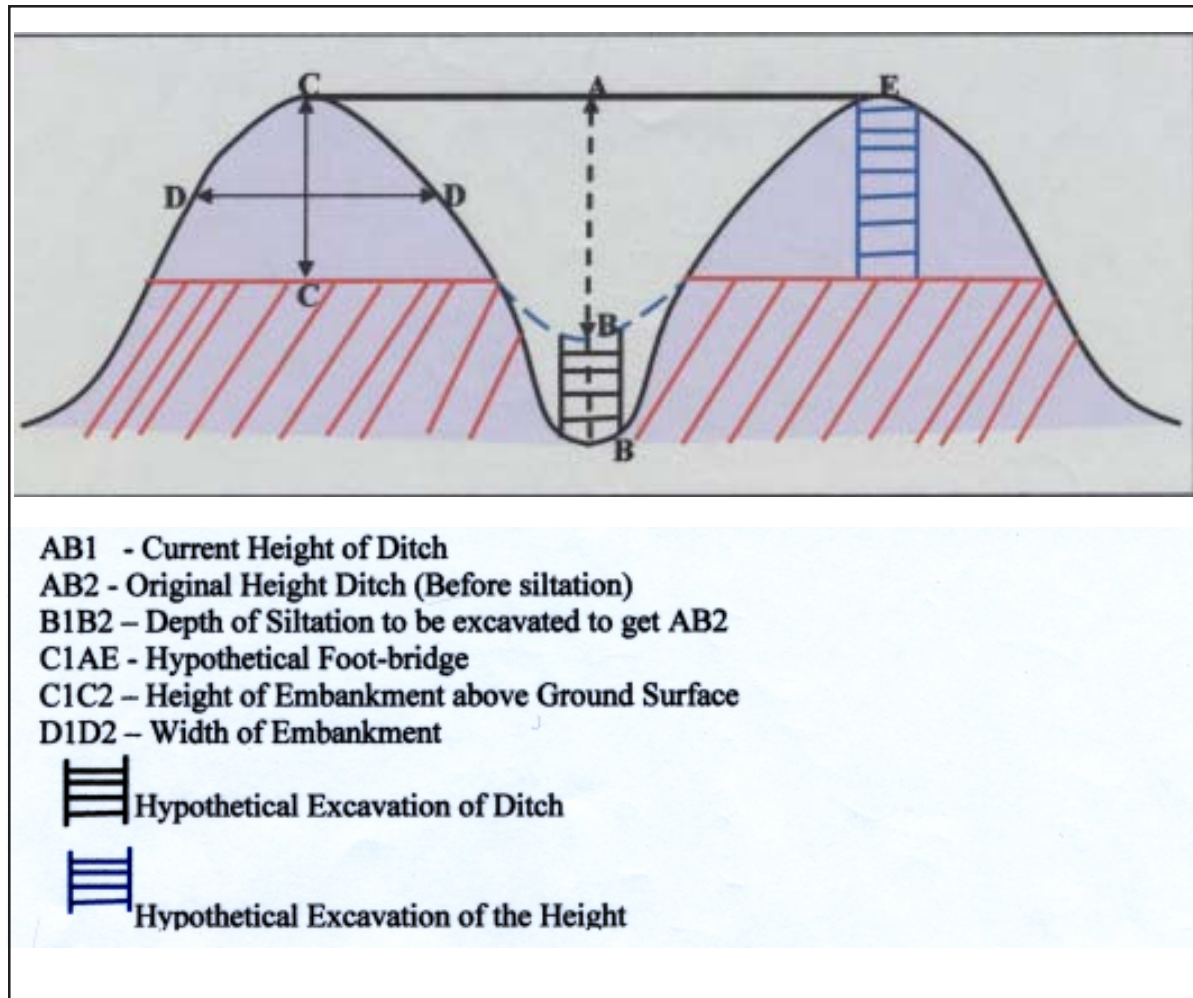
- * *Sub-type C: Atupa* (local lamps). Palm oil was normally put inside these lamps to keep them burning. Five of these lamps were retrieved from levels 40–60cm. They have slightly in-turned rims with depths varying from 3 to 5cm. The mouths range from 8 to 11cm (Figure 9).
- * *Sub-type D: Awo sobi* were usually small-sized vessels for containing food, and were used mainly in the archaeological past until the relatively recent historical period. *Awo sobi* were about twice the size of the *atupa* discussed above. The over-all size is the only thing that distinguishes *awo-sobi* from *atupa* (local clay lamps). In other words, sub-types C and D are similar in terms of general morphology and techniques of construction. Today, *awo sobi* are manufactured almost exclusively for ritual purposes. Sacrifices of food are usually offered to the gods and goddesses inside *awo sobi*. These are placed at a crossroads otherwise known as *ikoritameta*.

Other non-pottery finds, including ecofacts, grinding stones and china, were retrieved from the excavated trench at the Alagbede area of Orile-Owu. Three grinding stones came from spit level 70 -80cm (Figure 10). The grinding stones might have been

used for milling pepper, tomatoes, onions and beans as well as other food items based on our ethnographic findings. Although some new techniques and artifacts used in processing and cooking food are being added to the people's material culture, cultural continuity remains too important among the Owu-Yoruba of Nigeria to be glossed over. For example, grinding stones are still being used in several households in the study area regardless of their level of Western education. This cultural habit is a testimony to the fact that the past exists to some extent in the present among the Owu people. Ethnoarchaeology is a big plus to archaeological interpretation.

Other material remains include fragments of metal objects like knives, local traps and nails. Bones of animals including goats, sheep, bush bucks, bush pigs and cows were discovered. This is in addition to items including cowrie shells, snail shells and beads. Some of the snail shells belong to *Achatina* sp. while some are periwinkles. The cowrie shells are of two types: *Cypraea annulus* and *Cypraea moneta*. This identification was done by a zoologist from the University of Ibadan (Odaibo, personal communication 2010). Some charcoal samples were obtained from levels 30–80cm. These will be sent abroad for processing at the earliest opportunity. The availability of many snail shells in the archaeological record shows that Owu people consumed a lot of snails, in addition to such animals as goats and sheep. They might have used cowries also as a form of currency

Figure 11: Orile-Owu ancient city walls and ditches (after Ogundele 2004).



and/or for ritual purposes. The occurrence of china and beads reminds us of the phenomenon of flows and interconnections in the early period. This shows that Orile-Owu was not cut off from the cross-currents of globalisation or history in the past.

Apart from the excavated material and ethnographic finds at our disposal, non-portable artifacts or features, such as defensive ditches and embankments, were studied. According to oral tradition, these structures were constructed *circa* the 18th century as the Orile-Owu kingdom was growing rapidly in popularity in the midst of enemy communities and neighbours such as the Ife and Ijebu. These earthworks are in two parts – inner and outer walls and ditches. They were usually constructed through communal efforts and/or slave labour. Currently, the ditches

have an average depth of 7 metres, while the breadth is about 8 metres. The original depths of these ditches prior to siltation are yet to be determined. Excavation of sections of these earthworks is required (Figure 11). This would enable us to expand our knowledge of the indigenous knowledge system of earth engineering in Yorubaland. The archaeological relics of defensive strategies are potential resources for archaeo-tourism, which need to be properly harnessed for the socio-economic development of the region in the near future.

Conclusions

Orile-Owu (originally known as Owu-Ipole) occupies a prominent position in ancient Yoruba his-

tory and civilisation. The kingdom was probably founded about the 10th century AD, given the oral historiographic evidence at our disposal (Johnson 1921; Mabogunje 1971). The combined forces of Ife and Ijebu (two enemy neighbours of Owu) sacked the kingdom in 1825, having started the major campaign in 1820. The conflicts between Owu and its neighbours cannot be neatly disentangled from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. It is on record that this transoceanic engagement began in the late 15th century, and turned humans into cargo in order to promote European economies through their plantation and mining businesses in the New World (Uya 2003).

The Owu people built (through communal efforts and slave labour) two defensive walls and ditches. These earth constructions were inner and outer walls as well as ditches to keep external aggressors at bay, particularly in the 19th century when the Owu kingdom was at its apogee. But despite security-consciousness and this strategy, Owu collapsed as the Ife and Ijebu armies put the walled kingdom under a state of siege. Not unexpectedly, famine and disease began to take a heavy toll on the settlers. The survivors fled in different directions, even as far afield as the southernmost part of Yorubaland.

Relics of defensive ditches and banks in Owu Kingdom are certainly monumental artifacts that straddle the domain of science and earth engineering. They are also an encapsulation of facets of Owu engagements with the realities of their physical and social environments, particularly in the 19th century. These earth constructions or fortifications were minimally studied during the field work in February 2010. Sections of these structures will be excavated as soon as funds are available. Such efforts have the capacity to pave the way for a clearer picture of the techniques involved in the construction and maintenance of this edifice – a superb ancient knowledge system of earth engineering.

An archaeological excavation of a refuse mound was also conducted as a follow-up exercise to the reconnaissance of the study area. The retrieved material remains, coupled with oral history and ethnographic evidence, have enabled us to develop an understanding and appreciation of the scope and character of aspects of Owu cultural expressions with emphasis on the use and discard of space through time. Similarly, this fieldwork has demonstrated a

considerable amount of cultural continuity even in the face of broad change among the Owu people, a sub-ethnicity of the Yoruba. Such material constructions as *atupa*, local palm-oil lamps, *isaasu*, cooking bowls for soups, and *olo*, grinding stones, are indices of the past in the present.

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