

Urban Trajectory and Sociopolitical Formation on the Yoruba
Frontier: A report of 2004/2005 fieldwork at Ila-Iyara, Northeast Osun,
Central Nigeria

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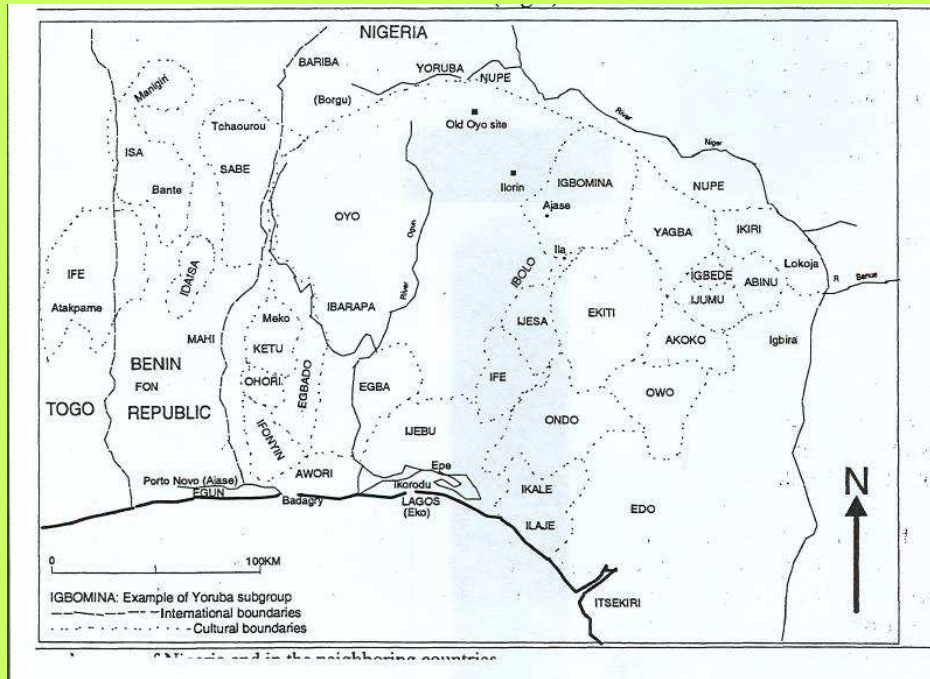
Introduction

- Archaeological researches until recently have favored large centers, mostly capitals of states.
- The cultural historical dynamics of African urbanism will be inadequate without an understanding of the development in the buffer zones between large political centers.
- In Nigeria, some recent archaeological studies seek to explore the relationships between large political centers and their peripheries (e.g., Aleru 2000; Eyo 1974; Ogundiran 2000; Usman 2000, 2001).
- My research in northern Yoruba concerns the issue of the process of social and political formation and the networks of interactions on the Yoruba frontier. Was this the result of indigenous efforts or the combination of indigenous and external impetus, or was it largely an external factor?

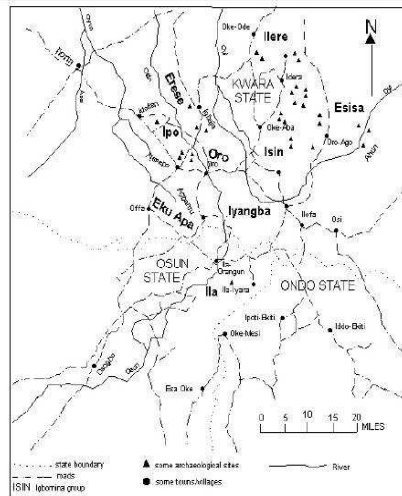
Study Area

- The northeast part of Osun state is home to three dialectical groups: the Oyo Yoruba, the Igbominas, and the Ijesha.
- The area could therefore be divided into three parts on the basis of Yoruba dialects.
- First, the Igbomina group of the Ila region consisting of Ila-Orangun, Ora, Oke-Ila, and Ajaba. The Ila settlements are more southerly situated than the rest of the Igbomina groups who are mostly in the north (e.g., Ipo, Erese, Oro, Isin, and Ilere). Second, the Oyo speaking group includes Oyan, Ikirun, Iragbiji, and others; and lastly, settlements with Ijesha influence such as Igbajo, Iresi, and Otan-Ayegbaju (Fig. 1).

The Yoruba sub-groups, showing the area of Ila



- This paper is a report of the survey of settlement wall and test excavation conducted at Ila-Iyara in the Ila area during the 2004 and 2005 field seasons.
- The modern principal town of Ila people, Ila-Orangun, lies about 65 km northeast of Ile-Ife and 90 km southeast of Ilorin on the southern edge of the savanna (Fig. 2).



- The oral tradition of the royal houses in Ila dates the origins of the polity to the 13th century.
- Some accounts refer to Ifagbamila (Ajagunla) as the son of Oduduwa who left Ile-Ife with his mother, Queen Adetinrin, about the 12th century (Adetoyi 1974).
- Johnson (1921) lists Ila as one of the kingdoms established by Ile-Ife princes. However, no European observer in the pre-colonial period ever grasped the nature of the settlement at its inception.

The European travelers arrived too late in the area and their reports only captured the horrific devastations of wars of the 19th century that began following the fall of Old Oyo.

Archaeological Work

- Ila-Yara is located at approximately 7°56'N and 4°57'E in the Northeastern part of Osun State. In relation to Ila-Orangun, it is approximately 7.5 km southeast. It is 4 km west of Oke-Ila.
- The site was the center of Ila polity from the 15th to the 17th century. Some families from Ila-Orangun are now using the site for growing cash crops (Fig. 3). A farm settlement, Oko-Ejemu, is located at the eastern part of Ila-Yara.



- Most conspicuous features at the site are enclosed rampart wall and ditches. (Fig. 4).
- The name 'Iyara' is synonymous with the walling system of the site. Iyara or Yara in Yoruba means trench, or ditch behind the walls of a town.
- The term, Iyara, may have been added to the original name, Ila, much later to distinguish it from other Ila-related settlements in the area with no wall.



Mapping and Description of Wall

- The survey of Ila-Iyara wall that began in the winter of 2004 was completed during the winter of 2005.
- A Trimble Global Positioning System (GPS) was used to map the wall.
- The GPS records digital locational data quickly and accurately in a format that can be downloaded to yield digitized maps.
- The distance between each reading was about 50 m intervals, except at bends or curves and gates where points at which we took readings were much lower.
- GPS mapping was supplemented with an abney and tape to calculate feature heights, since the GPS has an uncertain vertical error. Visibility on the wall varied from section to section.
- The reduction of vegetation as a result of farming in most places provided better visibility at different points on the wall. Mapping includes modern features (e.g., farm houses, roads, stream) closed to the wall to serve as reference points in future work.

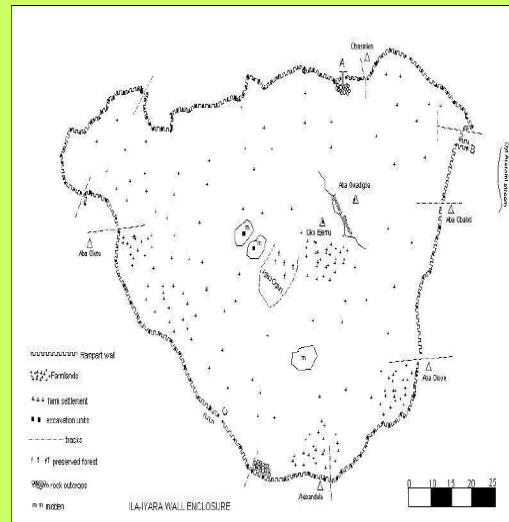
- The Ila-Iyara is a massive, single, enclosed rampart wall system with deep, continuous exterior ditches built probably in the late 16th or early 17th century (Fig 5).
- The height of the wall varied from 3 m to 5 m, and the width of the wall ranges between 4 m and 6 m.



- Three main entry gates and some minor entrances were associated with the wall.
- Most of the minor entrances are cuts on the wall, which may have been made recently by the local people to provide access to their farms and farm villages (Fig. 6).
- Also, several gravel roads pass through the wall to connect the farm settlements and other villages in the area with Ila-Orangun (Fig. 7).



- The Ila-Iyara wall is about 9.2 km (5.7 miles) in circumference (Fig. 8).
- This is quite large when compare with similar enclosed settlements investigated in Igbomina. For example, Gbagede and Yara walls in Ipo are 3.4 km and 2.8 km in circumference respectively (Usman 2001).



Excavation and Finds

- A 2x2 m test excavation was carried out in the winter of 2004.
- The purpose was to recover artifact and datable materials for better understanding of the site context.
- The unit, located on a midden, was excavated to a depth of 1.5 m (Figs 9-11).



Pottery was the most common artifact and occurred throughout the excavated levels. The non-pottery finds include bone bangle, animal bones, cowry, grinding stone, shells, iron slag, iron pieces, and tuyere (Figs.12-15).



- The diagnostic pottery consists of decorated and plain pottery, rims, lamps, lids, handles, and ceramic tiles.
- Twisted string roulette constituted about 68.9% of decorated pottery (Fig. 16).



Other decoration types are groove, burnished, painted or paint washed pottery, carved roulette, punctuation, scallops, incision, rocked combing, mat impression, encrusted, and composite designs (Figs. 17-21).



Dates:

- 2 charcoal samples from 2004 excavation:
- radiocarbon age of 480 ± 50 BP (Beta 202611), and 380 ± 40 BP (Beta 202610)

*** calibrated AD 1400 to 1650

** From 2003 excavation: 375 ± 40 BP (Usman et al. 2005)

Discussion and Conclusion

- Regional sociopolitical development in Yorubaland began during the classical period of Ife from A.D. 1000 and continued through the Intermediate Period, which ended about A.D. 1600.
- The spread of the sociopolitical and material culture innovations of this period in Yoruba and Edo regions was through population movements and intersocietal networks of elites, economic relations, and cultural imitations.

Some of the material culture representation of this period (e.g., stone figures, ceramic tiles, potsherd pavements, glass beads, city walls, and range of ceramic types) has been found in the periphery (Figs. 22-25).



- The establishment of Ila-Iyara was a consequence of migration process. According to oral traditions, Amota led his followers from Igbo Ajagunla to Ila-Iyara.

- The arrival of Ajagunla group at Ila-Iyara may have resulted in the acquisition of territories and organization of 'centralized' polities with subordinate villages and towns.

The new arrivals had to deal with two major problems:

- First is consolidation. The attempts at settlement must have been met with resistance from pre-existing groups, or compromises may have been made that probably involved the subordination of pre-existing groups to new centers of authority.

- Second is the provision of defense. The emerging frontier polities faced the growing and competing polities, such as Nupe, Owu, Ijesha, and Benin kingdoms. Owu was among the earliest polity to develop a cavalry army in the savanna (Pemberton and Afolayan 1996).

- In addition, the growing importance of the Atlantic trade, and the increasing use of horses in warfare in the West African savanna may have forced many weaker and powerful groups to seek protection (McIntosh & McIntosh 1988).
- The erection of enclosed wall can be seen as a response to the unsettling condition on the Yoruba frontier.
- As a militarized zone, and home to Yoruba and non-Yoruba, it stands to reason that adequate security was necessary.
- But there is also a link between the need and/or provision of security and political formation. The need to defend one's group from powerful outside forces is in itself enough to encourage political integration within in order to resist annihilation (Johnson & Earle 2000).
- Also, the evolution of stratified and centrally organized society has been described as a protection racket (Gilman 1991). Leaders provide protection from attack by social predators (including themselves) in return for tributary payoffs (Earle 1997).

- Ila's oral tradition reports that the ruler Amota defended the town against the attacks of the Olowu of Owu, a once powerful kingdom to whom Oyo paid tribute in its early history (Pemberton & Afolayan 1996), by erecting wall around the settlement.
- Amota requested his people to supply large quantity of 'beans' with which to construct an eredo, a massive dirt wall fronted by a deep pit, around Ila (Pemberton & Afolayan 1996: 41).
- 'Beans' as suggested here might have been tributes, or levies in the form of food, on the citizens for the labor employed in the construction, a manifestation of royal power.

- There are similarities as well as variations in the Ila-Iyara pottery with the pottery types found at Ife, Old Oyo, and Benin.
- General types shared with the group are twisted string roulette, incision, and groove decoration. Specific types shared with some of the group are painted washed or painted pottery recognized at Ife and Benin (e.g., Connah 1975; Garlake 1974) (Fig. 26).
- Pottery types like broom or brush incisions and snail shell-edge (Fig. 27) common at Old Oyo and some Igbomina centers in Northern Yoruba are absent at Ila-Iyara.



The rarity of these pottery types in excavation may suggest two things:

- First, Ila-Iyara was already abandoned before the large-scale migration of Oyo-Yoruba into Igbomina in the 17th century.
- Second, it may indicate that Ila polity was outside the main Oyo sphere of influence during the 16th and 17th centuries.

- The exact political influence of Ila polity and the nature of interaction that operated in the region before the nineteenth century are still unclear.
- But whatever the case, the polity was certainly overshadowed by Oyo's political power and influence in Yorubaland in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Ila's fledgling polity abruptly ended by the end of the 17th or early 18th century when the people of Ila-Iyara abandoned the site, and moved to Ila Magbon (later known as Ila-Orangun) where the process of socio-political consolidation may have continued (Pemberton & Afolayan 1996).
- The archaeological research in the northeast of Osun State is continuing.
- More studies of the Ila and neighboring polities is needed in which the nature and evolution of this ancient social formation and interaction is traced and interpreted in its own terms.
- An archaeological view of early civilizations from the periphery or frontier level will illuminate new aspects of the differentiation that categorized societies as 'complex' and the inherent tensions that drive their growth and collapse.

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