

## ■ NIGERIA

### Archaeological survey of Igbo Oje, near Ogbomoso, Oyo State, Nigeria: A preliminary report

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## Introduction

Yorubaland has witnessed a slow pace of archaeological research and space-time systematics of settlement and culture histories are lacking for most parts of the region. Early archaeological efforts here were geared towards the recovery of art objects with minimal attempt to solve specific culture historical problems. Most early Yoruba cities were relegated to the background during colonial rule, while their traditional chiefs were in most cases treated as second class leaders. This phenomenon was partly due to the self centeredness of the colonial masters and because the history of these cities has not been properly and adequately documented. This was probably the case for Igbo-Oje, once a famous and powerful city with a beaded crowned Oba and a large market that linked the south with the north. It was suddenly abandoned, and became a sacred grove "Igbo aiko", or Igbo-riro or 'Igbo Orisa' which literally means 'the forest of the demons'.

This study is a preliminary archaeological survey of the site in order to investigate the history and culture of the 'Olu-Oje' people who now are found throughout Yoruba land. Igbo-Oje is situated in the south western part of Ogbomoso town, along the Ajaawa road just after the Oje River. It lies between latitude 4° 11' and 4° 18' E and longitude

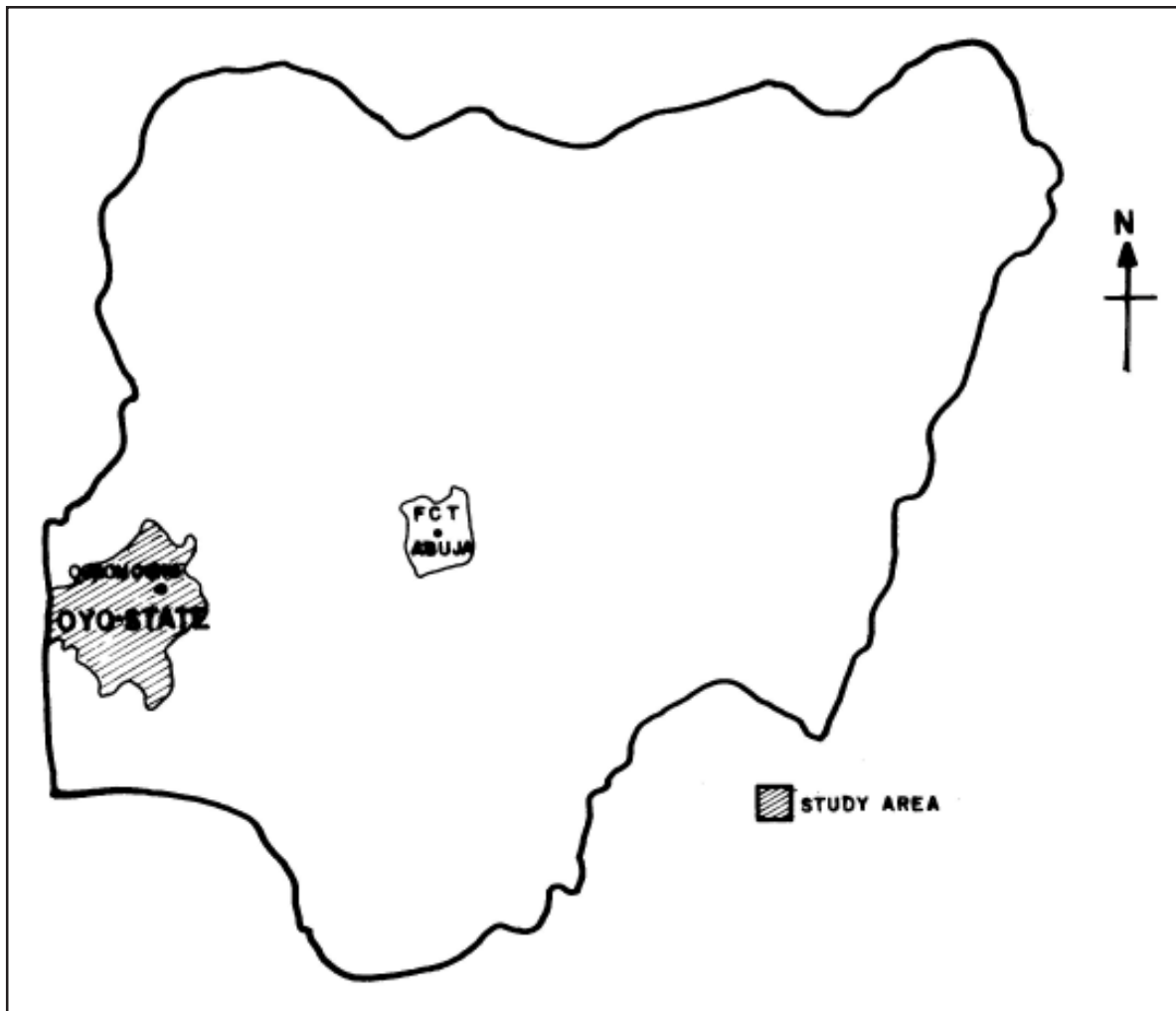
8° 8' and 8° 15' N. The site is positioned on one of the ranges of the Yoruba hills with an average elevation of about 400 meters above sea level. Administratively, it is in the Ogo-Oluwa Local Government Council area of Oyo State (Figure 1). The present vegetation is secondary in nature with essentially of derived savanna with several baobab trees (Figure 2) dotting the surface.

It is an abandoned settlement of the Oje people who are believed to be the descendants of Oluife, otherwise known as Obandi or Ompetu, who left Ile-Ife along with his people a long time ago. Who are the 'Oluoje'? What prompted the collapse of this first settlement and when did they settle at the present site of Ijeru? According to Oyerinde (1934), the Oluife or Obandi, otherwise referred to as Ompetu, left Ife as a result of a chieftaincy tussle or probably "as a result of military and political expansion of polity (which may) have caused regional settlement cycling and reshuffling of the regional settlement hierarchy" (Ogundiran 2002:4). Oluife had several stop over before finally settling down at this abandoned site. This appears to agree with most Yoruba settlements that sprang up during and after the Yoruba war from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This phenomenon was usually precipitated by wars, chieftaincy dispute or tussle or in accordance with directives by the Ifa oracle (Ogunfolakan 1994).

The renowned botanist Professor Olorode brought a fragment of a small pot to the office of the first author for identification. It was recognized as ancient, so the first visit to the site took place in late 2003. This revealed fragments of pot that are similar to the one earlier brought by Professor Olorode. A subsequent visit to the site during the dry season revealed the presence of remains of house foundations, abundant iron slag pieces, an extensive surface scatter of potsherds and many baobab trees, all of which clearly revealed that the site is an abandoned human settlement site.

Information collected from the present Ompetu of Ijeruland, the custodian of this sacred grove, revealed that it was once a 'no entry' site. Shortly after his installation in 2001, however, the Ompetu entered what was believed to be 'the forest of the demon' and what he believed was 'wasting of land'. According to him, his religious faith, Christianity, prompted him to defy the ancient tradition of 'igbo-aiko' (dare-not cultivate land). Not only that, the usual

**Figure 1:** Map of Nigeria showing Oyo State.



one week-long traditional festival was changed to a Christian carnival at the site. According to him, with the ever-increasing demand for human subsistence, it would be unwise to leave virgin fertile land uncultivated. But little did the king realize that the tradition forbids deferment of the traditional order of 'don't do'. There could be grave consequences. He also did not realize that the Yoruba people know and understand environmental protection of their surroundings. In this regard, they believe in the protection of their tradition and past ways of life, but also have faith in their forefathers and all what they died for.

It is a well known fact that the Yoruba people believe in the worship of Olodumare (God) through

their deities using animate and inanimate objects. These represent deified individuals and historical events that are of local and national importance. The deities are usually confined to shrines and groves where they died and were buried or where they have performed great feats during their lifetime. The advent of modern and foreign religions in Yoruba land, Christianity and Islam, has adversely affected the traditional beliefs of the people. Many of the converts of these two religions have lost contact with their original religions. This has led and is leading to the abandonment of the shrines and groves, while sacred groves that ordinary people hitherto dare not enter or cultivated became farmlands. Unknowingly, the destruction of this has led to, and is still leading

**Figure 2:** Baobabs at Igbo-Oje, now a maize farm.



to, the loss of precious and vital archeological and historical materials and evidence. The idea of Africans preserving their groves goes beyond mere keeping the 'gods' in such places. It was and is still aimed at preserving their historical relics and tradition. The present investigation is therefore aimed at throwing some light on the history of the Olu-Oje people who inhabited this site before it was abandoned.

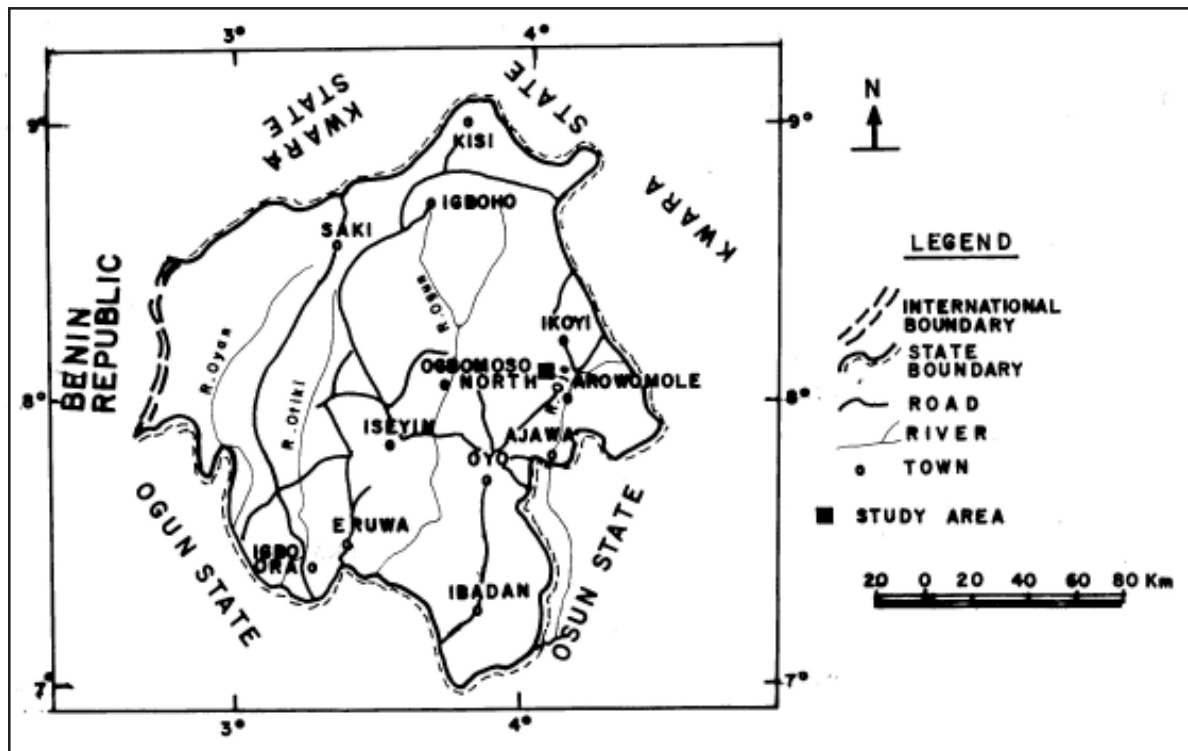
Many reasons account for location of settlements. Some of these, according to Ekanade (1986), include a search for a defensive site, agricultural land characterized by fertile soil and relatively flat surfaces, economic centers for exchange of goods between two places producing different products, availability of water, and a nodal site. One or more of these reasons might explain why Igbo-Oje was founded in its presently abandoned location on the bank of the Oje River. It is on fertile land that was probably formerly a thick forest, and is situated at a

strategic position between the people to the north and those to the south of Yoruba land.

### **Major Archaeological features/Materials recovered from the site**

This site is along the Ajawa road just after the Oje River (Figure 3). It is on a large expanse of land containing numerous cultural features, especially baobab trees which are concentrated near the Orori shrine. Abundant potsherds, fragments of pots, iron slag and grinding stones of different sizes and shapes also litter the site. A notable feature is the royal cemetery (Orori) measuring 7.5 by 13 meters which is now a cultural mound because of the inward collapse of the wall. Here the king and the royal family worship their ancestral father yearly. Though the event has been changed to a Christian carnival, the venue still remains the meeting point for the yearly

Figure 3: Map of Oyo State showing the study area of Igbo-Oje, Ogbomosho South Local Government Area.



gathering of the children of Ijeru. Also, at the bank of river Oje is the 'Idi Awe' shrine (Figure 5). According to oral tradition, items of worship are brought and offered to the ancestors. They include a variety of consumables and a dog. However the idea of using a cow as a sacrificial animal was introduced during the reign of Oba Oluyale. Although the festival is no longer observed as it was before, part of the tradition is still maintained. According to oral tradition (Ajogbe Aro, 85 years old, personal communication on 15/4/04), it is the right of only the princes and princesses to follow the Oba to the sacred grove. Others are only allowed to stay at a point before the Oje River. Today, after the Christian carnival at Igbo-Oje, people will gather at this point to wine and dine, while hunters continue to shoot to the air and display their hunting apparel with a modern musical outfit on a standby to entertain the audience. A number of ditches that looks like water cisterns could also be found at this site.

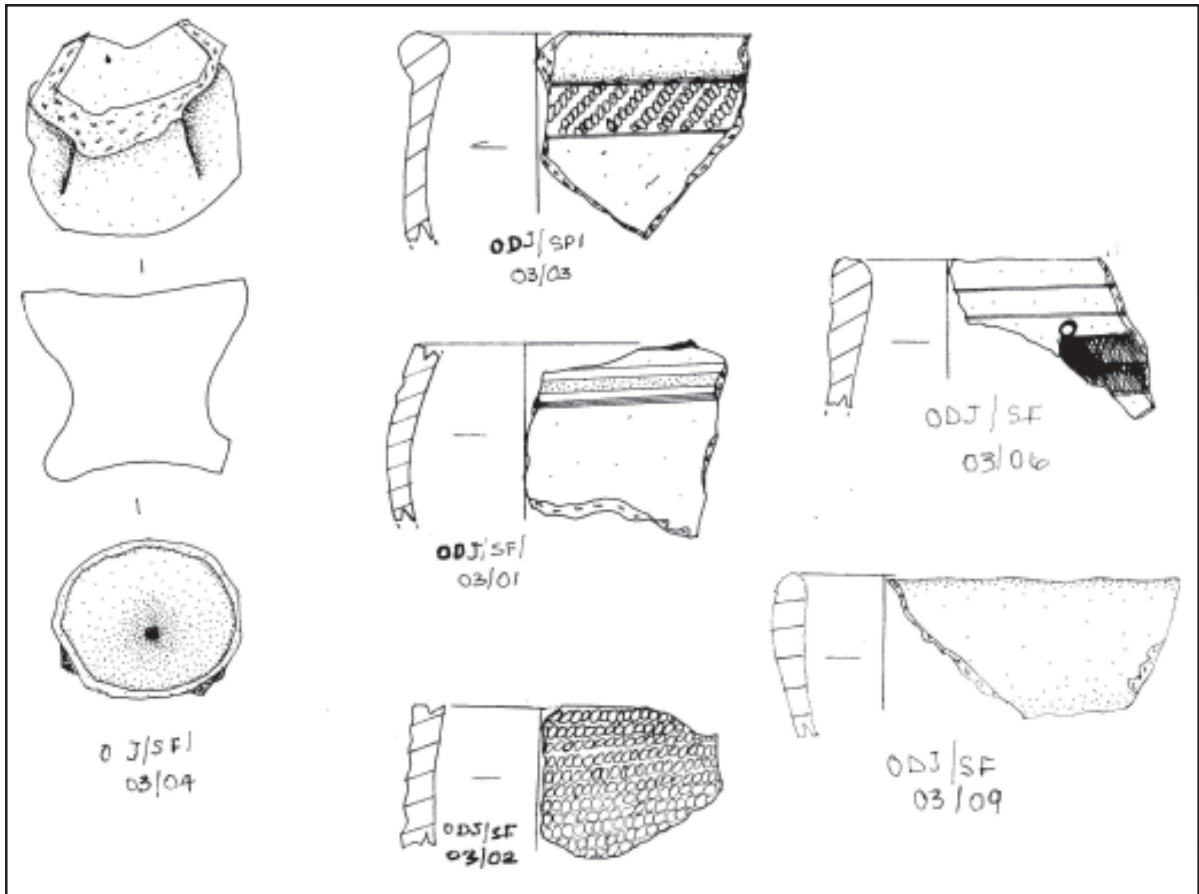
In the course of our survey, both systematic and random collections of surface materials were made. The former were focused around the royal

cemetery (orori) and the shrine, while the latter covered the entire site. The major finds collected are potsherds and lithic materials. Subsequently, a preliminary pottery classification and analysis was carried out with a view to identifying the major distinctive decorative techniques/motifs. Apart from fragments of pots collected, a fragment of a base of a traditional Yoruba ceramic lamp was also collected. It was this type of fragment that the initial informant Professor Olorode brought along with him. Figure 5 indicates the decoration patterns on pottery shards collected, all of which show that, different decoration motifs can be found on pottery shards from Igbo-Oje.

**Major characteristics of the materials collected**

Pottery decorations are essentially characterized by both impression and incision, with the later being predominant. Roulette is the most prominent impression pattern and was observed in almost 30% of the sherds collected. Two types of this roulette

Figure 4: Potsherds from Odo-Aje.



were found: twisted cord and maize cob. Interestingly, most of the sherds are characterized by composite decorative motifs, which in most cases consist of composite form. These include roulette with incision and at times with grooving. In Igbo-Oje, the decoration appears in form of twisted cord and incision. Where they appear with incisions, the line of the incision is thin and in multiples of two or three lines (nos. 2, 3). Number 10 appears in maize cob and large twisted cord. Number 9 is plain while 1, 6, and 7 are incised. Number 6 appears with groove punctuate and thinly twisted cord. Number 8 is unique in that the fact that the decoration is a composite incision with punctuate grooving in both vertical and horizontal design. It is a fragment of lid of the traditional soup pot - 'isaasun', and is decorated both outside and inside. The inside decoration is of brush

marks. The lithic material collected looks like a stone that was designed for sharpening objects, either metallic or lithic. It is quartz, axe shaped and sharpened in all the three edges (Figure 6).

### Discussion

As said earlier, the oral information collected affirmed that the site was abandoned during the reign of Oba Atoyebi as a result of the Yoruba war of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Oyeride 1934). In the oriki-orile (oriki of origin) of the 'olu-ojes' (the children of the ojes), mention was made of three basic things that are of vital importance to the archaeologist in his investigation and interpretation of materials that may be collected ethnographically or discovered/recovered archaeologically.

**Figure 5:** The Ide Awe shrine.



The oriki (cognomen) goes thus:

Oluoje, meri ate, omo apaja fun won ranwo. Olu Oje the child of those who kill dog for a feast.

Ela mo ko ngo gbodo jeye ega. I meet Ela (Orumila). I should not eat ega (village weaver).

Omo afinju oloja lode Oje. The child of a wise king from Oje Market

Olu oje omo a rohun ogun, baara fagbe. The child of olu-oje who has plenty to give beggars

Omo afinju eiye ti nmumi lagbada. The son of a wise bird that drink from a pot

Olugbo rere lohunlodo, ile wani. The king of the forest at river is from our house

Komoodan l'odo tebi. A virgin at the bank of the river

Omo orogangan laa fohun odo f'odo. The son of who gives instant reply the sound from a mortal

Oro gangan laa fohun odo f'odo. The child of who instant reply a sound from the river.

Omo Orogangan laa to'do l'Ompetu. The child of who trace the river instantly at Ompetu

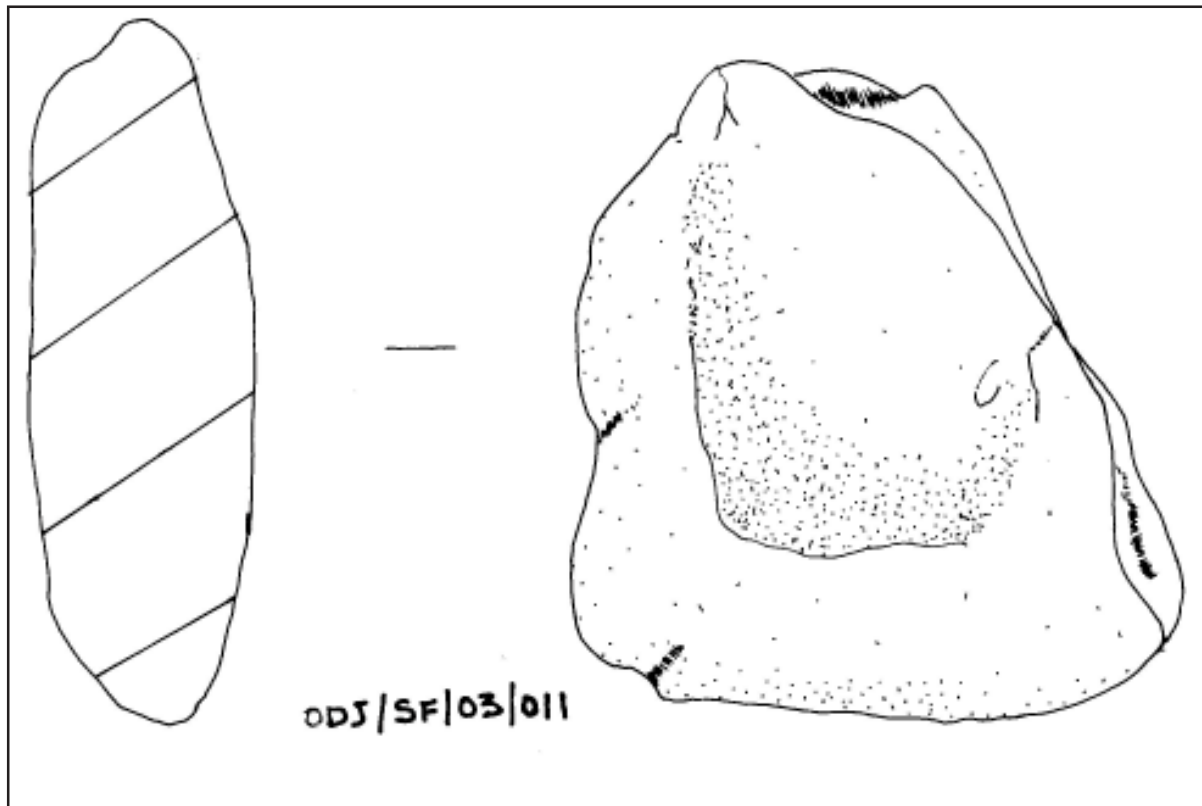
Omo aparun jegede eti Yemetu. The child of a standing bamboo at the bank of Yemetu

Kaka ki nlaya ki nsina ebi. Instead of being brave enough to miss my road to the house

kaka ki nlaya kiin si'na oje. Instead of missing my road to Oje,

mei b'opopo ile wa l'opopo ikefun. Our house is along Ikefun Street.

Figure 6: Axe shaped stone object.



Omo ilasa ogbaaro, omo osonu ile o gbaalo. You dare not appease Ilasa,

Omo ilasa o b'omi tutu re. Ilasa is not friendly with cold water

Ki lomi tutu o filasa se. What is cold water going to do with Ilasa

Omo owe se regeji gbile mokun are. The son of a flourished 'owe' tree

Oluoje 'mo akasa leri, ti ndode erin. Oluoje the child of an elephant hunter

Omo ak'eye wale, omo ak'eye wa'do, the child of whom brought birds home and to the river

Omo finju eye ti nmumi lagbada. A wise bird that drink from a pot

Eyin po l'Oje, Obirin o gbodo ko. Lots of palm-tree at Oje, women dare not harvest

Okunrin wa o si gbodo w'eku. Men must not process palm-oil

Oje kii je'ga, baba mi ni ki won mu'rore bo oko. Oje must not eat ega (village weaver), what is my father doing with irore (bronze manikin)

Eni f'epo we l'Oje daran aje. He who bath with oil in Oje invites the wrath of the witches

Eni f'oti we l'Oje da'ran esinsin. He who bath with wine invites flies

Omo a p'aja soju ina, omo a p'oluwo s'atete kokan. He who is roasting dog on fire, the son of who kills a condemned person at the entrance of the house

Aja ni ngo je, nko ni j'oluwo a bi keke l'enu. I will eat dog and not a condemned person with 'keke' tribal mark on his cheeks.

From the 'oriki' (praise poem), certain things that are of importance to archaeological investigation could be identified. Firstly, dog is mentioned and in the annual worship of Oje, the dog is one of

those items needed. Secondly, birds are mentioned. In fact it is said that the Oje people must not eat 'ega' (village weaver) or 'orore' (bronze manikin). In the course of our subsequent archaeological excavation, attention will be focused on the possibility of recovering any of these items. Mention is also made of river Oje which is today situated at the northern flank of the site. It is also embedded in the oriki that Oje women must not harvest palm fruits, while their men should not process palm oil. So there is a need to search for the absence of presence of these items in the course of archaeological excavation.

Another section of the oriki also sheds some light on the name Oje (oje means bronze in the Yoruba language). It may be possible to recover bronze or brass artifacts in the subsequent excavation of Igbo-Oje. It is widely believed that people were sacrificed to the gods in those days. A hint of this is reflected in the 'Oriki' of the oje people - 'Omo apajas'uju ina, omjo a-poluwo s'a kokan Ile (The child of who roasted dog on the fire, and gagged a human being at the entrance). Therefore, in the archaeology of Yoruba country, archaeologists must identify the oriki properly for the proper interpretation of archaeological finds, and the history they represent.

The Olu-Oje people re-settled Ijeru which today forms part of Ogbomoso town but which is distinct from the ethnographic survey of the two sides of the area. For instance, the 'oja-oba' (king's market) is on the Ijeru side. It is here that there is typical Yoruba royal architecture. In fact, the ancient palace still remains with the burial spots of the kings within the palace ground. Unfortunately, part of the palace has been demolished to give way for a modern building for the king without the taste of the typical Yoruba royal architecture.

Igbo-Oje has been found to be an abandoned settlement of the Olu-Oje people. From the surface remains collected, the site should throw more light on the history of Yoruba in general and on the Olu-Oje descendants in general. In the course of subsequent work on this site, effort will also be made to examine the relationship of the Olu-Oje people with other notable Yoruba towns, especially Ile-Ife and Old-Oyo, and also with the people of Ijeru in the modern day Ogbomoso South Local Government area. This will be done through detailed comparative study of archaeological materials and features

recovered from different sites in the geographical area. In addition, effort will be made to preserve and conserve the site with a view to making it a national and international tourist and research center. In studying the archaeology of Yorubaland, there is the need for archaeologist to pay attention to the oriki (praise-poem) and use it as a means of studying and interpreting archaeological finds.

### Proposal for Future Work

In the near future, archaeological work at Igbo-Oje will be carried out in three phases. Phase I involves (1) reconnaissance of the site with a view to determining its spatial extent, as well as mapping cultural features; (2) systematic collection of surface cultural materials from the entire site; and (3) a test-run geophysical survey of the site with a view to determining the nature of the sub-surface distribution of artifacts. Then some preliminary test pits will be excavated. Phase II involves controlled excavation at selected areas of the site with a view to identifying the distinctive cultural phases and their characteristic traits. Detailed laboratory analysis of collected materials will be done in order to understand the subsistence-settlement systems of the occupants of the site, their socio-cultural adaptations and the age of the site. Phase III includes detailed mapping of some selected areas of the indigenous architectural patterns of some compounds in present day Ijeru in Ogbomoso South L.G, Ogbomoso. It also includes creation of conservation strategies aimed at transforming the site into an important cultural heritage and tourist center in Yorubaland. Comprehensive documentation and publication of site reports will follow.

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