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Early Settlements and Subsistence in Okigwe, Southeastern, Nigeria.

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Introduction

Human settlement like in Okigwe area like other parts of the world has posed great challenges to scholars in both practical and theoretical framework (Willey 1953, 1968; Chang 1968; Rouse 1968, 1972; Balma 1971; Clark 1975). In all, settlement is seen as a locational term which includes both occupation sites and certain features which are suggestive of early human occupation. Udo (1982) has observed that settlement is a concrete expression of the workings of a society and economy overtime in a single place. Human geographers treat the spatial arrangement of societies in terms of local situations in conjunction with variable of climate, vegetation and resources.

However, from the archaeological perspective, Trigger (1967) has defined settlement archaeology as the study of social relationship by use of archaeological data. In his own contribution, Chang (1972) defined it as the archaeological methodology in which settlement components considered as activity areas, serves as the primary units for classification. Given our limited studies of the early human occupation of Okigwe area, settlement site in this paper would mean a place where a group of
remains of early human activities or occupation is found or located. It could be iron working debris, stone tool factory, caves and rock shelters, which have evidence of human habitation. These features would be studies in the light of the limited ethnographic data so far collected in the area. This no doubt, would help us to understand the settlement pattern and the relationship between the archaeological and ethnographic data in Okigwe and environs.

In so doing, we shall take cognizance of the central place theory settlement distribution. This, according to Hodder and Orton (1976) is used to include centres providing administrative, military or religious services. In our study area, we have been able to identify some locations with evidence of provision of specialized services, such as, stone tools factory, iron smelting factory, pottery and salt extraction among others. These could have either collectively or single served as a stimulus to early human movements from different parts of Igboland to the Okigwe area. This movement is supposed to be a gradual process. At first, by groups of artisans and hunters who search farther a field for game and suitable raw materials to cope with their environment. Later, with population increase, there was competition for the scarce resources and coupled, perhaps, with climatic changes overtime the settlements were abandoned for more favourable locations.

When all the sites of an area and of a period are identified and what they contained or manifest are known it ideally becomes possible to give some logical account of the settlement pattern of that area within the specified period. That is to say, it would then be possible to trace the way the people’s cultural activities and social institutions are arranged within the given area or specific points in time. It has been observed by Okpokilo (1979) that the location and size of settlement are to some extent influenced by environment factors. However, this depends on the level of subsistence of the inhabitants of such settlements. That is, the way the people acquire, produce, process or store their

Ibiam, A.M.
food and/or how and to what extent they are permanent in their habitat especially occupation locale - whether the people are migratory, semi-sedentary or sedentary. On the other hand, this phenomenon seems to have changed overtime. For as Sada (1975) rightly pointed out, that, even though water sources have been very important in the selection of settlement sites that free drainage, ease of movement and the availability of farmlands have also been overriding factors.

Be that as it may, the settlement pattern fan area, as rightly observed by Chang (1972) is determined by a multiplicity of factors. It is therefore the archaeologist’s task to determine in each, the order or importance of these factors. If then we conceive of settlement pattern as an outcome of the adjustments a society makes to a series of determinants that vary both in importance and in kinds of demands they make on the society, we must consider not merely the range of factors affecting settlement patterns but also the manner in which different factors interact with one another to influence a particular pattern. Trigger (1968) has pointed out that factors vary in importance according to both the local situation and the temporal relationship that they have to one another.

**Geology and resource base of Okigwe area.**

The dominant physical feature in this area is the Nsukka-Okigwe Cuesta. This North to South trending highland account for the hilly nature of the Okigwe area, in parts, reaching as high as 858m to 244m along the Okigwe-Ovim road, (Ofonoma 1975). This feature had earlier been recognized by Kitson (1913) thus:

*There is also a strip of country about 80 miles long and from 5 to 20 miles broad, consisting of sedimentary rocks of cretaceous and late tertiary age. It forms the Okigwe-Udi Orukuruam highlands which extend from the Northern Nigerian border southward to beyond Okigwe, and form the watershed between the Niger and the Cross River.*
The scarp face of the cuesta has given rise to chains of caves stretching from the northern end of Benue State to its Southern end around Arochukwu. This was caused by erosion and scarp retreat, (Umeji, 1985). According to Karmo Yemuda (1966) the cuesta is narrowest and the elevation largely obliterated near Okigwe as a result of differential erosion caused by the proximity of the various geological outcrops. Consequently this area forms one of the principal points through which the cuesta is crossed. The average height in Okigwe is between 120-180m. The narrow plateau here is confined to a narrowship which carries the road from Okigwe to Ovim and from there Southwards to Arochukwu.

There are series of springs and first order streams issuing out from the base of the Ajalli sandstone on the scarp face of the cuesta. The Okigwe area as studies have shown is located in the transition zone between the tropical grasslands of the northern Nigeria and the rainforest zone of the South, (Ihgozuzike 1975). However, remnants of forests could only be seen in sacred groves and gallery forests. Thus, Yemuda Karmon (1966) had observed that settlement on the Plateau and it slope is fairly dense. The mineral resources of this area are quite immense and some are known to have been exploited by man from the prehistoric times. These include the lateritic ironstones that form a protective cap on the cuesta and some ridges, doleritic volcanic intrusion at Ugwuele-Uturu and various clay deposits. Others are coal and limestone deposits, (Simpson 1955: Wilson and Bain 1928).

In parts of Okigwe, especially those located on the lowlands of the mamu formation, such as, Ishiagu, Umuhieze and Uturu are known to be extremely fertile. Another area is the eastern part of Isiukwuato (Acha) underline by the Nkporo Shale. These areas have been and still are the main suppliers of agricultural products especially yams (the king crop in Igbo Society) in Okigwe area. However, other places less favoured agriculturally as a result of very poor soil fertility seem to have channelled their skills to the development of arts and crafts. This helps
to supplement their poor agricultural yield that could scarcely last the harvest season. In these settlements like Issocho, Ilhue and Ugwuogu in Uturn, iron working, stone quarrying, basketry, palm oil pressing, wood carvings, weaving among others are very important aspects of the people’s life.

Archaeological data
In our two seasons of archaeological field work in Okgwe and environs, we have located and excavated a number of sites (Fig.1). These include iron-smelting sites in Ugwuogu, Ilhue and Issocho. At Ilhue, slag debris were found in shrive grove and strewn over farmland, footpaths and even living compounds in Amaikpa and Agidi villages. In most cases, the slag are arranged in a linear form along farm boundaries (as boundary markets) or heaped round palm trees in the farms as they turn-up during cultivation of food crops. The amount of slag that litter Ilhue farmlands and some living quarters point to the fact that extensive iron smelting took place in this area. However, human activities as noted above have greatly impaire their studies. That notwithstanding, we were able to archaeologically investigate this to be “in situ.”

It should be noted that we could not locate features of smelting furnaces which would have enabled us to reconstruct the type(s) of furnace used. But from the nature of the slag, which are in lumps or aggregates it is likely that slag tapping or shaft furnace might have been used. In the present circumstances therefore, we collected enough charcoal samples and the supposed pieces of broken furnace walls and potsherds for further analyses and radiocarbon dates during the excavation.

Kitson (1913) had observed that Okgwe is among the oldest settlements where ironstone deposits were worked which gave rise to home-based industries. We were thus:

In East Central Iboland the ore formerly smelted was an impure limonite, goethite and haematite, formed by sur-
Fig. 1: Map showing various archaeological sites in the study area.
face enrichment of ferruginous claystone and sandstone. The political station of Okigwe stands on the old site of a large mining-field. Most towns have blacksmiths. They make axes, hoes, adzes, spearheads, knives, matchets, iron cowbells, utulialc triangulars, personal ornaments, household requisites and other articles. Uzoma was formerly noted for this work but most of its smiths have now migrated to surrounding towns, where they do a good trade.

Besides iron-working sites, we have located and investigated some caves and rockshelters in Okigwe area for evidence of early human use. While the Ogba-Nkoko and Okpui-Chukwu caves in Ihube and Otaniqpa were rarely occupied by man that of Ulu-Chukwu rockshelter in Ahaba Imeri was inhabited by man. We observed active hunting activities in and around the vicinity of the caves and upon investigation there were preponderance of gnawed palm kernels by rodents. The cave deposit is very shallow in Okpu-Chukwu but deep in Uhu-Chukwu. The rich deposit of the rockshelters was as a result of both natural and human activities. Our observation and oral traditions collected in Ahaba Imeri go to show that the rockshelters was used in the past for oracle consultations to detect thieves and blacklegs in the society. It is regarded as the abode of God (Uhu-Chukwu). Presently, it is used as a resting place for farmers working in the vicinity and one could observe the stone tripod meant for cooking or roasting of yams by farmers. People were reported to have taken refuge at Uhu-Chukwu rockshelter during the Nigerian Civil War.

Ethnographic data
The Okigwe area is made up of the Otanchara, Otanju and Isiukwuato clans as well as Isuochi, Nnaeto and Umuchieje Igbo speaking communities. However, in our present research, we have collected data from Ihube and Uturu, the acknowledged traditional heads of their respective clans. Other towns where data was collected include Isuochi and Ahaba Imeri in Isiukwuato.
The names Onanchara and Otanuzu used to refer to the two major clans in the study area is said to "mark of identity and distinction within and between the clans. The word Oto is said to connote children while urchara and nzuz connote ferric oxide and white chalk. It is not yet clear whether these names reflect the predominant geological formation in their settlements or a mark of social identity in the past. In most Igbo Communities including our study area the word for children is Umu and the name of some communities: in both Onanchara and Otanuzu bar this out. For example, Umuzu and Umulolo meaning the children of Nze and Lolo respectively. Thus the socio-cultural meaning of the word Oto should be further explored to enhance our understanding of the words Onanchara and Otanuzu in its smelting of iron. While chalk nzu which is regarded as a symbol of purity and peace in Igbo religious life was and is still being exploited in Okigwe. For example, in every religious rites participants rub nzu in parts of their body and make a number of parallel lines on the ground. In some case, nzu is given as offering to deities. However, a critical study of the people’s oral traditions and aspects of their cultural trait such as dietary habits, cults and titles seem to suggest that the two clans might have migrated into Okigwe area from different and has topography of the area relative to other parts of Igbo land, yet, it has for several centuries attracted a considerable amount of population.

Traditions of origin collected at Uturu (ancestral home of Otanuzu) has it, that their progenitor Ena came from Afikpo area in the Cross River basin. The Eke-Ukwu square in the senior village of Achara in Uturu is said to be the place of dispersal of all Otanuzu communities. The head of this senior village is recognized as the head of all Uturu, because, as tradition has it, he is the direct descendant of Imobi who was Okpara Ena.

In Ibube, the traditional head of the Onanchara Communities, oral sources point to one Uram as their ancestor who came from Agulu and first settled at a place known as Ikpa Ora and later moved to Uputere. This later settlement site is regarded by
many Ijube people as their ancestral site. Some however, believed they came from Ishaigu, then, settled at Ikpa Ora. But as population increased with attendant pressure on available resource, the settlement was moved to Upetere.

In our subsequent ethnographic fieldwork we shall endeavor to see if we could locate these abandoned settlement sites (Ikpa Ora and Upetere) in Ijube as contained in their oral traditions. This is necessary because our earlier attempts to locate Ikpa Utu (extensive smelting site) prove abortive. Our guide and informant is a knowledgeable Ijube indigene and a blacksmith, after he had consulted with some elders of his Amaikpa village on the possible location of Ikpa Utu. It may well be, that this elusive smelting site was what Mr. Kitson had documented at the present Okigwe headquarters on his visit to the area while conducting the mineral survey of the district. It is therefore possible that the possible that the people have lost memory of the location as well as the art of smelting.

The town of Okigwe was said to have come into existence, when the colonial administration for strategic reasons chose the place as a military base because of its high ground. The area occupied by Okigwe as pointed out by Aranwunne (1981) was formally a piece of farmland belonging to Ijube, Ushai and Opi. The name according to him is derived from Oba-Asie meaning red-hot iron. If this is so and whatever is the merit or otherwise of the above tradition, it is possible that the Ijube people may have lost control of this location in the very distant past before the European penetration.

Who were responsible for the slag debris

In most Igbo settlements with history of iron-working, smelting furnaces are known as Utu. It is therefore surprising that the present inhabitants of Ijube could neither link the Ikpa Utu nor iron slag with smelting. As far as the people are concerned, iron slag is a different type of rock which grows from the ground. One of the elders when asked described slag as the ‘twin brother’
of stone. But they were able to identify the smiting slag as awula-
za. It was only when we demanded to know where we could
find this type of ‘stone’ in abundance that they mentioned the
site of Ikpa Utu. The name is suggestive of iron smelting site but
the people have lost memory of iron smelting and at the same
time still retain the place name that connotes smelting. The ques-
tion then, is who were responsible for the enormous slag debris
observed at Ihube. The ancestors of the present inhabitants or a
different group of itinerant ironworker? Which ever is the case,
the emerging data seem to suggest that iron smelting in Ihube is
of considerable antiquity. This belief is further strengthened when
we consider the amount of maintenance activities with respect
to smelting sites and slag at Ihube. The human activities, Gould
(1978) maintained is an indication of long history of human oc-
cupation. For example, smelting sites have been turned into farm-
lands. In Agidi village of Ihube, houses were built on former
smelting sites with iron slags mixed with the muds walls.

However, when studied in the context of the people’s tradi-
tion of origin, it seems possible to link iron smelting to the an-
cestors of the Ihube people. They were said to have emigrated
from Agulu. In Igboland, however, smiths are known as Agulu
and there are many Agulu settlements along the Udi escarpment.
In the Udi area, we have Agulu-Umana, Agulu-Amawo and
Agulu-Umabi. Presently, the Agulu settlements in Awka and Udi
are still active in blacksmithing and casting and were known to
have smelted in the past.

So far there has not been archaeological excavation in any
of the Agulu settlements to determine their antiquity of occupa-
tion. Nevertheless, oral tradition from Agulu-Umana, it is be-
lieved that all Agulu settlements emigrated from Agulu-Umana.
This migration was also recorded amongst the people of Awka
by Webb’s (1986) to the effect that the Agulu settlement in Awka
town came from Agulu Umana during the feast of Omu-ama-Uzu
associated with blacksmithing. It is the opinion of this paper
therefore, that the Agulus might have been responsible for most
of the smelting sites along the foot hill of Nsukka-O kilograms cuesta. Ironsmelting is known to have been carried out very close to the source of raw materials. This explains, perhaps, the reason for the absence of iron slag in Awka even though the people were renowned iron workers. The bloom, product of smelt was traded and often taken far a field to different smithing workshops usually located in living quarters and market places.

Because, smelting was done by a group of professionals far away from living quarters and the knowledge kept secret, people will most likely, with time, tend to forget especially when the privileged professional have all died. This may intact, explain to some extent the total ignorance of iron smelting by the present Igboe people. The present inhabitants. Presently there still exist in the area a lineage of smiths, Unuma Uzu to which Okonkwo Olutueghre our informant belongs.

On the other hand, the situation is different at Uguwogu another ironworking community in Okigwe area. In this place, smelters and blacksmiths have separate settlements and perform distinct functions in the society. Blacksmiths live in Obiaguta and Amaho quarters while smelters live in Okgwugwop village of Uguwogu. It was the smiths that built the stone pyramidal structure called Obialua in Orie awa market square. This is said to be the symbol of unity amongst the villages of Uguwogu. Obialua is decorated annually with nzu by blacksmiths during orie egbe festival. The smelters were different from the smiths and smelting was continued until shortly after colonial intervention. We are therefore able to record all the process of iron smelting at Uguwogu from elders who observed or are participants in iron smelting as youths. Blacksmithing is still a lucrative local industry with smiths making use of stone anvils in the production of various iron tools.

Discussions and Conclusion

The Okigwe area, from available evidence has potentials despite its rugged topography to attract series of human activities
from the earliest times. For one, the area has high quality rock dolerite) a rare occurrence in Igboland. This stone was used in the manufacture of stone tools which have been found in parts of Igboland and beyond (Anozie 1978, 1985). The Middle Stones Age tools said to have been discovered in Abakiliki (without vital information) which Anozie found in the National Museum may infact have come from the doleritic intrusion in Okigwe. Also, the ironstones which cap the cuesta were extensively exploited as evidenced by the huge slag debris in the area. At the same time, the very limited and often localized fertile soils were keenly competed for by series of immigrants into Okigwe. For example, a senior village, Achala in Uturu according to oral traditions was said to have drove away the Ukom people who cultivated the delicious Ukum yams. An Ihube elder was quoted as saying “owu ala wotu” meaning that it is the land that makes a good farmer.

These resources notwithstanding, the salt lake in Lokpanata utukka, Uturu and Okiposi were known to have been exploited in the past even to the present with the exception of the Lokpanata saltlake. This is said to be less saline when compared with those of Uturu and Okiposi Oposi. The value of salt was such that an Ihube source said it was used as a form of currency. Its importance is still reflected in Ihube bride wealth. Isichei (1983) has observed that salt lakes attracted settlers from very early period partly because of the wild game which was drawn to the salt licks. Okipoko (1993) on his own part has given reasons why northern Igboland (Okigwe inclusive) is of much interest to archaeologists. In the first place, the area lies within the transition zone between the forest and Savanna. Secondlly this ecotone is ideal place for early human occupation because of the animal resources of the Savanna and the meat from game, fruits, vegetables and tubers gathered from the forest environnent.

The control and management of these resources, will, over time engender some kind of conflicts, which may trigger off migration leading some settlements to shift bases either within
or outside their immediate environment. These types of movements are contained in the oral traditions of some of the communities in Oronchara and Oronu clans. As a result, Afigho (1981) believes as do the people themselves that they are autochthonous. This view seems to ignore the peoples traditions of origin which derived their progenitors from outside Okigwe as well as the enigmatic archaeological data which still beg for explanations. What is certain however is the fact that man (not necessary Igbos) through time had been occupying the Okigwe area. And that man had shifted settlements within the area response to his perceived needs and changing environments.

We can at least begin to delimit, tentatively though, two broad phases of human occupation of the study area. The first group would be the makers and users of stone tools as seen in the Ugwuolu Stone Age factor site. Their subsistence was based on hunting and gathering economy. It is expected that the toolkits of these hunter-gatherers would be seen in some of the cave and rockshelters along the Nsukka-Okigwe cuesta when they are archaeological investigated.

The second group of immigrants would be the ironworkers cum agriculturists. Given the advantages of iron technology, this group maintained a more effective occupation and exploitation of resources. This, no doubt, generated some internal rivalry amongst the competing groups leading to possible delimitation of territories and the defining of a modus vivendi. It is possible that this dichotomy of Oronchera and Oronu may be traceable to this period, to serve group identity and areas of economic spheres.

Nevertheless, ethnographic studies have shown that the two groups did and still cooperate in the exchange of goods and raw material procurement. Uturu women were known to have depended on the Ihube for the supply of raw material for mat weaving Uno when there is in short supply. There was no full scale war involving the two clans, however, one should not rule out some skirmishes between some settlements in the two clans.
There is a war deity aherlihi in Uturu that determines the course of any war and selections of war leaders. This goes to show that early inhabitants of Uturu did wage wars in defence of her fertile in its wake abandonee settlement sites such as, Ndunudu and Nvuruuru still remembered in oral traditions. The establishment of colonial administration in Okgowe and consequent quest for political patronage made different communities in the two clans to start to assert their independence. This has led to the proliferation of 'autonomous' communities in our area of study and their oral traditions have been modified accordingly, painting the image of being autochthonous and independent of any other community. This new order adversely affected the intergroup relations between and within the former traditional clan heads and their respective communities.

In conclusion, we observed that the challenges posed to ethnarchaeological research in Okgowe are quite enormous. Researchers should therefore endeavour to employ, as suggested by Agarish (1990) a systematic approach as a means of explaining the behaviour of part societies by the use of analytical models obtained from observers behavioural or cultural phenomena of living societies. Ethnoarchaeological research, in only a box that can help obtain a better use of analogy linking the past and the present. In this regard, Atherton (1983) has given very useful hints on the conduct of ethnoarchaeological research in Africa. By so doing, it is hoped that the relationship between archaeological remains and ethnographic data would be better understood and interpreted. It is suggested also, that ethnarchaeological studies of Okgowe area would benefit immensely when married with provenance studies of clays and potsherds as well as analyses of iron ores, slag and other material cultures derived in archaeological context. (Iheanu 1989; Arnold et al 1991; Okafor 1993). Such analytical studies would throw light on raw material source(s), manufacturing processes and distribution. And at the same time, enhance our understanding and interpretation of early settlements and migration subsistence procurement strategies and the changing sociocultural dynamics in Okgowe area.
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