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Early Urban Centres In West Africa

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Abstract

This article examines the diverse research views on the history of urban centres in West Africa. It focuses on the characteristics of some of the past urban centres at the time of their peak populations as revealed from the archaeological record. This article concludes that the quantum of research in West Africa is insignificant relative to the vast potentials for research to be conducted there. There is a pressing need for more research to obtain a fuller understanding of the histories of these past urban centres in West Africa.

Introduction

The term urbanism has generated much furore amongst scholars over the years. Various scholars using their local experiences have used several criteria to define urbanism. For example, Dickson (1947 in Andah 1976) defined an urban centre as a compact settlement engaged in non-agricultural occupations. Louis Wirth (1938) posited that a city is a relatively dense and permanent settlement of socially heterogeneous individuals. Service (1962) regarded states as a highly stratified and internally diversified socio-political organizations characterized by a central government which is largely divorced from the bonds of kinship; residential patterns are also based mainly on occupational specialization and not necessarily on blood or affinal relationship.

How do we equate these definitions to the evidence of past settlements in West Africa and should one conclude that there were no cities or urban centres in West Africa that met such definitions before the period of colonization. If such earlier urban centres existed, where were they located, and how do we draw the transition lines in space between a central city and the surrounding rural areas for particular locations within West Africa?

Early Perspectives on Urbanization

For many years it was assumed that West Africa had no past urban traditions, because scholars specializing in urban studies were of the view that cities can only be developed and sustained if they meet criteria such as the following, spelt out by Childe (1950): surplus food, monumental architecture, political authority, writing, calendrical and mathematical sciences, art, raw materials, regular foreign trade, full time specialization and density of population. In other words, food must be in abundance so as to sustain the large population expected in any given area classified as a city. According to Andah (1976), it was with increased food production (resulting in food surplus) and improved distributive networks that urban centres began to concentrate on new technological and socio-political activities.

The assumption that a society must possess writing systems to satisfy criteria of urbanization and state formation negates the eligibility of most settlements in West Africa to meet that status of stratification. Yet, contrary to Childe's postulations, urban centres existed in West Africa prior to the development of writing in Europe or the Middle East. The attributes of urban centres listed by Childe were only descriptively relevant for particular case studies in Southwest Asia, Europe, and America.

In contrast to Service's framework, Andah (1976) recognized that one type of early Yoruba town was socially and economically self-contained, and kinship remained the principal factor and the primary determinant of behaviour in every respect. Another type of settlement was characterized by ethnic diversity and a tendency for the distinct ethnic groups to live in separate quarters or enclaves and to be employed in diversified and specialized forms of work (Andah 1976:3). In other words, a state may not necessarily be divorced from the bonds of kinship. Guided by the rulebook laid down by Childe, early researchers in West Africa were uncritical and restricted in their analysis of the various settlement patterns of the region.

Meanwhile, based on the realization that indices which apply to early urbanization in some parts of the world do not automatically apply to West Africa, other scholars have started to develop new frameworks for studies of the past in West Africa. These new frameworks utilize analytic lenses such as: the reconstruction of the physical forms and settings of towns; the evolution of town landscapes, layouts, and changing proxemics and physiognomies of the settlement components in space and through time; and inferences on the physical and societal structure of the occupants, and the functional roles and relationships between the different

sections of the towns (Andah 1976:2). Using such new approaches, researchers will have a greater potential to critically sift the historical and archaeological records for a comprehensive study of past urbanization processes in West Africa

Early West African Towns

An array of bodies of archaeological, historical, sociological, and oral tradition evidence are clearly showing that West Africa had early urban centres (Effah-Gyamfi, 1987). The growth of towns in West Africa was not due to industrialization (a recent phenomenon compared to the long history of towns in West Africa), but rather to such factors as economic, ecological, and social conditions.

Andah (1976) recognized five main factors as responsible for the growth of early urban centres. One factor was geography, which played an important role in the establishment of such cities as Timbuktu and the earliest Hausa towns. Timbuktu was sited at a location which was easily accessible to both river and desert borne traffic. International trade also encouraged the growth and development of several urban centres in West Africa, and such centres included Tekrur, Awdoghost (Tegdoust), Qualata, Kumbi Tadimekka, Agades and Bilma. Others trade-influenced centres are Silla, Bamako, Segou, Djenne, Wagadougou, Fadan Gurma, Kaya Konkia, Jega, Katsina, Kano, and Kukawa. These cities sprang up as a result of international trade across the desert, within the Sudan as well as between it and the forest areas (Andah 1976).

Although international trade played a significant role in the growth and expansion of some early West African urban centres, other factors such as social functions also played tremendous roles in other settlement expansions. For example, according to Wheatley (1970), the *raison d'être* for the typical Yoruba city was its function as the seat of an *Oba*, the formal head of both ritual and secular functions of a city-state. Located in the centre of the primary settlement was an *Afin*, which was often looked upon as a sacred symbol that must be constructed with great skill and was utilized by the High Priest (*Oba*) in bringing power and prosperity to the kingdom (Wheatley 1970:392; Andah 1976). Similarly, the influence of Islam could spur settlement expansion of social and religious centres, as illustrated by the growth of towns such as Kanem-Borno. Another factor of urbanization in West Africa was the presence of mineral resources, such as gold and iron, which helped to initiate the growth of a number of urban centres in the region.

Early Sudan States

Historical data show that Ghana was one of the earliest known kingdoms in the West African Sahel Sudan. Ghana was a powerful empire which attained its peak in the 11th century. The presence of gold and taxes on exports and imports were the two main sources of revenue to the King, who around the beginning of the 11th century could raise a force of 200,000 warriors on short notice (Gugler and Flanagan 1978 in Okpoko 1987). According to Levtzion (1971), the extent of Ghana's dominion may be guessed by following al-Bakri's information about other towns and kingdoms in the western Sudan. To the west of Ghana, the Senegal River formed the border between Ghana and the independent kingdom of Takrur. In the south, Ghana's authority touched the gold bearing region of Bambouk (at the confluence of the Senegal and Faleme rivers), stopping short of the Madique mountains. To the east, Ghana reached the Niger, while to the north it dominated until 1054 or 1055 A.D. the Berber town of Awdaghost (Levtzion 1971). Ghana was overrun by the Almoravids around 1076. Archaeological excavations in Koumbi-Saleh, the capital and ancient city of Ghana, point to the town as having being occupied for a long period (Andah 1976).

Excavations by scholars such as Bonnel de Mezieres (1914), Lazartique (1939), Thomsey (1949, 1950), and Robert and Cross (1975, 1976) have exposed ground floors of buildings with impressive architectural features (Okpoko 1987). According to Andah (1976), the parts of Koumbi Saleh excavated thus far indicate a pre-Islamic stratum and subsequent phases showing Islamic architectural features and other influences. The materials recovered indicate that the inhabitants of the town practiced farming, trading, hunting, smithing and probably tailoring.

At Tegdoust, six occupational levels were discerned from the excavation of the town. The pre-urban level, which was the earliest, contained numerous hearths, but no visible buildings. The urban levels show trends in building technology -- stone houses were replaced by mud brick houses, and in the late medieval level the houses were entirely rebuilt in stone (Andah 1976, Okpoko 1987).

Although international trade thrived in early Ghana, archaeological evidence suggests that the growth of Ghana (as well as succeeding Mali and Songhai) were due to factors which can be found in the preceding Iron Age. In that earlier period, technological developments were combined with the ingenuity of the local populations in exploiting the natural and social

resources of their environments in more sophisticated ways than before. In other words, trade only played a complementary role in the expansion of the kingdom.

Mali

Sosso, the intermediate state between Ghana and Mali, extended its authority and reached the height of its power during the reign of Sumanguru Kante (Levtzion 1971). The victory of Sundjata, founder of the Mali Empire, during a revolt of the Malinke against Sumanguru Kante, put an end to the Sosso kingdom and opened the way for the extension of Mali's authority over the Sahel. Mali reached its peak in prosperity, fame, and territorial extent during the reign of Mansa Musa (Levtzion 1971). During the period of its greatness, the authority of Mali reached to Takrur and the Gambia in the west, to the upper Niger and the Malinke colonies and beyond in the south, to the foothills of the Bandiagara scarp in the east, to Gao and Tadmekka in the northeast, and to the nomad Berbers of the Sahel including Walata in the north (Levtzion 1971).

Unlike Koumbi Saleh, the capital of old Ghana Empire, not much is known about the archaeological relics of Niani, the capital of old Mali empire. This is because the capital has yet to be identified substantively by archaeological investigations. Excavations conducted to date have yielded scanty materials which are believed not to reveal the wealth of the empire to the degree that is evident in the historical record. However, archaeological investigations have debunked the speculations that Azelick was a copper mining and smelting town, while dates from Marandet, another site in the Air region of Niger, led McIntosh and McIntosh (1980:20) to conclude that Arab trade was superimposed on the indigenous systems.

Songhai

The kingdom of Songhai succeeded Mali. However, the capital Gao had been active in the trans-Saharan trade before the kingdom reached its zenith. Sunni Ali who, reigned between 1464 and 1492 A.D., embarked on various expeditions that led to the expansion of the empire and the trading centers of Timbuktu and Jenne became part of the empire in 1467 and 1473 respectively. The empire reached its zenith during the reign of Askia Mohammed Toure, who made a pilgrimage to Mecca with pomp and ceremony. Toure also expanded the territory of the kingdom. According to Levtzion (1971), the territory of the kingdom extended as far as Tekrur in the west; in the north east it reached the border of Taghaza and Agades which were important

economic centres. Songhai's influence also extended as far east as the Hausa states and beyond the Niger basin to the south. Internal disputes led to the disintegration of the empire, and in 1591 A.D. the empire completely disintegrated with a defeat by the Moroccan army.

Large scale excavations are yet to be carried out in such sites as Gao, Taghaza, Eso Souk and Timbuktu, which were important centres of the old Songhai empire. In Timbuktu, major archaeological features include the remains of three ancient mosques, while excavations in Gao have revealed a mosque built around 1324 A.D. Investigations at Teghaza reveal that it was constructed with three major components, a large pan and two tells. Archaeological investigations at Jenne-Jenno have revealed a large mound. Four units were excavated in the mound and these show four phases of occupation of the site.

The destruction of Songhai marked the emergence of relatively small states in the western Sudan. Such states include Rumo, with a capital at one of the provinces of Songhai, in Timbuktu. Other later states in the region included the Bambara, Segou, Kaarta, and Maasina

Kanem Bornu Empire

This was a two-phased empire, consisting of Kanem and Bornu. The Kanem empire had its beginning in the first millennium A.D., when the Magumi nomads united the sedentary Zagawa and Kanuri people who were living to the northeast of the present Lake Chad. Its capital was Njimi. The empire reached its peak about 12th century A.D. However, two centuries later the empire disintegrated and the Bornu Empire was formed to the west of Lake Chad. The capital was at Ngazargamu, and the empire reached its greatest height during the reign of Idris Aloma (1571-1603), who expanded the kingdom east, north, south, and westwards. Idris went as far as overrunning the Mandara country in the south and reducing the extent of Kano in the west. He battled against the Bulala as far as Babaliya in the east, and fought the Tuaregs and Teda and Bilma in the north (Adeleye 1971; Hallam 1966; Okpoko 1987). The Bornu kingdom collapsed during the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century when it came under the control of Rabeh from 1893 to 1900 and later under European imperialism.

Other important kingdoms east of the Sudan were Kano, which built city walls between the 11th and 12th century A.D., and Zaria, which under Queen Amina extended its territories from the Kwararafa state to Nupe and to Bauchi. By the 15th century, Katsina had started

challenging Zaria's influence and expanded southwards in the 15th century. Kebbi, Kwararafa, Zamfara, and Gobir were the other important Hausa states (Adeleye 1971).

Old Oyo Kingdom

The old Oyo was perhaps the largest of the Yoruba kingdoms. According to Soper (1993), Oyo Ile, the capital of old Oyo, lies some 130 km. north-northeast of the present town of Oyo, just within the boundary of the modern Oyo state. Old Oyo expanded as far as Nupe, and the empire covered all the Yoruba by the middle of 18th century. Earlier in the 18th century, the conquest of Dahomey had been achieved, while in the middle of the century the whole of Egba and Egbado, parts of Igbomina, the whole of Ajase kingdom, Dahomey and parts of Ibariba and Tapa became territories of old Oyo (Akinjogbin et al.). Oyo was presided over by Alaafin who was highly revered, but had his powers under the check of a council of state known as Oyo Mesi. Agbaje Williams (1983) used indices that were considered to contain useful demographic features to estimate the population of Old Oyo around 18th century to a range of 60,000-140,000. This however, according to Okpoko, may be conjectural.

Old Oyo was abandoned in 1836 or 1837, and is now an uninhabited game reserve. A series of detailed archaeological excavations have been carried out at the site of Old Oyo. Notable works were carried out by Soper, Willet, and Agbaje Williams. According to Soper (1993), the size of Oyo Ile is indicated by the defensive wall system, which, as described by Soper and Darling (1980), consists of basically three concentric walls. The inner wall (wall 1) encloses an irregular area of 235 hectares; the main wall (wall 2) is roughly oval, six by five kilometers in diameter, and encloses 2010 ha; the outer wall (walls 3 and 4) is some 6.5 km in diameter and encloses 2975 ha. In addition, there is a large loop of wall to the north (wall 6), which springs from wall 2 and encloses 2155 ha, and an arc of a wall (wall 5) within it, all concentric to the main system (Soper 1993:295). Willet (1960:75) identified two types of pottery tradition at Old Oyo. These included the Diogun style, which was characterized by a sandy paste, vessels fawny grey to brown in colour, and pottery that was well fired and quite hard while the surfaces were not burnished. A second type of pottery was the Mejiro ware (according to Soper), which had a very hard paste, black colour, with dark grey or light grey shading into a bluish grey which appeared almost white (Willet 1960:76).

As regards the Hausa states, archaeological investigations have shown that the site of Birnin-Ngazargamu was made up of a flat area about 2 km. across and enclosed by a large earthen rampart about 7 m. high which had five entrances. Connah (1981 in Okpoko 1987) reveals that the palace site at Birnin-Ngazargamu was made up of a slightly elevated area covered with fired-bricks (well fired to a red colour) which appear to have been made in moulds to some pre-determined standard (Okpoko 1987:256).

From the above review of evidence we have seen that Kroeber's (1948) proposition that a society in which person-to-person relationships are prevalent must be categorized as rural does not apply in West Africa. For example, amongst some groups (such as Yoruba) kinship may be a dominant factor and hence societal and cultural organization may be based largely on kinship structures. This does not mean that such a society will have a political institution that is weakly developed, as conceived by Kroeber; nor will it mean that such a society must be characterized an egalitarian structure and minimal frameworks of social authority and control.

Kroeber also missed the point by stating that a rural society is dominated in its culture and behaviour by localized folkways. In Kroeber's (1948) words, in such a society there is a strong belief in sacred things and thus their sense of right or wrong springs from an unconscious root of social feelings and its therefore unreasoned, compulsive and strong. We cannot refer to either Old Oyo or Ife as rural societies, even though there was a strong moral and religious sense.

Lastly, Kroeber further stated that one of the several attributes which make rural or folk societies what they are is their size. He stressed that this is the basis of social homogeneity and its uniformity. Folk societies are attached to their soils emotionally by ties of habits and economically by experience, as a result of this they belonged to the group of societies which identified themselves with their locality in contrast to the city dwellers who float without roots but take pride in a living large area and therefore constantly subject to play of fashion. In other words, every relationship must be formal and be devoid of sentimental attachments. This was not tenable in the early West African states.

Recommendations

Although we know that urban centres in West Africa have a long history, the information currently available is scanty. Early accounts by traveling Europeans and Arabs were shaped

mainly by their economic interests, which invariably meant that such accounts lacked information on population size, function, nature and more importantly the location of such sites. Oral information which ought to have backed up such accounts is also deficient in such details, thus making it difficult for archaeologists to carry out comprehensive studies of such sites and towns. For example, an archaeologist may face a very difficult situation where there is lack of information about the exact location of a particular site.

Other problems facing urban studies from the archaeological perspectives also include the rapid rate of the destruction of these sites. Quite a number of sites have been destroyed through such activities as ploughing, road construction, and farming (Adekola 2008). Determining the scale of excavation of urban sites also presents difficulties. Archaeologists face the challenge of determining how large excavation projects should be to be considered as representative of an urban centre.

Meanwhile, these problems are surmountable if research interest on urban studies is given financial support by the relevant authorities. Such supporting agencies can include the government at various levels, international agencies, as well as various universities. All organizations dealing with land, such as ministries of housing and works, as well as construction companies, must be encouraged to have archaeologists on their payroll. Lastly, urban studies should be carried out as a cross-disciplinary venture, while archaeologists can overcome the problem of scale through a carefully formulated research programme that can yield substantial information on such sites.

Conclusion

Contrary to the opinions of early scholars in West Africa, urban centres existed in the region long before contact with Arabs and Europeans. International trade (particularly trans-Saharan trade) did not initiate the rise of urban centres in West Africa, but rather a combination of factors culminated in the rise of such centres. Such factors include the ability of the local populations to perceive and exploit the resources within their environment, international trade, geography, economy, and the impacts of Islam – all played active roles in the expansion and development of urban centres in West Africa. Archaeologists need to do more research to shed light on the history of urban centres in West Africa, especially since oral and historical data are

deficient in such information as the nature and population of such sites. This can only be achieved with support from research organizations and governments.

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