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Ditches and Ramparts as Evidence of Warfare Defenses in 19th Century Yorubaland: A View from Keesi, Southwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

Internecine wars were prevalent in Yorubaland during the 18th and 19th centuries, culminating in the construction of ditches and ramparts and other forms of wall barrier by different settlements for defensive purposes. Orile Keesi was not left out in this situation, for the ditch and rampart there were associated with warfare. Archaeological reconnaissance and survey carried out at Orile Keesi, near Abeokuta in southwestern Nigeria, revealed ditch and rampart structural remains and other features and artifacts, including an ash mound, potsherds, iron slag, tuyeres, and human skeletal fragments. Although three types of ditch and rampart features were identified, only one was extensive enough to have covered much of the ancient settlement. Vegetation was thick, preventing mapping of the entire ditch and rampart structure.

Introduction

Orile-Keesi is located in the southeastern part of Abeokuta in Southwestern Nigeria. It is situated off Ibadan-Abeokuta road at a distance of about 1 km from the main road (Fig. 1). The site is under the jurisdiction of Odeda Local Government Area of Ogun State and Odeda, and that government unit's headquarters is situated 28 kilometers from Abeokuta, along the Abeokuta-Ibadan road. The settlement stands generally on a flat terrain, although some areas are shaped by sloping contours, particularly in the south and southeast areas. The site is located approximately 157 meters above sea level (Gbadegesin, 1992).

The climate of Orile-Keesi is monsoonal in character, presenting a typical contrast between the dry season and wet season. These climatic regimes are dependent on the two prevailing air masses blowing over the country at different times of the year. These are the tropical maritime and continental air masses. The vegetation of the area is secondary rain forest with thickets. A combination of factors, such as erosion, high rural population densities, shifting

cultivation, and annual bush burning, has combined to affect the original forest vegetation.

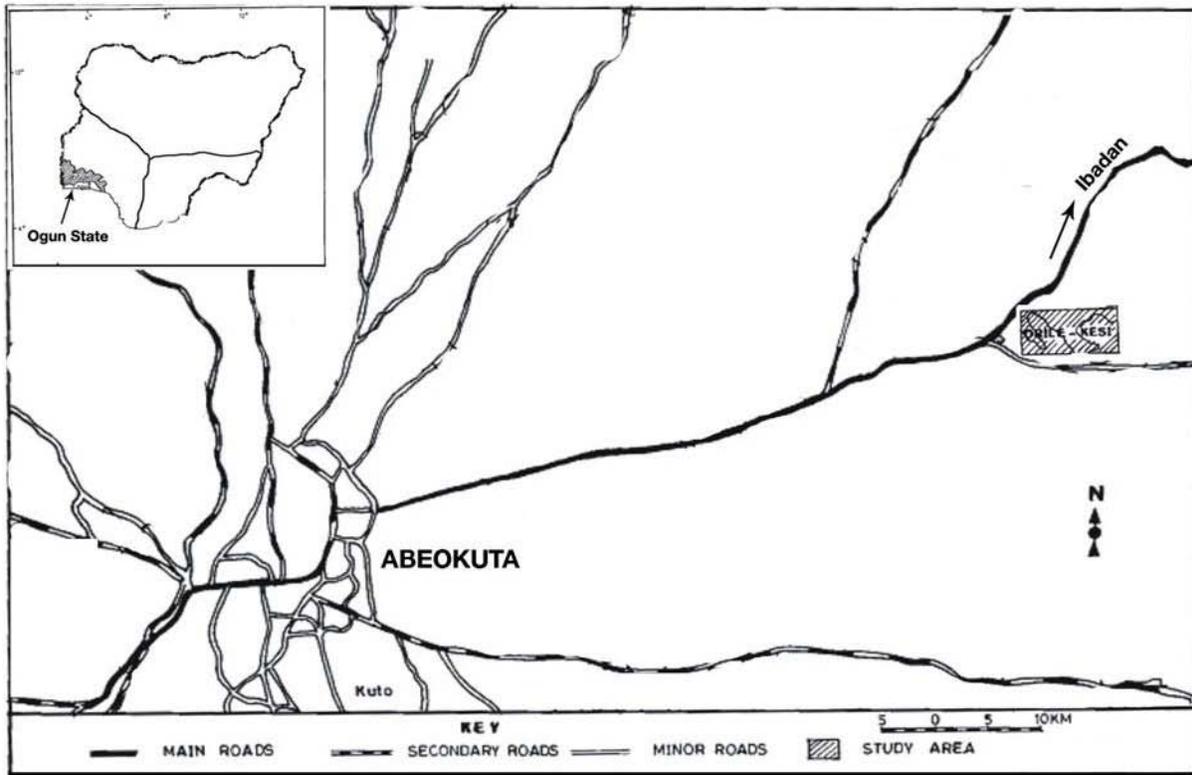


Figure 1. Map of parts of Ogun State showing the study area (Source: Ministry of Lands and Housing, Ibadan, Oyo State).

The area's vegetation has been extensively shaped by anthropogenic activities. The impacts of timber logging enterprises are evident in the area. For instance, the logging operators cut through the ditch and rampart in the northern part of the village in the process of creating an access road for their tipper lorries. The secondary nature of the forest is evident in the presence of the oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) in the northwestern part of the village. The oil palm is known to occur and regenerate where the forest has been opened up, as well as in river valleys or inhabited areas of forest regions (Sowunmi 1985, 1999). Generally, dense stands of oil palm in the rain forest are an indication of both a former opening up of such a forest and of human occupation (Sowunmi 1985). It is therefore not surprising that palm oil processing was one of the major occupations of the local residents in the past (Tiamiyu 2001: pers. comm.). The following forest trees are still seen on the landscape even though the original forest is fast disappearing: African mahogany (*Azelia africana*), obeche (*Triplochiton scleroxylon*), *Alstoria*

boonei, *Dialium quinensis*, *Mitragyna inemis*, *Entandrophragma spp.*, baobab (*Andasonia digitata*), and bamboo (*Bambusa arundinaria*).

Economically harvested trees of the Orile-Keesi area include oil palm (*Elaies guineensis*), cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*), kola nuts (*Cola acuminata* and *Cola nitida*), oranges (*Citrus spp.*), cashew (*Anarcadium occidentale*), guava (*Psidium guajava*), star apple (*Chrysophyllum albidum*), akee apple (*Blighia sapida*), and coconut (*Cocos nucifera*). Three important tree crops -- oil palm, cocoa and kolanut -- play important roles in the life ways of the people. Cocoa and kola nut are usually found together especially in the Southwestern and eastern parts of the settlement, while kola nut trees are scattered in different parts of the area. These economic trees are owned by individuals who are farmers but live in Abeokuta. Even though those farmers live in the town, they come to the village every weekend to examine their farms and take harvested crops to markets such as Olodo, Odeda, Alabata, Olugbo, and Kila among others (Agotola 2004: pers. comm). There are also orchards with citrus and coconut. The *Baale* of the village owns one of the orchards. Ekanade (1984:29) has referred to these tree crops as the “true derivations of the tropical rainforest since they are characteristically evergreen.”

Food crops include groundnut (*Arachea hypogea*), water leaf (*Talinum triangulare*), white yam (*Discorea alata*), yellow yam (*Discorea cayenensis*), sweet yam (*Discorea esculentus*), tomatoes (*Lycopersicum spp.*), okro (*Abelmoscus esculentus*), maize (*Zea mays*), cocoyam (*Colocasia antiquorum*), melon (*Melon cactus*), beans (*Vigna sinensis*), plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*), pineapple (*Ananas sativas*), pepper (*Capsicum annum*), cassava (*Manihot esculentus*), among others. The major food crops of the people are yams and cassava, and they dominate over other species in the area.

The site is drained by a number of streams. These include ‘Odo ibu’ (‘ibu’ means stream) and ‘Odo Alase’ (‘Alase’ means pond) which are found to the south-southwestern and northwestern parts of the settlement, respectively. These aquatic resources provide fish, crabs and mussels for the inhabitants of the village, and also serve as a source of drinking water.

Orile Keesi: A Historical Perspective

The word ‘Orile’ means ‘original homeland’ and the word ‘Keesi’ is derived from ‘*lakiyesi*’, that is, ‘take notice of’ (Ajagunjeun 2002: pers. comm). With time, the name was

contracted to 'Keesi' by the inhabitants of the land. The town was founded by Ojo, an emigrant from Ile-Ife (Ajisafe 1964:21). Orile-Keesi, the original homeland of the Keesi people, was a prominent settlement before the Egba migrated to Abeokuta in 1830. This once prosperous capital of Egba Agbeyin is at present a small village with remnants of the past settlement scattered around it. This was because only a handful of the descendants of the settlers of Keesi went back to resettle there after its initial abandonment. After its initial abandonment sometime before 1826, its inhabitants moved to Abeokuta under the leadership of their general, Ajagunjeun (Ajagunjeun 2004: pers. comm.). They now occupy a quarter in Abeokuta.

The settlement can be divided into two sections, which are Abule Oja and Emulu. Abule Oja is a family of warriors while Emulu village is a family of farmers. These are the two families that returned to Keesi from Abeokuta after its abandonment (Agotola 2001: pers. comm.). The others stayed back due to the Yoruba civil wars that continued throughout the 19th century. At that time, they became easy prey of the Ijebu and Ibadan forces. Ajagunjeun, the *Balogun* of Keesi at the time of its fall, was of the family of Abule Oja. Since the two families arrived differently, they decided to settle separately, but with time the two became fused together. The custom in earlier times was that if anyone came to Orile-Keesi they would ask whether he was going to Abule Oja or Emulu. The former had a flourishing market, hence the name, 'Abule Oja.' This market lost its importance because some of the people moved to Abeokuta (Agotola 2001: pers. comm.).

Reconnaissance and Survey

Reconnaissance is carried out to locate "sites with promising evidence of human settlement and occupation for further archaeological survey and excavations" (Alabi 1998:81). The reconnaissance of Keesi was carried out for two main reasons: first, to identify the archaeological potential of the site and see its viability for archaeological investigation, and, second, to collect oral traditional information or data from the region using mainly an unstructured interview approach. This helped in the identification of activity loci and in the understanding of their cultural and historical contexts.

The reconnaissance of Keesi was carried out between 1999 and 2004. During the visits features identified were documented for further archaeological investigations. The exercise benefited immensely from the assistance of some of the local people, particularly hunters who

are very knowledgeable about their local environment. During the reconnaissance some villages as well as a quarter occupied in Abeokuta by some Keesi people were visited and oral interviews were conducted. The reconnaissance involved field walking. The whole area was divided into four segments (north, south, east and west) and systematically traversed. This approach was adopted because of the forested nature of the site.

Due to the fact that no archaeological investigation has been carried out in the whole of Egbaland, we found the exercise to be worthwhile. The forest was very thick at the time the reconnaissance was conducted. Visibility and mobility were thus poor, hindering access to the location of surface archaeological features. Poor visibility and mobility are serious problems in the rain forest belts of the tropics. The thick undergrowth and multi-layered tree canopies generally make movement and visibility extremely difficult (Ogundiran 1990:10).

The reconnaissance revealed that the site has been greatly disturbed as a result of farming activities. In addition, artifacts (especially potsherds) are usually removed from their primary context to other areas in the course of farming. Our informants also could not identify some of the activity loci mentioned in the people's oral traditions. Farming is concentrated in the northwestern and southern parts of the site. It is important to note that no structural remains could be located. However, such artifacts as potsherds, cowrie shells, iron slag, tuyeres, iron nodules, metal objects, animal remains, ash mounds and settlement mounds were found on the farms.

Ditches and ramparts were also located in the northwestern, southern, and western parts of the settlement (Fig. 2). It was discovered that they did not entirely encircle the settlement. Two sets were identified which formed inner and outer ditches and ramparts (Fig. 3). At present, the inner ditch and rampart have been obliterated due to farming activities, while the outer ditch and rampart could not be clearly seen due to thick vegetation. As Eluyemi (1977:98) has observed, "the often dense tropical forest of southern Nigeria makes it almost impossible to recognize prospective excavation sites because of difficulties of access and of locating sites of antiquities by field survey." Furthermore, skeletal remains of two humans were discovered along the road that leads to the village from Magbon. Erosion had exposed these burials, and readily identified bones included a femur and ulna. There is no doubt that two individuals were buried very close to each other.



Figure 2. The outer rampart (image by authors).

An iron-working site was located very close to the outer rampart in the northern part of the village. Iron slag and tuyeres litter this area. However, no furnaces were discovered. Oral information showed that iron-working was a major occupation of extinct *Keesi*. We were also informed that in the process of farming, the people unearthed ‘*oju awa*’ (tuyeres), ‘*omo owu*’ (hammer stone), smoking pipes, and wooden and iron objects, among others. It is disappointing that no records of these finds during farming have been kept and this amounts to a destruction of the archaeological record.



Figure 3. Map showing the inner and outer ramparts (image by authors).

An *Esu* shrine was located in one of the entrances to the village, at the southeastern part. According to information gathered, the *Esu* deity was worshipped there by the former inhabitants, either before going to war for victory to be attained, or whenever any unusual situations like sudden death or outbreak of small pox occurred (Jimoh 2001: pers. comm.). Today, the deity is no longer being worshipped by the inhabitants of Keesi. The present-day settlement is located on the northern fringe of the site and the reconnaissance revealed that it occupied a small portion of it.

Survey Methods and Results

The mapping of the ditches and ramparts revealed that substantial portions had been destroyed. As noted above, a road had been cut through the inner ditch and rampart at the western part of the site by loggers in the process of lumbering. Mapping started at the northern

part of the settlement, where some portions of the ditch and rampart had disappeared completely.

At the time of mapping, a GPS mapping recorder was unavailable. A conventional survey method involving the use of a ranging pole and a magnetic compass for establishing distances and bearings was adopted. With this method, the ditches and ramparts were mapped, and the height was also recorded. However, the mapping was terminated at a point on the southern part due to the thick forest, which made mobility and visibility impossible (Fig. 3). The orientation of both the inner and outer ditches and ramparts to the present day settlement was also established. This was done by mapping the roads and footpaths cutting through the ditches and ramparts to the settlement.

The mapping revealed that the ditches and ramparts did not totally enclose the present day settlement. Oral information indicated that the ditches and ramparts were erected at strategic places that were more susceptible to enemies' attacks during the site's occupation. The maximum height of the rampart with the ditch at the southern part was 9.55 meters.

The inner and outer ditches and ramparts at the southern part were separated by a distance of 7.37 meters. At this section also, it was discovered that there were three ramparts instead of two. The middle rampart here only extends over a few meters. It probably served as a watch post between the inner and outer ditches and ramparts. The maximum depth of the rampart with the ditch at this portion was 4 meters. The total length of the mapped area is 955 meters.

Discussion and Conclusion

A very important factor of settlement patterns in areas of West Africa and, in fact, elsewhere, is defense. Defense can be defined as an action or decision that constitutes a hindrance or obstruction to invasion or external aggression. Ditches and ramparts played an important role in Egba defense especially during the 19th century Yoruba internecine wars. Commenting on the defence of Ikija, the first Egba town to be attacked and destroyed after the fall of Owu, Cooper and Mabogunje (1971:58) described it thus: "the city of Ikija was built on two small hills and the intervening valley through which ran a small stream that gave the town its water supply. It was fortified in the traditional fashion with double walls, the inner one which was strengthened by a particular ditch. The town was an important trading centre and its walls

were pierced by six gates.” Because the town of Ikija was well defended, the invasion took four months before it fell. The use of ditches and ramparts to guard against external aggression has given rise to a popular saying “*agba tan lodi ngbani*” (a defensive wall completely protects and supports the town enclosed by such wall) (Ogundiran 1990:167).

The Orile-Keesi site existed at a time when internecine wars were rampant in Yorubaland especially towards the end of the 18th and early 19th centuries. As a result, ditches and ramparts were constructed to ward off external aggression. There were two categories of ditches and ramparts at this site, that is, inner and outer (Fig. 3). It is not unexpected that Keesi was surrounded by ditches and ramparts at its first occupation, because it was, for some time, the capital of Egba Agbeyin section of the Egba settlements within the Egba forest. According to oral information, the inner rampart is known as ‘*odi amonu*’ (wall of ruins) and the outer rampart is called *iso* (watch post) (Odunbaku 2007). The outer rampart and ditch are claimed to have been pierced by three gates which linked the town with other towns such as Ikija, Erunwon, Kemta, and Ake, among others. Before a stranger could enter the town, he had to pay a certain amount as toll (Jimoh 1999: pers. comm.).

In times of danger the watchman in charge of the outer rampart would shout to the one stationed at the inner rampart and the information would be passed to the people inside. Soldiers would be stationed accordingly at strategic positions on the outer rampart. However, if the enemies succeeded in climbing the first rampart, the inner rampart would be well protected because once the inner rampart was climbed, the enemies had entered the town (Soneye 2000: pers. comm.). The forest between the inner and outer ditches and ramparts was called *Igbo ilu* (town forest) and it contained *igbo oba* (the King’s forest), farmland, and the Lakijena (a local deity among the Keesi) grove (Agotola 2001: pers. comm.).

Defensive ditches and ramparts were usually constructed by the community with the use of enslaved laborers (Ogundele 2004: 140). Information gathered from Orile-Owu in Southwestern Yorubaland indicates that it was the responsibility of a given community leader and his chiefs to work out arrangements for the construction of ditches and ramparts in the pre-colonial period. The earthworks were re-dug several times in order to maintain the original depth of a ditch after it had been covered by earth falling from the banks as a result of rainfall and possibly people walking on the banks (Ogundele 2004). In the course of mapping the

ditches and ramparts at the northern part of the site, it was discovered that there were three ramparts. As one of us (Alabi 2003: pers. comm.) reasoned, this might be because the northern part was more susceptible to enemies' attacks than the other parts. Moreover, as earlier pointed out, the ditches and ramparts did not enclose the entire settlement but they were only constructed in areas that were more susceptible to enemies' attacks (Soneye 2000: pers. comm.).

There is ample evidence to show that walls and ditches have been employed for defense of settlements in many time periods and locations (Johnson 1921:91; Law 1973:236; Fagan 1975; Okpoko 1979; Ogundiran 1990, 2000; Usman 1998; Usman *et al.* 2005; Ogundele 2000, 2004). In different parts of Africa, ditches and ramparts and other forms of defensive features were built around large and important kingdoms such as Oyo Ile, Owu, Ijaye Orile, Ijebu Ode (Sungbo's Eredo moat), Ila Iyara, Gbagede and Iyara in Igbominaland, Benin, Ogurugu, Ushongo, some Hausa States in Northern Nigeria, and Mossi settlements in Upper Volta, among others (Smith 1973; Okpoko 1979; Darling 1998; Ogundele 2004; Usman *et al.* 2005).

The Yoruba took cognizance of the importance of defence and security. Most towns were walled and deep trenches were constructed all around them. The more vulnerable a town was to external attack, the more substantial the wall. In order to ensure dependable protection of smaller towns, bush or thickets called *Igbo Ile* (home forest) were maintained. This *Igbo ile* was typically located about 0.5 to 1.5 kilometers from the walls round the town. This could easily act as a check against sudden cavalry attack and a good place for defense against external aggression. Trees in it were climbed and used to monitor the movement of an invading army's soldiers. Except in time of peace, it was considered a criminal offense to cut any trees in the home forest. Highways were made through it to the town gates by the inhabitants of the town and these were kept in excellent repair.

Capitals and other important towns sometimes had two or three walls. The Egba and Egbado in Yorubaland built wooden watch-towers on stilts above the walls during the restive periods of the 18th and 19th centuries; more usually, sentries were stationed on high trees (Smith 1973: 236). Three types of defensive walls have been recognised in Yorubaland in surveys to date. The first comprises of massive earthworks and this type has been found in Owu (Ogundele, 2004). The second one is usually of a lower depth than the first type. The earth or rampart was usually thatched to prevent it from being washed away by erosion. This has been recognised at New Oyo, Ibadan and Ijaiye and also in some older towns (Smith 1973:236). This was usually

built by large armies in the field. The rampart at Orile Keesi falls into this category, though there is no evidence that it was thatched. The third category comprises constructed mud walls, as have been found at Old Oyo.

Connah (1967:593-596) distinguished between walls which were a free standing mud-built walls and those which were called 'dump ramparts.' He noted that the free standing mud walls could be found in the savannah area while the second defensive wall was restricted to the forest region. In the former type, towns were more vulnerable to enemies' attacks and those that had to stand long sieges had a second or outer wall which enclosed a large area that was used to farm during a long siege. These two types were used by the Yoruba in the past, although the dump ramparts otherwise known as ditches and ramparts were more common than the free-standing walls. As observed by Smith (1973:237), the Yoruba used dump ramparts to protect themselves in troubled times; they were also used to create boundary demarcation between settlements in ancient times. However, security reasons must have prompted the erection of most ditches and ramparts in Yorubaland.

Note

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Appendix: List of Informants

NAME	AGE	SEX	OCCUPATION	PLACE	DATE
Raimi Soneye	60+	M	Farmer	Orile-Keesi	7/10/2004
Tiamiyu Tijani	70+	M	Baale of Emulu Village	Orile-Keesi	23/10/2001
Kasimowo Agotola	65	M	Farmer	Orile-Keesi	17/2/2000
Mr. Jimoh Hassan	60	M	Farmer	Orile-Keesi	17/2/2003
Mr Adesina Ajagunjeun	75	M	Farmer	Abeokuta	18/12/2003

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