

■ Nigeria

Historical archaeology and technology of Ugwunye Clan in Udi, Nigeria

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Introduction

Historical archaeology is a form of archaeology dealing with places, things, and issues from the past or present when written records and oral traditions can inform and contextualize cultural material. Today, archaeologists study the material remains of the past, which is indicative of human activities and/or environmental changes overtime (Fagan 1978). The material remains like an artifact (be it stone, wood, metal, clay or bone) are mostly obtained through excavation, which represent the human behavioral patterns that produced, used and discarded them. An archaeological investigation is usually initiated in human habitations most likely to contain archaeological material that are of sufficient importance, and time and resources must be invested in it to ensure that the information contained there is not lost.

Interestingly, most historical archaeological investigations have pointed to the fact that in the pre-colonial era in Igbo land, there were flourishing traditional technologies and industries, and organized settlement patterns (Anozie 2002; Chikwendu 2002; Okpoko 1979). These studies x-rayed indigenous technology in the study areas; however, the authors did not give any details of how the technologies served and affected the settlement pattern and the lifestyles of the people where they existed.

Investigation into historical archaeology and technology of Enugu State has been centered in Nsukka and its environs namely: Opi, Umundu, Ogboduaba, Obimo and Lejja. Little or no archaeological investigations of any sort have been carried out in Udi town, Obioma, Obinagu, Umuaga, Oji Amokwe, Eke, Awhum, Ebe, Ukana, Umulumbe, Okpatu, Akpakwume, Affa, or Egede, to mention but a few communities that make up the Udi Local Government Area. It is a fact that very little work, if any, has been done towards reconstructing the cultural history of the Ugwunye clan in Udi L.G.A. For example, no archaeological work has been done at Egede and Affa, despite huge evidence of slag deposits in the areas and their proximity to Okpatu, which still has evidence of iron smelting and standing furnaces. Thus, the relevance of archaeological research, which constitutes a reliable database for historical reconstruction of any society, is frequently dismissed. Furthermore, there is no documented evidence of sites/features in the Ugwunye clan. This research hopes to bring out meaningful historical information about the communities, which would place the Ugwunye clan on the archaeological world map.

Research Objective

The general objective of this research is to study the archaeological resources of the Ugwunye clan. Specifically, the objective is to identify and document archaeological sites and features in the Ugwunye clan with a view to expand our understanding of early human habitations and adaptation to natural environment.

Research Methodology

In order to effectively pursue the investigation, the researchers use archaeological reconnaissance and ethnographic study. For the ethnographic study, three instruments were designed to elicit relevant information. These are oral tradition, key informant interviews and in-depth interviews. Oral tradition was employed in this work as one of the cardinal means of gaining information on locations of sites, their uses and values in the Ugwunye clan, as well as information on socio-cultural settings of the study area. Key informants (knowledgeable people of Affa and Egede communities) were selected and interviewed. This method allowed the unexpected to emerge. In-depth interviews entail the collection of semi-structured or unstructured data through interviewer-interviewee verbal interactions or conversations. Archaeological reconnaissance is vital and indispensable



Figure 1: The furnace base in Mr. Ogwo's compound. (photo E.E. Okonkwo)

in fieldwork and helps in the collection of surface/sub-surface data. In this study, a survey of the two major communities (Affa and Egede) that make up the Ugwunye clan was conducted in order to identify notable archaeological resources for the study.

The survey was carried out on foot and on a few occasions, motorbikes were used to cover long distances, as no car or other vehicle can be used in the rugged terrain where these sites were located. Movements around the communities and within the sites were smooth despite the rugged terrain of the areas under study. With the assistance of a foreman (an indigene of Ugwunye clan) who acted as our guide, sites/features and knowledgeable people to be interviewed were easily identified. More importantly, the researchers had traveled earlier to the communities on several occasions to make consultations and arrangements for the research. The actual research lasted for two weeks.

Data presentation: archaeological resources in Ugwunye Clan

Iron smelting sites

There are high proliferations of slag (locally known as *Efuru*) in different villages of Affa especially in Ikono, Inoyi, Ogor, and Amukwu villages. Throughout the major expressway that leads to Affa town, slag deposits along the un-tarred roads are being exposed as the earth surface is washed away by rainfall. Within the community, at intervals of 500 meters to 1 kilometer, one can see evidence of slag everywhere, but there are areas where the slag

deposits are more abundant than elsewhere. Upon close observation, we saw a suspected furnace base in front of Mr. Ogwo's house (Figure 1) located 9.3 m from the first house in Ogwo's compound (our datum point) facing the rural main road. The circumference of the suspected furnace base measured 3.96 m and had a height of 0.36m.

Opposite Ogwo's compound is the Ononachi's family house with a distance of 8.9 m away from the identified furnace base in front of Ogwo's house. Within the vicinity, there is another evidence of high slag deposits that were unearthed by water-run off in the patch walkway that separated Ogwo's house from Ononachi's house, and it is about 19.2 m away from Ononachi's family house.

Behind Ogwo's house is Mr. Vitalis Ojiegbe's house, located 42.8 meters from our datum point. In front of Mr. Ojiegbe's house is another high concentration of slag deposits, especially broken ones. Worthy of note is that the zone from Ononachi's house to Ojiegbe's house shows a high concentration of slag, indicating a probable smelting center before the present occupants inhabited the area.

In Mr. John Edi's compound at Amiyi (a ward in Amaozalla autonomous community in Affa) there were high deposits of slag. Here, the slag was heaped to a height of 0.85 meters and length of 3.96 meters *in situ*. Onsite observation revealed current use of slag by the inhabitants to include reinforcement of building base/foundation walls, as well as to forestall erosion or demarcate farmland boundaries. In times past, children used slag for hunting of reptiles (like lizards etc.); slag also served as missiles during intertribal wars (Nwanyibuife Modayeni, pers. comm. 15/9/2015).

Our informant, Mrs. Bridget Edi admitted that they meet slag deposits in their compound and have no knowledge of what it is. To her, slag is a type of stone that comes from the ground and gives birth (breaks) to smaller ones. The smaller heaps around the edge of their building were parked by them. About 450-600 meters away from Mr. Edi's compound was more evidence of slag buried under the ground.

Similarly, in Egede town if one mentions *efuru* (slag), the people will refer you to Umuokpala village where they have high deposits of slag. The place is called *Ikpo-efuru* (dumping place) in the Amofia–Amaozalla axis of Umuokpala village. Beside the heap of slag, there are proliferations of slag all over the area up to 150 meters away from the *Ikpo-efuru*. The meaning and



Figure 2: An abandoned smithing workshop in Anaekeneze village. (photo E.E. Okonkwo)

uses of slag are unknown to Egede people. It is believed to be a type of stone created by God, which are a nuisance during farming because it makes farming difficult and sparks of fire are generated when a hoe hits the slag. Our informant (Mr. Ofor) admitted that as children, they used the stone (slag) to hunt birds and lizards; however, the origin/source of slag is unknown to the inhabitants of Egede town.

Blacksmithing

Blacksmithing is the production of iron tools/artifacts from bloom or iron scraps by forging the metal and using tools to hammer, bend, and cut the object to achieve the desired shape. The people of Affa and Egede towns admitted that they practiced blacksmithing in the olden days, but the technology was learnt from nearby towns like Amokwe, while itinerant smiths came from other towns like Nsukka, Awka and Udi and taught their people (Affa and Egede) how to smith. Presently, while some still practice this act in a basic form, others have abandoned it for other occupations like trading and farming. Smiths in our study area produced hoes (*Ogu*), matchets (*Nma*), sickles (*Nko*), etc. These tools are of high relevance to their agricultural practice because both communities are agrarian in nature. Today, most of their farming implements are bought in their local and nearby markets.

As noted above, the act of blacksmithing is in decline in Affa and Egede, while in Affa, the people still have vestiges of blacksmithing. Mr. Ezeoba Bernard (a retired blacksmith in Ogor village of Affa) explained that

blacksmithing is tedious and that explains why the youths of this present generation are more interested in getting white collar jobs after graduation. He further explained that his children had no interest in smithing and lamented that he remained the last of his kind in this occupation. Mr. Ezeoba’s workshop is an open hut with a zinc roof and no walls on its sides. It measures 3.51 m in width and 2.53 meters in height. Inside the workshop were many traps and hoes yet to be repaired, and now abandoned. Mr. Ezeoba admitted that new methods of smithing made it less stressful, such as using batteries or electricity to power the bellows, but he is tired and old and can no longer practice smithing.

There is no standing smithing shop in Egede. Instead, some of the areas shown to us as abandoned blacksmith shops are either overgrown by bushes or reused as residential houses; while in most cases, they were incorporated into farmland making their location and identification quite difficult (Figure 2). The majority of the smiths in Egede were non-indigene and left Egede at the decline of the industry as a result of old age, lack of patronage or family demand for the person to return home. In Anaekeneze village, we identified abandoned bellows that have been covered by grasses and shrubs, most probably an abandoned smith workshop.

Settlement pattern

For the purpose of this study, we shall define settlement pattern as an archaeological term used to describe how cultural activities were distributed over a given area at a particular time period. The different shapes of settlements are called patterns. The people of Egede have a nucleated type of settlement. They live in close proximity with each other while their farms are between 1-2 kilometers away from residential areas except for small ones that can be seen in neighbouring spaces separating one village from another. In Affa, the Amaozalla autonomous community has two settlements, Amaozalla-Uno and Amaozalla-Agu. Amaozalla-Uno was first occupied by the people of the village before a group left for Amaozalla-Agu, which is about 4-5 km away from Amaozalla-Uno. The people of Amaozalla-Uno explained the reason behind their brothers settling in Amaozalla-Agu. Firstly, land is fertile in Amaozalla-Agu; secondly, there is a long distance between home in Amaozalla-Uno from the farm. Coupled with the fact that after farming, the individual is already exhausted, people preferred to settle in Amaozalla-Agu for farming activities.



Figure 3: Ceramic pots arranged for collection of rain-water from the roof. (photo E.E. Okonkwo)



Figure 4: *Nkwu-mmiri* system: 135 pots for storing water and some for cassava processing. (photo E.E. Okonkwo)

The buildings or architectural patterns in our study area are virtually the same mud houses of usually two to three rooms, where one is used as kitchen and the remaining two are used as a room and parlour, though some can have two rooms – one for kitchen and the second one a living room. Worthy of note is that this type of building is no longer in vogue due to modern building technology. Blocks and cement, and in some cases, an integration of mud, cement and blocks, have replaced many mud houses.

Another important feature of settlement patterns in the study area is the unique arrangements of pots within compounds. Pots are set in a way that water run-off from the roof of the house will enter the pots; this is a result of water scarcity especially in Egede (Figure 3). Affa people do not suffer perennial scarcity of water as experienced in Egede due to the proximity of streams like Dinapata and Mmiri-Okwute. The number of pots observed in some compounds depends on the volume of water needed and used by the family; thus, the number of pots in each compound is an average of 50 pots. In Egede, the collection of pots for water storage is called ‘*Nkwu-mmiri*’ (water reservoir) (Figure 4).

Within the compound of Mr. Agu Ucheweteyi, we counted about one hundred and thirty-five pots at the left corner of his house; the ones in front of the house, and those in use in his kitchen were not counted. Apart from water storage, pots are used for cassava (*Fufu/Akpu*) processing. In Affa, pots are acquired through various means: 1) as gifts to daughters during marriage by her mother, friends, and well-wishers; 2) during ‘*Ogba*’ age-grade ceremony (women exchange pots as gift items); 3) through purchase in the local market.

These pots are of different sizes. Our informant Mrs. Celine Agu explained that her largest pot can contain

18 to 25 liters of water. The circumference of the biggest pot in Mr. Agu Ucheweteyi’s compound is 18.3 centimeters and was 64 cm in height; the smallest one measured 16.5 centimeters in height and 4.9 centimeters in circumference. Currently, the Egede local government project of drilling a borehole is a welcome development as it will reduce the problem of perennial water shortage in Egede.

Discussion of Findings

Slag: This is a solid material resulting from the interaction of flux and impurities in the smelting and refining of metals. The solid product generally forms a silicate glass-like material which is primarily non-metallic. The rock-like waste (slag) separates from iron (bloom) and is removed from blast surfaces. The proliferation of iron slag in the study area indicates that extensive iron smelting was carried out in the area by either the descendants of the present occupants or the past occupants of Affa and Egede. Close examination of the slag revealed different sizes and colours: some are amorphous, fingering, flow-shaped and flow-like amorphous, while others are dark, dark brown or reddish brown in colour. The people use the amorphous conglomeration types of iron slag to support building foundations and/or for erosion control. In some cases, bigger slag is used as a tripod stand and is also used in road construction or even as seats in some places outside the study area like in Lejja town.

Pottery/Potsherds: The people of Egede do not produce pots but are heavy users of pots for water storage and cassava processing, among others. The people depended on Olo/Aguobuowa people in the Ezeagu local government area as well as the Uzowani local government area for their pottery needs. Pottery wares are found in most

households and are also found in shrines. These pottery wares are greatly valued in archaeology and tourism. Clark (1964) noted that the work of the potter is highly prized in Japan and the proceeds from the sale of one pot are often very rewarding. Among the Ugwu-nye clan, pottery is a symbol of material and spiritual heritage. It is well integrated into the living pattern of the people and inseparable from their belief systems and worldview. They are therefore valuable objects for the promotion of tourism and cultural heritage. The type and numbers of pots used per household reflect the rich culture that exists within the studied towns and can provide tourists with a unique opportunity to understand and appreciate the Ugwu-nye clan's indigenous knowledge and cultural practices.

In Egede town, the arrangement of pots for the collection of runoff rainwater from the roof is unique, while the intermittent gaps from one pot to another within a compound, pots half-buried in the ground, remain a spectacular arrangement for tourists to behold (see Figure 4). Eleven potsherds were collected in the course of our archaeological reconnaissance within the iron smelting sites, out of which 8 were body sherds and 3 were rim sherds. The uniqueness of these potsherds is that they are of one decorative motif (net); however, the rims are decorated by incision (Figure 5). A close examination of the pots in Mr. Agu Ucheweteyi's compound indicates that there is cultural continuity in the type of pots used as well as the technique and motif of decorations.

Conclusion

Archaeology involves the method of reconstructing the history of an area using the physical or material remains of the past inhabitants of the area under study. It is a discipline that studies extinct societies through material culture (Andah & Okpoko 2004 in Bakinde 2005). Archaeology has its main thrust in the reconstruction of human cultural history, the extinct way of life, and building a verifiable chronology. This is done through scientific examination of material remains of past human activities. The discipline relies on any of the following: artifacts, features, ecofacts, sites, chronofacts (Andah & Okpoko 1994) for the interpretation of past environments. Artifacts like charcoal, potsherds, bones, slag and blooms are pointers to a potential archaeological site.



Figure 5: Body and rim sherds from Egede town. (photo E.E. Okonkwo)

The Ugwu-nye clan (Affa and Egede) is endowed with archaeological resources that are of great interest to both archaeologists and tourism professionals. The rich information that can be gleaned from pottery, iron smelting sites, settlement patterns, etc. in the study area can help give a clear insight into the socio-cultural and religious lifestyle of the people and their intergroup relations with their environs. This hopefully would help place the Ugwu-nye clan in the archaeology map of southeastern Nigeria, if fully investigated. Similarly, the tangible and intangible heritage resources available in the study area could be harnessed to promote both cultural and eco-tourism development.

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