



Early Urbanization in West Africa: An Archaeological Evidence from Birnin-Kudu Settlement

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Abstract

Several collections of evidences from oral tradition, archaeological, historical, sociological researches have clearly indicated several early urban centers in West Africa and the differences in their characteristics based on region. This paper is aimed at bringing to limelight the place of Birnin-Kudu as part of early urban center in West-Africa and sourced it data from archaeological excavations and survey, collection of oral traditions and review of several literatures relating to the research focus. The archaeological and historical evidences from Birnin-Kudu settlement relating to early urban centers were addressed as well in this paper. It concludes that Birnin-Kudu is one of the early urban centers in West Africa based on the analysis of evidence and recommends further investigations and absolute dating of the settlement.

Keywords: *Early Urbanization, West Africa, Birnin-Kudu, Archaeological and Historical Sources.*

Introduction

The term urbanization has generated much argument among many scholars (Adekola, 2009); several scholars have attempted the definition of the term “urbanization” based on their respective research. One of the earliest

definitions of the term was coined by Goldon V. Childe (1950), who asserted that for any society to be considered as an urban center, it has to meet certain criteria which include: surplus food, monumental architecture, writing, cylindrical and mathematics, arts, raw materials, political authority, regular full time specialization, population density and foreign trades. It should however be noted that, these ten criteria listed were based on his study at the Near and Middle East and cannot be generally applicable to the world because the formation and growth of societies in most parts of the world depends on the ecological condition of the region. Also the above mentioned criteria of urbanization “negates the eligibility of many cities in West Africa and contrary to his opinion many urban cities existed in West Africa prior the beginning of writing” (Adekola, 2009).

Dickson (1947) defined urbanization as the compact settlement without agricultural occupation. Although this definition is also subjective as many ancient societies with food surplus engaged in agricultural practices. Andah (1976) is of the opinion that the increase in food production (resulting to food surplus) and improve distributive networks that urban centers began to concentrate on other aspect of development. While to Louis (1938), urbanization is a settlement with a “relatively dense and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals”. According to Service (1962 in Adekola, 2009) regarded states as a “highly stratified and internally diversified socio-political organizations attributed with a central government which is largely out of bound of kinship; residential patterns are also based mainly on occupational specialization and not necessarily on blood or affinal relationship”.

Adekola (2009) also stated that industrialization is a recent phenomenon in the discussion of early urban centers in West Africa and not responsible for their growth; rather an attention on the economic, ecological and social conditions as factors to be considered.

Just like the case of Gordon v. childe, the above definitions and several others given by scholars were output of their investigations from different locations in the world and cannot be generally applicable to varying regions as mode of socialization, availability of resources and environmental factors differs in the multitude of societies.

For a clearer understanding of urbanization in West Africa, the works of indigenous scholars such as Andah (1976) have established a framework which pays attention to the aspect of physical forms and settings of towns; the

evolution of town landscapes, layout, changing proxemics and physiognomies of settlement components in space and through time, inferences on the physical and societal structure of the occupants and the functional roles and relationships between the different sections of the towns. Other collections of reports with a basis from oral tradition, archaeological, historical and sociological evidences clearly indicating multiple early urban centers in West Africa have been posited by (Effah-Gyamfi, 1987), cities such as Old Oyo Kingdom (Wheatley, 1970); Kano (Adeleye, 1971); Kanem Borno (Connah, 1981; Okpoko 1987); Koumbi Saleh (Andah, 1976); Tegdoust (Okpoko, 1987) Sosso (Levtzion, 1971); Timbuktu (Adekola 2009) Zaria and Katsina (Adeleye, 1987), among many other cities in West Africa.

However, inspite of all the above mentioned researches, there are other areas that lack attention. One of which includes the Old Birnin-Kudu kingdom even with its historical and archaeological relevance in the history of Hausa cities in West Africa. The evidence of urbanization in the old Birnin-Kudu can be viewed in different perspectives as several factors were responsible for the formation, as well as growth of the state. This paper examines the available evidences found in Birnin-Kudu and explains it to the understanding that it fits the description of an early urban center in West Africa. The old Birnin-Kudu Kingdom was initially known as Birnin-Bordan, therefore in this paper the names will be used interchangeably.

The paper is also an output of archaeological research carried out at the old Birnin-Kudu settlement by the Department of Archaeology during the 2019 field school. The methods of research used for this paper include a comparison of results from archaeological survey and excavations, review of historical and ethnographic documentations of Birnin-Kudu settlement.

Birnin kudu Geographical Settings and Historical Background

The historical origin of the people of Birnin-Kudu Kingdom is traced from the movement of people from regions as far as Sudan, Borno, Bebeji and Kano among many other locations. Today, Birnin Kudu is a town located in Birnin-Kudu Local Government Area of Jigawa State, Nigeria. It falls between Latitude $11^{\circ} 21'$ to $11^{\circ} 31'$ N and Longitude: $9^{\circ} 19'$ to $9^{\circ} 29'$ E. It is situated in the savannah region of West Africa and is characterized by igneous crystalline rocks of basement complex. It has arable land for farming and its major source of water from river Birnin-Kudu. The old settlement formerly known as Birnin-

Bordan is densely populated with several archaeological sites which include in plain sight giant defensive walls, gates and rock shelters namely Dutsen Habude, Dutsen Murhu, Dutsen Mesa as mentioned in (Disa and Abdulmalik, 2019) and Dutsen Zango (Mtaku, 1997) all of which visible rock paintings are depicted on them. Nzenwunwa (1983) sub-classified the types of painting on Birnin-Kudu rock shelters to include large soli, over lying style, solid red humpless and a single thick-bodied humpless. Other important historical features at the old settlement were rock gongs which were found at most of the rock shelters in the settlement.

Evidence of Early Urbanization at Old Birnin-Kudu

The evidence of early urbanization from the settlements at old birnin kudu include the presence of materials evidences dotted on the landscape of the area uncovered through excavations and analyzed using historical methods of research: since historical sources play a vital roles in the reconstruction of many African societies (Price 2009; Pikirayi 1999; Ogundiran 2001; Pikirayi 2006; Edward 2004).

The Old Birnin-Kudu settlement area was classified as a Late Stone Age settlement by many scholars such as Shaw, (1978); Nzenwunwa, (1983); Disa and Abdulmalik, (2019) based on numerous excavations and material evidence found in various sites. Dutsen Habude was excavated by Shaw in 1978; while Dutsen Mesa and Murhu sites were excavated recently by Department of Archaeology, ABU, Zaria, in 2019. The material evidence from the sites include: abundance of potsherds (with crude production technique), iron implements, stone flakes, cores, lump of stones, fragment of stone bangle, polished hand axe, spheroid, charcoal samples with concentration of ashes and a quartz lip-plug. All of these evidences suggests that the Kingdom witnessed the transition to early food production and sedentary ways of life. Finds from most of the pits excavated from the sites, most especially Dutsen Murhu site, suggests that the settlements have been in existence before the introduction of pottery as the lower layers of the pits are characterized by the absence of potsherds; the middle layers however are characterized by potsherds with crude production techniques; while the upper layers constitute finer potsherds. Although, no absolute dating methods have been carried out on the materials evidences retrieved from the sites, their characteristics fit earlier researches that

have been classified as part of the Stone Age settlements in West Africa and the point where pottery was identified represented period of sedentism.

At Birnin-Bordan settlement, a giant defensive walls with 5 gates (confirmed by oral tradition) was visible on site. The defensive walls were constructed using stones as foundations and mold of clay used to wall round the entire settlement. The ruins of the gates were measured; northern gate was 5.1m wide, 1.8m height and 8m thick; southern gate was 3.2m wide, 1.2m height and 2.25m thick; Southeastern gate was 2.08m wide, 0.48m height and 2.52m thick; Eastern gate was 6.40m wide, 2.8m height and 10.5m thick; lastly the Northeastern gate was 9.5m wide, 3.4m height and 11.4m thick (See Plate 1). Inside the wall existed different clans; each clan is characterized by presence of structures as well as distinct specializations such as dyeing, iron smelting, smithing, pottery, carving among others. There were also presence of several cultural mounds at different clans interpreted as an accumulation of cultural materials from different clans over time (See Plate 2). Dotted on different areas of the sites, were several stone files and stone anvils.

The mode of kingship at Birnin-Bordan was presided by a ‘Sarki’ who had supreme power over all other settlements without a check balance from any council, unlike the Old Oyo Kingdom which was under the control of Alafin and check balance by Oyo Mesi (Agbaje, 1983). The palace of the Sarki is situated at the center of the settlement and is still found in the present settlement (Disa and Abdulmalik, 2019). This is also observed at the Old Oyo Kingdom (Adekola, 2009; Wheatley, 1970) where the Afirin of the Alafin is situated at the center of the settlement. There are also remains of wall (See plate 3) which according to oral tradition have served as the prison yard in the past.

On other parts of the settlement are rock art sites which include: Dutsen Mesa (with rock painting measured 2.87m length and 1.94m breadth and other evidence such as; rock gongs; caves and rock hollow); Dutsen Murhu (with rock paintings measured 4.89m length and 3.95m breadth) and Dutsen Habude (with rock paintings measured 7.2m length and 2.1m breadths and several caves at the site) (See Plate 4). Oral tradition narrates that the earliest architecture of the settlement started with stones erections and was later replaced with mud architecture as now found on the landscape of the settlement. These characteristics are also found in the ancient Mali state of Western Sudan where their stones buildings were replaced with mud architecture (Adekola, 2009).

Factors Responsible for the Growth of Birnin-Kudu Empire

Andah (1976 in Adekola 2009), identified five factors responsible for the development of early urban centers in West Africa and these include: geography which has influenced sites like Kano, Katsina, Zaria and Timbuktu among many others; international trade for cities like Tegdaoust (Awdoghost) Djenne Djénno, Kukawa and Agades among others; social functions in Ife, Old Oyo and Benin (Wheatley 1970); the influence of Islam in Kanem-Borno and presence of mineral resources such as the Benin, Ife, Timbuktu, among others.

The factors addressed by Andah as stated above are commonly found in most of the established early urban centers in West Africa. The result of Andah's work on these factors fit in more discussion in West African cities. It should however be noted that he didn't make any emphasis that the five factors must be found in a single city before categorizing as an urban center. There are instances whereby a single city is influenced by several factors example of which include Kano where there were evidences of international trade, geographical factor and mineral resources responsible for its urbanization. International trade and influence of Islam were also part of the factors responsible for the growth of Kanem-Borno in West Africa.

Therefore, most of the factors stated by Andah as well the framework propounded by him, has affirmed the existence of Old Birnin-Kudu Kingdom as an ancient urban society in West Africa.

The geographical and geomorphological factors are one of the greatest factors responsible for the growth of old birnin kudu. The geographical position of Old Birnin-Kudu along many identified ancient Hausa cities such as Ngazargamu, Bauchi, Kano, Rano Kwarafa, Zaria among others can influence its growth. The giant standing defensive wall on its landscape, like that of Kano which was built between 11th to 12th century AD (Adekola, 2009); and Old Oyo which consisted three concentric walls (Soper, 1993; Soper and Darling, 1980). The defensive wall is an indication of central political authority in the Kingdom (Disa and Abdulmalik, 2019); and claimed to have attracted many populations from other neighboring settlements seeking for protection. The reign or period of the construction of the giant defensive wall that surrounded the kingdom is yet unknown but claimed to have been earlier than the 1571-1603 during the reign of Idris Aloma of Ngazargamu Empire.

The ecological factor on the other hand aided the growth of the empire from both archaeological and historical evidences from the state. At the old Birnin-

Kudu, the presence of river Birnin-Kudu supported livelihood with sufficient aquatic culture, source of water for day to day activities such as dyeing, smelting, pottery making architectural formations among others. The availability of mud influenced the constructions of standing structures till date such as palace, religious houses, defensive wall, and prison yard among other remnant architectures found in the old settlement as well as pottery production. The smelting, smithing, dyeing and wood carving practices supported by the abundance and varieties of plants and trees at the settlement.

Regarding the influence of Islam and international trade over the settlement, the Kanem-Borno Empire has a great influence on the Old Birnin-Kudu during the reign of Idris Aloma (1571-1603). Although, Birnin-Bordan predated the reign of Idris Aloma but this period witnessed an expansion of the Ngazargamu and had influence westward to as far as Kano (Adekola, 2009) and where Birnin-Kudu served as the corridor for the movement. The historical account from the settlement supported that the Old Birnin-Kudu Kingdom had a long trade between the people of Borno and beyond east (insinuating international trade); and with the people of Kano over time. This inferably suggested that the Old Birnin-Kudu could have served as the trade route of these cities during these prehistoric eras.

Discussion and Conclusion

With no doubt, the archaeological evidences stated above indicated sedentary ways of life in Birnin-Kudu settlement and an example of early urbanization. The settlement is today known as one of the earliest settlements in Hausa land and very famous among other settlements in its region. Disa and Abdulmalik (2019) has categorized the settlement as among typical Hausa settlement; linear and nucleated with population. The giant defensive wall round the settlement with gates depicted dense population and this is supported by the first statement of Dickson (1947) that urbanization goes with “...densely populated individuals...” The type of this defensive wall is also found in several settlement like Kano (Adeyemi and Bappah, 2011) Zaria (Ade, 2009), Old Oyo (Wheatley, 1970) among many urban centers in West Africa. Several clans with varieties of specializations indicates an example of development (Andah, 1976; Childe, 1950). According to historical accounts of the people, they engaged in long distance trade with many societies within and outside West African region. The abundance of material culture both on the earth surface and beneath supports

the claim of availability of resources on the settlement and this is an indication of early urbanization over the area (Andah 1976, Childe 1950). One of the characteristics of urbanization as stated by Andah (1976); Adekola (2009) is physical settings and layout. The presence of different clans, remnant of architecture, mounds, house foundations and defensive wall on the abandoned settlement determined the spatial distribution of the settlement in the past and is an indication of early urbanization. The art work, (Childe 1950; Andah, 1976), professions of wood carving, rock paintings and uses of rock gongs for communication is also an indication of the development and artistic intellect of the inhabitant of the settlement.

Lastly, the relationship between the materials retrieved from the excavated pits and the surface of the settlement indicated similarities in their culture and cultural continuity. The materials also supported and indicated the influence of environmental factors on the settlement based on the nature and characteristics. It should therefore be noted that the factors responsible for the origin of this urbanization in Birnin-Kudu is the ability of the people to exploit resources within the environment for their basic and advance needs; while other factors such as trade and influence of Islam over the area, are just an expansion and growth of the urbanization of the area.

Recommendation

Further archaeological excavations is required on the site to retrieve more evidence, most especially from the Birnin-Bordan and an absolute dating is required so as to determine the age of the materials at the site instead of mere relative dating from the typology of the materials.



Plate 1: Northern Gate of the Site



Plate 2: Sample of the Standing Architecture from the site

Source: Department of Archaeology, ABU Zaria, 2019 Field school.



Plate 3: Sample of the Mounds

Plate 4: Sample of Rock Paintings Sites

Source: Department of Archaeology, ABU Zaria, 2019 Field school.

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