

Archaeological Discovery of Early Settlements in the Kabi Valley, Northwestern Nigeria

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Abstract

Kabi River Valley just like other riverine settlements is an area that attracted human inhabitants from the second half of the fourteenth century. The area became attractive because of the opportunity created by the environment which is conducive for human habitation. Starting from the upper to the lower sections, the valley was dotted by evidence of human settlements. By the beginning of the fifteenth century, the region grew to a sophisticated political entity of great significance. This made it paramount for the use of archaeological method to uncover aspect of the people's history that cannot be discernible through sources other than archaeology. The aim of the paper is to provide an overview on the emergence of human settlements along upper and lower sections of Kabi River valley in the light of archaeological evidence. It goes ahead to account for the importance of the discoveries to the history of Kabawa people. A section was also created that dealt with some of the problems faced by archaeological research in the area. At the end, the paper concludes that the knowledge of archaeology is very instrumental to the study of the early history of the people in the valley.

Introduction

It was identified by scholars that the *Kabi* valley suffered a lot from the dearth of sources regarding the study of early human settlements.¹ The sources from which to elicit information in relation to history of early human settlement in the area, are, unfortunately, scanty; there was lack of record evidence and oral

information. Thus, it appeared most logical, therefore to resort to the use of archaeological evidence, no matter how thin it may be. This is to enable us reconstruct the past of this region more accurately. Archaeology being a study of man in the past through the material remains of his activities has been used in several parts of the nation, including our area of interest. It has been discovered that the *Kabi* valley has evidence of early habitation that goes back to early years of the fourteenth century.² Although the physical remains of early man have not been discovered in this region, his cultural remains have no doubt provided clear insight into his life pattern.

Archaeological studies in Kabi valley point to the fact that the area has been supporting human occupation for a long period. Some of the researches conducted by archaeologists, like Sutton and Obayemi, provide a lot of insights into the early history of the people. Most of these surveys were very important because they revealed the early settlement pattern of the valley. However, all the sites discovered reflected on a highly interesting trend: that is, settlements were located along river banks, confirming the importance of water to the life of inhabitants. Most of the settlements were identified by the presence of the settlement mounds. The mounds were discovered and might have represented early human habitations. Habitation site indicators were identified in the presence of finds, such as big lumps of burnt clay and potsherds discovered in abundance.

The area of Kabi River valley did not witness rigorous archaeological research compared to its neighbouring area of Middle Niger valley. Most of the works in the area were conducted through archaeological surveys. In this effort, surface collections were used to explain the nature of the settlements. It was in 1976 that rescue mission was carried out through the excavation conducted by Ade Obayemi at Maleh and Soro.³ In spite of that, archaeological research conducted in the area help in no small measure in revealing the history of ancient settlements in the area.

Geographical Description of Kabi River Valley

It is appropriate to examine the influence of environment and how it had shape the pattern of human settlements. Kabi valley falls within one of the broad belts of the Sudan savannah. With its characteristic grass cover, the region enjoys two noticeable seasons – wet and the dry. In the south and south-west, the wet season lasts longer. The seasons are very important elements of the West African climate. Their effects vary from one place to another, as they follow certain trade winds which affect the entire West African Sub-region.⁴ The wet season coincided with the South-West trade winds which originated from the Atlantic Ocean and are responsible for most of the precipitations in West Africa. The dry season on its part is accompanied by the harmattan which is marked by dry and dusty winds blowing from the north eastern direction.

The area of Kabi valley covers the stretch of the Rima from its confluence with River Sokoto (near the present day Wamakko town) in the north to where it joins the Niger below the valley of Bande in the South. It is called Kabi River because it passes through the territory of the old Kabi kingdom. The flood plain is very wide, extending in places to between three and eight kilometers. Most of the tributaries

flow east to west where they empty their waters in the Kabi River. For most of their length, they flow on the basement complex rock which is very resistant and consequently, they were able to cut narrow and deeper valleys and flow very rapidly. By so doing, they carried a lot of debris from their upper courses. The main river (River Kabi) into which they empty their water, flows through a different topographical feature, which is mainly of sedimentary rock formation which is gently sloping.⁶ The gradient, especially at the lower section, is gentle with wide and shallow channels. When the tributaries with their heavy loads of sediments enter the main river (Kabi Valley) where the speed flow was weak, they deposited the larger particles first.⁷

During the rainy season, rivers overflow their banks and become incapable of containing the volume of water which increases as a result of marked run-off. They therefore spread out, flooding a considerable portion of the valley and thus creating poor drainage conditions. The swampy environment resulting from this had two vital advantages to the riverine communities under consideration. In the first place, the water moisture storage capacity of the soil was valuable for dry season cultivation, while the presence of alluvium increased its agricultural potentials, especially for the production of swamp rice which has been in cultivation for centuries.⁸ Secondly, the 'Fadama' environment created by the actions of the river, is fertile and attractive, supporting large concentration of profitable agricultural activities since the early times.⁹ The importance of this environment for agricultural purposes was noted by the nineteenth century explorers, like Clapperton and Barth who had passed through the territory.¹⁰

From this brief discussion, it is very clear that the river system was not just a mere characteristic of the landscape; it was in fact one of the most important agents which conditioned early humans settlement pattern and occupational pursuits. The location of this region in an arid environment meant that, for people to overcome the scarcity of water supply and to enjoy profitable agricultural activities, they needed to settle close to the rivers where their need could be guaranteed. Little wonder, then, that the early Kabi sites such as *Gungu*, *Leka* and *Surame* were located within the river valley.

Furthermore, apart from the major role played by the rivers in the area of agriculture and human occupations, other geographical features that attracted early settlers into this region, include the absence of any significant high relief which made human movement over an extensive area unimpeded and easy. This has to do with a monotonous, gently undulating and seasonally arid terrain. Also the availability of laterite source of iron working industry as well as the prevalence of clay for pottery production seems to be an additional factor.¹¹

Archaeological Evidence of Early Settlements

As highlighted above, the emergence of early human settlements in the region was attracted by the nature of the environment, which has been supporting human occupation for a long period of time. Previous archaeological enquiries revealed about eight categories of sites which were conveniently grouped into three, namely: walled settlements, mounds and open settlements,¹² all located along the river side.

In his research, Sutton divided the region into three zones, namely; upper, middle and lower Kabi, and study of settlement patterns was arranged using this division. Settlement mounds were discovered in the three zones which represent human habitation. Generally, the mounds appear rounded, but a careful examination revealed local variations in their morphology. The dome or rounded com-shaped mounds predominated in the upper Kabi area, whereas, the high elongated ones with single double or triple crests were regarded for the lower Kabi.¹³

Lastly, the walled and open settlements sites were located in the upper Kabi valley. Some of those walled sites belong to the period of old Kabi kingdom (1500-1800), while the others were constructions of the Sokoto Jihad of 1804.¹⁴ The ancient walled sites are associated with fortifications, the most prominent are Surame and Gungu.

What should be known here is that, while Sutton divided the region into three (upper, middle and lower valley), in this study, only two divisions will be adopted, since they adequately cover the area in focus. They are the upper and lower Kabi. The upper Kabi refers to the area from Birnin Kebbi and above it to Sokoto, while the lower Kabi refers to the zone between Birnin Kebbi and where the River joins the Niger in the South. The lower Kabi is notable for the existence of high mounds. Unfortunately, there have been no excavations conducted in this area. The upper Kabi area, has apart from the survey of 1975 already mentioned, enjoyed a rescue excavation mission conducted by Ade Obayemi at Maleh and Soro.¹⁵

The Upper Kabi Valley Settlements

Upper Kabi valley as described earlier is an area starting from Kabi and above to Sokoto. The area constitutes a zone that contains the old Kabi sites which encompasses the area of the early political centres of the Kingdom. The region was relinquished as a result of the pressure by the Tuaregs from the north and Gobir uprising that were responsible for the shifting of the capital of the kingdom west ward to Birnin Kebbi and later to Argungu after the fall of Surame.¹⁶ While Maleh and Soro represent wall-less settlements, it was here that Obayemi carried out a rescue excavation in the 1970s. Under this section, effort was made to observe the pattern and mode of various settlements under two different forms – walled and open settlements.

Walled Settlements

This zone of upper valley is characterized by the presence of walls abandoned settlement. Prominent among them are Surame and Gungu settlements.

The Ruin of Surame

Information about the archaeology of Surame is based on excavation and survey reports. According to Opadeji¹⁷ controlled archaeological work on the site began in 1991 by a team of German archaeologists. The work include but not limited to excavations that spanned from 1991-1993; revealing different phases of occupation, one of which, predates the wall of Surame. The site has been dated to AD 1390-1650 through the archaeological excavations.

Another fieldwork in Surame was conducted by the Department of Archeology in 2012 with the objectives of documentation and mapping of the house foundations on the site in order to understand the settlement layout and to test the hypothesis that the defense walls were constructed during the last occupation of the site. Two hundred and Nineteen (219) circular and fifty-four (54) rectangular foundations were mapped on the site. Three (3) pits were opened near the defensive wall to its structure and foundations¹⁸. The research by Opadeji and the field school report of the Department of Archaeology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria revealed the different phases of occupation before the site attained the full status of *Birni*. Two types of wall were also categorized: the straight free standing type and the laterite filled standing type.

At one time, Surame was the headquarters of Kabi kingdom. Its impressive structures can still be appreciated from the well preserved ruins that are clearly visible.¹⁹ The city was built up of stones. The settlement is surrounded by ditches before the surrounding wall. The total circumference of the wall of Surame has been estimated to be about 19 kilometers. The walls of Surame were made up of an inner, older wall and outer walls with several annexes added. In addition, there were many gates isolated along both the inner and outer walls.¹⁸ Eight gates were said to have existed in association with the city out of which the name of some have been preserved in the oral tradition of the Kabawa such as *Kofar Dashi* and *Kofar Magajiya*.²⁰

A visit to the site of Surame by some NCE students of Shehu Shagari College of Education, Sokoto led by one of the authors in 2016 provided us with the opportunity to a cursory examination of the entire site. We were able to notice a lot of scattered stones all over the enclosed area and left with the impression that they were probably used for huts and granaries where grains were stored as well as used as stone walling.

In fact, from the observations, it could be suggested that the massive earth and stone works still visible at Surame, many people might have been involved in the building of the city. Several traditions reported by Augie indicated that among the people that took part in the construction were from Nupe, Zazzau, Songhai, Zamfara and Azbin.²¹ In addition, slave labour was also employed. Since Kabi was said to have conquered many territories, the war captives might also have been used in the construction.²²

It is uncertain on how the people at Surame solved the problem of water supply. There was no visible surface water around and the site is quite located some kilometers from the river. There is a tradition which says that the people usually lined up in a chain from the village to the river and they passed leather buckets of water from one man to the other.²³ It appeared that the site of Surame was deliberately chosen and the construction was made to provide maximum security in times of grave emergencies.

The Site of Gungu

Gungu was one of the old Kabi fortified towns located southwest of Surame. *Gungu* means island or a river valley place in Songhai. It was believed to be an

important center of trading activities that flourished as a result of the Wangara expansion into the area in the fourteenth Century²⁴. Like Surame was constructed of stones and mud. The ruins are still visible even though the structure is not as well-preserved as that of Surame. The construction was simpler and the absence of complexity has promoted the view that it was more ancient than Surame.²⁵

Evidence of settlement in this site appeared in the form of rectangular stone structure. Other artifacts, such as potsherds, were found to be similar to those of Surame. This suggest that the materials from both sites were contemporary.²⁶ The location of the two sites were remarkable because Surame was located on the right bank, while Gungu was on the left bank. This perhaps indicated a direction from where constant attacks designed to undermine the security of Kabi kingdom were mounted.²⁷ Other walled towns in the area which appeared in different ages included Birnin Kebbi, Silame, Birni Salma, Sauwa and Argungu.

Open Settlements

This section is designed to cover the discovery of settlements without town walls. These are Maleh and Soro. It was here that Ade Obayemi carried out his test pit examination in the 1970s. The main aim of Obayemi's work was to salvage the sites and the remains they haboured from the danger of human activities who were engaged in quarrying for building materials, especially clay. The organizers believed that the rescue mission would provide significant insight needed for solving the problem of chronology associated with the hierarchy of settlement in Kabi valley.

The Site of Maleh

Maleh is one of the plain settlements located in the upper Kabi valley. The area was excavated by Ade Obayemi in the 1970s. The upper layer was laid with laterite and gravel while the other two lower floors were 'paved floors' with potsherds.²⁸ The nature of the stratigraphy coupled with the rich and interesting artifacts deposited at considerable depth all combined to support a permanent occupation site.

Another significant finding at Maleh site was the glass beads, ferment and multi-coloured glass, bracelets, decorated ceramic tobacco pipes etc. Others were cowry; gastropod including marginelloid shells and a piece mineral of galena were also recovered from the site.²⁹ The above items are said to have indicated evidence of early trade between the outside regions and Kabi kingdom.

The Site of Soro

Soro was another settlement without walls. The area, like Maleh, was equally excavated by Ade Obayemi. The excavation of Soro revealed the presence of artefacts, such as decorated fragments of tobacco pipes and a heavy concentration of animal bones. It is remarkable that the glass bracelets, beads, the cowry and marginelloid shells which were common in Maleh site were absent from Soro. This is very vital and interesting because Maleh is located just four kilometers away from Soro village. The absence of the material mentioned above suggests that Soro

was perhaps not an important centre of exchange like Maleh and the prevalence of cowries and other items in Maleh must have been closely associated with a long distance trade.³⁰

The Lower Kabi Valley Settlements

The lower Kabi Valley is the zone located between Birnin Kabi and the River Niger. The region is notable for the existence of high mounds. Unfortunately despite the existence of these attracted monuments in the area, no excavation has ever been dedicated to any section of the region. The area has only experienced archaeological survey in the 1970s by JEG Sutton. According to him, archaeological evidence in the area is marked by the presence of numerous settlement mounds. During the survey, Sutton particularly singled out Bunza type as typical. On account of their large size, it was suggested that the mounds if properly excavated would provide a good depth of successive periods.³¹

Although the reason behind the way, the early settlers concentrated their settlements in this zone has not been clearly brought out. However, there was suggestion that the salt industry from the locality, especially from Raha, must have been the major reason behind the location of settlement in the area.³² As mentioned earlier, there have been no excavations in the area to confirm or reject the view. Thus, the sequence of settlements here can still not be sketched accurately. There is only one cultural material that appeared to be common to all the sites in the region- pottery; and because of its high degree of occurrence, it can provide useful information on the technological and cultural interaction within the settlements in the Kabi valley on the one hand and between them and the areas outside the valley on the other.³³

Significance of the Findings

Studies on the various settlement sites of Kabi River valley revealed archaeological materials of great significance. From the materials found, this study has been able to make some acceptable deductions with regards to the potentialities of such recovered objects.

The archaeological research carried out in this region in general, revealed that the Kabi valley contained evidence in the existence of inter group relations and inter-dependence of various groups in the region. It is evident from the artifacts recovered that the essential inter-dependence of human groups necessary for progress and of their cultural debts to each other was demonstrated. An examination of certain aspects of the lives of the people depicts concrete evidence of intergroup relations. Just as we argued earlier, the environment has been a great factor in the selection of occupation site in Kabi valley. It is clear that in the Bunza area high mounds flank both banks of the valley. However, as the area favoured the cultivation of swamp rice, this commodity formed part of the items of exchange between the lower and the upper Kabi valleys.

Findings at Maleh site also indicate the level of luxuries and prosperity of their makers. At the site, the artifacts found from surface collection and those from actual excavations were many and varied. They included glass bracelets, glass beads,

decorated tobacco pipe and cowries. These indicated the level of luxury and prosperity of their providers. In addition, potsherds pavement floors discovered at Maleh were very significant indicator of the level of architectural development of the people. This same element of architecture had been recovered from many prehistoric sites in Nigeria including Ile-Ife, Diama, Ulaira and Yelwa areas.³⁴ Pavement floors are usually associated with periods of prosperity as a deliberate attempt to make the living floors very solid and firm.

In addition to the above, the findings provide information on commercial contacts between Kabi valley and the outside areas. Material evidence obtained from Maleh and Soro such as the decorated tobacco pipes, cowries, glass beads, glass bracelets and marginelloid shells indicate an evidence of trade link between the major commercial centres of Kabi valley and Western Sudan. For instance, these materials from Maleh and Soro were found to be typologically comparable with similar archaeological material finds at Gao, Timbuktu and Djanne.³⁵ This is a clear evidence and indication of commercial contacts between the region and the states of western Sudan. Similarly, the presence of shells indicated an existence of the flourishing money-economy in the area. Apart from Maleh and Soro evidence from the site of Tumuni located near Binji town of Sokoto indicated the presence of some bronze and copper vessels which indicated a commercial contact between Kabi and the culture of the Mediterranean area. Also, the beads collected from the same site were said to have been of Arab manufacture.³⁶ What all this information points to, is the fact that trading transactions between Kabi valley and the region of Western Sudan and North Africa had existed for centuries; thus, portraying the economic significance of the former.

Furthermore, the discovery of animal bones at Soro site indicates possibly, the habitation of butchers in the area. Although Soro has been identified as a place where Kanta used to keep horses,³⁷ the high frequency of the bones supports the view that Soro was butchery. The contrary opinion was further corroborated by the analysis of the bones which did not show evidence of horses among the collection. This large evidence of bones coupled with the fact that most of them were charred, prompted Ade Obayemi to suggest that the site excavated was butchery.

With regards to dating of materials discovered in the area, it is important to note that a charcoal sample discovered in Maleh was dated to 1350AD.³⁸ From this date, it is clear to posit that Maleh was not only important as an international trade centre, but that its foundation predated the emergence of Muhammad Kanta, whom many sources claimed to be the founder of those settlements.³⁹

The discovery of gastropod shells in the Maleh was very fundamental. These shells were used as currency in the Timbuktu – Gao area in the seventeenth century whenever cowry shells were scarce. These discoveries in Maleh, therefore, mean that it was still an active commercial centre even during the seventeenth century.

Problems Associated with the Study of Settlements in the Area

Some of the problems identified in the study of prehistoric people in the area of Kabi River valley constitute the following: One of the problems associated with the study of prehistoric cultures in the region has to do with inadequate research. In

spite of the archaeological potentials of the region, very few researches were conducted which seemed to be quite insignificant to unveil the hidden aspects of the people's history. For instance, in 1975, JEG Sutton conducts a pioneering research that covered the entire region without excavation. A year after in 1976, Ade Obayemi engaged on a rescue excavation of Maleh and Soro site. This was followed by a research conducted by Germans in the ruin of Surame in 1991 up to 1993 and finally in 2012, when excavations were conducted by the Department of Archaeology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria. Most of the researches were concentrated on the upper section of the valley at the detriment of the lower section. In fact, there have been no excavations reported in the latter. This hampers the possibility of any reasonable information on the early history of the area.

Secondly, the region suffered from government neglect in the sense that government did not care much about the knowledge of history. This discourages government from funding researches for the benefit of studying people's culture from the grass root.

Thirdly, lack of professionals equally hampered the possibility of the study of early sites in the area. Fourthly, the area of Kabi valley and the entire West African region suffered from the problem of acidic soil. This type of soil is very unfavourable for enhancing the survival of buried materials of organic origin. This is the reason behind the absence of very important artifacts made from the organic objects in most of the researches conducted.

Finally, destruction of archaeological sites seems to be another problem associated with the archaeological research in the region. Destruction usually comes in two ways -human activities as well as the effects of natural agents such as wind and water erosion. In fact, it was in response to the effect of human activity which threatened the viability of Maleh site that led to rescue excavation conducted by Ade Obayemi in the 1970s.

Conclusion

The limited archaeological excavations recorded for the region of Kabi River valley area has made it difficult, if not impossible, for one to speak with any precision about the antiquity of settlements located in this region. The problem created does not permit of any comparative analysis of the cultural materials between the two (upper and lower) areas of Kabi valley. This is because of the fact that the types of materials recovered mostly through excavation in the former have not yet been discovered in the latter. In spite of this, however, the study was able to speak with more confidence on certain development, such as, the similarity in the pattern of settlements in the whole area, as well as, the significance of the artifacts recovered mainly in the upper section of the valley. Thus, we are hereby recommending for the sponsorship of more archaeological researches, most especially, in the lower section of the valley. This will help in revealing the hidden information which will permit a comparative analysis of the cultural remains for better understanding of the process of interaction between upper and lower sections of the valley.

Endnote

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39. Tradition says that Soro, Leka, Gungu and Surame were all established by Muhammad Kanta. This is said to have been disputed by the archaeological evidence emerged from dating of Maleh site.