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THE ESSENTIALITY OF EARLY URBANISM IN UNDERSTANDING AFRICAN PREHISTORY: A FOCUS ON WEST AFRICA

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Abstract

This article has focused on the Essentiality of Early Urbanism in Understanding African Prehistory, with a bias on West Africa. It examines the meaning and imperative of urbanization in prehistory and also looks at the various sources for the study of early urbanization, as well as interrogates the diverse research views on the application of Western meanings of urbanization in the study of ancient urban centres in African societies. Data for this research has been elicited via secondary sources or written documents. This paper therefore contributes to what is so far known about the subject of urbanization in prehistoric studies, particularly in the context of African prehistory. However, the quantum of research on urbanization in Africa, (especially in West Africa) is so far insignificant to have a generalized position on what constitutes the entire features of the ancient urban centres in the West African Region. Hence, there is a scholarly need for more research to pave the way for greater understanding of what constitutes the major features of early urban centres in the region.

Keywords: Prehistory, Early urbanism, Complex societies, Africanism, West Africa.

Introduction

The entire region of Africa was known as *Bilad-al-Sudan*, or "Land of Blacks," the term used by the Arab travellers, geographers, and historians who first wrote of the region's history.In the contemporary Africa, this name survives only in the Republic of Sudan. Like the present day Africa, *Bilad-al-Sudan* was also divided in to North, South, East and Western Sudan. As such, the Western Sudan in ancient times comprised of the present day Burkina Faso, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and parts of Mauritania. Research shows that "it was

in the region that the empires of Ghana, Mali, Songhai, and Kanem Bornu, etc. flourished" (Anyanwu, 2012, p. 377).

Initial scholarly works on early urbanism in Africa erroneously attempted to be subdued by a Eurocentric propagation that West Africa had no past urban centres. According to Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka (2012, p. 339), "it has been assumed that much of the impetus for the development of complex West African societies came from outside of the indigenous economy in the late eight century A.D. as North African Arabs initiated trans-Saharan trade for gold and slave from sub-Saharan regions".

This was basically because of the fact that "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" (Adekola, 2009, p. 2). Much emphasis was on abundance food to sustain the large population expected in any given area classified as a city. However, Andah (1976) stressed that "it was with increased food production (resulting in food surplus) and improved distributive networks that urban centresbegan to concentrate on new technological and socio-political activities" particularly in Africa (Adekola, 2009, p. 2).This also brought about social stratification and ensured that all activities were coordinated even without such features like writing, mathematical science and foreign trade as listed by Childe.

Further, increased archaeological activities in West African Region such as "controlled excavations incorporating radiocarbon dating programmes has revealed evidence of complex social stratification, long distance trade, and even urbanism in West Africa by the middle of the first millennium AD" (Mclntosh and Mclntosh, 1981, p. 610, cited from Okpoko and Eze-Uzoamaka, 2012, p. 339-340). Examples of such archaeological investigations include work on sites like Dhar-Tichitt, Walata, Koumbi-Saleh, Tegdaoust, Jenne-Jeno, Begho, Bono Manso, Nok Valley, Oyo Empire, and several other sites in Nigeria and West African countries revealed much evidence of complex societies (Munson, 1971; Posnansky, 1973; Andah, 1976; Effah-Gyamfi, 1979; Anquandah, 1993; Mclntosh and Mclntosh, 1993; Holl, 1985).

This is in no exception to other African regions like the North, East Central and Southern Africa, where archaeological investigations has also revealed important evidence of early urban centres such as the Kush, Axum and Nubia in North Africa; Bunyoro, Buganda, and Ethiopia in East Africa; Great Zimbabwe, and the Zulu Kingdom in South Africa (Anyanwu, 2012).

The Concept of Urbanization (in Prehistory)

Efforts at allocating a definite meaning to the term urbanization have proved a difficult task since there does not seem to be an agreement among scholars as to what urbanization actually represents. The differences in the definition of the term are as a result of the different environmental, economic and cultural settings from which towns and cities developed (Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka, 2012).

Scholars in their various local experiences have used several criteria to defined urbanism (Adekola, 2009; Okpoko, 1998). At very popular instance demography has been seriously featured in most of the definitions. Away from demography is the prominent concern for agriculture (Andah, 1976). While industrial development is a down played factor, except for contemporary reasons (Service, 1962; Andah, 1976).

In the United States, for example, an urban place is defined as a settlement with at least 2,500 residents (Federal Register, 2010). This rather generous definition results in critical disagreement as most social scientists find it unconvincing, believing that size alone does not appear to explain the features of an urban area. Thus, researchers in the humanities and social sciences have utilized a variety of approaches in defining urbanization. According to Louis (1938), "an urban area is a relatively large, 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 relation or kinship.

However, in recent times, urban scholars particularly in Africa are trying to move away from the ethnocentric approach in the definition of the term urbanization that largely characterized formal literatures on early urbanization (especially as pertaining African societies).

Early writings on the topic of urbanization in ancient Africa by scholars such as Louis (1938), Childe (1950), Sjoberg (1960), Service (1962), and Northam (1975), placed emphasis on factors and necessary features that must be recorded in the achievement of towns before they could be recognized as an urban centres. Such generalizations have been debunked by recent writings as scholars are beginning to chart a new discourse on issues surrounding factors like environmental, economy, socio-political and cultural differences among communities of the past world. Therefore, there is need to emphasis that the subject of urbanization is a universal one but its manifestations must be studied within the context of race, environment/landscape, culture, economy and politics of the people that occupied a concerned place in the past and present as the case may be (Okpoko, 1998).

Thus, urbanization should now be seen as the process by which rural communities grow to form cities, or urban centres, and by extension, the growth and expansion of those cities. Urbanization is said to have begun in ancient Mesopotamia in the Uruk between (4300-3100 BCE) for reasons scholars have not yet agreed on. It is speculated however that, a particularly prosperous and efficient village attracted the attention of other less prosperous tribes who then attached themselves to the successful settlement in Uruk (Mark, 2014).
Historian Lewis Mumford notes that

> ...though permanent villages date only from Neolithic times, the habit of resorting to caves for the collective performance of magical ceremonies seems to date back to an earlier period…The outline of the city as both an outward form and an inward pattern of life might be found in such assemblages (George, 1997).

This process then gave rise to the densely populated centres which came to be known as 'cities'.

On the other hand, Helen Chapin Metz proposes that the growth of cities in Mesopotamia was as a result of the inhabitants struggling to cope with the environment. This account interprets that

> the civilized life that emerged at Sumer was shaped by two conflicting factors: the unpredictability of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which at any time could unleash devastating floods that wiped out entire peoples, and the extreme fecundity of the river valleys, caused by centuries-old deposits of soil. Thus, while the river valleys of southern Mesopotamia attracted migrations of neighboring peoples and made possible, for the first time in history, the growing of surplus food, the volatility of the rivers necessitated a form of collective management to protect the marshy, low-lying land from flooding. As surplus production increased and as collective management became more advanced, a process of urbanization evolved and Sumerian civilization took root (Mark, 2014).

In Africa and particularly in the sub-Saharan Africa, oral and written information on early forms of urbanization are very scanty and reflect mostly the economic aspect. However, it has been useful in locating ancient towns and in throwing light on their sizes and functions. Hence, in line with Effah-Gyamfi (1987), one may consider a pre-Arab/pre-European settlement, as urban if the particular settlement is mentioned in written records, oral sources and known through archaeological surveys and excavations as being large, relatively dense and, above all, dominating the neighbouring elements in the areas of its location, economic, social, religious and political aspects (Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka, 2012).

Sources for the Study of Early Urbanization in Africa

i. **Oral Traditions:** As stated by Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka (2012), oral traditions has been scientifically verified and has served as proof of locating archaeological sites as well as help to describe mysteries about archaeological findings. Oral traditions have also helped in corroborating archaeological dates on several sites in Africa. Thus, studies into the early urban centres in Africa have made tremendous use of oral tradition in diverse ways. This is particularly true of the fact that, written sources for the reconstruction of the past of African peoples are suspected to have a lot of paucity and inadequacy. More so, archaeological investigation into early urban centres in Africa is still in its rudimentary stages in many part of the continent. Therefore, there is every need for oral tradition to be used as a supplement to archaeological studies on urbanization in Africa

ii. **Historical Documents:** Historical writings especially of outsiders (Arabs and Europeans), has been one of the viable resources for the study of urbanization in Africa. Historical sources like hieroglyphic and hieratic dating to 3rd millennium BC, historical and geographical writings by classical authors dating to the 5th century BC, medieval ecclesiastical histories dating to 6th century AD, medieval Arab histories and geographies dating to 10th century AD and the works of European travelers in the early modern period, has been huge sources for the study of urbanization in Africa (Connah, 1987 cited in Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka, 2012). Our knowledge of several ancient sites in Africa has been derived from diverse historical documents. Therefore, there is need for archaeologists to supplement archaeological data with oral traditions and historical documents where possible.

iii. **Urban Archaeology:** "This is a sub-discipline of archaeology involving the application of archaeological methods to the study of major towns, cities and urban areas. Urban archaeology searches thoroughly into the processes that gave rise to early urbanization" (Darvill, 2008). According to Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka (2012), there has been an increasing awareness among archaeologists beginning from the 1980s. Particular emphasis has rested on the fact that large complex sites should not be studies in isolation (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1993). For them, many urban centres, if not all, are directly or indirectly linked with the regions around them, and as such all their activities should be recognized and studies in the context and peculiarities in such location. This is because, the historical origin of an urban centre could sometimes lie in the concentration of place functions, which relate to markets, defence, or administration, and this could apply to more than just a village (Grove, 1972). It has also been observed that, the greater the level of variety of functions in a town, the larger its area of influence (McIntosh and McIntosh, 1993).

A Brief Overview of Early Urban Centres in West Africa

Following the above discussion, how do we relate these definitions of urbanization by scholars like Louis (1938), Childe (1950), Sjoberg (1960), Service (1962), and Northam (1975), to the evidence of past complex societies in West Africa, or should one conclude that there were no early cities or urban centres in West Africa that met such requirements before the period of colonization?

According to Andah (1976), the system of classifying ancient urban areas is a difficult task and differs from one country or region of the world to another. As such, international comparisons of ancient urbanization indicators or historical analyses of ancient urbanism are difficult to establish. This is because the growths of urban centres both in the past and present rest on factors like environmental provisions in a location, the economic indices as well as the political-will and the human resources available to transform such natural provisions.

Therefore, the assumption that a society must possess writing systems to satisfy criteria for early urbanization and state formation negates the eligibility of most settlements in West Africa to meet such 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 (Adekola, 2009).

In challenge to the above, Andah (1976,p.3, cited in Adekola, 2009) "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" Settlements were 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. The establishment here is that, "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". An Overview of Some Early Urban Centres in West Africa as given by Adekola (2009) is as follows:

i. **Early Sudan:** "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" (p. 4). 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). The materials excavated indicate that the inhabitants of the town practiced farming, trading, hunting, smiting and probably tailoring.

ii. **Mali:** research indicates that **"**Sosso, the intermediate state between Ghana and Mali, extended its authority and reached the height of its power during the reign of Sumanguru Kante" (p. 5). Adekola stressed that "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" (p.5). This development availed Mali the opportunity of expanding to Takrur and the Gambia in the west, to the upper Niger and the Malinke colonies in the south. In the eastern part, Mali expanded beyond the foothills of the Bandiagara scarp, as well as Gao and Tadmekkato the northeast. This continued to the nomad Berbers of the Sahel and Walata in the north (Levtzian, 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" (p. 5).

iii. **Songhai:** as narrated by Adekola (2009, p. 6),"the kingdom of Songhai succeeded Mali, though; 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 centres 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. 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". Major archaeological features in Timbuktu include the remains of three ancient mosques, while excavations in Gao have revealed a mosque built around 1324 A.D.

iv. **Kanem Bornu Empire:** this empire had two phases, namely Kanem and Bornu. Emergence of Kanem Empire was around the first millennium A.D. This was possible because of the unity of the sedentary Zagawa and Kanuri people by the Magumi nomads. The sedentary Zagawa and Kanuri people were living to the northeast of the present Lake Chad. The capital of Kanem Bornu Empire 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. 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" (p. 6). Research also shows that Katsina, Kebbi, Kwararafa, Zamfara, and Gobir added as other notable Hausa states (Adeleye, 1971, cited from Adekola, 2009).

v. **Old Oyo Kingdom**: for Adekola (p. 7) "the old Oyo was perhaps the largest of the Yoruba kingdoms". Soper (1992) posits that Oyo Ile, the capital of old Oyo, lies about 130 km north-northeast of the present Oyo town. Following its great influence, the old Oyo Kingdom expanded to as far as Nupe, covering all the Yoruba by the middle of 18th century. The old Kingdom conquered Dahomy in the 18th century, while the whole of Egba, Egbado, Ajase, Ibariba and parts of Igbomina and Tapa were conquered in the middle of the century. The old Kingdom was presided over by Alaafin, whose powers were also under the check of a council of state referred to as Oyo Mesi. The old Oyo Kingdom was eventually abandoned in 1836 or 1837.

The Essentiality of Early Urbanism in Understanding African Prehistory

The importance of the study of early urban centres to the understanding of African prehistory cannot be over emphasized. This is because the subject has aided archaeologists and other prehistoric scholars in their quests to understand the totality of factors that influenced the formation of early town, cities and urban centres. This subject of study have helped Africanist scholars to gain insight into the early man's ability to manage factors like environmental provisions, agricultural activities, socio-political and economic indices as well as the human resources, which gave rise to many early human cultural developments.

More so, the subject also help Africanist scholars to have insight into the means by which the complexity in early urban societies was managed by the prehistoric African man, which also led to the achievement of such magnificent urban centres like Kush, Axum and Nubia in North Africa; Bunyoro, Buganda, and Ethiopia in East Africa; Great Zimbabwe, and the Zulu Kingdom in South Africa; as well as Ghana Empire, Mali Empire, Songhai Empire and the Oyo Empire among others (Anyanwu, 2012).

The knowledge of early urbanism has also enabled Africanist scholars to engage their external counterpart in attempts to debunk their Eurocentric approach hitherto applied in addressing the topic of early urban centres in Africa. To this end, scholars such as Andah (1982, 1999), Effah-Gyamfi (1987), Okpoko (1987), Okpoko and Eze-Uzomaka (2012), have argued that, the application of Eurocentric features that must be available before a location is regarded as an urban centrecan no longer be accepted.

This is because early urban centres evolved at different times in different regions of the world and also, factor such as environment, socio-political, human capital as well as the economic indices that led to the formation of such early urban centres were respectively different in all regions of the world. Therefore, the study of early urban centres in every part of the world

should be done with caution. Taking into cognizance the contexts in which such centres evolved and the achievements they left behind.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the essentiality of early urbanism in understanding African prehistory, with a bias on West Africa. We have noted that effects at allocating meaning to the term urbanization or what constitutes early urban centres has proven to be a difficult task. Thus, various scholars, given their different experiences from different parts of the world have defined urban centres or states in several ways (Okpoko, 1987). However, the term urbanization can best be explained in the context of the environment, socio-political/cultural settings, and the economic factors of the area within which such urban centres exists.

Again, this research has revealed that the impact of urbanization in African prehistory far outweighs the debate on what features should qualify the meaning and/or status of an urban centre. Therefore, efforts should be shifted to questions such as; where an early urban centre evolved and what were its major achievements, on which indices did such urban centres developed and expanded, what were the major driving forces (whether it was trade, agriculture or religion)? What constituted its Indigenous Knowledge System (for instance, knowledge of iron working, pottery, and dyeing among others)?

In West Africa for example, urban centres have a long history, but the information currently available on the topic is scanty. Again, reliance on early accounts by travelling Europeans and Arabs cannot give succour to the needed information. This is because these accounts 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 early urban 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, without reliable oral information, prehistoric researchers may face a very difficult situation of getting the exact location of an urban site. Further, rapid rate of destruction of archaeological sites containing evidence of ancient urbanism in many West African countries like Nigeria is another major issue of concern. Therefore, looking at the volume of work that is needed to be done in the area of the understanding of early urbanization in West Africa, scholars should begin to largely channel more efforts towards addressing the questions raised above rather than continuing to duel on the externality or internality of the knowledge of early urbanism in Africa.

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