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# **History in Store: A Study of a Prototype Archaeology Site at Gbaagbum Village in Gwer West Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria**

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### **Author's contribution**

*The sole author designed, analysed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.*

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Aim:** To bring to light a prototype archaeology site at Gbaagbum village in Gwer West Local Government Area of Benue State, Nigeria. Data for the study was gotten through primary and secondary sources. These includes oral interviews, observation and documentation from field work, and written / archival records respectively.

**Study Design:** The study items were from Gbaagbum village and the research evaluation of the items found at the site revealed that the site was home to unknown occupants before the present settlers.

**Place and Duration of Study:** Gbaagbum village in Gwer West Local Government Area (LGA) of Benue State, Nigeria.

**Methodology:** There was physical observation of the culture materials found at the site and through oral interview sessions conducted further revelations were made.

**Results:** Findings revealed that it was once an abandoned site for an unknown migrant community who occupied the area, but relocated before the present occupants. Furthermore, the study revealed a tunnel with complete and pieces of pots and a human jaw in the first chamber. There was a big open pot which serve as a lid to the second chamber. The paper suggests that a more comprehensive and professional archaeological / historical study be conducted at the site and within the Ityôshin area to unearth a history of the originators of the cultural materials that were

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accidentally discovered. The use of modern archaeological equipment, methods and principles can be greatly relied upon in this regard. To conclude a lot still needs to be done in archaeology especially in the remote areas like the Gbaagbum Village of Benue State, Nigeria.

*Keywords: Ancient history; archaeology; settlement; site; prototype.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

History and archaeology have always been twin children in a bid to define the past, compare the present and determine the future. While history is more theoretical in trying to identify the past facts, archaeology applies practical methods to obtain information from past remains and document same for history. Thus, the methods of acquisition of information used by archaeology make history an activity-oriented subject. This explains why historians sometimes accompany archaeologists on research or visit sites/museums to access archaeological records preserved there. By these interactions, both have a common goal of studying the past human activities in order to reconstruct past history. It is in this regard that the paper became quite imperative.

The paper in essence examined decades of inhibition of these artifacts and human fossils worthy of historical and archaeological importance which were accidentally discovered in 1998 and till date, no proper archaeological study carried out. The study therefore urges the public; particularly archaeologists to carry out a rescue excavation in the area to save the remains that might be found there due to constructions and the Fulani invasion which compelled the inhabitants to desert the area since 2013. Apart from Gbaagbum Village, the Ityôshin has a history of migration which mentions specific sites that requires archaeological study to support oral tradition to confirm its historical reality. Such sites include the Igbor Hill footprint on the rock which has a controversial account with the Masev, blacksmith furnaces and tuyeres, pottery sites, the Ikyande footprint and the pubescent edible gardenia (Ishôôdou) in the River Benue at Gbaji-Sengev among others. These in effect will widen the scope and horizon of the various experts in archaeology, history and other related disciplines to carry out more research in rural areas of north central Nigeria.

## 2. CONCEPTUAL ISSUES

History like other academic disciplines has several definitions stretched by some historians

and non-historians alike. P.L. Gardiner in Majuk for example views history as an 'objective past' [1]. But E.H. Carr in Sutton and Yohe II defines it in two ways; "the inquiry conducted by the historian and the series of past events into which he inquires" [2]. It is important to note that these human activities that the historian studied about man were not done in isolation, but were about man in his society. Collectively, Majuk refers to the definitions of history as 'a body of knowledge about the past activities of man in society, or other events that have had an influence on man, which are obtained through research or inquiry' [3]. It is in the light of this that the research was initiated to inquire into the past and present of the unidentified community whose remains have been found at the present Gbaagbum Village as well as to ascertain the arrival date and culture of the present occupants of the location.

A sample of items discovered in the place showed that there was a great history in store for posterity. But in order to tap the knowledge, this research has to employ inter-disciplinary approach in which case historical archaeology takes precedence. Sutton and Yohe II define archaeology as the study of past peoples and societies, the goals of which is to discover, describe, interpret, explain and understand the past through analysis of the materials left by past peoples [4]. The application of these goals has implications for the study of history. For instance, history records many things including events, transactions, royal lineages, taxes and trade [5]. Some of these records are excellent; some are deliberately or ignorantly biased, while for many activities no records exist at all. To address these short comings, archaeology can be employed to confirm, contradict, or correct historical records, to add depth to poorly recorded parts of history and to elucidate the lives of those left out of recorded history [6].

Norah adds that, humankind dates back to almost 4million years ago, but writing was invented about 5,000 year's ago [7]; but not widespread. In view of that, written history can tell us about only a fraction of our past. The study of our remote past according to her can only be possible through what archaeologists call

'material remains' such as left over houses or other buildings, tools and objects in stones, woods, bones, metals, fragments of pottery, jewelry and other adornments, as well as plants and animal remains found on sites [8]. It was in this connection that archaeologists designate certain ancient settlements for reconnaissance based on evidences of human habitation over time and eventually declare them archaeological sites and were protected for continuous research.

Ekechukwu, Mangut and Ezeadichie define 'settlement' as a locational term distinguishing a site which shows evidence of human habitation from a non-occupation site [3]. Similarly, the three authors define 'site' as a basic unit, cluster or associated cultural remains within a specific land-form, or a place where a group of remains of human occupation or activity is located [3]. Such locations may include; a factory, a butchery point, ritual or burial place, a rock shelter, or a settlement arena. Based on the above conceptual clarifications, it will not be out of place to designate the Gbaagbum village settlement as a prototype archaeological site worthy of study.

### 3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The site at Gbaagbum village in Gwer west area of Benue State in Nigeria formed the material used for this study. The basis of the study is to strengthen the history of the people through the examination of objects found at the site. The research objects were identified and examined while probing the history of settlement in the village. Based on this discovery and items found at the site, Gbaagbum is labelled to be a historical heritage and an asset to archaeology.

The items discovered at the site, like pots were comparatively examined with the present items used by the current residents of the village and the difference observed. Detailed analysis was carried out after critical observations were made, literature was reviewed and formal interviews were carried out and conclusively, recommendations were made for further archaeological works in the area.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In 2003, the researcher visited the Community Primary School, Gbaagbum on a different assignment which was the inspection of its facilities for possible approval and take-over by

the State Primary Education Board, Makurdi. The visit prompted the research after curious probing about the story of the holes uncovered in the area. The quest to reveal a history in store using the knowledge of archaeology, the study became certain which led to preliminary investigation and proper research at the village.

Figs. 2 and 3 shows pottery materials kept in the custody of the village head.

Further revelations could not be captured in pictures because of the human remains, the bones in what looked like a grave could not be removed by the Villagers and was covered in the ground. In a bid to visit the Village again it was gathered that the village and school were destroyed during the Fulani invasion in 2013 [8]. The destruction means history was once again buried or stored and it needs excavation. The task of excavation is not an impossible one. Moloney says most evidence of ancient settlements and human activities disappear long before excavation occurs as it either disintegrates or is lost over centuries [9]. She went further that on 24<sup>th</sup> August, 79AD, Mount Vesuvius erupted, burying the area around the Bay of Naples in Italy under tons of volcanic ash and lava or later pumice about 3-5 metres [9]. The eruption sealed and at the same time preserved the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum for 1700 years. By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, its fame was remembered and zeal to inquire into the past of the two cities led to the commencement of work on the site of Pompeii which resulted to the discovery of the architecture and the daily life of the people in general.

Although there were no volcanic eruptions in Africa, particularly Nigeria, population movements in Sub-Saharan Africa which were a general phenomenon affected the area, and led to abandonment of many settlements [3]. Many of such sites in North-Central Nigeria and beyond could be excavated to reconstruct the history of people who once lived in certain areas but relocated. It is important to note that the vital task of documenting archaeological sites before they were lost forever was to save our heritage, not to create the indigene/settler conflicts. In essence, history and archaeology were concerned with the achievements of man either on transit or in sedentary life. That was why to trace a history of the origin of the Hausa, the descendants of Bayajidda who was said to have fled from Baghdad his homeland to Kanem-Borno, and

then to Daura (Hausa land), Katsina State, was to examine the mission, creativity and its achievements, not to repatriate them [10]. Similarly, the Fulani whose original homeland was the Senegal River valley area were recognized as indigenes of other areas in West Africa and beyond [10]. Sequel to the above, it is important to trace the history of a people whose feat the study felt was worth investigation.

#### **4.1 Historical Background of the Gbaagbum Village**

According to oral sources, the Gbaagbum Village was founded about 126 years' ago [5] which is about 1890 AD. It is about five kilometres on Kura–Atondiir Road (see Fig. 1). Kura is situated on Kilometer 18, Makurdi-Naka Road. The founder of the Village, Gbaagbum Usu died in 2010, having lived for about 120 years [6]. Though there were fragments of pottery materials which showed that the place was once a human settlement, the houses constructed by the new occupants were not directly on top of the site in question. It was in 1998, that the community decided to establish a school that the site was chosen for the project [7].

According to Ityozungur Kyegh, “they were constructing a pit latrine and in the process of digging the pit; they suddenly burst into a big hole” [8]. Consequently, they were forced to abandon the project and call the attention of the villagers. On their arrival, they were courageous enough to enter into what looked like a tunnel, thereby encountering assorted pots, a vertebrae and one jaw of a dead human. In an attempt to move forward, they saw a vessel with a wide mouth which covered the passage, thus, making further entry into the interior part of the tunnel impossible. With increase activities on the school compound, two more holes appeared, but nobody dared to enter the tunnel again. Meanwhile, the then village head Gbaagbum reported the matter in 2001, to the then Ter Nagi, Chief S.G. Damna and the DPO whom in conjunction with the Head, Department of Education, Gwer West LGA Mr. Timothy Aboho came to investigate the site [11]. They exonerated the community from the fear of being accused of murder, but did not forward the report to the appropriate authority for necessary historical/archaeological study. Appropriate authority here refers to the universities or institutes of archaeology/museum studies.

##### **4.1.1 Implication for history**

The application of the results of archaeological research through evidence to the study of history is enormous. The information comes in many forms; there are visible signs such as ruined buildings, megalithic stone structures, pyramids and excavated objects made of clay, stone and metal. These were all human made and were called ‘artifacts’ [12]. Moloney went further that, at times excavation reveals ‘features’ which were signs of human activity such as planned buildings, pits for storage or rubbish, hearths which were in context and could not be moved from the sites. And that there were ‘eco-facts’ which were remains of natural plants, pollen grains, soils, animals, insects and fish which were sometimes assembled by humans showing the type of diet of ancestors and the environment in which they lived. The three forms by which information was obtained about the past could apply to the place of study. For instance, the discovery of assorted pots at the site could result to what Moloney calls ‘the clay pots speak’ [9]. He further says, pots making which began 10,000 years ago shows that groups began to settle permanently in that area; in this case, the ancient migrants at Gbaagbum village. Pots were used by many for everyday purposes such as cooking, storage, transportation and trading. These further speak about varieties of food consumption and inter-group relations. There were other designs like figurines, musical instruments, beads, objects of adornment and implements used for hunting and fishing. The designs showed evidence of decorative arts, fashion, music and exploration of wild life. The designs of the pots could also determine a history of a people whether they were borrowed ideas or indigenous and the time they were made as well as their occupation. The physical appearance of the pots could be compared with similar types of any identified existing ethnic group to ascertain their conjugality. These also showed the level of advancement in civilisation of the people in traditional or indigenous science and technology which the migrant under discussion were not left out.

On the other hand, the presence of human bones in the tunnel could be likened to a grave of an important person who was buried with grave goods, in this case the pots. The way people were buried and the grave goods buried with them may indicate their importance or social status in the community [12].

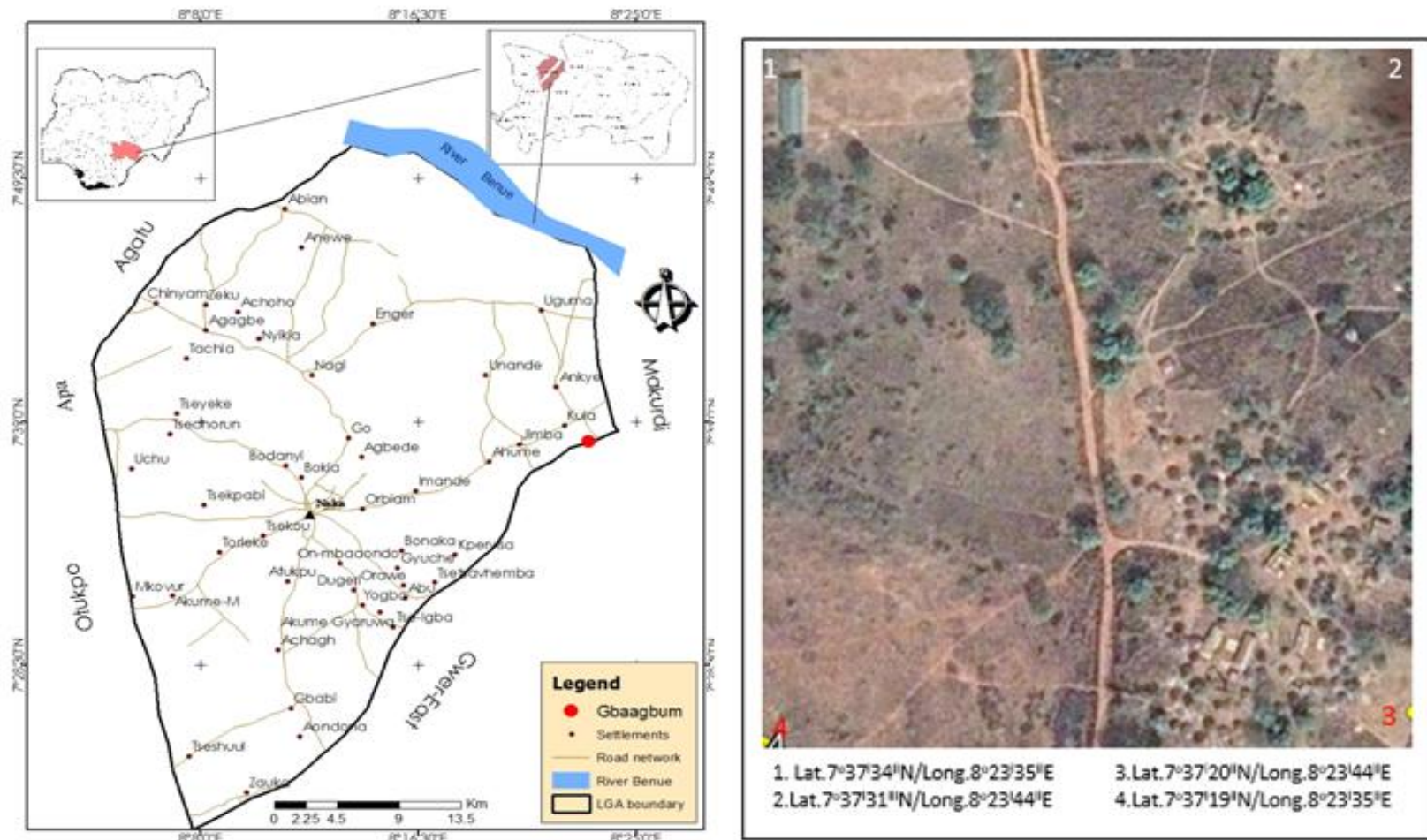


Fig. 1. Location of Gbaagbum



**Fig. 2. The village head holding one of the pots**



**Fig. 3. Pots found in the hole**

For instance, the presence of human remains at the outer part of the chamber may signify the honour done to a personality by burying alive his or her security guard (s) or servant (s) with him or her. However, tilting towards the direction of status in this case may be too hasty because the culture materials in the inner chamber covered with a lid are yet to be identified. And until excavation was done, its history will remain in store. If it was a grave, it could be a possible cause of their migration to another location; hence, some migrant ethnic groups like the nomadic Fulani used to abandon their settlements once they lost a member. However, the claim may be justified if the bones showed evidence of a disease or human attack. According to Idris Amali, the Idoma, Igala, Bassa, Ebira, Edo and some ethnic groups around Calabar axis were ethnic groups in Nigeria that at one time or the other buried kings with slaves or servants in such type of graves [13]. All these assumptions could be explained better when a

proper archaeological work would be conducted in the area. It is there and then that a history of the migrant group could be trace and reconstructed. At the moment, there is no concrete account of which group settled in that location before the present community (Ityozungur [14]) in the same vein a proper history of the Ityoshin could be traced from where human memory could account for to the present location with appropriate dating.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION**

This paper seeks to establish the relationship between history and archaeology in reconstructing pre-history. It identified Gbaagbum Village with an adjacent site which had evidence of an ancient human settlement. The evidence includes; fragments or pieces and complete pots, a gorge or tunnel suspected to be

a burial chamber, vertebrae (spinal cord bones) and a jaw of a human being. These were accidental finds in the course of work on the Community Primary School, Gbaagbum. The paper calls for a thorough archaeological and historical research to authenticate its archaeological site status and its historical connection. It also made mention of other sites that deserve detailed study to put a history of the Ityôshin into proper perspective. The study thus concludes that logical conclusions of research in this site will open doors for more studies of this nature in archaeology and history; especially that of the indigenous knowledge systems of the ancient people in north central Nigeria like the study area and other places.

### CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, respondents' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

### COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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