

### Sungbo's Eredo, Southern Nigeria

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Surveys of what may prove to be Africa's largest single monument, Sungbo's Eredo, are nearing completion. This massive, 20 metre high, thousand year old kingdom boundary rampart snakes through 160 kilometres of thick rainforest undergrowth and freshwater swamp forest around Ijebu-Ode in southwest Nigeria. It lies close to Lagos, Ibadan and Ife, centres of learning, where many of Nigeria's leading professional archaeologists have worked. Yet, apart from two cross-profiles measured near Itele (Darling 1975), an inordinate delay of nearly forty years elapsed between the first sketch of this enormous feature (Lloyd 1959) and its main survey.

In 1993, the Leventis Foundation funded a survey of Nigeria's potential World Heritage Sites; and a rapid 400 metre sample survey of Sungbo's Eredo was taken en route from the Epe to Ijebu Ode road. At 20 metres was a massive silk-cotton tree with white cloth tied around its trunk, a shrine to the Eredo. At 200 metres the deep ditch was crossed by the ancient footpath to Epe, with toll-gate ruins outside and garrison ruins inside; both features had associated shrines. At 300 metres was a spectacular 20 metre high section with vertical ditch sides of indurated laterite, still marked by ancient tools. At 400 metres was a right-angled junction: the northern arm was part of the main 160 kilometre course, the eastern arm went down to a nearby swamp, a link of then unappreciated secret significance.

Two months later, Nigeria's new Legacy organization visited the site; and provided modest funds to obtain 1:25,000 aerial photographs and engage in some survey preparation. In 1994, three students from the Department of Conservation Sciences, Bournemouth University, UK helped survey

the east and south of the Eredo, often having to cast around in wet vegetation and dug-out canoes when impenetrable swamp forest interrupted the course. In 1996, with Nigeria's new World Heritage Committee, a metre square hole was dug where house-builders had removed much of the Eredo bank near Ketu. At 130 centimetres depth, as forecast from the cross-profile, the bright red bank subsoil changed dramatically to a gray and black fossil topsoil full of large charcoal chunks, which yielded a radiocarbon date of over a thousand years B.P. - in tune with the pattern of subsequent dates. In 1995, preparation for survey of the Eredo's north and west sections was conducted at weekends on motorcycle taxis along overgrown bush tracks. Five more Bournemouth University students, a member of Nigeria's World Heritage Committee and two other Nigerians helped in one of this century's more unusual archaeological surveys. Each day, surveyors equipped with orienteering compasses, local guides, waterproof paper and pens, were sent up to 30 kilometres in all directions - none knowing exactly where they would finish. Their routes were crossed by great fingers of impassable freshwater swamp; one Nigerian girl waded up to her neck in water and one British student was left up a tree when his raft disintegrated. Another 80 kilometres of Africa's greatest boundary rampart were laid bare; and with it another surprise. Along the gently sloping interfluves, the Eredo was deliberately engineered with ditch baulks to retain seasonal rainwater as shallow moats. This feature arose from perceptions which significantly qualify previous interpretations of swampland salients on the Eredo and Benin earthworks and, very forcibly, of the main Benin City moat.

In 1997, GPS surveys on motorcycle taxi found the final links of the main Eredo course and clarified the loci of sections separated by swampland; the constructors measured radially down each interfluve to site the Eredo - not by crossing tint: swamps as once thought. Cross-profiles measured by spirit-level and metre-rule showed a range of steep U-shaped and V-shaped profiles; and two isolated 20 metre ditches unexpectedly led to a radical interpretation of Eredo (and other earthwork) construction techniques. Some sections of the Eredo remain to be reached by ground survey, but the overall Eredo boundary is now fairly clear (see map). As Lloyd suggested four decades ago, the Eredo en-



**Figure 2:** Top: Outside the 5 m wide moat and 4 m high bank near Sungbo's grave.  
Bottom: halfway across moat.



**Figure 3:** View from bank at one means of crossing moat.

**Figure 4:** Near vertical section through Sungbo's eredo as originally dug about a thousand years ago near Itele, looking southwest.



closes a vast area, nearly 40 kilometres north to south and 35 kilometres east to west - indisputably the boundary of a sizeable political entity, probably a powerful kingdom or queendom. The survey revealed additional loops of shallower ditches in the northern Basement Complex; details of how swampland and rivers were negotiated; and differences in profile depth and topology along the 160 kilometre course. Without compasses or aerial photographs, the original constructors kept to a coherent masterplan, despite the challenges posed by swampland barriers: the course of this rampart ran nearly constant either side of all but the most extensive swampland areas, and where a major discrepancy did occur, it was rectified by a series of subsequent ditches.

Traditional lore links the construction of this impressive boundary to the legendary Sungbo, a wealthy childless widow, giantess, priestess/goddess, devil woman or even erstwhile Queen of Sheba, to whose grove and magically bare grave flock many long-distance pilgrims. This and the

links with the present Awujale dynasty and its Odo settlements require more study.

In the forty years between Lloyd's publication and this survey, it is ironic that so many textbooks published at Lagos, Ibadan and Ife placed Africa's rainforest kingdoms five or more centuries later than the early Savannah kingdoms: for contradictory proof on a massive scale lay less than an hour's drive away from each of these academic armchairs. Igbo-Ukwu and Benin's nebulous Ogiso dynasty are no longer early rainforest anomalies, and Sungbo's Eredo seems set to push back our understanding of state formation in the African rainforest by half a millenium or more.

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side notice boards. Professor Peter Lloyd: WSU 4635 first radiocarbon date for the Eredo. British Academy: some travel, per diem and research publication expenses. IUCN-NC: path/Eredo clearance, notice boards, brochures, conservation.

Authorization: National Commissions for Museums and monuments. The Awujale of Ijebu-Ode and the Otonba Osibogun. The help of local chiefs and people too numerous to mention individually.

World Heritage Committee Members, Nigeria, 1995/96: Dr. J. Eboremine (Chairman), Mrs. Akpata (Archaeologists), Mr. G. Imonirhua (Principal Superintendent of Monuments), D. Alafiatayo (Surveyor), D. Ajigolo (Photographer), Dr. P. Darling (Resource person).

Survey and logistical personnel: 1994: N. Hammond, D. Elliott, K. Merrick, Ms. T. Olajide, Ms. M. Stevens; 1995: Mrs. P. White, Ms. C. Gardner, R. Thompson, J. Graham, T. Thearle, Mrs.

A. Kotey (Environmental lawyer), Miss A. Nwanguma (Student), 1996/97: Ms. T.A. Ewaikpe, Ms. C. Edeneogle (Exploratory field surveyors).

In Memoriam: Monsieur Dormant, who helped this survey, was with his wife in the ill-fated ADC flight 086, when it disappeared deep under the swamps close to Sungbo's Eredo at Ekun near Itoikin on November 7, 1996. May their souls, and all those others buried with them, rest in peace.

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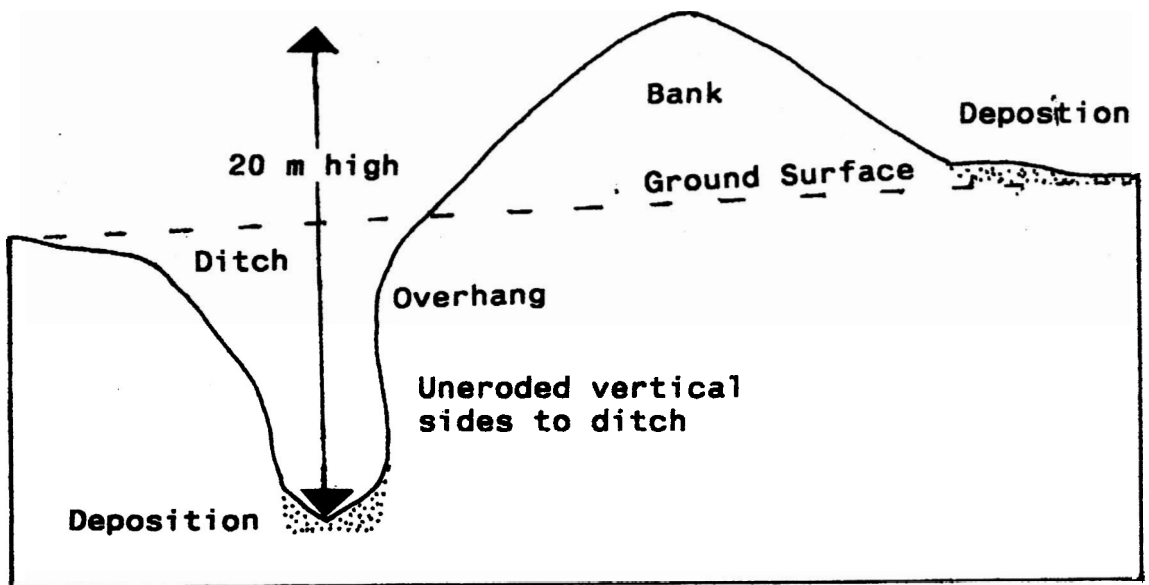
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**Figure 5:** Near vertical section through Sungbo's eredo near the interfluve edge between Ijebu-Ife and Itele, looking northeast.





**Figure 6:** This 20 m thick section near the Epe roads has near vertical ditch sides with a slight overhang. Since later deepening would have been an impossibility on this section, this overhang must have survived since the eredo's original construction. The growth and local protection of forest along the eredo must have been an important factor in preserving the earthwork more or less as originally dug.



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