

NIGERIA

Potsherd pavements in Ilare-Ijesa, Yorubaland: A regional perspective

Akinwumi Ogundiran

Dept. of Archaeology and the African
Studies Center
Boston University
Boston, Massachusetts
USA, 02215

Introduction

Potsherd pavements have long been a subject of interest in the archaeology of West Africa (Nzewunwa 1989). In Yorubaland (western Nigeria and parts of Benin and Togo), over thirty sites with potsherd pavements have been identified (Figure 1), but the most extensive occurrence of the pavements is at Ile-Ife and its satellite settlements (Eyo 1974a, 1974b; Garlake 1974, 1977; Ogunfolakan 1994; Willett 1967, 1970). In fact, the ubiquity of potsherd pavements in the archaeological deposits of Ife formed the basis of the three-stage cultural phases that Eyo (1974a) has proposed: Pre-Pavement (pre-12th century), Pavement (12th - 16th century), and Post-Pavement (post 16th century). Most of the potsherd pavements in Yoruba region are composed of ceramic tiles laid on the edge in herringbone design in a prepared clay floor. These floor tiles are generally associated with temples/shrines, roads, and courtyard residences. Since 1988, archaeological efforts have been stepped up to understand the regional distribution of potsherd pavements in Yorubaland (Agbaje-Williams 1995, 1998; Agbaje-Williams and Ogundiran 1990; Baptist 1989; Ogunfolakan 1994; Siyanbola 1988). One of the results of these efforts is the identification of a potsherd pavement in Ilare Ijesa, an early political center in central Yorubaland, about 50 km north of Ile-Ife (Figure 1).

Excavations

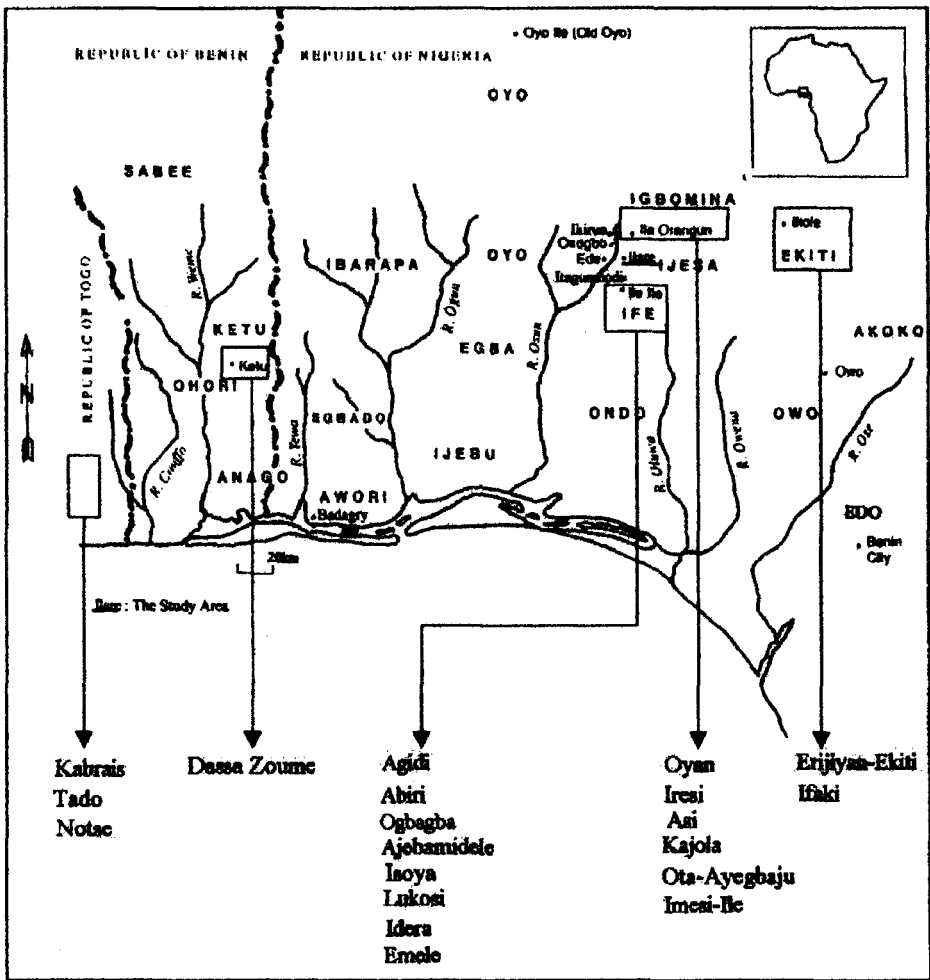
Two test units were excavated at the potsherd pavement site in Ilare in order to identify some of

the materials associated with the pavement and to describe the functional and cultural contexts of the site (Figure 2). **Unit 1** is the locus of the concentration of the tiles, covering an area of 1.8 by 3 m (Figure 3). The tiles were edge-laid in herringbone pattern within a matrix of very compact, fine red clay (Figure 4). Only a few are decorated, and these only have stamped motifs. The tiles were in rectangular and polygonal shapes, and their size range between 5 x 2 cm and 7 x 3 cm. The excavation of the unit mainly consisted of surface scraping to expose the ceramic tiles without displacing or destroying them. To test whether any cultural deposits lay below the potsherd pavement, a trench of 60 x 40 cm was excavated at the southeast corner of Unit 1 (Figure 3). The trench was dug to a depth of 50 cm but no cultural material was recovered. Two strata were defined for the excavated unit. Stratum I (topsoil, 8-10 cm thick) is a solid light red (2.5YR 4/6) clay and stratum II consisted of very compact red clay (2.5YR 4/8).

Unit 2. The excavation of the second unit revealed the remains of a jar that was buried in a capsized position (Figure 5). The mouth of the jar rested on two slabs of granite at the depth of 31 cm. The orifice diameter of the jar is 35 cm and its maximum diameter is 65 cm. The lower portion of the jar was broken, possibly removed before it was buried. The height of the excavated jar is 44 cm although its total height could have originally been about 60 cm. No other object was recovered from the unit apart from the fragments of the pot and the two granite slabs. It was not possible to retrieve the pot as a single piece because of its fragmented condition. After all the measurements and photographs were taken, the sherds, 182 body sherds and 13 rim sherds, were removed. Twenty-five of the body sherds and all 13 rim sherds are plain while the remaining 157 body sherds are decorated with clustered stamped motifs. The stratigraphy of Unit 2 is similar to that of Unit 1. The solid light red (2.5YR 4/6) topsoil is 6-15 cm thick and it contained the rootlets of palm tree. Stratum II consisted of very compact red clay (2.5YR 4/8) sediments but it is heavily disturbed by tree roots and a termite burrow. These disturbances are clearly seen on the north wall.

The stratigraphic position of the pot is consistent with that of the potsherd pavement and both the pot and the ceramic tiles bear the same type of

Figure 1: Yorubaland, potsherd pavement sites and ethnic subgroups.



stamped motifs and the same physical properties. The pot and the ceramic tiles also poorly fired and have red surface color, grayish paste color, coarse paste texture, rough surface, and gravel inclusions. In view of the similar physical characteristics, I will suggest that the jar was made of the same clay materials as the ceramic tiles.

Discussion

Archaeological studies of pre-19th century potsherd pavements have largely focused on the material components and layout patterns. Hence, ceramic tiles are often discussed in terms of whether they are flat-laid or edge-laid; in herring-bone or basket-work pattern; and whether the tiles consist only of ceramics or are combined with cob-

bles and pebbles (Agbaje-Williams 1995; Garlake 1974, 1977; Fagg and Willett 1962: 359; Willett 1967). This emphasis on the physical aspects of potsherd pavements have shown the architectural attributes shared by a wide range of cultures and societies from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, and from the 11th century B.C. to the 19th century A.D. (Nzewunwa 1989). An important aspect of potsherd pavements that has, until recently, been documented only in Ile-Ife is their association with buried jars and flasks. The regional context of potsherd pavements associated with buried pots, especially within 60 km radius of Ile-Ife, is only beginning to be understood. The archaeological survey by Ogunfolakan (1994) has led to the documentation of pot-pavement associations in the southern Igbomina and Osun area of Yorubaland, especially in Ila-Orangun. Ogunfolakan (1994) has reported

Figure 2: Ilare potsherd pavement site, contours and excavation units.

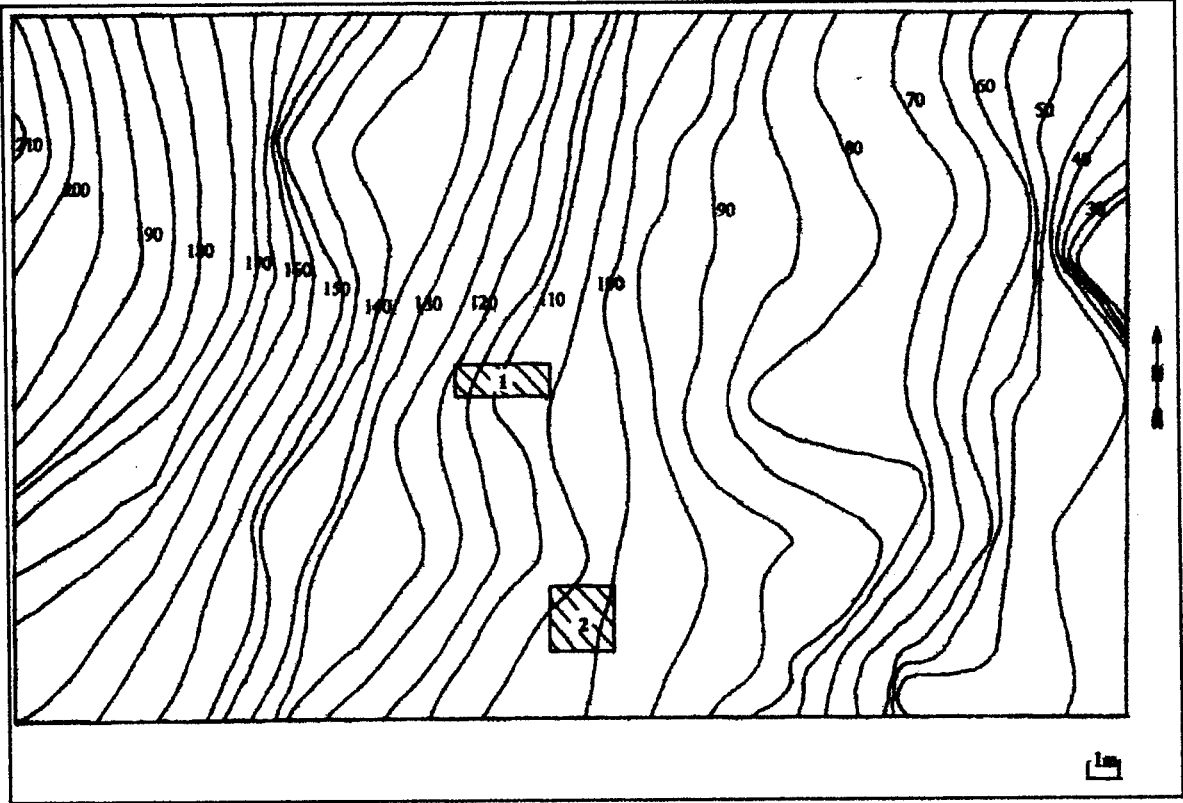


Figure 3: Potsherd pavement tiles and excavation unit 1.

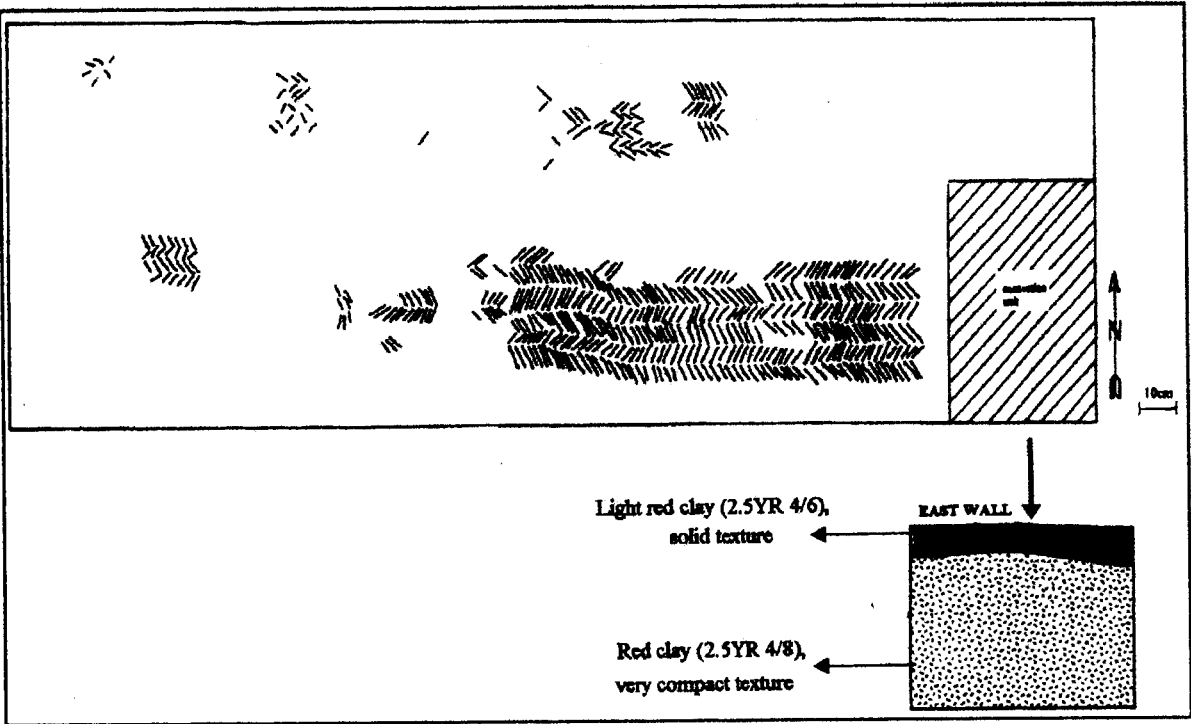
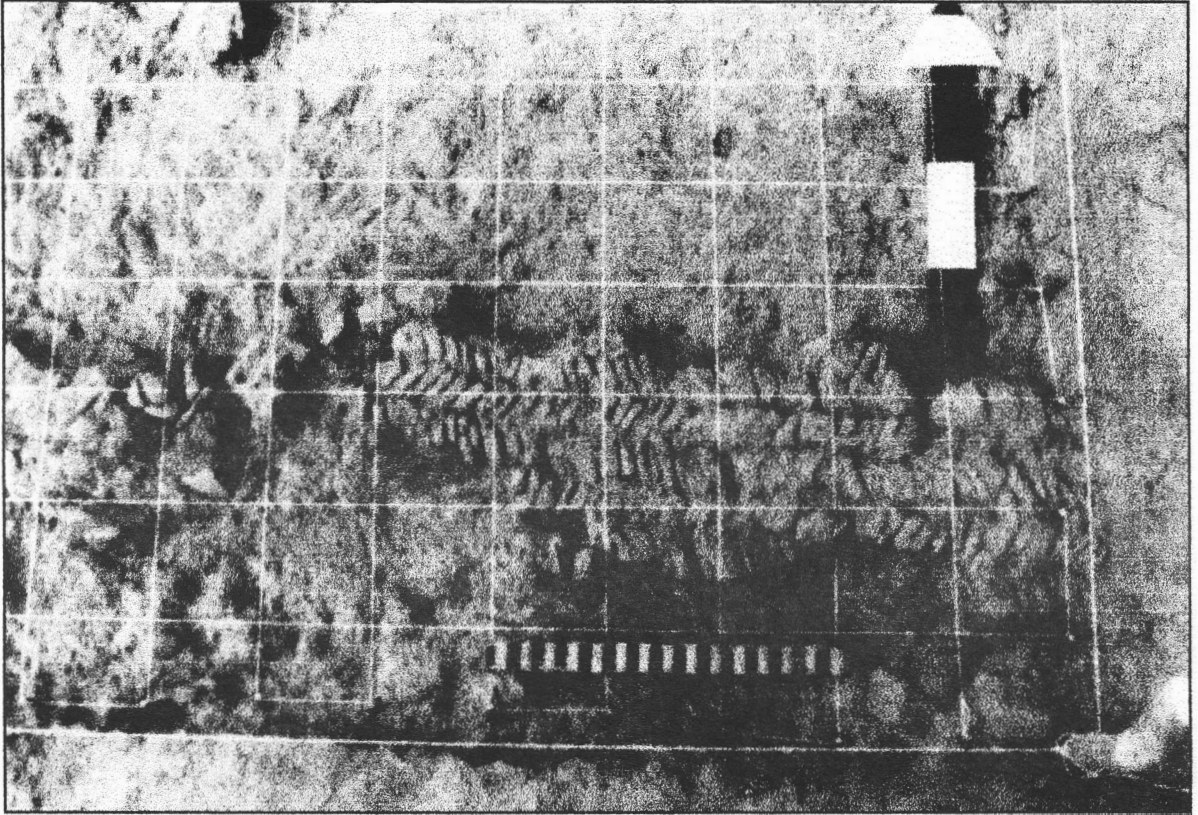


Figure 4: Potsherd pavement tiles.



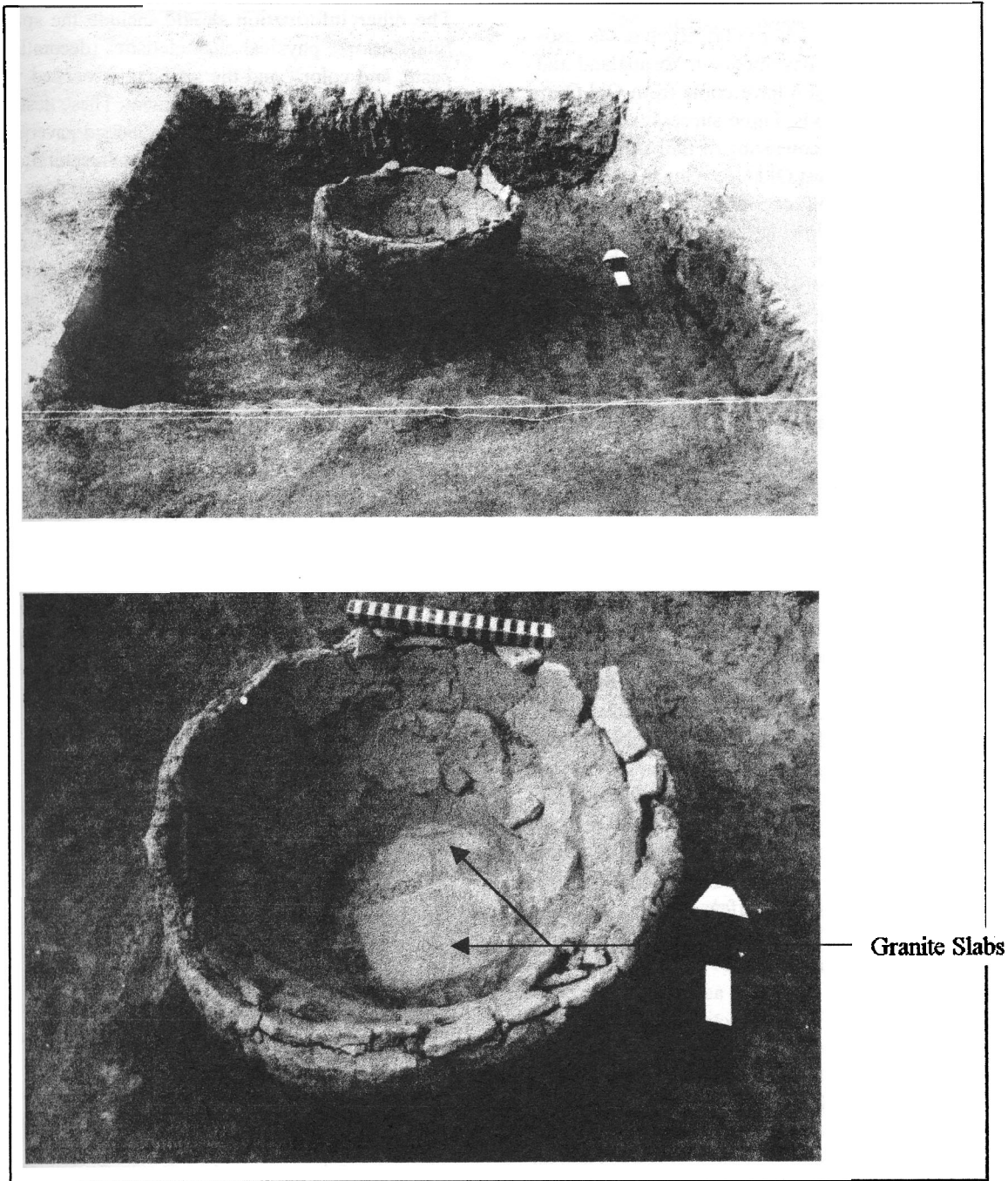
that the ceramic tiles at Awogbemi grove in Ila-Orangun, were arranged in a circular form around a buried pot. The recent excavation in Ilare is, however, the only such association so far excavated outside Ile-Ife. Although most parts of the potsherd pavements in Ilare were already eroded before the excavations, one can deduce from the examples at Ife and Osun/southern Igbomina areas that the potsherd pavement in Ilare was constructed around the capsized pot.

The evidence at Ife sites and Ilare indicate that the pots may be buried in upright or capsized position with the lips of the pots at the same level as the pavement surface. The bases of the pots were also often removed before burial and the ceramic tiles were laid to radiate from the buried pots (Eyo 1974a, 1974b; Garlake 1974, 1977; Willett 1967:105, 1970:320). Ethnographic information and archaeological contexts indicate that the buried pots within potsherd pavement matrices at Ife, Ilare, and Ila Orangun can be interpreted as “symbolic channels connecting the pavements to the earth and

thus as receptacles for libations” (Garlake 1974:143). The open-ended pots and pot-necks would then have served as a metaphorical ‘routes’ that connected the Yoruba earthly world with the underworld where, according to the Yoruba religious philosophy, all the ancestors and deities reside. Sacrificial libation to the Earth (*Ilè*), one of the deities in the Yoruba pantheon, is a common religious and ritual practice in Yorubaland. Earth, the life-giving deity, is considered as the link between the Yoruba earthly world (*Ayé*) and the underworld (*àjà-ilè*). It is therefore plausible to consider the pot-pavement associations in Ife, Ilare, Ila-Orangun, as altar receptacles for religious worship. Hence, I will suggest that making distinctions between pavements with buried pots and those without buried pots provides a useful way to understand the cultural contexts of potsherd pavement construction in Yoruba region.

All the calibrated radiocarbon dates that are associated with the excavated potsherd pavement sites in Ife are in the range of 12th-15th centuries:

Figure 5: Views of the capsized jar and the associated two slabs, Unit 2.



Ita Yemoo, 12th-14th centuries (Willett 1967); Odo-Ogbe, 12th century (Eyo 1974); Woye Asiri, 12th-15th centuries; and Obalara site, 14th century (Garlake 1974, 1977). These dates belong to the 'Classical'

period in the culture history of Ife (Willett 1967). And, like the terracotta and bronze sculptures, potsherd pavements formed part of the material ensembles of cultural efflorescence and elaborate

sociopolitical institutions in Ile-Ife between the 11th and 16th centuries (Eyo 1974:162).

Outside Ife, the other radiocarbon dates associated with potsherd pavements in Yorubaland and the adjacent Edo region have come from Old Oyo, Benin, and Itagunmodi. Three successive levels of potsherd pavements, consisting of flatly laid sherds, have been uncovered at Old Oyo (Soper 1975). Two calibrated radiocarbon dates of ca. 13th and 14th centuries are associated with the pavements. At the Museum site in Benin, a charcoal sample above one of the pavement rubbles yielded a calibrated date of 13th-14th century (Connah 1975:32,35). Similarly, at Itagunmodi, a settlement 15 km northeast of Ife, a charred palm kernel seed associated with potsherd pavement has been dated to the 14th century (Agbaje-Williams 1995).

Summary

The clustering of the radiocarbon dates from six potsherd pavement sites in Ife, and other sites in Itagunmodi, Benin, and Old Oyo within 12th-15th century indicates that the flooring of houses, temples, and roads with ceramic tiles was a pan-regional architectural style that developed about the same time in different parts of Yorubaland. It appears that between the 13th and 14th centuries, potsherd pavements had become a pan-Yoruba cultural tradition especially in the areas of central Yorubaland that were undergoing the processes of political centralization and urbanization. It is possible that the potsherd pavement site in Ilare belongs to the 12th-15th century period of Ife's cultural efflorescence, a period of rapid processes of centralized sociopolitical formation across Yorubaland. The potsherd pavements that were associated with pots primarily served religious functions in Ife and this cultural practice is now documented to be present in other parts of central Yorubaland, especially in Ijesa and southern Igbomina/Osun regions. Ethnographic information and archaeological contexts show that these pots were used as libation receptacles and as containers of spiritual and medicinal ingredients.

The evidence at Ife, Ila-Orangun, and Ilare shows that we can develop a classification system that recognizes the diverse functional-cultural contexts of potsherd pavements in Yorubaland. The first step is to identify whether a potsherd pavement is associated with buried pots, followed by the

identification of the type (jar, bowl, flask) and positioning (capsized or upright) of the buried pot(s). The other information should include the spatial relationships, physical characteristics (decorations, paste, and color); and the artifacts associated with the buried pot(s) and the pavement. These descriptions will help to differentiate potsherd pavements that served utilitarian domestic architectural purposes from those that functioned in religious and ritual contexts. This will enable us to develop a better understanding of potsherd pavements as a class of material ensembles that characterized cultural-historical development in Yorubaland between the 12th and 16th centuries.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Dr. Raphael Alabi of University of Ibadan for assisting me with the archaeological survey of Ilare. Mrs. Anthonia Fatunsin graciously supervised the 1997 fieldwork in Ilare on behalf of the National Commission for Museums and Monuments. I also thank Dr. Michael DiBlasi and Prof. Julie Hansen of Boston University for their helpful comments on the earlier draft of the paper.

References

- Agbaje-Williams, B.
- 1995 *Archaeological Investigation of Itagunmodi Potsherd Pavement Site, Ijesaland, Osun State, Nigeria, 1991/92*. IFRA Publication, Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.
- 1998 Potsherd pavements and early urban sites in Nigeria, Yorubaland: A Consideration. Paper presented at the 14th Biennial Conference of the Society of Africanist Archaeologists, Syracuse University.
- Agbaje-Williams, B. and A. Ogundiran
- 1991 Oral Traditions and the Archaeology of Ijesaland. Paper presented at the 10th Annual Conference of the Archaeological Association of Nigeria. Institute of African Studies, University of Ibadan.

- 1992 *Cultural Resources in Ijesaland*. Ibadan: Ijesa Cultural Foundation and African Books Builders.

Akinjogbin and Ayandele

- 1980 Yorubaland before 1800. In O. Ikime, editor, *Groundwork of Nigerian History*. Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, pp. 121-143.

Baptist, O.

- 1989 *Archaeological and Ethnohistorical Investigation of Ilare*. BA thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University.

Connah, G.

- 1975 *The Archaeology of Benin: Excavations and Other Researches in and around Benin, Nigeria*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Eyo, E.

- 1974a *Recent Excavations at Ife and Owo, and their Implications for Ife, Owo, and Benin Studies*. PhD thesis, University of Ibadan.
- 1974b Excavations at Odo Ogbe street and Lafogido, Ife, Nigeria. *West African Journal of Archaeology* 4: 99-109.

Fagg, W. B. and F. Willett

- 1962 Ancient Ife: an ethnographical summary. *Actes du IVième Congress Panafricain de Prehistoire*. Tervuren, pp 357-373.

Garlake, P.

- 1974 Excavations at Obalara's land, Ife, Nigeria. *West African Journal of Archaeology* 4: 111-148.
- 1977 Excavations on the Woye Asiri family land in Ife, Western Nigeria. *West African Journal of Archaeology* 7: 57-95.

Nzewunwa, N.

- 1989 Prehistoric pavements in West Africa. *West African Journal of Archaeology* 19: 93-116.

Ogunfolakan, B.

- 1994 *Archaeological Survey of Osun North-East, Osun State, Nigeria*. MSc Dissertation, University of Ibadan.

Siyanbola, A.

- 1988 *Archaeological Investigation of Imesi-Ile, Obokun Local Government Area, Ijesaland*. BA thesis, Obafemi Awolowo University.

Soper, R.

- 1975 Archaeological works at Old Oyo. Unpublished Report, Department of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Ibadan.

Willett, F.

- 1967 *Ife in the History of West African Sculpture*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 1970 Ife and its archaeology. In J.D. Fage and R.A. Oliver, editors, *Papers in African Prehistory*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 303-326.