

Old Oyo or Ijebu-Oyo Pottery: The Vessels of Oke-Eri

by

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Abstract

In this study, scientific methods in palynology (the study of pollen grains and other spores, especially as found in archaeological or geological deposits) and ceramic petrology and a literature review have been employed to investigate how Oyo pottery in the Savannah reached Oke-Eri (Ijebu-Ode) in the rain forest in Nigeria. The results suggest that pottery in Oyo ceramic complex was produced in an environment with few plants and brown wares in an environment where plants were comparatively more, but not necessarily forest vegetation. Furthermore, the petrology analyses showed that two different techniques were used in producing the pottery types in question while a review of the premises of politics, commerce, diffusion and the independent cultural development of traits by different cultures were established.

Key Words: Old Oyo, Oke-Eri, Ijebu-Ode, palynology, ceramic petrology.

Introduction

Oke-Eri is a small community about 4km from Ijebu-Ode in Ogun State South Western Nigeria. This community is the traditional starting point of the enormous earthwork monument known among the Ijebu people as Sungbo's Eredo. The term Sungbo's Eredo literally means Sungbo's earthwork, Sungbo being the name of the very powerful and influential woman who initiated and supervised the building of the earthwork. This earthwork surrounds the ancient Ijebu kingdom of south western Nigeria and lies in the heart of the rainforest enclosing an area of 25 miles (40 km) north to south and 22 miles (35 km) east to west (Onishi, 1999).

According to Darling (1999), the Sungbo's Eredo is a 160 km long earthwork which among other things has unified the hitherto diverse communities of Ijebuland into a formidable kingdom. The ditches along the entire length of the Eredo are astonishingly magnificent, with some places recording depths of up to 20m in the south towards Epe and Odogbolu but surprisingly only about 5-10m deep at Ijebu-Ode (Darling, 1999)

Oke-Eri is a community which is said to have been the dwelling place and eventually became the burial place of Bilikisu Sungbo, the acclaimed initiator and builder of the Sungbo's Eredo and therefore the traditional starting point of the earthwork. Bilikisu Sungbo is believed to be a very rich and powerful queen among the Ijebu people who was childless and because she did not want to be forgotten by her people after her demise, decided to build such a great monument in memory of her. Her tomb which lies within a sacred grove has become a sort of 'shrine' as thousands of worshippers flock there annually for prayers to this powerful deity.

From recent archaeological excavations which spanned five years and carried out at different spots of the earthwork, radiocarbon dates suggest human occupation existed before European contacts. The dates are 730 ± 30 B.P. and 4040 ± 30 B.P. and have added to the knowledge and evidence that the rainforest region of West Africa had a history of human occupation within a durably settled order that pre-dates the Atlantic trade.

In 2009, a systematic archaeological excavation was carried out on a refuse dump within this sacred grove and two dates were obtained which are 227 ± 49 B.P. and 144 ± 38 B.P. indicating a recent occupational site. The reason for this excavation was to throw some light on the life ways of the dwellers of this now abandoned area with a view to providing the basis of a systematic analysis and consequently a better interpretation of the cultural materials that are recovered from the earthwork excavations. The excavation on the refuse mound was actually a control one to facilitate better understanding of the contemporary use of the earthwork and its ditches.

A 3m by 2m area was marked out right at the centre of a refuse mound which was approximately 20 metres long (north to south) by 15 metres wide (east to west). Excavations proceeded at 10 cm spit interval, with sieving and collection of materials done concurrently. The refuse mound trench reached a depth of 285 cm (sterile layer) that consists of 27 distinct spit levels and five distinct cultural layers. A total of 20,622 potsherds were recovered from this excavation unit.

During classification, a close examination of the pottery materials recovered from the excavation revealed two distinctly different pottery types laid side by side and running through the length of the trench in varying amounts. These were black (5YR 2.5/1 and 7.5 YR N2/0) and brown (7.5YR 5/4 and 2.5YR 5/4) ware potsherds. The black ware pottery with maximum thickness of 1cm, most of which are bowls and lamps was dominated by decoration motifs of incisions, burnishing and punctate; they are burnished/ polished.

These are some of the characteristics of Oyo ceramic complex pottery to be discussed later. Present day Oyo is a town approximately 200km north from Oke-Eri (Ijebu-Ode). The brown potsherds on the other hand are larger and thicker (maximum thickness of 2-3cm), the dominant decoration being “V”, shaped a decorative style that is associated with the Ijebu people.

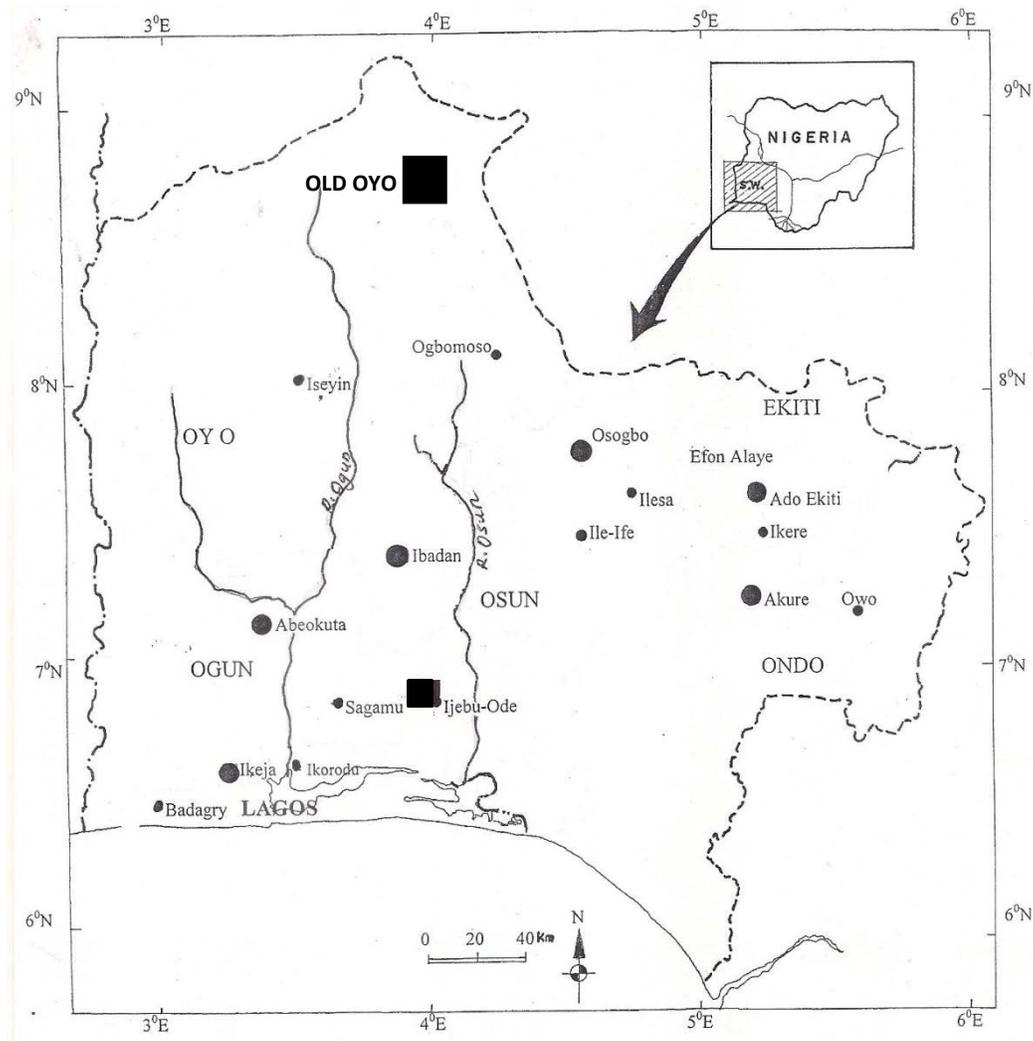


Fig. 1: South-western Nigeria map showing Old Oyo in relation to Ijebu-Ode / Oke Eri.

The main thrust of this paper is to address the following questions bearing in mind that the distance between the two locations is well over 200 km if one considers the present day Oyo and Oke-Eri. The questions are: How did the “Oyo” pottery reach Oke-Eri? Was it through conquest, trade or were they produced locally in Oke-Eri by Oyo potters or Ijebu potters that were familiar with old Oyo pottery techniques?

It is of utmost importance to embark on a study like this because according to Usman (2005), ceramics have been employed for understanding regional cultural-historical and inter societal contacts by some Yorubanist archaeologists such as Agbaje-Williams (1983), Aleru (1998) and Ogundiran (2000). The basis being then to better understand the association of these ceramics with different decorative styles and manufacture techniques associated with this site: were they produced from the same or different raw material sources or were they items of trade or indicative of socio-political activities?

Description of Pottery

The diagnostic attributes of the Old Oyo pottery, as discussed by Agbaje-Williams 1983; 1989a; 1989b; Omokhodion 1978; Usman 2000; and Willett 1961 include a characteristic burnishing, basting, brush marking, shell-edge, scallop impressions, dot punctate, and incised geometric symbols consisting of cross, triangular, square, and perpendicular motifs. The assemblage so described above has come to be known as the Oyo ceramic complex (Ogundiran, 2011). Twisted string roulette, incision, groove decorations were also characteristic of the old Oyo ceramics complex (Usman, 1998). The above description that characterises and has become a diagnostic feature of the Oyo ceramic complex originated in the northwest region of Yorubaland, especially in the core Oyo territories as early as the ninth century AD (Agbaje-Williams 1983).

Plate 1 below shows samples of the “black” pottery wares recovered from the trench opened at Oke-Eri sacred grove in association with the brown potsherds and these bare some of the afore mentioned features and so were classified as old Oyo ceramic complex. On the other hand, plate 2 shows samples of the brown potsherds classified to be typical Ijebu pottery and are different in colour, decoration, size and texture.



a. Incised and dot punctate



b. Dot Punctate at inner rim part



c. Incised, Dot Punctate and Cross symbol



d. Burnished and Incised (perpendicular)



e. Incision, Punctate and burnished



f. Burnished and Incised

Plate 1: (a-f): "Old Oyo" Pottery (Ogiogwa, 2015)



a. Large & small 'V' & incision



b. Large single 'V'



c. Large single 'V' & incision



d. Wavy lines with round belly incisions



e. Small double 'V', incisions & grooving.



f. Large single 'V', wavy lines with incision

Plate 2: (a-f): Typical Ijebu pottery. (Ogiogwa, 2015)

Materials and Methods

Pollen analysis and ceramics petrology were used in this investigation. The methods used for the investigation were chosen based on the premise that though the basement rock for Old Oyo and Oke-Eri (Ijebu-Ode) is Sedimentary, the vegetation zones are different. Whilst Old Oyo is located in a guinea savannah, Oke-Eri (Ijebu-Ode) is in the rainforest. To this extent therefore, it is presumed that the pollen analysis will show that the pollen to be found within each pottery sample will be different considering the difference in their vegetation zones if they were produced in Old Oyo and Oke-Eri (Ijebu-Ode) respectively. However, if on the other hand, they were produced within the region (Oke-Eri) which they were found, there would be similarities in the pollen signatures of the pottery types.

As regards the ceramics petrology study, the modal analysis which is used to determine the accurate representation of the distribution and volume percent (%) of the mineral within the thin section is preferred in an attempt to tracing the provenance of the rock type or parent rock type. Most importantly, the extinction rate of the quartz will indicate the probable distance travelled by each sample.

Three samples for each pottery type that is the Ijebu and Old “Oyo” ceramics complex were selected from the following levels of the refuse mound trench: 60-70, 130-140 and 200-210cm. These levels were preferred because of the percentage of the brown (Ijebu pottery) to the black (Old “Oyo” pottery), while level 60-70 cm had the smallest i.e. 1.191%, followed by 130-140 cm which had 9.540% and 200-210 cm had the largest at 24.782%. See Table 1 below.

Serial Level Nos	Spit Levels (cm)	Ijebu pots	Old Oyo Pots	% of Old Oyo
	Surface	151		
1.	0-10	1665	51	3.063
2.	10-20	1080	20	1.851
3.	20-30	1574	27	1.715
4.	30-40	1018	14	1.525
5.	40-50	748	23	3.172
6.	50-60	1221	37	3.030
7.	60-70	1343	16	1.191
8.	70-80	934	19	2.034
9.	80-90	870	32	4.155
10.	90-100	506	37	7.312
11.	100-110	980	63	6.428
12.	110-120	965	74	7.668
13.	120-130	453	39	7.052
14.	130-140	566	54	9.540
15.	140-150	597	37	6.228
16.	150-160	976	50	5.122
17.	160-170	736	77	10.461
18.	170-180	695	66	9.496
19.	180-190	660	96	14.545
20.	190-200	558	61	10.931
21.	200-210	239	48	24.782
22.	210-220	494	34	6.882
23.	220-230	396	11	2.777
24.	230-240	106	1	0.943
25.	240-250	59	-	-
26.	250-260	10	-	-
27.	260-270	3	-	-

Table 1: Ijebu and Old Oyo Pottery in Oke-Eri Refuse mound

Palynological Analysis

For the pollen analysis, selected brown and black pottery samples were crushed and subjected to standard palynological preparation (Faegri and Iversen, 1988). After preparation the final residue was transferred onto slides which were studied under a light microscope with a magnification of x400.

Ceramics Petrology

For the ceramics petrology study, thin sections were made from the selected pottery samples. The samples were crushed and impregnated with epoxy and left for 24hrs to core. They were then trimmed using the cut off saw so as to allow it fit on a glass slide. One surface of a glass slide is lapped and the trimmed surface of the sample is also lapped using water and silicon carbide on a glass plate. The lapped surfaces were subsequently bonded together using epoxy on a hotplate, so as to allow them bond very well for 24hrs; after which they were trimmed to 50micron and subsequently lapped to 30micron on a glass plate. The slides were then studied under the petrographic microscope (Nesse, 1997 and Gribble & Hall, 1992).

Results

Palynology: The two samples were extremely poor palynologically. In total, four pollen and spore types were recovered, namely two pollens and two fungal spore types. The black samples from level 60-70cm and 200-210cm were barren (Table 2). Several leaf cuticles and charred epidermal cells were also recovered from the brown pottery. The pollen and spores are described below.

Table 2: Pollen, spores and epidermal cells from Oke-Eri pottery

Depth in cm	Black	Counts	Brown	Counts
60-70	Barren	-	Large spore	284
130-140	cf. Areaceae	2	Combretaceae/Melastomataceae	1
200-210	Barren	-	Lasiodiplodia sp.	1
			Charred and uncharred epidermal cells	9

Pollen

Areaceae: This is a family of palms, several of which dwell in open places such as savannas (Hyphene, Borassus, Phoenix dactylifera) and secondary/dry forest (Elaeis guineensis, Cocos nucifera); few are found in freshwater swamps such as *Raphia vinifera*, *R. hookeri* and *Phoenix reclinata*.

Combretaceae/ Melastomataceae: These are two very large families the pollen grains of which are very similar, and almost impossible to separate their pollen with a light microscope hence they are always grouped together. Most are trees and shrubs that are natural to forest regions, few are herbs characteristic of disturbed areas.

Spores

Lasiodiplodia sp: This is a fungal spore associated with wood decay; one of the most common of the fungus is *L. theobromae* which is the major cause of rots in *Citrus* and *Mangifera* fruits (Úrbez-Torres et al., 2008).

Large Spore: This is an unidentified fungal spore.

Observation

The recovered pollen and spores are too scanty to make any meaningful interpretation. However, it can tentatively be said that the black pottery had undergone firing to a high degree such that most pollen and spore originally contained therein were destroyed. This is inferred from the absence of spores, which are even more resistant than pollen. In addition, the lack of epidermal cells suggests that the clay was probably sourced from an area where plants were few; such as an open environment. The Arecaceae pollen recovered resembled those of *Phoenix reclinata*, the parent plant of which dwells in freshwater swamps. This is not unexpected considering that potters usually obtain clay from swamps of freshwater and/or rivers. The occurrence of pollen and spores from the brown pottery is an indication that firstly the clay was not fired to a temperature as high as those of the black types, and secondly it was probably from an environment where plants (leaves and fruits) were dominant features. But this does not necessarily signify forest.

Results of Ceramics Petrology Analysis: Table 3 shows the mineral content of the vessels.

Table 3: Average Modal Analytical Results

S/No	Depth in cm	Vessel samples/	Mineral content (%)				
			Kaolinite	Quartz	Feldspar	Mica	Heavy Mineral
1.	60-70	Brown	72	18	4	3	3
		Black	70	22	3	3	2
2.	130-140	Brown 1	73	20	2	2	3
		Brown 2	72	21	3	2	2
		Black 1	71	23	2	2	2
		Black 2	72	20	4	2	2
3.	200-210	Brown 1	70	19	4	3	4
		Brown 2	73	16	4	4	3
		Black 1	71	20	3	2	4
		Black 2	70	22	4	2	2

Observation

The percentage representations of the minerals are quite similar which will indicate that the vessels were produced using materials with the same or similar origin but with different techniques. The minerals present and their proportion indicate the samples to be clay and the angular nature of the quartz (polycrystalline) indicates that the samples analysed have not travelled far.

Discussion

The following discourse attempts to explain the presence of the black pottery that has now been classified as part of the old Oyo ceramic assemblage with the brown ones also known as the Ijebu assemblage within the Ijebuland. The following premises namely: politics, commerce, diffusion and independent cultural development of traits by different cultures will be explored.

The first premise is political to which some historians, like Okubote (1937) claimed that there was a time that Oyo Empire brought the Ijebu kingdom to a tributary status which no other writer makes mention of, neither does the oral history of the Ijebu makes reference to it. Furthermore, Fig 2 is a map of the old Oyo empire with its expanded territory of which Ijebu-Ode and invariably Oke-Eri was not part of.

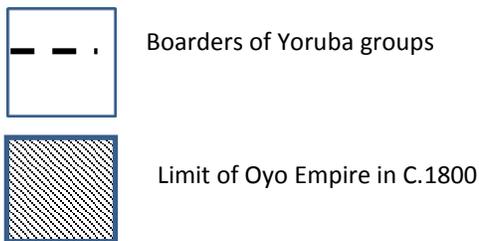
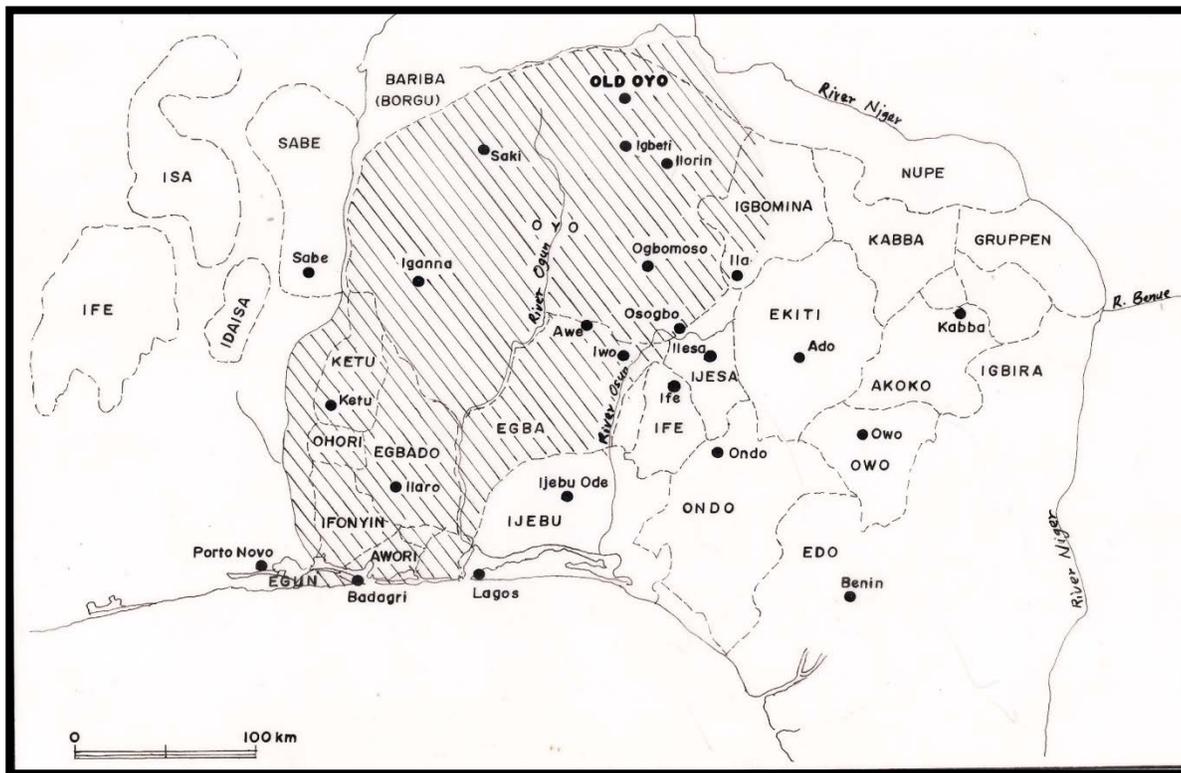


Fig.2: Extent of Old Oyo Empire and other Yoruba groups in C.1800

However, it is pertinent to take a cursory look at the political premise as posited by Ogundiran and Saunders (2011) as a way of understanding the movement of the repertoires of Oyo materials to other locations far away from their local domain.

Ogundiran and Saunders (2011) noted that the Oyo Empire embarked on a southward political expansionist programme during the late 16th century. In the course of this programme, the ceramics and other goods characteristic of Oyo Empire could then have gained entrance and prominence in other Yoruba towns within the path of contact and influence and the contiguous areas that were clearly beyond their original home.

They claim that the distribution of Oyo ceramics followed the routes of its expansionist strategies and it seems that they would appear in quantities proportionate to the degree of their makers' presence in the new territories. The first route was by conquest and formation of client states and this is seen in places like Ipo-Igbomina; obviously, one can imagine that the presence of the pottery will almost overshadow the original pottery complex of the people if any.

The second route was the case of conquest and formation of tributary states. The only example given here is Dahomey. Ijebu has not been mentioned here by the authors. To which extent, can the claims of Okubote (1937) and Odutola (1946) that the Oyo Empire subjected Ijebu to tributary status be accepted? For material representation of this status of subjection to be considered in this case, one will expect a ratio 1:1 of pottery and other materials of Old Oyo to Ijebu. Fig.2, 3 and Table 1 which are the statistical expression of the pottery in focus does not support this.

Worthy of note is the fact that according to Ogundiran, (2000), the whole of the entire Yorubaland lived in the shadows of the Benin and Old Oyo hegemonies from about 1600-1800 also in an ambiance of economic transactions that was tied to the Atlantic trade.

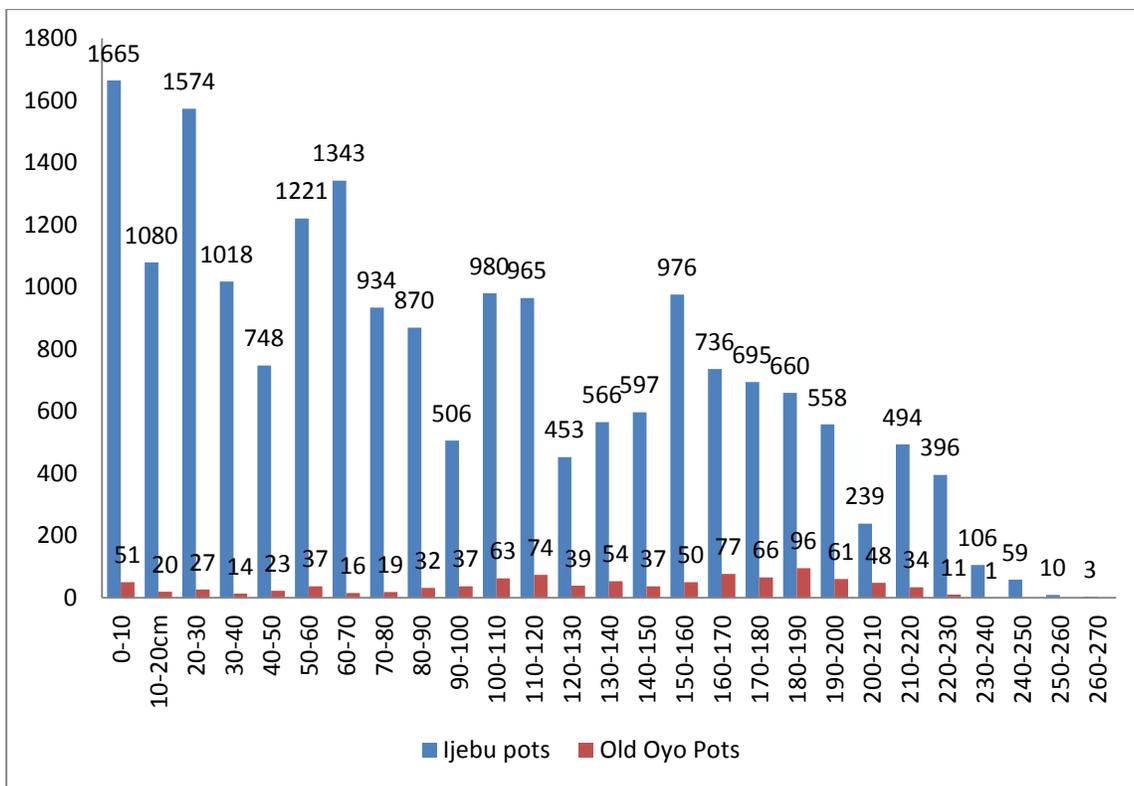


Fig 3: Ijebu pots Vs Oyo Pots

Besides, the Old Oyo Empire set up some other independent States into junior “gift-giving” partners (for instance, Ilesa). Similarly, there was outright absorption of existing polities in adjacent areas into the metropolis/heartland of the empire (such as, Ikoyi). Also established were Old Oyo colonies in the frontier zones (for instance, Ede).

This could in a way explain the presence of the Oyo ceramics in Ijebuland within the typical Ijebu pottery decoration types. However, the ratio of the Oyo to the Ijebu ceramics to a large extent does not suggest political subjugation. Also, the results from the scientific investigations do not suggest that the said ceramic came from a long distance of Oyo to Ijebu. Also bearing in mind that according to Gallay et al; (1996), Kramer, (1997), Stark, (1994), potters commonly will sell their wares within a 15-50Km radius of their homes and usually tend to keep within the lower end of the range unless except there is a situation whereby the wares can be transported by water, then the range is increased.

The second premise of explanation for the presence of the “Old Oyo ceramics complex” within the Ijebu ceramics is economic. Ijebuland, especially the Ijebu Lagoon side, was a major port site in the Bight of Benin alongside others, such as Ughoton and Ode-Itsekiri; and therefore was a target for any would-be entrepreneur from the hinterland (Ogundiran, 2002). From around the 16th century, these ports were early economic exchange centres between Europeans and Africans and the Ijebu people played a very prominent role in this trade thereby enjoying the economic advantage of their geographical position/location.

According to Ogundiran (2002), this European/African exchange from the 16th century created new economic opportunities along these coastal economic centres (of which the Ijebu enjoyed a vantage position) and had widespread effects on the hinterlands. These effects were so intensive and alluring that they encouraged some political entrepreneurs of whom Old Oyo was one to pursue enthusiastically, expansionist agenda aimed at controlling or having competitive advantages in the new regional epicentres of commerce.

Therefore, since Ijebuland was one of these economic epicentres that linked the hinterlands to the coastal market, the two communities (Oyo and Ijebu) would have been in contact through trade. To this extent, the premise of commerce can explain the Oyo presence in terms of their pottery at so far a location from their original home as it most likely had been a trade item.

It could therefore be claimed that the Old Oyo ceramics present within the Ijebu assemblage could have reached Ijebuland at a time when an attempt was made by the Old Oyo political entrepreneurs to partake of the economic opportunities opened along the new coastal economic centres, of which Ijebuland was one.

Furthermore, two dates were obtained from the Oke-Eri Refuse dump excavation: from levels 230-240 cm and 210-220 cm respectively. These levels were very close to the bottom of the trench. The dates of 227±49 years B.P. and 144±38 years B.P. indicate a period of occupation.

These dates, when converted to “real time dates”, place the time of occupation of the site to around 1640-1682A.D and 1725-1777AD, respectively. The dates coincide with the time of the expansionist programme of Old Oyo (that started in late 16th century) a period after the arrival of the Europeans to the coast who further opened up of the area as commercial centres.

From Fig. 3 and Table 1 above, one will notice that the Old Oyo ceramics started to appear from level 1 (0-10 cm) and continued to level 24 (230-240 cm). These ceramics were present in various numbers till they reached a record figure of 96 pieces at 180-190cm. Therefore, adding the sequence of occurrence of the Old Oyo ceramics, the dates obtained from the excavation to the other proffered explanations above (that is Oyo presence in Ijebu), the presence of the Oyo became noticeable and reached a climax among the Ijebu between 1600 and 1800 A.D. However, the results obtained from the scientific investigations are not conclusively geared to this present argument, but leave a vacuum to be filled by other premise of discussion.

Another premise will be diffusion. It is defined by Conrad (2011) as the spread of a cultural item from one culture to the other which can occur through direct or indirect ways as well as being forced. Also, Heatwole (2006) asserts that cultural diffusion is when culture and the factors that account for it such as migration, communication, trade and commerce spread from one culture to the other. He sees culture as not being static but as a mobile force which moves over space because the geography of culture is constantly changing.

To Heatwole (2006), culture traits originate in a particular area and spread outward ultimately to characterise a larger expanse of territory. Also, for any aspect or cultural trait to manifest in a place other than its place of origin, it had to have been adopted in response to contact with the original “owners” in probably the place of trade, in cases of migration and conquest to mention a few.

To an extent, cultural diffusion can help explain the presence of these “Old Oyo ceramic complex” potsherds within the Ijebu assemblage as there was definitely contact as regards trade not to mention other aspects of interaction of the two peoples.

Yet another premise to be examined in an attempt to understand the phenomena of the elements of these two cultures found side by side with one in an area clearly beyond its “original home” is by expanding the Boas’ (1920) theory of historical particularism which posits that it is possible for similar traits to be independently developed by different cultures based on its own particular set of circumstances such as geography, climate, environmental resources and particular cultural borrowing. Cultures are therefore diverse and unique each with countless traits developed independently.

To this end therefore, it can be said that the samples of ceramic which the present researcher considered Old Oyo ceramic owing to the diagnostic features on them, may actually belong to the Ijebu and can be explained as part of the Ijebu culture bearing similar traits to the old Oyo ceramic complex.

At this point, it behoves one to connect all the premises so far discussed in the attempt at explaining the above. Boas (1920) by inference posits that the similarity of culture traits is usually as a result of a set of circumstances of which culture borrowing is one which aptly joins in buttressing Conrad's (2011) position that to a large extent, historical particularism is related to the concept of diffusion. From here, he goes on to explain that similar traits between the cultures may have diffused through interaction between the cultures and in this case Ijebu and Old Oyo.

The main focus of this study was to ascertain the most probable factors that were responsible for the presence of the samples of the Old Oyo ceramics within the Ijebu assemblage. Regardless of the nature of the factors i.e. be it political conquest, commercial interaction, diffusion or independent development, the results of this study have definitely established the fact of contact by one means or the other between the Ijebu and Old Oyo as far back as the between 1600-1800 A.D.

Conclusion

The main conclusion here is that while the results of the palynological analysis is not fruitful, the results seem to suggest that the black pottery was produced in an environment with few plants, and the brown wares in an environment where plants were comparatively more, but not necessarily forest vegetation. Furthermore, it is clear from the petrology analyses that two different techniques were used in producing the pottery types in question. However, the issue of whether they were "imported" from Oyo or produced locally in Oke-Eri is yet to be resolved. However, the theories of Cruz (1996), that such situation might be as a result of specialisation of either individual potter or entire community on the one hand and that there could have been social relations of production according to LaViolette (2000) or cultural transmission through marriage or migration or contact (Gelbert, 1999) on the other hand are possibilities for concluding this discourse.

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