THE ROLE OF THE ITAAKPA FINDS IN THE RECONSTRUCTION OF YORUBA ETHNOGENESIS

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Abstract

Although numerous sources document Yoruba identity, the origins of the Yoruba remain highly contested. Rather than relying exclusively on Ife-centric narratives derived from oral traditions, this study contends that the Niger-Benue Confluence area served as the primary locus for the formation of Yoruba identity. By prioritising material and scientific evidence, which is less susceptible to the biases inherent in oral historiography, this paper synthesises linguistic and archaeological data to trace Yoruba origins. Central to this analysis is the scientific reconstruction of a human mandible discovered at the Itaakpa rock shelter, providing the first tangible insight into the anatomy of populations inhabiting the confluence area approximately 3,000 years ago. The evidence from Itaakpa supports the identification of the Niger-Benue confluence, currently inhabited by Okun-speaking communities, as the authentic dispersal ground for the Yoruba, Igala, Igbo, and Nupe linguistic groups.

Keywords: Itaakpa; Yoruba ethnogenesis; Niger-Benue Confluence; Late Stone Age; Archaeology; Okun Yoruba

1. Introduction

Reconstructing Yoruba ethnogenesis has long provoked vigorous debate, situated between the rich oral traditions of central kingdoms and the sparse, though steadily expanding, archaeological record of the Nigerian hinterland (Akintoye, 2010; Ijagbemi, 2005; Iyekolo, 2006; Johnson, 1921; Obayemi, 1985; Ogundiran, 2020; Opadeji, 2012; Sowunmi, 2012; Usman, 2012). For decades, the dominant framework rested on an Ife-centric model, positing Ile-Ife as the singular cradle of civilisation from which all Yoruba populations dispersed (Johnson, 1921). This paradigm, rooted in the political mythology of dynastic charters, has progressively come under scrutiny as material evidence from the broader Niger-Benue region accumulates.

The discovery and subsequent analysis of finds from the Itaakpa rock shelter in the Iffe Ijumu area of Kogi State have fundamentally challenged this linear perspective. Itaakpa furnishes a deep-time biological and technological anchor in the Niger-Benue confluence (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012; Oyelaran, 1991). Situated at the intersection of the Guinea savanna and derived forest zones, Itaakpa increasingly appears to represent the primary ancestral homeland where a proto-Yoruboid identity first crystallised during the transition from the Late Stone Age (LSA) to the Iron Age (Akintoye, 2010; Ogundiran, 2020; Usman, 2012).

Located approximately 500 metres west of the village of Iffe Ijumu (Bakinde, 2011), the site offers a stratigraphic sequence that bridges the critical temporal gap between early Holocene foragers and medieval forest urbanites. While traditional historiography gravitates toward migration narratives pointing to Egypt, Mecca, or the Near East, the archaeological evidence at Itaakpa firmly points toward autochthonous cultural development (Obayemi, 1985; Oyelaran, 1991). Data from excavations conducted between 1985 and 1988 by a joint British-Nigerian team reveal continuous human presence spanning the ceramic phase of the LSA into the early Iron Age, approximately 2,200 years ago (Oyelaran, 1991). This continuity indicates that the foundational elements of Yoruba culture, namely sedentism, pottery manufacture, and specialised social organisation, were being forged in the confluence region long before the political centralisation of Ile-Ife (Bakinde, 2011, 2013, 2014).

The geographic location of Itaakpa is paramount for understanding broader Yoruboid dispersal (Figure 1). The confluence of the Niger and Benue rivers has served as a linguistic and cultural mixing bowl for millennia, offering a diverse ecological niche where various groups interacted, traded, and eventually diverged (Akintoye, 2010; Ogundiran, 2020). Within this specific environmental context, the community of practice that would eventually become the Yoruba began to emerge, adapting to a landscape characterised by rocky outcrops, savanna grasses, and gallery forests (Ogundiran, 2020).

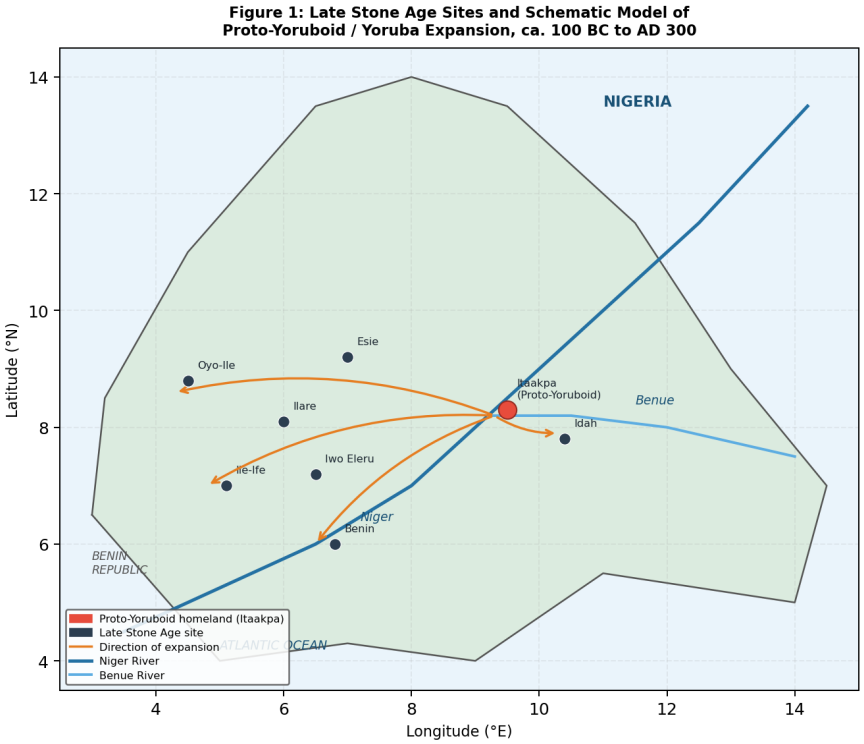

Figure 1: *Late Stone Age sites and schematic model of proto-Yoruboid / Yoruba expansion, ca. 100 BC to AD 300. Source: Adapted and modified from Ogundiran (2020).*

2. Method of Research

This paper is a synthesis of the archaeological research conducted in the Okun-speaking area of Yorubaland spanning roughly the last millennium to the present. The research at Itaakpa employed a multidisciplinary approach combining traditional archaeological techniques with bioanthropological and palaeoenvironmental analysis. Stratigraphic excavation was conducted across three field seasons between 1985 and 1988 by Philip Oyelaran as a doctoral research project under the supervision of Philip Allsworth Jones at the University of Ibadan (Oyelaran, 1991). The excavation established a clear, undisturbed stratigraphic sequence, enabling the differentiation of discrete phases of human activity.

Excavated materials were subjected to chronometric dating using Accelerator Mass Spectrometry (AMS) on carbonised palm kernels. This procedure yielded a chronological anchor of approximately 2,210 B.P. (Oyelaran, 1991). AMS dating is particularly valued for its precision when applied to organic materials directly associated with human activity layers, and the carbonised palm kernels at Itaakpa provided an ideal substrate for establishing a reliable temporal framework. The standard AMS radiocarbon age is expressed using the conventional formula:

Equation 1: $t = -8033 \times \ln(A/A■)$	where t = age in years BP; A = measured ^{14}C activity; A■ = modern standard activity

The researchers also conducted a comprehensive analysis of the lithic assemblage, which was composed predominantly of quartz, and ceramic technology analysis. These analyses traced the technological transition from hunter-gatherer microlithic traditions to the ceramic-bearing LSA and early Iron Age. The recovery of human remains, specifically a partial maxilla and mandible, allowed for physical anthropological comparisons. The mandibular analysis at Itaakpa demonstrates that the recovered skeleton belongs to a modern human population, in contrast to the archaic morphology observed at Iwo Eleru (Harvati et al., 2011). The affinity of the Itaakpa remains with skeletal material from the Shum Laka rock shelter in Cameroon (Lavachery, 2001) furnished important data on demographic movements and biological connections across West-Central Africa (Figure 6).

Beyond archaeological methods, linguistic evidence was also incorporated into this synthesis. Documented scholarship indicates that proto-Yoruboid populations were inhabiting the Niger-Benue confluence area as far back as 7,000 years ago (Akintoye, 2010; Williamson, 2005). These converging lines of material and linguistic evidence were assembled to establish the scientific basis for identifying the Niger-Benue confluence area as the origin zone of the Yoruba people.

3. Stratigraphy and Chronological Sequence

Excavated by Philip Oyelaran and Philip Allsworth Jones between 1985 and 1988 (Oyelaran, 1991), Itaakpa yielded a detailed, meticulously dated record of human activity (Ogundiran, 2020; Oyelaran, 1998). The stratigraphic sequence begins with the ceramic phase of the West African Late Stone Age, a period defined by the coexistence of microlithic stone tools and fired clay vessels.

Radiocarbon dating of burned palm kernels found in direct association with human remains produced a calibrated date of 2,210 ± 80 BP (approximately 300 BC). This date places Itaakpa's occupation squarely within a period of substantial regional transformation across West Africa (Lavachery, 2001; Opadeji, 2021).

The stratigraphy reveals no apparent discontinuity between the ceramic LSA layers and the subsequent Iron Age deposits, thereby indicating steady, unbroken occupation. This stratigraphic continuity provides compelling support for the autochthonous model of Yoruba ethnogenesis, suggesting that the inhabitants represented an evolving population that adopted new technologies such as metallurgy while maintaining established cultural foundations. The chronological sequence is summarised in Table 1, and the comparative chronological positioning of key sites is illustrated in Figure 2.

Table 1. The Chronological Sequence of Itaakpa Site

Period	Approx. Date	Key Markers	Cultural Phase
Early Ceramic LSA	300 BC – AD 200	Quartz microliths, early pottery, burned palm kernels	Proto-Yoruboid expansion
Middle Sequence	AD 200 – AD 800	Refined pottery, ground stone axes, increased sedentism	Early sedentary societies
Late Sequence / Iron Age	AD 800 – Present	Iron slag, iron wire, arrowheads, recent pottery	Integrated Iron Age Yoruba

Source: Adapted from Oyelaran (1991); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012).

The presence of human remains within the excavation matrix, specifically a partial skull comprising a mandible and maxilla belonging to an adult male in his twenties, is highly significant. This find enables direct biological comparison between Itaakpa populations and other regional groups. Analyses indicate that dental dimensions and cranial features align with those of other LSA sites in West Africa, particularly Shum Laka in Cameroon (Lavachery, 2001), suggesting a shared ancestry among populations inhabiting forest-savanna ecotones during the mid to late Holocene. This biological evidence provides a material link that bypasses the interpretive limitations of oral tradition, grounding Yoruba prehistory in the physical reality of the Niger-Benue confluence.

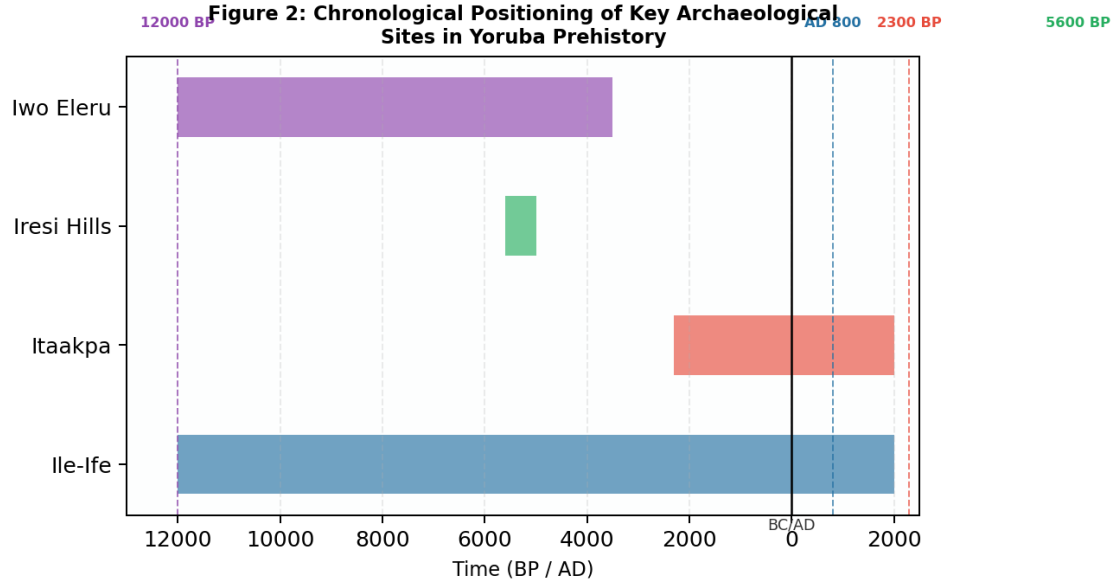

Figure 2: *Chronological positioning of key archaeological sites in Yoruba prehistory. Source: Data from Oyelaran (1991); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012).*

4. Lithic Technology and Microlithic Tradition

The analysis of the lithic materials has been conducted in detail elsewhere by the excavators and does not constitute the primary focus of this paper (see Allsworth Jones et al., 2012). Nonetheless, the lithic assemblage recovered from Itaakpa offers profound insights into the technological strategies of the early inhabitants. Of the 5,830 lithic pieces excavated, the vast majority were crafted from locally occurring quartz (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012, pp. 163–177). The deliberate use of quartz, despite its tendency to fracture unpredictably compared with flint or chert, indicates a high degree of specialised skill among the Itaakpa stone-workers. This technical proficiency reflects generations of accumulated knowledge transmitted within the shelter community.

Within this assemblage, Oyelaran and colleagues identified 28 distinct tool types forming a highly functional toolkit for hunting, processing plant matter, and domestic activities (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012, pp. 163–177). The presence of burins and awls indicates activities such as engraving or leather-sewing, while side scrapers and points point to hide preparation and the manufacture of projectile weapons. The distribution of these diagnostic tool categories is presented in Table 2 and illustrated as a compositional chart in Figure 3.

Table 2. Inventory of Stone Tools and Their Probable Uses

Tool Category	Count	Primary Function	Implications
Side Scrapers	13	Processing animal hides and plant fibres	Sedentary domestic labour
Points	2	Arrowheads or spear tips for hunting	Sustained foraging economy
Burins	2	Engraving and fine tool manufacturing	Craft specialisation
Awls	2	Piercing leather or wood	Tailoring and woodworking
Microliths (Undiff.)	High	Inserts for composite tools	Sophisticated LSA technology

Source: Adapted from Oyelaran (1991); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012, pp. 163–177).

The persistence of the microlithic industry alongside pottery and, subsequently, iron tools constitutes a notable finding. The evidence demonstrates that the adoption of new technologies did not immediately render earlier ones obsolete. Such technological gradualism reflects a stable and pragmatic society that integrated innovations into an existing cultural system rather than undergoing abrupt technological rupture. In the context of Yoruba ethnogenesis, this pattern indicates incremental cultural evolution in which the LSA heritage of stone-tool use formed the technological foundation for later advancements in metallurgy and urban planning.

Furthermore, the abundance of quartz flakes and manufacturing debris indicates that Itaakpa functioned not only as a residential site but also as an active tool-production locale. The presence of this debris suggests the intergenerational transmission of craft knowledge within the shelter, a hallmark of sedentism in which domestic spaces serve as primary arenas for the reproduction of cultural and technical skill.

Figure 3: Composition of Diagnostic Stone Tools from Itaakpa Rock Shelter
Source: Data from Oyelaran (1991); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012)

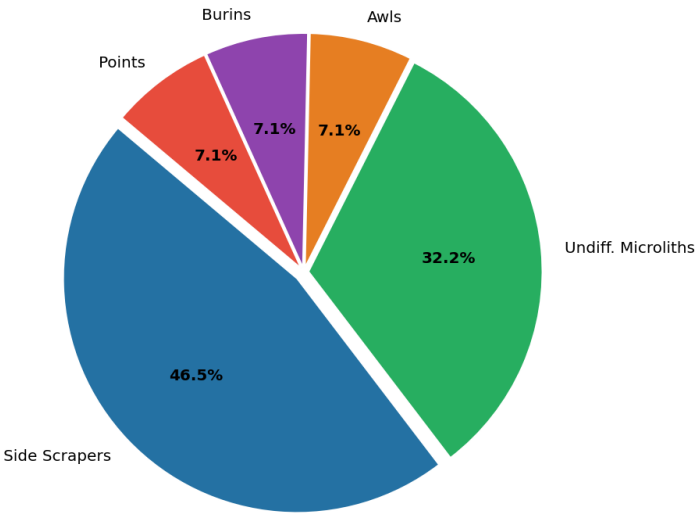

Figure 3: *Composition of diagnostic stone tools from Itaakpa Rock Shelter. Source: Data from Oyelaran (1991); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012).*

5. Ceramic Typology and Cultural Evolution

Pottery is arguably the most diagnostically rich artefact class for reconstructing the social complexity of the Itaakpa inhabitants. The excavations yielded 1,257 sherds, of which 51 percent carried decorative treatment. Analysis of this assemblage reveals a sophisticated ceramic tradition that was simultaneously functional and aesthetically refined.

The primary decorative techniques recorded at Itaakpa include grooving, incising, and twisted-string roulette, all of which align with broader West African ceramic trends of the period (Figure 4). Twisted-string roulette, in particular, is a hallmark of the LSA to Iron Age transition across the savanna belt. Its prevalence at Itaakpa, comprising 13.8 percent of decorated sherds when considered alongside grooving, suggests that the inhabitants were embedded in a wider regional exchange network, sharing technological and stylistic repertoires across the Niger-Benue confluence. Vessel forms and their cultural significance are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Ceramic Vessel Forms and Their Cultural Significance

Vessel Form	Features	Inferred Usage	Cultural Significance
Small Globular Pitchers	Thin walls, rounded bodies	Serving liquids or oils	Social refinement

Vessel Form	Features	Inferred Usage	Cultural Significance
Large Pitchers	Thick walls, fire-blackened	Cooking and boiling	Communal food preparation
Storage Pots	High capacity, wide mouths	Water and grain storage	Risk management / sedentism
Shallow Bowls	Wide rims, shallow depth	Frying or serving foods	Culinary diversification

Source: Adapted from Allsworth Jones et al. (2012, pp. 163–177).

Microscopic examination of paste microstructure revealed the use of organic matter as temper, indicating an advanced empirical understanding of material properties among the potters. The addition of organic materials to the clay body reduced drying shrinkage and minimised cracking during firing, resulting in more durable vessels (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012). This technological sophistication enabled the reliable storage of water and surplus food, thereby underpinning the transition toward permanent settlement.

Tracking the ceramic assemblage through the stratigraphic sequence reveals a clear developmental trajectory in which vessel forms and decorative elaboration become progressively refined in the upper layers. This evolution mirrors the broader social trajectory of the Yoruba people as they moved from small, localised LSA foraging bands toward the complex, nested political structures of the Iron Age (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012). The Itaakpa ceramic sequence thus provides a material record of this transformation, demonstrating that the foundations of Yoruba craftsmanship and social organisation were established in the northeast long before the rise of centralised empires.

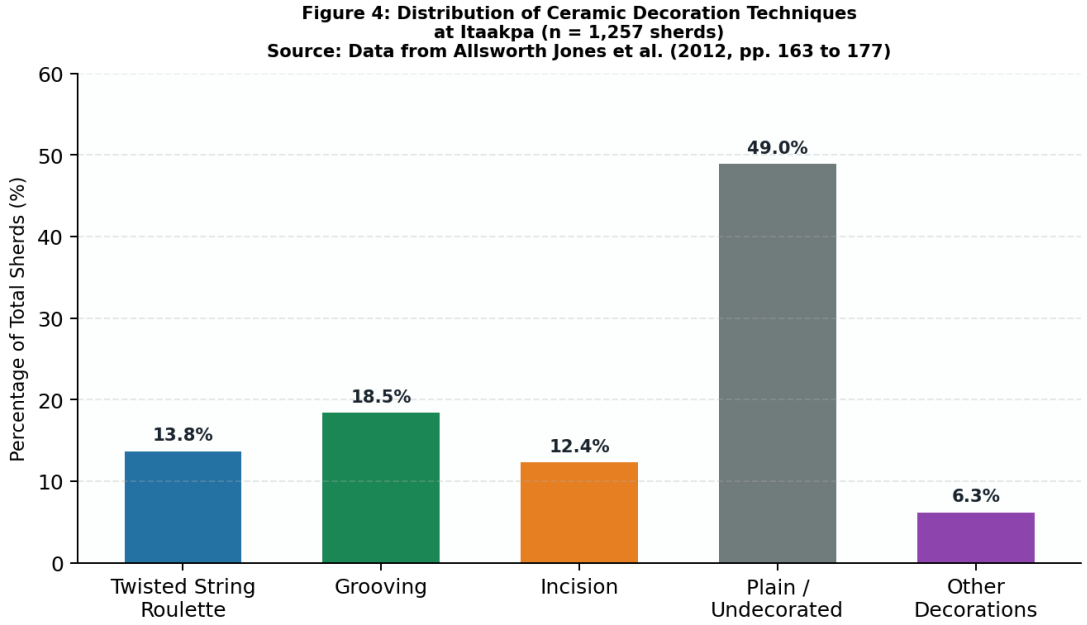

Figure 4: *Distribution of ceramic decoration techniques at Itaakpa (n = 1,257 sherds). Source: Data from Allsworth Jones et al. (2012, pp. 163–177).*

6. Bioarchaeological Insights

The discovery of human remains at Itaakpa offers a rare and intimate glimpse into the physical health and lived experience of early Yoruba ancestors. This individual, who lived approximately 2,200 years ago, has been named Oni Itaakpa (The Person of Itaakpa) in the landmark historiographic synthesis by Ogundiran (2020). The designation is symbolic as well as analytical: it restores personhood and agency to a prehistoric life that might otherwise remain an anonymous data point.

Detailed dental analysis reveals that the teeth of Oni Itaakpa were generally in good condition, lacking macroscopic caries or calculus accumulation. This dental profile is consistent with a diet low in fermentable carbohydrates but rich in fibrous plant foods and animal proteins. However, the presence of enamel hypoplasia on multiple teeth indicates that this individual endured episodes of severe physiological stress during childhood. Such enamel defects form when systemic stress such as malnutrition, febrile illness, or chronic food insecurity disrupts ameloblast activity during crown formation. Archaeologists interpret these markers as physical evidence of periods of starvation or disease, likely correlated with seasonal resource scarcity or prolonged climatic deterioration (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012).

The degree of enamel disruption correlates closely with the palaeoenvironmental record for West Africa, which documents a period of significant climatic stress between the fourth century BC and the third century AD, characterised by reduced and increasingly unpredictable rainfall together with intensified dry seasons (Oyelaran, 1998; Sowunmi, 2012). The enamel hypoplasias on Oni Itaakpa thus constitute a literal, somatic archive of the environmental hardships encountered by confluence populations during this epoch. The relationship between environmental deterioration and the rise of social complexity is modelled in Figure 5.

Morphometric analysis of the Itaakpa mandible reveals features that align closely with modern West African populations and contrast markedly with the archaic morphology documented at Iwo Eleru (Harvati et al., 2011). A comparative examination of symphysis height, bigonial breadth, and ramus height across regional LSA sites (Figure 6) confirms that the Itaakpa individual falls within the modern human range and shares biometric affinities with contemporary populations from the Cameroon Highlands, consistent with the demographic connectivity of the West-Central African forest-savanna mosaic (Lavachery, 2001). The mandibular morphometric index is calculated as:

Equation 2: MMI = (Symphysis Height / Bigonial Breadth) × 100	MMI values between 32.0 and 36.5 are consistent with modern West African populations (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012)

The survival of Oni Itaakpa into his twenties despite early hardship attests to the resilience and adaptive capacity of these early communities. The social structures of confluence populations were evidently effective in providing the mutual support required to withstand extreme environmental stress. In this context, the Itaakpa remains represent not merely a biological data set, but a testament to the perseverance that enabled proto-Yoruba groups to maintain their presence and ultimately expand.

Figure 5: Environmental Stress and Social Complexity in the Niger-Benue Confluence Region
Source: Synthesised from Oyelaran (1998); Sowunmi (2012); Ogundiran (2020)

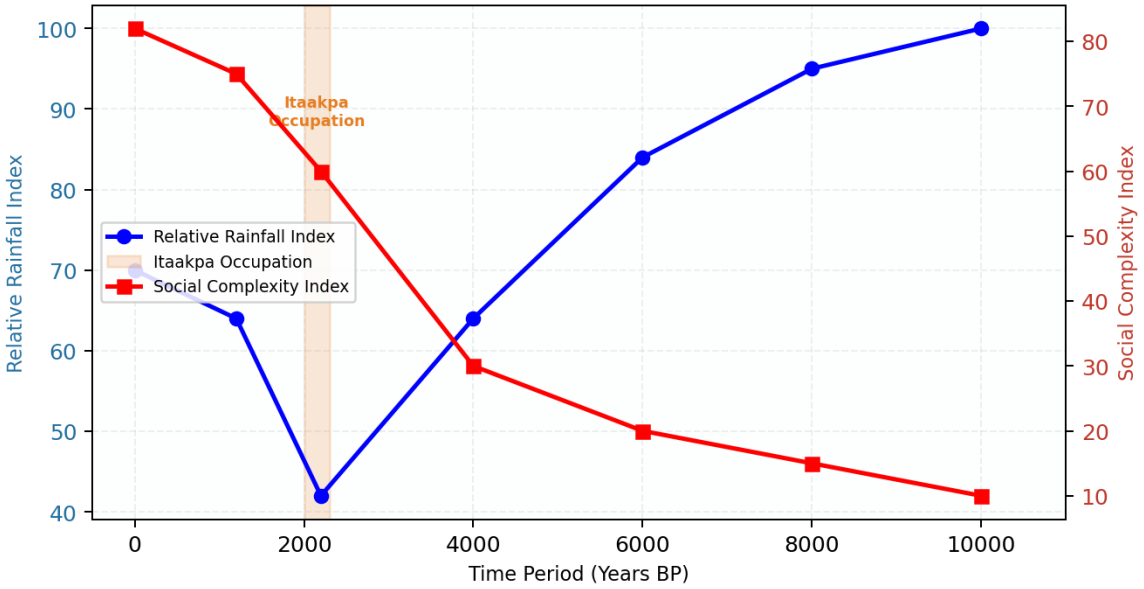

Figure 5: *Environmental stress and social complexity in the Niger-Benue Confluence region. Source: Synthesised from Oyelaran (1998); Sowunmi (2012); Ogundiran (2020).*

Figure 6: Mandibular Morphometric Comparison – Itaakpa vs Selected West and Central African LSA Sites
Source: Adapted from Allsworth Jones et al. (2012); Lavachery (2001)

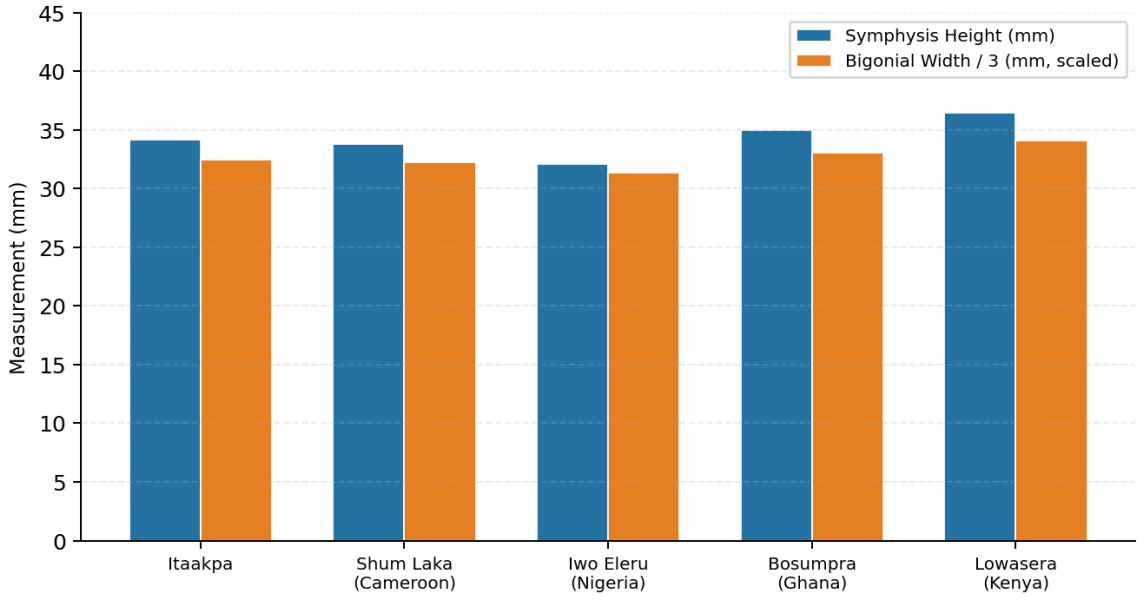

Figure 6: Mandibular morphometric comparison – Itaakpa versus selected West and Central African LSA sites. Source: Adapted from Allsworth Jones et al. (2012); Lavachery (2001).

7. Environmental Stress and Social Innovation

The Holocene aridification phase was not merely a period of hardship; it functioned as a catalyst for radical social and technological innovation among confluence populations. Pollen records extracted from sediment cores near Itaakpa document a marked reduction in forest indicator species and a concomitant expansion of open savanna vegetation during the main occupation horizon (Oyelaran, 1998). This ecological transition compelled early Yoruba ancestors to diversify their subsistence strategies and reimagine their community organisation.

The most transformative of these adaptations was the shift from a mobile foraging economy toward a household-based model of resource management. The house, or ile in Yoruba, emerged as a corporate entity capable of organising collective labour, accumulating surplus food, and controlling access to restricted resources such as water and arable land (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012; Ogundiran, 2020). The archaeological continuity at Itaakpa demonstrates the enduring success of this model, enabling the inhabitants to maintain a stable presence in the confluence for centuries during a period when less adaptable neighbouring groups may have been forced to migrate or perish (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012).

Table 4. Human Responses to Environmental Stress at Itaakpa

Environmental Condition	Human Response	Evidence
Reduced rainfall / drought	Intensive plant management	Oil palm and yam cultivation (charred remains)
Expanding savanna	Sophisticated hunting kits	High volume of quartz microliths
Scarce water resources	Development of storage vessels	Large ceramic water storage pots
Social vulnerability	Formation of cooperative bands and household groups	Continuous occupation of rock shelters

Source: Adapted from Oyelaran (1998); Allsworth Jones et al. (2012).

This period of environmental pressure also coincides with the linguistic divergence of the proto-Yoruboid family. As discrete groups adapted to the specific ecological niches carved out by the drying climate, they gradually diverged into the daughter languages recognisable today: Igala, Itsekiri, and Yoruba proper (Williamson, 2005). The Itaakpa finds provide the material ground truth for this linguistic dispersal, revealing a population deeply rooted in the confluence yet equipped with the technological and social repertoire necessary to eventually expand westward into the forested heartland of southwestern Nigeria (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012).

8. Bridging the Archaeological Gaps

One of the most significant contributions of the Itaakpa finds is their role in closing a vast temporal void in Yoruba prehistory. For many years, a fundamental disconnect existed between the early Holocene burial at Iwo Eleru (ca. 11,000 BP) and the emergence of classical Ife civilisation (ca. AD 800), leaving nearly 10,000 years of human evolution open to conjecture (Harvati et al., 2011). The chronological positioning of these key sites is illustrated in Figure 2.

Positioning Itaakpa within this chronological sequence (Table 5) reveals a clear technological and social progression. The microlithic tradition observed at Iwo Eleru persists at Itaakpa, augmented by widespread pottery use and a more explicitly sedentary lifestyle. The pottery decorations at Itaakpa, particularly twisted-string roulette and grooving, directly anticipate the sophisticated ceramic arts and potsherd pavements of the classical Ife period. This stylistic continuity demonstrates that Yoruba artistic traditions developed indigenously over millennia within the Nigerian landscape, rather than being introduced through external migration.

Table 5. Bridging the Chronological Gap in Yoruba Prehistory

Site	Period	Contribution	Link to Ethnogenesis
Iwo Eleru	12,000 – 3,500 BP	Earliest known burial in West Africa	Deep-time biological ancestor; archaic morphology
Iresi Hills	5,600 – 5,000 BP	Transition to Ceramic LSA	Early sedentism in the forest zone
Itaakpa	2,300 – 2,000 BP	Yoruba Archaic era sequence; first modern human skull	Transition from LSA to Iron Age; proto-Yoruboid homeland
Ile-Ife	AD 800 – 1600	Urbanism, Bronze and Terracotta arts	Political and religious florescence

Source: Adapted from Oyelaran (1991); Harvati et al. (2011); Ogundiran (2020).

9. The Transition to the Iron Age

The upper stratigraphic layers of the Itaakpa excavations reveal the final piece of the proto-Yoruba technological sequence: the adoption of iron technology. The discovery of iron slag, iron wire, and an iron arrowhead indicates that, by the later phases of occupation, metallurgy had been fully integrated into the material culture of the rock shelter inhabitants.

The shift to iron was transformative for Yoruba expansion. Iron tools permitted the efficient clearing of dense tropical rainforest, facilitating large-scale cultivation and the consolidation of larger settlements. At Itaakpa, the presence of iron slag indicates that metallurgy was not merely used but actively practised within the immediate region, suggesting the existence of local smelting operations. This local mastery of iron technology gave northeast Yorubaland groups a decisive competitive advantage, enabling greater control over their environment and over neighbouring populations.

This Iron Age transition carries particular significance for the Okun Yoruba, the sub-group currently inhabiting the Iffe Ijumu area. While traditional narratives frequently claim that the Okun migrated from Ile-Ife during dynastic expansions in the second millennium AD, the Itaakpa finds suggest a far more ancient and continuous history of residence (Bakinde, 2011, 2013, 2014). The Okun likely represent an autochthonous Yoruboid population that has occupied the Niger-Benue confluence for over two millennia, making them among the most ancient segments of the broader Yoruba family. The oral traditions linking them to Ife can therefore be understood as retrospective political and religious alignments designed to integrate these ancient communities into the prestigious Ife-centred monarchical system (O'Hear, n.d.).

10. Cultural Significance of Pottery Decorations

The decorative patterns encountered on Itaakpa pottery are more than aesthetic choices; they are cultural markers connecting the site to the broader Yoruba world across millennia. The twisted-string roulette pattern documented at Itaakpa is a direct stylistic antecedent of the edge-laid and herringbone motifs used to create the famous potsherd pavements of Ile-Ife, Old Oyo, and Benin (Owoseni, 2026).

Table 6. Evolution of Ceramic Decorative Patterns

Pattern	Origins	Maturity	Implication
Twisted String Roulette	Itaakpa LSA layers	Pavement motifs at Ife and Oyo	Stylistic continuity
Grooving / Incision	Itaakpa LSA layers	Specialised ritual vessels	Functional evolution
Maize Cob Roulette	Late appearance (Iron Age)	Widespread in Old Oyo	Historical marker for New World contact

Source: Adapted from Allsworth Jones et al. (2012, pp. 163–177).

The technique of breaking pottery sherds and setting them on edge to create durable and aesthetically charged courtyard and shrine surfaces represents a distinctive Yoruba sociotechnological identity that can now be traced to its deep roots in the confluence region (Owoseni, 2026). The presence of foundational ceramic skills such as kiln temperature management, clay preparation, and decorative rouletting at Itaakpa by 300 BC demonstrates that the so-called Classical Yoruba period was not a sudden cultural flowering but was built upon a deep technological and cultural substratum. This understanding fundamentally reframes Yoruba history as a cohesive, long-term formation rooted in the Nigerian landscape, rather than a succession of disconnected migration episodes.

11. Discussion

The Itaakpa finds constitute a landmark contribution to the archaeology of West Africa, not merely because of the intrinsic significance of any single artefact or ecofact, but because of the cumulative force with which the assemblage as a whole challenges established narratives of Yoruba origins. The prevailing Ife-centric model, derived principally from oral traditions curated within the political apparatus of Yoruba monarchies, has long posited Ile-Ife as the unique locus of Yoruba creation (Johnson, 1921). This framework, while culturally powerful, is demonstrably insufficient as a scientific account of ethnogenesis. The Itaakpa evidence compels a paradigm shift toward a confluence-centred, autochthonous model that is consistent with both the material record and the comparative linguistic data.

From an archaeological standpoint, the unbroken stratigraphic sequence at Itaakpa spanning roughly 2,300 to 2,000 BP provides the most compelling argument for in-situ cultural development. The absence of any evident discontinuity between LSA and Iron Age deposits is not a trivial observation. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, the introduction of iron technology is associated with population replacement or significant demographic disruption (Iliffe, 1995). At Itaakpa, the evidence points instead to technological adoption by a resident population, consistent with the autochthonous model championed by Obayemi (1985) and subsequently elaborated by Ogundiran (2020).

The bioarchaeological dimension of the Itaakpa finds adds an irreplaceable layer of evidence to this argument. The mandibular and dental data from Oni Itaakpa indicate that the confluence population was morphologically modern and biometrically aligned with contemporary West African groups, rather than with the archaic population documented at Iwo Eleru (Harvati et al., 2011). This morphological modernity is significant because it suggests that the populations responsible for the ceramic and lithic innovations at Itaakpa were biologically continuous with the Yoruba and related Benue-Congo-speaking peoples known from historical and ethnographic sources. The biometric affinity with the Shum Laka assemblage (Lavachery, 2001) further situates the Itaakpa population within a broader network of West-Central African populations sharing a common Holocene demographic history.

The palaeoclimate dimension of the Itaakpa sequence deserves particular attention in this discussion. The period of Holocene aridification between approximately 4,000 and 1,500 BP was not a uniformly catastrophic event for West African populations; rather, it operated as a selective pressure that differentiated resilient, adaptive communities from those unable to reorganise their subsistence and social strategies. The evidence from Itaakpa, including the proliferation of ceramic storage vessels, the development of the household economy, and the eventual mastery of iron technology, collectively suggests that the proto-Yoruboid communities of the confluence were among those most successfully adapted to this environmental challenge (Oyelaran, 1998; Sowunmi, 2012).

The linguistic evidence corroborates and reinforces this archaeological picture. The reconstruction of proto-Yoruboid as a language spoken in the Niger-Benue confluence zone approximately 7,000 years ago (Akintoye, 2010; Williamson, 2005) predates the Itaakpa occupation by several millennia, indicating that the cultural identity being crystallised at the rock shelter was itself the product of a much deeper linguistic and social history. Blench (2010, 2011) has further demonstrated that the geographic patterning of Niger-Congo languages in Nigeria is consistent with a confluence -based dispersal, with Yoruba, Igala, Igbo, and Nupe all traceable to a common homeland in the Niger-Benue region. The Itaakpa finds therefore validate the linguistic reconstructions with tangible material evidence.

The implications for understanding the Okun Yoruba specifically are equally significant. The Okun, long marginalised in mainstream Yoruba historiography as a peripheral sub-group with disputed origins, emerge from the Itaakpa evidence as potential representatives of the most ancient, most deeply rooted stratum of Yoruba cultural identity (Bakinde, 2011; O'Hear, n.d.). Their oral traditions of migration from Ife, rather than invalidating this conclusion, are more parsimoniously interpreted as political accommodations made during the period of Ife hegemony, when alignment with the sacred city conferred legitimacy and protection on peripheral communities (Ogundiran, 2009).

The ceramic evidence is particularly illuminating when considered in the context of broader Yoruba cultural history. The decorative continuity between the twisted-string roulette patterns at Itaakpa and the potsherd pavements of classical Ife and Oyo provides a material thread connecting the proto-Yoruboid world of the Late Stone Age to the political and artistic florescence of the first millennium AD (Owoseni, 2026). This continuity refutes claims of external origin for Yoruba ceramic traditions and instead positions the confluence region as the heartland of an indigenous aesthetic that would eventually define one of West Africa's most recognisable civilisations.

From a methodological standpoint, the Itaakpa case also offers important lessons for the archaeology of ethnogenesis more broadly. The integration of stratigraphy, chronometric dating, lithic analysis, ceramic typology, bioarchaeology, palaeoenvironmental reconstruction, and linguistic modelling in a single site-based study demonstrates the explanatory power of truly multidisciplinary approaches. No single line of evidence would have been sufficient to sustain the autochthonous hypothesis; it is their convergence that makes the case compelling (Allsworth Jones et al., 2012; Ogundiran, 2020; Oyelaran, 1991).

Future research at Itaakpa and related confluence sites should prioritise ancient DNA analysis to test the hypothesised biological continuity between LSA populations and modern Yoruba and Igala speakers. Pottery residue analysis using gas chromatography-mass spectrometry (GC-MS) would shed light on the dietary and economic practices of the inhabitants, complementing the osteological data from Oni Itaakpa. Fine-grained palaeoclimatic modelling using high-resolution speleothem and lacustrine records from the confluence region would further contextualise the relationship between environmental stress and social innovation documented in the Itaakpa sequence. The site has thus far yielded extraordinary insights, yet its full evidential potential remains far from exhausted.

12. Conclusion

The significance of the Itaakpa finds for understanding Yoruba ethnogenesis is multidimensional. Biologically, the remains of Oni Itaakpa provide a tangible human connection to the ancestors who survived the climatic upheavals of the Holocene. Technologically, the site documents a sophisticated microlithic and ceramic tradition that transitions without apparent rupture into the Iron Age. Socially, it furnishes compelling evidence for the emergence of the household group as the primary building block of Yoruba political and cultural organisation.

Centring the Niger-Benue confluence in the narrative of Yoruba origins necessitates a fundamental reconsideration of traditional Ife-centric and migration-based models. The weight of evidence reveals a history of indigenous development in which the Yoruba emerged through millennia of adaptation, technological innovation, and cultural interaction within the diverse ecological landscape of the confluence region. The rock shelter at Iffe Ijumu stands not merely as an archaeological site but as a silent witness to the dawn of the Yoruba world.

As research continues, Itaakpa will endure as a benchmark site for West African archaeology. The potential of future multidisciplinary studies incorporating ancient DNA sequencing, pottery residue analysis, and high-resolution palaeoclimatic modelling promises even deeper insights into the life of Oni Itaakpa and the origins of one of Africa's most intellectually and artistically vibrant cultures.

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