

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELD RESEARCH AT IBAGWA-ANI, SOUTHEASTERN NIGERIA.

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### Abstract

*This study seeks to examine the archaeology and cultural history of the people of Ibagwa-Ani, southeastern Nigeria. It was born out of the desire to understand the cultural sequence of the area and to teach the final-year students of the Department of Archaeology and Tourism the rudiments of archaeological fieldwork. The research was necessitated by the fact that very little is known about the archaeology of Ibagwa-Ani due to the paucity of archaeological data from the area. Research methods employed in this study include survey, excavation and ethnography. Material remains such as pottery, slag, charcoal and oil palm seeds were recovered from the excavation. Analysis of data confirms the presence of slag in the area which demonstrates the presence of iron working tradition in the vicinity. Results from the pottery analysis revealed a pattern whereby general overlaps in decoration occurred between the potsherds from the study area when compared with potsherds from other areas in Nsukka like Lejja, Aku and Opi. Recovered archaeological materials suggest that a trading system must have existed in the past between Ibagwa-Ani inhabitants and their neighbours.*

**Keywords:** Archaeological investigation, excavation, potsherds, slag, Ibagwa-Ani, Southeastern Nigeria

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### Introduction

Archaeological research in southeastern Nigeria has witnessed a gradual proliferation over the last couple of decades. While the themes of the various research endeavours have been mostly focused on iron smelting, especially in Nsukka area, some other areas like Ibagwa-Ani have not been explored archaeologically. This article discusses the first archaeological investigations conducted by the staff and students of the Department of Archaeology and Tourism, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, in October 2022 at Ibagwa-Ani in Enugu state, Nigeria. Survey, ethnography and test excavation were conducted in order to gather information on the site characteristics, search for deposits suitable for future expanded excavations, teach final-year students of Archaeology and Tourism the rudiments of archaeological fieldwork and recover material culture and dateable samples. Surveywork was focused on the villages of Amahu and Akuma in Ibagwa-Ani where there is extensive evidence of potsherds and ironworking remains on the site's surface. This paper thus presents the results of the fieldwork carried out at Amahu and Akuma in Ibagwa-Ani.

### Background information

The name Ibagwa-Ani is composed of two Igbo words: Ibagwa and Ani which mean "land is plentiful". Ibagwa-Ani is in Nsukka Local Government Area of Enugu State, Nigeria. It is bordered on the north by Okpaligbo, on the west by Okpuje on the east by Obukpa and on the south by Alor-Uno (see figure 1). Not much is known or has been written about Ibagwa-Ani history, geography and vegetation history. However, the vegetation of this area like most other places in southeastern Nigeria is derived from savannah and thick tropical rainforest (Ofomata, 1976). Its topography and landform are mountains, hills, valleys, and plateaus. It has been suggested that hills must have played a vital role in the lives of the early inhabitants of Ibagwa-Ani and other areas in Nsukka. People would have settled at the foot of these hills, attracted by the rich soil. However, these assertions are all tentative.

The primary occupation of the present inhabitants of Ibagwa-Ani is farming, although domestic and/or long-distance trading and civil service jobs also exist. The people here practice a mixed cropping system. The main crops cultivated are yam (*Dioscoreaalata*), cocoyam (*Colocasia esculenta*), cassava (*Manihot esculenta*), pepper (*Capsicum frutescens*) and vegetables for food and trade. While yam and cassava are the main foods, rice, maize and beans are also part of their diet. Other subsistence activities include hunting; black-smithing and basket making. Animal husbandry is another aspect of the economy of the people and the animal bred are sheep, goats and chickens (domestic fowls).

Despite the multiplicity of excavations and surveys in the neighbouring villages such as Obukpa, Edem-Ani, and Obimo, no archaeological survey and excavation have been carried out in Ibagwa-Ani. Thus, this research is the first archaeological research that seeks to examine the archaeology and cultural history of the people of Ibagwa-Ani. It is important to note that many of the previous excavations carried out in the above-mentioned sites have focused on

the origin, techniques and chronology of ironworking. The test excavations during the 2022 fieldwork at Ibagwa-Ani targeted sites that could furnish us with information on the cultural history of these people through their material culture.

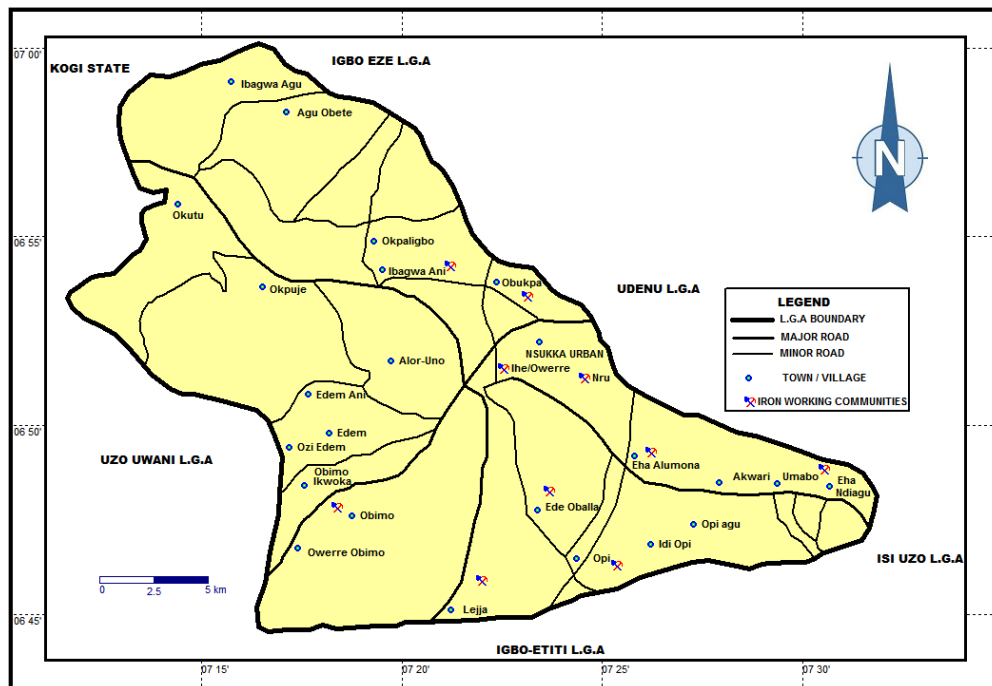


Figure 1.0. Map of Nsukka showing Ibagwa-Ani  
Source: Google Earth

## Research Methods

In archaeology, research methods are formed by the notion of the fitness of purpose and thus, the purpose of research invariably determines its methodology and design (Cohen *et.al.*, 2000). This research was designed to explore the archaeology of Ibagwa-Ani and to elucidate information with regard to the occupational and cultural history of the people. During the study, data was primarily obtained through ethnography, surveys and excavations. Information from the interviews, oral accounts and survey guided us in locating the area for the excavation. The reason for choosing a combination of such methods was to gather complementary data that would aid in the interpretation of the site and also to understand the distribution of archaeological materials in the vicinity.

## **Survey**

Prior to the visit to the site by the staff and students to commence survey and excavation, there was an earlier visit by some of the staff members of the Department to inform the people of Ibagwa-Ani about our intended visit and to familiarize ourselves with the landscape. Since no archaeological excavation has been carried out in this town before then, we had to work around the village asking questions and looking for potential archaeological sites during our first visit. Through these earlier visits, we noted some sites with the potential of providing stratified deposits for excavation and survey in the villages of Amahu and Akuma. Following our visit, an intensive opportunistic survey was conducted in the village of Akumaby the staff and students. This survey was conducted with the aim of closely collecting, examining and documenting archaeological surface scatters and locating suitable areas where an excavation unit will be established. During the survey, GPS readings and photos of the areas with high concentrations of surface scatters and exposed cultural materials were taken while an account of observations made during the survey was noted in field notebooks. Additionally, some of the archaeological materials on the surface were also handpicked and bagged for further analysis.

## **Excavations**

In this study, excavation was conducted towards the entrance of the family homestead of Mr Julius Onah. The choice of this area for establishing the excavation unit was twofold: First, there was a high concentration of slag and pottery on the surface; and second, the area had very little or no surface disturbance. One excavation unit of a 2 X 2 m was established using the grid method. This method involves the use of Pythagoras theorem that states the sum of the squares on the legs of a right triangle is equal to the square on the hypotenuse (the side opposite to the right angle) – or, in familiar algebraic notation,  $c^2 = a^2 + b^2$ . Hand trowel, measuring tapes, shovel, and spirit level among others aided the excavation process. The excavated soil was dry-sifted through 5 mm screen wire mesh to recover cultural materials of different sizes. Arbitrary layers established at 20 cm spits and photographs were taken for every level in the unit when features were observed. At the end of the excavation, a section of the unit was drawn to show the different layers based on soil texture, soil structure color and material inclusion. Artefact distribution, stratigraphy, floor plans, features in addition to other contextual information were documented in field notebooks and graph sheets.

## **Ethnography**

To obtain the social dimension of the material culture, ethnographic inquiries through structured interviews were conducted as part of the field research. The objective was to gather information that would help decipher social meaning from some of the present material culture. Interviews were segmented according to age, where some elders above the age of 70 years were the target sample. The elders were targeted because in the Igbo culture, old age is associated with knowledge and wisdom. Within this population, other individuals from the ages of 30-50 years were deliberately chosen according to their competence and knowledge of cultural history and craft specialisation of the area, as well as their ability to identify some of the artefacts discovered during excavation and survey, their uses and relevance in the past.

## **Research**

The results gathered from Ibagwa-Ani through survey, systematic excavation and ethnography are presented below and it is then subsequently followed by data analysis of the materials recovered from excavations.

## **Archaeological Survey**

The archaeological survey (field walking) carried out at Akuma village was restricted to open and cultivated areas and much attention was paid to archaeologically visible areas (i.e. areas with a concentration of archaeological materials) (see Figure 2.0). A total of 312 potsherds were collected from the survey of which 79.6 % were body sherds and 20.4 % were rims (see table 2.) The result from the surface samples shows that potsherds constitute the majority of the material culture in the area while slag made up the remaining material culture in Akuma.



*Figure 2.0. Reconnaissance survey by a student*

### **Excavation Results**

Following the grid system of archaeological excavation, a test trench measuring 2m x 2m was established and excavated to a depth of 120 cm. In line with the general goal of the project, the test excavations aimed to:

- 1) Explore the archaeological significance and potential of Ibagwa-Ani
- 2) Establish a relationship between the material culture from the study area and other sites in Igboland.
- 3) Teach the final-year students the rudiments of archaeological fieldwork
- 4) Define the chronological sequence of the area.

As previously stated, this is the first archaeological excavation and survey in Ibagwa-Ani. Thus, this study is targeted at providing insight, for the first time, into the nature of archaeological deposits at Ibagwa-Ani.

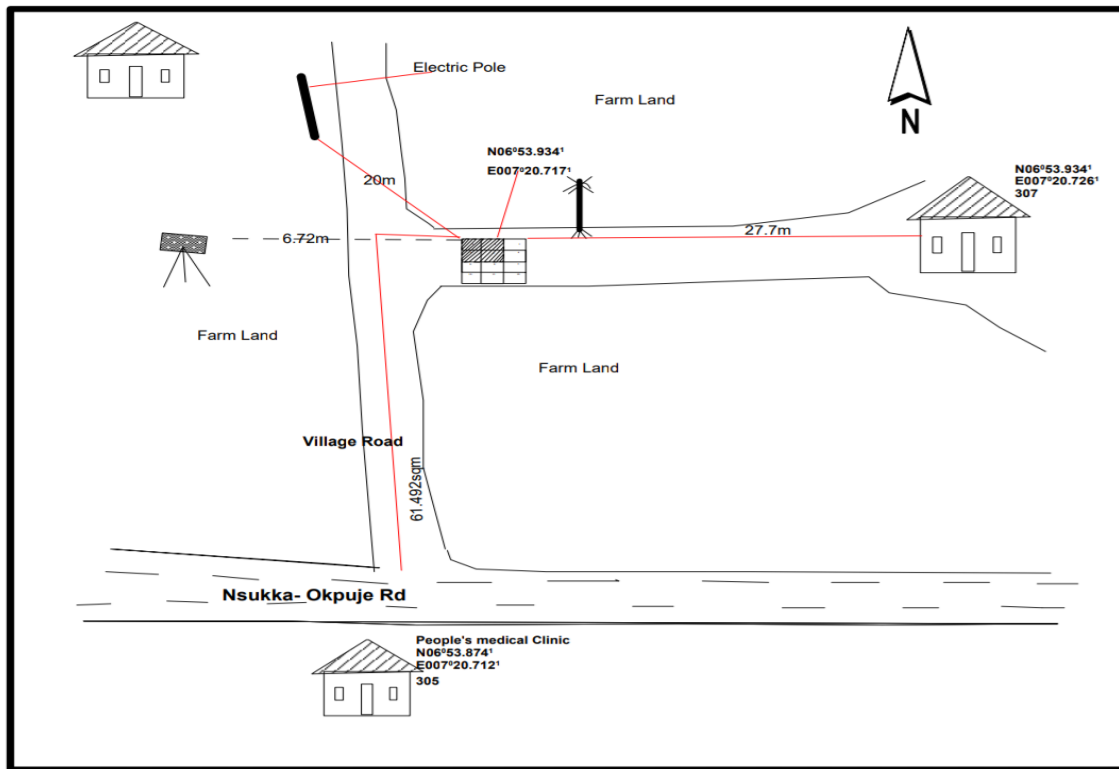


Figure 3.0. Site plan of the study area

The choice of establishing a trench at the spot that was chosen for excavation was influenced primarily by the concentration of cultural materials mainly slag on the surface area at the entrance of the compound ( $N 07^{\circ} 30.225$ ,  $E 004^{\circ} 33.701$ ). After we had established the 2m x 2m unit following the grid method, the northwest corner of the pit was chosen as the reference point (Point of origin) from which measurements were taken as we excavated (see Figure 3.0). Arbitrary spits of 20 cm were maintained throughout the unit and the excavation terminated at a depth of 120 cm. Cultural materials were retrieved over the surface of the unit before the excavation commenced

Table 1. Pottery Inventory

Trench	Rim sherds	Body sherds	Total
Spit 1	5	97	102
Spit 2	8	61	69
Spit 3	-	105	105
Spit 4	10	93	103
Spit 5	2	10	12
Total	25	366	391

Layer 1 (0-20 cm) yielded 102 potsherds and 450 slag with sandy light brown colour. In comparison, layer 2 (20-40 cm) produced the same cultural materials as layer 1 with a slight increase in the quantity of slag and sandy dark brown color. In all, a total of 69 potsherds and 560 slag fragments were recovered from this layer. Layer 3 was the most productive of all the layers in this unit in terms of potsherds as it yielded 105 of the total potsherds recovered and 301 slag fragments (see Figure 4.0.). The fourth layer had almost the same quantity of potsherds (103) as layer 3 but saw a drastic reduction in slag. Slag remains from layer 4 saw a reduction from 88 pieces to 40 pieces.



Figure 4.0. Excavation at Akuma, Ibagwa-Ani (Layer 30-40 cm)

The final layer (5) quite predictably produced the least amount of materials with only 12 potsherds and 20 slag fragments. The third, fourth and fifth layers had the same soil color of red loamy compact clay. Most of the potsherds recovered from layer 5 were very small and proved problematic to identify. No cultural material was recovered from layer 6. As a result, it was deemed sterile. In terms of texture, the soil was sandy, gritty and compact respectively. However, there was little variation in soil compactness as illustrated by the profile below (figure 5.0).

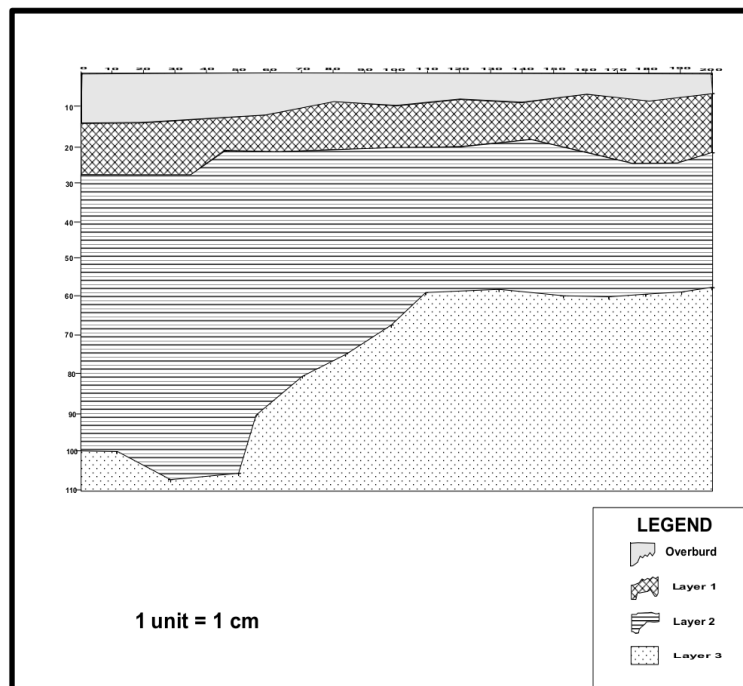


Figure 5.0. Stratigraphic profile

## Ethnography

Interviews conducted among the selected elders revealed that the Ibagwa-Ani people are of “UmuAttama” origin and were originally from Igala, which is now part of Kogi State, Central Nigeria. It also revealed that blacksmithing was highly revered in this area in the past. The blacksmiths are highly respected and non-indigenes of Ibagwa-Ani outside the blacksmith royal clan can be taught the skill (see figure 6.0). The socio-political structure of Ibagwa-Ani is decentralized such that power is divided among various heads, namely *Onuoha/Asogwa, Onyishi, Oha/Ndi-Ishi, Umuada, Otuogbo, and Igwe* (kingship). Interviews conducted also established that there are a good number of competent traditionalists before the advent of westernization and globalization. In its present socio-cultural settings, about fifteen percent of the population retains traditional religion or combine both traditional and Christian religion.

Slag locally known as *Ehuru* was recognised by the people as a type of stone created by the supreme God and used to demarcate land boundaries, prevent erosion, support the edge of a weakened house basement and occasionally used as a missile during inter-tribal wars or for hunting animals. This gave us the impression that they were not the original inhabitants of the area and had no knowledge of smelting, despite the fact that their counterparts did smelt iron. Similarly, the people were unable to identify most of the designs on the potsherds. They admitted that, while they use pots, they did not produce them; instead, they brought them from the people of Nrobo or neighbouring markets.



Figure 6.0. The blacksmith shop at Amahu, Ibagwa-Ani

On the completion of the fieldwork and subsequent return to Nsukka, the excavated materials were categorised according to their kinds, hand washed and dried in an open space at the Department of Archaeology and Tourism laboratory. Fragile materials were handled with extreme caution. The reason for washing was to remove sand and make visible some embedded features. The recovered materials were sorted into the following broad categories: potsherds, slag, cinder, seeds and catalogued. Only potsherds and slag were subjected to detailed laboratory analysis.

**Analysis of Materials**

On the completion of the fieldwork and subsequent return to Nsukka, the excavated materials were sorted and categorised according to their type of material makeup, hand washed and dried in an open space at the Department of Archaeology and Tourism laboratory. Fragile materials were handled with extreme caution. The reason for washing was to remove sand and make visible some embedded features. The recovered materials were sorted into the following broad categories: potsherds, slag, cinder, seeds and catalogued. Only potsherds and slag were subjected to detailed laboratory analysis.

Table 2: Potsherds recovered from reconnaissance

	Rim Sheds	Body	Total
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Surface collection	63	249	312
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**Table 3: Cultural materials recovered from excavation**

S/N	Potsherds	Slag	Palm kernels	Total
1.	102	450	6	558
2.	69	546	-	615
3.	105	301	-	406
4.	103	88	5	196
5.	12	40	-	52

**Pottery Analysis**

Classification of potsherds and analysis fell under five broad categories: technique, colour, temper, motif and sherd type. A total of 391 potsherds were collected from Ibagwa-Ani and analysed. Of the analysed piece, 25 are rimsherds while 366 are bodysherds. Since pottery is the most common material and the best for developing a cultural sequence, the analysis focuses on the description of the potsherds. The approach used identified three major rim classes; inverted, everted and neutral. Additionally, the pottery recovered from Ibagwa-Ani is notable for the thin walls, fine, well-fired paste, and small sherd size. The decorative motifs include net, rope and maize among others. Sand and grog are the dominant non-plastic-inclusion/ temper, which is present but not plentiful in the paste. The rim sherds are dominated by everted rims. On the few decorated sherds, maize roulette is the dominant motif and the most common techniques are incision and roulette. Most of the vessels are decorated either on the rim alone or body.

Comparing the assemblage with previously identified vessel classes in Nsukka and other places in Igbo land, the everted rim and roulette-decorated potsherds stand out. For instance, similar potsherds described by Chikwendu (1977) and Chamiet. al., (2011) are more widely everted. Some of the potsherds from Ibagwa-Ani also bear some resemblance with some potsherds from Lejja in terms of their prominent roulette decoration. The grooved impressed pattern at Ibagwa-Ani is also comparable to the groove decoration from Igbo Ukwu (Shaw 1978). The potsherds with different motifs suggest that there must have been trading and exchange of cultural materials, wartime relationship between Ibagwa-Ani and other communities in the past and present.

**Uncarbonised nuts**

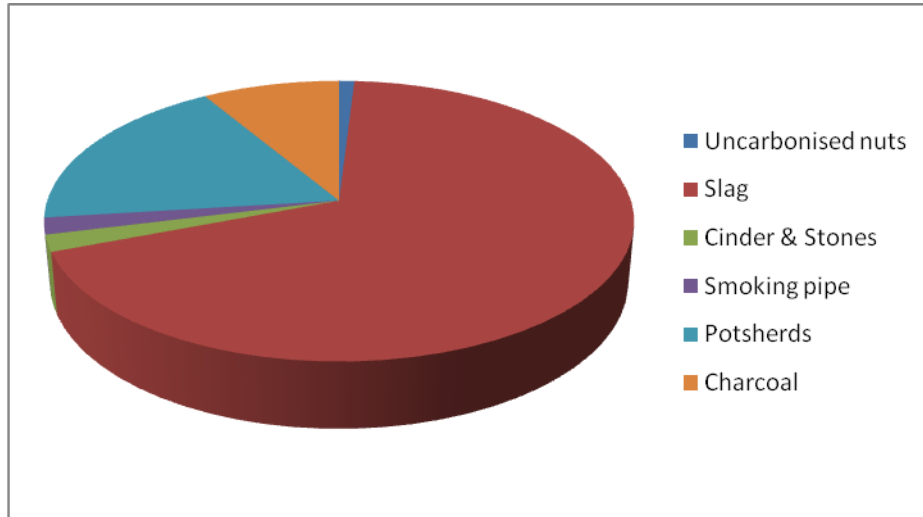
Eleven uncarbonised oil palm seeds were recovered in this study (see figure 7.0). These samples were unearthed in layers 1 and 4. These oil palm seeds although uncarbonised might indicate evidence of plant food production on this site.

**Slag**

A total of 1425 slag remains were recovered from the unit in the study. Most of the pieces are very fragmented. The slag fragments were analysed under different categories. Analysis of the slag remains revealed that they belong to the middle iron working phase as classified by Okafor (1993). These slag



remains have an elongated smooth rosy surface and are referred to as aggregate slag. In any archaeological site, the presence of slag is an indication of iron working which may have been carried out on a small or large-scale basis. The large number of slag remains recovered from this area is suggestive that the area may have been a centre of iron smelting.



*Figure 7.0. Overall distribution of all the cultural materials from Ibagwa-Ani*

**Dating**

Charcoal samples were collected from all the layers of the excavation unit but none of it was dated due to lack of funds. However, excavations from similar a site in southeastern Nigeria known as Owerre-Elu with the same type of slag morphology place the site at 1060±60 BP - 570±60 BP (Okafor 1993). All of these positions are still tentative until more detailed and extensive work is carried out at Ibagwa-Ani and its surroundings.

**Discussion and Conclusion**

The 2022 archaeological fieldwork was done with the aim of exposing the student to the rudiment of archaeological fieldwork and the interpretation of archaeological data. Not so much is known about the archaeology of Ibagwa-Ani when compared to other parts of Nsukka like Lejja, Aku, Opi among others. At Ibagwa-Ani, a unit of 2 X 2 m was established and the materials recovered comprised potsherds, slag, palm kernels, charcoals, uncarbonised nuts and cinder. This unit was made of three occupation horizon (1, 2 and 3).

Layer 1 contains a high frequency of potsherds and slag which continues to increase at about 25- 60 cm and then reduced drastically at about 60-80cm and furthermore at 80-100cm. The pottery assemblage was mostly roulette decorated when compared to other types of motif. The several pieces of slag recovered also suggest that this site might have been an iron working considering the large number of slag on the surface and sub-surface. Additionally, the oil palm retrieved from the excavation connotes that oil palm might have been abundant in the area and may have constituted the dietary food practices of the people. Against this background, the occurrence of potsherds at the site indicates the use of the site for human settlement and the evidence of potsherds points to the existence of habitation. The preponderance of roulette technique in the pottery assemblage from the layers suggests that the makers may have belonged to the same culture and traditions. While the chronology of ironworking production at Ibagwa-Ani still remains to be fully elucidated, the 2021 archaeological investigations confirmed that the archaeology potential in this area is huge. A much larger sampling plan is envisioned in the next phase of archaeological excavation at Ibagwa-Ani for the next cohort of students in 2023. This will permit the establishment of site chronology, description of material culture

and ironworking technology. The excavation at Ibagwa-Ani was the first to be conducted and the density of cultural remains at the site suggests that it is an iron smelting site with the potential to yield materials to extend the cultural sequence for Ibagwa-Ani through a comprehensive study of the pottery and iron working remains.

### **Acknowledgements**

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