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Chapter · January 1989

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7 *Material aspects of Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko ethnicity: archaeological research in northeastern Sierra Leone*

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The Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko are ethnic groups occupying adjacent areas in northeastern Sierra Leone. The three groups share several culture traits, but various factors allow the groups to be distinguished ethnographically. Examination of archaeological data, primarily relating to defensive sites occupied during the past 200 years, indicates that material culture provides only a limited indication of these divisions. Material expressions of group cohesion, social identity and ethnicity that do occur are primarily manifest in ritual. This chapter provides an insight into the problems faced by prehistorians in identifying ethnic groups or defining culture areas. Possible directions for future work and implications of the research are considered.

The geographical and culture setting

Northeastern Sierra Leone is located within the forest–savanna ecotone; the southern part of the region is characterized by tropical forest and farm bush, whereas the north is more open and savanna grass and baobab trees are common. Physiographically the area lies on the Koinadugu Plateau, an extension of the Guinea Highlands, and is dominated by intricately dissected plains, hills and mountains. Culturally the area consists largely of Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko (Fig. 7.1), but smaller numbers of Fulani, Mandinka and other ethnic groups are also present. The three larger groups are swidden agriculturalists. Chicken, goats and sheep are commonly kept, but cattle, when owned, are often tended by Fulani herdsmen. There is a high degree of cultural similarity throughout the region, but a variety of linguistic, cultural, political and historical factors characterize the individual groups.

From: *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity*, edited by Stephen Shennan, Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.

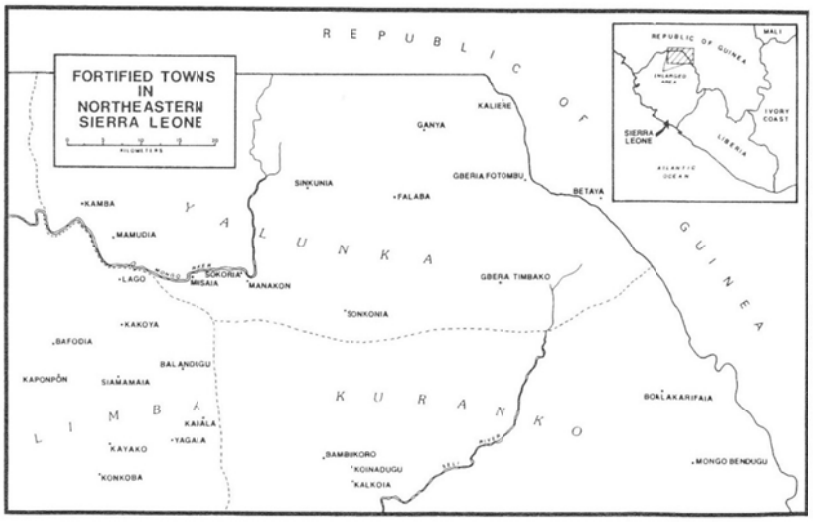

Figure 7.1 Map of northeastern Sierra Leone, showing sites referred to in the text.

The Yalunka, Kuranko and Limba are most easily distinguished on the basis of language. The two former groups are closely related Mande peoples whose languages are, to a degree, mutually intelligible. Greenberg classifies both within the Mande group of the Niger–Congo language family, which also includes more-northerly groups such as the Bambara (Greenberg 1970, p. 8). Many Kuranko live in Sierra Leone, but a significant number are found in the Republic of Guinea, occupying the territory as far east as Beyla. The Yalunka – also referred to as Djalonke, Dialonke and Jallonke – are an extension of a large ethnic group in Guinea. The Limba are set apart from the Yalunka and Kuranko linguistically, and are placed in the West Atlantic subfamily (*ibid.*, p. 8). Other members of this group include the Temne, Bulom, Kissi and Gola, people found to the south. Most Limba live in northern Sierra Leone, but a small number are found in the Republic of Guinea.

Only a limited amount of ethnographic information is available for northern Sierra Leone before the late 19th century, making it difficult to assess the change that has occurred in the various ethnic groups during the past few centuries. Dress, social structure and religion ('secret societies'), as well as language, in southern Sierra Leone tie the Limba to groups who are generally regarded as the first occupants of the region (Rodney 1967, p. 219, Atherton 1969, pp. 139–45, Fyle 1979a, pp. 4–5). By the 17th century it seems that European visitors to the coast were able to distinguish the Limba and related groups (i.e. the 'Sapes': Bullom, Temne, Baga, etc.) from more-recent arrivals (Atherton 1969, pp. 140–1). At least some ritual practices seem to have undergone little change between the 17th century and

the present (MacCormack 1979). On the basis of the continuity of stone tool forms throughout the Late Stone Age and the early Iron Age, Atherton has suggested that the Limba may have occupied Sierra Leone during the entire period (Atherton 1969, p. 140).

In the more recent past the Limba have been increasingly influenced by northern Islamic groups, such as the Mandinka and the Fulani, and Christian missionaries (Ottenberg 1983, 1984). Today there is a prevalence of Mandinka names among Limba ruling families, and it has been suggested that many of the Limba settlements founded during the past 200 years were connected with the arrival of Mandinka settlers (Finnegan 1965, p. 15). Work by Christian missionaries did not begin until the 1940s and has concentrated in a few of the larger settlements. Despite these influences, Islam and Christianity have had comparatively little effect on Limba sociocultural practices.

Oral histories suggest that the Kuranko and Yalunka are more-recent arrivals in Sierra Leone, perhaps beginning to migrate south out of the Sudan during the 16th century (Fyle 1976, pp. 109–12, 1979b, pp. 6–8). Oral histories indicate that slave raids were frequently carried out against the Limba by the incoming groups. The impetus for the migration of the Kuranko may have been the disintegration of the Mali Empire in the late 15th century. The Yalunka originally occupied the Futa Jallon in the Republic of Guinea, but they were displaced by the Fulani (Fyle 1979b, pp. 34–9). They may have entered northern Sierra Leone as early as the 17th century, but oral histories place the founding of most towns in the second half of the 18th century.

The Yalunka and Kuranko share certain ritual practices, particularly those of the hunters (Donald 1968; Jackson 1977). However, the Yalunka are more Islamized than the Kuranko (over 90% of the former consider themselves Moslem), and this is reflected in ritual, Islamic prayers and references to Allah having more prominence among the Yalunka. Various styles of dress, musical instruments and other culture traits are common to both groups.

Before the 20th century a series of Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko polities controlled large areas which at times extended well outside the border of present Koinadugu. However, the degree of political cohesion exhibited, particularly within the Limba and Kuranko areas, seems to have been quite variable. It appears that although a settlement might be considered as being subject to another, individual towns retained a great deal of autonomy. It also seems that spheres of influence varied with the power of individual chiefs. For example, Finnegan notes that the town of Yagala was at times subject to Bafodia, and during other periods was controlled by Bumban far to the south (Finnegan 1965, p. 16). Oral histories further suggest that at other times Yagala may have been independent.

Within the Yalunka area the pre-colonial political situation was somewhat different. By 1800, under the influence of the Samura of Falaba, different Yalunka groups had coalesced into what Fyle (1975, 1979b) refers to as the 'Sulima Yalunka Kingdom'. The borders of Sulima came to include all the

Yalunka chiefdoms of modern Koinadugu, as well as Yalunka land in the Republic of Guinea. The Kuranko of Sengbe Chiefdom also came under domination (Fyle 1976, p. 111), resulting in a slightly more complex political organization than among the Limba and Kuranko. Falaba emerged as a regional judicial and administrative centre, with the *manga*, or king of Falaba, as its leader (Fyle 1979b, pp. 49–64). Important cases were tried at Falaba, and all trading and redistribution was supervised by the *manga*. On a continuum of political development, the Yalunka situation was much closer to the 'state', as described by Service, whereas the political organization of the Limba and Kuranko could be classed as 'chiefdom' (Service 1975, pp. 74–80, 104–64).

Material aspects of Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko ethnicity

The data examined here primarily relate to Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko sites dating to the past 200 years. Archaeological research in Sierra Leone is still largely in its exploratory stages, and only a limited amount of research has been done in the northeastern part of the country (Newman 1962, 1966, Cole-King 1976). Larger-scale excavations were undertaken by Atherton at Kamabai and Yagala rock shelters, sites located within Limba territory. A sequence ranging from *c.* 2500 BC until at least the 14th century AD is represented (Atherton 1972, pp. 42–3). As noted above, a fair degree of cultural continuity is suggested by the archaeological data. Although it is tempting to see the Limba as the descendants of this Late Stone Age population, the question requires more study.

Atherton also provided the first archaeological descriptions of fortified towns in Koinadugu District (Atherton 1968, 1983). He commented on some of the unique features of the sites, and obtained a radiocarbon date of AD 1740 ± 100 years on charcoal from a cave used as shelter during the rainy season or during periods of warfare. This agrees with Limba oral histories, which generally extend no further back in time than the late 18th or early 19th centuries, and which recall the founding of several of the larger Limba settlements.

Survey work carried out by the author between December 1978 and January 1981 focused on defensive sites known to have been occupied by the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko during historic and protohistoric times (DeCorse 1980, 1981). The area examined covers approximately 4500 km^2 in Koinadugu District, including portions of the Limba Chiefdoms of Wara Wara Yagala and Wara Wara Bafodia; the Yalunka chiefdoms of Musaia Dembelia, Sinkunia Dembelia and Sulima; and the Kuranko chiefdoms of Mongo and Sengbe. The objective of this research was to provide archaeological data from an area that had received only limited attention. More than 25 settlements were examined. Oral histories were collected or were available for many of the sites. Several sites were mapped, surface collections were made and test excavations were undertaken at one settlement.

Although an attempt was made to visit as many sites as possible within the study area, the size of the area covered, time constraints and transport problems resulted in research being concentrated in some areas. The comments and conclusions presented are therefore of a preliminary nature.

Settlements

Defensive sites dating to the past 400–500 years are common in West Africa. Many such sites are found in Liberia, Sierre Leone and the Republic of Guinea, and a variety of defences are represented (Alldridge 1901, p. 219, Malcolm 1939, Haselberger 1964, p. 99, Siddle 1968, Abraham 1975). Kup (1975, p. 26), for example, notes that hilltop forts protected by circular entrenchments are associated with Mande peoples. The Mende of southern Sierre Leone at times surrounded their settlements with more than ten fences or walls, while ditches and towers protected each entrance (Alldridge 1901, p. 230, Malcolm 1939, pp. 48–9). The Susu of northern Sierra Leone, a group closely related to the Yalunka, protected their towns with mud walls which at times were more than 15 ft (4.5 m) thick. In many cases winding entrances through dense brush were also employed (Alldridge 1901, pp. 97, 155, 298–300, Siddle 1969, p. 33). The Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko utilized similar defences, and the remains of many of these still survive.

The defences represented at the sites examined in northeastern Sierra Leone varied due to vegetational and topographical considerations, and possibly due to some culturally determined patterning. Settlements of the Yalunka tend to be located on level areas on low riverine plateaux of interfluves, although hilltop sites are also found. Settlements on level open areas such as Musaia, Manakon and Sinkunia often contained more than 100 houses. Laing estimated that Falaba, capital of the Sulima Yalunka Kingdom and one of the larger settlements, had 400 houses in 1822 and a population of between 6000 and 10 000 people (Siddle 1968). Located in lightly forested areas, the towns were protected by mud walls, or *tatana*. Small portals near the gates enabled men to fire at attacking forces. In some instances the town fortifications were stockades of living trees interspersed with timber or mud walls. Such was the case at Falaba, which was '. . . surrounded by a natural stockade of over 500 huge trees. . . . One of the gates of the town, of which there are seven, is ingeniously cut through the trunk of one of the largest trees' (Blyden 1873, p. 128). Outside the walls a large moat was sometimes dug. Today the ditch at Falaba, though heavily eroded, is still more than 20 ft (6 m) across and 15 ft (4.5 m) deep in places.

The Kuranko sometimes made use of defences similar to those of the Yalunka. Such was the case with the towns of Mongo Bendugu and Masadugu, which had encircling stockades of living trees. However, in the more densely forested areas to the south a different strategy was utilized. Thickets of dense brush which surrounded a town were cultivated as a natural, impenetrable barrier. This distinctive vegetation pattern can be seen clearly on infrared false-colour photographs. Walls or stockades provided

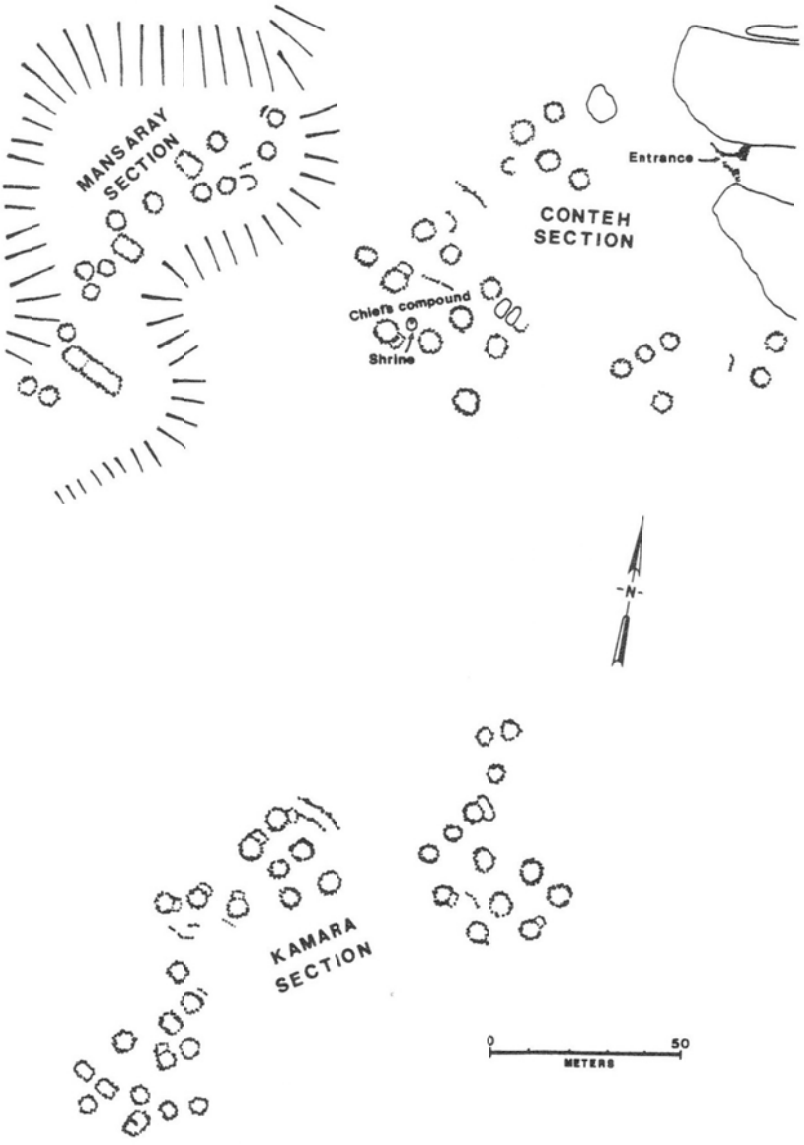

Figure 7.2 A sketch map of the ruins of the Limba settlement of Kakoya, illustrating the clustering of dwellings in clan groups.

additional protection at entrances. The entrance itself was usually a low, narrow doorway which could be closed with a thick wooden slab.

Situated to the west of the Yalunka and Kuranko, the Limba of the Wara Wara Mountains employed a wide variety of defences. In addition to being more-heavily forested, the area is broken by dissected hills of granodiorite, and it presents some of the most rugged topography in the country. The terrain is often broken by outcrops, rock shelters and massive boulders. Some Limba towns, such as Kaponpon, were protected by stockades similar to those already described for the Yalunka. Others employed thickets of thorn bushes, which the Limba call *inthiri*, not unlike the vegetation barriers used by the Kuranko. Other Limba settlements presented some unique features employing the natural inaccessibility of the Wara Waras. Inconveniently situated on top of steep hills, distant from farmland and water sources, these towns were easily defended. Unable to set wooden house-supports into the rock hilltops, the Limba often constructed their houses of stone (Atherton 1983).

Observations of modern Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko settlements indicate that they are often broken into sections which reflect clan groupings. Membership in a clan carries certain ritual and social obligations and, to a certain extent, regulates marriage patterns. A traditional village has several circular clusters of clan groupings, a feature which can be recognized archaeologically, particularly at Limba sites such as Balandugu, Yagala, Siamamaia and Kakoya, where houses were constructed of stone (Fig. 7.2). In cases where houses were constructed of mud, the task of the archaeologist is much more daunting, although the study of modern dwellings and careful excavation does provide clues (MacIntosh 1977, Agorsah 1985). Traces of dwellings are quickly levelled by rain and vegetation, and farming often obliterates the remains. Even at the old Limba town of Bafodia, which was occupied until the 1950s, it was difficult to identify clan groups even though traces of some house mounds remain and informants were able to indicate which areas were associated with each clan.

Architecture

Problems of preservation also make it difficult to examine differences in the spatial arrangement of individual Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko houses. Plans of several modern dwellings and structures, as well as stone-walled dwellings from abandoned Limba sites (Fig. 7.3), illustrate some of the basic similarities found in architecture throughout the region. Structures are usually round and traditionally had thatch roofs of some kind, though the manner in which the thatch was applied and even the thatching material itself seems to have varied, particularly in the Limba chiefdoms south of Koinadugu District. Buildings, whether of stone or of wattle and daub, were plastered with a mixture of mud and cow dung, a technique widely used in West Africa. Dwellings of all three groups generally have two opposing doors, and the space under the eaves is frequently utilized as a work or storage area.

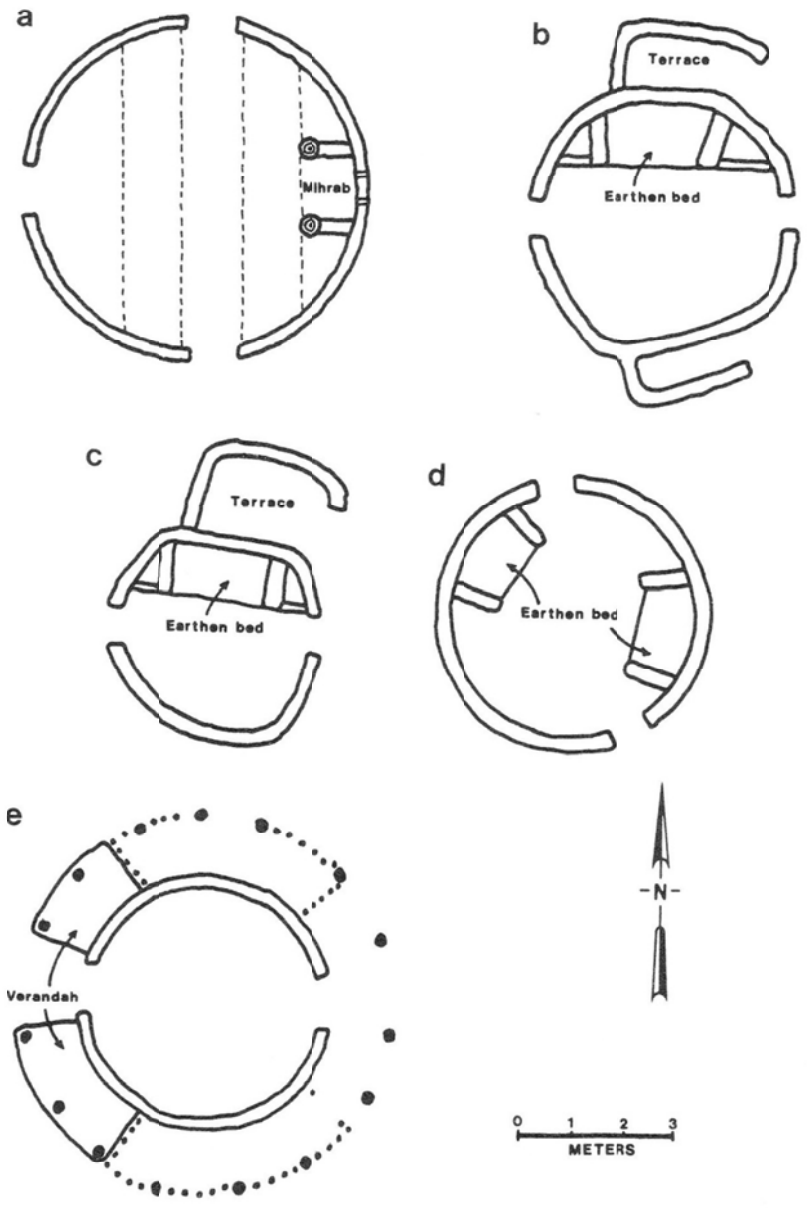

Figure 7.3 Limba and Yalunka architecture: (a) Yalunka mosque at Sokoria; (b–d) stone-walled Limba dwellings at Yagala; (e) a Yalunka house at Kamba.

Limba stone houses are frequently smaller and sometimes have a distinctive spatial arrangement. This almost certainly resulted from the terrain where the houses were constructed, rather than from cultural differences or patterns. The mountain-top sites are craggy and boulder-strewn, and houses had to conform to the space available. In some cases dwellings were actually perched on top of some of the larger boulders. Terraces for work areas had to fit in where space allowed. Differences in stone coursing noticed between different sites are probably also due to natural factors; the size of naturally occurring cobbles varies at different locales. Mud-walled Limba houses located in more-open areas are similar to those of the Yalunka and Kuranko. Structures of comparable form and construction can be seen among the Foulbe to the north in the Republic of Guinea (Prussin 1982, p. 63) and in Temne settlements to the south. Differences between the housing of various ethnic groups may exist, but a significant amount of variation also occurs within the individual ethnic groups.

Ritual behaviour

Material aspects of ritual behaviour such as shrines, rock paintings and burial practices can be important indicators of ethnicity. Only a limited amount of information on these practices was collected, but enough is available to indicate their significance, and the data are surveyed here. A variety of devices are used by the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko to intercede in supernatural events. These may take the form of individual shrines, talismans worn on the body and ritual offerings hung above doorways or, occasionally, buried under the floor.

Several shrines and ritual areas were still in use or had been used in the recent past, and informants were able to assist with interpretation. The forms taken by the shrines varied greatly between settlements; many were unique, and most were constructed of insubstantial materials. One example is a shrine located next to the Mongo River, some distance outside the Yalunka settlement of Kamba. A place of offering for spirits associated with the hippopotamuses in the river, the shrine was little more than four sticks supporting a light covering. The shrine to a spirit at Sinkunia, another Yalunka town, was slightly more substantial in appearance. It was located in a dome-shaped hut approximately 3 m across, constructed of poles with a covering of thatch. A fence bounded the space around the shrine. Another example is the founder's shrine at the Yalunka town of Musaia. Oral history indicates that a virgin was sacrificed and buried beneath a young orange tree. Today little denotes the special significance of the tree except that the fruit-laden branches remain unpicked. A Limba ancestral shrine at Yagala was marked by nothing but a small broken iron pot and a large piece of quartz.

Because of the wide variety represented, and the fact that many of the shrines described above are made of very perishable material, their importance as archaeological indicators of ethnicity is limited. However, there are

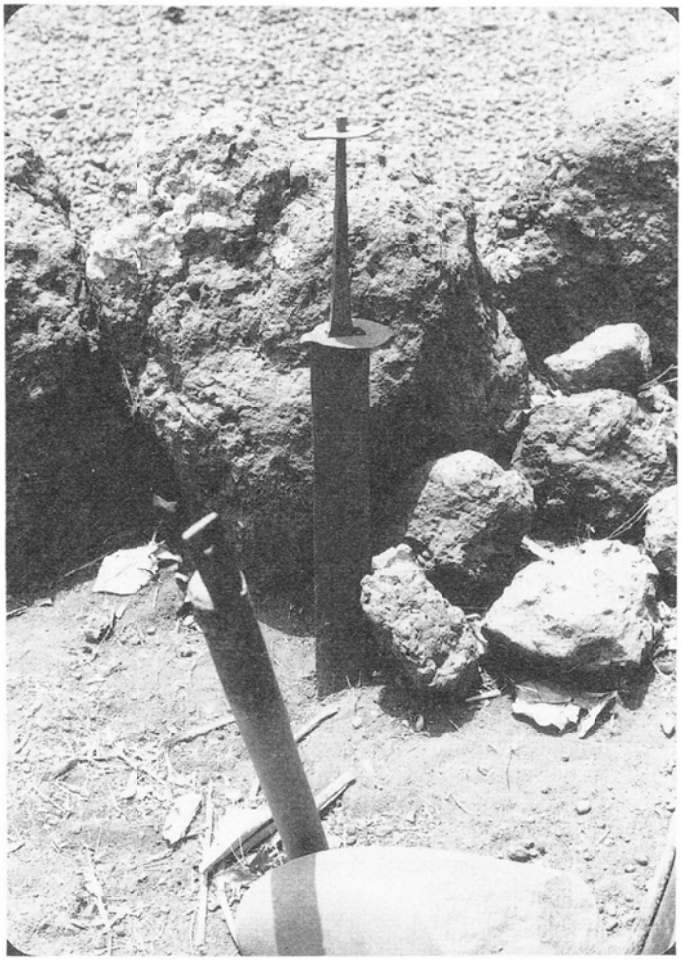

Figure 7.4 A Yalunka shrine in front of the chief's house at Kamba. An Islamic prayer area lies in the background. The gun barrel is approximately 2.5 cm in diameter.

certain shrines which deserve special comment. Shrines associated with the chief's house can be seen in many settlements. In the Wara Wara Limba chiefdoms a platform of flat stones approximately 6 ft (2 m) across is prepared and a round stone is placed in the centre. In some cases a flat stone slab may be placed upright. In Yalunka and Kuranko areas similar shrines consist of a stone or pile of stones, a wooden post (*sarakawodena*) and a piece of iron. The last of these is frequently an old sword or trade gun (Fig. 7.4), but other items may be used (for example, at the paramount chief's

compound in Musaia an old engine block lies next to a large pile of stones). Trotter (1898, p. 40) may have been referring to this type of shrine when he noted that two guns were buried in the centre of villages to mark the end of the Sofa War.

Shrines and ritual areas are also associated with hunters' societies and puberty rituals. Hunters among the Kuranko erect a special shrine outside of their settlement to the hunting deity Mande Fabourre, a first man–first hunter figure. This is made of mud and consists of a low platform surmounted by an anthropomorphic figure (sometimes little more than an amorphous pillar) 2–3 ft (60–90 cm) in height. This is usually covered by a small thatch roof. When sacrifices are made, blood is spilled on the figure, and traces of this can often be seen. The hunters are organized into groups at the subchiefdom level. Shrines are associated with certain territories, and they are not necessarily found outside every Kuranko settlement. Shrines of this type were not observed at any Limba or Yalunka settlement, although apparently the latter group did construct similar shrines in the past. Yalunka hunting rituals still focus on sites where the shrines were located, although no evidence of these can be seen today.

Puberty ceremonies involving the circumcision of males and the excision of females are important throughout the entire area. Each group has its own particular practices, but the 'borrowing' of certain customs can be seen in marginal areas. Material aspects of this ritual behaviour include special dress, sacrifices, tools and specially designated areas, but little which is of use to the archaeologist. Circumcision of males and the excision of females traditionally take place outside of the settlement, in special areas which are sometimes left unbrushed. Temporary shelters were sometimes erected for the initiates, but no other special features mark the sites. Locating and identifying these ritual sites without the aid of informants or oral histories would be difficult, though distinctive vegetation patterns might provide some indication of their location. What would be preserved archaeologically at such sites would be difficult to associate with a particular group. An exception is ritual paintings made in connection with Limba excision rituals (DeCorse in press). However, such paintings seem to be confined to a very localized area and do not appear in all Limba chiefdoms.

The most substantial ritual structures found in the region are mosques. These are usually variations of the square mosque prescribed by Malekite law, but local adaptations can be seen, such as the small round mosque at Sokoria (Fig. 7.3a). Archaeologically such a structure might prove difficult to differentiate from a dwelling. At times the sacred Moslem space is reduced to a simple square of stones with a pebbled surface (for examples among the Foulbe, see Prussin 1982, p. 62). Among the Yalunka and Kuranko these prayer areas sometimes lie adjacent to traditional shrines, indicating the syncretic nature of religious beliefs.

Artefacts

Of the artefactual material recovered from surface collections and excavations, ceramics are by far the most common. Ethnographic studies of Fulani pottery by David & Hennig (1972) and Bedik–Fulbe pottery by Atherton (1983) indicate some of the problems and possibilities in using pottery in studies of ethnicity, and a similar situation is seen here. Ethnographic observations of modern Limba and Yalunka potters provide an indication of how pottery was probably produced in the past. Pottery manufacture seems to have always been exclusively a female occupation (Thomas 1918, p. 111, Atherton 1969, p. 108). Vessels of 'all kinds' were still being produced in the north-east in 1918 (Thomas 1918, p. 41), but today work is largely confined to undecorated cooking pots.

Traditionally clay for potting was obtained from two sources – geological deposits and the interior of large termite mounds – sources which are still used today. Dry clay is pounded into a powder using a stone or wooden pestle, and is then sifted by hand or sieved. Informants indicated that temper was not intentionally added to the clay. When the clay is used, water is added and the paste is pounded to the right consistency. A pot is started by moulding a slab of clay over the bottom of an old pot or calabash. Coils are then used to build up the remainder of the pot. The surface is smoothed with a calabash paddle. In ethnographic cases decorations were confined to occasional raised bands, incising, stabbing or stamping. These decorations were applied when the newly formed pot had become leathery. The completed pots were fired in the open under a pile of brush.

The type of manufacture described above is common to much of the interior of Sierra Leone and probably to many of the neighbouring parts of West Africa. Analysis of archaeological collections indicates similar methods were used in the past. Evidence of a moulded base and coil construction could be seen on many fragments. The paste of all sherds examined from archaeological sites contained fine to very coarse sand inclusions, with occasional fragments grading up to 4 mm. This is similar to ethnographic examples. Tempering with millet stalks, shell or other organic material has been reported from other parts of Sierra Leone, but does not appear to occur in Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko areas. Four per cent of the sherds excavated from Wara Wara Rock Shelter contained large fragments of laterite, granule to pebble in size (0–1 cm), which may have been intentionally added as temper. Such inclusions were not found in any ethnographic or archaeological examples from other sites in Koinadugu District, or from any other part of the country. However, this could be due to the small size of the comparative collections.

Certain vessel forms and decorations may be associated with certain ethnic groups, but insufficient work has been carried out in Sierra Leone to make a complete assessment. No highly distinctive ritual pots, such as those found in some areas of West Africa, were noted in northern Sierra Leone. However, some local variation in utilitarian forms were noted in both ethnographic and archaeological examples. There also seem to be styles of

decoration that are common to some areas (or even to individual towns), yet other decorative techniques clearly cross-cut ethnic groups and some motifs can be found as far afield as southern Sierre Leone, Mali and Ghana. It may prove difficult to separate variation due to local artistic traditions and ethnic factors from those resulting from temporal changes. For example, pottery forms and decorative styles from Bafodia Old town (occupied from the late 18th century to 1950) are quite different from those recovered from the original settlement at Kawoya located nearby.

Discussion and conclusions

The Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko, although sharing certain cultural practices, are regarded by themselves and outsiders as distinct ethnic groups. Examination of their material culture, although providing information about social organization, ritual practices and technology, offers only limited indications of these divisions. Culturally influenced choices greatly affect methods of house construction, use of space, settlement patterns and numerous other aspects of material culture, yet climatic, topographical and historical factors are also of importance. Archaeologically, Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko sites look very similar. In fact, the Yalunka and Kuranko sites have more in common with Limba settlements than with those of more-closely related Mande groups living in the Sudan. Several writers have noticed similarities in house construction and settlement patterns from widely disparate parts of Africa which share certain climatic or topographical characteristics (Denyer 1978). These factors were probably more important in determining the types of defences and methods of house construction used by the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko than ethnicity.

Some indication of the slightly more centralized political system within the Yalunka area is suggested by the archaeological data. Yalunka settlements (especially Falaba) are much larger than any Limba or Kuranko sites. This was largely determined by using documentary sources, but this is something that could be examined archaeologically.

Technology also presents a confused picture of ethnicity among the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko. Pottery, the only industry discussed in detail here, varies in form and decoration both temporally and geographically. This variation does not readily reflect ethnic differences. Other manufactured items may be more useful. For example, iron-smelting furnaces reported in the Kuranko area earlier in this century (Dixey 1920) are different from any observed archaeologically in the Yalunka area. Although this may have potential, any patterning along ethnic lines would be confused by the movement of skilled craftsmen between groups. This was definitely the case in northern Sierra Leone, where oral histories indicate that blacksmiths were so highly valued for their skill that they were singled out for capture in raids into neighbouring areas. Women, the manufacturers of pottery, were also frequently taken as wives or slaves.

The most important archaeological indicators of ethnicity within the study area are material aspects of ritual behaviour. These exhibit more variability than other categories of material culture, and to some extent seem to be associated with particular ethnic groups. To follow Wiessner's (1989) approach to style, shrines play important social and symbolic rôles among the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko, and provide a suitable means of expressing individuality or ethnic identity, or both. In contrast, other aspects of material culture examined have very minor social and symbolic rôles and have a limited amount of 'comparative' value. However, the shrines described exhibit a high degree of variability and none appears to be present in every settlement of a certain ethnic group. Preservation again poses a problem, as exemplified by the Kuranko hunting shrines. Relatively small, impermanent and located some distance outside of settlements, it is unlikely that such sites would be easily discovered without the aid of informants.

It is notable that various types of aesthetic expression, an area which is often noted as an indicator of ethnicity or social identity, is very limited throughout northern Sierra Leone (DeCorse & Benton in press). Representative and geometric painting is uncommon, and there are no traditions of carving or sculptural ornamentation. Traditional types of embellishment seem to have been mostly confined to simple geometric designs found on iron weapons, shrine posts, storage boxes and occasional house supports. These limited areas of aesthetic expression provide little indication of 'individuality' or 'social cohesion' and further complicate an archaeological assessment of ethnicity.

The research reviewed here underscores the work of others which has clearly demonstrated the difficulty in using material culture to ascribe ethnicity or even to define broader cultural groups (for example, Vansina 1961, Atherton 1983). In fact Atherton, in his review of ethno-archaeology in Africa, suggests that archaeologists would be better off if they avoided 'a fruitless quest for paleosociopolitical epiphenomena such as ethnicity' (Atherton 1983, p. 96). This may be good advice. However, given the important rôle of archaeology in the study of culture history and ethnic origins, and the increasing political and legal implications of such research, it seems a difficult area of study to ignore.

What seems clear from the ethno-archaeological research that has been undertaken is that culture traits, artefacts or attributes are often poor indicators of ethnicity when considered individually. However, the study of overall artefact, attribute and trait patterns may prove more helpful in defining ethnic groups. Work in this direction can be seen in the 'local rule' model evolved by Agorsah (1983) for his work on the Nchumuru in Ghana, where regularities in spatial distributions provide a distinctive archaeological signature. Quantitative studies of artefacts and their patterns by historical archaeologists suggest possible directions for future research. Methods of pattern recognition developed by South (1977) have been employed in a variety of historic period sites. A good example of their potential is provided by work by Lewis, Moore, Armstrong, and others, on slave plantation sites.

In these cases the researchers were able to demonstrate the unique character of African–American culture, even though no artefacts of clearly African origin were recovered (Singleton 1985). Further research along these lines may make it possible to define ethnicity more clearly among groups such as the Limba, Yalunka and Kuranko.

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