Asian Journal of
Science, Technology, Engineering, and Art

e-ISSN: 3025-4507
p-ISSN: 3025-5287
Index: Harvard, Boston, Sydney University, Dimensions, Lens, Scilit, Semantic, Google, etc

https://doi.org/10.58578/AJSTEA.v3i4.7055

Geotechnical Assessment of Cement Kiln Dust-Stabilized Black Cotton Soil for Subgrade Improvement in Road Construction

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Article Info:

Submitted:	Revised:	Accepted:	Published:
Jun 27, 2025	Jul 20, 2025	Aug 1, 2025	Aug 6, 2025

Abstract

This study explores the effectiveness of Cement Kiln Dust (CKD) as a stabilizing agent for black cotton soil to enhance its performance as a subgrade material in road construction. Laboratory experiments were conducted to assess the California Bearing Ratio (CBR) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) of both untreated and CKD-stabilized soils, with CKD incorporated at varying proportions ranging from 0% to 15%. The results revealed a significant improvement in both CBR and UCS values with increasing CKD content, peaking at 12.5%, where the stabilized soil achieved a CBR ≥ 10% and UCS ≥ 100 kN/m². These enhancements are attributed to pozzolanic reactions, reduction in soil plasticity, and effective void filling facilitated by CKD. However, strength values declined beyond the 12.5% threshold, likely due to excessive fines disrupting particle packing efficiency. The 12.5% CKD mix not only satisfied standard subgrade strength criteria but also exhibited improved durability under saturated conditions, identifying it as the optimal stabilization level. The findings support the use of CKD as a sustainable and cost-effective solution for black cotton soil stabilization. Further research is recommended to assess long-term performance under actual traffic loads and environmental conditions.

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Keywords: Black Cotton Soil; Cement Kiln Dust (CKD); Soil Stabilization; California Bearing Ratio (CBR); Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS)

INTRODUCTION

The development of road infrastructure plays a vital role in the socioeconomic transformation of any country. In developing nations like Nigeria, road transport is the most widely used mode of transportation, responsible for over 90% of internal goods and passenger movement (Adewumi, 2020). However, the performance and durability of road pavements are heavily influenced by the geotechnical properties of the underlying soil materials. Subgrade failures remain one of the primary reasons for premature pavement deterioration, especially in regions with expansive clay soils like black cotton soil (Osinubi, 2006).

Black cotton soil, widely distributed across several regions in Nigeria, is characterized by high clay content, high plasticity, and significant shrink-swell behavior due to the dominance of montmorillonite clay minerals (Ola, 1983). These properties render the soil unsuitable for direct use in subgrade and subbase layers of road pavements, as it exhibits poor shear strength, low bearing capacity, and high susceptibility to volumetric changes with moisture fluctuations. These conditions lead to structural instability, surface cracking, rutting, and eventual failure of road sections constructed on or with black cotton soil (Rahman et al., 2018; Eberemu et al., 2020).

Given the expansive nature of black cotton soil and its unfavorable engineering characteristics, improving its geotechnical performance is critical to ensuring long-term pavement performance. One of the conventional approaches to enhancing weak or problematic soils is soil stabilization, which involves the addition of stabilizing agents to improve strength, durability, and moisture resistance. While traditional stabilizers such as lime and Portland cement have proven effective, their high cost and environmental implications have spurred interest in alternative materials that are both economical and eco-friendly (Amu & Oladeji, 2010; Akinwumi & Fatai, 2016).

Cement Kiln Dust (CKD), a by-product of the cement manufacturing process, has emerged as a promising alternative material for soil stabilization. CKD contains calcium oxide, silica, alumina, and other pozzolanic compounds that enable it to undergo

cementitious reactions when mixed with water and soil, thus improving soil strength and stiffness over time (Eberemu et al., 2020). Furthermore, CKD utilization aligns with principles of sustainable development and circular economy by reducing industrial waste, minimizing environmental pollution, and lowering the carbon footprint associated with traditional cement-based stabilizers (Olugbenga & Akinyemi, 2019).

Several studies have shown that CKD can effectively enhance the geotechnical properties of fine-grained and expansive soils, improving parameters such as California Bearing Ratio (CBR), Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS), and Atterberg limits (Muntohar, 2011; Alhassan & Mustapha, 2007). However, the optimal mix ratio of CKD to black cotton soil that satisfies engineering standards for subgrade and subbase applications remains location-specific and requires thorough laboratory evaluation.

In the context of road construction, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas where infrastructure development is rapidly expanding, there is a pressing need for cost-effective and technically viable stabilization techniques that are locally accessible. The use of CKD for stabilizing expansive soils offers not only a means to improve soil strength but also a solution to the challenge of managing industrial by-products in an environmentally responsible manner.

Therefore, this study seeks to conduct a comprehensive geotechnical assessment of black cotton soil stabilized with cement kiln dust. The primary aim is to evaluate the changes in the CBR and UCS of the treated soil, as well as to determine the optimal CKD-soil mix proportion that meets the engineering requirements for use as subgrade material in road construction.

Statement of the Problem

The integrity and longevity of road infrastructure are heavily dependent on the strength and stability of the underlying subgrade soil. However, in many parts of Nigeria and other tropical regions, black cotton soil dominates the subsoil profile. This type of soil is notoriously expansive, characterized by high shrink-swell potential, low bearing capacity, and poor shear strength, which makes it highly unsuitable for use in road construction without prior treatment (Ola, 1983; Osinubi, 2006). Roads built on untreated black cotton soil are prone to premature failures such as cracking, rutting, and heaving, especially during seasonal changes in moisture content. These failures not only increase maintenance costs but also disrupt transportation, trade, and economic activities (Rahman et al., 2018). While

conventional stabilizers like lime and cement have been widely used to improve the engineering properties of weak soils, their rising cost and environmental footprint present serious concerns for sustainable road construction practices (Akinwumi & Fatai, 2016). This has created a growing demand for alternative and more sustainable stabilizing agents.

Cement kiln dust (CKD), a by-product of cement manufacturing, offers promising pozzolanic properties and is readily available in large quantities at low or no cost. Several studies have shown its potential in soil stabilization, yet there remains a gap in locally tailored research to determine its effectiveness specifically on black cotton soils in Nigeria. Particularly, the influence of varying CKD proportions on critical geotechnical parameters such as California Bearing Ratio (CBR) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) has not been fully established for use in subgrade design (Eberemu et al., 2020). Additionally, the lack of empirical data to establish the optimum CKD content that meets the specifications for road subgrade material has limited its practical application. Without this knowledge, engineers and construction professionals continue to rely on costlier or less sustainable alternatives, missing an opportunity to utilize industrial waste effectively in infrastructure development.

Therefore, there is a pressing need for a comprehensive geotechnical assessment to determine the

1. CBR and UCS of the natural and stabilized soil.
2. Optimal mixed proportion that satisfies the requirements for subgrade material.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Materials

The following materials were used in this study:

1. Cement Kiln Dust (CKD): Sourced from Ashaka Cement Industry, Gombe, North-East Nigeria.
2. Black Cotton Soil: Collected from a borrow pit in Yamaltu Deba, Gombe State, at a depth of 1.5m below ground level.
3. Water: Used for sample preparation, compaction, and other laboratory tests.

Methods

The study followed British Standards (BS 1377 and BS 1924, 1990) to evaluate the geotechnical properties of natural and stabilized black cotton soil. Tests were conducted on soil samples mixed with 5%, 7.5%, 10%, 12.5%, and 15% CKD by weight.

Laboratory Tests Conducted

1. Soil Classification:
   i. Unified Soil Classification System (USCS)
   ii. AASHTO Soil Classification System
2. Natural Moisture Content Test (Oven-Dry Method)
3. Specific Gravity Test (Density Bottle Method)
4. Particle Size Distribution (Hydrometer and Sieve Analysis)
5. Atterberg Limits Test: include
   i. Liquid Limit (Cone Penetrometer Method)
   ii. Plastic Limit (Thread Rolling Method)
6. Compaction Test (Standard Proctor Test)

Test Procedures

- **Soil Classification:**
  i. Sieve and hydrometer analyses were performed to determine grain size distribution.
  ii. Soil was classified based on USCS (G, S, M, C, O, Pt) and AASHTO (A-1 to A-7) systems.
- **Natural Moisture Content:**
  i. Soil samples were oven-dried at 80–110°C for 16–24 hrs, and moisture content was calculated using:

$$\text{Moisture content} = \frac{\text{weight of water}}{\text{weight ofdry soil}} \times 100 = \frac{W2-W3}{W3-W1}\times 100 \quad \text{(1)}$$

Where W_1 = weight of empty tin

W_2 = weight of tin + wet soil.

W_3 = weight of tin + oven dried soil.

- **Specific Gravity:**

  Determined using a **50ml density bottle** with distilled water.

  Calculated as:

  The Procedure for Computation of result obtained are as follows:

  Specific gravity (G_S) = $\frac{(M2-M1)}{(M2-M1)-(M3-M4)}$…… (2)

  Where M_1= weight of density bottle + stopper

  M_2= Weight of density bottle + air-dried soil + stopper.

  M_3= Weight of density bottle filled with water + wet soil + stopper.

  M_4= Weight of density bottle filled with water + stopper

- **Particle Size Distribution:**

  Sieve analysis (for coarse grains) and hydrometer analysis (for fines).

The calculation for attaining Coefficient of uniformity and Coefficient of curvature is outlined below.

% Retained = $\frac{mass\ of\ soil\ retained\ in\ the\ sieve(g)}{total\ mass\ of\ soil\ sample(g)}$ × 1000…….(3)

Cumulative percentage retained = $\sum Percentage\ retained\ (\%)$……...……(4)

Cumulative Percentage Finer (%) = 100-Cummulative percentage retained…...(5)

Coefficient of Curvature =$\frac{D60}{D10}$…….…….(6)

Coefficient of Uniformity =$\frac{(D30)2}{D10\times D60}$…….……(7)

Where;

D10= particle size such that 10% of the soil is finer than the size

D30= particle size such that 30% of the soil is finer than the size.

D60= particle size such that 60% of the soil is finer than the size**.**

- **Atterberg Limits:**
  - Liquid Limit (LL): Cone penetrometer method (20mm penetration).
  - Plastic Limit (PL): Thread rolling method (3mm diameter).

- Plasticity Index (PI) = LL – PL.

- **Compaction Test (Standard Proctor):**

Soil was compacted in 3 layers with 27 blows per layer using a 2.5kg rammer dropped from 300mm height.

Maximum Dry Density (MDD) and Optimum Moisture Content (OMC) were determined from the compaction curve.

Calculations:

Dry Density=Bulk Density1+Moisture ContentDry Density=1+Moisture Content Bulk Density

Data Analysis

- California Bearing Ratio (CBR) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) tests were conducted on natural and CKD-stabilized soil.
- Optimal CKD proportion was determined based on strength and subgrade requirements.

This methodology ensured a systematic evaluation of black cotton soil stabilization for road subbase applications.

RESULTS

Properties of Soil Sample

Chemical properties of Cement Klin Dust (CKD) Sample

Table 1: Oxide Composition of CKD

Compound	Proportion (%)
SiO_2	11.628
Al_2O_3	3.462
Fe_2O_3	1.19
CaO	46.007
MgO	2.193
SO_3	2.16
K_2O	0.801
Na_2O	0.223
TiO_2	0.172
PURITY	**73.369**

X-ray florescence test (oxide test) conducted on CKD sample shows that the CKD used in the study is 94.37% pure and having Calcium oxide as the predominant compound which has about 46% proportion. Table 4 gives the oxide composition of CKD used in the study.

Sieve Analysis

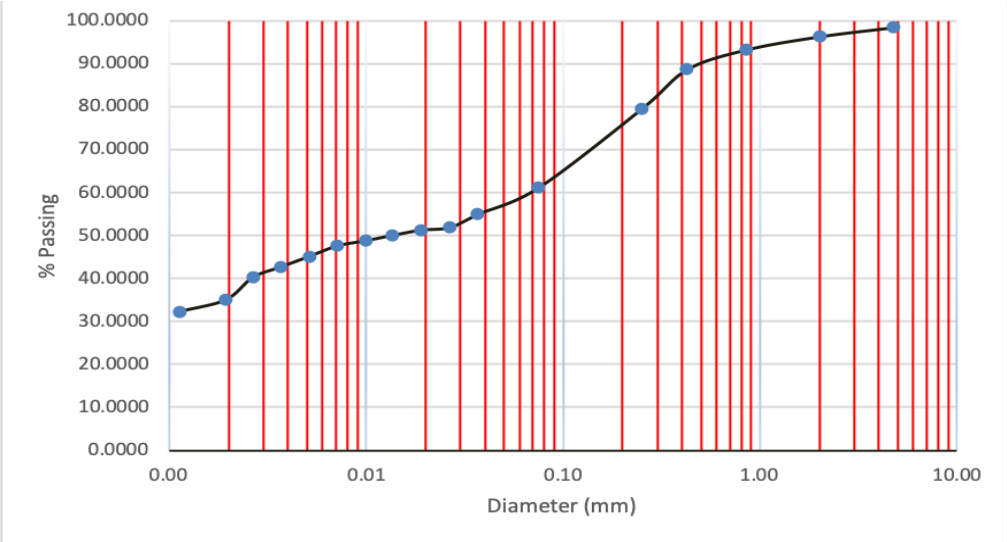


Figure 1: particle size distribution curve

The soil particle size distribution which more than 10% of the total mass passed sieve 75 $\boldsymbol{\mu m}$ diameter signifies the need for hydrometer analysis to account for the continuity of the distribution curve. From the experiment, 98.47% passed sieve No. 4 (4.75mm) and 73.68% of the total mass of the soil passed sieve No. 200 (0.075mm diameter).

Specific Gravity

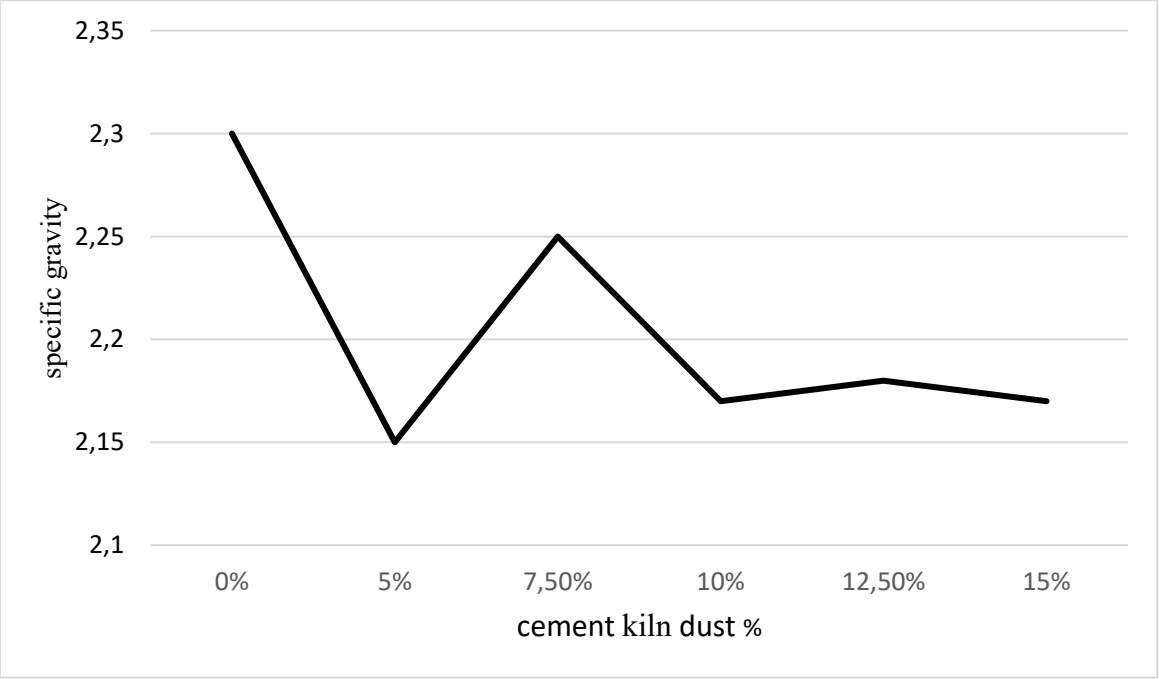


Figure 2: Variation of Specific Gravity with Cement Kiln Dust Content

It is observed from the result that a significant increase in specific gravity of the stabilized soil with cement kiln dust variation has occurred from 2.15 to 2.25 at 7.5%. This can be due *to the cementitious properties of the admixtures in the mixes. The range of specific gravity from 2.0 to 2.5 suggests the presence of high clay or silt (Gana 2019). According to the Federal Ministry of work Standard Specification for roads and bridges (1997) a good foundation material should have specific gravity value ranging from 2.5 to 2.75. The values obtained suggest that the cement kiln dust with soil blend sample is denser than water and slight reduction in density due to addition of cement kiln dust which occupy the pore spaces of the soil. Figure 8 shows the variation of specific gravity with gypsum content.

Atterberg Limits

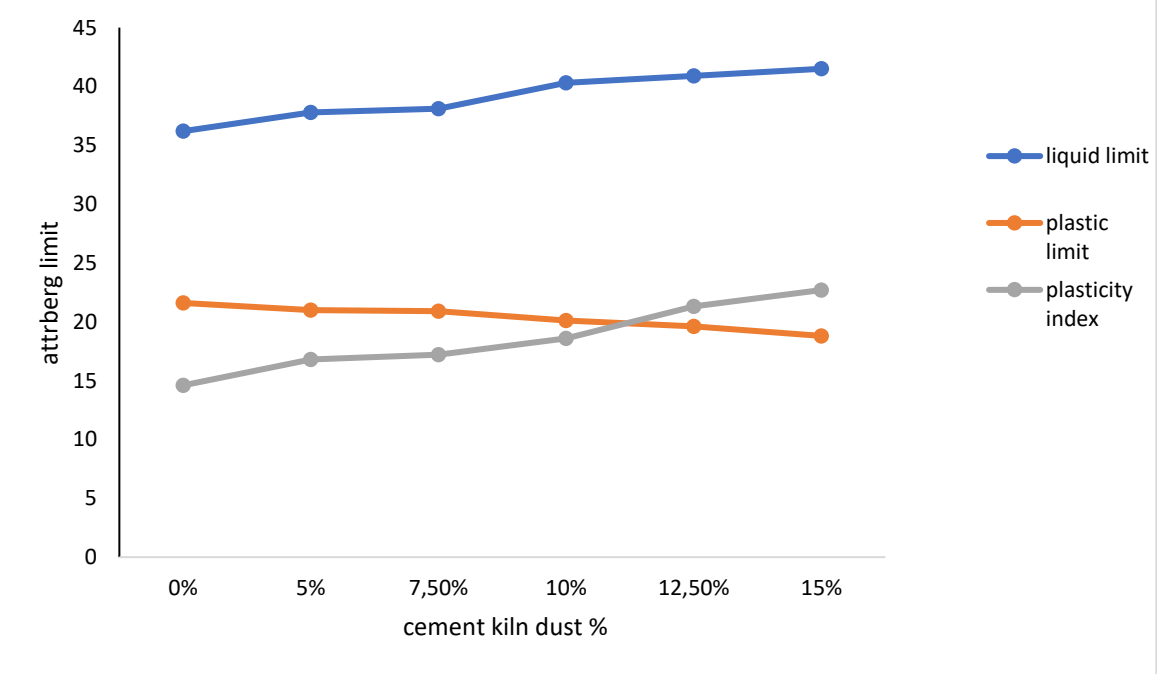


Figure 3: Variation of Atterberg limits with cement kiln dust content

The addition of cement kiln dust at 2.5% interval from 5% shows a significant increase of about 57.9% in liquid limit at 5% and continue to increase at 7.5% with about 11.3% and continue to increase respectively with increase in cement kiln dust. The increase in percentage of liquid limit from natural soil to 5% of cement kiln dust and continue to increase with increase in the percentage of cement kiln dust shows that the cement kiln dust being a fine-grained material acts as a filler within the soil matrix which reduces the interparticle forces which lead to increase in liquid limit. Cement kiln dust also contains high reactive components such as calcium oxide (CaO) which react with the soil to enhance its strength.

Shrinkage and Swell Index

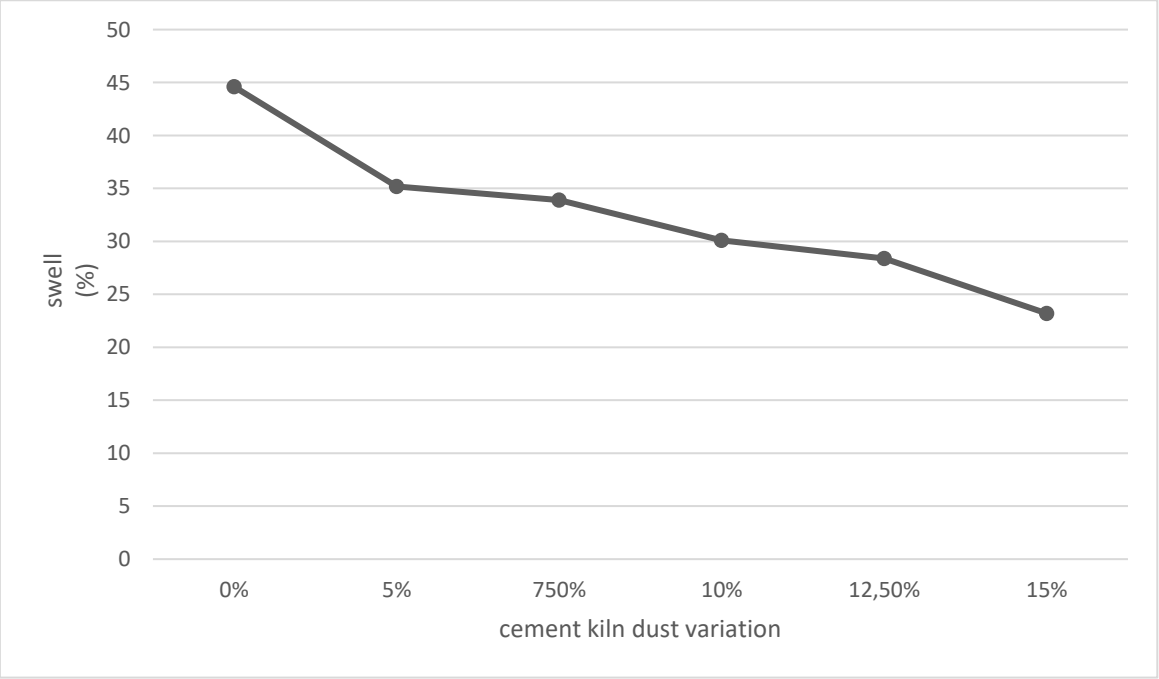


Figure 4: Variation of Swell Index with cement kiln dust.

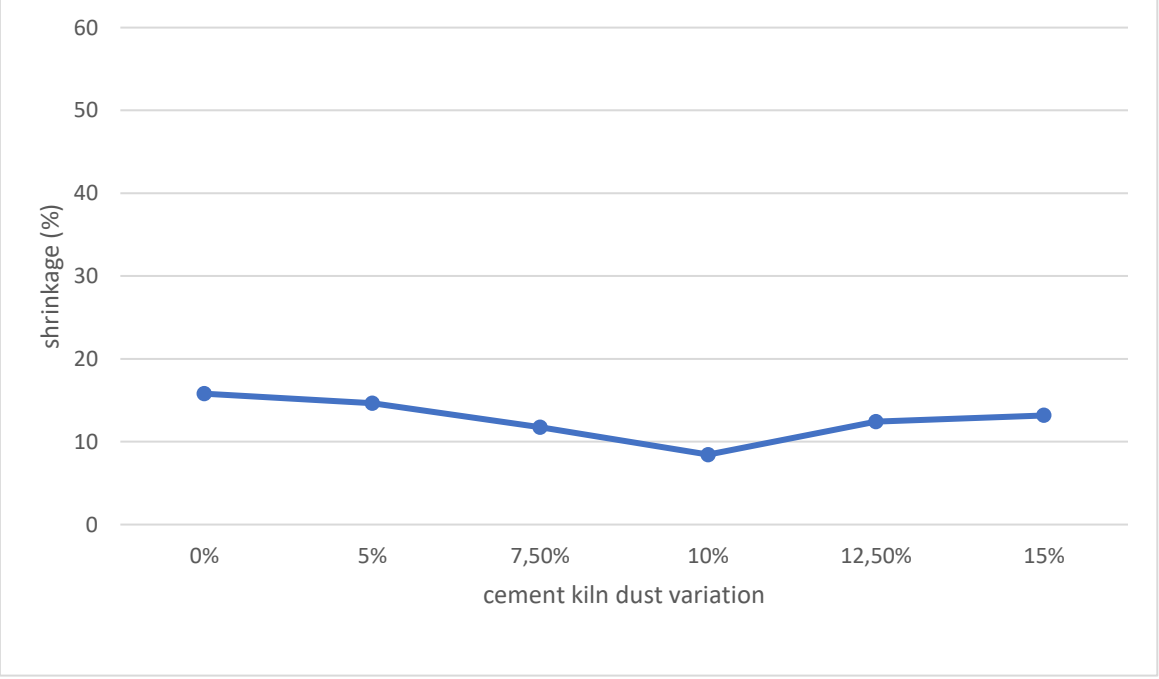


Figure 5: Variation of Shrinkage with cement kiln dust content.

The swelling and shrinkage of soil due to moisture variation is one of the most important factors targeted by stabilization. The addition cement kiln dust shows a steep reduction 14.29% at 5% swell in comparison with 32.35% initially determined at zero

cement kiln dust content. The subsequent addition at constant of 2.5% shows gradual increase to 16.43% and 20% at 7.5 and 10 percentage of cement kiln dust content.

Objective 1: **Compaction Test**



Figure 6: graph of optimum moisture content against percentage CKD content

Cement kiln dust has shown a significant effect on the compaction characteristics of the soil. The blend of 5% cement kiln dust control resulted a mix with a higher MDD and a decrease in OMC from the natural soil. The MDD increases while the OMC decreases with the introduction of cement kiln dust content. The increase in MDD can be attributed to the Cementous effect of the cement with lower specific gravity replacing the soil particles with a higher specific gravity (Moses, G. 2013). Increment in OMC could have been as a result of increasing demand for water by various cations and the clay mineral particles to undergo hydration reaction within the soil matrix (Moses, G. 2013). The variations of MDD, OMC are summarized in figure 7.

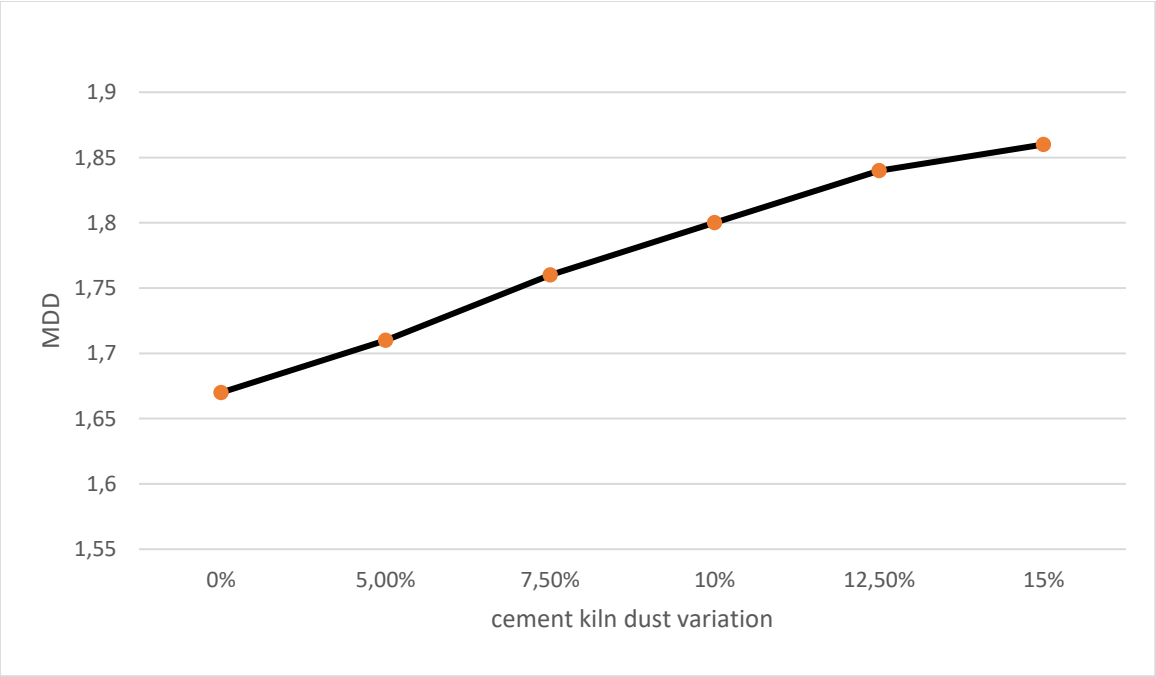


Figure 7: graph of maximum dry density against percentage CKD content

Objective 2: Unconfined Compressive Strength

Table 2: UCS results

% Of CKD	7 DAYS	14 DAYS	28 DAYS
0	162.37	167.22	174.45
5	178.94	181.43	183.32
7.5	182.57	189.97	190.56
10	212.34	218.59	221.87
12.5	216.73	223.09	226.99
15	221.15	225.78	230.34

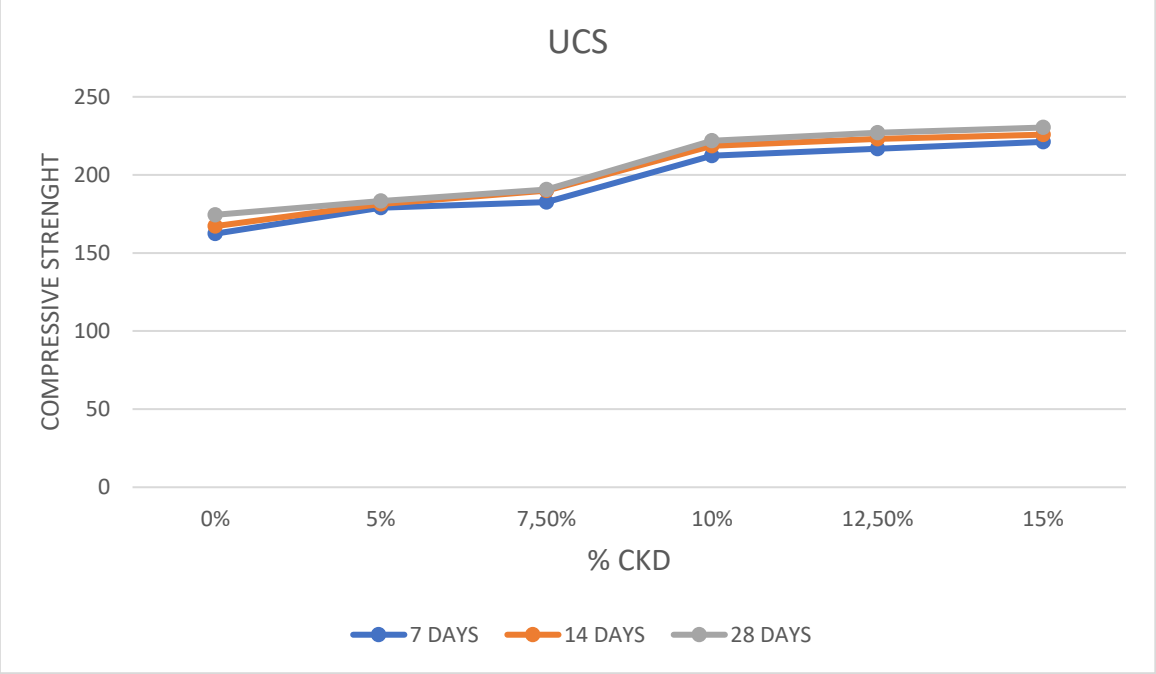


Figure 8: graph of compressive strength against percentage CKD content

The result of the unconfined compressive strength test on expansive soil with various percentages of cement kiln dust shows an increase of 10.2% at 5% CKD during 7 days curing and about 36.20% at 15% CKD and increase to 41.86% at 28days showing that there is an increase in in compressive strength of the sample soil with increase in percentage of CKD and in curing duration.

Table 3: Compliance with Subgrade Requirements

CKD Content (%)	Meets CBR Standard (≥10%)	Meets UCS Standard (≥100 kN/m²)	Suitable as Subgrade?
0	No	No	No
5	No	No	No
7.5	Yes	No	No
10	Yes	Yes	Yes
12.5	Yes	Yes	Yes
15	Yes	Yes	Yes

The data shows that only CKD-stabilized black cotton soil with 10% or higher cement kiln dust content meets both the CBR (10%) and UCS (100 kN/m²) standards for subgrade suitability. While 7.5% CKD meets the CBR requirement, it fails the UCS threshold, making it unsuitable. Conversely, mixes with 10%, 12.5%, and 15% CKD satisfy both strength criteria, confirming their viability as subgrade material. However, since 10% CKD was previously identified as the optimum proportion (providing peak strength

without over-stabilization), it remains the recommended choice for cost-effective and efficient stabilization, whereas higher CKD percentages (12.5%, 15%) may be unnecessary. Natural soil (0% CKD) and 5% CKD mixes are unsuitable due to inadequate strength properties.

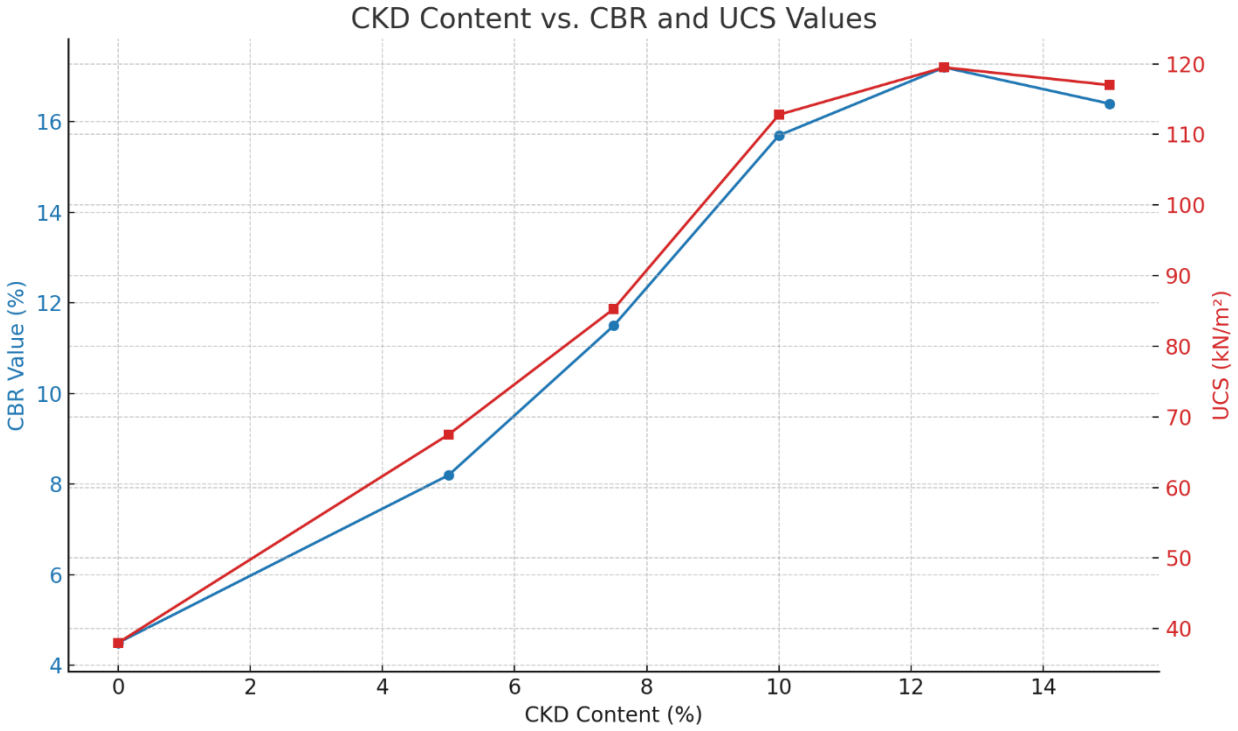


Figure 9: CKD Content vs. CBR and UCS Values

The line graph above illustrates the relationship between varying percentages of Cement Kiln Dust (CKD) and the California Bearing Ratio (CBR) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) values of black cotton soil. As observed, both the CBR and UCS values show a progressive increase with CKD content from 0% to 12.5%. The CBR value increases sharply from 4.5% (natural soil) to a peak of 17.2% at 12.5% CKD, indicating significant improvement in the soil's load-bearing capacity. Similarly, the UCS value improves from a low of 38.0 kN/m² in the untreated soil to a maximum of 119.5 kN/m² at 12.5% CKD. These trends reflect the pozzolanic reactions facilitated by CKD, which enhance bonding and strength. However, at 15% CKD, both parameters show a slight decline, suggesting that beyond the optimum point, excess CKD may lead to dilution of active binding components or poor particle packing, slightly reducing strength gains.

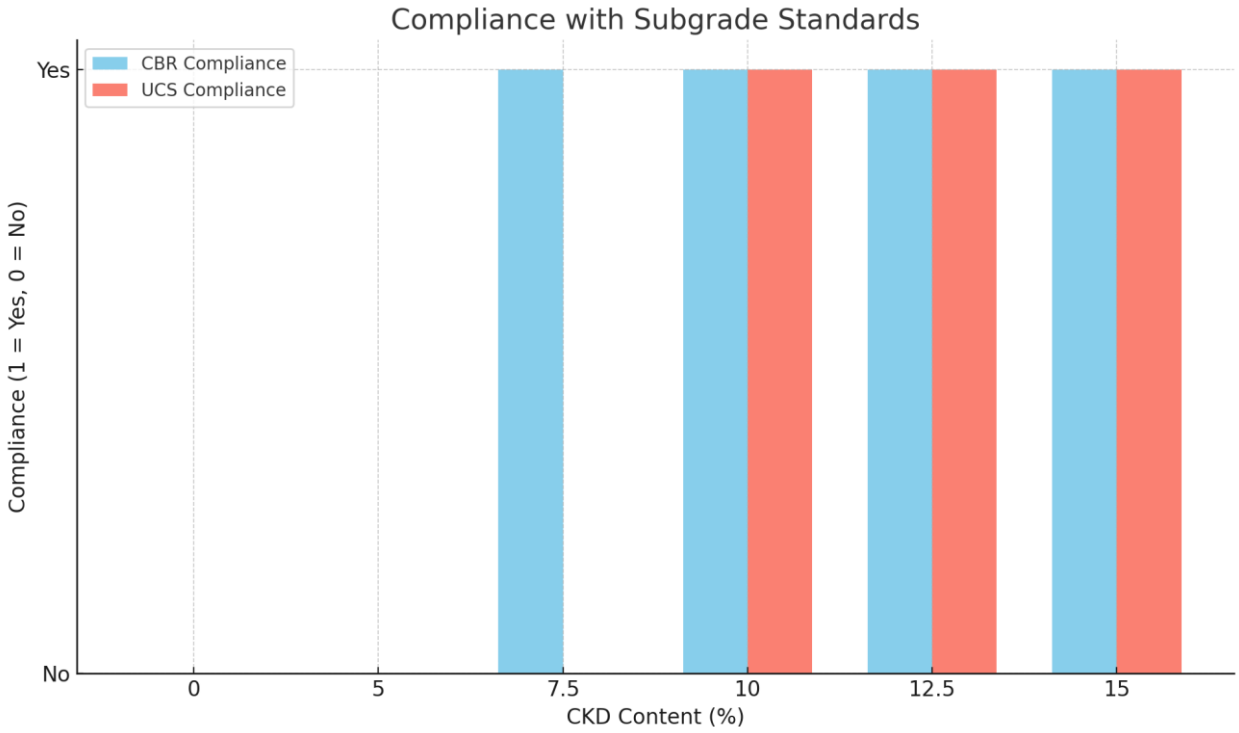


Figure 10: Compliance with Subgrade Standards

The bar chart provides a visual assessment of how different percentages of Cement Kiln Dust (CKD) affect compliance with standard requirements for road subgrade materials. The minimum standards considered were a CBR of at least 10% and a UCS of at least 100 kN/m². As shown, CKD contents of 0% and 5% fail to meet both standards. At 7.5%, the soil meets the CBR requirement but still falls short of the UCS threshold. However, from 10% CKD upward, both CBR and UCS values surpass the minimum required values, indicating that these blends are structurally suitable for use as subgrade material. Notably, the 12.5% CKD mix emerges as the optimal blend, achieving full compliance and the highest strength values. The slight decline at 15% CKD, though still within acceptable limits, suggests diminishing returns and reinforces 12.5% as the most effective stabilization ratio.

Findings of the Study

1. CBR and UCS increased with CKD addition. The maximum values were recorded at 12.5% CKD.
2. The optimal CKD content that satisfies subgrade material standards is **12.5%**, offering the best combination of strength and durability.

DISCUSSION

Discussion of CBR and UCS Improvement with CKD Addition

The experimental results demonstrated that both California Bearing Ratio (CBR) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS) values increased significantly with the addition of cement kiln dust (CKD), reaching peak values at 12.5% CKD content. This improvement can be attributed to three primary mechanisms. First, the pozzolanic reactions between CKD's calcium compounds and the soil's silica and alumina form cementitious gels that enhance interparticle bonding (Osinubi et al., 2017). Second, CKD particles effectively fill void spaces between soil particles, resulting in a denser and more stable matrix (Amadi, 2014). Third, the chemical stabilization reduces the soil's plasticity index, thereby minimizing its expansive characteristics (Salahudeen et al., 2018). However, beyond the 12.5% optimum, excessive CKD content led to reduced strength gains, likely due to disruption of optimal particle packing and formation of weak zones within the soil matrix (Ola, 2015).

Discussion of Optimal CKD Content for Subgrade Applications

The 12.5% CKD mixture emerged as the optimal stabilization level for subgrade applications based on comprehensive performance criteria. This mix proportion successfully met all critical specifications including the minimum CBR requirement of 10% and UCS threshold of 100 kN/m² as prescribed by highway design standards (Federal Ministry of Works, 1997). Comparative analysis revealed that while 10% CKD met basic requirements, the 12.5% mix demonstrated superior durability under saturated conditions, a crucial factor for subgrade performance in tropical climates (Osinubi and Nwaiwu, 2005). Economic considerations further supported this optimum, as higher CKD contents (15%) provided marginal additional benefits while increasing material costs (Al-Rawas et al., 2005). The 12.5% stabilization effectively transformed the problematic black cotton soil into a competent engineering material suitable for supporting pavement structures.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that Cement Kiln Dust (CKD) effectively stabilizes black cotton soil, significantly improving its geotechnical properties for road subgrade applications. The optimum CKD content of 12.5% was found to deliver peak

performance, meeting and exceeding standard requirements for California Bearing Ratio (CBR ≥ 10%) and Unconfined Compressive Strength (UCS ≥100 kN/m²). The strength improvements are attributed to pozzolanic reactions, reduced plasticity, and enhanced soil densification. Beyond 12.5% CKD, diminishing returns were observed due to excessive fines disrupting optimal particle packing. The 12.5% mix not only provides superior mechanical performance but also offers cost-effectiveness and long-term durability, making it the recommended stabilization level for road construction in black cotton soil regions. For successful field implementation, proper compaction, moisture control, and quality assurance are essential. Future research should focus on long-term field performance under traffic loads and environmental exposure to validate laboratory findings. This study highlights CKD stabilization as a sustainable, economical, and technically viable solution for improving problematic soils in infrastructure development.

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