

SOCIAL APPROACHES IN POTTERY DISTRIBUTION NETWORKS: THE CASE OF UPPER EAST GHANA

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This paper is part of the *Archaeology in the Upper White Volta (Ghana NE)* project¹. The project is a comprehensive ethnoarchaeological study that includes, among other things, the analysis of multiple aspects related to the production, distribution and use of ceramics. The study area is centred in the districts of *Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo* and *Garu-Tempane*, in northeast Ghana (Fig. 1). Different ethnic groups with varying cultural and linguistic characteristics (Mamprusi, Kusasi, Fulani, Komba, B'Moba and Busanga) live together in this region.

Pottery distribution studies have usually been focused on the economic value of the products (Vossen 1984), means of transport and communication (Vander Linden 2001), labour organization (Arnold III 1991, Costin 1990), or in the technological and typological characteristics of pots (García Rosselló 2008). From an ethnoarchaeological point of view, our work here attempts to emphasize how other variables, such as social relationships and ideology, are also involved in the creation of complex pottery exchange networks. These aspects are essential to achieve a deeper understanding of how north-eastern Ghanaian communities produce and use ceramics.

In our case study the variables which simultaneously influence vessel distribution and consumption patterns are multiple: infrastructure of mobility (roads, means of transport), scale of production and qualities of pots, labour organization, territoriality and settlement (Fig. 2). Nevertheless, social and familial relationships, and also different social perceptions established between the various ethnic groups, are active agents that determine the distribution areas, networks and trade systems as well as the choices of consumers.

Only Komba and Kusasi women produce and distribute pottery. However, the consumer group is much larger, encompassing all ethnic groups living in the area, about 5000 km² (Figure 1). In this regard, we have to take into account: 1) the mechanisms underlying the establishment of distribution networks

and 2) the existing exchange types. Both show two different strategies depending on whether they are Komba or Kusasi products.

Distribution patterns of Komba ceramics and types of exchange

The Komba production area is characterized by footpaths, a dispersed settlement with low population density and limited markets that are not too large. Mobility in the area is thus restricted, especially in the rainy season (from May to September). Also, the fabrication technology results in a reduced volume of production. All this restricts the pottery distribution area mainly to around production sites and nearby markets. In this context, we can establish two kinds of exchange: 1) the first is direct sale at markets, where the non-producer groups acquire the ceramics. 2) The second relates to social networks and family connections whereby sale is made directly at the production site on previous request. Sometimes, this kind of interchange can exceed those limits as discussed below.

Distribution patterns of Kusasi ceramics and types of exchange

The Kusasi production sites are located near to the Garu and Tempane markets. Gravel and partly-asphalted roads comprise infrastructure relating to mobility. This allows motor vehicle traffic all the year. The roads permit the transport of pottery by inter-city buses and trucks (Fig. 3a). At the same time, fabrication technology and the organization of labour enhance the production of a larger volume of pottery in a shorter time and a continuous supply of ceramics in a relatively large area. More vessels are therefore distributed in the Kusasi area than in the Komba area.

These factors have determined the existence of more dynamic and complex types of exchange. We have documented the presence of intermediaries and a system of direct selling in the markets, characterized by partnerships among potters. The distribution network is at two levels: the first one from the production site to nearby markets often using donkey-drawn carts (Fig. 3b), and a second level from the main market (Garu) to other markets, such as Nakpanduri, using motor vehicles.

In this sense we can identify and define the following exchange strategies:

1) Direct sale in markets: potters sell their products in the Tempane and Garu markets where they collectively set up selling points according to their area of origin and the types of the vessels they sell. Also, some potters individually sell their pots together with processed or agricultural products.

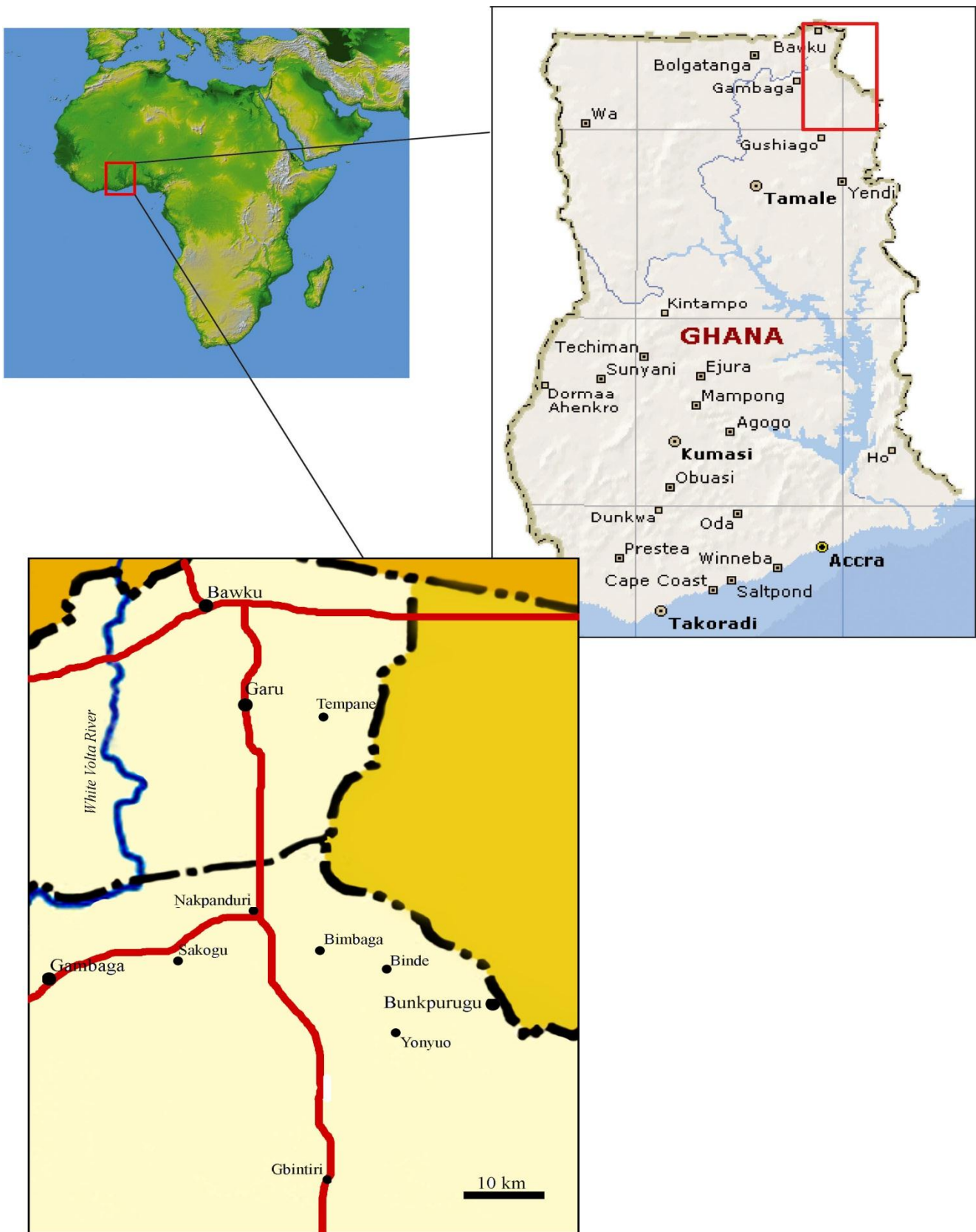


Figure 1: Geographic location of the studied area within north-east Ghana.

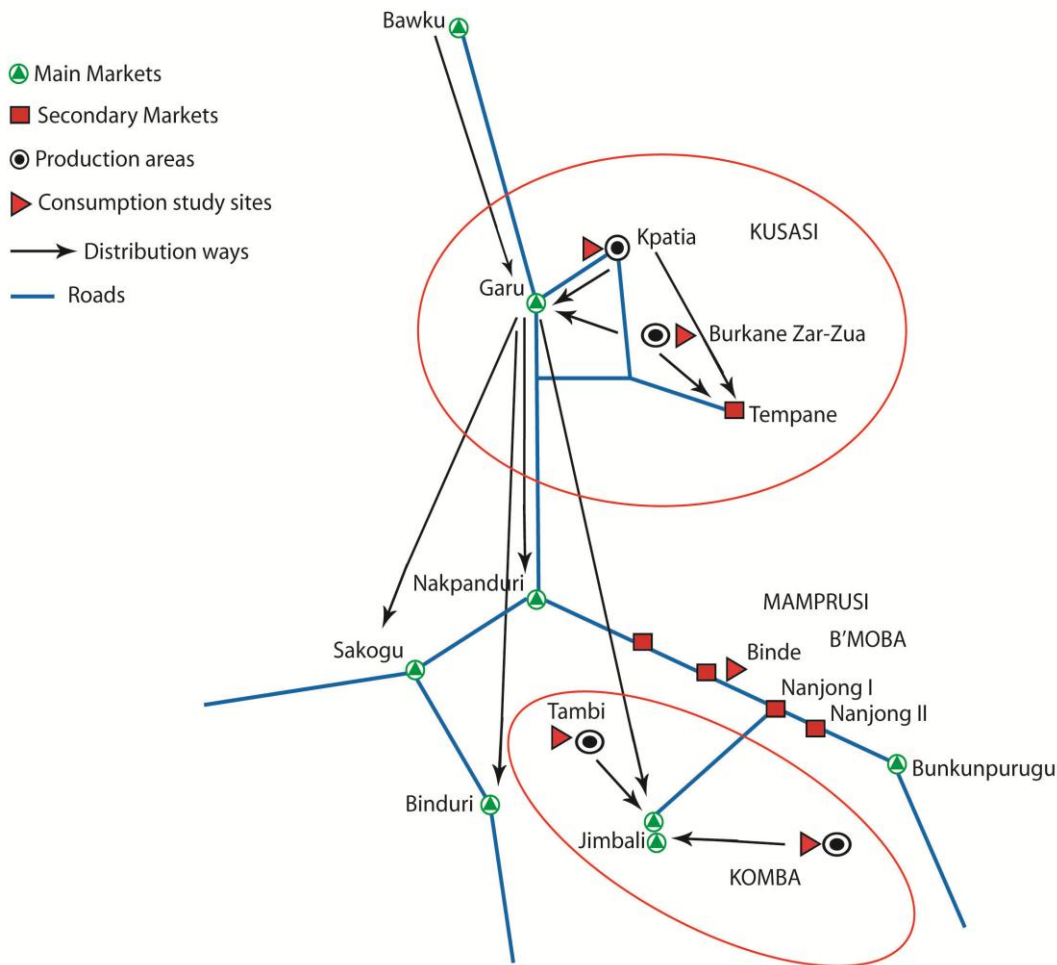


Figure 2: Schematic sketch of the study area showing pottery transactions in the districts of Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo and Garu-Tempene. Each arrow refers to pottery distributions between villages.

2) Sale in the production site: in this case intermediaries connected by family ties with potters acquire the vessels at the production site. Repeatedly, women of non-producing areas buy all the ceramics they need directly from potters who have contact with them through family ties.

3) Sale in markets by intermediaries: women, who were once potters but no longer make pots, or whose relatives are potters, often serve as intermediaries. They buy the products directly from potters and redistribute them in major markets like Nakpanduri, Garu, Bawku, and Binduri (Fig. 3c).

4) Sale from intermediary to intermediary: In some cases the intermediaries engage in the distribution from a stall in the main market of Garu where intermediaries from other localities, including Bunde and Nagpanduri, purchase vessels to sell in communities where they live.

Discussion

Several scholars have argued that in semi-domestic production contexts, geographical proximity determines the distribution of pottery in a territory, both in the way it is distributed and its degree of variability (Arnold 2000; Livingstone-Smith 2000; García Rosselló 2008). However, as pointed out by Vander Linden (2001), approaching the understanding of ceramics distribution from only this viewpoint is reductionist. This point is reflected perfectly in the territory studied. Although the Komba production and distribution centres are located near the Mamprusi area (less than 30 km), the majority of pottery consumed by the Mamprusi is of Kusasi, and comes from more distant centres (Garu > 50km, or Bawku > 80 km). This shows that other factors, such as social and family relationships, and consumer preferences, are affecting the distribution of ceramics.



Figure 3: A and B) Infrastructures of mobility: inter-city trucks and donkey-drawn carts (Garu). C) Direct point of sale in the market of Binduri. D) Komba pottery set belonging to a woman and acquired at the time of marriage (Tambi).

As an illustration of this dynamic we analyse two examples: family interactions in the acquisition of ceramics, and the influence of social value of ceramics on distribution.

Beyond pottery used daily for food preparation and consumption, the women of our study area own a set of large vessels in which they keep their personal belongings and store grains. The women usually acquire such ceramics in their birthplaces, have strong identity relationships with the vessels, attach high symbolic value to them, and hence use them throughout their lives. The pottery set is acquired by a bride or by her parents at the time of marriage, either when the bride moves to the husband's home or after she gives birth to her first child. This is a clear example in which pottery distribution is articulated through social networks and not by geographical, economic, or mobility variables. The second example relates to the different perceptions that consumers have of Komba and Kusasi ceramics. The former are considered by consumers to be heavier, rougher and more fragile than the latter. Nevertheless, our analyses show that differences between both types of pottery are not large enough to support this view. Consumer preferences appear to be connected rather to the

complex social, political and economic relationships established between the different ethnic groups. The rest of the ethnic groups in the study area often perceive the Komba people as traditional in their way of life and see their pottery in this light. This may partly explain the limited distribution and acceptance of Komba ceramics in the area.

We have attempted to show in this discussion that the variables involved in pottery movement and distribution are significantly complex and interconnected. Therefore, we cannot, as a general rule, account for the distribution of non-standard and semi-domestic pottery on the basis of only low mobility and strict local character. We must also consider that social relationships play a major structuring role in the formation of exchange types, organizational systems and scale of pottery distribution. Within the same territory, therefore, there may be different, overlapping and constantly changing distribution patterns.

¹ Archaeology in the upper White Volta basin. Northeast of Ghana. Ministerio de Cultura de España SGIPCE/AM/cmm (Archaeology abroad projects 2010).

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