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Social Identities and Material Culture: Oral History, Archaeology and Ethnoarchaeology in the Upper Basin of the White Volta (NE Ghana)

Manuel Calvo[1], Kodzo Gavua[2], Jaume García Rosselló[1], David Javaloyas1, and Daniel Albero[1]
[1]ArqueoUIB - Research Group in Material culture and Archaeological Heritage, University of the Balearic Islands (Spain).
[2]Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies, University of Ghana.

Introduction

This article presents an update of the overall results from ethnoarchaeological field seasons carried out between 2009 and 2013 in the frame of the project "Oral history, archaeology and ethnoarchaeology in the upper basin of the White Volta (NE Ghana)", a joint research by the University of the Balearic Islands (Spain) and the University of Ghana.

The project aims to develop multidisciplinary research by combining different strategies -archaeology, ethnoarchaeology and oral history - in the study of the diverse social identities that define daily life of the communities of people inhabiting the upper basin of the White Volta river. Specifically, this multidisciplinary approach intends to broaden our knowledge of how these social identities are constructed and continuously modified, as well as to understand the role material culture has played in this process.

The upper basin of the White Volta river –particularly the districts we consider in our research: Bawku, Garu-Tempane, Nakpanduri and Bukumpurugu-Yunyoo (Figure 1) is, in this sense, an extremely fertile ground due to the presence of diverse language groups and people who consider themselves to belong to different ethnic groups. However, the actual boundaries of the territories occupied by each ethnic group is not clearly defined; similarly, both their political identities and the consequent relationship with the Ghanaian state are heterogeneous. Furthermore, the several communities inhabiting this area also profess a wide range of religious identities. This large diversity of identitarian manifestations coexisting in a relatively reduced territory initially drew our attention. Consequently, we proposed to study how the different social identities present in the area interact. We hope this approach will broaden our knowledge of material culture as a crucial agent that actively participates in the continuous shaping of identities.

The first field seasons were focused on the issue of ethnic identity, taking as a premise that it is one of the key elements defining the social identity of the daily life of people living in the area. We are fully aware of the complexity embedded in the concept of ethnic identity and the multiple - and often contradictory - ways to define it. In this case, we understand ethnicity as the specific expression in the present of the social identity of a group, characterized by the real, metaphorical or fictional kinship developed amongst the members of the group. In this kinship construction, the genealogical or biological reality is generally secondary or irrelevant, as the truly significant feature is the claim and acceptance – both by group members and by other groups – of a common ancestor (Emberling 1997: 302; Eriksen 1993: 12; Jones 1997; Meskell 2001; Sweeney 2009; Weber 1968: 289).

Hence, we assume that ethnicity is a socially constructed phenomenon, with a historical contingency, which responds to social practices acting in the present. It is thus a dynamic phenomenon constantly recreating itself, which is reformulated through time and where multiple forms of social identity take part (Lentz 2000). According to this

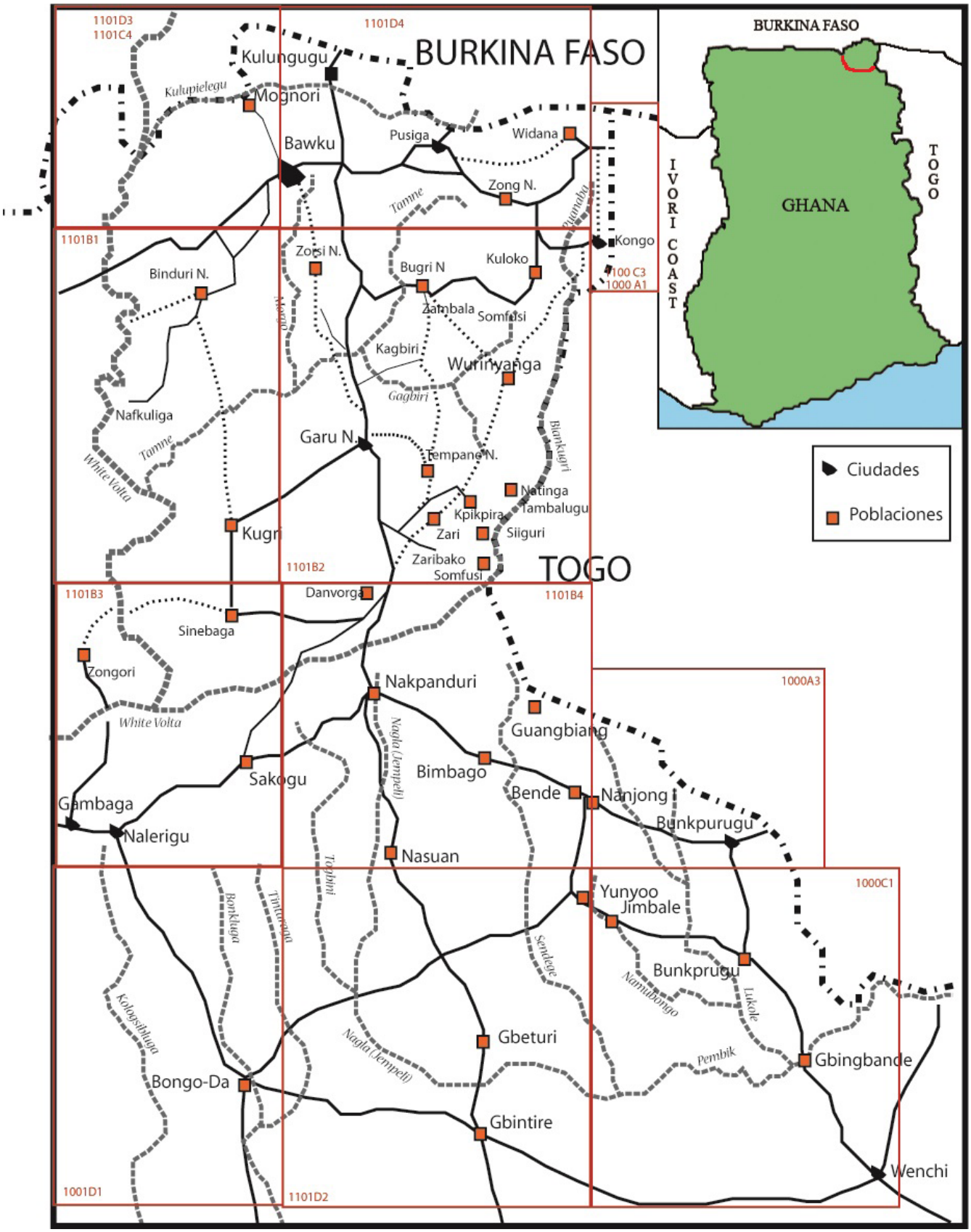

Figure 1: Map of the study area.

interpretative framework, the analysis of materiality, as an element participating in the generation of identitarian dynamics, presents several advantages because it allows the tracing of social practices – ethnicity in this case – which are generally marginalized by the dominant political, social and scientific discourse. In other words, the study of materiality gives way to the recognition of other dynamics related to the construction of apparently less explicit social identity. This explains why part of our work has been focused on the identification of ethnicity and its fluent and constantly negotiated nature by considering two social practices with clear material expressions that are widely practiced amongst the inhabitants of the territory studied independent of their ethnic affiliation: pottery and domestic place.

Ethnicity in Northeast Ghana: a Historical Approach

We understand that the premise that ethnicity is one of the main social identities defining the modern communities we study is not obvious and demands a thorough analysis. Thus, this section provides a summary of this issue, which justifies our starting point.

Despite the generalized lack of historical and archeological sources on the topic, there is a large amount of work that has built up a strong narrative where three broad historical processes for the origin of ethnic identities in NE Ghana can be identified. These works are based mainly on the different collections of historical traditions of the local communities that have been written down since the arrival of Western European settlers in the area.

The first historical process is defined by the arrival of new peoples to the area. Hence, some scholars (Davis 1986, 1997; Drucker-Brown 1986; Wilks 1981) state that Mole-Dagbane communities from the northeast settled in this territory between the 13th and 14th centuries AD (Cleveland 1991; Drucker-Brown 1975, 1992; Fage 1964; Manoukian 1951). These newcomers would be characterized by a centralized hierarchical political organization of a chieftaincy or kingship (Rattray 1931:46) as well as the system of patrilineal descent, two aspects that differentiated them from the "acephalous" groups who had previously inhabited the area.

In turn, the second historical process refers to the relationships established between these large groups. Regarding this question, many researchers (Bogner 2000; Brukum 2001; Dawson 2000; Maasole 2006; Manoukian 1951; Mather 1999; Pul 2003; Tonah 2005a) argue that, while occupying the territory, the hierarchical groups subjugated the acephalous native peoples.

Finally, the third large historical process involves the arrival of Europeans and the establishment of the British colony after 1898. This new situation triggered substantial changes in the indigenous socio-political systems. In the early 1920s, the interest of the British colonial government in implementing a more efficient colonial system favored the exertion of power and the spread of the political structure of the chieftaincy - typical of the groups incorporated during the second process - over the other ethnic groups living in the territory through the *indirect rule* system. This decision had two direct consequences of great importance: first, a new political system in which ethnic divisions were the main structuring units was established and, second, the sub-chiefs of the traditional hierarchical groups were sent to the territories inhabited by the acephalous communities, giving rise to a period of conflict (Pul 2003).

This is roughly the most widely accepted discourse about the origins of the ethnic identities present in northeast Ghana. These narratives basically follow essentialist perspectives, which emphasize the presence of ethnic groups prior to the arrival of Europeans in Africa, though accepting the substantial modifications introduced during the colonial phase. From our point of view these discourses are not fully reliable as they are supported by the data collected and processed by colonial officials at the beginning of the European authority in the area, who conceived ethnic identities as rigid

and stable realities. Despite the problems embedded in an accurate reconstruction of the origins of ethnic identities, it seems clear that at one point during the colonial phase, they must have been visible features which constituted the daily routines of the local communities.

By the early 1950s, two major political changes took place: first during the self-government phase and then with the independence of Ghana in 1956. Since independence, a succession of differing political phases have altered the status of the power exerted by the traditional chieftaincy systems in the Ghanaian state, moving from a desire to reduce their power to its promotion (Boafo-Arthur 2003; Jönsson 2009; Pul 2003).

Since 1992, the central government has officially recognized the chieftaincy system by including the Chieftaincy Act of 1971 in the new Constitution without any of the subsequent amendments. This new document regulated the position of traditional chiefdoms in the current political system, while demanding the creation of major administrative bodies inside the system, and that were granted absolute power on the decisions regarding the organization of traditional chieftaincy without the intervention of the Ghanaian state (Boafo-Arthur 2003; Pul 2003; Jönsson 2009).

This legal regulation confirms the dominance of the hierarchical groups over the acephalous peoples described in the narrative of the traditional discourse about the origins of the ethnic identities in northern Ghana, where differentiation between acephalous and hierarchical groups is one of the defining elements. Thus, the incorporation of the Chieftaincy Act in the Constitution of the modern Ghanaian state implied the acknowledgement of the power of the traditional chiefdoms and, at the same time, the marginalization from the political sphere of the numerous ethnic groups traditionally considered acephalous.

One of the main consequences of this political situation is the existence of serious inter-ethnic conflicts. One of the best examples of this belligerent situation is the case of the Konkomba groups, who live in the Northern Region and have traditionally been considered acephalous. Despite representing 17.3% of the local population they have gained no recognized political voice, as the dominant ethnic groups - some of them much smaller in demographic terms - have systematically denied them the right to have a paramount chief. This situation has generated rising tensions in the area, including the outbreak of several military interventions, such as the so-called wars of 'Pitu', 'Mango' and 'Guinea Fowl' (Bogner 2000; Brukum 2001; Ladouceur 1979; Staniland 1975; Tonah 2005a,b; Weiss 2005).

The list of inter-ethnic conflicts due to similar situations is long. The importance of ethnic identities, however, surpasses these conflicts as the intermingled relations between ethnic identities and political power are major issues defining the life of such communities in many crucial areas, including access to public infrastructure (transport, health, education) or even the right to own property in an increasingly capitalist land appropriation system.

The Pottery

The study of pottery is separated into three areas according to its *chaîne operátoire*: production, distribution and consumption.

Production. In the area considered, Konkomba and Kusasi women exclusively manufacture pottery. This situation has given rise to two different technological traditions within a rather similar production context: manufacture in the domestic domain on the one hand, and a part-time activity complementing domestic chores and agricultural activities on the other (Calvo *et al*. 2011, 2013a). Pottery types made by both groups include comparable forms that are mainly distinguished by their metric proportions and decorative patterns (Figures 2 and 3).

Konkomba manufacturing systems are characterized by pastes mixed with crushed sherds, a

Figure 2: Technical manufacturing systems.

Figure 3: Konkomba and kusasi major ceramic types.

convex-molded base and a type of coiling technique where the coils are placed in an alternated fashion making two lines joined by pressing (Albero *et al*. 2013). The vessels are later fired in surface kilns. Kusasi modeling strategies are defined by the use of untempered clay, a molded base, and either the application of overlapping coils or stacking a line of coils and joining them by internal pressing of the lower joining area to be later smoothed. Firing in this case takes place in one-chamber permanent kilns (Calvo *et al*. forthcoming).

Distribution. Regarding distribution, there are also two alternative models (Calvo *et al.* 2013a Figure 4). The first one is a small-scale and short distance distribution limited to the potters' residential and production area. This strategy, quite frequent in Konkomba communities, implies that people in the same community or living nearby move to the production area to purchase the products. The potters may also attend the markets near their residence - such as the one in Jimbale or Garu- to sell their products either in individual stalls or as groups of

women of the same origin offering a similar kind of good. The second model, which is exclusively related to Kusasi production, covers a larger scale and generates a greater dispersion of pottery throughout the territory. In this distribution system, some non-producer intermediaries, who may be of a different ethnic affiliation from the potters, also participate. The spread of the products from the production area is conditioned by their Kusasi or Konkomba origin, amongst a myriad of other factors (Calvo *et al.* 2011, 2013a) including social ties, which in this case are both of an ethnic and kinship nature.

Use. Pottery products are used by most of the population regardless of their ethnic affiliation. These products include containers to store all kinds of products, cooking pots and bowls for food consumption, or pottery vessels for the shrines. These products make up the female domain, whereas only the ones related to the ancestor cults are acquired and manipulated by men. The preference for either Kusasi or Konkomba pottery basically rests on three conditions: 1) the existence of any kind of social contact, generally related to kinship or a common birthplace with the potter; 2) access to such products in the market; and 3) perceptions of the pottery and its producers. For instance, once her first child is born and she receives her own bedroom, the woman potter acquires a familiar pottery "dowry" to store her possessions in her sleeping area. The

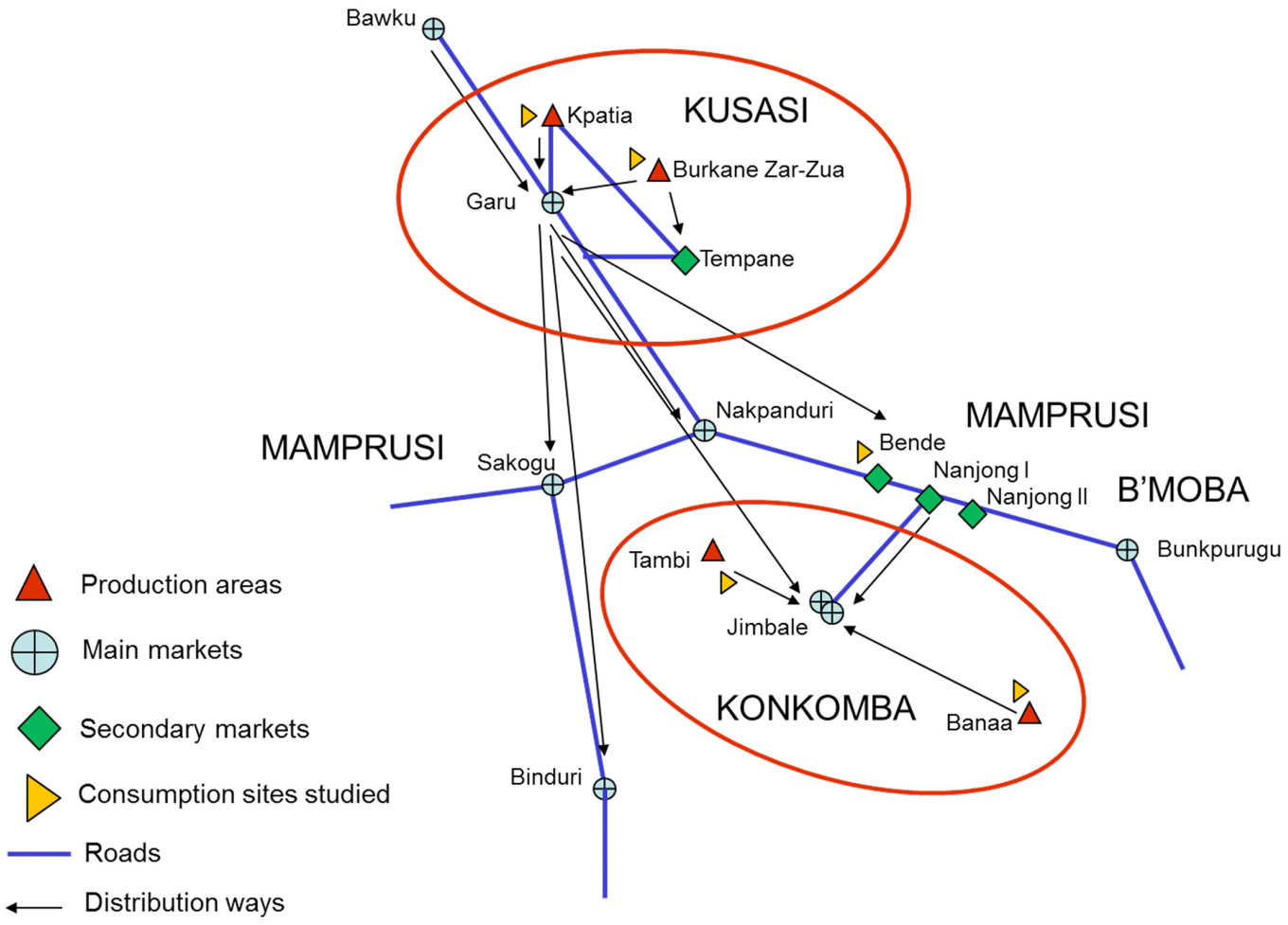

Figure 4: Ceramic distribution patterns.

dowry may be inherited from her mother or bought by her parents for her new room in her birthplace. As opposed to this acquisition based on deep kinship or ethnic values, the rest of the purchases of pottery are basically conditioned by access to either Konkomba or Kusasi productions. As mentioned, the larger distribution of Kusasi pottery, as well as the general perception of its higher quality over Konkomba material, make the former more heavily used in the territory under study, except specifically in the Konkomba area.

The Domestic Place

The aim of this line of research is to define the domestic places of the different ethnic groups inhabiting the study area. In order to do so we have to assume that any place is socially, culturally and historically built. At the same time, such places should not be considered as the sole result of human actions but also as an active element which models social reality. From this point of view, we expect to identify how the domestic place mirrors to a large

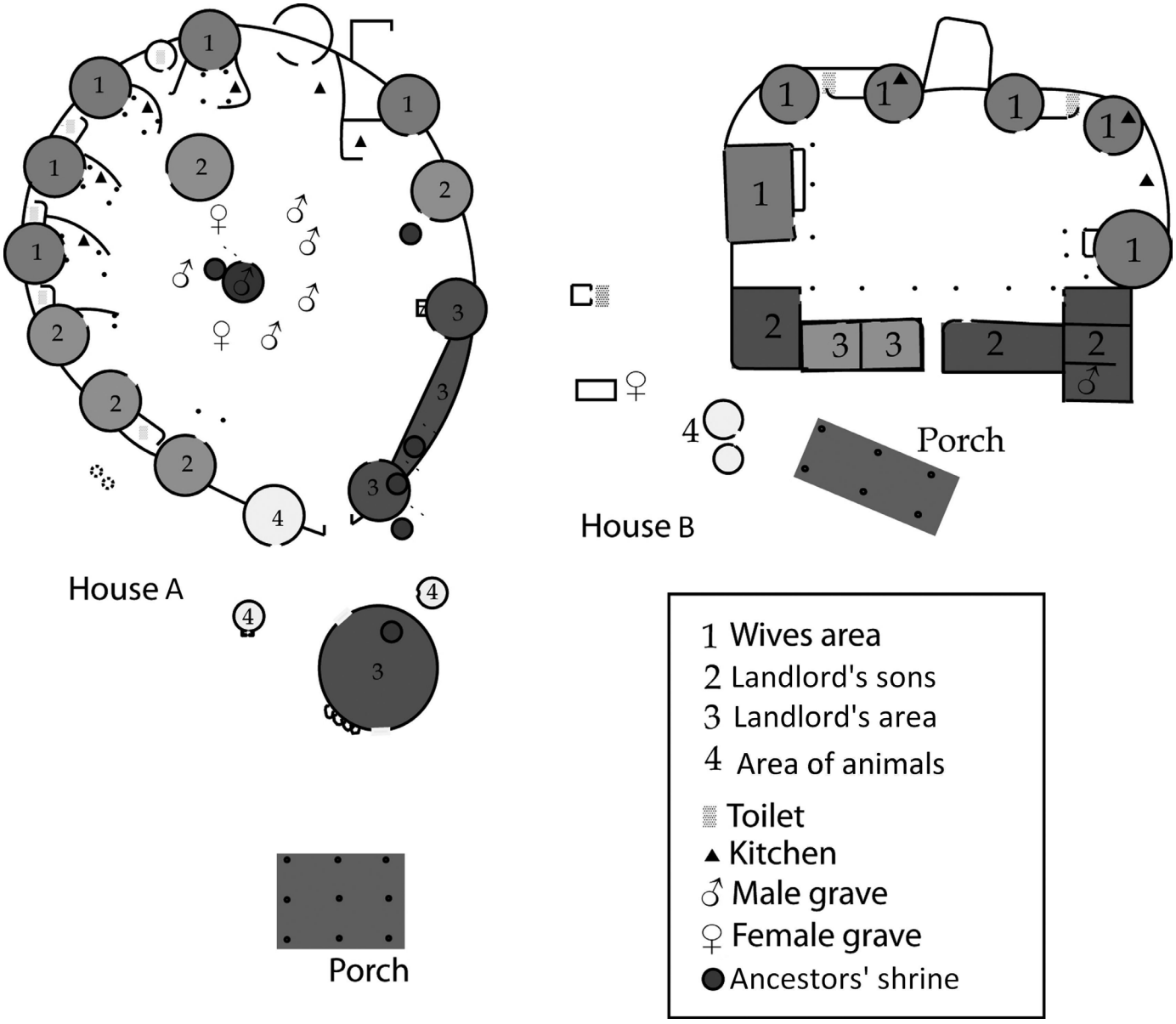

Figure 5: Spatial analysis of two Mamprusi houses from Binde (Bukumpurugu-Yunyoo; Northern Region).

extent the socioeconomic situation of the human groups who occupy it. Furthermore, we want to put in evidence how inhabitants use domestic places daily to express and codify multiple messages, and to renegotiate their positions in the social arena.

In this sense, we state that in the territory located in the surroundings of the upper White Volta basin, domestic dwellings greatly reproduce the socioeconomic structure of their inhabitants while playing a key active role in the configuration of social reality. The domestic place has a great importance in the symbolic daily life of the peoples of the area: it witnesses a large part of everyday activities, from giving birth to learning, feeding practices, craftsmanship and other aspects more closely related to the symbolic-religious world, including sometimes their members' own deaths.

Broadly speaking, there is a dwelling model, which is reproduced throughout northeast Ghana (Figure 5). These places are defined by an assemblage of round bedrooms around a central yard (nowadays square bedrooms built with industrial materials are also found. The bedrooms are the property of the landlord, his wives (as it is a polygynous society) and adult sons who have their own families. These house-rooms are the real private places for the inhabitants, as deduced from the lack of their visibility from outside the dwelling, and the presence of doors. This is in clear contrast to the public nature of the central yard where most of the house chores are carried out.

Gender issues are partly reflected and constructed in the spatial organization of the dwelling: men's bedrooms are located near the entrance, whereas women's are found further away. In this distant place, each wife has her own kitchen, where the food for her children is prepared and her own foodstuff is stored. This spatial arrangement appears to reflect norms that require men to ensure the security of women. Similarly, the agricultural and herding economic base is represented in the existence of several areas devoted to grain storage, the presence of pens for domestic animals or the vegetable gardens found outside the dwelling. Finally, dwellings are also the physical place where a large part of the symbolic activities of the community takes place, with places for the cult of ancestors and burial.

Regarding the material representation of ethnic identities in the domestic place, we observe the existence of clear differences in the distribution of areas and their daily use. There is, however, a conspicuous material element recognized by most social agents as a token of ethnic identification: the

Figure 6: Differences between Mamprusi, Konkomba and Bimoba roofing systems.

roof of bedrooms. In the Bunkpurungu-Yunyoo district, inhabited by Mamprusi, Konkomba and Bimoba communities, the men in charge of this task can identify specific ways of roofing the bedrooms depending on the owner's affiliation to a specific ethnic group (Figure 6).

From our point of view, these different kinds of roofs may be connected to the idea that they depend on building techniques that have been transmitted in the domestic domain from father to son, and, thus, are closely related to the construction of ethnicity, which is fundamentally based on the genealogical relationship established by the father's lineage. In this sense, actively reproducing these technical solutions together with their own social agents' identification as defining elements at an ethnic level, supports the construction of these identities in daily practice.

Conclusions

In this paper we present the first results of the ethnoarchaeological study we have been leading in the Upper White Volta basin regarding the relations found between ethnic identity and material culture. We have stated that ethnic identities in northeast Ghana are key elements in the configuration of the current reality of local communities. However, far from being stable and permanent structures, social identities are fluid constructions that continuously change as they engage with long term complex processes involving a large number of agents with diverse perspectives resulting in new identities emerging from existing ones. In other words, ethnic identities are in a permanent negotiation between the past and the present.

As already discussed, material culture is closely related to this phenomenon and may be used as a pragmatic tool to observe certain dynamic identities that are not as visible as the ones that can be deduced from political relations amongst the communities. It is mainly due to its definition as the relevant theater where identity is constantly negotiated.

For instance, female ethnic identity in Konkomba and Kusasi communities is nowadays related to the manufacture of pottery. Nevertheless, pottery production in the recent past was also a common practice amongst other groups such as the Bimoba or the Busanga. Similarly, in spite of the strong differences in the production of both groups, the distribution, use and consumption of pottery are absolutely generalized throughout the territory. Although particular preferences for some products may be related to the ethnic identity of the customer, the several ethnic groups are not permeable despite their regular contact. Existing relationships are used to shape the community's own identity and to conceptualize the rest of the groups living in the same territory. At the same time, these contacts promote the existence of common practices shared worldwide.

In this sense, a phenomenon worth mentioning is the kind of dwelling used. Broadly speaking, the model chosen is quite generalized in the study area regardless of the ethnic affiliation of the inhabitants. Most variations on this pattern are more conditioned by a dichotomy opposing the urban and rural world, modernism and tradition, as well as by the religious profession of the landlord and gender or socioeconomic distinctions rather than by ethnicity. Only a few specific elements such as the roof of bedrooms seem to depict a strong ethnic identity of the father's lineage of the family.

However, due to the fluent, relational and permanent nature of the construction of ethnic identities as well as of their intermingled relationship with the rest of the social identities, ethnic differentiation expressed in the roofs of bedrooms should be contextualized with remaining social practices. For instance, women decorate the external walls facing the central public yard where they carry out a large number of their daily activities. When the women's ethnic identity does not coincide with the landlord's, a renegotiation process of the social positions held by the different agents is recreated in the material culture.

A second noteworthy example highlights the tension existing between tradition and modernity as a negotiation stage to gain access to political and economic power (Calvo *et al.* 2013b). Nowadays it is frequent to witness how some men with certain economic power replace the traditional rounded bedrooms modeled with clay and thatched roofs with square rooms built by specialists who use industrial building blocks and corrugated tin roofs that eliminate the ethnic affiliation of these structures. However, in several cases traditional alternatives are preferred, and reject these new technical manifestations.

In sum, preliminary results for this project provide a better understanding of the complex relationships amongst social practices, ethnic identity and material culture that characterize the local communities in northeast Ghana.

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