

GHANA

Excavations and Surveys in the Tongo Hills, Upper East Region, Ghana. July 2005. Fieldwork Report

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Introduction

This note describes the results of a season of excavations and survey focused upon the Tongo Hills of Upper East Region in July 2005. The primary aims of the fieldwork were (1) to reconstruct the sequence of occupation in the Tongo Hills; (2) to obtain ceramics which could be compared with those recovered from excavations previously completed in Gambaga, the capital of Mamprussi (known via oral tradition to have exerted an influence upon the Tallensi through, for example, population transfer and slave raiding [Fortes 1945, 1949, 1987]), and currently being prepared for publication (K. Fowler, pers. comm.); (3) to evaluate the archaeology of African traditional religions via Tallensi material culture (see Insoll in press); and (4) to assess variant perceptions of landscape amongst the Tallensi primarily as a mechanism for indicating the fallacy of phenomenological models currently fashionable in aspects of prehistoric European archaeology (see Tilley 1994, 2004; Insoll 2004). This season follows on from a preliminary survey undertaken in the Upper East and Northern Regions in July and

August 2004 and completed under Ghana Museums and Monuments Board permit number 0151/vol.6/257 (Insoll *et al.* 2004). The 2005 season was carried out under permit number 0425/vol.5/161 issued by the Ghana Museums and Monument Board.

Survey

The survey strategy had three aims: (1) to record all vestiges of archaeology in the Tongo Hills; (2) to complete an EDM survey of the Nyoo and Bonaab shrines; and (3) to complete a botanical and ethnobotanical survey of the Tongo Hills. The first aim was achieved by finishing the intensive transect survey begun in 2004 (Insoll *et al.* 2004). Specifically, focusing upon the eastern side of the Tongo Hills between the ascent to Tongo proper (N10°41'09.0" W000°48'13.5") and the descent to Yinduri (N10°40'23.3" W000°49'10.8"). Various sites and features were recorded including numerous instances of possible rock gongs, grinding hollows and cup marks, abandoned areas of agricultural terracing (e.g. N10°40'23.3" W000°49'10.8"), cemeteries (e.g. Gundaat – N10°40'50.1" W000°48'33.4"), extensive pottery scatters attesting to former village sites (e.g. Old Yinduri), and shrines associated with rituals completed prior to the start of the Golib festival (e.g. Kuitnaab – N10°40'18.8" W000°48'39.5").

An EDM survey of both the Nyoo and Bonaab shrines was also undertaken. These are two of the most important shrines in the Tongo Hills; the former being utilized, for instance, during the annual pre-farming season Gologo or Golib festival (Fortes 1945), and the latter a sacred grove which has “benevolent, protective and curative” properties (Kankpeyeng 2001:24). This survey was completed to accurately define the boundaries of these shrines, and to plan their internal features such as hearths and sacrifice places. But besides accurately planning these elements, the botanical elements of the shrines (trees and shrubs) were also treated as separate features and hence plotted in as well. By treating the botanical components in this way it was realized that the shrines were far from ‘natural’ places but largely created as the result of human action and interference (Insoll, in preparation).

This last observation was confirmed by the third element of the survey; the botanical inventory. This was undertaken by Daniel Abbiw of the Botany

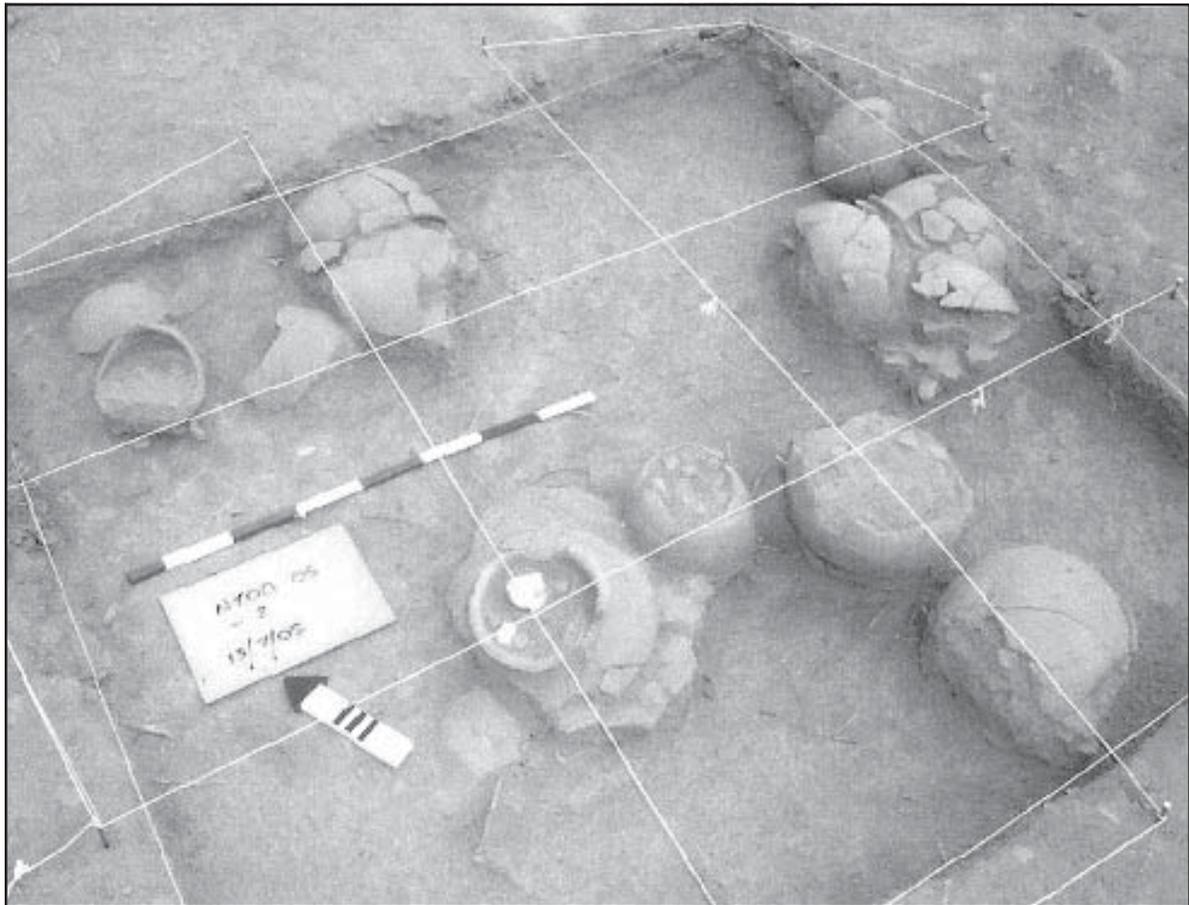
Department of the University of Ghana, Legon. In total, 39 species of trees and scrubs were recorded in the Tongo Hills which are, overall, representative of edaphic climax vegetation but which are also largely surviving as they are either economically useful and/or have prohibitions placed upon their exploitation (Abbiw 1990). Hence very little 'natural' vegetation exists in the Tongo Hills. A digital photographic record of all the plant types was also made, and the botanical inventory was extended down from the hills, south-east, onto the plain below in the vicinity of Santeng for comparative purposes, where it was noted that the vegetation, if anything, was even more denuded. Completing the EDM survey was also constructive in indicating that rather than the Nyoo shrine being merely a sacred grove as previously thought, it seems also to be constituted in part by an abandoned village, as attested, for example, by the abundant stone structural remains recorded.

Excavations

Prior to beginning the excavations, a series of meetings were held with the representatives of both secular and spiritual authority; the chiefs, earth priests, and elders, and the assembly man. The necessary sacrifices were also completed in order to allow the excavations to proceed; these were successful and permission was given. This approach of consultation and continual involvement of the local community in all aspects of the project has been a vital element of its success and a key methodological tool, and was similarly utilized to gain initial research and survey access (Insoll *et al.* 2004).

The Nyoo shrine was made the focus of two trial excavations. Following the identification of the putative village a 1.5 m square test pit was excavated at the eastern end of the area where the structural

Figure 1. Pots in situ, NYOO 05 (A) (All photographs by T. Insoll).



remains were recorded (assigned the code NYOO 05 [A] – N10°40'30.8" W000°48'39.4"). It was found that the whole of the trench was filled to a depth of approximately 40 cm with complete pottery vessels and sherds which had been forced into the ground, seemingly representative of an act of structured 'ritual' deposition (Figure 1). Fragments of quartz were found within some of the vessel mouths, but whether this is intentional is unknown. These ceramics were layered upon each other - i.e. as the pots collapsed they crushed down on further vessels below - and in so doing have provided an extensive assemblage of pottery types for comparative purposes with those from Gambaga (Figure 2). Furthermore, the ceramics themselves can also be dated by the thermoluminescence (TL), as organic materials, including charcoal, were not obtained in sufficient enough quantity to enable conventional C14 dating to take place. The dating is to be completed in the TL laboratory in the Department of Archaeology, University of Durham.

Surface indications illustrated that this pottery spread extended for some 300 m east to west, interspersed with stone rubble, seemingly, from collapsed houses (though this latter observation is at present uncertain), for perhaps 200 m of the total extent. The large area which the pottery covered was confirmed by a further 1m square test pit placed at the western extent of the ceramic spread (NYOO 05 [B] – N10°40'32.5" W000°48'39.9"), with again, densely packed pottery recorded, ceramic material found in association with two standing stones of ca.1m in height. The latter formed part of a 'field' of ca. 45 standing stones of similar dimensions – whose purpose and date is as yet unknown (Figure 3). Interestingly, it would seem that the majority of the lithic material used to produce the standing stones was imported and might not be representative of the geology of the Tongo Hills themselves. This observation will be confirmed by including a geologist from the Department of Geology, University of Ghana,

Figure 2. Ceramics from NYOO 05 (A) 2.

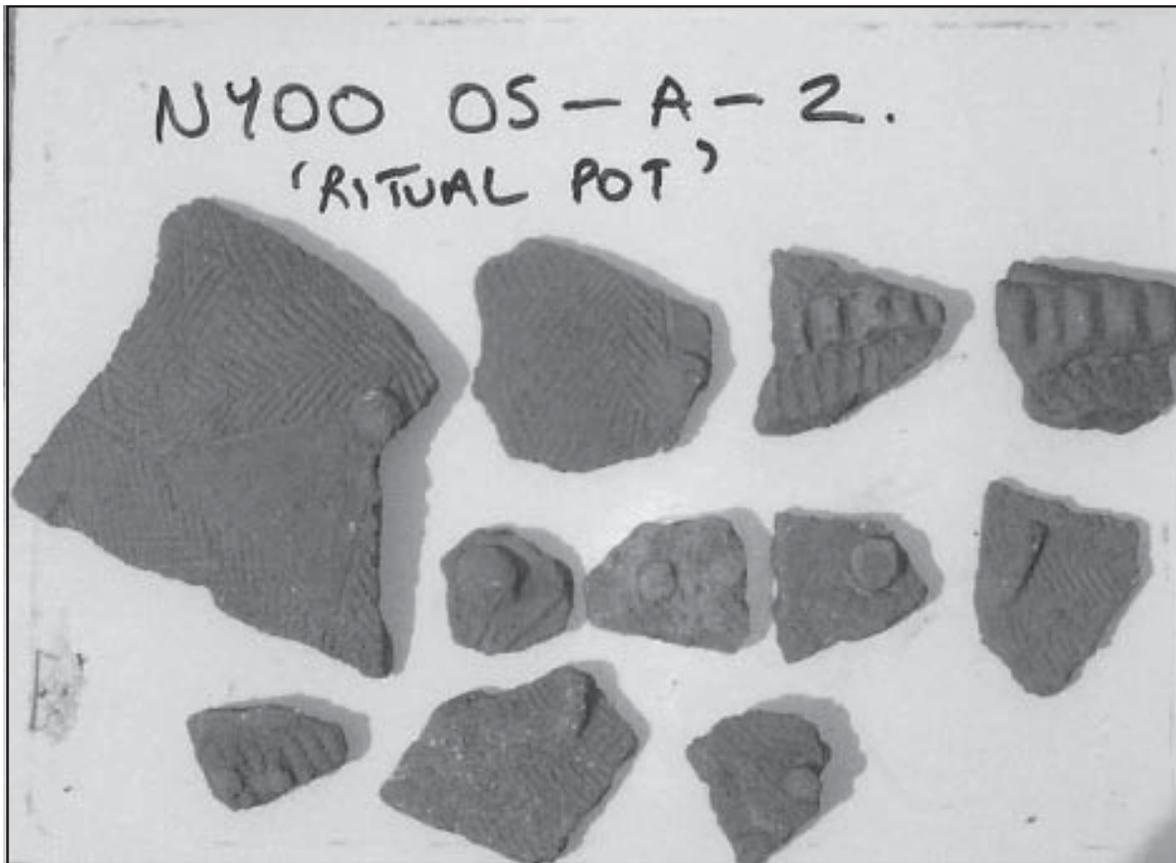
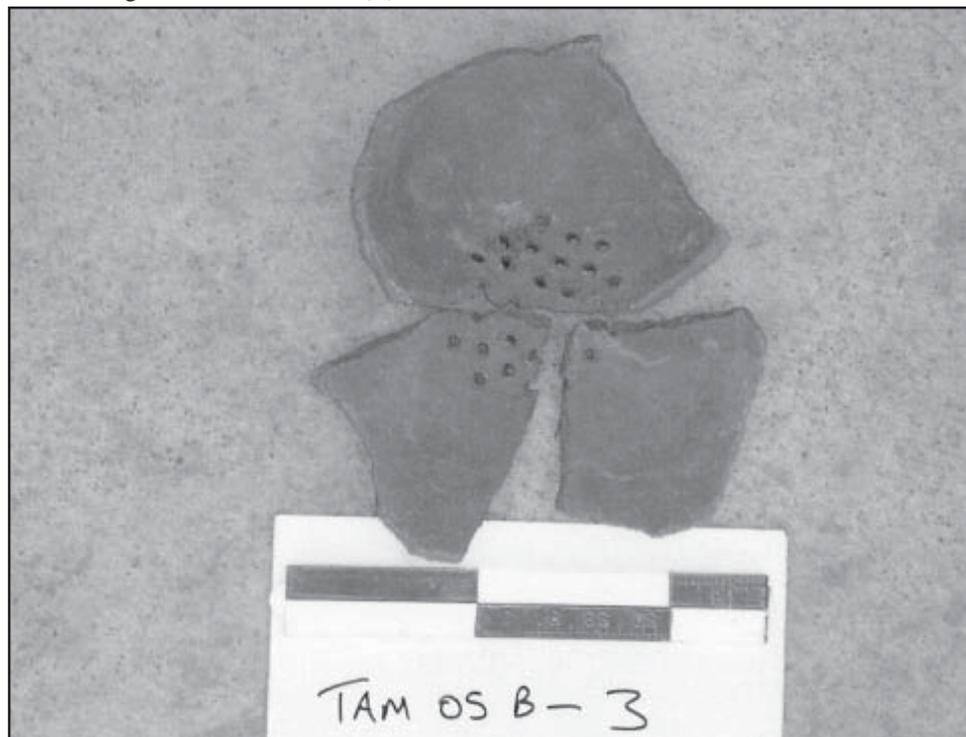


Figure 3. The 'standing stone' area, Nyoo shrine.



Figure 4. Steamer fragments from TAM 05 (B).



Legon, in the 2006 season. This standing stone 'field' would seem to form a third distinct zone in the Nyoo shrine, the others being the 'village', and the contemporary sacrifice area which now forms the ritual centre of the shrine. The latter being composed of several large rock outcrops, one of which is the focus of sacrifice, and a sparse grove of trees.

Besides ceramics and quartz, no other artifacts were recorded in the excavations completed at NYOO 05 (A). In contrast, a complete plain iron bangle was recorded in NYOO 05 (B) set below one of the standing stones. Neither unit produced any faunal material which is surprising considering the putative 'village' interpretation ascribed part of the site. However, contemporary observations of the action of humans, vultures, and dogs upon the remains of sacrifices completed in the Nyoo shrine today indicate that very little is left to enter the archaeological record. In addition to consumption on site, many body parts are removed from the shrine entirely according to how the sacrifice is being divided and distributed.

Information was sought to attempt to reconstruct the meaning and history of the components which form the Nyoo shrine, and although still a very active shrine today, nothing useful concerning the date of the pottery, 'village', and standing stones was obtained from the custodians of Nyoo, other than that they were associated with the 'ancestors'. Thus the TL dates will be very useful in filling this gap in oral history. Additionally, the importance of extending the excavations in the 'village' and standing stone area is obvious, and this is being made a primary objective of the 2006 season.

Three excavations were also completed outside the 'ritual' context of the Nyoo shrine. Two 1.5 m square units were placed in the Tambiha area, south-east of Nyoo, their location in part being dictated by it being possible to purchase (and destroy) the crops growing on them. The first excavation, TAM 05 (A) (N10°40'25.2" W000°48'52.9"), provided a few sherds of abraded ceramics but was largely sterile, contained no features and was terminated at a depth of 45 cm. In contrast, TAM 05 (B) (N10°40'23.4" W000°48'54.6") uncovered the remains of a kitchen associated with the processing (steaming) of the leaves of the *dawa dawa* tree (Figure 4). A household shrine similar to types recorded in contemporary houses was also found adjacent to the kitchen processing area, with the whole seemingly representing part of an abandoned compound, and largely composed of the hard packed

remains of the floor. The ceramic assemblage recovered from this unit has both similarities and differences with the Nyoo pottery in, for example, lacking the types of ritual pottery, as indicated by the prominent applied spikes and knobs of the latter (Kankpeyeng, pers. comm.). Other than ceramics, TAM 05 (B) provided few finds, and those present (three fragments of haematite?, 2 fragments of slag, and 1 tiny fragment of burnt bone?) can be explained by their inclusion within the mud used to build the compound floor which was excavated.

The final test excavation, again of 1m square, was placed within a prominent rock shelter, Gbegbeya Veug - Hyena's Cave (HY 05 [A] – N10°40'19.1" W000°48'59.9"). This was a site identified in the 2004 survey season (Insoll *et al.* 2004). The excavation was placed in the deepest part of the cave. It revealed a sequence of archaeological deposits before the excavations were halted at about 90 cm depth. The excavations will be resumed in the 2006 season when the relevant equipment to process the soil samples will be brought to the Tongo Hills from Accra. This necessary caution was exercised for besides the abundant assemblage of ceramics recovered from the top 75 cm of deposits, a dense layer of quartz microliths (blades, flakes, cores) was encountered in layer HY 05 (A)-6 (Figure 5), i.e. subsequent to the ceramics ending. This would seemingly indicate LSA occupation of Hyena's Cave and, in turn, of the Tongo Hills. However, reconstructing a chronology is dependent on processing of the ceramics which will be submitted for TL dating. These ceramics came from the layers above the one containing the lithics.

The ceramics which were obtained from the uppermost layers in Hyena Cave are comparable, in some respects, to those recovered from the excavations in Nyoo and TAM 05 (B). This was evident, for instance, in the incised decoration found on decorated body sherds from layer HY 05 (A)-2 which resembled that present on some sherds from Nyoo, specifically in the similar use of demarcated semi-circular incised bands in filled with short straight lines. Other finds from this unit included, at the top (HY 05 [A]-1), fragments of green bottle glass and a couple of pieces of clay tobacco pipe, with lower down, several fragments of red haematite or ochre recovered, along with some slag, iron ore, and what appear to be crucible fragments (HY 05 [A]-2 to 5). Hence a complete occupation sequence would seem to be represented at Hyena's Cave from comparatively recently through to, potentially, the LSA.

Figure 5. Microliths from HY 05 (A).

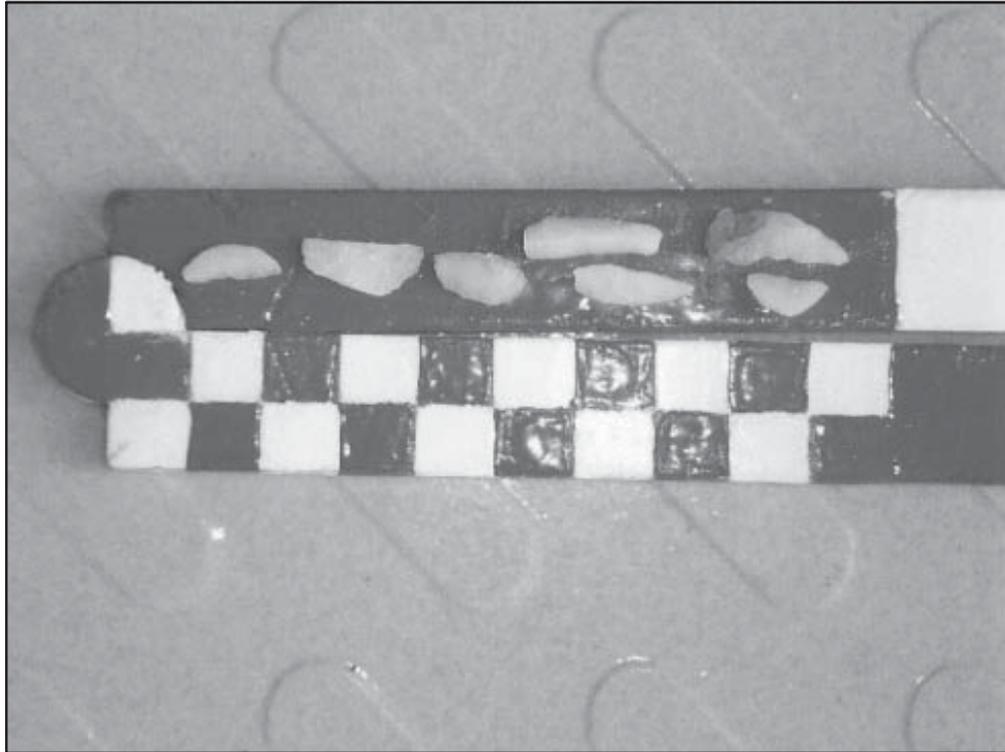


Figure 6. Father's shrine contents, abandoned compound.



Miscellany

Besides the excavations and surveys just described, where possible oral traditions were also collected and interviews held with the elders and chiefs to collect data on the history of the shrines, the process by which shrines are created, and landscape perception in general. A variety of new information was thus gained as, for example, in reference to the key role which rock seems to play in shrine franchising processes (Insoll, in press). A detailed photographic inventory was also completed of contemporary shrine types largely on an ad hoc basis, but which has now provided a representative database of the dominant shrine configurations and their material culture components (faunal remains, lithic materials, tools, ceramics etc.) in the Tongo Hills. This was supplemented with two hours of digital video which was taken of sacrifices in the shrines and the archaeological research in general and which has been subsequently edited as a DVD available for teaching purposes (Insoll 2005).

An abandoned compound (N10°40'42.7" W000°49'03.1") was also planned and recorded in detail, specifically with reference to assessing the ethnoarchaeological implications of its collapse and how its associated shrines might be archaeologically visible. This structure was reputedly built ca. 1990 and abandoned following the death of the owner in 1996 (Roger Yin, pers. comm.). The decay of the structure was well-advanced with the walls both 'melting' and collapsing. Of interest was the fact that both the household and personal shrines which were formed of ceramic vessels along with their respective contents (for example, coins, cowries, bronze bracelets), as well as other personal possessions such as knife, axe and hoe blades, were seen to be durable and would, theoretically, be recognizable elsewhere as being interred as the result of intentional deposition (Figure 6), assuming that the configurations were similar.

Conclusions

The results of the 2005 season have far exceeded original expectations in providing an insight into the complexity of ritual practice as indicated archaeologically at the Nyoo shrine, and attesting to the longevity of occupation in the Tongo Hills, potentially, via the evidence recovered from

Hyena's Cave. Furthermore, a reasonable assemblage of ceramics has been recovered which will be useful for comparative purposes with the few existing archaeological assemblages from the region. Finally, and perhaps inevitably, many more questions have also been raised which it is hoped will be answered as research proceeds again in June-July 2006 and subsequently over future years.

Acknowledgments

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