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Excavations and Surveys in the Tongo Hills, Upper East Region, Ghana, July 2006: A Preliminary Fieldwork Report

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Introduction

This report describes the results of a further season of excavations and survey focused upon the Tongo Hills of Upper East Region of Ghana in July 2006. Fieldwork was centered in the Tongo Hills as these are inhabited by the Tallensi ethnic group, who have been comparatively well-studied anthropologically (Fortes 1945, 1949, 1987), but who have been almost wholly neglected archaeologically until the start of the current project. The primary aims of the fieldwork have previously been outlined (Insoll et al. 2005) and include, by way of recap: (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 by a Canadian team in Gambaga, the capital of the Islamized kingdom of Mamprugu, and currently being prepared for publication (Kense 1992; K. Fowler, pers. comm.), in order to contextualize the archaeology of the Tongo Hills in their regional setting; (3) To evaluate the archaeology of African traditional religions through excavation in extant shrines and via recording other aspects of Tallensi material culture; and (4) To assess variant understandings of contemporary landscapes and their components therein; shrines, geology, plants etc.

This season followed on from a preliminary survey undertaken in the Upper East and Northern Regions in July-August 2004 and completed under Ghana Museums and Monuments Board permit number 0151/vol.6/257 (Insoll et al. 2004). A season of test excavations was also completed in July 2005 in the Tongo Hills and was carried out under permit number 0425/vol.5/161 issued by the Ghana Museums and Monument Board (Insoll et al. 2005). The research was made possible by the formal permission gained from the Ghanaian research authorities, but also through the permission granted by the local communities in the Tongo Hills. Thus, where necessary, negotiation was also completed with the shrines and their custodians, primarily via the agency of sacrifice.

Survey

In comparison to the previous two seasons, archaeological reconnaissance survey was not accorded such a priority for the reason that the results previously obtained had allowed the development of research objectives which could be more fully addressed via excavation (see Insoll et al. 2004, 2005). Nonetheless, intensive survey of areas previously neglected was continued and this has further helped in understanding the picture of land use and settlement in the Tongo Hills over time. The survey objectives of the 2006 season were (1) to target areas previously neglected, (2) to continue the program of EDM survey and planning of rock features and extant shrines (3) to compete a geological survey of the Tongo Hills.

Primary in relation to the first objective was the survey completed of the north-eastern part of the Tongo Hills from the top of the plateau down to its base where it joins the road to the contemporary lowland settlement of Tongo. This was initially undertaken as a reconnaissance survey by Kankpeyeng accompanied by a local Earth Priest or Tengdana, and subsequently again by the remainder of the project team. These surveys recorded a variety of important sites including an area, Kusanaab, linked by oral tradition with the Kusasi ethnic group (and

as is indicated by the name). The Kusasi are neighbors of the Tallensi, to the north-east of the Tongo Hills. This might represent a Kusasi linked area of settlement in the Tongo Hills, i.e. in what is Tallensi land today, and although now abandoned, shrines located in caves on the hill close to the Kusanaab site are still the focus of periodic rituals completed by Kusasi. An abandoned settlement was also planned (N10º40'51.2" W000º48'21.7") which may or may not be linked with the latter. This was composed of the remains of perhaps three hut platforms on a small terrace c. 43 m x 16 m. Scatters of sherds dumped down slope at either end of the terrace, along with grinding hollows, and the remains of associated agricultural terracing were also recorded. This site will be made a focus of excavation in the next season so as to obtain an assemblage of domestic ceramics to compare with the large assemblages recovered from the Nyoo shrine (see below), which by the nature of their context could be best defined as 'ritual', as opposed to the predicted 'domestic' assemblage from the former site.

Other sites recorded in this survey included a large baobab tree, the hollow centre of which was formerly used as a place of refuge (N10º41'09.5" W000º48'14.9"). That this use was more than just the result of local legend was seemingly confirmed by the recovery of three pot sherds and a fragment of a worked stone pounder or rubber from a tunnel in the interior of the tree. A large rock shelter complex was also recorded; Kizitou Cave (N10º40'42.6" W000º48'13.9"). The strategic position of this complex looking out onto the White Volta River and the bush (now farmland) below was immediately apparent. Pot scatters throughout the various shelters in the complex indicated this fact was also probably appreciated by earlier, but as yet undated populations as well.

Survey was also completed of a rock outcrop, Kudoro, south-east of the Hyena Cave, the latter excavated and surveyed in 2005 with a putative LSA occupation noted (Insoll et al. 2005). This was undertaken for two reasons. Firstly, because of its proximity to Hyena Cave, and secondly for its potential associations with the Golib Festival, Kudoro being located immediately behind the place occupied by the Santeng Tengdana for the duration of the festival. Dense scatters of ceramics, but not stone tools, were recorded in rock shelters at the summit of the Kudoro outcrop (N10º40'14.5" W000º49'01.8"). These attest to extensive occupation in this area, and repeat the patterns already noted in Kizitou and Hyena Caves. Also of interest was a shrine, Gobal, which was located (N10º40'14.8" W000º49'01.3"). Access to this shrine was restricted and hence it could only be viewed from a distance but the shrine itself was apparently formed of a rock-shelter set within a natural bowl shaped 'amphitheatre' below the summit of Kudoro. Thus it was again apparent, as had been previously noted at the pre-eminent shrines of Yaane and Nyoo, that archaeological sites are being enshrined, in so doing indicating a complex awareness of the past and relationships therewith (Insoll 2006).

The inventory of rock features begun in 2005 was also significantly expanded. Two very well-preserved rock cut gaming boards were planned (Figure 1), and an extensive rock outcrop covered with numerous features was surveyed and drawn (N10º40'36.6" W000º49'08.2"). The latter included cupules, and grinding, pounding, and sharpening hollows. This concentration of rock features at the south-eastern, Tengzug section, of the Tongo Hills is of interest as it stands in contrast to their comparative paucity elsewhere in the hills. This might be a reflection of the density of settlement in this section, for in this respect it certainly differs today from the more sparsely settled northern part of the hills. The program of EDM survey and planning of the extant Tallensi shrines begun in 2005 was also continued. The Nyoo Biil shrine used during the Golib festival as a location of solemn early morning ritual and subsequently of community dances was thus planned. Permission was also gained for the active sacrificial area of the Nyoo shrine to be mapped. While successful negotiations also allowed for the planning of the rockshelter which forms the Yaane shrine as well. Hence all the major shrines in the Tongo Hills have now been planned.

The third and final objective of the 2006 survey program was also met. The geological survey of the Tongo Hills was completed by Dr B. K. Baneong-Yakubo, assisted by P.M. Nude and Y.S. Anku of the Department of Geology, University of Ghana, Legon (Baneong-Yakubo et al. 2006). It thus complements the botanical survey completed in 2005 (Abbiw 2005; Insoll, in preparation). Besides the overall picture of the geology of the region which was obtained, it only having been apparently known cursorily before, much data of immediate archaeological significance was also gained. This related primarily to the provenance

Figure 1. Gaming board recorded, N10º40’25.0" W000º49’00.2" (all photographs Timothy Insoll).

Figure 2. Field clearance boundary formed of schist ‘grinders/rubbers/pounders’.

of the standing stones previously recorded in the Nyoo shrine (Insoll et al. 2005). Thus a survey of these standing stones was completed which encompassed both mapping the positions of the 143 whole or fragmentary stones recorded as well as identifying their geological provenance based upon information supplied by Baneong-Yakubo (pers. comm.).

The results of this survey indicated that a variety of locally available rock types were used in the production of the standing stones. These included Bongo granite, amphibole/chlorite schist, meta-chert, and Leocratic granite. Initially, it was thought that, excluding the Bongo granite, these rocks had been brought into the Nyoo shrine from significant distances. However, survey of the north-eastern down slope of the Tongo Hills, already described, indicated that these rock types, though not seemingly immediately available on the plateau, were being sourced from the slopes of the Tongo Hills as well as, potentially, the lowlands below. This is of interest for a statement was obviously being made not only through the erection of the standing stones themselves but also through the materials they were made of, i.e. not only the Bongo granite directly to hand.

Similar observations were gained based upon the examination of two shrines composed of more portable lithic objects. These included a shrine associated with the Bo'araam harvest festival and formed of quartz spheres which is located near the house of the caretaker of the Yaane shrine, and the other a shrine with medicinal properties incorporating various schist, possible grinding stones/pounders, at the entrance to the Bonaab sacred grove. The question as to what degree human agency was involved in the production of the latter objects is intriguing, for at first sight these would all seem to be human produced grinders/rubbers/pounders. Nonetheless, again, the survey of the north-eastern slopes of the Tongo Hills indicated that identical types of stones to these schist 'grinders/rubbers/pounders' are frequently seen scattered in fields and forming clearance boundaries at the base of the hills in such numbers that this would seem to preclude their human 'origin' (Figure 2). Similar lithic objects were recovered from the excavations in Nyoo (see below) and these have been exported for further analysis in order to address this issue.

In contrast, the anthropogenic origin of the quartz spheres would seem more certain, but cannot be confirmed by microscopic analysis as ritual prohibitions do not allow their handling. However, in terms of provenance, the quartz as a material could certainly be local to the plateau of the Tongo Hills as it was noticed outcropping at one location (N10º41'09.2" W000º48'23.2"), and other outcrops must exist. Thus, in summary, the complexity evident in Tallensi relationships with plants and trees noted during the botanical survey in 2005 (Insoll forthcoming), would seem to be replicated in their notions of the materiality of rock as well, as intimated by the results of the geological survey.

Excavations

Following on from the successful results of test excavations completed in the Nyoo shrine in 2005, a priority of the 2006 season was to complete large scale area excavations so as to better understand the features previously recorded. These being, firstly, a spread of pottery covering some 300m east to west, interspersed with stone rubble, and secondly, the standing stones already mentioned. Hence two large units were opened contiguous to the test pits excavated in 2005 (see Insoll et al. 2005).

NYOO 06 (A). The first of these units was assigned the code NYOO 06 (A) and measured 8m x 4m (N10º40'31.0" W000º48'39.2"). As observed in the 2005 test pit (NYOO 05 [A]), only shallow archaeological layers were encountered with a maximum depth of c.15-20cm before sterile deposits were reached. This noted, the matrix that was removed was densely filled with archaeological material, predominantly sherds, many from complete vessels apparently broken in-situ, but also containing an assemblage of 35 lithic objects comprising predominantly stone grinder/pounder/rubbers, both fragmentary, and complete, but also lumps of quartz. Five small pieces of both vitreous and tap slag, two iron points and one iron finger ring were also recovered. A definite increase in density in pottery present was also evident towards the southern end of the trench, i.e. where it incorporated the test pit, NYOO 05 (A), which had been almost wholly filled with pottery (Insoll et al. 2005) (Figure 3).

Interspersed amongst the pot filled deposits were seven stone arrangements (Figure 4). Originally, it was thought that these might represent cairns, but this idea was discarded on the basis that the stone

Figure 3. NYOO 06 (A). The 2005 test pit is to the left of the photo where the density of pottery is greater.

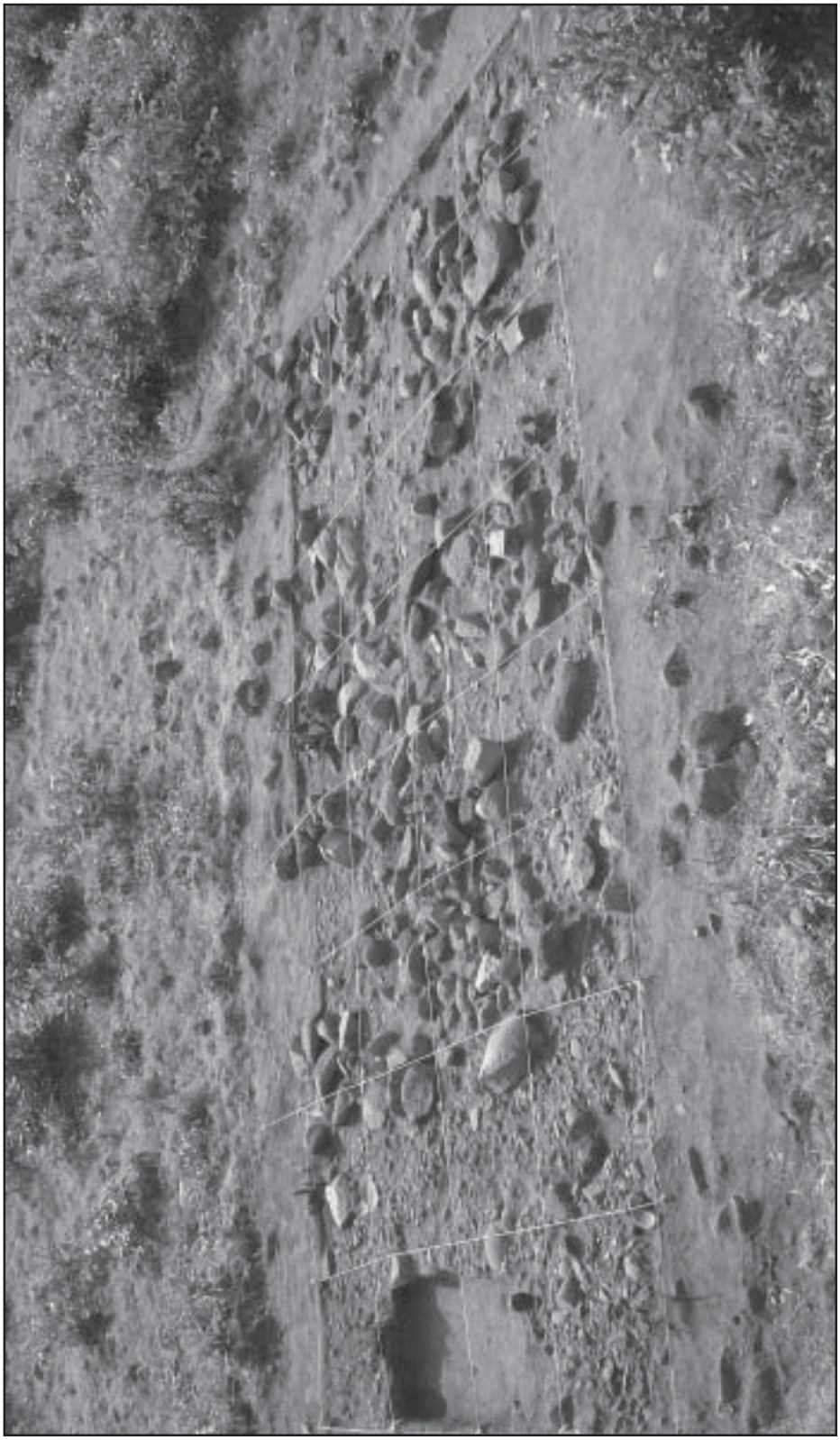

Figure 4. NYOO 06 (A). Demarcated stone arrangements after the pot filled layer was removed.

arrangements were almost entirely composed of a single layer of stones. There was no significance apparent in the numbers of stones composing the arrangements which ranged between 51 and 16. However, care had definitely been taken in the arrangements of the stones, possibly with some concern evident as to the color patterning of the aplite (fine-grained granite), Bongo granite, and schist present. The colors red, pink, black, and grey were noted, with white represented by smaller fragments of quartz frequently found, as well as by the banding in some of the granite. In so-doing this could potentially be a further manifestation of the oft-noted red-white-black color symbolism evident in sub-Saharan Africa (Turner 1966; Jacobsen-Widding 1979).

Removal of the stone arrangements and excavation below one of these (SA 1) to a depth of 45cm produced very little material in comparison to the infill between them. 'Infill' is the right term to use here, as it would appear that the pots were deposited after the stones had been arranged. Unfortunately, the TL samples taken in 2005 were unsuitable for dating on account of their small size so the chronology is as yet unknown. Further adequate samples for TL dating were obtained (NYOO 06 [A] 5 - B5) and these have been submitted to the Oxford Research Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art to redress this.

The precise function of the stone arrangements and pot infill is unclear, though the oft-misused term 'ritual' (Insoll 2004) would here seem entirely justified. Working hypotheses can, however, be proposed. Firstly, the random arrangements of the sherds in the infill layer and the inclusion of the smashed complete or nearly complete vessels would seem to preclude their description as potsherd pavements of the type found elsewhere in West Africa (e.g. Shaw 1978). At Ife in Nigeria for instance, the sherds forming the pavement were often set in the ground on their edge in herringbone designs (ibid), as opposed to the random patterning evident in Nyoo. Rather, what might be represented by the ceramics (and other materials) in this feature at Nyoo are communal ritual activities, possibly even one deposition event involving a lot of people and pottery. Preliminary indications with regard to the pottery assemblage indicate little variability with a standard range of vessel types found (Ashley 2006) supporting the hypothesis that repeat deposition over a long period of time is not represented. The absence of any contextual difference also supports this idea of a single or at least a rapid deposition event. Though the gradation in density of pottery present already remarked upon indicates that a simplistic uniform infilling around the stone arrangements did not take place.

Equally, what the deposition of the pot and other materials might represent or be associated with is unclear. Various suggestions can be made, with perhaps the most compelling being that it might broadly function within the framework of commemorating or supplicating the ancestors or deceased. But the absence of funerary remains precludes a direct link with the dead. This interpretation would seem plausible based upon broad parallels elsewhere, less so, perhaps, with Tallensi practices today, but certainly reminiscent of, for instance, the Akan Asensie, or 'place of pots' (Bellis 1982). A point qualified with the proviso that direct Akan connections are not being proposed, just generic parallels suggested. The deliberate destruction of some of the pots, with holes forced, bored, or chipped in their bases for example, might support this association with the ancestors or deceased. An interpretation lent further weight by the results of the excavations in NYOO 06 (B) discussed below.

Furthermore, based upon observations of contemporary practices in Nyoo Biil associated with the Golib festival, it is possible that the stone arrangements served as meeting or assembly places perhaps utilised during important rituals or festivals. Very similar stone arrangements are used in Nyoo Biil when each elder, chief, or priest has their specific known seating place on one of the stones. Such arrangements are also found outside some contemporary Tallensi compounds, as at the house of Yiran, the caretaker of Yaane. However, the previous hypothesis advanced (Insoll et al. 2005) that NYOO 05 (A) was part of a putative village site (and thus so by inference would be NYOO 06 [A]) now seems much less probable based on the density of the stone arrangements, the absence of other domestic indicators (in comparison with the settlement site recorded during the survey and described above, for example), and the parallels with contemporary ritual sites just described.

Although it is unwise at this preliminary stage to advance too far in interpretation, it can again tentatively be suggested that based on contemporary

parallels what might also be represented by the stone arrangements at Nyoo is the residue of movement, perhaps dance (Insoll et al. in press). Again, during the ritual activities observed at Nyoo Biil, dance around and between the stone arrangements was seen to be a key part of the Golib festival. That such activities might also have occurred in the area of stone arrangements excavated in Nyoo would not seem inconceivable.

NYOO 06 (B). The second unit excavated was likewise placed adjacent to a test pit completed in 2005, NYOO 05 (A). This unit of 6 x 4 m was situated within the area of Nyoo most densely clustered with standing stones so as to attempt to gain an insight into their meaning and purpose (N10º40'32.8" W000º48'39.8"). In total 12 clusters of either paired or single standing stones were recorded inside this unit (Figure 5), and shallow surface cleaning of 1-2cm depth almost immediately encountered groups of iron bracelets and points which had been placed adjacent to the standing stones. In total, eight complete iron bracelets, seven iron bracelet fragments, one iron finger ring, five iron points, and two fragments of iron strip were recovered. The bracelets were almost uniformly of simple design and their presence was described as representing the interring of 'personal gods' associated with the dead, i.e. intimate personal possessions, possibly following the instructions of diviners to carry out such actions (R. Nabdoam pers. comm.; also Figure 6).

The function of, and meaning behind, the presence of the iron points is less immediately obvious. They could have served a variety of purposes, but based upon contemporary analogy and the context of discovery they could have been used for ritual purposes. This interpretation might be lent support by the ritual pots recovered beneath and adjacent to each of the standing stones (see below). An association between similar pots and iron points exists today in certain divining rituals, where the iron points are used as supports for the pots (H. Golibdaana pers. comm.).

Interspersed with the iron objects were ceramic sherds, and seven either fragmentary or complete granite or schist pounder/rubber/grinders and two white quartz lumps, as well as a small fragment of red ochre, and another of slag. Both the number of pounder/rubber/grinders found and the density of ceramics was less than that recorded in NYOO 06 (A), though the lithics and ceramics were otherwise of the same types. The ceramics from all the excavations were analysed by Dr Ceri Ashley, formerly of the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. Based upon her unpublished field notes the assemblage can be briefly summarised thus (Ashley 2006).

Seven main categories of vessel forms are represented. These include Flared Mouth Bowl, Hemispherical Bowl, Restricted Mouth Bowl, Carinated Bowl, Spherical Bowl, Collar Necked Jar, and Everted Neck Jar. The main decorative techniques employed are Twisted String Roulette (TGR) and Knotted Strip Roulette (KPR). Less well represented decorative techniques include Cord Wrapped Stick (CWS), Carved Wooden Roulette (CWR), Incision, Comb Stamping, and Embossing. While rim forms can be classified as Rounded, Overhanging, and Squared, and bases as Pedestal, Thickened, Rounded, and Flattened (Figure 7).

Considering the evidence from both NYOO 06 (A) and NYOO 06 (B) in totality, it would appear that distinct differences in ritual practice are indicated in the various areas of Nyoo. This is manifest both in the excavated materials recovered but also in the surface features previously recorded. This notion of differential ritual practices across Nyoo is lent further support by two pear-shaped clay objects, broken, but still conjoining, which were uncovered in association with a complete pot (NYOO 06 [B] 4 - D4). Their actual shape, 'pear-shaped' being a somewhat neutral description, is reminiscent of a pair of testicles, and if correct, a fertility association would thus not seem unwarranted. These objects (or object, as they had been joined) had a hole in each of the two pear-shaped segments (Figure 8) perhaps for libations.

The standing stone which this pot and ritual objects had almost certainly been associated with no longer survived, though some of its stone packing was still seemingly in place adjacent to and above the pot. Once again providing a precise interpretation as to what this object was used for is impossible, and opinions sought from community members varied though generally consensus existed in that it was (a) A ritual object, (b) probably offered libation and/or sacrifice (hence the holes), and (c) functioned as a 'Personal God'. The clay object was within the shallow pot-filled layer (NYOO 06 [B] 1-4), a layer which

Figure 5. NYOO 06 (B). Standing stones and associated pots.

Figure 6. NYOO 06 (B). Iron bracelet and points in situ.

Figure 7. The types of pottery (decoration, rim types, forms, and bases) recorded.

Figure 8. NYOO 06 (B) 4 - D4. The clay ritual object(s).

did not exceed a maximum depth of 7-8cm. Below this the quantity of pot and other materials reduced significantly, as a more natural brighter orange fill was reached at a depth of between 6 to 11cm from the ground surface (NYOO 06 [B] 5). The complete pot below the clay objects just described was associated with this latter context, but it and two other pots were removed before this association was clear and hence had been already assigned to context NYOO 06 [B] 4. Ultimately from context NYOO 06 [B] 5, thirteen complete (and one partially complete) pots were recovered. Fourteen of these were thus left in situ, below and slightly adjacent to their standing stones, and in three other instances had been removed before this association had become clear, as described (Figure 5).

Eleven of these vessels were capped with large pot sherds forming a sort of lid and of the thirteen complete vessels left in situ, two were Short Collar Necked Jars, nine Flared Mouth Bowls, one a Spherical or Flared Mouth Bowl (the lid made precise attribution difficult), and one a Hemispherical Bowl. No trace of pits associated with the deposition of these pots was found and they were located at a depth (to the top of their lids or rims) from the ground surface of between 12cm and 23.5cm. The position of the pots in relation to the standing stones also varied and no meaningful cardinal orientation could be reconstructed, other than, perhaps a certain propensity for a northern position.

The ritual nature of the deposits in this area of Nyoo was thus firmly indicated by the discovery of these pots. A fact confirmed during a visit to NYOO 06 (B) by a group of Tallensi elders led by the Assemblyman, John Bawa Zuure. The ensuing discussion was useful for interpretative purposes in indicating that the specific associations between, for example, the iron bracelets, standing stones and pots was unknown, they did not resemble contemporary practices, but the general meanings were - i.e. that they were linked into negotiating destiny via the agency of 'Personal Gods' and functioned within the framework of ancestral worship. The key point made in this respect being that Nyoo should be considered as the great shrine for all the Tallensi, where worship started and spread from (J.B. Zuure, pers. comm.). It could thus in effect be called a reservoir or nucleus of ritual practice, and is broadly analogous to the notion of "symbolic reservoirs" as discussed by Sterner (1992:171-172; and see MacEachern 1994), but 'symbol' would here be translated into 'ritual'.

Prior to backfilling a test pit was excavated to a depth of c.60cm (NYOO 06 [B] 6-7 - D3, D4) in order to assess whether human burials were also associated with the pots and standing stones but at a greater depth (this had been thought unlikely by the elders). No archaeological material was recovered from below a depth of 40cm (NYOO 06 [B] 7), and only a few sherds of pottery from above this. A sherd for TL dating was, however, removed from the interface of NYOO 06 (B) 6 and 7, the last sherd to be recovered. Hence no associated funerary remains or any other features were recorded in the sterile natural orange gravel filled deposits encountered and excavation was thus halted and the site backfilled.

Conclusions

The results of the 2006 field season have far exceeded expectations and generated various new research questions primarily in relation to the nature of African traditional religions, their archaeological signatures, and how they alter over time. Several years further research is envisaged in order to address both these questions, and those relating to historical issues surrounding Tallensi interaction with Mamprugu and their other neighbours such as the Kusasi. The latter will now be approached in a twofold manner. Firstly, via comparative ceramic analysis with the material being written up from earlier excavations in Gambaga, the capital of Mamprugu (Kense 1992; K. Fowler pers. comm.), and secondly through a comparison with the ritual practices and shrine types recorded amongst other non-Islamised ethnic groups such as, for instance, the Kusasi (Mathers 1999, 2003) or the Bulsa (Kroger 1982).

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