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Journal of Anthropological Archaeology

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaa

Do faunal remains reflect socioeconomic status? An ethnoarchaeological study among Central African farmers in the northern Congo Basin

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 February 2008

Revision received 25 June 2008

Available online 15 August 2008

Keywords:

Socioeconomics
Animal prey
Taxonomic diversity
Ethnoarchaeology
Zooarchaeology
Farmers
Central Africa

ABSTRACT

Zooarchaeological analyses often draw inferences on socioeconomic status from the composition of bone assemblages associated with houses and other structures in residential sites. In this paper, we test how well faunal assemblages reflect socioeconomic differences among contemporary farmer households in two rural villages in the Central African Republic. Independent measures of wealth are tallied and ranked for six households in each village, including complete inventories of the types and numbers of material goods and the sizes of residential structures and agricultural fields. These data are compared against the associated food bones collected from household trash middens and activity areas, including skeletal abundances, large mammal body part representation, and taxonomic diversity. In most instances larger and more taxonomically diverse faunal assemblages are associated with houses of means and the faunas do, in fact, reflect differences in socioeconomic status. However, faunal “wealth” may be linked to factors unrelated to social or economic inequalities, notably the presence of active hunters. Our analyses suggest that small animals provide useful and important data in assessing socioeconomic means, and comparative studies of wealth in archaeological contexts should not be based on bones alone.

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Introduction

Qualitative and quantitative comparisons of food residues to assess economic means have had a long history in both archaeological and ethnographic contexts. From hunter-gatherers to state-level societies, spatial differences in food types and abundances are often used to identify socioeconomic differences in prehistoric contexts (Dietler and Hayden, 2001; Welch and Scarry, 1995; see also LeHuray and Schutkowski, 2005) and include a number of studies that center on the composition of bone assemblages generated by the consumption of meat (Bayham and Grimstead, 2006; Crabtree, 1990; Emery, 2003; Hockett, 1998; Kirch and O'Day, 2003; Pohl, 1985; Schmitt, 1992). In addition, there are a number of inquiries in historic archaeology where spatial contexts, known ethnic contexts, or material goods are compared against the types and frequencies of associated cuts of meat (Crader, 1984, 1990; Lyman, 1987; McKee, 1987; Reitz, 1987; Schmitt and Zeier, 1993; Schulz and Gust, 1983), and there are ethnographic studies that use game types and abundances to identify and characterize feasts and socioeconomic inequalities (Adams, 2004; Demmer et al., 2002; Dietler and Hayden, 2001; see also Price and Feinman, 1995).

This paper builds on these previous investigations of the relationship between foodways and economic means by centering on a single question; do faunal remains reflect socioeconomic status

among contemporary Central African farmers? To investigate this question we begin by presenting detailed ethnographic information on Central African farmers and their foraging neighbors. We then provide data on the types and abundances of material wealth, number of structures, and the size of structures and horticultural fields for six households in two separate villages. Based on these economic findings, the houses are ranked and compared against the types and frequencies of faunal remains retrieved from associated household middens and activity areas. Our intent is to provide straightforward analyses of material wealth and associated bone and shell refuse in two contemporary rural contexts that will offer insights to identifying socioeconomic status differences in prehistoric farmer and forager residential sites. This study is not new in that we assume that socioeconomic differences should be reflected in the abundance and types of food resources—in this case differential access to animal prey—and that differences in household faunal aggregates ought to be correlated with the types and frequencies of material goods, structures, and other indicators of economic stature (Crabtree, 1990 and references therein). It is unique, however, in that for the first time it provides comprehensive ethnoarchaeological records of material wealth and land associated with a series of individual households to compare against animal bones from adjoining middens and food preparation loci. Moreover, our investigations of faunal “wealth” examine a variety of household types and data classes, including taxonomic richness and evenness, and the proportions of large game and the frequencies of associated high quality cuts of meat.

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Project setting and ethnographic context

The study sites consist of the small rural villages of Ndele and Grima. Both villages are located on the periphery of the Ngotto Forest Reserve in the southern Central African Republic (Fig. 1). The N'Gotto Forest Reserve is a 3250 km² triangular shaped area that lies between the Lobaye and Mbéaré Rivers along the extreme northern edge of the Congo Basin. The area is co-managed by Eco-systèmes Forestiers d'Afrique Centrale (ECOFAC), an EC funded regional conservation entity, and logging companies with the goal of balancing preservation and sustainable harvests. The area is a complex mosaic of microenvironments including swamps with evergreen forests, ephemeral wetlands, and occasional pockets of open wet savanna (Bahuchet and Guillame, 1982). Most of the region is comprised of a dry Guinea–Congolian rainforest containing thick patches of understory vegetation and a dense forest canopy (White, 1983, 2001). The region is characterized by high temperatures (annual average is approximately 25 °C [77 °F]) and humidity (70–90%). Annual precipitation averages about 160 cm, most of which occurs during the wet season between June and October where monthly averages can exceed 20 cm (Hudson, 1990).

Several ethnically distinct farming populations inhabit the area. Grima is inhabited by approximately 150 village farmers who speak an Oubanguian language. Ndele is occupied by about 100 village farmers, most of whom speak Banda Yangere and a few speak Pande. The ancestors of some of these villager populations are believed to have entered this portion of the Congo Basin some 2000 year ago, but historic and very recent migrations also contrib-

uted to these populations (David and Vidal, 1977; Hewlett, 1991a; Jones, 1959; Vansina, 1990).

Farmers largely make a living by growing crops, but some earn wages working for local lumber companies or as rangers for ECO-FAC. A few farmers also supplement their income by producing specialized products for local sale such as basketry or mud bricks. Some men supplement their income by obtaining and selling prey through illegal hunting activities or making palm wine, while some women produce and sell corn whiskey. Both men and women may earn wages by working in the fields for their neighbors.

Almost every farmer maintains one or more fields of manioc (cassava; *Manihot esculenta*) and many grow smaller amounts of coffee (*Coffea arabica*), taro (*Colocasia esculenta*), peanuts (*Arachis hypogea*), maize (*Zea mays*), tobacco (*Nicotiana* sp.), yams (*Dioscorea* sp.), and squash (*Curcubita* sp.). Fruiting plants and trees such as pineapple (*Ananas comosus*), papaya (*Carica papaya*), mango (*Mangifera indica*), banana and plantain (*Musa* sp.), oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis*) and passion fruit (*Passiflora edulis*) are encouraged by farmers but generally not grown in large quantities. Horticultural fields are scattered around each village and include some that are less than a hundred meters from the village edge and others that are more than two kilometers distant. Most farmers also maintain small vegetable gardens near their houses, which might include sugar cane (*Saccharum* sp.), okra (*Hibiscus esculentus*), eggplant (*Solanum* sp.), peppers (*Capsicum* sp.), tomatoes (*Solanum lycopersicum*), and pineapple. Livestock is limited here, but most farmers keep a few chickens. In Grima, several families also owned goats and a few enterprising families are raising ducks. With the

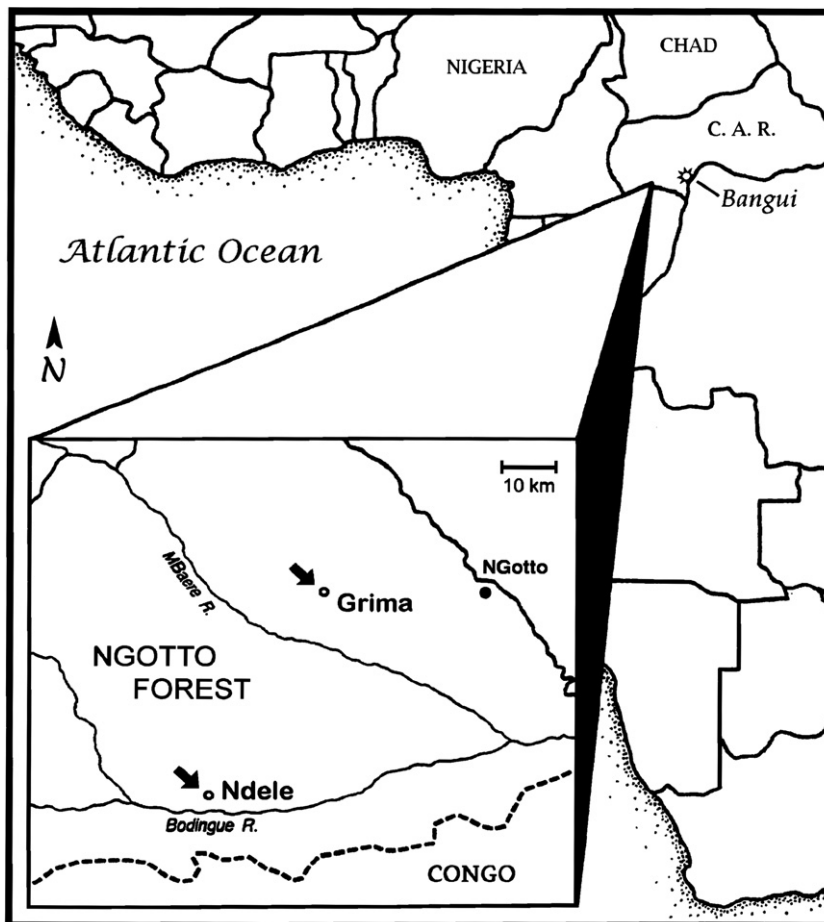


Fig. 1. Map of west Central Africa showing the locations of Ndele and Grima in the southern Central African Republic.

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