



Research paper

Ceramic transactions in a multi-ethnic area (Upper East Ghana)

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ABSTRACT

Pottery distribution studies have usually focused on the economical value of the products, means of transport, labour organisation, and the technological and typological characteristics of the pottery. This paper attempts, from an ethnoarchaeological perspective, to emphasise other variables, including the social relationships and ideological aspects in the creation of complex pottery exchange networks. These phenomena are essential to achieving a deeper understanding of how communities produce, distribute and use ceramics. The case study we present is centred in the multi-ethnic Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo and Garu-Tempane districts in northeast Ghana. In this region, the aspects that affect the ceramic distribution and consumption patterns are multiple: mobility infrastructures, such as roads and transport means; production scales and pot quality; labour organisation; and territoriality or settlement systems. Nevertheless, social and familial relationships as well as different social perceptions established among the various ethnic groups are active agents that determine the distribution areas, networks and trade systems as well as the consumers' pottery choices.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Objectives and study area

Traditionally, ceramic distribution studies have focused on the economic value of products (Vossen, 1984), transport means and mobility networks, the structure of production (Arnold, 1991; Costin, 1990) as well as the technological and typological characteristics of the potteries (García Rosselló, 2008). Less commonly, some approaches on the role of social relations in ceramic distribution have also been developed (Haour et al., 2011; Longacre and Stark, 1992; Stark, 1992; Van der Linden, 2001).

This article discusses ceramic distribution systems from an ethnoarchaeological viewpoint in a multi-ethnic area such as north-east Ghana to advance the knowledge of those variables that, when interconnected, explain the dispersion of the pottery in the territory and are essential to understanding both the ceramics and the communities that make and use them. To achieve this goal, we have studied various elements that influence the scale of ceramic distribution: infrastructures related to mobility, production systems, physical and perceived characteristics of the manufactured end products, organisation of the productive process, the territory and size of the exporters' nuclei and the places that receive the pottery. Finally, we have emphasised

the role of social and family relations in generating certain ceramic trade networks. The analysis of relationships and social spaces in distribution strategies is essential because they often determine the dispersion of the materials and ideas much more than other variables, including spatial proximity (Hodder, 1982).

One of the many aspects that the ethnoarchaeological project *Archaeology in the Upper White Volta (north-east Ghana)*² explores is the potential role that these different variables can play in interpreting the distribution of the vessels. The main theoretical starting point of this project is to suggest new approaches in the archaeological research of pottery which may expand the current views by providing new interpretative frameworks. Our aim is not to develop direct analogies between specific archaeological case studies and contemporary societies.

The study area is centred in the Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo and Garu-Tempane districts in northeast Ghana, which border Togo and Burkina Faso. This is a largely rural region of about 5000 km², located about 100–150 km from the nearest towns (Tamale and Bawku). Diverse groups with different cultural and linguistic characteristics live in this area: mamprusi, fulani, konkomba, kusasi, b'moba and busanga. Within the Bunkpurugu-Yunyoo district, in the south-east mamprusi territory and north of the dagomba kingdom, the b'moba and konkomba groups are clearly the majority. However, the mamprusi is the group that supposedly legitimately owns the land and thus, from the village of Bende, politically manages and controls the territory.

An important part of the work that has already been performed on ceramics in the different campaigns in northeastern Ghana between

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² Archaeology in the Upper White Volta basin. Northeast of Ghana. Ministerio de Cultura de España SGIPCE/AM/cmm (Archaeology abroad projects 2010 and 2011).

2009 and 2012 has focused on the production, distribution and use processes. The study of ceramic trade in this area is particularly interesting, as its production is essentially performed by individuals from the kusasi and konkomba ethnic groups, while the mamprusi, who holds the political power in the region, only consumes what is produced. This is therefore an interesting aspect to emphasise as some ethnic groups are engaged in producing ceramic vessels while others are engaged in the consumption; this aspect generates ceramic distribution networks organised by multiple variables and various kinds of phenomena, which will be addressed below.

1.2. Production areas

Before studying pottery distribution in the region, it is important to address a brief reference to the production areas and their ceramic production systems. The space in which the production is developed as well as the artefacts' use are variables that can influence the technology, production scale and variability observed in the archaeological record (Arnold, 1999; De Boer, 1984; Harry and Bubemyre, 2002; Longacre, 1999). As explained below, the different production strategies actively influence the distribution networks as they determine the production scale and the potteries' properties and, therefore, the number of vessels put into circulation. Both variables can influence the distribution of certain ceramics in the territory.

Within the study area, women with a konkomba or kusasi ethnic affiliation exclusively control ceramic production. In both cases, the pottery is made by hand in domestic contexts, being a part-time work combined with household tasks and agricultural activities. In both cases, the bases are modelled in a mould, which is then combined with coils to lift the body. Though potting is restricted to certain households, we cannot speak of systems of mass production or a specialised activity. Despite these similarities, we have found significant differences in the productive strategies that potters from one or another ethnic group put into practise (García Rosselló, 2010).

On the one hand, konkomba manufacturing systems are characterised by the use of clays mixed with grog and a modelling technique that uses crushed coils alternately stacked in two lines. The firing, performed by only one or two potters, is performed in surface structures with an average capacity of four large vessels and 12 small and medium pots. On the other hand, kusasi manufacturing strategies are characterised by using non-tempered clays and a modelling technique that uses overlapping coils applied on a single line and stretched. The firing is performed in permanent kilns with a single chamber that have a capacity of 10–12 large vessels and 12–20 small and medium vessels. These structures are used in each firing by different potters that can be from one or several production units.

The different manufacturing strategies displayed result in two systems with different production scales and products with different qualities. In konkomba production, the strategies followed in the paste preparation and the modelling stage result in the need for more time to make the vessels. Likewise, the firing strategy involves a smaller number of pieces produced in each firing, thus limiting the production scale and the number of ceramics available to be distributed to users. In contrast, the kusasi productive strategy presents faster manufacturing and a larger volume of ceramics produced in each firing, thus increasing the production scale and the number of ceramics available to be distributed to users.

2. Methods

The methodology used to study the ceramic transactions in the region and the variables influencing the distribution networks has been designed by analysing the production process, distribution and use of ceramics. This strategy involves studying productive and distributive centres as well as consumers of the different areas and ethnic groups present in the study area. Information from producers, traders and users

has been obtained from oral interviews and the ceramic products found in the local main markets, associated with nine production units, 11 kusasi and konkomba potters and 16 households, have been documented.

On the one hand, the distribution of the pottery made in each production unit was simultaneously studied while analysing the *chaîne opératoire* and the technology used. On the other hand, studying most markets documented in the region allows us to know what types of ceramic products are available in the redistributive centres, the guidelines that articulate the points of sale and how the latter influence ceramic dispersion within the territory. A total of 12 markets were visited (Gbintiri, Bimbago, Bende, Jimbale, Bunkpurugu, Nakpanduri, Garu, Bawku, Nanjong 1 & Nanjong 2, Mambabaga and Nassuan) and 36 people dedicated to selling ceramics included in over 20 points of sale were documented. In each point of sale, a series of questions (Calvo et al., 2011a) articulated the study of ceramics and distribution patterns to the sellers and buyers, directly addressing those issues and variables related to the study. Moreover, we recorded the different types, morphological traits and decorative patterns of the ceramics found at each point of sale. This recording system will allow us to study the dispersion of typological and decorative features of the ceramics throughout the territory in future works. All information was completed using a photographic record of the point of sale and all of the ceramic products it contained.

Finally, studying the parameters that organise the consumption patterns of 16 households associated with the mamprusi ($n = 6$), kusasi ($n = 3$), konkomba ($n = 3$), fulani ($n = 3$) and b'moba ($n = 1$) ethnic groups complements the analysis of the redistribution centres as it incorporates multiple variables focusing on the needs of the users who demand the ceramics. To record the consumption patterns, a questionnaire with many and diverse questions was applied to each piece of pottery found in every studied household (Calvo et al., 2011a). A total of 933 specimens were analysed using this procedure, and all information obtained regarding the distribution of these ceramics was completed with a detailed study of the provenance of the potteries located within each domestic context. The typology, durability, functions and uses of the pottery vessels were also systematically recorded as these aspects can determine what kind of pottery is circulated in a territory and its mobility dynamics. Lastly, the spatial location of each piece of pottery within the household contexts was acquired, and a photographic record was taken.

3. Results

3.1. Pottery transactions in productive areas

We stated three possibilities for ceramic distribution patterns (Fig. 1): households that produce their pottery, households that buy pots directly from a potter and buyers who purchase pots in markets or redistributive centres. Within the konkomba group, households that do not produce pottery but are near production units tend to acquire vessels in these production centres and, to a lesser extent, at markets where potters sell their products, including Jimbale. In these cases, we understand that there is a local ceramic distribution among producers and users of the same ethnic group. This type of distribution suggests that the meaning in terms of social or identity grouping could easily be maintained in their use contexts (Dietler and Herbich, 1998; Van der Linden, 2001).

To obtain vessels, kusasi consumers prefer to go to local markets (e.g., Zaaire or Garu) that are located within 4 km, allowing the consumer to arrive and depart from the market via foot in under a day. These markets contain different types of points of sale outlets and seller skills, forming a complex picture of ceramic trade networks that explains why acquisitions are made in the markets rather than directly from the production centres.

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