Intra-tribal Conflicts and the split of Birifoh Sila Yiri: A multiple Approach towards Indigenous Knowledge Management and Tourism in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to reconstruct the Birifoh migration and intra-tribal conflict stories that were gathered mainly through sociological methods. Using a multiple approach consisting of ethnography, documented evidence and archaeology, this study found that the Sila (hawk) patriclan finally settled in Birifoh after a long sojourn from Wa. Evidence of rapid population growth at Birifoh was established as the presence of huge compound sizes were reported. As a result, coordinating human activities was constrained which led to a serious intra-tribal conflict that also caused loss of human life and property. The ethno-archaeology and history provided enough clues about bloodbath as there was evidence of multiple burials/pile of bones and some of the instrument that were widely used during that period. It is therefore concluded that this reconstruction is relevant for the, local community to remember their past, academics to do further research and promotion of dark tourism to improve the local economy in Ghana.

Keywords: Intra-tribal conflict, Ethno-archaeology, Lobi, Dagaaba, Birifoh

1. INTRODUCTION

Birifoh-Sila Yiri is located between 10°30'02".3N and 002°51'43".8W in the Upper West Region of Ghana. It sits on a hilltop to the northwest of the Black Volta River marking the boundary between Ghana and Burkina Faso. The Birifohs are part of the Lobi ethno-linguistic group in Ghana. The economy of the present Lobi area is largely agrarian in nature with minimal commercial activities. According to Birifoh oral history, most of their traditional architecture was made up of mud-buildings flat-roofed tops or thatch. However, in contemporary times, the architecture can be described as a mosaic of mud and block buildings either roofed with grass or galvanized sheets.
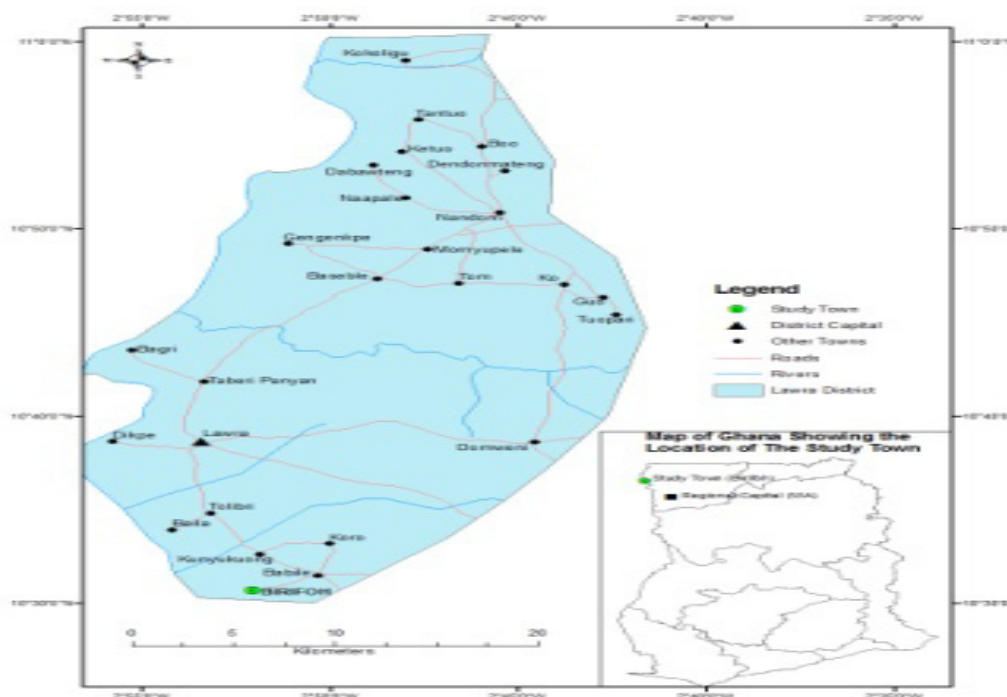

Fig1: A map of the study area

Upon their settlement, Sila Yiri witnessed a phenomenal growth in population but all can traced their ancestry to the leader and founder of present day Birifoh. Consequently, even compound houses became so huge and this made information dissemination difficult. Hence, announcement such as deaths or out-doorings had to be done through sounds from drums or horns. To make such announcements, informants climbed rooftops to do so for neighbouring houses to hear (Ninkara, 2009). This mode of communication still exists in recent times. For instance, the beating of local drums (gongon) is used to mark the beginning of the farming season and also to inform community members to tether their animals.

The continuous growth and expansion of the Birifoh-Sila Yiri led to a tragic incident or conflict. According to Okoro, (2008) the validity of oral tradition through multiple interviews of individuals and groups versatile in local history. However, previous evidence of intra Birifoh conflict was documented by a western sociologist who employed oral and historical approaches, the outcomes of which might have been negatively affected by prejudices, biases language barriers and exaggerations (i.e. Goody, 1954; 1962; 1972). The admission of Goody upon his return to Birifoh that he misunderstood narrations about the Bagre forty years ago provide a strong support of our assertion (Goody, 2007). On account of these weaknesses, this study seeks to use multiple methods consisting of archaeological excavations, ethnographic studies and historical sources as ways of reconstructing the conflict story for indigenous knowledge management and tourism.

2.0. OBJECTIVES
The objectives of this study are to use mixed approaches to reconstruct the story regarding the migration and intra-Birifoh conflict as a way of managing indigenous knowledge for purposes of development including tourism.

3.0. Methods and Materials
 Several methods and materials were employed to gather data for this study. The methods included ethnography or oral tradition, documented evidence (history) and archaeology. According to Hassan (1999), oral traditions in Africa bridge the gap between generations and enrich the present with ancestral voices that speak directly from one person to another. In consonance with this view, others argue that oral tradition enriches archaeological interpretations when versatile people in local history are interviewed and sometimes combined with approaches such as ethnographic observations archival sources (Okoro, 2008; Stahl, 1994). However, others argued that ethno-archaeology should not be merely a source of analogues to identify past objects or phenomena, but must instead elucidate the present in the light of the past and detect the past seeds of the present (Hassan, 1999).

Ethnography was used by identifying knowledgeable persons who still remember stories about the Birifoh people. The historical method was a desk-top or literature based approach. This was to find out what previous authors had written down about the Birifoh conflict. With the archaeological method, two areas were dug to retrieve artefacts for analysis. For the archaeological approach, systematic excavation was adopted using simple tools such as pick axes, shovels, trowels, hand picks and sieves. Two areas, BSY1 and BSY2, were chosen for excavation. The choice of sites was informed by exposed conglomeration of surfaced artefacts through erosion and pits dug to collect soils for house construction. The materials for the ethnographic approach comprised of a focus group discussion whilst books, articles and the internet were the main materials for the historical approach.

4.0. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS
4.1. Historical or documentary evidence of Birifoh migration
Various accounts about the migration of the Birifohs to the present location abound (i.e. Wilks, 1989; Goody, 1967; Kuba & Lentz, 2002; Wilks, 1989; Fynn & Addo-Fenning, 1993). Some of these authors who used oral or historical approach to gather information reported that the people migrated from Wa, the present capital of Upper West Region, as a result of the pressure from Ashantis in southern Ghana and 'Babatu and Samori'-led slave raiders (Wilks, 1989; Goody, 1967).

Another version has it that the Birifohs migrated to Siiru and Noruu both in Wa. It said that, later those who settled in Noruu proceeded to Jirapa before continuing to their current place in Birifoh-Sila-Yiri. According to Goody (1967), on the arrival of the Birifohs, they met the *tendeme* (owners of the land) who had already established themselves in Kol'ora, a neighbouring Dagaaba village. Both oral and historical sources indicate that some of the Birifoh moved westwards and crossed the Black Volta into Burkina Faso (Kuba & Lentz, 2002; Goody, 1967).

Furthermore, historical documentation of oral traditions revealed that the conflict was caused by a struggle for land amongst various custodians such as the Waale (*tendaanba*), the Lobi and Dagaaba in the Upper West Region of Ghana (Wilks, 1989; Goody, 1967). This made the Waale chief to invite the Dagomba to assist them to fight these groups. According to this narration, the chiefs invited their Dagomba kins for military support. This could be true as history portray the Waala, Mamprusi and Dagombas as belonging to the Mole-Dagbani linguistic group who share similar chieftaincy institutions (Goody, 1967; Fynn & Addo-Fenning, 1993).

4.2. Ethnographic evidence

According to narrations from two members of the Haiyiuri patriclan, of Brifoh, they came from the northern settlements of Tinto-Laleung and Nabing settlements in Burkina Faso. This migration made them settled farmers instead of their previous occupations as traders. In another version, elders from Birifoh-Sila and Birifoh-Maalbaa recounted that one section of the compound had a funeral which was unknown to members from the other side who were engaged in merry making. The bereaved clan did not take the attitude of the Birifoh kindly and so launched an attack on them. This led to the destruction of properties and loss of many lives. This action according to elders from Birifoh-Maalbaa, precipitated their departure to Baapare (literary meaning under the stream). The remaining family members in Wa were disowned and nick-named 'Sambaleebiire' by the migrated group because they were suspected as being traitors.

The cause of the Birifoh-Dagaaba conflict might be true. This is because according to the traditions of the two groups, participation in funerals is very vital and reciprocal. The Dagaaba attack on Lobi appears to follow the 'Mosaic, Islamic and Hammurabi laws which surmise that a hurt or injured person was supposed to take vengeful retribution on the person who caused the injury (Matthew 5: 38; Qur'an, 5:45; Qur'an, 2: 178; King, 1997).This was to deter future occurrences of such events.

The Baaparee or 'Stream Side people', the Sambalee and the *Enyualee* see themselves as people from one ancestry but whatever they were engaged in, this tragic incident is still fresh in their mind. Some oral tradition circulating in Birifoh maintained that the *Enyuulee* were the people who inflicted the pain on their brothers, destroyed their properties and killed some of them including their animals. The Sambalee and Baaparee had no option than to move away in search of new settlement. The Baaparee eventually settled close to a stream ("baa" in Dagaare) to utilize the water for their farming and domestic activities. However, some oral tradition circulating in Birifoh claimed that it was the people from *Kal'ora* the initial land owner (tendaana or tengansobo) that intervened and mediated among them and finally broker peace among the various families to avoid future bloodbath.

4.3. Archaeological evidence

An archaeological survey and excavation was carried out in Birifoh-Sila Yiri. Two excavated units were marked out; one on the top of the hill named unit BSY1 and the other unit at the base of the hill, named unit BSY2. The excavated units were gridded into three metres by three metres (3m x 3m) and later subdivided into one meter by one meter (1m x 1m) grids. The total area covered by the hill is about 105,701 square metres using Geographical Position System (GPS) to walk round the whole area. At BSY1, a burial that was identified, at the depth of 60cm, was covered with pottery pieces. There were also evidence of five pottery pavements and nine plastered floors identified at various intervals. The corpse identified was probably placed on the pottery pavement before it was covered with the soil (Figure 2). This is because the fifth pottery pavement was identified at the same level with the burial (Saako, 2009). A base of a water storage pot was also identified *in-situ* in the ninth floor. There was also evidence of a burnt/charred floor identified in BSY1. At BSY2, located at the base of the hill, multiple burials were identified. But the bones could not be gathered for laboratory analysis due to their fragile nature. Other assemblages from the excavation included oyster shells, pieces of bone of goat, rodent, cow and bovid. There were also arrowhead, pieces of iron slag, cowry shells and pottery pieces.

The evidences of tragedy or conflict was an inference from the wide subject area of archaeology of conflict citing examples from elsewhere across the globe. According to Lambert (2002), archaeology has an unparalleled capacity to reveal the extent and conduct of violence and war precisely because it covers long periods and focuses on a time before Western European expansion, colonialism, and other processes that altered the character and trajectory of many indigenous American societies. Archaeological investigation of warfare primarily relies on four lines of material evidence: settlement data, injuries in human skeletal remains, war weaponry, and iconography (Lambert, 1994; LeBlanc, 1999; Vencl, 1984; Wilcox and Haas, 1994).

The first of these, settlement data, is particularly useful for identifying both concern with defence and the consequences of failed (or absence of) defensive measures. The time and material resources people deem necessary for protection can help define perceptions of threat (Haas and Creamer, 1993). The burning of structures, on the other hand, is a common consequence of war (Hoig, 1993; Kroeber & Fontana, 1986; Rice, 2001; Thomas, 1981). In the case of Birifoh-Sila Yiri, according to the oral traditions and oral history most of the houses were set ablaze and people were maimed. Archaeological evidence of burned structures and settlements can therefore help document actual attacks, although other possible causes of burning (e.g., accidental fires, intentional clearing) must also be considered (Lambert, 2002). A new and more powerful weapon like the bow and arrow (Blitz, 1988) may change military tactics and thus the nature and scale of warfare and all of its material manifestations, so the relatively sudden appearance of a new weapon in the archaeological record may also constitute a sign of increasing intergroup aggression (Lambert, 2002).
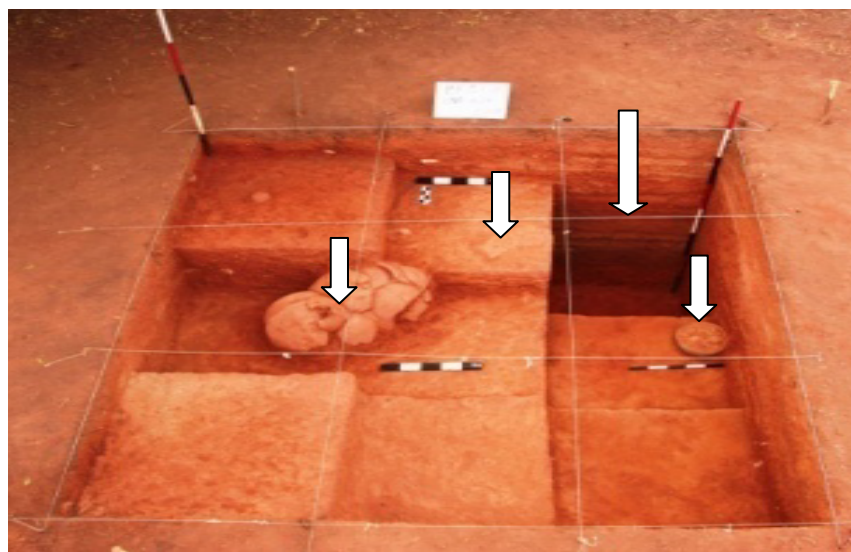
Fig2: Burial covered with pottery pieces

Numerous houses foundations were identified in Birifoh-Sila Yiri during the reconnaissance survey. Burial and multiple burials were also recovered in 'BSY1' and 'BSY2' which go to confirm some of the oral traditions with regard to the tragic story of the Sila Family (Hawk family). The multiple burials identified in BSY2 were probably a mass grave in which more than one corpse was buried in a single grave (Fig.3 & Fig.4). Multiple burial in Birifoh-Sila Yiri and its environs only occurs when people die through an epidemic such as contagious diseases like cholera. These mass graves are called '*bogsule*' ('black graves') usually located within the parameters of the house (Rattray, 1969; Goody, 1962; Alenuma, 2002).

Figure 3:BSY2 showing a stone foundation and multiple burials was identified
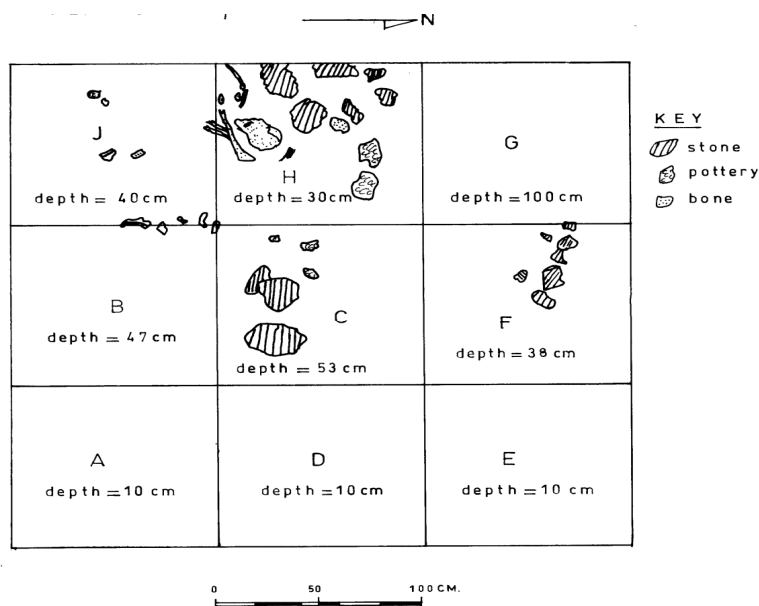
Figure 4: Floor plan of BSY2 showing evidence of multiple burials in SqH at the depth of 30cm

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The archaeological evidence confirms the existence of intra-tribal conflict in Birifoh-Sila Yiri in the past reported by historical and ethnographic evidences. For instance remnants of house foundations and cultural materials such as querns, grinding stones and the multiple burials encountered during the excavation all go to buttress the issue of conflict. Oral accounts by present inhabitants indicating the discovery of lots of bones, skulls and various pot types during excavations of soil for house construction, supports the existence of conflicts. The depth of the excavated pit was almost two meters from the top and still produced cultural materials that probably support the claim by some of the inhabitants that the hill was created as the result of the collapsed houses. Traditionally, mass burial is not a practice in the area under Birifoh custom. Also oral accounts and previous works did not give accounts of the occurrence of epidemics to merit mass graves. It may therefore be concluded that, the mass burials discovered were as a result of conflict.

It is suggested that for the sake of preservation of past heritage, indigenous knowledge management systems (Barnhardt & Kawagley, 2005) be applied to serve the purposes of academics and to preserve this knowledge for posterity. The information should equally be marketed for 'Dark Tourism' (Walter, 2009) as in the case of Rwanda to provide alternative economic activities for community members. We therefore recommend that more investigations be conducted to further confirm some of these claims.

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