

*The Nexus Between Archaeological Exploration and Heritage Contestation:
Perspectives From Pizaga, Upper West Region of Ghana*

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Abstract

This paper is centered on an ancient cultural landscape called Pizaga located in the Upper West Region of Ghana. The landscape is endowed with adequate traces of past human existence. It comprises a flat land and intriguing rock formations within which are a series of rock shelters. It is characterized by several surface configurations of potsherds, house mounds, mass of iron slag, and other archaeological features. However, the landscape is endangered by several destructive mechanisms. Currently, it is impacted by several indigenous agricultural practices, such as the felling of trees for farming and domestic uses and grazing of animals. To explore the landscape through an archaeological exploration as a means of salvaging its archaeological heritage from destruction, a conflict erupted between two communities (Kolon-Yiri and Tabiesi) over its ownership. However, to avoid escalated conflicts among the parties involved, the community-based research model aided a mitigation process that allowed for the conduct of the research. As research anchored on a multi-disciplinary approach, other methods were employed. These included the collection of oral accounts, preliminary archaeological investigations, and the use of ethnographic research tools and techniques including photography. Using these methods helped to obtain both qualitative and quantitative data for the research analyses. Through the archaeological exploration, the research helped to foster historical relationships and a greater understanding of shared ownership models that engender peaceful co-existence as well as positions the site at Pizaga in a temporal context, and this makes the study critical.

Keywords: Heritage Contestation, Archaeological Exploration, Community-Based Research

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Introduction

This paper is centered on an ancient settlement called Pizaga located in the Upper West Region of Ghana. Pizaga, based on its archaeological evidence, is established as a place that represents the history of human activities within a defined locality either for a particular identified period in the past or over several different decades. It is established that each of the two (2) different cultural features (the flat land and the intriguing rock formations) of the general landscape has its own intrinsic value. The narratives surrounding the two features clearly highlight the historic dynamism and the present diversity of the landscape. Not until an attempt to explore the site in January 2018, the entire cultural landscape was completely abandoned by its contemporary users causing its vulnerability. It was also unknown that two (2) communities (Kolon-Yiri & Tabiesi) were feuding over the site's ownership. With the escalation of the contestation over its ownership, access to the site for further archaeological exploration was problematic. To respond to this contestation, an immediate and effective approach was required. Hence, a mediation process was engineered through an application of a community-based model guided by the Stakeholder Theory. Indeed, this facilitated a smooth resolution of the conflict that aided the success of the research.

Contestations Over Heritage Assets

Indeed, Ghana, being the first country to attain independence in the sub-Saharan Africa in 1957, has over the years, experienced relative peace and security. In effect, the country has benefited from significant direct foreign investments and socioeconomic improvements (Nolan-Haley, 2014). Considering these however, there is the existence of various forms of contestations that lead to conflicts among several contemporary societies in Ghana. For instance, contestations over land ownership are often one of the primary causes of conflicts among several contemporary communities in the country. Given that the livelihoods of most indigenes of these communities depend on the quantum of land acquired, struggle for its control engages people at all levels or ranks of society (Havnevik et al. 2007). With the existence of land contestations, the measurement of sociocultural, economic and political power through direct ownership and control also exists (Kaberry, 1959). Moyo (2008) argues that conflicts over land among ethnic groups are mostly occasioned by unequal control because of its cultural and economic significance. In the post-independence era, conflicts over land ownership in Ghana has been a contentious and recurrent problem among several contemporary communities.

Proceeding from the premise that several archaeological heritage resources are situated on natural landscapes, the whole purpose of land ownership then becomes an issue in protecting the dignity of the individual owners of such assets, and aids in avoiding conflicts predominantly among contemporary users of the land. In recent times, the commodification of heritage assets has taken a centre stage in the practice of heritage. This is particularly so, when the heritage of a community or of a group of people tends to be an avenue for tourism development. Bugarin (2008) asserts that contemporary communities consider heritage patrimony as a source of moneymaking rather than paying much attention on the sociocultural considerations (cf. Ampofo Manu, 2019). Hoelscher (2011) contends that heritage has become a source of an essential economic gain and a foundation of personal and collective identity of an individual person or a group of persons. With the idea of commodification, several heritage assets or resources have been either forcefully or genuinely appropriated primarily for economic gains. In some instances, the reconfiguration of modern socio-political and economic boundaries of nations has also led to the reconfiguration of cultural boundaries of several present-day communities (Wanda, 2010 cf. Ampofo Manu, 2019). In effect, the reconfiguration of the

cultural boundaries has granted access to various communities to cross societal boundaries to commodify one's heritage for the purposes of monetary gains (Wanda, 2010). Notably, the reconfiguration of cultural boundaries has primarily led to varied degree of contestations among groups of relatives over tangible (physical) heritage resources particularly in cases where the significance of these resources is established or recognized. In several instances, the realization of the significance of a heritage asset ignites contestations among contemporary users. In the circumstances, several archaeological explorations that seek to salvage the archaeological heritage resources in these contested areas are mostly put on hold or completely halted.

It is worthy of note that the written cultural history about a people is reflected in the physically built cultural environments (such as landscapes) that the people create for themselves (Howe and Logan 2002) as well as the physical objects they make for themselves, and thus, are highly revered, well protected, preserved and properly managed for posterity. The neglect or disregard of these landscapes or physical objects as representations of identities and cultural values of past human societies by contemporary communities leads to a larger extent, the destruction of archaeological heritage resources. In effect, communities' identities and memories are completely lost. Similarly, any natural disaster or "any activity for land management can destroy, forever, not only the physical remains but any archaeological information present in the environmental context" (Barceló, 2004:1). For this reason, there is the need for everyone to, as a matter of urgency, ensure the protection and preservation of recognized archaeological heritage resources particularly when these resources help in reconstructing the memory of the history of humanity.

In recent times, heritage as an academic discipline acknowledges the need for archaeological heritage resources to be well protected and properly managed through an immediate and effective approach. Fundamentally, the identification and documentation of these resources are essential even though this approach is a more complex subject that requires a holistic study (Rautenbach et. al., 2015). By documenting the identified archaeological heritage resources in a defined cultural landscape, we (as heritage practitioners) are assured of the appropriate measures to be executed in ensuring their preservation and proper management. Notably, the identification and documentation of archaeological heritage resources are mostly, and successfully done through archaeological explorations. Nonetheless, attempts to conduct such explorations usually lead to a series of contestations that if not properly managed may lead to unwarranted conflicts among several different opposing parties. For instance, a communication gap in the understanding of the researcher's work if not properly addressed could lead to a strong dissonance between the researcher and other members of the community where the project is to be executed.

Similarly, developmental projects executed by either a state or private agency are usually hit by various forms of contestations. In effect, these projects are completely halted or delayed. For instance, the construction of a hydroelectric dam on the Black Volta River at Bui Gorge in present-day Bono region in Ghana resulted in a conflict between the Bui Power Authority (the state agency) and three (3) affected communities namely, Bui, Akanyakrom and Dokokyina (Apoah & Gavua, 2016) in 2007. Members of these communities contended that their prestigious individual heritages regarded as the "souls" of their ancestors will be impacted by the construction of the dam. They further argued that to neglect and witness the destruction of their heritages by being besieged by the flood waters of the dam would lead to a desecration of their deities (Apoah & Gavua, 2016). Hence, they called for proper measures to be put in place in ensuring the safety of their valuable heritage assets by providing adequate "provisions for

the relocation of the Ñsoulsì of their communities, including deities and ancestral remains” (Gava et.al., 2015:2).

In resolving the emerging conflict, the Bui Power Authority engaged the services of archaeologists to intervene in order not to halt the power-generating process and project schedule (Apoah & Gavua, 2016). Hence, through a negotiation with the Bui Power Authority, a team of archaeologists from the Department of Archaeology and Heritage Studies of the University of Ghana led by Professor Kodjo Gavua conducted an archaeological exploration (through identification and documentation) within the catchment area of the project (of which the three (3) communities fall within) in 2009 and 2010. This was primarily to salvage the archaeological heritage resources from destruction. The team also facilitated a negotiation with the Bui Power Authority that led to the relocation of the ancestral remains as well as shrines of deities and other features identified as vital heritage properties by elders of the communities in 2011 (Apoah & Gavua, 2016).

In a recent development in Ghana, some twelve (12) communities to be affected by a lithium exploration company, Atlantic Lithium Company, in the Mfantseman Municipality and Abura-Asebu-Kwamankese District of the Central Region raised some issues of contestation over the said project (Ghana News, Agency, February 2024). These communities although consent to the execution of the project, however, on the grounds of culture and traditions, they charged the Atlantic Lithium Company to protect and preserve some indigenous water sources and mangroves that had, for several centuries, served as sacred finds in reconnaissance, hence the project should be halted. In a private conversation with an indigene (name withheld) of Ewoyaa upon our visit to the community, he intimated that they are happy for such a project to be executed in the area as it could create jobs for the local people in the affected communities, however, he pleaded for the preservation of the spiritual sanctity of the gods, goddesses and other resting places of their ancestors within the catchment area.

Interested in the stories being told through archaeological data, and with a primary aim of salvaging archaeological heritage resources from destruction, archaeologists and other researchers in the heritage industry institute measures that ensure archaeological explorations in contested areas. The constitution and encouragement of collaborative measures in research and practice yield several positive and practical results (Ataley, 2012; Gavua & Nutor, 2013; Gblerkpor & Nkumbaan, 2014; Swanepoel, 2010 cf. Ampofo Manu, 2019). Thus, in the practice of archaeology, collaborative approaches make the discipline culturally, economically and politically relevant (Gavua & Nutor, 2013 cf. Ampofo Manu, 2019). Largely, archaeology as a field of study, has, and continues to play major role in negotiating and resolving heritage-related conflicts among contemporary communities (Schmidt 2014b, cf: Apoah & Gavua, 2016).

Dealing With Contestations in Archaeological Exploration

The stakeholder theory has ultimately become a dominant discourse in most academic research (Mitchell et al. 2007; Pesqueux & Damak-Ayadi 2005 cf. Khanyile, 2018). The theory is a multi-disciplinary approach that draws on social sciences such as sociology, and applies literature on systems theory, corporate planning, social responsibility and organisational studies (Mainardes et al., 2012). It is managerial (Freeman et. al., 2004 cf. Khanyile, 2018) and can be articulated by asking varied questions. Being multi-disciplinary in nature, it employs creative holism borrowed from systems theory that relies on a multi-disciplinary approach to conceptualize and contextualize research (Khanyile, 2018). Contrary to the application of this theory, some scholars argue that the theory mostly includes a string of normative elements that

assume that the interests of all legitimate stakeholders have intrinsic value, and that no set of interests is assumed to dominate (Clarkson, 1995; cf. Khanyile, 2018). However, Doh & Quigley (2014) contend that the theory assumes a network of connections and linkages particularly between agencies and their constituencies. In this regard, the theory becomes a useful tool for establishing a good rapport and ethical relationships between a researcher and the stakeholders in a given research area. Khanyile (2018) asserts that the application of this theory helps in addressing fundamental questions systematically. Therefore, researchers are encouraged to have an asymmetrical dialogue with relevant stakeholders within communities before embarking on any research (Jongbloed et al., 2008). The multitude of stakeholders with whom a researcher must engage implies that an effective strategy for understanding and managing stakeholder relationships is essential, and this has a significant impact on the success of the research (Jongbloed et al., 2008).

The application of this theory in archaeological exploration requires the identification of key stakeholders. These stakeholders are individual persons or group(s) who can affect or are affected by the activities that take place within their sociocultural settings and, who are equally the architects of those settings, hence, they play critical roles in decision-making, establishing and implementing policies (Freeman, 1984; 1994; Bryson, 2004; Duckworth & Moore, 2010; cf. Khanyile, 2018). Effective collaboration among stakeholders is key, and this helps bring together different kinds of human resources and competencies that may assist in implementing projects, programmes, activities and research (Louw & Venter, 2013). Therefore, there is the need to factor in the people within the community when executing any activity such as academic-based research. This is the only avenue to have multiple voices that will enrich the outcome of the research (Bugarin, 2009).

The engagement of stakeholders in research serves as a key and powerful tool in mediating contestations over heritage assets among contemporary communities. Hence, guided by the Stakeholders Theory, different stakeholders were engaged *before*, *during* and *after* the archaeological exploration in Pizaga. The political administrators (i.e., The District Chief Executives for Nadowli-Kaleo and Daffiama-Bussie-Issa District Assemblies, the Members of Parliament for Nadowli-Kaleo and Daffiama-Bussie-Issa Constituencies), the elders of the traditional authorities as well as other opinion leaders including youth leaders of the two (2) communities (Kolon-Yiri and Tabiesi) were contacted. There were sectional meetings held with members of the two communities. Some other members including traders, farmers, and among others were also contacted. All of these were ethically done to allow for the successful and positive conduct of research in Pizaga.

Practically, the engagement of the stakeholders was effectively and efficiently executed through the Community-based model. For the mediation process, the application of this model was categorised into two (2) separate modules namely, *Community-based Entry Strategy* and *Community-Based Engagement strategy*. While the community-based entry strategy allowed and facilitated the mediation process through the respective key stakeholders such leaders of the two (2) communities, the Community-based engagement strategy facilitated the mediation process through other stakeholders such as the youth in the respective communities. The two (2) models offered an opportunity for all parties involved in the mediation process to have their voices or concerns heard. These models created an avenue for instituting community mediation.

Community mediation, as tool for community conflict resolution, is a human resource that facilitates the restructuring of the social fabric, serving as a universal public service involving

various sectors within a specific geographical area (Sauceda & Gorjón, 2015). Typically, it is a conflict resolution process where opposing parties work together to reach a consensus without becoming adversaries to potential solutions (Piedra, 2017). Community mediation is seen within the objectives of sustainable development concerning equitable access to peace and justice. It plays a significant role because it is a civic tool through which members of society can address their differences and manage conflicts that arise in both private and public domains. Additionally, it enables participation in the construction of the society to which they belong (Velázquez, 2019). The application of the two (2) models restored peace and security among the two (2) communities feuding over the ownership of Pizaga. In effect, the conflict resolution allowed for the conduct of archaeological exploration in Pizaga.

Conclusion

The archaeological exploration in Pizaga was eminent following the narratives of the migratory story of the Guomo people (a sub-lineage of the Dagaaba of the Upper West Region of Ghana) of Kolon-Yiri. This group of relatives claim Pizaga as the original settlement of the entire Guomo lineage, and further intimated that the site was the first permanent settlement of their ancestors before migrating to present-day Kolon-Yiri. The attempt to explore the site in January 2018 to complement the narratives erupted a contestation between the Guomo of Kolon-yiri and the Manyala of Tabiesi over the site's ownership. As a result of the contestation between the communities, access to the ancient settlement for archaeological exploration was problematic. However, with a keen interest in contributing to existing knowledge of the archaeology of the Upper West Region of Ghana, and with primary aim of salvaging the archaeological heritage resources of Pizaga, appropriate measures that could foster a mitigation process were instituted, and these allowed for the archaeological exploration in January 2023. It is of worthy to note that researchers in archaeological explorations are primarily not to be seen as mediators in conflicts among indigenous communities over heritage assets. However, to effectively address the challenges and to avoid escalated conflicts among communities feuding over ownership of a heritage resource or asset, researchers are expected to initiate appropriate measures in addressing same that would allow for the conduct of their research. Such measures include the application of the community-based research model guided by the Stakeholders Theory which fundamentally serves as avenues for community mediation. To conclude, these models facilitate a smooth mitigation process, and allow for archaeological exploration of a contested heritage. The archaeological exploration in Pizaga has helped to foster historical relationships and facilitated a greater understanding of shared ownership models that engender peaceful co-existence among parties involved in heritage contestations. Generally. The research positions Pizaga in a temporal context, and this made the study critical.

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