

# Archaeology, Anthropology and Material Culture of Tando, Koma Land of Northern Ghana

Jobila Mohammed Zakari

An Anthropologist and a Research Officer Working with National Commission for Civic Education Tamale, Northern Region, Ghana

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**Abstract:** This research was borne as part of the requirements for the award of the author's Master of Philosophy degree in archaeology at the University of Ghana. The study sought to investigate aspects of the material culture of Tando and its relationship with material culture from other sites within the Koma Land archaeological region. The Koma Land archaeological region is an area within parts of the modern-day Districts of Northern Ghana, namely Mamprugu Mogduri, Balsa South and Wa East, identified by archaeologists and anthropologists alike for its concentrated archaeological material remains. However, aspects of the overall data obtained from this archaeological survey are discussed in this paper to throw more light on the significance of Tando in the Saharan trade network of West Africa, aspects of material utilization in domestic space and how the present-day people's belief system is shaped by parts of the ancient Koma Land material culture.

**Keywords:** Archaeology, Anthropology, Material Culture, Tando, Koma Land, Northern Ghana The Koma Land Archaeological Region.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Northern Ghana is characterized by soil preservation of sculptural and lithic objects and patchy iron ores which have been a focus of archaeological and anthropological research since the second half of the twentieth century AD. On the plains particularly, within the basins of the Kulpawn and Sisili rivers, archaeologists have labeled an area called the Koma Land Archaeological Region consisting of stone circle mounds and settlement mounds/sites arising from the formation of long human occupation, covering loosely an area of 100 x 100km (Kankpeyeng & Nkumbaan 2009: 195). These mounds appear spherical in nature, and are partitioned along with superstructures and substructures encasing human and animal remains, grinding stones, iron implements pottery discs, terra cotta figurines, cowries and stones marking out the surface of the mound with a ring/circle shape numbering between ten and fifty depending upon the size of the mound (Anquandah 1987: 173).

The Koma Land archaeological region commonly demonstrates stone circle mounds and settlement mounds. These mound/sites are closely distributed amongst both living and abandoned settlements of the geographical area. While the former includes Yikpabongo, Tando, Gwosi, Kundugu, Tantala, Yiziesi, Yagba, Daboziesi, Tovoo, Tantuosi, Wiesi, Fumbisi, Zugkpeni and Nangruma, the latter are Zoboku, Kpikpirigu, Baranya and Fagusa. These settlements are situated in the districts of Mamprugu Mogduri, Balsa South and Wa East of the Northern Regions, Upper East and Upper West respectively (fig. 1).

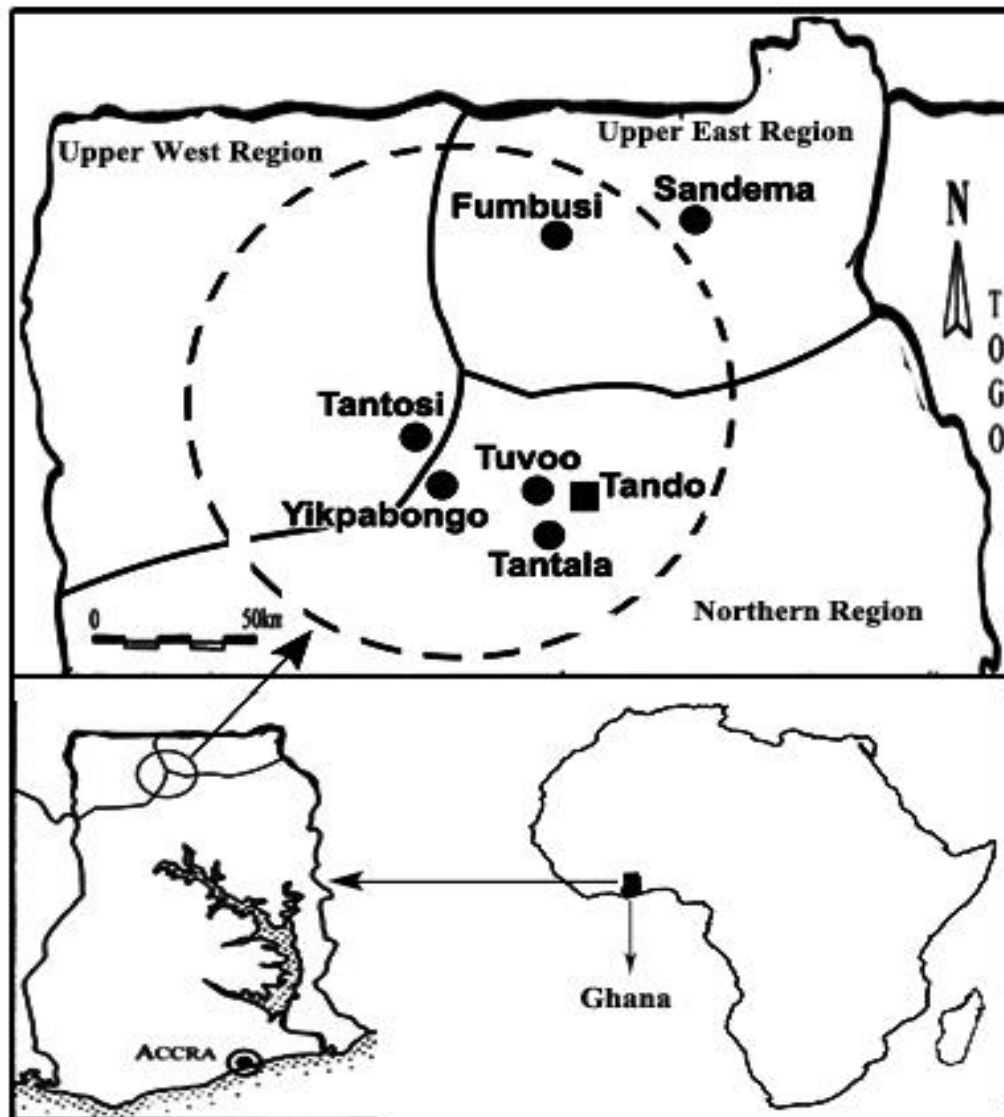


Fig.1, Tando and Koma Land archaeological region

The Koma Land archaeological region is characterized by four main ethno-linguistic groups, namely 'Konni' (Anquandah 1998; Kankpeyeng *et al* 2013: 478; Kröger & Saibu 2010: 1), 'Mampruli' (Rattray 1932; Zakari 2010: 2), 'Sisali' (Swanepoel 2004, 2008: 12) and 'Buli' (Anquandah 1998; Apentiik 1997; Kröger 1982). However, these groups speak an uncommon language, but their architectural and cultural traits are widespread. They intermarry and observe rituals and funerary practices arising from analogous religious concepts (Zakari 2010, 2011).

The people of Tando are part of the larger Northern Ghana Mamprusi ethnic group, but their language, '*Mampru Sabli*' (Black Mampruli), varies slightly semantically from the Mampruli spoken in other parts of 'Mamprugu' or modern Mamprusi settlements such as Walewale, Nalerigu, Lengbinsi, Gambaga and others. The Mampruli and its sub groups within, and other nearby groups of languages to be precise, Komni and Buli belong to the Mole-Dagbani or Oti-Volta sub-group of languages spoken in parts of Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo (Naden 1985; Kroger 2016).

Surveys unveil that the Kingdom of Mamprugu developed as early as 1475 AD (David 1987). The Koma Land archaeological region in modern times is drained by the Sisili and Kulpawna rivers, with several streams that run dry during the arid season of northern Ghana (November to April). The environmental disposition of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Sisili-Kulpawna basin played a key role in the socioeconomic and artistic exploration of the Iron Age Koma Land peoples.

The basin, which accrues its geological sources from the prevalent three geological rock groups, namely, sedimentary, metamorphic and igneous (Anquandah 1987: 173) probably provided the people living there, with favorable environmental and cultural habitation requirements to explore for their economic and social needs (Zakari 2010, 2011). Until somewhat two years ago, poor road networks hindered the accessing of the area during the raining season (June-August). This, however, probably motivated the labeling of the area as 'overseas' (Anquandah 1998: 7) because, it was impossible for researchers to cross the rivers without a boat. Nevertheless, recent improved road networks and the creation of bridges over the Sisily and Kulpawn rivers make the area largely accessible any time of the twelve month.

The first contact with the Koma Land terracotta took place in the 1960s when the people of Yikpabongo were digging for mud to construct a house (Kroger 2017: 43). Ben Baluri Saibu, a lawyer and a retired member of parliament of the area, subsequently, reported the existence of the terracotta figurines and sites to the Ghana Museums and Monuments Boards (GMMB) Accra. Contemporaneously, Franz Kroger, a German anthropologist who was studying the Balsa culture of northern Ghana, subjected a clay sculpture from the village of Yikpabongo to Thermoluminescence (TL) chronological analysis at Max Planck Institute for Nuclear Physics in Heidelberg, Germany.

This scientific analysis produced dates of between  $405 \pm 135$  years. This date was widely accepted by researchers until later revision of the ancient Koma Land habitation and materials which suggested new dates of between 6<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD (Insoll et al 2012). Better still, Franz Kroger followed up with initial publications of the Koma Land figurines, and also notified the Department of Archaeology, University of Ghana, of the discoveries (Anquandah & van Ham 1985). These reports culminated in the first visit by officials of the Ghana Museums and Monuments Board (GMMB) to the archaeological region in 1984 (Kankpeyeng and DeCorse 2003).

In 1985 the first scientific excavations were commissioned in the village of Yikpabongo by Professor James Anquandah (Anquandah 1998, 1987; Anquandah & Van Ham 1985). After a break of about 20 years of digging, Professor Benjamin Kankpeyeng and Dr Samuel Nkumbaan, who at times, were joined by Professor Timothy Insoll and Professor Natalie Swanepoel, and scholars, including the author started to carry out new digs in the area.

Over the years, the Koma Land archaeological research has unraveled divergent material culture with varied archaeological and anthropological interpretations. Of these materials are terracotta figurines, ceramic discs, potsherds, stones, daub, flora and fauna remain and tobacco/smoking pipes (Anquandah 1998, 1987; Anquandah & Van Ham 1985; Appiah-Adu 2013; Asamoah-Mensah 2013; Kankpeyeng & Nkumbaan 2008, 2009; Zakari 2010: 30, 2011). Between the period of 6<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, the ancient Koma Land civilization flourished and remnants of their material culture piled up in stone circle mounds (Anquandah 1998, 1987: 173-174; Anquandah & Van Ham 1985; Kankpeyeng and Nkumbaan 2008, 2009). Unlike the settlement mounds which are related to the present-day people of the area, the manufacturers of the stone circle mounds are still unknown.

## 2. SURFACE SURVEY

The approach to this archaeological study was eclectic; it involved archaeology, oral tradition, ethno-history, geography and ethnography. Prior to the diggings, there was a surface survey in the entire village of Tando. This employed a method known as a spoked wheel reconnaissance survey. In applying this technique, a datum point was located at about the middle of the village and sampling units identified. These units were evenly arranged along eight (8) radiating transect lines positioned at angles of 45 coordinate. Four (4) workmen from the research team lined up at arm's length and walked from the datum point to the extreme fringes of the village in which the team did indeed collect artifacts (terracotta figurines, tobacco pipes, stone implements and potsherds) and also recorded features (mounds) with GPS readings.

Elsewhere in Ghana, scientific archaeological research has demonstrated a successful application of spoked wheel reconnaissance surveys, particularly, in the Boyase Hill of Kintampo Culture sites (Bredwa-Mensah 1984). Akin to settlement and stone circle mounds in other areas within the region (Anquandah 1998, 1987; Anquandah & Van Ham 1985; Kankpeyeng & Nkumbaan 2008, 2009), the study at Tando also brought to light settlement and stone circle forms of mounds (Zakari 2010).

These mounds have been classified on the basis of their inner diameter, material content and morphological appearance. Whereas the stone circle mounds (whose makers are still unknown amongst researchers there) are of superstructure and substructure in character and also reveal terracotta figurines, potsherds and stones or impressions of stones on their

surface (Anquandah 1998; Kankpeyeng & Nkumba 2008), the settlement mounds have manifested pieces of local ceramics, hearths, daubs and others cultural objects believed to be products of the present-day peoples (Kankpeyeng & Nkumba 2008; Zakari 2010).

Excavations were conducted on one of the settlement mounds (N10° 11' 13.6" W001° 30' 46.4") in which two pits were dug measuring 2meters by 2meters and 3meters by 1meter (fig. 2).

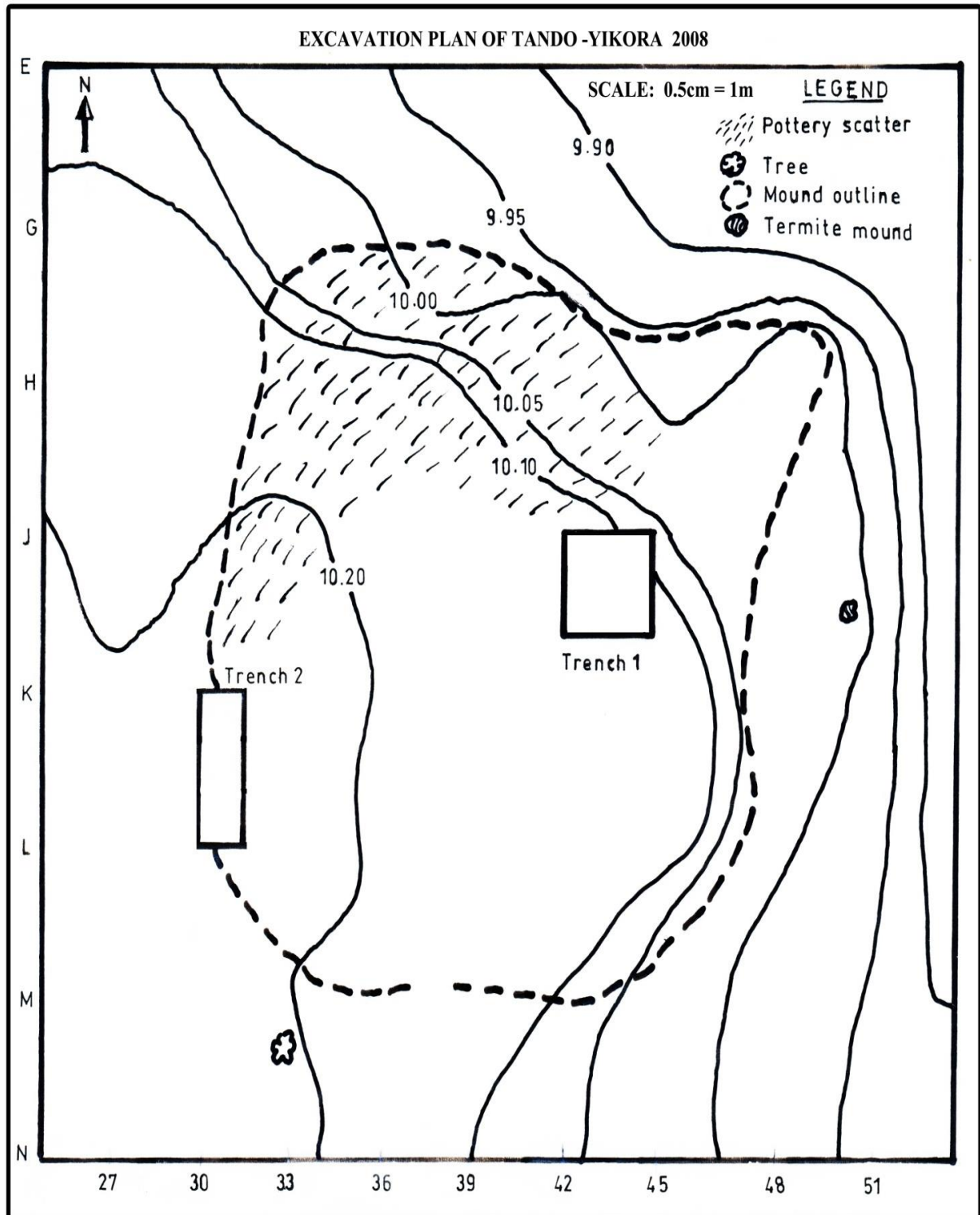


Fig. 2, Topographic site plan and excavated portions of the mound

***Archaeological Excavation and Interpretation:***

By means of arbitrary stripping, the two trenches were excavated by the approach of vertical intervals of 20cm. The soil brought about by each level was sieved to catch every artifact including small ones. The artifacts were recorded and bagged according to the levels from which they were obtained and appropriately labeled showing site name and year of excavations, the particular level obtained and the type of object (Fig 3).



**Fig. 3, an excavated trench at Tando**

However, the excavations revealed archaeological finds that shared a similar material group with materials uncovered from other sites in the region. What was so fascinating in the Tando digs was a discovery of the 18th century AD smoking pipes, which is relatively uncommon amongst other sites in the area. Overall, the excavations and surface collections assembled 3702 potsherds, 38 terracotta figurines, 4 tobacco pipes and 15 stone implements.

The Koma Land archaeology, has since the beginning of scientific research, revealed varied material objects with resulting interpretations of complex life ways (Zakari 2010, 2011), arising from social and religious practices and composite belief systems (Kankpeyeng *et al* 2013), ritual and curative or healing dynamics (Kankpeyeng & Nkumbaan 2009; Insoll *et al* 2012), complex burial ceremonies (Anquandah 1987; 1998; Anquandah & Van Ham 1985; Kroger 1982; 2017) and ancestor veneration amongst the present-day peoples (Zakari 2010, 2011).

The terracotta artworks obtained from the study were broken down and sorted based on Louis Perrois (1972) proposed scheme of examining works of artistic creation, which puts emphasis on the measurement of the art form. Perrois classifies works of art by measuring the torso through to the proportion of head and lower limbs in which he calls 'hyperlongiform' (very long torso, over 50% of the total height), 'longiform' (Long torso, about 50% of the total height),

'equiform' (torso less than 50% of the total height and 'braviform' (about 33-36% of the total height). At least, 15 out of the total 38 figurines recovered had 70% of the entire structure intact, making the object feasible for examination by measurement. In this classification, 13% of the total figurines fell under the category of 'hyperlongiform.' However, 20% of them were also in the group of 'longiform.' The other groups, ie 'equiform' and 'braviform' recorded 40% and 27% respectively.

The figurine assemblage at Tando has enriched our understanding about the daily lives of the ancient Koma Land peoples and their external economic, social and cultural contact groups in the Saharan, Sahelian and forest zones of West Africa. The works of art in Tando have not only broadened our scope about how Tando and its surroundings served as trade routes in the West African sub-region but also how cultural contact became prevalent and influential in the region.

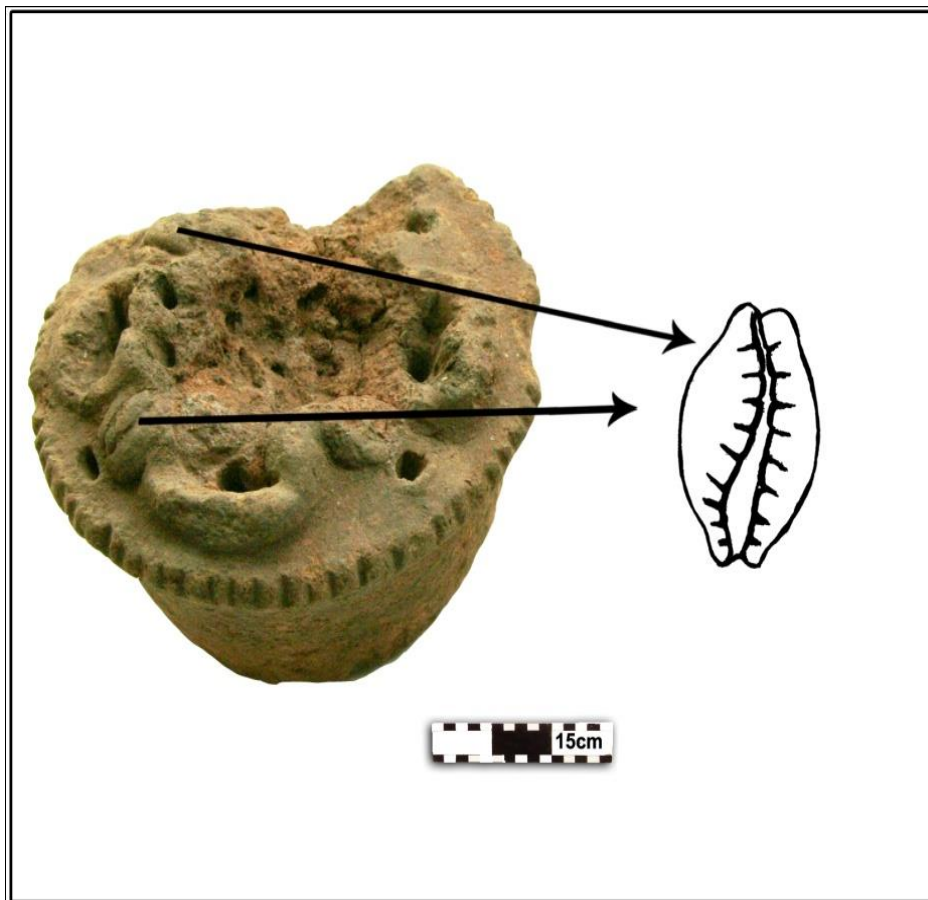
Though, it is still not clear who and what commodities were actually involved in the long distance Saharan trade, yet the discovery of Indian ocean cowry shells excavated at Yikpabongo, the terracotta art depicting camel and horses, and cowry motifs depicted on some works of art suggests that the Koma Land people were deeply involved in long distance trade (Anquandah 1987: 179). Furthermore, a closer look at some decorations administered on Tando figurines, provides enough evidence to suggest that the long distance traders from the Niger Inland Delta area armed themselves well with the purpose of fighting off their assailants before they embarked on the journey.

Whereas riding a horse or camel, the trader dressed with an arm dagger which is "the only weapon clearly identifiable on many male" horse riding "figurines," and "in a fight it could be easily drawn from its attachment to the left upper arm using the right hand" (Kroger 2017:49). This argument does not only testify how horse (not common in Ghana) riders from the Sudanic region came in contact with Koma Land people, but also it describes the armed stature of the travelers (fig. 4)



**Fig 4, a broken figurine with arm dagger fixed to the left arm**

Unlike western sculpture fashioned out for aesthetic purposes, African traditional art was a necessary component of quotidian life and it would be unacceptable to understand African culture without an understanding of the artistry. African sculpture serves to symbolize authority and functions to maintain social control and the manufacturing group's identity. Just like figurines from other Koma Land sites eg. Yikpabongo, aspects of Tando sculpture also demonstrated traits of religious practice. Nevertheless, objects of religious practice can be interpreted as vehicles of cohesion that carries the common beliefs and participation of the group's ceremonial life. For instance, a terracotta ritual object came to light with designs of stamped cowrie shells on the object (Fig. 5).



**Fig. 5, clay designs of cowrie shells on a terracotta objects**

In the former times of West Africa, cowries were used as a currency (Kroger 1982). Unlike York's (1972) analysis of the 11th century *Cypraea moneta* cowrie is believed to have originated from the Maldives and used in the Mali empire, the cowries from the grave digs at Yikpabongo, nine kilometers north of Tanado, were classified as *Cypraea annulus*, a common cowrie species on the East African coast of Zanzibar that probably arrived there in the 15th century, though a few of *cypraea annulus* from the Gonja village of Jakpawuase date much later (Kroger 1982).

Furthermore, the significance of cowrie shells has been mentioned in the historical records of Medieval Islamic Sudan as products of export from Sijilmasa to earlier states of West Africa such as Kumbi Saleh (ancient Ghana), Gao, Jenne, Kouga and others (Anquandah 1998:78). It is of great importance to note that cowrie shells, did not only serve as trade goods or medium of exchange in the past, but also their presence in the Koma Land region, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, probably influenced the present-days people's belief system due to the peoples' prestigious regards for the commodity. Figure 5 was probably a religious object that functioned as *wonni*, a symbol of magical power that could drive one's luck or control his/her daily fortunes. This practice is still widespread in Tando and such mystical objects are usually discarded after the owner or keeper passes on.

Oral interviews conducted by the author further revealed a religious practice that was deeply seated in the concept of *jaasi*. This belief system is associated with the spirit of newly born twins. An informant recounted that after the birth of twins, the male parent carves two wooden sculptures, with much resemblance to an ancient Koma Land sculpture, which are kept in the room to represent the spirit of the twins.

The object is also adorned with cowries, metal bangles and sometimes, surrounded by ritual pots and other objects that may be relevant in this context. With the wooden sculpture, the parent approaches the spirit embedded in them through the offering of sacrifices with the purpose of invoking good health, bumper harvest and success, not only for the twins but also for the members of the entire family (fig. 6).



**Fig. 6, carved wood artworks representing twins *jaasi***

The connection between the present-days' people's belief system and modern artistic expression imitating ancient terracotta figurines is widespread amongst the neighboring cultural groups of Tando. The practice appears to express the group's identity by playing the role of ancestors, lesser gods or totems. For instance, amongst the Bulsa, Kroger (1982) reveals two clay heads at the village of Zamsa, which represent *Anaanateng*, an ancestor and his wife preserved in a stone hill about 1.50m high and a few kilometers away from the compounds.

They receive no sacrifices in where they are kept, but rather in ancestral shrines, some distance away in the bush. Figurine production is a preserve of female and still prevalent in modern-day Bulsa communities. Again, amongst the Lobi of Birifo in the Upper West region, the death of an elderly person can result in the carving of his or her effigy, *kpii die*, which is kept in the ancestor room (Goody 1962: 224). At one side of an ancestor's room, a carved wooden objects and clay figurines including cowrie shells were spotted during an archaeological survey (Saako 2017: 27). These objects, in parts establish the connection to supernatural forces governing survival, including ancestral spirits and other deities, particularly those overseeing rainfall.

The excavations at Tando uncovered pottery with different shapes and size. Pottery is an important tool for measuring technological and stylistic development. Archaeologists and anthropologists view pottery as a key to understanding the evolution of local manufacturing techniques and production (Crossland 1989; Shepard 1954).

Pottery can be used as vehicles for understanding internal communication networks and cultural contacts (Anquandah 1982; DeCorse 1998; Insoll 1997; McIntosh and McIntosh 1980; Phillipson 1985; Stahl 1994). The changing decoration, shape and manufacturing techniques of pottery makes it an ideal tool for answering questions about human occupation from a diachronic perspective (Apentiik 1999; Franke 2014: 169). However, the functions of pottery can reflect new strategies used for food production, consumption and storage as well as articulate social identity, religious belief, philosophy and cultural perceptions (Asamoah-Mensah 2013: 7; Breunig et al 1996).



Pottery is also a desirable reconstruction object with much relevance to archaeology because; it can stay well over time, though it breaks, yet each piece retains its form and shape (Shinnie and Kense 1989; Zakari 2010). The survey produced a large number of pottery that were mainly body, rim, neck and base (see the table below).

Numerical distribution of pottery sherds recovered from Tando

Provenance		Rim	Body	Neck	Base
Level 1	Trench 1	257	386	114	45
	Trench 2	290	258	200	20
Level 2	Trench 1	379	144	122	26
	Trench 2	108	176	119	20
Level 3	Trench 1	26	154	94	17
	Trench 2	16	216	162	19
Level 4	Trench 2	20	66	66	13
Level 5	Trench 2	16	61	52	20
Total		1112	1481	929	180
Percentage		30%	40%	25%	5%

On the whole, the pottery revealed body sherds numbering 1481, making up the largest figure of the pottery form. This number represented 40%, while others, such as rim, neck, and base recorded 1112, 929, and 180 representing 30%, 25%, and 5% of the total sherds respectively. However, further analysis of the pottery's rim structure commonly revealed direct or straight, everted and inverted in shape, which provided insight into the fact that their functions were utilized in domestic space (Fig. 7)

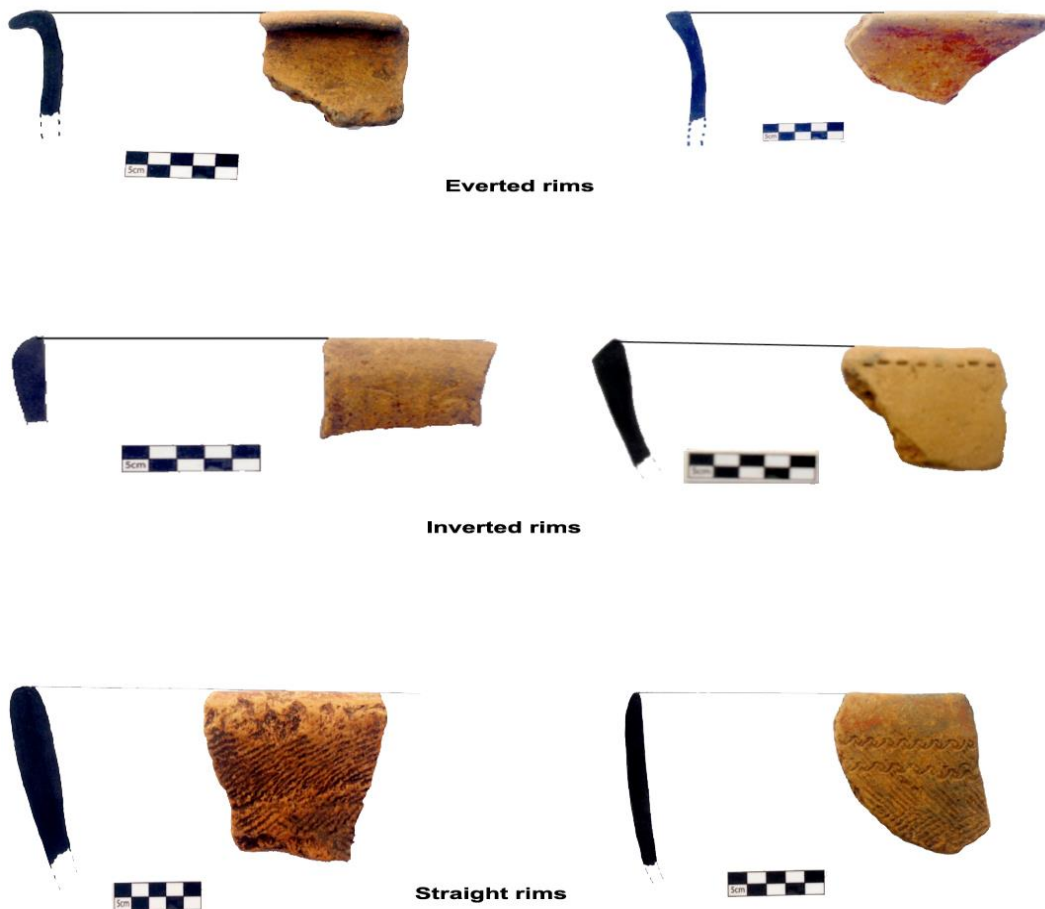
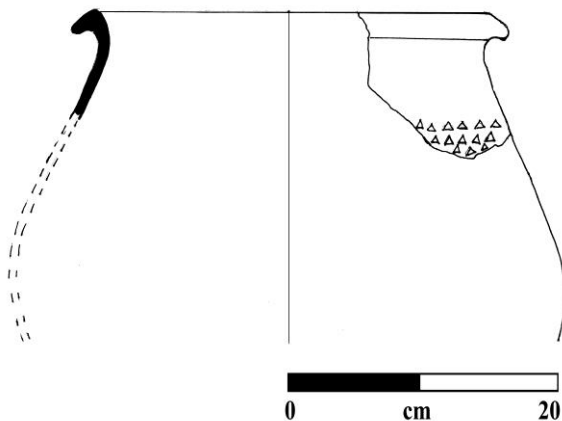


Fig.7. different rim forms

From Binford (1987) and David et al's (1988: 369) view point of pottery's function of 'tecnomic' or 'utilitarian,' aspects of Tando pottery fell within the framework of cooking of foods, fetching, serving, and storage of water and beer and brewing. The ethnographic studies in this context confirmed this utilization in the domestic space of Tando. While some pottery was considered to have functioned as water and wine storage vessels, others were seen to have been used for transporting of liquid substances and processing of ancestor reverence. However, a cooking pot recovered from the archaeological record revealed a spherical body shape with round base and wide mouth with everted rim or neck (fig. 8 & 9).



**Fig. 8, reconstructed cooking pot from the Archaeological record**



**Fig. 9, cooking pot covered with a lid from the ethnographic context**

More observations at Tando by the author further revealed that such pots are still commonly being used by the present-day people. The author was shown one of such pots in a woman's room, learning that it was acquired for the purpose of cooking for the entire family. However, pottery workshops or pottery tradition was not identified in Tando, probably due to lack of material resources and skills needed for the potting process such as clay preparation and molding, decorating, drying and firing. This, therefore, makes pots a commodity of import from Fumbisi in the Balsa South District of Upper East Region, a town of about 16km northeast of Tando (Apentiik 1997; Zakari 2010).

### 3. CONCLUSION

The study has offered insights into various cultural patterns of the settlers of Tando through time, given the notion that culture is an abstraction that sums up values, behavior and material items of a group of people. Through the process of acculturation, a great deal of light has been thrown on how the Koma Land people learnt from and shared cultural characteristics with other subgroups within the west African sub region. Though, the commercially-minded Mandespeakers traveled to Ghana area for trading purposes, they also introduced varied cultural traits into the region. Consideration of different kinds and levels of variability in material culture exploration through archaeological and anthropological approach has revealed ways in which cultural groups flourished in the area. Such insights were advanced and their interdependence on concepts of culture was explored and considered to throw more light on the understanding of how, in parts, a variety of technology and production techniques had shaped the life ways of both the ancient and present-day peoples of Tando.

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