

■ GHANA

**Nyanaoase, Akwamu: Further Archaeological Investigation**

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**Introduction**

Nyanaoase,<sup>1</sup> between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, was the capital of the Akwamu<sup>2</sup> people, who currently have their capital at Akwamufie near Akosombo in the Asuogyaman District of the Eastern Region, Ghana. Nyanaoase means “at the base or foothills of the Nyanao Hill”. It literally or technically refers to all of the settlements lying at and/or surrounding the foothills of Nyanao Hill. These settlements include Sekyikrom, Noka, Duaeyeden, Akwamu Amanfo and other small villages. Nyanao Hill is located about 35km northwest of Accra and is a very conspicuous relief feature on the fringes of the Accra Plains (see Figure 1).

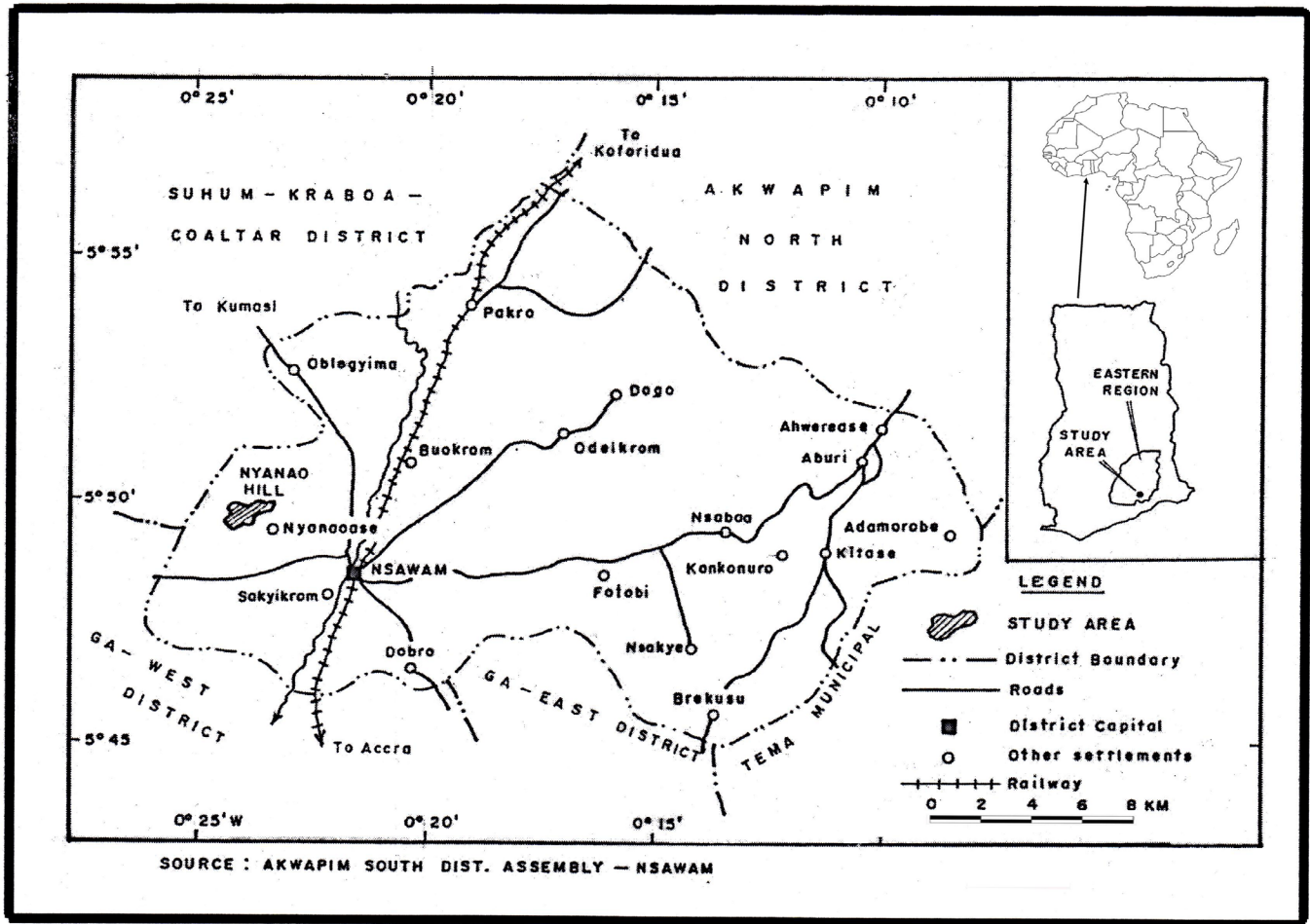
Reconstruction of Nyanaoase-Akwamu history has been fraught with inconsistencies regarding the interpretation of available data. One of the problems is the reconciliation of the historical data and oral traditions. While the oral traditions identify the top of Nyanao Hill as the ancient location of the seat of government of the Akwamu, historical evidence indicates the Nyanaoase settlement to be located at the foothills of Nyanao Hill. Another significant inconsistency regarding the archaeology of Nyanaoase is the fact that the exact location of the Nyanaoase settlement is yet to be fully resolved. It is accepted by archaeologists and historians

working on Akwamu history, that Nyanaoase refers to a cluster of settlements surrounding the Nyanao Hill (e.g., Keteku 1981; Ozanne 1962a; Wilks 1959; see also Kea 1982). However, one of these settlements refers to the ‘exact’ capital of Akwamu, namely Nyanaoase, and there is a clear distinction made between Akwamu proper and greater Akwamu during the 1650s (Wilks 1961: 100). While it is clear that greater Akwamu refers to the larger area under Akwamu dominion, the fact that Akwamu proper refers to the Akwamu capital must be made with some reservations. This inconsistency is further complicated by the toponymy or linguistic implication of ‘Nyanaoase’ – namely ‘below the Nyanao Hill’. Thus, Nyanaoase refers to a settlement beneath the Nyanao Hill as indicated above. It is challenging – as is paradoxical or ironical - to decipher why the oral traditions consistently refer to the hilltop as the seat of government. Nevertheless, the locals also sometimes do refer to the ‘top of the hill’ as ‘Nyanaoso’ differentiating it from the ‘Nyanaoase’ - ‘below the Nyanao Hill’.

Despite the fact that the Nyanao Hill features prominently in the documentary, traditional, and linguistic underpinnings of Akwamu historical renditions, the hill and indeed its immediate environs have not been a major focus of archaeological study. Davies (1976) and Keteku (1981, 1982) undertook limited surface survey and collection on the Nyanao Hill.

Keteku (1981, 1988) conducted limited text excavations at Duaeyeden (southwest of the Nyanao Hill), the only excavation that was in close proximity to the Nyanao Hill. According to Keteku (1982), the archaeological remains recovered did not meet expectations. The major excavations conducted by Keteku (1981) and Ozanne (1962a; 1962b) were in Akwamu Amanfo and Kofisah respectively. These were satellite Akwamu settlements; the former is about 10km and the latter about 25km north of the Nyanao Hill.

The research discussed here was aimed at investigating the natural, archaeological, and



**Figure 1:** Map of Akwapim South District showing Nyanao Hill (Map of Africa and Ghana showing the study area).

cultural features on and around the Nyanao Hill landscape, and assess their implications regarding past human settlement and cultural development. This in turn has implications for the discussion of the Akwamu capital, Nyanaoase settlement during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Contemporary perception and traditions associated with the Nyanao hill also provide insights into past and present symbolic aspects of the hill and its associated features.

**Sources of Data and Research Methods Used**

The sources of information used in this research included ecological, documentary, ethnographic, oral traditions, and written historical

data, in conjunction with archaeological survey and excavations. In most cases, written archival records were not in English. It was, however, possible to draw on secondary published and unpublished works for this research. Oral histories and traditions as well as ethnographic data were obtained through interviews. These were conducted at Sekyikrom, Noka, Akwamu-Amanfo, Adoagyiri, Nsakyee settlements near Nsawam in the Eastern Region and at Akwamufie near the Volta Lake. These interviews were mainly informal and structured, allowing for the acquisition of qualitative information. A total of 18 people were interviewed. Persons interviewed were randomly sampled and diversified to include linguists, queen mothers, and ordinary members of the communities. The age limits of the interviewees

ranged from about 20 to 60 years. The interviewees were asked about Akwamu origins, their cultural behaviour, the abandonment or desertion of the Akwamu-Nyanaoase settlement, resettlement at Nyanaoase and their perceptions about the various natural environment and features in the area. Some of the communities surrounding the Nyanao Hill are descendants of Akwamu. For instance the chief of Sekyikrom is the Gyasehene of Akwamufie. Therefore, understanding the behaviours of the present communities might help to understand those of the past. Contemporary lifeways and behavioural patterns of the communities living on and around the Nyanao Hill were observed. These included economic activities, farming practices, settlement patterns, architecture, religious practices, craft specialization, foodways and the perceptions of the people about the Nyanao Hill. It is worth noting that

the time frame for such observation was limited.

**Archaeological Survey**

Archaeological survey was undertaken to evaluate past human activities on the landscape, as well as to test the written records and oral traditions. Archaeological fieldwork was in two phases, each lasting 10 days; the first in February 2008 and the second in April 2008. The first phase was devoted to the survey and excavation of two units on the highest peak of the Nyanao Hill. The second phase was used to undertake further survey on Nyanao Hill and to conduct excavations on the lower peak and within the Noka Township. Features such as farmsteads, springs, rock formations, etc. were photographed and recorded using GPS (see examples in Figures 2



**Figure 2:** Rock boulders.



**Figure 3:** Spring (*Sikam*).

and 3, and see Appendix 1 for GPS coordinates and notes). Surface collection was done in some areas. However, the artefacts collected were relatively few. Much of the materials were located on slopes and were likely eroded down from the hilltop and, therefore, in secondary context. It was, therefore, difficult to use these materials to evaluate cultural associations.

With respect to the archaeological excavations, three different locations were

identified and randomly sampled based on the local traditions and histories as well as historical narratives reported by Wilks (1957, 1959) and Keteku (1981, 1982). Due to contradictory accounts of written records and local traditions there was the need to test locations both on the hill and its immediate surroundings, especially to the north where written records indicate was the location of the capital. A total of three test units were exposed (Figure 4). These were designated as Loci 1, 2 and 3. Loci 1 and 2 were exposed on the hill top, while

Locus 3 was exposed on the lowland in the town of Noka, about 50-100m to the north of the Nsawam-Asamankese Road. In addition to this, at Locus 1, an erosion terrace made of a stone arrangement measuring 1 x 4.63m was exposed. None of these units extended beyond 40cm deep. A total of 1,701 artefacts and ecofacts were recovered including surface collections ranging from local pottery, metal objects, beads, a local smoking pipe, glass, European ceramics, a polished stone axe and bones. The general inventory of archaeological finds is presented in Table 1.

Preliminary study of the pottery recovered from the excavations helps to elucidate on the chronology of the site and the nature of the relationship of Nyanaoase to adjoining sites on the Accra Plains to the south and the forest areas to the north. Two distinct groups of sherds were recovered from the excavations, classified on the basis of vessel forms, surface colour, surface treatment and decoration. This distinction is not only typical of the pottery from Nyanaoase, but it is pertinent to sites on the Accra Plains and other coastal sites of Ghana (Boachie-Ansah 2004; Bredwa-Mensah 1990; DeCorse 2001; Keteku 1981). The first of these groups is angular or carinated, black, smudged, burnished, evened, shiny, relatively well fired pottery. This is designated Okai Kwai Ware at Ayawaso and constitutes the major ware (96.6%) at the site (Bredwa-Mensah 1990: 101). Keteku (1981:

121) calls this pottery Akan Ware and it constitutes the major ware in his excavations (see also Bellis 1972, 1976; Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1978, 1982). The 2008 excavations at Nyanaoase produced limited quantities (9.59%) of this ware. Keteku (1981) asserts that this ware was restricted to the plains of Nyanaoase. However, the 2008 excavation produced these sherds mainly from the minor peak of the twin-peaked Nyanao Hill.

The second pottery assemblage is dominated by bowls, jars and pots with constricted necks, with colour ranging from brown to grey and they were mainly undecorated (see examples in Figures 5 and 6). Where there were decorations, circumferential arc grooves constituted the major motif. This ware or group is designated X-ware at Ayawaso where they were found in limited quantities (Bredwa-Mensah 1990: 119-123). Keteku (1981: 122) designated this pottery the Nyanao Ware because it was restricted in its distribution to the hill and its immediate vicinity. Keteku found this ware in limited quantities. An important formal feature that distinguishes the so-called Nyanao Ware or X-ware from the Akan or Okai Koi Ware is the existence of elaborate bases. Pedestal bases are not typical of the Akan in the forest regions of Ghana especially during the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Boachie-Ansah 2004: 227-228, 2006:78; see also Bellis 1976:73 and Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1982). However, in the 2008 excavations this ware constituted the major pottery and was distributed

ITEM	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
Pottery	1481	87.07
Metal objects	39	2.29
Surface collection	4	0.24
Beads	4	0.24
Smoking pipe	1	0.06
Bones	151	8.88
Glass	21	1.23
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1701</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1: General artefact inventory.

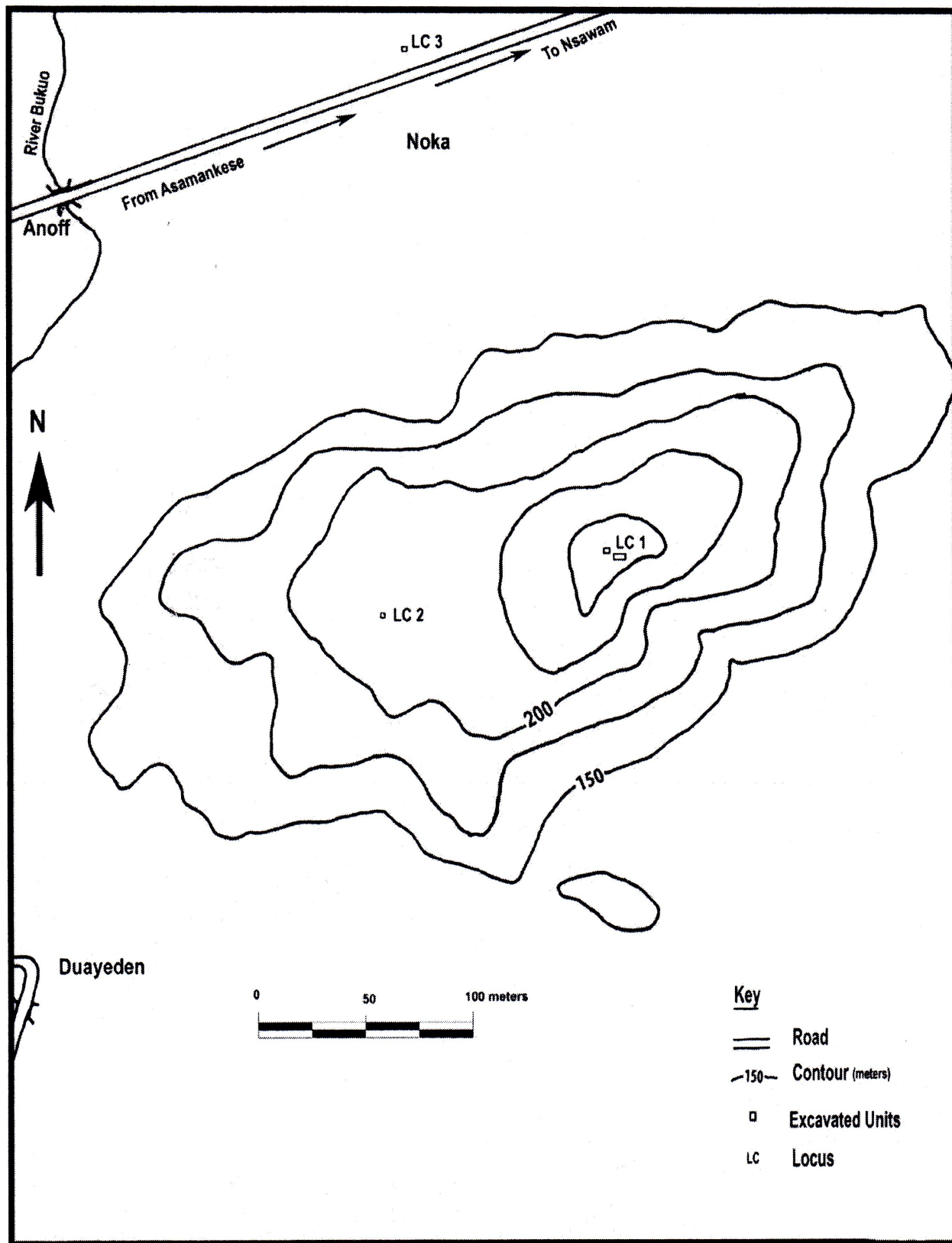


Figure 4: Map of Nyanao Hill showing the excavated units (LC).



Figure 5: Pottery bowl forms.



Figure 6: Pottery bases.

both on the peak and the immediate plains. The sources of these two distinct traditions are yet to be identified and therefore any conclusions drawn with respect to source are rather based on rational discretion.

Two tentative stipulations can be made. One is that the potters in the Densu Valley and Shai Hills made two distinctive wares and supplied them to the Accra plains and adjoining communities. The second scenario could be that the Akan potters in the hinterland made one of these wares while the potters of the Densu valley also made their separate wares. Also, we cannot discount the possibility of independent local variants of these pottery traditions even though no large scale potting industry has been documented in this region. It has been noted that Akan influence regarding the pottery on the coast only became common after the 1800s (Boachie-Ansah 2004: 228; see also DeCorse 2001: 118).

Despite a good deal of archaeological investigation of the Accra Plains since the 1950s, area synthesis is lacking. Comparison of the pottery traditions in the area has been called for (e.g., Boachie-Ansah 2004; Bredwa-Mensah 1990; Keteku 1981), however there has not been a comprehensive synthesis of the ceramic traditions in the region. On an even broader scale, there is the need to examine the relationship between the pottery traditions in the contiguous hinterland polities such as Asebu (Nunoo 1952), Efutu (Agorsah 1975) and Eguafo (Spiers 2007) that emerged as a result of European contact. These are potential avenues for future research.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The archaeological data recovered offer insights into the nature of Nyanaoase settlement in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is clear that the hilltop could not have supported the elaborate settlement as was described in the written accounts. The area of land surface does not extend beyond 200m across the hilltop. There was no evidence to suggest

clearing or surface modification (e.g., terracing), as is the case in other areas such as Krobo Mountain (see Gblerkpor 2005). Furthermore, the materials recovered from the hilltop seem to be later than the supposed period of occupation of the Akwamu capital, postdating the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

Some tentative observations or suggestive scenarios can be drawn about the nature of the Nyanaoase settlement, the Akwamu capital. Firstly, there were clusters of small settlements each not measuring more than 200m<sup>2</sup> located to the north of the Nyanao Hill, one of which probably represented the seat of government. Secondly, the uniquely situated Nyanao Hill might have been used for military and religious purposes rather than as a settlement site. People might have run to the hill to take refuge from their enemies. The hill would have provided an excellent defensive position, and functioned as an observatory for any oncoming enemy attack. In fact, it is possible that rock boulders (see examples in Figure 2) could have been rolled down the slope to kill oncoming enemy soldiers.

The hill also might have been a seat of a shrine where from priests would have come from time to time to perform routine rituals. Current ideology about the Nyanao Hill indicates that the people perceive the Nyanao Hill as a god going by the name 'Nyanao Buako'. He (Nyanao Hill) is believed to have been born on Thursday, a fact probably accounting for why it is forbidden to do any farm work on the hill on this day. During the 2008 fieldwork there was no indication of ritual use of the hill. However, Keteku (1981: 78; 1982: 74) reported that rituals performed on Nyanao's peak, probably were serviced by traditional religious leaders. In West Africa, such symbolic landscapes are not uncommon and are embedded in oral traditions, myths, legends and mnemonics (e.g., Aremu 2001; Schmidt 1990, 2006; Togola 2003). The power and domination of Akwamu kings are well documented in traditions of Akwamu, Akwapim and Gas (see Kwamena-Poh 1973). This is probably made manifest by the symbol of the Nyanao Hill. It is said in Akwamu traditions



that from the hilltop, the greatest Akwamu King, Ansah Sasraku, could see a large part of the Accra plains that was under his dominion. The Nyanao Hill rises conspicuously at the northernmost end of the Accra plains adjacent to the Akwapim hills. It is also argued that the successive relocation of the Akwamu capital to Nyanaoase from Asamankese was to take advantage of the booming trade on the Accra Plains during the second quarter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Wilks 1957, 1959). The Nyanao Hill did not only serve as symbol of power, but also provided military advantage to the Akwamu state.

The subject of the presence of the Akwamu at Nyanaoase is fraught with many unresolved issues, some of which include the exact location of the political capital and the place or role of the Nyanao Hill in Akwamu historical development at Nyanaoase. This research, even though it has not resolved these issues conclusively, it has been able to shed light on the nature of Nyanaoase settlement that has not been highlighted in previous research. The nature of vegetation cover at the site serves to hide archaeological manifestations, a problem that future archaeological research will have to tackle. Further research would have to focus on the town of Noka and few outlying hills to the north. It is also recommended that in the future, the contiguous capitals of Asamankese and Nsakyé need to be examined archaeologically in order to show how these settlements fit into the larger picture of Akwamu hegemony during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Finally there is a call for regional synthesis of the ceramic tradition in the hinterland region of southern Ghana to indicate areas of similarities and difference as indicated by Crossland (1989).

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### Footnote

<sup>1</sup> Keteku preferred the spelling Nyanaw (Nyanawase) probably following the topographic map's spelling. However, most other scholars such as Ozanne, Wilks and Kea used Nyanao (Nyanaoase).

<sup>2</sup> The place of Akwamu ethnicity is not clear. A number of other Akan ethnic groups such as Asante and Akwapim people hold allegiance to the Akwamu stool (see for example Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1980; Kwamena-Po 1973; Meyerowitz 1952; Wilks 1959 for discussion). This is due to the disruption of Akwamu hegemony during their wars with the Akyem and Gas in the 1730s.

Appendix 1: GPS coordinates of features and their descriptions.

FEATURE	LOCAL NAME	GPS COORDINATES	DESCRIPTION/NOTES
1	<i>Kwakye</i>	N 5°48.32" W 0°24.26"	Spring measures about 2m in diameter, dark in color and was surrounded by grasses and small palm trees about 3m tall. It is said that it does not dry up. It serves the water needs of the Noka Township during drought. Located about 200m south west of Noka. Translation of the local name is unknown.
2	<i>Kwame Ketewa Akura</i> (Little Kwame's Village)	N 5° 47.40" W 0°24.51"	An extant farm camp comprised of an elevated wooden structure supported by wooden beams. The structure measures about 4x5m. There were no other observable structures.
3	<i>Nsu Kokoo</i> (Red Water)	N 5°47.88" W 0°24.51"	Located in a rock outcrop southeast of locus 3. Measures about 50x100cm. Dark in color, it is said that the famous Akwamu king Ansah Sasraku asked his slaves to dig a well with their hands, the result been this spring in the rocks so he (Ansah Sasraku) could drink from this spring. It is believed that the pond has some curative element for epilepsy.
4	<i>Nsu Fitaa</i> (White water)	N 5°47.89" W 0°24.42"	Located to the south of the twin peaks of the Nyanao Hill. Light gray color. Measures about 2x1m. It is said that it used to serve the water needs of royals.
5	Rock shelter	N 5°47.85" W 0°24.31"	Measures about 5m in length with overhead canopy slab (measuring about 1m) protruding towards the west. Used by a farmer as a camp.
6	<i>Bekai</i> (Remnant residents)	N 5°48.01" W 0°24.16"	Two undetached dilapidated mud houses believed to be one of the remnant settlements of the Akwamu after the abandonment. There are approximately three ruins of other collapsed structures.
6	<i>Dwofoe</i>	N 5°47.79" W 0°24.05"	Measures 4x5m <sup>2</sup> . Located in the depression between the two twin peak mountains. It is said to have served as the slave quarter of the settlement. Dark in color. Situated in a cocoa farm. The meaning of the name is unknown.
7	Slave Quarter	N 5°47.74" W 0°25.13"	Said to be the slave quarter of the Akwamu settlement though no indications prove as such. Two detached house structures were identified; the vegetation here was relatively sparse constituting a few grasses.
8	Rest stop	N 5°47.89" W 0°23.91"	Said to be a rest stop while hiking to the peak of the hill. The area measures about 10m <sup>2</sup> .

9	Rock boulders		N 5°47.89" W 0°23.87"	A rock arrangement of three boulders at 5m intervals probably used as a weapon by rolling it onto attackers. Each rock measures about 1m in diameter. Weight of each could not be determined. They were arranged in a north-west to south-easterly direction.
10	Stone terrace		N 5°47.95" W 0°23.79"	Located on the peak of the mountain supposedly used to check erosion. It measures about 80cm in width and about 20cm thick. The arrangement was in an east-west direction.
11	Ditch		N 5°47.89" W 0°23.76"	Probably naturally created gorge with very steep sides. Very rugged such that the peak may not be accessible by this route. No measurements were taken due to thorny vegetation. It is located to the southeast of the main peak.
12	Deserted settlement	<i>Kwame Ketewa Akura Village</i>	N 5°47.96" W 0°24.42"	Said to be an ancient settlement probably of the Akwamu but the surface indications point to recent activities. There was a sparse scatter of bottle and pottery on the surface.
13	Settlement	<i>Manpongfo Akura (the Manpong People's Village)</i>	N 5°48.25" W 0°23.26"	Partially deserted twin settlement said to have been inhabited by migrant Mampong people from the Akwapim Ridge. Each has at least two detached rooms made of mud and thatch. These two villages are aligned in a north south direction with a distance of about 40cm separating them.
14	Rock shelter	<i>Obodan (Cave)</i>	N 5°48.01" W 0°23.43"	A rock slab that probably was used to form a roof and has collapsed creating a sheltered corridor measuring about 50cm in width about 5m in length. It is located to the east of the main peak.
15	Rock shelter	<i>Obodenchem (Crocodile Rock)</i>	N 5°48.04" W 0°23.44"	A huge rock formation apparently shaped like a crocodile with a wide opened mouth. It was difficult to take any measurements because of thorny vegetation and slope. It is estimated to measure about 40x20m in size. The head is aligned towards the south-east.
16	Spring	<i>Sikam (Money Zone)</i>	N 5°48.12" W 0°23.62"	A 1x1m spring located to the north of the main peak south of the footpath. It was surrounded by tall trees. It has a light brown color.