

## GHANA

### Some archaeological indications of the Slave Market and the Baobab trees of Saakpuli, Northern Ghana

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Archaeological investigations in Saakpuli began in October 2001. It has now been established that Saakpuli can boast of several water management cisterns as a significant feature of its archaeological and cultural landscape. Over 60 of these cisterns are found in three cistern fields (Okoro 2002a:5). Saakpuli has a slave market, a feature that has made it a place of interest to the Savelugu-Nanton District Assembly, the National Museum in Accra, the Upper East Regional Museum, Bolgatanga and the Ministry of Tourism and the UNESCO (Accra) Office.

This report is on the slave market and the baobab trees of Saakpuli. Baobab trees form outstanding floral features of this landscape. This paper describes the first research results of a program to provide data for an understanding of the cultural and archaeological significance of the slave market and the baobab trees of Saakpuli. The main objective is to assess the contribution that archaeology can make in (a) the reconstruction of Northern Ghanaian cultural heritage, (b) our understanding of pre-colonial slavery and the slave trade, and (c) the promotion of sustainable domestic and foreign eco-tourism.

### The Baobab trees of Saakpuli

There are six baobab trees in Saakpuli. Five of them are located within the village, while the sixth is found about a kilometer to the north. The residents call the baobab tree *tuwa* (singular, and *tuhi*, plural). The size of the baobab trees in Saakpuli makes them the largest that I have seen in Northern Ghana. They are larger than all those that I have so far seen in Salaga area of East Gonja. Diameters of these trees are shown in Table 1.

The Chief of Saakpuli, Alhassan Yakubu aged about 75 years indicated that he saw eleven baobab trees when he first settled in Saakpuli in the early 1970s. Five of the trees have therefore died. The largest tree (#1) is located roughly in the center of Saakpuli and serves as a resting place for the residents and their livestock (sheep, goats and fowl). It is also the place for holding of community meetings and interactions as well as meetings between the chief and the Fulani herdsmen in the area. This tree (Figure 1) has thick sprawling roots that project conspicuously up to about eighty cm. These roots serve as "seats" on which the people sit. A few people manage to lie down on the roots. I did not experiment by lying on the roots so for now I am not in a position to comment on how comfortable it would be.

Under this tree is a mortar planted into the ground which serves as a common property for use in pounding any substance from food to herbal medicine. I did not know of the cultural significance of this mortar facility until when one afternoon I returned from a field survey and found one of the women from the chief's house (where I was staying) singlehandedly pounding something in this mortar. The chief's house is about 30 meters away. I became curious and wanted to know why she was pounding "something" under the tree away from her home. I inquired from my local assistant and I was informed that she was pounding *fufu* (a local food made from boiled yam). Then in the next twenty minutes, I was served by this woman with a meal of *fufu* with groundnut soup. I realized that it was my *fufu* that was being pounded in the common property mortar under the baobab tree.

The Chief narrated to me that in the early years of his settlement in Saakpuli, a small column of fire flame rose up from a spot near the baobab late in the night. This occurrence ceased when other people started to settle in the village. Chief Yakubu attributes the fire feature to the burial of a powerful person at the spot. He suggested that the baobab tree might have been planted near the grave of this man. He also showed me a plastered surface near the fire spot. If this plastered surface is evidence of the floor of a compound or room, then the said "powerful man" might have been buried in the courtyard of the house or in one of the rooms. In this case, the baobab tree may have been planted near the house rather than near the grave. Archaeological evidence in Salaga and elsewhere in Northern Ghana shows a relationship between settlement mounds and baobab trees.

**Table 1: Dimensions and remarks on Saakpuli Baobab trees**

Identification number of tree	Diameter of stem at 1.5 m high	Remarks
1	12.40 m	Community meeting and resting place, center of the village
2	6.50 m	Located inside the village
3	3.30 m	The smallest tree, inside village
4	5.60 m	Located inside the village
5	11.20 m	Slave marker baobab tree
6	12.15 m	Located outside the village

In Salaga, aged and prominent persons were in the past buried in their homes (rooms) and not in the public cemeteries.

The centrally placed baobab tree has bee columns on it but I did not document any report of a bee attack. The size of the stem of this tree is big compared to the overall height of the tree. In the Salaga district, a baobab tree of that size would grow taller. All the baobab trees in Saakpuli also have branches that extend backwards down. This has brought the tips of the branches closer to the ground surface. Access to the honey, fruits and leaves on the trees are often made from the low branches.

The next largest tree (#6) measuring about 12 m around the stem and located to the north of Saakpuli is called *gbumbe tuwa*. *Gbumbe* is the name of a god in Saakpuli. Around this tree are several settlement mounds that may be contemporary with the planting and growth of *gbumbe tuwa*. One of the baobab trees (#5) measuring about 11 meters at the stem and located to the south-east (on the immediate outskirts of the village) is where the Saakpuli Slave Market (Saakpuli daabi daar) is found. Oral information gathered indicate that slaves were teetered to the stem and sprawling roots of the baobab trees by means of chains and foot lockers.

**Local uses of the baobab tree**

The people of Saakpuli have uses for almost all parts of the *tuwa* tree. The seeds (*tukpila*) are removed from the fruit, fried and ground at the mill into a powder. This is prepared into *tuo zaafi*, the local meal that can also be made from corn and

millet. The dry fruit pod (*tuwula* [singular], *tuwuli* [plural] ) contains a powdery stuff (*tuzin*, literally meaning baobab powder) which can be scooped out and eaten raw or made into porridge for breakfast. The powder tastes and smells good. The leaves (*tukare* in Dagbani and *kuka* in Hausa) are a favorite ingredient for soups. Children (sometimes under the supervision of older people) climb from the low branches or by means of forked tree stems to the top of the baobab trees to harvest the fruits and break enough leafy branches for the household.

Information on the medicinal properties of the baobab tree was not readily forthcoming. But informants mentioned that the roots and bark have healing properties. The bark is used for preparing medicine for chest diseases. Informants added that for the purposes of preparing “chest medicine”, portions of the bark have to be cut specifically from the east side and west side of the baobab tree stem. Removal of bark is evident on all the baobab trees of the village, but it was not easy for me to determine which removals were indicative of cutting for “chest medicine”.

**Reconnaissance survey of the Slave Market**

My preliminary survey at the slave market site of Saakpuli was done in the company of the linguist of Saakpuli, Wudana Aminu Alhassan, Seidu Alhassan, a local teacher and Bukari Sulemana, a member of the local Assembly. Defining the size and limits of the market was not easy as there was no consensus among these three individuals/leaders. Archaeology has to come in to help settle this issue

**Figure 1:** Baobab tree #1 in the middle of Saakpuli village.



**Figure 2:** Saakpuli slave market showing baobab tree #5.



through the use of a detailed surface survey, mapping and systematic excavation. This will be done in future researches in the village.

It became clear to me that the limits defined by my informants run close to the frontage of the two compounds close to the site in the northern and north-western sides (Figure 2). The eastern and southern sides that are not built up is where my informants claim the market extends outward up to about 200 meters from the baobab tree. The baobab tree is therefore not in the center of the slave market. The tree stands roughly in the north-western part of the market. While we wait for later research to enable us settle this issue of the dimensions of the market, the closeness of these two compounds to the market site raises the danger of possible disturbance or eventual destruction of the slave market site.

It is refreshing to know that, to forestall possible encroachment on the site, the traditional authorities have decided that no new compounds should be built beyond the present northern and western limits of the market. There is an awareness that the slave market area should not be destroyed of its tourism and historical significance. This development also reflects the impact of the efforts of the District Tourism officer, Mr. Gallant Alhassan Iddrisu in creating an awareness among the local people of the need to protect their cultural heritage as a result of his visit and identification of eco-tourism sites in the district.

This picture from Saakpuli contrasts sharply with that of Salaga in the East Gonja District of Northern Ghana. Here, the area of the former Big Market (*Buban kasua*, in Hausa) that contained the Salaga Slave Market has been disturbed extensively (Okoro, in prep.). The area has been turned into a lorry park as well market for the weekly market days of Salaga. Also, a fuel station has been developed. The construction of this fuel station resulted in the mechanical and physical digging of huge pits on the slave market land into which huge fuel storage tanks have been placed. There are also other some private houses standing on the *Buban kasua*.

### Surface indications from the Saakpuli Slave Market

Farming activities have been undertaken before on the area of the slave market. No such activity was seen when I visited the site but the impact of

previous plowing by tractor and by human was evident. The common surface materials that I found as we walked the area were pieces of local pottery. These are thinly distributed over a wide area. Nearer the baobab tree, more sherds were found. On the western side of the tree and right under it I found cowry shells and a broken fragment of gin bottle with part of an embossment that carried the inscription "SINCE 185(?)". The break line has almost taken away the "5". The number after the "5" is gone with the other pieces. These have not been found yet.

Coins were also found underneath the tree. These were made up of one 1958 three-pence coin (with the head of Kwame Nkrumah, the first President of Independent Ghana on it, and with the inscription "CIVITATIS GHANIENSIS CONDITOR \* KWAME NKRUMAH \*") and two 1976 one pesewa (post Ghanaian 1957 Independence-currency). The others are a 1995 twenty-pesewa coin. In effect, these are all recent coins and I was informed that they got to where I found them through present-day people of Saakpuli. It has been emphasized that Islam is the main religion in the village but there is a strong adherence to indigenous religious practices (Okoro 2002:2). I found from my visits to markets in the Savelugu-Nanton District (Pishugu, Diari, Savelugu) and in the West Mamprusi District (Walewale) that "old coins" are sold in these markets. Fifteen years ago (1987 and 1988), I saw "old coins" for sale at Cambaga and Nanlerigu Markets in East Mamprusi District.

These coins are bought by individuals who need them as part of the items for certain rituals and "local medicine". The presence of these coins under the baobab tree is a reflection of yet another important role that the baobab tree play in the lives of the people of Saakpuli. How far back this practice goes will be investigated from excavations and further ethnographic and oral historical studies. For now, it can be noted that, the baobab tree is a focus of ritual performances of various sorts involving the use of various cultural materials. These "rituals" and "medicines" are not always meant to destroy others. The "rituals" are sometimes performed to stop the manifestation of certain evil trends and disasters facing individuals, families or groups of people in the village. Rituals are also performed to evoke specific ancestral "powers" and "spirits" to ensure the development and wellbeing of those involved.

What is also significant about the baobab tree in the Slave Market is that two of the sprawling roots have one hole each on them. Traditions claim that these holes were used by the slave dealers as receptacles for cowry shells. In addition to this form of usage of the holes I am inclined to suggest that these holes were measures for estimating or determining the quantity/value of cowries to be paid for slaves. Whether one or more full cowry measures could buy a slave (male or female or child) cannot be indicated now. I plan to do further research to gain better understanding of these features in relation to the slave trading activities in the Saakpuli Slave Market.

### The markets of Saakpuli

Oral information shows the presence of a slave market (*daabi daar*) and a regular market or markets (*daar*) in Saakpuli. While there was an agreement among my informants on the precise location of the slave market, the same cannot be said of the other market(s). One informant called Alhassan Mamma aged about 80 years and his younger brother Ibrahim Alhassan narrated that the regular market of Saakpuli was located to the southwest of the present village. But Aminu Alhassan, the linguist of Saakpuli said that the regular market was to the west of the slave market in an area presently settled on by the compounds including his and that of Alhassan Mamma. Alhassan Mamma and his brother have promised to take me to their version of the market site when I return to the village.

It is significant to note that it is only Alhassan Mamma and his brother who mentioned this market that is located some distance away from the present village. They indicated that they were told of this market by their grandfather and father who were once chiefs of Saakpuli. In effect, Saakpuli had two or more markets, one of which is located away from the present village. Further oral and detailed archaeological investigation is needed to clarify the divergence in the oral traditions. The distribution of settlement mounds and information from farmers and hunters on mound locations suggest a "town" in the past that covered at least 4 km<sup>2</sup>. The old Saakpuli should be differentiated from the present one which stretches about 300 meters across with about 27 households and a population of about 300 people (Okoro 2002a:2). The old Saakpuli was an extensive settlement that could easily accommodate within its

boundaries other regular markets in addition to the regular one. A major regional archaeological survey in Saakpuli is called for. An objective in this direction will be the determination of the size of Saakpuli in the latter part 18th and in the 19th centuries when it became an important slave market in pre-colonial Northern Ghana.

### Excavations at the Saakpuli Slave Market

A test excavation trench measuring 1 by 2 m was conducted right underneath the baobab tree. The trench was aligned in a North-South direction and its north wall was only 10-15 cm from the base of the baobab tree. The trench was set in the south side of the tree. The excavation went down in 10 cm spits and the soil in each layer was carefully sieved and collected of any cultural remains. Local pottery was the most common materials found in the first 10 cm spit (level 1). Also found were five cowry shells one of which was partly damaged by the digging. Tiny pieces of bottle or glass as well as a few stones were collected. These will be analyzed in detail once the necessary studies are completed. The second level (10-20 cm) produced four cowry shells, local pottery, a metal piece, animal tooth and bones. At the third level (20-30 cm) only local pottery were found and in reduced quantity. The digging could not go below 45 cm because in the fourth level (30-45 cm) reddish pisolith-gravels were encountered especially in the northern half. At 45 cm, a pisolith-block layer was exposed. Digging stopped as it was impossible to dig through this layer. Incidentally, the single potsherd found in this layer was lying directly on the pisolith cement bedrock.

The exposure of a pisolith-block layer at a depth of about 40 cm is not surprising to me, In Salaga, the deepest one can go with any digging before hitting the pisolith-block layer is about 1 meter. While serving as the terminal point of archaeological excavations, the pisolith-block layer is important in the construction of cisterns. It forms the capping material or roof below which the impermeable clay or clay shale layer is dug out and made into a tank or chamber, These underground tanks catch and store surface run-off water for use by local residents in Saakpuli. Similar cisterns have earlier on been recorded in Salaga. The pisolith-block layer may have formed the bedrock on which the trading activity at

the market started. If this is proved right, then it may be added that a cultural debris of about 45 cm thick was created from human activities (including the trading in human beings) in the market for which the cowry shells indicates one of the modes of exchange.

### Conclusion

The economic and cultural past of Saakpuli is slowly being unfolded. The evidence of water cisterns (*belisi* in Dagbani), settlement mounds and two or more markets are indicators of a center of economic importance in pre-colonial northern Ghana. The present-day Saakpuli does not reflect the old Saakpuli. The old Saakpuli was a big settlement covering several hectares of land. The old Saakpuli bequeathed several cultural and material resources to the present. Among these are the baobab trees. From a total of eleven baobab trees that were standing on the landscape, only six remain. The baobab tree is central in the lives of the people. It gives them food, medicine, shade and a place to sit, relax or hold meetings. The baobab tree at the Slave Market is significant in terms of the images and memories that it evokes as well as the present ritual performances that occur under it.

Saakpuli has a lot to offer to eco-tourism development. It is central to our the current drive towards understanding slavery and the slave trade in pre-colonial northern Ghana. The slave markets in pre-colonial Northern Ghana numbered slightly over half a dozen (Okoro 2002b:9). Saakpuli is one of them. What we need is a better appreciation of the size and other details of this slave market. What my research has done in Saakpuli may be just a "scratch" of the surface of an extensive cultural and archaeological heritage of northern Ghana. The slave market at Saakpuli is virtually intact unlike the situation at Salaga. With the availability of support I see Saakpuli as an archaeological and historical phenomenon to be investigated in detail.

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