

Birifoh Belief System: Perspectives from Birifoh-Sila Yiri, Upper West Region, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the Birifoh beliefs and worship systems in north-western Ghana. This study examined various uses of shrines and circumstances leading to their establishment in Birifoh-Sila Yiri and its environs. Data was collected through participant observation, interviews, focus groups and desktop research. An interpretative analytical approach was employed. The study found that gods or deities (shrines) in the traditional settings are represented by wooden, metal and ceramic figurines. Several shrines were found including ancestral shrines, wooden figurines, earth shrines, chameleon shrines, ceramics figurines, river shrines, xylophone shrine, landed shrine and kunkpenibie shrine. Their functions were to protect hunters and ensure the general welfare of families including childbirth and general prosperity. The belief of Birifoh is that, shrines represent relationships between the spiritual and physical worlds that form part of the Dagaaba and Lobi cosmology.

Keywords: Sila-Yiri, Birifoh, patrilineal, figurine, earth shrine, ancestor, religion, diviner

1.0 INTRODUCTION

For some communities in Ghana, both wooden and ceramic figurines used to represent the dead are revered as if they were living beings. The wooden sculptures representing dead ancestors are carved from a particular tree after the demise of the person. Such people are considered as ancestors who lived lives worthy of emulation. Several criteria exist to determine which deceased people can be represented by figurines. The deceased should have had children whilst alive and should also have died a 'proper death' (*kunvela*) as distinct from an evil one '*kunfaa*' (Goody, 1962: 223). Parts of trees are used to carve the shrine but the trees to be used are usually selected by diviners who are locally known as *bagbuura*. However, before this done, it is the children who must initiate and commission the carver '*dapeгна*'.

Birifoh is occupied by the Lobi ethno linguistic group in the north-western part of Ghana along the Black Volta River (Saako, 2009: 1; Naaeke, 2003: 22 See Fig. 1). Earlier archaeological excavation conducted was limited to the first settlement site of Sila Yiri and produced ancient burial covered with potsherds (Saako, 2009). However, per local informants through informal conversations, there is a close relationship between burials and Lobi figurines because of their orientation as representing their ancestors. To this effect, this study conducted at Sila Yiri of the Birifoh in northern Ghana was an ethnographic one aimed at employing mix methods including excavations, personal observations, oral traditions from the elderly and knowledgeable people as well as secondary data relevant to the beliefs regarding worship and physical representations of ancestors. The analytical techniques were largely interpretative with some illustration to elucidate the various practices.

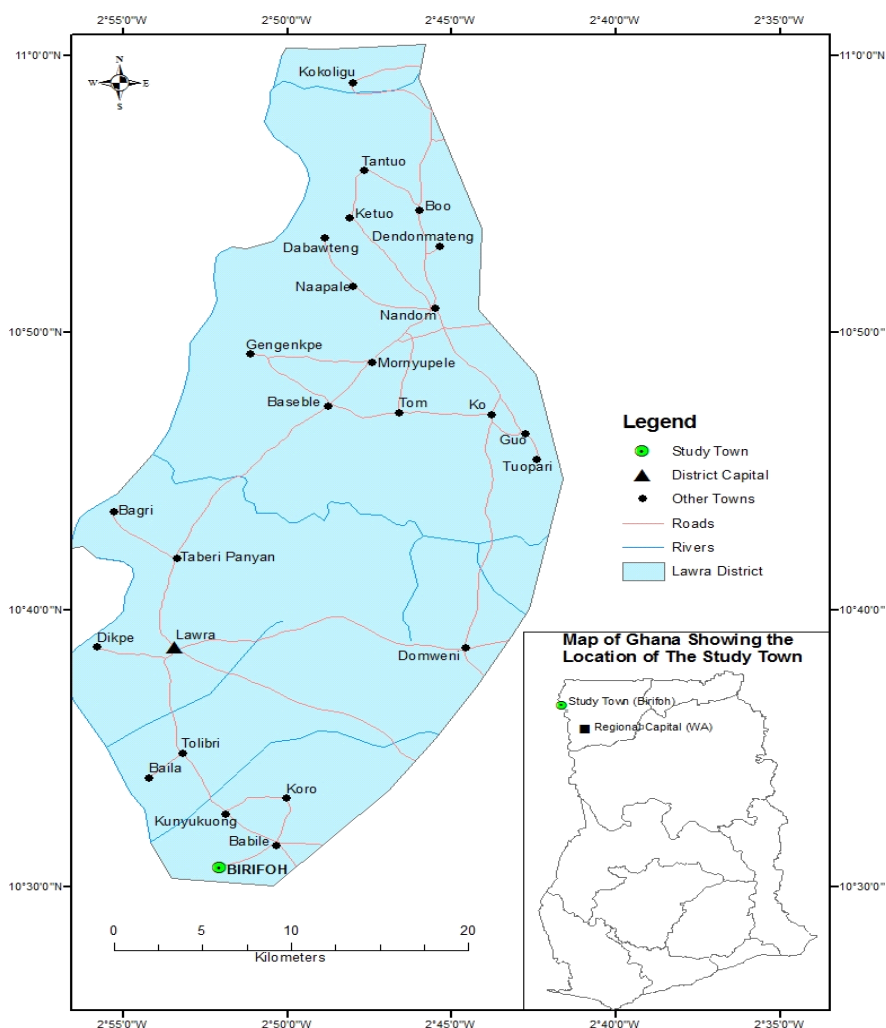


Fig.1: Showing Map of the study area

2.0 BIRIFOH SPIRITUAL REALM

Religion is a fundamental element in African cultures and can thus be seen as one of the strongest elements in the traditional background of most African societies. According to Mbiti (1989:1-5) 'African Traditional Religion is a unified entity but each group of people has their own religious system with a set of beliefs and practices. Traditional African religious systems are not some specialized entities separate from daily and mundane life. Rather they are a complex body of practices which are an integral part of the life of practitioners who seek to create a meaning to life's complex workings. These practices, ideas and beliefs of African cultures are not static but rather changing. Similar to many African cultures, the Birifoh belief system also accommodates religious syncretism.

Excavation conducted at two sites did not recover ceramic/wooden sculptured figurine. This finding was similar to that of Saako (2009) which only discovered burial and potsherds. Contrary, ethnographic data produced ceramic and wooden ancestral figurines in Birifoh and its environs. This second finding was corroborated by oral tradition which maintained that, there were close relationships between burials and Lobi figurines as they are tied to ancestral veneration. The Birifoh spiritual universe is roughly made up of the complementary concepts of heaven and earth in the forms of rain shrine (*saangmin*), earth shrine (*tengangmin*), ancestors (*saakummine*) and other spirit shrines. Apart from the *tengangmin* which encompasses the whole community; the *saakummine* plays an all-important role, especially in lineage/family matters. Other spirits beings include the '*kontome*' (i.e. spirit or wild beings), river god (*maangngmin*), chameleon god (*gomongmin*), landed god (*ngminsiuraa*) and xylophone god (*gyilengmin*) (personal communication with Mr. C.D. Ninkara, 2011/2012). Above all is the

creator god, or Supreme Being (*naangmin*), who is not obviously active in the affairs of men, but is thought to rest behind everything.

3.0 ANCESTORHOOD

Funeral ceremonies are the most elaborate of the ceremonial occasions of the Dagaaba and Lobi. This is because of the general belief in life after death. These ceremonies are the means by which actual passages of human beings from the land of the living (*tengzu*) to the land of dead (*dapaarewie*) are effected. Additionally, ancestor reverence or respect for the dead hinges on beliefs of their ability to protect, guide, and offer showers of blessing to the living. These are considered as the most important aspects of the relationship between the living and their supernatural agents. According to the Lobi and Dagaaba belief systems, people who become ancestors are never dead. Being an ancestor is thus a continuation of life in the other world of spirits and serve as media between their relatives, the spirits and gods (Alenuma, 2002:9). It is important to bear in mind that not all deceased persons are elevated to the rank of ancestors.

In each society, it is the people who select the living dead for the rank of an ancestor. The ancestral spirits are mostly those of human beings, who continue to live in the unseen world. To many Africans, the dead people are not dead at all. Death is only a transitional state to a spiritual life free from material hindrances. The deceased are at once dead and alive, and because of their ironic nature they are known in African Traditional Religions, as the living-dead. Quite often, ancestorhood implies moral superiority and exemplary leadership within the household. The person must possess certain qualities such as long life, physical integrity, morality, the person's social standing and self-control. According to Pobee (1976), the ancestor is the one who lived to a ripe old age and in an exemplary manner or did much to enhance the prestige and standing of the family, clan and tribe. In consonance with this view, (Amanze, 2003:44-446) commenting on the Akan posits that, though ancestors are the second pillar of Akan Religion known as the *asaman* or as *amanfoormpanyinfo* (elders) or *nananom* (great ancestors), a person may not become an ancestor unless he or she has children.

The ancestors are those of the clan who have completed their life-courses here on earth and are leaving to the place of the dead, the spiritual waiting place (Pobee, 1976: 8). The Konkomba of Northern Ghana called the ancestors *Uumbwardo* (Tait, 1955) which literally means God's house, thereby depicting the dead as elder brothers of the living at the house of God. Highly respected elders are usually buried in the middle of the family compound or in front of the family house rather than in the public cemetery (Saako, 2009:62; Goody, 1962: 79-152; Alenuma, 2002:9-11). This is to keep them close to the family who are constantly being watched over by such dead elders or ancestors. The ancestors do not only play an important role after their death, but also while they are alive and are believed to be present in most of their families' deliberations. It is against this backdrop that from time to time, libation is poured, after invoking the supernatural being and other deities. The spirits of the ancestors are also invoked upon for guidance and protection. Another prominent aspect of the personality of an individual is the concept of the soul, or spirit (*sie* or *nyaakpiin*), and its relationship with the body (*engan*). While the body of a person decomposes upon death, the *sie* (ghost) assumes an eternal life after progressing through four sequential phases of ghost, spirit, ancestor and finally gods (*naangmime*). They possess healing and protective powers and medicines, and special lineage taboos and prohibitions are linked to them. Only those members of the lineage who have been initiated to these shrines, and learned their taboos, can expect to be protected by them.

4. CREATION OF THE ANCESTOR SHRINE

The ancestor shrine is created at a 'Bitter Funeral Beer' ceremony (*Ko Dãã toa*). It is during this period that the tree to be used and the person who must be a member of the patriline to cut it are determined (Goody, 1962). The son only follows to carry the branch home to the carver. But before that, a bamboo rod of about one meter long is used. For a man, the rod usually used is the one taken from the bow that rested on his lap at the burial service and which hanged on the compound wall ever since (Good, 1962: 230). For some communities in Birifo, a bow is used as intermediate/temporary shrine and placed at the frontage of the compound to signify that a "big pillar has fallen" (i.e. an elderly person in the compound is dead). For an old man, the shrine may be made from pieces of bamboo cut to the same length as the walking stick on which he leans. But the bamboo rod is only an intermediate form of the shrine (1962: 224). The ancestor shrine is the creation of the funeral itself.

The third funeral ceremonies, known as *Ko Dàà Tuo*, (Bitter Funeral Beer) takes place at the beginning of the rainy season. It consists of three phases. The first phase is the whitewashing of the surviving spouse a stage further toward completion; the second phase deals with the creation of a provisional shrine which is made from the wood used for bows and then is placed in the byre of the dead man's compound; at the final ceremony the permanent shrine is carved and also put in the byre beside the anthropomorphic figures of earlier ancestors. This piece of forked wood is known as the spirits stick (*kpiindaa*), or alternatively as the father's stick (*sããdaa*). The

shrine is seldom spoken as simply as “spirit” or the “Father.” Only males that have children born to their name have ancestor shrine since is the son that has to carve the figure for the parent. Sometimes, if a man has no child, a daughter can make the shrine instead but on behalf of her younger brother. Again, it is not only men who die childless that do not have an ancestor shrine made for them but those who have suffered an evil death ‘*kunfaa*’ unless the sin that has been committed is first expiated by the prescribed sacrifices. But anybody that kills his brother or father or any clansman is a sin against the ancestors that cannot be forgiven, and a shrine is never carved for such a man (Goody, 1962: 383).

A woman who has left children behind also has a shrine establish to her name, one that is similar in form to provisional shrine provided for a man at the Bitter Funeral Beer. But this intermediate ceremony a woman’s stick is taken into byre of her husband’s house and leaned against the wall. At the final ceremony it is carried in solemn procession to her father’s house and placed near the shrines of her patrilineal forbearers (Goody, 1962: 384). If it is a woman’s shrine, pots are broken by the eldest daughter as at the burial service. The stick is then bathed in water, anointed with oil, doused in beer, and finally carried by the women into the byre, where it is leant against the wall near the corner in which the ancestor shrines are kept (see Goody, 1962).

5 ANCESTRAL WOODEN FIGURES ‘*KPIIN DAAR*’

The ancestral shrine is located at the entrance to the house (*dondore*) leading to the kraal and finally into the courtyard. Among many of the Dagaaba and Lobi, it is made of a wooden, carved human-like stick, somewhat like a ‘Y’ upside down for males, and a straight stick for females (Mbiti, 1989: 9 See Fig. 2, 3, 4& 5). The custodianship of this shrine is in the hands of the family head (*yidaandoa*), which most often is the senior son of the deceased. It is him who addresses and communicates with the ancestor (s), through a diviner, which he usually does before any important decision is made on behalf of the family or lineage (personal communication with the earth priest in Birifoh-Sila Yiri, 2008). Both men and women can have sculptures or ‘*buteba*’ made for them, but with certain conditions. Obviously, being a parent is a primary condition. Also, it is necessary to have died a “proper” death, as well as having lived a “good” life. Usually it is the eldest son who has the duty to make the shrine, and he is considered to “own” it. A woman who was survived by children can also get a ‘*buteba*’ made in her name. Before her final funeral rites, this shrine is kept in her husband’s house, but after the final rites it is carried to the house of her father to be placed beside the shrine of her patrilineal ancestors. It is her senior daughter who makes the ‘*buteba*’ for her.



Fig. 2: Showing male wooden sculptures (*Kpiinda*)



Fig. 3: Showing female wooden sculptures (*Kpiinda*)



Fig4: Showing a pile of wooden figurines in a room within the courtyard in Birifoh-NaaYiri

There are some specific trees that are used in carving these figures. These include Fig tree (Koltaan), long thorn 'Guo' (*Acacia Albida*), bamboo, and ebony tree 'Gaa' (*Diospyros mespiliformis*). However, the ebony tree is the commonest used in carving these sculptures in Birifoh. This is because it can resist termites' infection. But sometimes a bamboo stick is used to represent a female ancestor according to C. D. Ninkara (an opinion leader in Birifoh-Sila Yiri). The 'buteba' is the material representation of the deceased, and during its creation, the shrine (the stick) is treated in the same way as the corps at the funeral (Goody, 1962:228; Mbiti, 1989:10). Sacrifices to the ancestors are usually first made after some misfortune has occurred, such as serious illness, crop failure, or death. A diviner is consulted to reveal the cause of the misfortune and he prescribes the appropriate sacrifice.

5.1 EARTH SHRINE (*TENGANG NGMIN*)

In many dwelling places among the Lobi and Dagaaba in the Upper West Region, the most important focus of religious activity is the earth shrine. This is because it is in it worship that other settlement emerged as social unit. The earth is therefore considered as living being. *Tengan* comes from the Dagaare or Lobi word 'tene' or 'ten' meaning earth/soil and 'gan' means skin. The two words are therefore put together and which literary means 'earth body'. It is against this backdrop that it is generally prohibited for one to shed blood of another (Goody, 1972: 17). If such an incident occurs, the culprits are given some fines which must be used to pacify the earth. The earth shrine is usually located in the central grove and thus belongs to the whole community. Sacrifices to this shrine are carried out by the earth priest and his assistants from the same patriclan. Houses or compounds are protected by the earth shrine since stones from the grove are placed in the foundations of every house and constitute an element in other shrines (1972: 17).



Fig. 5: Showing the grave of a carver with the wooden sculptures planted into the grave

However, every home or compound has an earth shrine located in front of the compound or some corner within the compound (See Fig. 6 and 7). To install such shrines at home, a stone is brought from the grove and that form the basis of the creation of the shrine. Properties found without owners, lost animals and persons are placed in the custody of this shrine. When for a long period their owners are not found animals are then sacrificed to the earth shrine. However, persons are not sacrificed to the shrine but are under custody of the shrine and therefore called '*tenganbiiri*' (i. e. children of the earth shrine see Saako, 2009).

5.2 CHAMELEON SHRINE '*GOMO NGMIN*'

This shrine is created when one comes across chameleon eggs or witness them mating or following each other or meeting each other from two opposite directions. A diviner is usually consulted who gives directions as to what to do. Such shrines are identified by the bangles associated with them and the initiators or owners are signified by similar bangles they wear. These bangles are made from iron depicting the image of a chameleon and the action one met it or them. But for those who witness chameleons laying eggs, it is the soothsayer or diviner who directs what to do. Creating such shrines often takes a long time (personal interaction with C. D. Ninkara chief of Mgangbuli and of the Sila family, 2011). It is believed that such shrines can bring good fortune to its owner and that is why it takes long time to establish it than the rest. Again, the eggs are sold to people who want to establish similar shrines. The Chameleons are usually made from metal and are placed in the shrine. They are usually made by blacksmiths and are sold in the open market for people who want to establish such shrines (See Fig. 8, 9 & 10).



Fig. 6: Showing the earth shrine in Birifoh-Sila Yiri



Fig.7: Showing the earth shrine in Birifoh (*Birifoh-Bãã*)



Fig. 8, 9& 10: Showing two Chameleons facing each other and a snake '*GomoNgmin*'



Fig. 8, 9& 10: Showing two Chameleons facing each other and a snake '*GomoNgmin*'



Chameleons and other metal objects in the market

6. CERAMIC FIGURINES (*Komtome*)

The ceramic figures are associated with the spirit (*Komtome*) and are confined in trees, hills and rivers. The wild beings or *kontome* play vital roles in Lobi and Dagaaba cultures and are portrayed concretely in speech and in sculpture. There are different sculptured shrines for both males and females. Residents also believe that sculptures represent dwarfs which perform gender-based functions and inhabit the hills, rivers and trees (Goody, 1972: 19). Such sculptured shrines are installed in rooms outside the house especially, those called 'yibile' (small room).

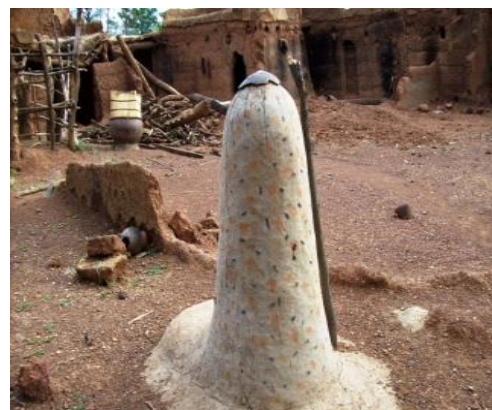


Fig. 11, 12, 13 and 14: Showing ceramic (clay) figurines shrines in Birifoh-Sila Yiri

6.1 RIVER SHRINE 'MAAN NGMIN' OR KONTOM-MGIME'

The river shrine is installed after an incident has occurred and a diviner consulted. The person would then be told to establish such a shrine because it wants to be associated with him/her. Before installing it, the person must go to the river side with a fowl and make a sacrifice there. After the sacrifice, the person picks a stone and collects water and mud from the river to constitute items that will be used to install the shrine which is in the form of 'kontome' (i.e. images moulded with clay to represent them : See Fig. 15 & 16). This shrine is for either hunting (*tem meoni*) or general family welfare including childbearing (*dogrung*) and material prosperity (*yelsungne*).



Fig. 15 and 16: Showing Bosigri River (i.e. Black Volta) and dwarfs/kontome shrine

The study found that, in the case of hunting, the 'maangming' (river shrine) is installed by old people. They therefore have the duties of declaring periods of traditional hunting expeditions. Hunting is declared when horns are blown for three consecutive market days at market grounds. Shrine owners are usually of the firmest belief that their shrines are going to guide hunters. Thus, they expect that one of the forelegs of any animal killed given them. However, if it is any bird, it is the wing that is reserved for the 'wiesobs' (shrine owners). At Birifoh-Baapare, Mr. Siuraa (a.k.a. Bonya) had a similar shrine and had recently organized one of such hunting expeditions in Birifoh (personal communication with C. D. Ninkara, 2012). However, in the case of family welfare, both sexes can install the 'maangming' but their installation processes differ.

For the man for the shrine is installed by relatives called the *kotombiiri* (that is the dwarf's children) at his father's house. Before the installation, *pito* is brewed and fifteen fowls (including a cock) are sacrificed at various points. But the number of fowls varies from one community to the other. The first fowl is sacrificed at a hill (*teang*) before a stone is picked from there. The second fowl is sacrificed at the river (*maan*) and another stone is picked and the third fowl is sacrificed at the house where the shrine is to be installed. The collection of the stones is done prior to the day of installation and they are added to the *pito*. The *pito* is prepared without yeast called 'dāākara'. On the morning of the installation, the *kotombiiri* moulds the clay figures. It is done by a male and a female who usually sit facing each other while moulding them. The cock is given to the male whilst a guinea fowl is given to the female. After the installation, sacrifices are made with a dog called 'dungsoglaa' (literary means black animal) and a male goat/sheep called 'dungpilaa' (literary means white animal). However, for the welfare of a woman, 'maangming' is installed in her husband's house. Despite the location of the shrine, it her father's side who provides the *dungpilaa* whilst the husband's side provides the *dungsoglaa* and a fowl. It is the *kotombiiri* of the woman's patriclan that does the installation not the husband's relatives. Anytime she wants to sacrifice, it is always the representative of the woman patriclan unless otherwise authorized by the wife's patriclan.

6.2 XYLOPHONE SHRINE 'GYILE NGMIN'

The xylophone god (*Gyilengmin*) is a kind of spirit associated with people who play the xylophone in public places such as festivals, funerals and other public gatherings. The duty of this shrine is to protect the xylophonist against any calamities that may befall him during the course of his duty. It is a common belief among Lobi and Dagaaba that there are bad people and spirits that may want to distract or incapacitate one by throwing some bad spirits at the person. This according to oral traditions gathered from Birifoh, such charming or throwing of spell at people

mostly occurs during funerals and festive occasions such as the ‘*Kobina*’ festival (harvesting festival celebrated every year during first week of October). But it is believed that if one consults this shrine it will protect and guide you against such eventualities (See Fig. 18).



Fig.18: Showing the xylophone shrine

6.3 THE LANDED SHRINE ‘*NGMEN SIURAA*’

It is the personal shrine which has been established by an individual to guide him/her in all his/her endeavours so as to provide good luck, health and success. Before one establishes such a shrine, he/she must first of all consult a diviner or soothsayer who gives directions as to what he/she should do. Such shrines are usually found in people bedrooms because it is he/she alone that sacrifices to it (See Fig. 19&20). However, it can be said that this tutelary work is at two levels. The first level is where an individual is having a spirit guardian, who can be an ancestor, a medicine shrine, or other agencies. The second is where each clan has a guardian spirit which serves them as a whole. (Goody, 1972: 27).



Fig. 19: Showing a personal shrine located within a portion of the room



Fig.20: Showing a personal shrine located within a portion of the room of a *pito* brewer

6.4 **KUNKPENI BIE (CAN'T ENTER WITH ANY DIABOLISM)**

This is another shrine moulded from clay and erected above the ground outside the compound which is within vicinity of the chief palace (Prussin, 1969: 99). This shrine according to the inhabitants of the area (the NaaYiri) was installed by the Late Naa Gandaa I himself (the first chief of the Birifoh traditional area). *Kukpenibie* is supposed to be a god against evil, a god which brings riches to whoever so desires that and asks for it, a god that gives fertility to barren women and hence a god for the protection of children. During the first half of the 1920s, two brothers called Kwodzo (Kojo) and Kwame Nti set out from Kwapra, a small village near Kumasi to Birifoh to franchise this shrine. By 1931, the powers of *Kukpenibie* had impressed Nana Prempeh I, who was related to these two lads. At that time, burglary and witchcraft were rife in Kumasi, and the Asantehene wanted this potent fetish in his kingdom to get rid of these two evils spreading like wild fire in the big towns. According to the Ashantis, the potency of this fetish was comparable to the then illicit *akpeteshi* drink, and thus brought about the nickname *kakamia* for the drink, a distorted pronunciation of *Kukpenibie*. This was later even put in a song titled '*Kakamia bo me ka*' (Allman and Parker, 2005:136-41).

This shrine is purposely for protection against any evil deeds and curative purposes of people who have been inflicted with some evil spirits. There are periods within the year that these clayed built figurines are rehabilitated. This shrine is unique because of the size and the arrangement of the figures and particularly its location within the Naa Yiri (i.e. royal of the Birifoh traditional area). However, *kunkpenibie* is a shrine that everybody can consult both near and far for their protection and prosperity (See Fig. 21, 22&23).



Fig 21, 22 and 23: Showing ceramic/clay figures (*kunkpenibie*) in BirifohNaa Yiri

7. CONCLUSION

The ethno-archaeological evidence provides insights on Birifoh religion both wooden and ceramic sculptured figurines among this Lobi ethno linguistic group in north-western part of Ghana. These beliefs and practices are often referred to as animist beliefs, that is, the belief in a doctrine that all life is produced by a spiritual force separate from matter, and all natural phenomena have souls independent of their physical being. Geography plays a role in characterizing the beliefs and ideologies of individual groups (Simpson, 195: 61). God had become the sole coordinator of life, thereby devaluing the powers possessed by ancestors. Instead, the idea arose that ancestors' spirits stood in an intercessory position between the living and God (Simpson, 1995: 63). All land is believed to be under the ritual protection of an earth god with whom first-comers supposedly have more direct contact than late-comers (Kuba and Lentz, 2002:392).

There are elements of continuity as well as change especially with regard to mortuary practices. The study indicated that both male and female who have children and die a proper death have ancestor figures carved to their name. But at final funeral rites, a sculptured figurine representing a woman is relocated to her father's house and placed among ancestor figures of her patriclan. The chameleon shrine is created only when one witnesses it in four actions, laying eggs, approaching each other from different direction, following one another and mating. There are other shrines associated with trees, hills and rivers and they form the abode of the wild being called the dwarfs '*kontome*'. The shrine is made up of a stone, mud and water as well as the images of the wild beings moulded in clay. The river shrine is a typical example created after an incident had occurred to a person and following consultations with a diviner. This shrine is associated with prosperity, child bearing and general wellbeing of the family. Both male and female can install such a shrine. But in the case of the woman it is the *kontombiiri* of the patriclan that install it and they perform all the sacrifices associated with it.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1) Religion plays a pivotal role in all aspects of life of the community and does form part of their worldview. Community leaders especially, chiefs, earth priests and *tendame* (custodian of the land) must therefore be well engaged in all deliberations from beginning to end. The religious beliefs of the communities that archaeologists and other researchers are working must not be overlooked. Religion forms the basis of their existence and therefore play critical role in all spheres of their lives.
- 2) The religious belief of individuals and communities must be respected for peaceful co-existence in order to avoid religious violence. We must respect religious pluralism in the country as against religious fanaticism that promote hate and chaos in some countries across the globe.

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