This article is intended to enlighten the Ghanaians on what archaeology is and how the findings of archaeology research are relevant for matters of cultural awareness as well as in capacity building in rural water supply and tourism. It is also an attempt to introduce readers to a field research in Salaga (under the Salaga Research Project, SRP) that ran from January 2001 to January 2003 (Figure 1). Data processing has just started.

Often, research findings in Ghana are beautifully done in long essays and theses. Once they are submitted for the awarding of degrees, they remain out of public purview. It is time to change this practice. The Ghanaians are part of the audience. The public should also endeavor to attend presentations and lectures to know about this research. Newspapers should include stories and events about everything from archaeology to zoology. Archaeological finds afford critical means of assessing water and slavery and slave trade in Salaga by providing information that is not available from other records.

Bones

To the uninitiated, the mention of the word archaeology conjures up several images that include that of eccentric pith-helmeted professors and ragged adventurers who overcome all odds to retrieve relics and excavate old burials and old rubbish dumps. The archaeologist is seen as one who is interested in "ancient things" and normally the first materials that comes to mind are bones. In Ghana, archaeology is one of the least (if not the least) respected disciplines. At the University of Ghana, most students who are offered archaeology initially see it as a punishment or a failure. Such students are considered by their colleagues as old-fashioned. A few of such students are teased and jokily called "Archaeo" by friends in and outside the university.

In recent times, the images of bones in archaeology has led to the creation of another "degree" by Legon students for those who read the subject. Archaeology students are said to be doing "B. A. Medico" (Bachelor of Arts/Medicine) suggesting probably a combined honors degree in social and medical sciences. I anticipate that the faculty and academic boards of the University of Ghana would spend days trying to design an honors degree of this strange combination. On the home front, the situation is not much better. Most parents become disappointed that they spend money to educate their children only to find they choose archaeology instead of administration, law, economics and other mainstream subjects. Interestingly, if there are any subjects that are only taught at the university level in Ghana, and do not appear in the curriculum at the basic level, archaeology is one of them. As a university course, it is only offered in Legon. This may account for the low level of academic and public awareness of the existence of this discipline and its relevance and significance.

Archaeologists in Ghana have not always been proactive in bringing their findings to the public using mass communication. Except for a few cases (see for example Professor James Anquandah's article in The Mirror on April 27, 2002), archaeological research reports have not been seen as "consumable public information". Research results have often remained hidden in local and foreign academic journals and books that are not accessible to the public. Sometimes, even students of archaeology are not able to have access to such reports because the University of Ghana cannot always subscribe to relevant journals and books.

Funding issues

There are even some people in administrative and decision making positions in Ghana who think that if the lack of funds should necessitate the closure of any departments at Legon, archaeology should be one of them, if not the first choice. Such people cannot be faulted because they are simply reflecting a basic misconception and ignorance. In the minds of many people, archaeological research is not worth supporting. But there is financial support from foreign governments, agencies, foundations, embassies (especially the French) and the UNESCO Accra Office, where Mr. Bruno Lefevre has been a...
Figure 1: Map showing Salaga and other places mentioned in the text.
Ghanaian and Africanist archaeologists have some means to investigate, document and reconstruct Ghana's rich ecological, cultural and historical past.

The Salaga Research Project has received some financial support from the Ministry of Tourism, at the instance of the Honorable Hawa Yakubu (when she was the Minister of Tourism) and the East Gonja District Administration headed by Mr. Bismarck Dari. The Honorable Boniface Abubakar-Saddique, the M.P. for Salaga Constituency and the Deputy Minister, Trade and Industries also supported the field work. This is an encouraging development for Ghanaian archaeology and particularly for northern Ghana where there so much work remains to be done.

Basic and applied archaeology

Many disciplines study the past, but archaeology is the one that integrates perspectives into a single framework. This framework begins with the human biological and evolutionary roots and continues with cultural manifestations from the prehistoric to the recent past. Archaeology uncovers the diverse human adaptations and innovations as we interact with the natural and social environment in order to develop capacities in crop and animal production, medicine, religion, arts and craft, water management, science, technology, trade (including the slave trade), industry and tourism. Archaeology is able to produce insights in all these areas beyond the limits of history. It is multi-disciplinary, its conception is holistic and its approach is comparative.

Like many other disciplines, archaeology can be divided into basic and applied research. Basic archaeology is directed towards gaining scientific knowledge for its own sake. Applied archaeology aims at gaining and utilizing the scientific knowledge of the past to meet recognized and pressing needs. It seeks to recover and document past knowledge, experience and value systems for direct application in present-day socio-economic development.

The Salaga Archaeology Research seeks to play a positive role in getting Ghana out of the present HIPC conditions through the boosting of tourism, and the application of hydro-geologically appropriate and time-tested indigenous water harvesting, exploitation and storage strategies (Figures 2 and 3). It also seeks to develop a platform for self respect and for the recognition of past achievements. We cannot succeed as a nation when we ignore our past or refuse to study, understand and use it appropriately. We cannot build our present on the past of others. We cannot forever pretend to be less concerned about our past achievements and strive to achieve successes today hoping that the future generation will remember, recover, study and use them.

Palatial remains

The first excavation near Salaga was in the 1960s. Flooding from the proposed Volta Dam necessitated the undertaking of rescue archaeology in the northern Volta Basin. Several sites were surveyed and a few were excavated. But a site near Grushi Zongo, located about 5 km southeast of Salaga, though not near the flood zone, was too attractive and significant to be ignored. Formerly referred to as Jakpasere or Jakpawuase, it should correctly be called Jakpawuto on the basis of recent oral and linguistic data gathered by the SRP Jakpawuto is associated with Ndewura Jakpa, founder of the Gonja State. Its massive wall remains dating to the 17th century still stand. Measurements of the wall remains and the dimensions of seven other related huge mound features suggest that the features represent a complex of tower houses or multi-storied buildings. Since traditions associate this site with Ndewura Jakpa, the features are interpreted as palatial residences of Jakpa and his elite group. But more significantly some local traditions maintain that the wall structure was built from a mixture of clay, milk and honey. Other traditions mention a mixture of clay and shea-butter. Today, clay wall houses that are abandoned in the Salaga area are reduced by natural elements into rubble in no time. One may ask if is it milk and honey and/or shea-butter that is needed be mixed with clay to make long lasting house walls. What has prevented the present generation in the Salaga area from using the same materials to make durable house walls?

While we wait to test these methods experimentally, I must add that these traditional interpretations may not be taken at their face value. They may be an attempt by the living to use tradition to explain an architectural feat of the past that is unique and beyond the limits of contemporary local building capacities. We intend to explain why these walls that are exposed to the elements have lasted for so long. For now, suffice it to say that the site remains a
Figure 2: Women collecting water from a cistern in Salaga.

Figure 3: Children (girls) like their mothers often go in groups to collect water from well and cisterns.
monument worth preserving, because it represents one of the high class pre-colonial residential areas of Gonjaland comparable to what we think of present-day residential areas such as East Legon or Airport.

After the 1966 excavation at Jakpawuto, the Salaga area did not see any archaeological investigation. However, this situation is being corrected with applied archaeology research on indigenous water management (underground water cisterns and wells) and the slave system of Salaga (slave markets, slave routes, slave baths, slave villages, slavery related artifacts as well as the slave raids and wars). Data for analysis is derived from surveys, mapping and excavations, ecological studies, oral traditions, written and archival sources as well as ethnographic studies and observations. Very few people will disagree with the Salaga Research Project that the issues being investigated have direct implications for capacity building in rural water supply, rural development and tourism in Salaga and the surrounding villages in particular and northern Ghana in general.

Regional surface surveys in Salaga and surrounding areas have for example led to the discovery of several more of the Jakpawuto type mound complexes. While some of the mound sites relate to the early settlement of the Gonja in northern Ghana, others represent images and landmarks of slavery and slave trade in Salaga. Together, these mound features reflect and document pre-colonial power, status, technology, architectural design, trade as well as slavery in Gonjaland.

Wells and Boreholes

There is widespread contemporary use of wells and cisterns as water sources here (Figure 4). This has implications for understanding the economy, ecology and traditions of Salaga. Salaga is a stressed environment where water scarcity and shortage has been an issues since the beginning of the town. Wells and cisterns that enabled human existence in Salaga. Yet I found that several cisterns and wells have been left to choke or be filled in. Modern bureaucrats advocate boreholes and pipe-borne water, so who are we to blame the people of Salaga for allowing these veritable linchpins of past water resources management to go to waste? In a few cases, local government authorities, churches and NGOs have constructed hand-dug wells sometimes fitted with pumps. The fact is that, the borehole facilities do fail to yield water or they breakdown. The dams dry up, the pipes refuse to run. I even recorded a case where a newly made (additional) borehole never yielded to the people in the Adamupe and Yakubu area of Salaga. There was a problem with the unit for pumping the water. This borehole stood dry while I investigated ancient cisterns from which water was being collected.

The cost of one borehole may clean and rehabilitate 100 or more ancient wells. Spending a little money to maintain a few of these ancient facilities would be a useful exercise. It is such an indictment on development that villagers are encouraged to neglect their wells only for them to ran back to these wells when the so-called “modern” system fails or breaks down. Traditional wells and cisterns will continue to hold their own as far as water supply in rural northern Ghana is concerned. One of the reasons is that unlike we in the urban areas, village folks do not have tanker service to provide water when the taps do not flow. Also they do not have large containers. A few clay and aluminum pots is about all they can provide for themselves for water storage. We are talking about people who are poor and may not have seen a poly or sintex tank before. Poverty in northern Ghana is chronic.

My findings show that not all activities in the villages require clean or potable water. House construction, for example, can be done with any water. The key element is that large quantities of water is needed. When the water supply that is available in a village is the borehole it means that village house builders have to spend much more time to get water. If local cisterns and wells are maintained, these would provide alternative rural water supply. Salaga is a unique human settlement in Ghana. The sheer numbers of wells and cisterns cannot be surpassed. Apart from those in the town proper there are several more in the bush. Salaga has more than enough attractions to refresh the minds of the wide-eyed local or international tourist.

The development of Salaga as a settlement was rapid. In the 19th century, it quickly overtook several earlier trade towns and became the leading slave market not only in pre-colonial Ghana but in the whole of the West Africa sub-region. Several thousands of slaves (alongside kola nuts, sheep, goats, clothing and other merchandise) were annually and openly displayed in the Salaga Market (Buwan Kasua). Here, the slaves were examined for their physique, age,
Figure 4: A new well under construction in Salaga.

Figure 5: The leg shackle: one of the relics of human enslavement in Salaga.
gender and prices or terms regarding their sale (Figure 5). The slaves were bargained for and paid for with different types of “money”. Some were exchanged for fine alcoholic drinks or textiles. The slave trade, in whatever form we see it, will forever remain with us as part of our past, our present and our future. It is up to the present generation to create the best from this human experience. The Salaga Research Project has a central vision that the men, women and children who were denied their inalienable right to self-determination and self-recognition through enslavement should have their experiences, landmarks, and relics comprehensively studied and packaged in a presentable way. This will move the culture history and heritage of Salaga from the realm of occasional adhoc planning that seems to characterize “tourism” in Salaga.

Tourism

The East Gonja District Assembly does not even have a tourism desk or office. There are several students of archaeology, history, geography and sociology who could be employed in this way. These personnel will systematically identify, collect and document local ecological and cultural heritage sites and features as well as liaise with local and foreign individuals, ministries and boards that have something to do with tourism development and promotion. The District Assembly may request for national service personnel with these background.

At the national level, it should be made a local government and rural development policy that every district must have a desk or office where local heritage, indigenous knowledge and tourism issues can be handled. The Salaga Research Project has decided that it is imperative that foreign and local tourists should appropriately and accurately be informed about Salaga and its slave related past. The cultural heritage of Salaga should be preserved and developed in a sustainable manner. Any hasty ad-hoc local development strategy that destroys the heritage of Salaga should be discouraged.

Slave market

The Salaga slave market has also been mapped and test excavated (Figure 8). Oral histories have been collected on this market and other slave related places in Salaga. On the slave space stood houses, kiosks, Jorry parks and other commercial centers. Although some of these structures have recently been moved, the loss or destruction of cultural materials from the construction activities on the slave market was clearly demonstrated by the test excavation results. The slave market is too important for its development needs to be placed solely on the local administrators, local historians and opinion leaders. There is the likelihood that in their attempts and enthusiasm to achieve short-term results, people may sometimes do things that rather destroy the Salaga heritage. Salaga Slave Market is a national asset of historical and cultural significance. A better form of support and development strategy is needed.

Practical results

The Salaga research achieved immediate practical results when the cisterns of the slave bath that were cleaned out and later stored rain and surface run off water, became points of water collection for residents in the neighborhood. Several farmers and traders, moving along the Salaga Tamale road on foot, motor cycles and bicycles, collect water from the
Figure 6: The interior of a well in the Salaga slave bath.

Figure 7: Excavation of a well at the Salaga slave bath site.
wells. Preliminary analysis shows that through the construction and use of these facilities, the "yesterday" people of Salaga were able to provide water for use by a huge population of between 15,000 and 50,000 people that descended on Salaga in the dry season months of October/November to March/April annually for trade and other purposes.

The population of Salaga at the peak of its pre-colonial development was highly variable. It expanded to its elastic limits in the dry season. Trade reduced in the rainy season and the population size contracted. Estimates of fixed past population numbers for Salaga may not be too helpful in presenting the peculiar historical demography parameters of Salaga. Slaves were the core labor force that produced food and water. They were used in the local economy on farms and in the construction of wells and cisterns. They served as one of the most powerful magnets that brought in people from all over West and North Africa as well as Europe. These people came as traders, settlers, religious leaders, teachers, tourists, scientific and commercial explorers. Tourism in Salaga, therefore, has a longer history than we normally think.

The Salaga research is achieving a greater understanding of the cultural, historical, economic and ecological variables that underpinned the slave trade and other past developments. The understanding should inform us appropriately as we undertake development in tourism and other areas in Salaga presently and in the future. This study will give a cutting edge to both ecological and heritage tourism. It will enhance the attempts at capacity building in tourism and cultural awareness both in Ghana and in the Diaspora. There is no denying the fact that enslavement of Africans by Africans and non-Africans occurred centuries ago but this historical experience has direct relevance to many present-day problems faced by Africans and peoples of African decent elsewhere. The story of water, slavery and the slave trade in Salaga needs to be told, shown, touched and demonstrated archaeologically. In our capacity as specialists of the grassroots, applied archaeologists are experts of indigenous people and culture.

Figure 8: The historic Salaga slave market, presently the scene of several activities.