
STRAWS WITHIN A GLASS HOUSE: A REPLY TO STAHL

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When I originally agreed to publish my article “Under the Rocks: reconsidering the origin of the Kintampo Tradition and the development of food production in the savanna-forest/forest of West Africa” in the ‘reply and response’ format it was under the impression that this would engender some fruitful discussion focused on issues relevant to the topic. The article certainly was intended to foment debate. Sadly, this opportunity has been missed as is evident from “Glass Houses under the Rocks: A Reply to Watson”, which is based on a subjective discourse rather than academic debate. I am genuinely saddened by this outcome. Although I have no intention of responding point by point to Stahl, I will briefly highlight some of the most egregious aspects of Stahl’s reply prior to describing the substantive issues that have been entirely ignored.

An Encounter with ‘Straw Men’

Stahl (p. 57) insinuates that my critique of her research is based upon a “straw (wo)man” argument. This is fallacious. A “Straw Man” argument is a logical fallacy - a mistake in reasoning - that relies on a caricatured version of an argument, rather than the actual argument, created so that this ‘effigy’, or position, may be easily refuted in debate. The creator of a straw man argument uses this device to side-step, or mischaracterise the argument(s) of an opponent in debate in order to make them appear weak or ridiculous. As should be quite clear from the article, I have no need of such an illegitimate device. I do not believe that I have either misrepresented her arguments or misquoted her position. Yet, it appears that the logical fallacy that I am supposed to have committed is actually ‘perpetrated’ by Stahl, as she attempts to caricature my argument(s) by providing a commentary based on a highly selective (mis)reading of the article.

1) As an example, it is stated that I have misrepresented Stahl as “forwarding an argument about environmental change based on taxa represented by a few individuals” (Stahl, p. 59). The passage in dispute is reproduced at length on page 59 of Stahl’s response, whilst the issue concerns my citation of “...reduction in forest cover...with a corresponding increase in woodland savanna’ [which] is based on three species of primates...rodents and artiodactyls...”. As is clear from Stahl’s citation of her own work, the faunal data is suggested to be indicative of anthropogenic activity associated with forest clearance, garden hunting *etc.* I did not impute or state that any environmental (or climatic) agent was actually suggested by Stahl, which is evident if my ‘misquote’ is read within its context:

“K6 faunal remains comprise ca. 16 species, with generally only a single individual of any species represented in any layer...Suggested anthropogenic modification of the local environment and Kintampo hunting strategies...are based on either the occurrence of a single individual or a few individuals distributed throughout a long occupation sequence (*Tab. 2*). Apparent “reduction in forest cover...with a corresponding increase in woodland savanna” is based on three species of primates (MNI 6, layers 2-5), three species of rodents (MNI 5, layers 2-4) and three species of artiodactyls (MNI 4 layers 1-5) (STAHL 1985b: 142-144). Evidence for garden hunting is similarly limited, comprising the few duikers and single guinea fowl. This faunal assemblage is the largest recovered from any Punpun/Kintampo site, but is it adequate for inferring forest clearance or garden hunting?” (Watson, this volume p. 23).

2) As correctly observed by Stahl (p. 63), I do emphasise the “importance of incorporating technological analysis as a component of assessing the cultural affiliation” of the pottery assemblages. Yet, Stahl (p. 61-62) does not acknowledge that this was only a *component* of the ceramic analysis and conveniently

ignores the details of my argument. It is clearly stated in the text that “[d]ifferentiation of Punpun and Kintampo pottery was based primarily on technological characterisation of fashioning methods and fabric types” (this also included presence/absence of finishing techniques) and decoration and morphology, *i.e.* stylistic and technological variables (Watson, *p.* 11-13). Utilising *all* of these criteria meant that it was a relatively simple matter to assign sherds to either the Punpun or Kintampo Tradition; this of course includes undeco-rated sherds. The few sherds that were inconsistent with the criteria developed to characterise the pottery of these traditions were excluded (see captions for *Tables 10-11*) from definition as either Punpun or Kintampo. The method used for determining fashioning techniques was based on the visual inspection of every sherd (edge and sherd wall) and careful attention to detail (published references cited in the article and those developed through experience) meant that it was possible to assign a sherd to a particular fashioning technique (*e.g.* coil manufacture) or general technique (*e.g.* beating method). Stahl (*p.* 61-62), however, appeals to broad generalities and possibilities, and disregards the specific and distinctive characteristics of the assemblages in question, their context, or the nuances of my analysis. There is a great difference between understanding the vast range of possibilities that need to be accounted for in any type of analysis, and, in this instance, those developed through experience and familiarity with large pottery assemblages. As detailed in the text, these assemblages are highly distinctive and cannot be easily confused, and by using a range of criteria their distinctive attributes were accurately characterised.

As to whether these criteria, which constitute the most fundamental aspects of ceramic analysis, can be used to determine the existence of coherent pottery assemblages, and if one can then proceed to analyse specific attributes of each assemblage (*e.g.* stylistic variability and temporal patterns) does not need any explanation as the answer is self evident.

Stahl (*p.* 62) incorrectly highlights an inconsistency in my criticism of her “‘prescriptive’... assignment of ceramics to Punpun or Kintampo groups based on Flight’s decorative treatments” and my use of pottery decoration and rim types. As detailed in my article (*p.* 6, 22-23) STAHL (1985b: 128-134) relied on decorative attributes, which are insufficient for comprehensively discriminating between the pottery assemblages. A more specific problem is that it leads to ambiguities in characterisation and ascription of ‘cultural affiliation’,

such as is evident in STAHL’s (1985b: 134; emphasis added) analysis of Punpun decoration where “[l]ess common techniques which **probably** also fall into the Punpun phase were ‘scallop’ impressions..., and ‘cord-wrapped rocker’...”. This raises the possibility that these and some other décors may have been incorrectly ascribed to either the Punpun or Kintampo Traditions. Thus, the stratigraphic representation of the ceramics and, as a corollary the ‘cultural sequence’ at K6 as suggested by Stahl is in doubt. I reiterate the need to employ a range of criteria for characterisation as discussed above.

The reader is of course free to formulate their own opinions, but I suggest a careful comparison of the arguments presented in the article with the claimed omissions and caricatures presented in Stahl’s reply.

A Glass House

STAHL (1985a, 1985b, 1986, 1993 and 1994) has never been explicit as to the mechanism(s) underlying her model. As She (*p.* 60) states this was due “in part because we lacked a substantive evidential basis for doing so.” Yet, I quote from the most detailed exposition published by Stahl:

“If the Kintampo culture represents an incursion of a population from the north we would expect to see a pattern of early [radiocarbon] dates at northern sites, and progressively later dates further south... **the available radiocarbon dates do not support the notion that people with a distinctive cultural baggage moved into Ghana from either the north or west.**

Other researchers have suggested more diverse origins for the Kintampo culture. According to this model, an indigenous population practising yam and oil palm management, and collecting diverse wild plant and animal resources, came into contact with populations from the Sahel and ultimately from the Sahara. These populations possessed a distinctive lithic technology and exotic domesticates which became incorporated into the indigenous LSA adaptation. The contact in this case was not necessarily in the form of intrusive occupations in central Ghana; rather, introduced traits were incorporated into a local adaptation. POSNANSKY (1984: 150) suggests that differential integration of these traits accounts for regional variation in the Kintampo culture.

The existing radiocarbon dates are not inconsistent with a coalescence of the Kintampo culture in central Ghana, involving a fusion of local and exotic traits that resulted in a distinctive adaptation... [STAHL 1985b: 146-147; emphasis my own].