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A Material Culture and Ontological Perspective of Sisaala Clans' Indigenous Cultural Practices in Ghana

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Abstract

This study examines totemism as a material and ontological system through a descriptive single-case study of selected totemic clans in Sisaala East Municipality, Upper West Region of Ghana. Due to the inadequate and inapt documentation of Sisaala Clans' totemic clan compositions, this study, drawing on qualitative fieldwork involving twenty-four (24) participants composed of chiefs, elders, clan heads, opinion leaders, and traditional priests, selected using maximal variation sampling, explored how the Sisaala clan totems operate as material anchors of ancestry, identity, and social organisation. Espousing participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis, the study identifies how totemic material and taboos structure clan composition, regulate social roles, and sustain moral obligations within and across Sisaala communities. Data were analysed using reflective thematic analysis with MAXQDA (v24.4.1). The findings show that Sisaala totemic systems materialise philosophical concepts of kinship, origin, and responsibility, embedding belief within everyday practices

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and ritual life. By foregrounding indigenous ontologies of material belief, this study contributes to the debate in material culture studies on the agency of Sisaala totemic symbols, the social life of belief, and the entanglement of materiality and cosmology in African societies. To strengthen the documentation and preservation of clan totemism, the study recommends future exploration of diverse dimensions of clan roles and ritual authority in other ethnicities.

Introduction

Totems are plants and animals used as symbols by clans. Crocodiles, elephants, crows, parrots, snakes, and lambs are some animals used as symbols to represent clans (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Dery et al., 2023). These totemic symbols include both fauna and flora, which function as sacred emblems embodying ancestry, identity, and moral obligation (Dery et al., 2023; Gbene et al., 2021). Plants include the San, Salai Guggul, Siri, Vilvam, Raffia, Kol, Peepal, Kadamba, Uma, Cashew, and Semal (Amirthalingam, 2014; Goswami, 2018). Thus, members of a clan consider these animals or plants sacrosanct, hence revere them. The venerated animals or plants of the clans become their totemic symbols (Asante et al., 2025; Gbene et al., 2021). The totemic symbols represent the clans' authority and are connected to the ancient and mythological history of the clan. This history is ideologically and mythically related to the kin of the clan (Benson, 2021; Massola, 2025). Hence, clan members believed in the history and totemic symbols of their clan and, as a result, practised totemism.

Totemism has been widely theorised within Anthropology of Religion, particularly by Emile Durkheim, who conceptualised totems as representations of collective social identity (Miller, 2022; Strijdom, 2024), while Claude Levi-Strauss viewed them as a classification system of structuring human- nature relations (de Castro & Zamora Corona, 2025; Sánchez-Villagra, 2022). The belief in the totemic symbols and prohibiting the killing and eating of the totemic animals, plants, or objects constitutes totemism. This totemism is usually practised by a group of people from a common ancestor, lineage, or grouped by actual relatives and descent, referred to as a clan (Dery et al., 2023; Makgopa, 2019; Mills et al., 2022). Regionsnah and Gbana (2018) posited that several villages in Sisaala land in Ghana's Upper West Region feature multi-clan residents. In Ghana, several totemic groups include Aduana, Agona, Abura, Eguafo, Effutu, Ajumako Krachi, Nkonya, Ga, Shai, and Osudoku (Agboada, 2024; Asante et al., 2025; Hohome, 2017; Mensah et al., 2024; Rattray, 1932; Segbafah, 2025; Sulemana Anamzoya et al., 2023). These totemic groupings identify between one and the other the distinctive symbols or emblems employed. This is possible as totemic animals are displayed on ceramic containers by ancient societies to

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enhance their jars or vessels and communicate to onlookers about their origin (Knappett, 2025; Navei, 2021, 2024).

Despite existing descriptive accounts, such as Asante (2025), Atanga (2019), Chieminah & Gbana (2018), Dery et al. (2023), Gbene et al. (2021), Mensah et al. (2024), and Segbafah (2025), there is limited scholarship examining Sisaala totemism as a material ontological system that actively structured social relations, special organisation, and cosmological meaning. Therefore, this study explored the philosophical foundations of the Sisaala clans and their significance to Sisaala inhabitants. As the totemic culture of many Sisaala classes is not documented, the results of this study provide viable totemic information to art instructors, curators, art historians, and cultural lovers. Art instructors and students will understand how the Sisaala totemic clans are composed, the philosophy behind their composition, and the meanings attached to them. This will enable the proper use, conservation, maintenance, and promotion of the Sisaala people's totemic cultures. Also, this study's findings will provide policymakers and stakeholders in art and culture with viable data on clan composition for integration into the Ghana educational curriculum. This will aid in the study, practice, and understanding of viable knowledge about Sisaala totemic clans' composition, myths, significance, and history. Also, the 1992 constitution of Ghana, Article 39 Clause 4, states that historical places of interest and artefacts shall be protected, promoted, and preserved by the state (Republic of Ghana, 1992). Totems formed part of the state's cultural artefacts that should be protected and promoted in our cultural life. In addition, to achieve Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4, target 7 focusing on ensuring all learners acquire knowledge and skills for sustainable development, covering education for sustainable development and global citizenship to promote human rights, gender equality, peace, cultural diversity and sustainable lifestyles by 2030, as emphasised in the UNESCO 2030 Agenda of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (United Nations Development Programme, 2025a). This study aligns with the Ghana Education Strategy Plan (ESP) 2018-2030, stipulating the integration of cultural values and heritage (Indigenous Knowledge System) into the curriculum to make Ghana a learning nation (Ministry of Education, 2019). Furthermore, this study supports the African Union Agenda 2063 on building great African museums to mobilise and unify people in building common ideals and promoting African culture to build the ideals of Pan-Africanism. This can be done by creating awareness of African cultural artefacts, including the philosophical composition of the Sisaala clan totems, which aim to preserve and promote African cultural heritage (African Union, 2025). Again, a study by Warner et al. (2025) suggests the exploration of heritage, such as totemic clans, to rebuild practices, traditional aesthetics, and authenticity of cultural artefacts. This study contributes to material culture studies by demonstrating how totemic objects function as agents within indigenous ontologies rather than passive symbols.

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Therefore, the philosophical clan composition of the Sisaala people should be explored in depth. This will enable totemic objects, often an animal held in regard by members of a clan, who feel that there was a peculiar bond of emotional identity between themselves and the totem, to be understood and learned (Eller, 2021). Again, the exploration of the Sisaala clans' composition unearths the functional and symbolic purposes with several philosophical and socio-cultural values and undertones. These will safeguard, defend and develop the Sisaala people's culture. However, less information about the philosophical composition of the Sisaala clans remains silent and inaccessible (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018). The totemic symbols can be used to inscribe on or ascribe to dress and clothing to enhance their aesthetic appeal (Gbene et al., 2021; Zhu, 2022).

Given the necessity to comprehend in depth the philosophies of the clan communities and the meaning of the totems to clan members and art teachers, this study aims to explore the philosophical clan composition of four selected Sisaala clans in Ghana. Therefore, the study sought to investigate the philosophical thoughts of the Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeviaraa, and Heliviaraa clans in the Municipality of Sisaala East of Ghana, Upper West Region. This study answers the question, what are the philosophical thinking in the Sisaala East Municipality about the Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeviaraa, and Heliviaraa clans? This study provides a resource material for establishing the visual art programme for schools and universities, as it is beneficial to art educators and policymakers. Art educators will use this study as a method of protecting and transferring the cultural legacy of the Sisaala people to students. The results will provide relevant information that expands and enhances existing knowledge on totems and promote the teaching and study of certain aspects of culture and values in Sisaali.

Literature review

Sisaala East Profile

Tumu is the administrative capital of Sisaala East Municipality, located in the northeast corridor of Ghana's Upper West Region between roughly 10° and 11° N and 1.3° W (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021) (Figure 1). The Ghana Statistical Service (2021) positions the municipality as bordered by Kasena Nankana and Bulsa South district to the west, Burkina Faso to the northeast, Mamprusi and Wa East to the east, Daffiama Bussie Issa to the southwest, and by Sisaala West district to the west. Sisaala East Municipality occupies a substantial portion of the region, about 26.7%, and has a population of 56,528, made up of 48.7% male and 51.3% female (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). The municipality lies within the Guinea Savanna vegetation belt underlain by Birimian and granite formations with notable water resources. It comprises five major town councils, including Tumu, Bujan, Wallembele, Sakai, and Nabulo, and 68 urban and rural settlements organised into eight (8) primary totemic clans, of which four clans are the focus of this study (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). Local livelihoods and culture of

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the Sisaala people are shaped by Islam, traditional beliefs, and Christianity, and the area is an important food basket for maize and shea nut production in Ghana (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021). The municipality offers diverse tourism assets, historic and natural sites such as grottoes, mysterious rivers at Nmonduonu, crocodile ponds at Bujan, caves at Kassana, pottery centres at Dangi, mountain ranges at Bawiasibelle, and memorial sites at Tumu, underscoring its cultural and ecological significance (Ayamga, 2020; Ghana Statistical Service, 2021).

Indigenous Cultural Practices

Asante et al. (2025) and Rios (2026) conceptualise indigenous cultural practices in the Sisaala land to include living systems of identity, morality, and social organisation. In support of this, Chieminah and Gbana (2018), Dery et al. (2023) and Sangaparee (2010) emphasise that Ghanaian clans function as symbols of ancestry and community belonging. Consequently, this enables clan-linked animals and plants across Sisaala, Akan, Eve, and Ga societies (Asante et al., 2025; Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Sangaparee, 2010). Correspondingly, Asare et al. (2014) and Benson (2021) stress that environmental and preservation value of totems in protecting wildlife and natural resources (Asante et al., 2025; Shanunu, 2024). However, this study synthesises these positions by showing that Sisaala totems structure ritual duties, regulate taboos, and sustain moral obligations. In addition, Sisaala totems serve as active agents in social life for clan communities. This view aligns with Bhowmick (2022), Bille (2022), and Küchler & Carroll (2020)'s work, emphasising object agency and material meaning. However, this study contrasts descriptive clan accounts with deeper philosophical reading, demonstrating that indigenous cultural practices are materially embedded, socially bound, and cosmologically significant.

Clan Composition in Ghana

Generally, in Ghana, a clan comprises a group of individuals connected as members of a common ancestor by blood, lineage, or family. This group consists of the same totemic animal, comprising two or more families or lines (Dery et al., 2023; Makgopa, 2019). Ghanaians organised themselves into organisations, which in turn consist of yet smaller groups themselves (Dery et al., 2023). Individuals are the smallest organisation. The number of people and organisations in each clan is not consistent but varies. Asante et al. (2025), Dery et al. (2023) and Rios (2026) opined that a clan comprises all individuals of a common ancestor's patrilineal descendants. The ancestors are traced through tribal or genealogical lines. Massola (2025) added that kinship networks and custodian responsibility are linked to totems and clan markers.

The English term clan came from the Scottish Gaelic '*Clann*', meaning children, descendants, progenies, or descendants, as Majumder (2025) opined. A clan is an actual or imagined family and lineage group of people (Majumder, 2025; Massola, 2025). In addition, if lineage information is unclear, clan members are grouped around a founding member or an apical predecessor. In indigenous Ghanaian societies, clans are exogamous (Asante et al., 2025;

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Dery et al., 2023; Gbene et al., 2021). This implies that members of a clan cannot intermarry. Clans have preceded and existed in every country's more centralised system of communal organisation and governance. Members of a clan are designated as autonomous clans using emblems, totems, or other symbols. The family relationships have a symbolic predecessor, whereby the clan has a fixed common ancestor that is an emblem of the oneness of the clans. When this ancestor is non-human, the totem is commonly referred to as an animal (Dery et al., 2023; Majumder, 2025).

Several clans had different totems in Ghana. For instance, Ahwiaa, Nvavile, Madwoni, Asamangama, Ezohile, Azawua, Akisi, and Awongoba clans in the historic Nzema region of Ghana are among the following clans (Johnson, 2015; Sulemana Anamzoya et al., 2023). Clans like Aduana, Agona, Anona, Asakyir, Asanie, Asona, Bretuo, Ekwuona, and Oyoko are in the traditional territory of the Ashantis in Ghana (Asare et al., 2014; Mensah et al., 2024; Rattray, 1932). The Sisaala ethnic group in Ghana traditionally comprises clans such as Samviaraa, Hamviaraa, Gamviaraa, Giliganviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, Heliviaraa, Baliviaraa, and Nyibiviaraa (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Gbene et al., 2021). The Ewe ethnic group clans in Ghana include Tapa, Nkonya, Anlo, Lafe, Krachi, Amlade, Bamee, Dzevie, Uifeme, Yetsofe, Blu, Adzovia, Bate, Tsiamie, Agave, and Ame (Agboada, 2024; Hohome, 2017; Kpodo, 2019; Segbafah, 2025). Clans like Kpone, Ga, Shais, Osudoku (Tseer et al., 2022), Old Ningo, Ningo Prampram, and Big Ada are found among Ghana's Ga ethnic groupings (Sangaparee, 2010). A customs clan consisting of Kumawu, Asumanya, Bompata, Kwaso, Akyease, Takyiman, Nsuatre, Drobo, Kwaman, Boaman, Agogo, Apromaase, Tikurom, Kaase, Apagya, Manso-Mmem, Manso-Abodeom, and Nyinahen, stipulated by Asare et al. (2014) and Mensah et al. (2024) of the Akan people. This review shows that the Ashanti, Sisaala, Ga, and Ewe ethnic groups practice clan systems. These clans regulate the structure and composition of the people. However, the philosophical undertones regulating the composition and structure of the clans are limited and underexplored. Hence, the need for this study.

For instance, within the Ashanti ethnic group, as emphasised by Asare et al. (2014), Mensah et al., (2024) and Rattray (1932), membership of the clans, such as the Agona clan, includes: Tafo; Bodwesango; Fomesua; Asienimpon; Trede Ahwiaa; Ampabame; (Nkawie). Asakyiri includes clan-grown communities of Akorokyere, Ayaase, Asokore, Abofuo, Asakyiri, Apeadu, and Asakyiri. Kumasi Amakom, Dompooase, Antoa, Agona, Nkoranza, Wenchi, Atwoma, Kofiase, and Denyase belonged to the Asene clan. The Ejisu, Offinso, Feyiase, Manso-Nkwanta, Bonwire, Atwi-a-agogo, Abrakaso, Taabuom, Beposo, Toase, and Odumase clans are included in the Asona (Odum, Odum-na, Dwum or Dwumina) clans. The members of the Bretuo clan include Mampong, Amofo, Afigyaase/Effiduase, Jamase, Apae, Domeabra, Adankranya, Ago-Hwidiem, and Abuotem. The clans of Ekuona (Asokorea, Kokofu-Abuoso, Adumasa), Heman, Abenkyem, and Duayaw-Nkwanta are Adanse Fomena, Banko, Kona, Asokore-Mampong, and Brekum. The

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Kumasi, Dwaben, Kokofu, Bekwae, Mamponten, Bogyae, Dadieso, Obogu, Asaaman Adubiase, Pampaso, Kontanase, Kenyasi, and Ntonso are the Oyoko (Daku, Yogo, Yoko, Oweko, or Anona) clan. This shows that the clans comprise communities that constitute their compass. However, the philosophical selection criteria for inclusion into a clan are scarce. Therefore, this study explores this philosophical inclusion criterion of the clan's composition.

Among the Anlo clans of the Ewe ethnic group, Agboada (2024). Hohome (2017), Kpodo (2019) and Segbafah (2025) highlighted that the Lafe Clan cults include Avadovaklo, Kodzikli, Avadatsi, and Tsiamitsi. Togbi Gbe, Sui, Nyaga, and Adebe are the Amlade Clan cults. Gbaku and Gbekukuia are part of the Bamee Clan community. The Klevie Clan Group consists of Gbotonya and Kovi alternatively. Mala and Kotsi are the Tovie Clan cult. Nyigbla and Dzevi are the guardians of the Dzevie Clan. Mama Asife is part of the cult of Uifeme clan. Avadatsi is included in the Yetsofe Clan community. Adzovia Clan cult is Mama Tɔmi, Asimatsɔnu, Danyevi, and Afɔmabgetɔme. The cult of the Bate Clan includes Bate and Fiazikpui. Like clan members include Zio, Atsipkui, and Dzomadodetɔngɔ. The villages of the Tsiamie Clan are Tsali and Dokutonyi. Kaklaku, Gbe, Tsixi, and Dzemu are part of the Agave Clan. Mama Blolui is part of the Ame Clan. These examples illustrate that clan systems across Ghana are not merely genealogical but function as socio-symbolic structures linking identity, ecology, and governance.

The makeup of the Sisaala ethnic group, as highlighted by Chieminah and Gbana (2018) and Gbene et al. (2021) comprised Wallembele, Bugubelle, Tarsaw, Kulfuo, and Wasai clans forming the Samvian clan. Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Dangi, Lilixia, and Bakuala, Hamviaraa clan. Pieng and Vamboi made up the Bondia clan. The settlements in Gamviaraa comprise the settlements of Gwollu, Kandia, Sorbelle, Pulima, Silbelle, and Kwala. Tumu and Ugantu include Gilinganvian clan villages. The towns of Bandei, Sakalu, and Nabulo constituted the Kpeivian Clan. Nabulo, Jitong, Nyimati, and Bullu are Helivian clan communities. The Pievian clan comprises the villages of Jijen, Sentie, and Kusali. Jeffisi, Buoti, and Chinchin are members of the Balivian clan. The Bujan, Nabugubelle, Nanchalla, Taffiasi, and Dimajan clan communities are Nyibiviaraa. This example illustrates the composition of the Sisaala clans but is limited in the philosophical meaning underpinning the composition.

Clan Totems

The totemic beliefs and behaviours within Ghana's Akan traditional systems include: Ahwei and Aduana clans' dog is respected; Nvavile and Agona clans revere the parrots; Madwuri and Asakyir clans link with the vulture; Crow utilised by the Ezohile and Asona clans, the Azewa and Bretuo clans relate to the Leopard, the Akisi and the Ekuona Clan prohibit the Buffalo, and the Awongoba Clans linked to the Falcon, and the Oyoko Clans revere the Bat (Asare et al., 2014; Johnson, 2015; Mensah et al., 2024; Sulemana Anamzoya et al., 2023). The Fantes in Ghana totemic animals and beliefs include: elephant associated with the Denkyira, Eguafu, Abura,

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Ajumako, and Abeadze clans; Bushbuck is linked to the kin of Ajumako and Effutu; Crab is utilised by the Oguuaa clan, Grey Parrot is prohibited by the Anomabu clan; Hen and Chicks revered by the Edina clan; and the Antelope is regarded as sacred by the Ekumfi and Abirem clans (Mensah et al., 2024; Sangaparee, 2010). Ghana's Aduana, Kumawu, Bompata, and Essumeya clans use the flaming Dog as their totem; the Denyasi clan had the totem of the honey badger; traditional areas of Nkoransa use the Fruit Bat as their totem; traditional Drobo and Wenchi clans regard the crested porcupine and tree hyrax, respectively, as their totem (Mensah et al., 2024; Sangaparee, 2010). Manya and Yilo Krobos thought and saw Buem's, and their totemic creature is the buffalo (Sangaparee, 2010). This shows that clans in Ghana use animals and plants as their totemic veneration. However, the philosophical underpinning of this is limited in scholarly discourse.

Ghana's Sisaala ethnic group, the porcupine group, relates to the Samvian clan, the Hamvian clan's little red-pot beliefs. Crown-bird of the Gamvian clan, Gilinganvian-related crow, Kpeivian clan of leopard, Helivian clan of squirrel, Pievian clan of red sheep, Balivian clan of monitor lizard, and Nyibivian clan of crocodiles are adored (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Gbene et al., 2021). The use of flora and fauna exemplifies the symbolic and philosophical relationship between humans and the environment, therefore necessitating further in-depth exploration of their philosophical meanings.

In Ghana's totemic creatures and beliefs, Agboada (2024), Hohome (2017) and Segbafah (2025) believe that the Ewes include the lion adored by the Krachi, crab linked with the Tapa and Nkonya people. The Anlo Clan and Lafe Clan have their totemic creatures: monitor lizard 'Eve,' Antelope 'se' and Sparrow's 'atsutsr ume.' As you use it as your totem, the Amlade Clan is connected to the monitor lizard. The leopard and the Monitor lizard are the totemic creatures in the Bamee Clan. The antelope's totem is the 'se' with the Klevie Clan. The Tovie Clan had the buffalo as its totem. As its totemic animal, the Dzevie Clan is associated with the leopard. Antelopes and tortoises are adored by the Uifeme and Blu Clans. The sheep as a totem is connected to the Yetsofe Clan. Adzovia Clan Totem is Adzovia tilapia, a brown fish like tilapia *Melanopleura* (Akpa). The Bate Clan's totems are the leopard, hippo, dog, crab, and raffia. As a totemic animal, Like clan members employed the sawfish 'nyanyake.' The Tsiamé and Agave Clans use the land crab or cashew tree as their totems. The members of the Amé Clan revere the dog (Kpodo, 2019). This review shows the congruence of the totemic animals among different totemic clans. However, the reasons necessitating these congruences and their symbolic and philosophical relations are underexplored.

The Kpone People revere the lion. Sangaparee (2010) believes that the Ga, Shais, Osudoku, and Old Ningo clans are linked with the elephant; the Ningo Prampram clan is a crested eagle that is used as a totem, and the cock is utilised by the traditional Big Ada clan.

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This study shows that the Ga ethnic group practices totemism. However, the philosophical meanings underscoring the use of such animals are scanty and blurry in academic literature.

The review synthesises the clans and their totemic associations of the various groups in Ghana. The review showed congruence and divergence among clans' totemic veneration. This shows that totemic clans in Ghana share similar totemic creatures but have different, divergent mythical narratives. The review demonstrated that totemism is chiefly practised among ethnic groups in Ghana. The study demonstrated the use of animals as the major totemic veneration within most clans. This demonstrates the pivotal role of animals as symbols of totemic veneration. However, the philosophical composition of these clans and their communities is limited and scarce in scholarly documentation. Therefore, this study explores, in depth, the philosophical undertones of the Sisaala totemic clans as a contribution to academic discourse.

Theoretical underpinning of the study

This study is anchored in materiality and ontology, drawing on the work of Alfred Gell's theory of social agency (Bhowmick, 2022; Bille, 2022; Kuchler & Carroll, 2020). The theory of social agency views Sisaala totemic animals, plants and objects as active participants in social relations (Bhowmick, 2022). Kuchler and Carroll (2020) argue that material forms carry social force, shape human conduct, and mediate relationships within a community. Therefore, this framework positions the Sisaala clan totems as moral, ritual, and spatial organisers of clan life. This belief shows that the totemic symbols structure the Sisaala clan's identity, define symbolic roles, regulate taboos, and sustain moral obligations (Asante et al., 2025; Rios, 2026). Dery et al. (2023) and Gbene et al. (2021) believe that totemic symbols link clan ancestry, origin stories, shrines, regalia and community authority into a unified lived system of meanings. The meanings explicitly position the Sisaala clan totems operationalised by Chieminah and Gbana (2018), as materialised philosophical concepts of kinship, origin and responsibility (Asante et al., 2025; Benson, 2021). The materials sustain the Sisaala clans' social and cosmic order as argued by Gbene et al. (2021). This theory aligns with indigenous ontology, emphasising that Sisaala clan totems mediate relations between humans, ancestors and the spiritual realms (Benson, 2021). Therefore, this theory enabled the study to interpret Sisaala clan totems as embodied social realities that organise clan identity, continuity, and belongingness.

Research Methods

Research Design

This study adopted a descriptive single-case study design ingrained in the qualitative interpretive paradigm. This approach enabled the study to explore the philosophical compositions of the Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeviaraa, and Heliviaraa clans located in the Sisaala East Municipality of Ghana's Upper West Region. The descriptive single case study was

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considered appropriate as it enabled an in-depth and context-specific investigation of the socio-cultural realities, beliefs, and philosophical undertones embedded within the selected clan communities (Yin & Campbell, 2018). This design enabled the study to examine the selected Sisaala clans as bounded cultural systems situated within their natural settings (Creswell, 2017; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). This facilitated a holistic understanding of the indigenous philosophies, traditions, and lived experiences of the totemic cultures of the Sisaala clans. The use of a single case study design was justified because the four (4) Sisaala clans share interconnected histories and cultural and philosophical identities (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Gbene et al., 2021). This made the clans a unique and information-rich case for investigation as they constituted a distinctive cultural unit (Yin & Campbell, 2018). This study design was suitable as it aided the study in generating rich, nuanced and culturally grounded insights into the philosophical totemic milieu of the Sisaala clans (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Creswell & Guetterman, 2025).

Study Settings

This study was conducted in Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, and Heliviaraa in the Sisaala East Municipality, Upper West Region, Ghana, where the selected clans are historically and culturally situated (Creswell & Guetterman, 2025). These sites (clan communities) were selected due to their strong historical continuity of totemic practices and accessibility for fieldwork (Figure 1)

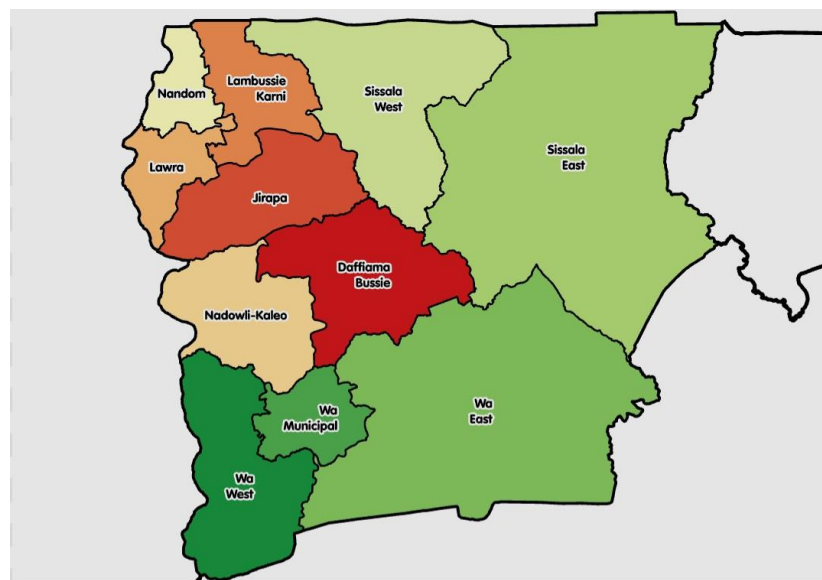


Fig. 1. Map showing Sisaala East Municipality in the national and regional context)

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Sampling and Participants

The study purposefully selected Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, and Heliviaraa communities (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The maximal variation sampling strategy was used to maximise participation in the individual interviews of the twenty-four (24) participants (P1-P24) (Creswell & Guetterman, 2025). This sample was selected based on their cultural knowledge and involvement in totemic clan traditions (Denzin et al., 2024; Ting et al., 2025; Tisdell et al., 2025). This sample comprises Sisaala clan chiefs (2), sectional heads (9), clan heads (3), traditional priests (5), and community landlords (5). These participants were approached face-to-face. The inclusion criteria were age, role in the community, involvement in totemic activities, and demonstrated knowledge of the clan totemic traditions. All participants who met the inclusion criteria agreed to participate, and none declined.

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Table 1. Sisaala Clans Participants' Demographics (N=24)

Case	Participant	N	Gender	Age Range (Mean)	Role
Hamvian	P1-P6	6	Male	37 – 65 (≈51)	2 SH, 1 CH, 2 TP, 1 CL
	P7-P11	5	Male	32 - 70 (≈51)	1 C, 1 SH, 1 CH, 1 TP, 1 CL
Kpeivian	P12-17	6	Male	36 – 68 (≈52)	1 C, 2 SH, 1 CH, 1 TP, 1 CL
Pievian	P18-P24	7	Male	35 – 72 (≈53)	4 SH, 1 TP, 2 CL
Helivian		24		32- 72 (≈52)	
Total					

Note: C= Chief, SH= Sectional Head, TP = Tradional Priest, CE= Cultural Educator, CL = Community Landlords

Data Collection

To ensure accuracy, the study employed back-translation and cross-checking after initial translation (Zhao et al., 2024). Two (2) linguistic experts in Sisaali re-translated selected transcripts back to Sisaali, without recourse to the originals (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The back-translation and the original audio were compared for discrepancies. This gold standard method confirmed that meaning was preserved. Ambiguous passages were discussed in joint meetings with the transcribers. This iterative translation review process enhanced the study's rigour in qualitative language work. Hence, no repeat interviews were conducted.

Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Credibility was ensured through member checking and triangulation (Enworo, 2023; Guba, 1981). The data were given to the twenty-four (24) participants and ten (10) cultural enthusiasts from the four (4) Sisaala clan communities for member checking (Table 2). Respondent and method triangulation were employed to ensure the credibility of the study. An audit trail supported dependability, while confirmability was enhanced through reflexive practices (Gunbayi, 2024). Transferability was achieved through rich contextual descriptions (Pratt et al., 2025; Gunbayi, 2024; Alder, 2022; Hayre, 2021).

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Table 2. Member-Check Events (N=34)

Who	When	Language	Material Checked	Outcome/Changes
All study participants (N=24)	Within 1 month of the interview.	1 Sisaali and English	Interview transcript summaries	Minor clarification and additions
Cultural enthusiast (N=10)	Within 1 month of the interview	1 English	Interview transcript summaries	Minor addition, clarification of terminologies, and spellings of names

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed following Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) Compliance Table (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2024a, 2024b) (Appendix 1). The thematic analysis process involved iterative coding, categorisation, and theme development by the study. This process combined inductive and deductive coding with constant comparison across data sources. Audio recordings were transcribed using Otter.ai and polished in Microsoft Word (Office 365). The transcripts were imported into MAXQDA (v24.4.1), where analysis followed a reflexive thematic approach. First, data were organised in MAXQDA's project files, then read transcripts repeatedly to familiarise oneself with the content while highlighting the important and repeated patterns. During coding, segments relating to totemic meanings were labelled with open codes, for instance, *unity*, *symbolic*, *soul*, *saved*, *revered*, *guided*, *protection*, *ancestor*, and *cohesion*. A cross-case analysis strategy was employed to synthesise the across cases using metrics to see patterns and contrasts among sites. This approach helps in replication logic across cases (Cobian & Ramos, 2021). Where discrepancies arose, the study re-examined the transcripts to build consensus. These cases were grouped into higher-level categories (creative coding). Related codes were then grouped into higher-level categories (creative coding), such as *ancestral roots*, *totemic identity*, *social unity*, and *clan meaning*. From these categories, overarching themes such as *"totems as clan identity"*, *"totems as clan symbolic roles,"* and *"totemic clan inclusion"* were derived. Throughout the analysis, coding memos were used to document insights and patterns. Themes were refined iteratively and supported by raw data excerpts. These steps follow Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) guidance for thematic analysis.

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The use of MAXQDA facilitated transparent tracking of codes and categories and allowed easy retrieval of all coded segments for the final report. All procedures ensured the rigour and appropriateness of the data. An audit trail of coding decisions was maintained to ensure analytical transparency. Participants requested that the findings of the study be provided to them to use as a source for archiving their totemic culture.

Ethical Consideration

This study maintained reflexive field notes (reflexive journal) to address positionality. There were two (2) male researchers. The two (2) researchers are natives of the Nabua clan within the Sisaali-speaking clans' region and art educators with a decade of experience in teaching and research, familiar with the four (4) selected clan customs as insiders. Ethical approval was sought from the University of Education, Winneba, Department of Art Education. The Declaration of Helsinki (Sawicka-Gutaj et al., 2022; Shrestha & Dunn, 2020; World Medical Association, 2025) and the Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Studies guidelines were adhered to (Du et al., 2022; Tong et al., 2007) (Appendix 2). Participants' informed consent was sought, including anonymity, confidentiality, and free withdrawal, which was ensured through the study using pseudonyms (Hamviaraa, P1-P6; Kpeiviaraa, P7-P11; Pieviaraa, P12- P17; Heliviaraa, P18-P24) instead of participants' real names (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). All ethical documentation, including informed consent records and community permissions, is securely archived and available upon request. However, the participants' knowledge of the researchers was known during the study.

Results

Totems as clan identity, totems as a clan's symbolic role, and totemic clan inclusion are the inductive and deductive themes that emerged from the data.

Totems as Clan Identity

The findings reveal that each Sisaala clan is defined by a core asset and associated villages that share a common lineage, identity, totemic symbols, and origin myths. Table 3 provides a summary of the identified communities as expressed by the study participants, belonging to the Hamviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, Pieviaraa, and Helivian clans. For instance, all Hamviaraa participants consistently mention "*Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Bakwala, Dangi and Lilixia*" (P1) as the core Hamviaraa communities, with several also listing "*Santijan, Badasibe, Bichemboi, Guosi, Kundungu and Funsii*" (P4) as affiliated "*brother*" (P5) communities. Correspondingly, all five (5) Kpeiviaraa informants cited "*Sakalu and Bandei*" (P8) as the primary communities, adding that smaller sections of "*Nabulo Gbangaa, Buoti, Jeffisi and Sorbelle*" (P11) all fall under the clan's umbrella. In the Pieviaraa clan, the study agreed that "*Jijen, Sentie, Kusali,*

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Katua, Ina (now Yalliaboi), and Babube" (P15) are the core communities. The study acknowledges *"Desima, Challa, Funsu and Tinniabe"* (P17) as additional *"brother"* (P16) communities as part of the wider Pieviaraa constellation. Chiefs and elders in Helivaraa identified two principal communities, including *"Nabulo Gunaboi (the senior brother) and Nabulo Kajiaboi"* (P20). Additionally, sections of *"Tumu (Takorobelle), Dolinbizon, Challu, Jitong, Nyimati and Bullu"* (P18) are linked by kinship and intermarriage to the Helivian clan.

Table 3. *Communities comprising each Sisaala clan*

Clan	Core Communities	Additional Communities
Hamviar aa	Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Bakuala, Dangi, Lilixia	Santijan, Badisibe, Bichemboi, Guosi, Kundungu, Funsu
Kpeiviar aa	Sakalu, Bandei	Nabulo Gbagaa, Buoti, Jeffisi, Sorbelle
Pieviara a	Jijen, Sentie, Kusali, Katua (Yalliaboi), Ina, Babube	Desima, Challa, Jeffisi (Sisaala West), Funsu, Tinniabe
Heliviar aa	Nabulo Gunaboi, Nabulo Kajiaboi	Tumu (Takorobelle), Dolinbizon, Challu, Jitong, Nyimati, Bullu

Totems as a Clan's Symbolic Role

In the Sisaala land, clan communities are assigned roles to further illustrate how their totemic affiliation is materialised in the clan organisation. Across the Hamvian clan, one community is consistently designated as the senior with the ancestral *"seat"* (P1) and another as the paramount, thus the *"chieftaincy seat"* (P5), with other communities charged with custodian or ritual duties. For instance, in the Hamvian clan, elders posit that *"Kong (the deer totem's locale) is the ancestral head"* (P3) of the clan, while *"Sakai"* (P2) serves as the seat of the *"paramount chief"* (P6). *"Nankpawie and Bakwala"* (P1) are the custodians of Hamviaraa's sacred paraphernalia, *'take care of all our clan's spiritual tools, materials, and equipment"* (P6), thus ritual accoutrements. Additionally, *"Dangi and Lilixia"* (P4) guard the clan deity *"wottuomo"* (P6), with each maintaining the shrine of this god. The war song *"Baayila"* (P5) and other regalia are equally kept by specific communities, indicating how material culture, such as songs, ritual objects, or shrines, is tied to clan roles. Conversely, in the Kpeivaraa clan, *"Sakalu"* (P10) is described as the *"ancestral head"* (P7), where all major clan sacrifices, rituals, and decisions are made. Again, *"Bande"* (P11), as an *"elder son of Sakalu"* (P7), only participates but follows Sakalu's lead. However, some sections of *"Nabulo Gbangaa, Jeffisi and Buoti"* (P9) are characterised as junior communities that *"observe and assist Sakalu in rituals"* (P8) rather than preside over them. Among the Pievian clan, all participants agreed that *"Jijen"* (P13) is the *"elder (landlord)"* (P17) community, stating *"all clan gatherings are done in Jijen"* (P14). Whereas *"Sentia*

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and Kusali" (P15) are "offspring communities of Jijen" (P16) who migrated to their present locations to farm, hence follow "Jijen's directives" (P12). Equally, information from the Helivian clan explains that "Nabulo Gunaboi is the senior brother" (P24), ritual centre and hosts all clan meetings, while "Nabulo Kajiaboi is the younger sibling who follows Gunaboi's lead" (P20). All these clan communities' roles are illustrated in Figures 2 to 5 below.

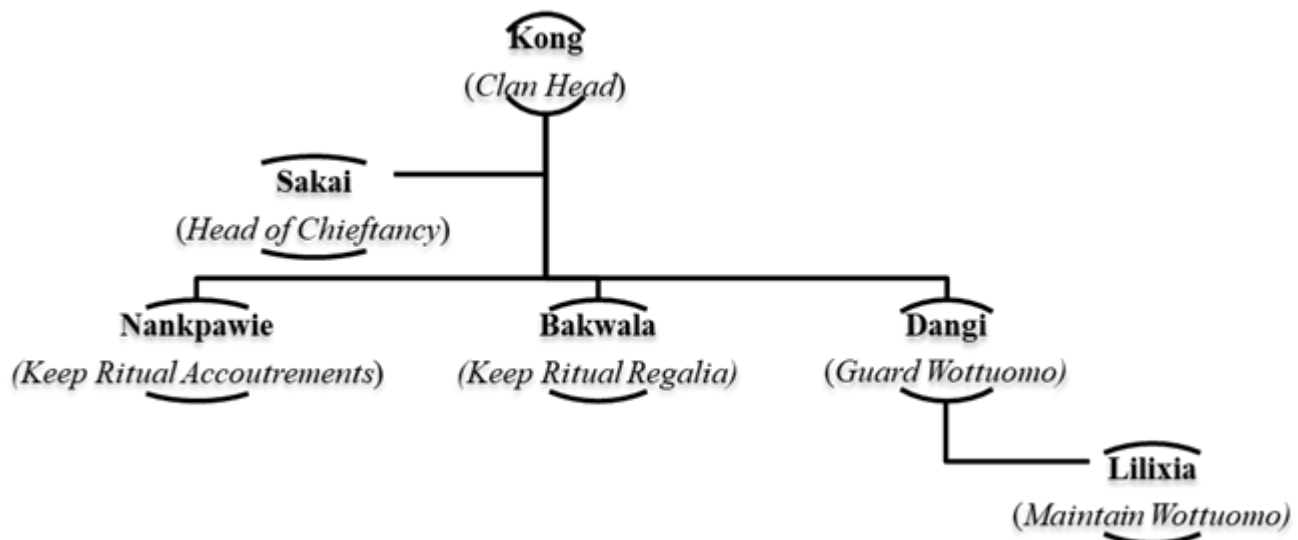


Fig. 2. Roles of Hamvian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

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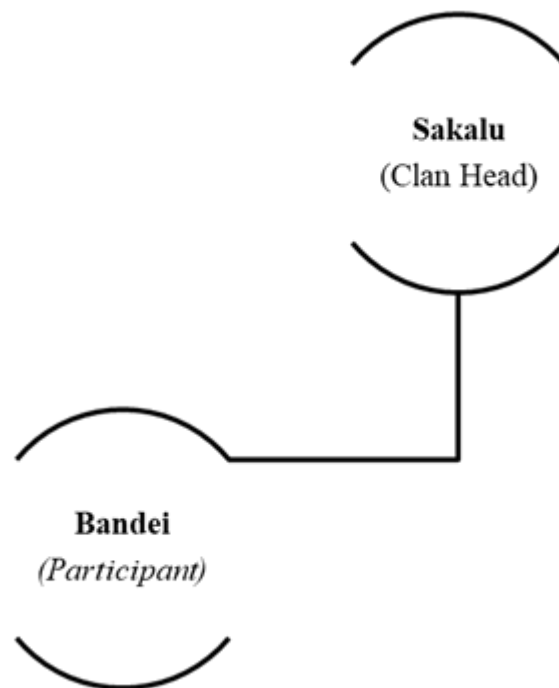


Fig. 3. Roles of Kpeivian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors Construct, 2026)

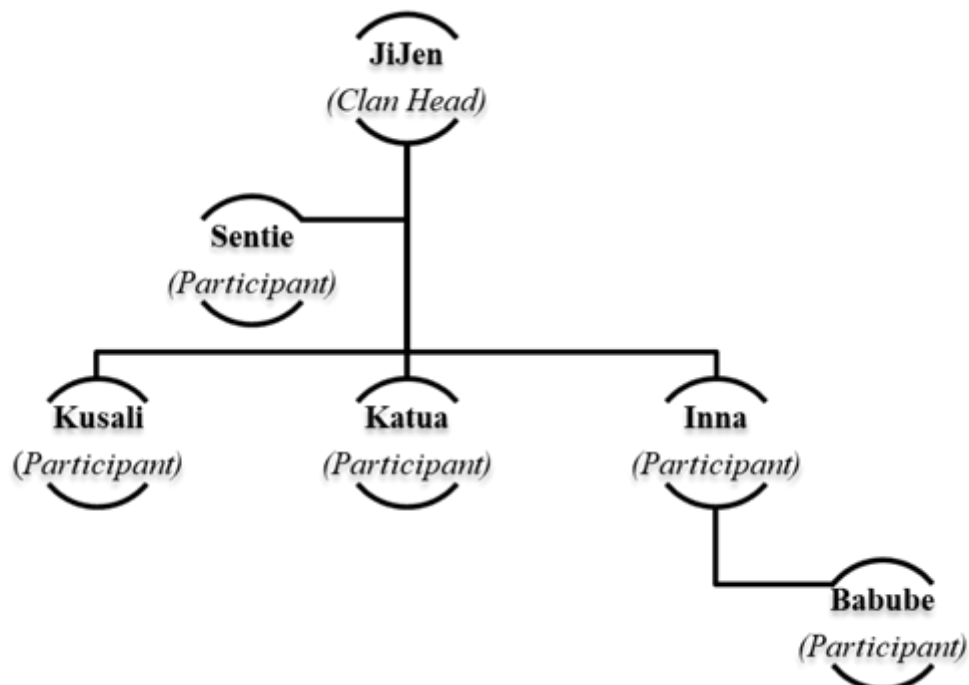


Fig. 4. Roles of Pievian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

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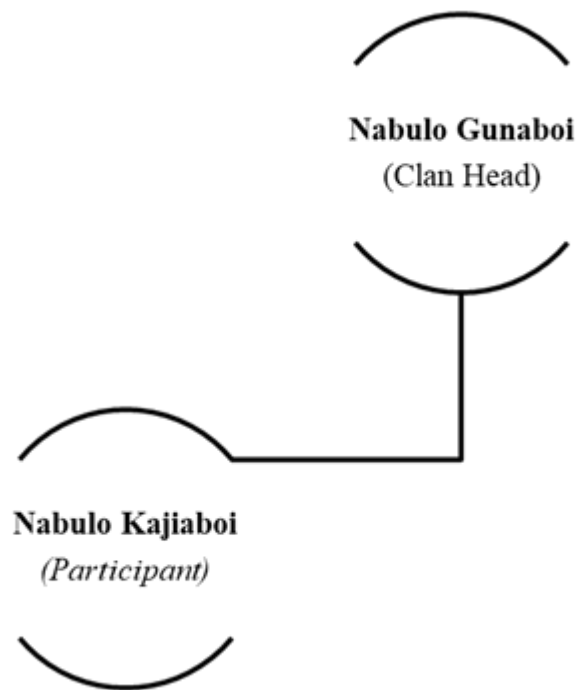


Fig. 5. Roles of Helivian Clan communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

Totemic Clan Inclusion

The study narratives reveal that clan membership and totemic belief are deeply understood philosophically in terms of shared ancestry and cosmological kinship. Across the Hamvian clan, participants explained that they *"come from one ancestor"* (P1-P6), an origin often linked to a totemic animal, plant, or object. In the Hamvian clan, for example, elders told of migrating together from *"Mamprusi land to Kong Kpiasi"* (P5), stressing that *"we were the same brothers...from one common ancestor who reveres the bisque ware"* (P2). Also, Kpeiviaraa clan members traced their lineage to *"Takuria (Near Gwollu, in the Sisaala West District, Upper West Region)"* (P8), noting that *"war and migration"* (P7) scattered them, but they remain one people who *"all come from one ancestor"* (P11). Importantly, these clans emphasise common totems as the glue of kinship. Additionally, information from the Kpeivian clan observed that all community segments *"reveres the Leopard 'Kpei' and Monkey 'Mwnag' (P9)*, their guardian spirit, and that *"all Kpeiviaraa communities come from Takuria"* (P10). Similarly, Pieviaraa elders insisted that their people were *"from Katua"* (P12) but united because of *"revering the same red sheep totem"* (P16). Even Heliviaraa members narrated that *"Nabulo Gunaboi and Nabulo Kajiaboi"* (P21) are descendants from *"one common ancestor"* (P22), *"who was saved and directed by a squirrel"* (P18). This is a cosmogonic tale that literally links their human lineage to the clan's squirrel totem. These accounts suggest that Sisaala totemic animals are not mere symbols but active

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receptacles and agents in their worldview, literally guiding ancestors and mediating human-spirit interactions and relations.

Totems as clan identity, totems as a clan's symbolic role, and totemic clan inclusion are the inductive and deductive themes that emerged from the data.

Totems as Clan Identity

The findings reveal that each Sisaala clan is defined by a core asset and associated villages that share a common lineage, identity, totemic symbols, and origin myths. Table 3 provides a summary of the identified communities as expressed by the study participants, belonging to the Hamviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, Pieviaraa, and Helivian clans. For instance, all Hamviaraa participants consistently mention "*Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Bakwala, Dangi and Lilixia*" (P1) as the core Hamviaraa communities, with several also listing "*Santijan, Badasibe, Bichemboi, Guosi, Kundungu and Funsu*" (P4) as affiliated "*brother*" (P5) communities. Correspondingly, all five (5) Kpeiviaraa informants cited "*Sakalu and Bandei*" (P8) as the primary communities, adding that smaller sections of "*Nabulo Gbangaa, Buoti, Jeffisi and Sorbelle*" (P11) all fall under the clan's umbrella. In the Pieviaraa clan, the study agreed that "*Jijen, Sentie, Kusali, Katua, Ina (now Yalliaboi), and Babube*" (P15) are the core communities. The study acknowledges "*Desima, Challa, Funsu and Tinniabe*" (P17) as additional "*brother*" (P16) communities as part of the wider Pieviaraa constellation. Chiefs and elders in Helivaraa identified two principal communities, including "*Nabulo Gunaboi (the senior brother) and Nabulo Kajiaboi*" (P20). Additionally, sections of "*Tumu (Takorobelle), Dolinbizon, Challu, Jitong, Nyimati and Bullu*" (P18) are linked by kinship and intermarriage to the Helivian clan.

Table 3. *Communities comprising each Sisaala clan*

Clan	Core Communities	Additional Communities
Hamviaraa	Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Bakwala, Dangi, Lilixia	Santijan, Badisibe, Bichemboi, Guosi, Kundungu, Funsu
Kpeiviaraa	Sakalu, Bandei	Nabulo Gbangaa, Buoti, Jeffisi, Sorbelle
Pieviaraa	Jijen, Sentie, Kusali, Katua (Yalliaboi), Ina, Babube	Desima, Challa, Jeffisi (Sisaala West), Funsu, Tinniabe
Helivaraa	Nabulo Gunaboi, Nabulo Kajiaboi	Tumu (Takorobelle), Dolinbizon, Challu, Jitong, Nyimati, Bullu

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Totems as a Clan's Symbolic Role

In the Sisaala land, clan communities are assigned roles to further illustrate how their totemic affiliation is materialised in the clan organisation. Across the Hamvian clan, one community is consistently designated as the senior with the ancestral *"seat"* (P1) and another as the paramount, thus the *"chieftaincy seat"* (P5), with other communities charged with custodian or ritual duties. For instance, in the Hamvian clan, elders posit that *"Kong (the deer totem's locale) is the ancestral head"* (P3) of the clan, while *"Sakai"* (P2) serves as the seat of the *"paramount chief"* (P6). *"Nankpawie and Bakwala"* (P1) are the custodians of Hamviaraa's sacred paraphernalia, *'take care of all our clan's spiritual tools, materials, and equipment"* (P6), thus ritual accoutrements. Additionally, *"Dangi and Lilixia"* (P4) guard the clan deity *"wottuomo"* (P6), with each maintaining the shrine of this god. The war song *"Baayila"* (P5) and other regalia are equally kept by specific communities, indicating how material culture, such as songs, ritual objects, or shrines, is tied to clan roles. Conversely, in the Kpeivaraa clan, *"Sakalu"* (P10) is described as the *"ancestral head"* (P7), where all major clan sacrifices, rituals, and decisions are made. Again, *"Bande"* (P11), as an *"elder son of Sakalu"* (P7), only participates but follows Sakalu's lead. However, some sections of *"Nabulo Gbangaa, Jeffisi and Buoti"* (P9) are characterised as junior communities that *"observe and assist Sakalu in rituals"* (P8) rather than preside over them. Among the Pievian clan, all participants agreed that *"Jijen"* (P13) is the *"elder (landlord)"* (P17) community, stating *"all clan gatherings are done in Jijen"* (P14). Whereas *"Sentia and Kusali"* (P15) are *"offspring communities of Jijen"* (P16) who migrated to their present locations to farm, hence follow *"Jijen's directives"* (P12). Equally, information from the Helivian clan explains that *"Nabulo Gunaboi is the senior brother"* (P24), ritual centre and hosts all clan meetings, while *"Nabulo Kajiaboi is the younger sibling who follows Gunaboi's lead"* (P20). All these clan communities' roles are illustrated in Figures 2 to 5 below.

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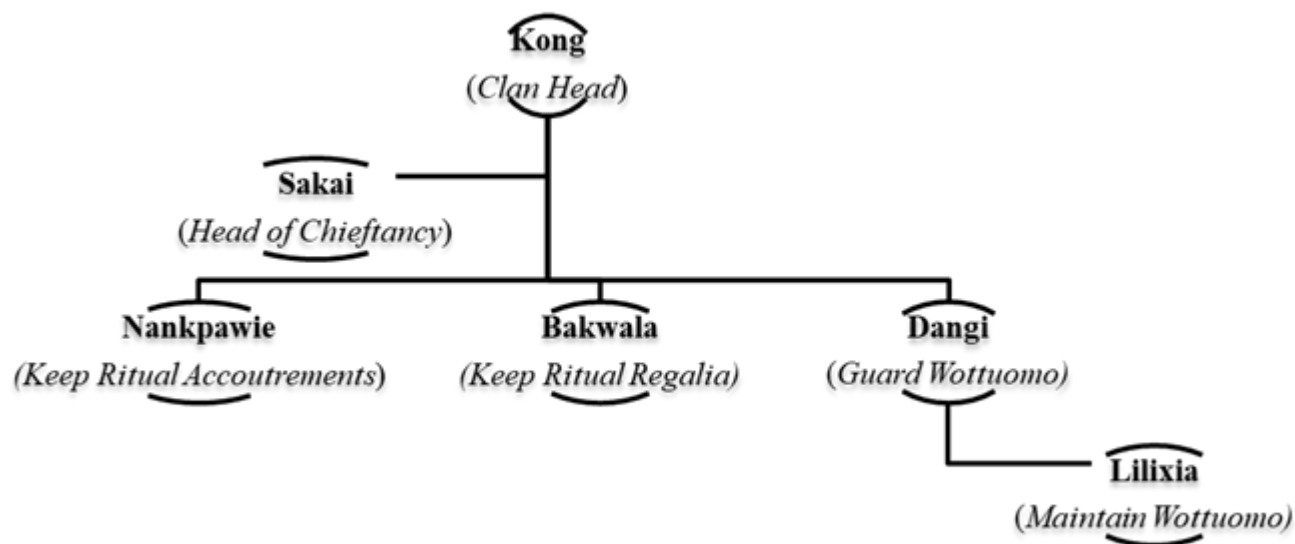


Fig. 2. Roles of Hamvian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

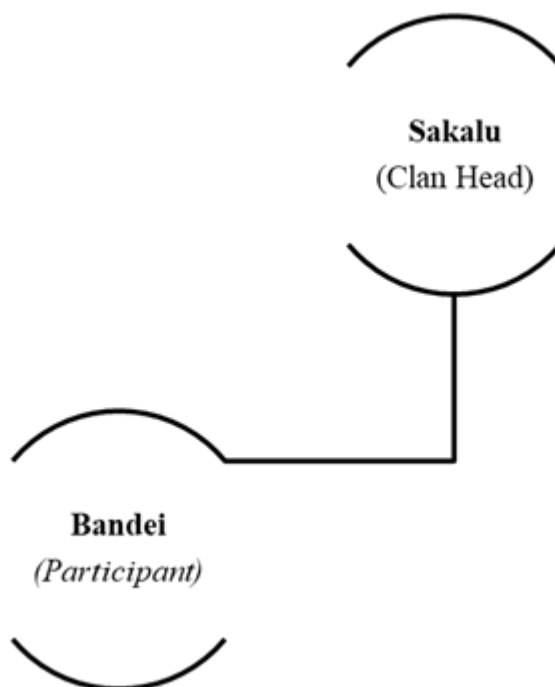


Fig. 3. Roles of Kpeivian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors Construct, 2026)

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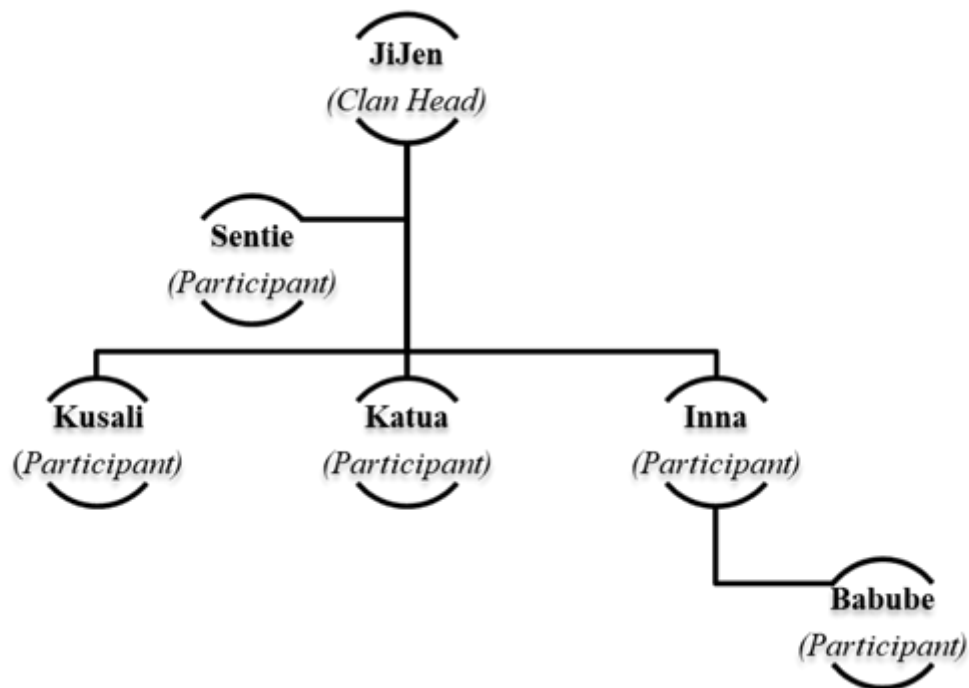


Fig. 4. Roles of Pievian Clan Communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

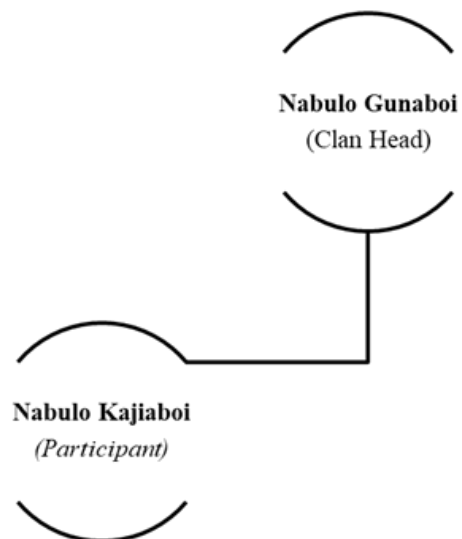


Fig. 5. Roles of Helivian Clan communities
 (Source: Authors construct, 2026)

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Totemic Clan Inclusion

The study narratives reveal that clan membership and totemic belief are deeply understood philosophically in terms of shared ancestry and cosmological kinship. Across the Hamvian clan, participants explained that they *"come from one ancestor"* (P1-P6), an origin often linked to a totemic animal, plant, or object. In the Hamvian clan, for example, elders told of migrating together from *"Mamprusi land to Kong Kpiasi"* (P5), stressing that *"we were the same brothers...from one common ancestor who reveres the bisque ware"* (P2). Also, Kpeiviaraa clan members traced their lineage to *"Takuria (Near Gwollu, in the Sisaala West District, Upper West Region)"* (P8), noting that *"war and migration"* (P7) scattered them, but they remain one people who *"all come from one ancestor"* (P11). Importantly, these clans emphasise common totems as the glue of kinship. Additionally, information from the Kpeivian clan observed that all community segments *"reveres the Leopard 'Kpei' and Monkey 'Mwnag' (P9)*, their guardian spirit, and that *"all Kpeiviaraa communities come from Takuria"* (P10). Similarly, Pieviaraa elders insisted that their people were *"from Katua"* (P12) but united because of *"revering the same red sheep totem"* (P16). Even Heliviaraa members narrated that *"Nabulo Gunaboi and Nabulo Kajiaboi"* (P21) are descendants from *"one common ancestor"* (P22), *"who was saved and directed by a squirrel"* (P18). This is a cosmogonic tale that literally links their human lineage to the clan's squirrel totem. These accounts suggest that Sisaala totemic animals are not mere symbols but active receptacles and agents in their worldview, literally guiding ancestors and mediating human-spirit interactions and relations.

Discussion

Totems as Clan Identity

This study is supported and emphasised in the works of Asare et al. (2014), Johnson (2015), Kpodo (2019) and Sangaparee (2010) Kpodo (2019), Asare et al. (2014), Johnson (2015), and Sangaparee (2010). The study findings are consistent, as opined by Chieminah and Gbana's (2018) account of recording Hamviaraa communities, including Sakai, Kong, Nankpawie, Bakwala, Dangi, and Lilixia, while expanding the clan's composition to include additional settlements in Sisaala East and neighbouring Wa East. Notably, Chieminah and Gbana's (2018) earlier study had emphasised Jitong, Nyimati, and Bullu for Heliviaraa, but the present data show Gunaboi and Kajiaboi as the current heart of the clan. Correspondingly, this study reflects localised migration and affinity stories of the Sisaala clans as operationalised and used in the works of Dery et al. (2023), Makgopa (2019) and Mills et al. (2022). Moreover, the use of totemic symbols as clan identity was operationalised by the Hamviaraa, Pieviaraa, Kpeiviaraa, and Heliviaraa clans in the Sisaala ethnicity. This demonstrates that totemism is chiefly practised by the Sisaala clans in Ghana's Upper West region. However, though the study highlighted the community

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membership and belongingness in clan activities, divergence emerged among all four clans regarding clan inclusion and membership in specific clan activities.

Totems as a Clan's Symbolic Role

The patterns reflect material logic, including roles as distributed by seniority, origin, and location, and each community's obligations are physically manifested in objects and spaces. The assignment of ritual objects and sacred places to specific communities, as shown in Hamviaraa above, exemplifies the material agency of totems and deities. As Chieminah and Gbana (2018) and Dery et al. (2023) state, some clan communities have no permanent role except when needed, while other communities are fixed custodians of totemic objects. In all four (4) clans studied, this means that totemic items, including carved deities, fetishes, ceremonial stools, or nets, are housed in and cared for by designated communities (Asare et al., 2014; Kpodo, 2019). Similarly, senior clansmen are seen as "*accoutrements*" of the totem's authority, a belief visible in naming as used in the case of Nabulo Gunaboi to mean father of '*Heli*' squirrel for Helivaraa, and in prohibition (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Gbene et al., 2021). Contrary to this, Hamviaraa elders insisted that meeting in Nankpawie outside clan ceremonies is a taboo, "if *clan members meet in this community, a person will die from this community*" (P5). This underscores how moral obligation is enforced throughout the place (Gbene et al., 2021; Tseer et al., 2022). This shows that everyday life, including market centres, funeral rites, durbars, and ritual practices such as war songs "*Baayila*" (P4), shrine maintenance, and sacrificial altars, is structured by these community-specific totemic roles. Therefore, belief is continuously materialised in community activities. This aligns with the notion that totems "*structure social roles*" and "*sustain moral obligations*" across Sisaala communities, as posited by Agboada (2024), Mensah et al. (2024) and Segbafah (2025).

Totemic Clan Inclusion

Sisaala totemic clans materialise philosophical concepts of kinship, origin, and responsibility. Belonging to a clan is framed as a hereditary trust, making each clan member owe loyalty to the clan's lineage, represented by the totem, and must observe taboos, including not harming the totemic symbol as a moral duty (Chieminah & Gbana, 2018; Dery et al., 2023). This sacred kinship is woven into the daily lives of clan members as the totemic symbols are seen in dress and regalia to reinforce identity (Gbene et al., 2021; Zhu, 2022). This is seen in place names and rituals to reinforce origin stories and embed belief in tangible form (Kpodo, 2019; Mensah et al., 2024). This study conceives Sisaala clans as kin groups bound by shared ancestry and a common totemic object with clan structure and ritual roles to reflect the indigenous ontology where material symbols actively sustain social and cosmic order, as postulated by Agboada (2024), Gbene et al. (2021), Segbafah (2025) and Tseer et al. (2022).

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Therefore, this study affirms that Sisaala clan totems constitute a dynamic system of materialised beliefs that sustain identity, responsibility, and continuity. This study supports the theory of materiality and ontology by reinforcing arguments that material objects and living species actively participate in the production of meaning, morality, and kinship highlighted in the works of Bhowmick (2022), Bille (2022) and Küchler & Carroll (2020). The study extends debates on African totemism by demonstrating its role as an organising principle of social structure rather than a residual belief system (Asante et al., 2025; Nwafor et al., 2026). This study supports the need for broader recognition of totemic systems as intangible cultural heritage from a policy perspective (Adom et al., 2024; Benson, 2021; Massola, 2025). In Ghana, cultural frameworks can explicitly incorporate clan totems, sacred species, and ritual spaces as protected cultural resources. Also, this study aligns with Ghana's constitutional mandates for the preservation of cultural artefacts and historical traditions, as operationalised by the 1992 Constitution of the Republic of Ghana. For educational practice, the study provides culturally grounded content for integrating indigenous knowledge into art, history, and citizenship curricula as stipulated by SDG 4.7, ESP (2018-2030), CESA (2026-2035), and the African Union Agenda 2063 (African Union, 2025; Ministry of Education, 2019; United Nations Development Programme, 2025a, 2025b). Totemic philosophies enhance culturally responsive pedagogies and heritage-based art education. For cultural institutions, the documentation offers empirical grounding for exhibitions, festivals, and community heritage initiatives. This study demonstrates that material culture can inform theory, policy, and practice.

Policy Implications for Indigenous Knowledge Preservation

There is a need for documentation to preserve our indigenous knowledge systems, such as the totemic clans of Sisaala, from adulteration, westernisation, loss, and extinction. This can be done by engaging in scholarly works to document and archive the original indigenous knowledge systems from traditional leaders before their demise. Traditional leaders, including chiefs, community landlords, clan heads, and traditional priests, can promote the documentation and archiving process.

Community education on the relevance and important roles of totems and totemic veneration in guarding and protecting Sisaala communities, enhancing moral behaviours, and reducing environmental degradation and pollution should be intensified by traditional leaders and rulers.

Tourism infrastructure, especially in the totemic clans such as the "*wottuomo*" and "*Kong Kpiasi*" in the Hamviaraa clan, should be improved to provide satisfactory services to tourists and to prevent these historical totemic sites from extinction.

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Sustainable tourism requires support from all stakeholders, especially the government, chiefs, clan leaders, and family heads, to protect the Sisaala totemic animals and objects from extinction and harm.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study is limited by its focus on only four (4) Sisaala totemic clans, which may restrict generalisability. Additionally, reliance on self-reported data may introduce subjective bias. Studies in the future can extend similar case-study inquiry to other Sisaala clans such as Gamviaraa, Samviaraa, Giliganviaraa, Nabua, and Nyibiviaraa. Also, comparative studies across Ghanaian ethnic groups would further illuminate regional variations in totemic philosophy and clan organisation. Longitudinal studies are needed to examine how modification, formal education, and religious change affect totemic belief systems. Scholars should investigate the intergenerational transmission of clan knowledge and the role of elders in situating totemic philosophies. An interdisciplinary study combining anthropology, art education, and heritage studies could deepen understanding of totemic material expressions. Material analysis of artefacts, regalia, and dress incorporating totemic symbols would further enrich material culture discourse. Therefore, future studies may explore varied dimensions of clan roles and ritual authority. Policy-oriented research could assess the feasibility of integrating clan knowledge into national cultural heritage registers. Pedagogical research should pilot curriculum modules based on clan philosophy and evaluate their educational impact. Collectively, these directions would strengthen documentation, preservation, and critical engagement with Sisaala totemic heritage.

Conclusion

Examining the philosophical composition of the Hamvian, Pievian, Kpeivian, and Helivian clans in Ghana's Sisaala East Municipality through the lens of integrated material culture underpins this study. The findings demonstrate that Sisaala clans are constituted through interconnected communities united by shared ancestry, totemic affiliation, and historically assigned social roles. Sisaala clan's composition is not merely genealogical but is materially anchored in specific settlements that function as ritual, political, and custodial centres. Totemic animals and objects, including leopard, squirrel, red sheep, monkey, and bisque ware, operate as ontological agents rather than symbolic emblems. The totems mediate relationships between humans, ancestors, and the spiritual realms that shape moral conduct and social cohesion. The assigning of roles among clan communities reflects a structured hierarchy rooted in seniority, migration histories, and spiritual authority. Clan duties, such as custodianship of shrines, regalia, and deities, are materialistically believed through daily practice. The study reveals that Sisaala totemism embeds philosophy into lived experiences through taboos, ritual obligations, and

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spatial organisations. These findings challenge reductive interpretations of African totemism as merely symbolic or representational.

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Conflicts of Interest:

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Disclaimer Statement

This work was part of a thesis submitted to the University of Education, Winneba, for the award of a degree.

Author Bionote

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Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Hillia Fuseini Hillia, upon reasonable request

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Authorship and Level of Contribution

Hillia Fuseini Marifah: Conceptualisation, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Bennin Abdul-Aziz Marifah: Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Writing – review & editing

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