

PREFACE

I AM GRATEFUL TO Ohio University Press for making it possible for me to bring together in one volume a number of essays to do with the Akan in general and the Asante in particular. They represent the directions of my inquiries since *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* appeared in 1975. Most of these ten essays have some sort of relationship to papers published since then. Initially I thought simply to reprint these, scattered as they are in all manner of books and journals. I immediately confronted problems of repetition. Worse, I encountered error. I found myself trying to remove the former, to rectify the latter. The result is that only chapter 6 reproduces its original without significant change. Chapters 2, 9, and 10 are heavily, and chapters 1, 4, and 5 lightly, revised versions of previously published texts. Chapters 3, 7, and 8 are essentially new, though the first two incorporate some material from earlier pieces.

The essays are arranged by theme. Chapters 1–3 are to do with the conditions under which Akan society emerged in its historic form. To adapt one of Marx’s more felicitous dicta, the Akan made their own history, but they did not do so under conditions of their own choice. These chapters suggest the ways in which forest peoples were able to enter the world bullion market on terms that enabled them to exchange gold for labor and thereby to create a food-producing economy in an otherwise indifferent environment. At the political level, the earliest Akan “estates,” by processes of consolidation, gave way to the early Akan “states,” until finally Asante emerged as the dominant regional power.

Chapters 4–7 explore aspects of Asante culture: the pervasive importance of wealth in society, the mental mapping of the kingdom for purposes of trade and government, and, with reference to so-called human sacrifice, the close relationship between the status of the living and that of the dead. The remaining chapters are prosopographical in approach. Chapter 8 reviews the careers of the incumbents of the highest military office in Kumase, and chapter 9 those of a number of functionaries within the civil administration. The final chapter is the life history of a woman who, on behalf of the Asantehene, conducted negotiations with British, Danish, and Dutch on the Gold Coast in 1831.

No particular theory underlies these essays. I have worked in the field of Akan and Asante studies for little short of forty years. I have always thought of myself as attempting to find out what *really* happened in the past and why things happened one way rather than another. It will be

quite apparent that I am much concerned with the material base of society and assign it a certain priority in analysis. I am in no way dismissive of the importance of studying systems of belief, but I do not see them as unrelated to the material base. This appears to me not a matter of theory but of common sense: a foraging society cannot support kings and courts, an agricultural society may be able to. Disputes about the precise relationship between base and superstructure, however, I find quite unrewarding. I also find incomprehensible the encoded language of poststructuralism. I simply do not understand a respected scholar and old friend, T. C. McCaskie, when he writes that, during the annual Odwira ceremonies, “Asante culture was deconstructed aspectually—like a hermeneutical grammar—and then reassembled and renewed.”¹ But all is in the eye of the beholder. In a 1989 dissertation on African historiography, approved by a respectable enough American university, the ire of the writer was such as blithely to embrace us both:

McCaskie, like his colleague Wilks, remains a prisoner of the anti-dialectical and anti-historical, universalist perspective of conservative intellectualism which has all too often failed to grasp or appreciate the fundamental differences between various historical forms of social and political organization.²

That said, the reader may wish to proceed no further!

My major concern about the state of Akan and Asante studies has been, perhaps, less with theory than with attitude. I have been fortunate enough, over the years, to have had many students to harangue. I have always tried to convince them that the most cherished right of the scholar is the right to be wrong. As historians, we cannot work with Euclidean standards of proof. We are obliged to interpret; to speculate not wildly but in an informed way. Proof or disproof are not the issue, but coherence, plausibility, logic, sense, elegance even. It is all too easy to take refuge from the fray in a safe but arid skepticism: to afford no place to hunches, intuitions—call them what we may. A late colleague of mine was of a suspicious bent. “Wilks makes guesses,” she would say. This did not really worry her; it was my problem. “They often turn out to be right”; of this she complained bitterly.

To deny the historian the right to be wrong inhibits the spirit of free inquiry.³ Conversely, the historian has to be prepared to acknowledge error in his or her work, for what scholar is immune to it? But this is not the realm of sackcloth and ashes, of guilt and confession, of *mea culpas* (and frantic searches through the job columns for an alternative career!). To be wrong, and to be shown to be wrong, is part of the excitement of the quest. One is trying to open up a field of inquiry, not to close it down. No one has the “last word” because that is not what it is all about. To

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be told that one has, may seem very flattering—but it is in truth a kiss of death.

The multitude of persons to whom I am indebted in one way or another will be apparent from the footnotes to the essays. At the risk of offending some—and I hope they will forgive me—I have to acknowledge particular debts to Joseph Agyeman-Duah of Kumase, who labored hard to have me think like an Asante; to T. C. McCaskie, who worked with me for many a year in making the Asante Collective Biography Project a reality; and to J. Allman, K. Arhin, R. A. Kea, and L. W. Yarak, all of whose writings have been specific sources of intellectual inspiration. D. Britz has never failed to resolve the many bibliographical problems that have arisen. I have also to acknowledge a different kind of debt to the many Asante who generously shared their knowledge of the past with me. Asantehene Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II maintained a watching brief over my inquiries in the late 1950s and 1960s, and Asantehene Nana Opoku Ware II generously encouraged them in the 1970s. Finally, I am grateful to those of Ohio University Press who so efficiently saw this work through from script to book: to Holly Panich, Helen Gawthrop, and Gillian Berchowitz in particular, but also to those whose names I do not know but whose varied skills I admire and appreciate.

These essays are concerned with the Asante past. What, then, of the future? The Asante will, I believe, continue to manifest a respect for the Golden Stool and all that it represents and to retain a keen awareness of the debt they owe to those who have gone before, to the ancestors. If I am wrong, then the Asante nation may cease to exist other than as a romantic evocation of times past. If I am right, then the nation will forge for itself a place in a rapidly changing world, the structure of which none of us, the Asante included, can even begin to envisage. Asante will, surely, continue to work out its destiny within the framework of the Republic of Ghana and of whatever wider configurations of African states may emerge. Its history, explored in these essays, suggests that it will do so without abandoning a sense of identity: a consciousness of cultural and linguistic community, an awareness of the past, and a highly particular vision of the unity of past, present, and future. Such, surely, are the stuffs of nationhood.

Ivor Wilks
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