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# Traditional Institution in Coastal Development: Asafo Companies in Cape Coast History

Brian L. Perkins

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**TRADITIONAL INSTITUTION IN COASTAL DEVELOPMENT:  
ASAFO COMPANIES IN CAPE COAST HISTORY**

Brian L. Perkins

CSA - GHANA

Fall 94

Professor Kwame Arhin,  
Director, Institute of African Studies,  
University of Ghana, Legon

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## I. INTRODUCTION

**The Coast of Guinea, which is part of Africa, is for the most part unknown, not only to the Dutch, but to all Europeans, and no particular Description of it has yet come to light, nor indeed anything but a few Scraps scattered in Books written upon other subjects, most of which are contrary to the Truth, and offer but a sorry Sketch of Guinea.<sup>1</sup>**

**- William Bosman, Chief Factor  
for the Dutch at the Castle of St. George d'Elmina,  
1705**

Nearly three-hundred years have passed since Bosman wrote these words in his book entitled *A New and Accurate Description of Guinea* identifying the general lack of information circulating in the West pertaining to West Africa, and even still this ignorance tenaciously persists. Schools in the West, more specifically in the United States, long ago threw away -- in theory, at least -- the ideas of Africa as "the Dark Continent" which had no culture or history before the European explorers and traders began frequent sea-borne visits to the coast of West Africa in the fifteenth century. Current texts focused on the evils of the European, who immediately upon arrival in West Africa began the systematic exploitation of its resources and consequent oppression of its inhabitants. This interpretation of transaction between Europe and West Africa, and those subsequent between the Americas and West Africa, is quite popular these days in its seemingly progressive defiance of old concepts that justified European behavior in Africa

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<sup>1</sup> William Bosman. *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea. Divided into the Gold, Slave, and Ivory Coasts.* (London: 1705) preface.

In my research I used two different editions of this book. Primarily I used the original, whose information I have printed above and refer to throughout as "Bosman (i)". The other ["Bosman (ii)"] which I used was a reprint which 11 contained no bibliographical information, so when citing it I will refer to the letter number (the book is divided into letters) rather than page number.

up to the colonial period and afterwards. While claims that the Europeans in general acted primarily out of self interest (and imperial interest), in a most morally repugnant fashion, certainly are not subject to much dispute, ultimately this interpretation is Eurocentric. Like its predecessors, this view fails to examine, or even consider, the various indigenous social systems as important and effectual historical determinants. This present endeavor, it should be stressed, does not aim to ignore the European part in West African history. To do so would be absolutely ridiculous. What this work aims to do is to focus on indigenous systems and integrate them with the European story, which is more widely told.

The oversight of traditional West African institutions in the basic Western treatment of pre-colonial and colonial history implies a political and ethnic unity amongst the indigenous people. Furthermore, it implies that those people had little or no politico-military strength with which to exercise any degree of control over the transactions with Westerners. The image thus created shows West Africans to be one people whose role in the development of their own history was static and minimal. This simply was not the case.

West African societies of the Middle Ages, pre-colonial, and colonial periods were diverse, dynamic, and numerous. Degrees of political, economic, and military power varied across the sub-continent. Thus alliances and rivalries were born among these societies as great kingdoms and empires expanded while smaller villages and city-states struggled to maintain independence. Conquest and population growth forced large-scale migrations, sometimes creating new tensions.

It is only when we recognize the complexity of the West African social fabric and examine its institutions that we can begin to understand how towns, cities, and nations developed. These people were not silent by-standers as historical events unfolded around them, though the great omission of their social systems from the Western record seems to imply this. Therefore it becomes necessary to examine traditional institutions -- their form and function -- as indigenous societies merged, collided, and interacted with each other and with the different European peoples who began appearing on the coast in the fifteenth, century.

A brief study, such as the present one, cannot hope to encompass all of the major institutions along the coast, or even all of them within one ethnic group. This work must be content to focus on one particularly influential institution, Asafo, as it was established in one of the most historically important towns on the coast -- Cape Coast, in the traditional area called Oguaa. That a study such as this one should concern itself with Cape Coast is quite appropriate, for, as Dr. N.A. Dyre Sharp noted, "there would appear to be a more precise and ancient history relating to Cape Coast than to any other town in the continent of Africa, outside of Egypt and Morocco."<sup>2</sup> Throughout this rich history Cape Coast's Asafo Companies, organizations to which all citizens belong by birth, provided two types of service: 1) Military -- by which the Fante state was able to remain independent of Asante imperialism and dominate the coast of what became modern Ghana; and 2) Communal labor -- by which the town of Cape Coast was able to expand

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<sup>2</sup>"Cape Coas:: An Historical Sketch, From 1610-1725." Paper presented at the first meeting of the Cape Coast Historical Society, 29 August, 1934. Transactions of the Cape Coast Historical Society. Vol. 1 No. 1, Oct 1936,

as its population grew. Study of this institution, then, is essential to forming an understanding of how Cape Coast developed.

Previous research into this specific topic, as far as I know, is not very extensive, or at least is not widely available. If it was, my academic supervisor most probably would not have sent me to search for it. The majority of existing works that I was able to locate which treat the subject can be found in Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana, Transactions of the Historical Society of the Gold Coast, and Transactions of the Historical Society of Cape Coast. Three such works which I felt to be most useful are Dr. Sharp's study to which I referred earlier, Tenkorang's "The importance of Firearms in the Struggle between Ashanti and the Coastal States,"<sup>3</sup> and Pachai's "An Outline of the History of Municipal Government at Cape Coast."<sup>4</sup> However, most of the essays in the records of the transactions which treat the subject at all do so tangentially.

The most direct treatments of Asafo's role in the development of Cape Coast which I was able to find are located at the Central Regional Archives in Cape Coast. One is an unpublished essay by Arthur Ffoulkes', the District Commissioner at Cape Coast Castle in the early twentieth century, entitled "The Company System of Cape Coast Castle,"<sup>5</sup> and the other is a transcription of a speech delivered to historical Society of Ghana in 1963 by W.S. Kwesi Johnson, entitled "The Asafu in Cape Coast History."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana. Vol. IX, 1964, 1-16.

<sup>4</sup> Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana. Vol. VI11, 1965, 130-160.

<sup>5</sup> ACC 774/66

<sup>6</sup> ACC 90/64



The University of Cape Coast and the University of Ghana, Legon, both have doctoral theses and papers submitted to various conferences on file which may be of help in conducting further research, but I was unable to obtain those which in name seemed pertinent before the submission of this paper. It must be emphasized that there is a seemingly endless supply of documents and several sources of oral histories which touch on different aspects of Cape Coast Asafo and Asafo in general, such as J.E. Casely Hayford Gold Coast Native Institutions and Michael Crowder's West African Resistance. There is no shortage of information. The task at hand, one which I am only now beginning to understand, is to work through as much of the material which is presently available until a relatively clear picture can be seen.

## **II. METHODOLOGY**

**"You can't jump into this research without reading [laughs]... reading a lot."  
- Dr. I.R. Amuah, Music  
Department, University of Cape  
Coast**

Written information about the history of West Africa dates back as far as the eighth century a.d., when Muslim scholars first began visiting and describing the Western Sudanese empires of the Middle Ages. Written documentation of affairs on the coast came much later when the European merchants and officials began to explore and survey lands they occupied and traded within. Among these works, those by Bosman, Meredith<sup>7</sup>, and Barbot<sup>8</sup> are comprehensive and informative primary sources. The last few decades have produced several extensive general history books pertaining to the dynamics of West African society and civilization which draw upon these and a great deal of other primary sources as well as traditional oral histories. Among those, I have found those by F.K. Buah and Adu Boahen to be quite helpful.

Any study of West African history, for those not previously acquainted with the subject (such as myself) should begin with these or similar books. They enable the student to see the general framework into which a more specific study can fit. Inevitably one will be lead back to these books for reference when something is not clear -- and this

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<sup>7</sup> Henry Meredith. An Account of the Gold Coast of Africa: With a Brief History of the African Company. (London: Nelson Ltd., 1967 [reprint of 1812 original])

<sup>8</sup> John Barbot. A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea; and of Ethiopia Inferior: Vulgarly Angola: Being a New and Accurate Account of the Western Maritime Countries of Africa. Paris, 1732.

is certain, many things will not be clear. Therefore it is wise to spend sometime growing familiar with the histories related in these texts.

Unfortunately, many of these texts are not necessarily widely available abroad, that is to say, out of West Africa. I spent many days this past summer in libraries and bookstores all over the United States (traveling by car between Rhode Island and Texas) searching for such books in preparation for my study in Ghana, rarely finding anything of great substance. Nevertheless, I was able to find one book -- a middle school text -- which proved to be very helpful as it was simple, clear, and concise. The lesson to be learned is twofold: 1) If one is new to the general subject one should acknowledge this fact and act accordingly -- I shudder to think how much time I would have lost had I not realized my ignorance from the outset and started from ground-zero; and 2) In a limited resource area (in my case many cities in the U.S.) one should take whatever is available and learn it well.

Once I arrived in Ghana I was fortunate enough to be introduced to several excellent lecturers and professors who were able to help me shape my project and guide me properly through it. I was very surprised at the amount of time and energy they were willing to contribute to my efforts, not only advising me, but actually walking or driving me to meet contacts who they thought would be able to further assist me. For historical research, one can hardly do better than to start at the universities with the experts who have dedicated their lives to such work.

Beyond their invaluable counsel, they were able to furnish me with the all-important letter of introduction. This letter is quite necessary for two reasons. Firstly, it enables one to obtain materials in limited-access resource centers like the Africana Rare Room in the Balme Library at the University of Ghana, Legon, and the Central Regional Archives, in Cape Coast, both of which I used frequently. Secondly, it serves as

testament to any involved parties who might have suspicions that there is a valid reason behind all the questioning, note-taking, and photographing which a researcher does. Indeed in some circumstances there is nothing one can do to justify one's actions, innocent though they might be. The letter did not always come to the rescue. However, it is a good idea for the researcher in the field to keep as many proofs of validity with himself or herself at all times.

Primarily my research consisted of two components: 1) Examination of primary and secondary sources at the Balme Library, the archives in Cape Coast, and the University of Cape Coast main library's African History Room; 2) Interviews with persons educated in the oral history of Cape Coast and/or Asafo. In this way I hoped to incorporate as many points of view as possible in my study. For while many histories may be biased, and many others have become confused over time (the two groups not being mutually exclusive), it is hoped that when several are used together, a reasonably accurate picture might develop. Furthermore, the cross-examination of several sources tends to expose the different agenda or biases of different historians, which in itself reveals much about the various cultures from which the histories have come. For this reason I have decided to use and cite resources which in some circles might be discarded either because of a lack of cultural sensitivity or an apparent contradiction to the accepted treatment.

A more technical problem also arose with some of my sources. As the earliest documents were written before the institution of a standard orthography, one encounters quite a few inconsistencies in the spellings of certain groups and locations. While some of these variations obviously come from the same word, others do not. For this reason, I have included a listing of spelling variations in the appendix, as I wanted to remain true to the original documents that I quoted, without causing too much confusion.

I commenced my study with the document work (and continued this work throughout) so that I would be able to conduct the interviews as a relatively well-informed inquirer. Beyond this, I found that it took quite a while to find an interpreter and set up an itinerary, and so I began my research with reading work as I did not wish to remain idle during this set-up period. In my document research I found not only an abundance of correspondences from European (primarily British) traders and officials to their home governments, but also correspondences between those Europeans and the traditional indigenous government, more specifically, the Omanhene. Many of these papers focused specifically on the Asafo Companies. However, the archives in Cape Coast, where the bulk of these documents is located, does not have a topical index. Therefore I spent a great deal of time sifting through pages and pages of somewhat impertinent material.

It is here that I should describe the abbreviations in my citations. "ADM" refers to the administrative file at the Central Regional Archives. The number which follows is its index number. "ACC" refers to the accession books, and the second number after this abbreviation refers to its year, while the first refers to its listing number. Therefore ACC 76/66 is the seventy-sixth listing in the accession book from 1966.

Another problem I faced in the limited-access resource centers was that I was not allowed to leech the documents for myself (in fact, to this day I still have no idea where the room which contains the documents at the Cape Coast archives is). For this reason I had to carefully choose titles which I thought would yield relevant information, deliver the call or accession number to the assistant, who was often very difficult to locate, and wait for him to return with the document. It is my understanding that this is fairly standard process when primary or rare sources are involved, so the neophyte archival

researcher ought to be informed that the process of simply obtaining the document can be a fairly time-consuming process.

An even more substantial part of my time was absorbed by transcription. Photocopy machines are not quite as common in Ghana as they are in the U.S., so I spent many hours transcribing information that at home I would have photocopied straight away. Even when a machine was present and functional, the process of procuring the copy usually entailed filling out a form or two, showing the copy assistant exactly what to copy, and being told to "go and come", as the copies would not be ready for a while. Thus whether transcribing or copying, more time was consumed than I had imagined. The positive side of this issue, however, is that the act of transcription impresses upon the memory details which otherwise might be forgotten. It also forces the researcher to carefully select the necessary information, thereby requiring him or her to constantly evaluate the goals of study.

Once I had collected a reasonable amount of information from which to conduct my formal interviews and had found a suitable translator/assistant, I began my formal interviews. In these interviews I aimed to gain a better understanding of Cape Coast's progression from a small fishing village to a large trade center from the leaders of its seven Asafo Companies and from a few of the traditional rulers of the area. However, I found that this goal was slightly over-ambitious given the time frame in which my study had to fit, primarily because of scheduling problems. Without exception I had to make appointments through intermediaries. This compounds the problem of scheduling interviews geographically, as I had to locate the intermediary, who then had to locate the potential interviewee. I then had to relocate the intermediary, who more often than not had encountered some difficulty or another and told me to "go and come" (anyone in Ghana is bound to here this phrase a lot).

At the end of my research period I had interviewed four Asafo leaders and a couple of men well-educated in the oral history of traditional authority, but no traditional authority figures themselves. I was given the opportunity to interview the Omanhene (paramount chief) of the Oguaa traditional area, but the scheduled date fell after the due date of this project. I also spoke with the Queen mother of Efutu, but we spent the majority of our first, and what turned out to be only, discussion of substantial length talking more about the goals of my project than about her understanding of the area's history. We planned to meet later, but due to miscommunication with her messenger, I was not able to see her again.

Through I was not able to conduct all the interviews that I had hoped to, those which did actually transpire taught me not only a great deal about history, but about how to interview effectively. One thing I learned quickly was the necessity of compensating the interviewee. If someone sacrifices time and energy to help a stranger with his or her work, it is only polite to return the favor. My situation usually mandated that I present the interviewee with a bottle of Schnapps and some "small money" as a token of appreciation. Indeed, it would not have been appropriate to conduct the interview without presenting gifts in return.

A more technical aspect of the interview which, surfaced immediately was the difficulty of translating the conceptual question. One instance stands out in my mind particularly: during my interview with the Supi of the Anafo No. 2 Company, we were discussing one of the company's shrines. It had a dragon depicted on it, and I asked, thinking it was a relatively simple question, "What does that mean?" For the next several minutes my translator posed this question to the Supi in a number of ways. After a short while a few others joined in the conversation (most of my interviews were conducted outside and there were often spectators), some who spoke English well enough to discuss with me specifically what it was I meant to ask. A debate ensued until finally, after another several minutes, I was given a response.

A crucial part of any interview is learning how to tap the knowledge of the interviewee, and what I have found is that often-conceptual questions fail to help do this. Also, complicate questions like, "Can you describe how the role of your organization changed as the town developed?" usually did not provoke the desired detailed response. Direct questions like, "Who did you fight?", usually fared much better. However, I liked to throw in a few conceptual questions in each interview anyway, just to see what would ensue, which often times was quite interesting and educational, even if my question was never answered in the typical sense.

I recorded my interviews mainly by transcription. I brought a tape-recorder to the first few, but I found that I was able to write everything down fairly quickly, so I did not really need the machine. Furthermore, such devices tend to make some people uneasy, especially if it is a stranger who doing the recording them and then leaving, never to return again. For these reasons I decided not to tape-record my interviews.

While written documents and formal interviews constituted my all or most of my cited research, it would be a vast oversight not mention the more casual, and what some might consider "less academic", aspects of my study. For example, during my first week of research I had several conversations with students and recent graduates at the university in Legon who challenged the motivation and goals of my study. When they asked why I was in Ghana, they would not accept, "Because my university in the States doesn't have any African history classes," as an answer. They demanded answers: What knowledge did I seek and why? These questions and subsequent conversations help me to put in perspective what it was I meant to gain from my endeavor.

Once in Cape Coast, I spent a few days simply walking around and getting a feel for the town. I should note, however, that this was not my original intention. The day I arrived I discovered that my only contact, ironically, had traveled to Accra for that morning (from where I had just come). As she was to stay away the entire weekend, during which the libraries and archives were closed, I had no other option than to walk



around the town and try to learn something. I doing so I was engaged in several informative discussions. In fact, I found that in general the people there were much more interactive with foreigners than the people of other towns and cities which I had visited. Had I not spent so much time during the first few days learning how to respond properly, my project certainly would have suffered.

For instance, as on my way to Fort Victoria to get some photos one morning, before a scheduled appointment at the university, having passed the usual number of groups of children chanting what became known amongst my fellow students as "The Obruni Song"<sup>9</sup>, a group of elderly men greeted me from a bench on the side of the road: "White man! How are you? Come." I responded with "Good morning," and walked over to shake their hands. We had a brief conversation, and then I was on my way.

As it turned out, one of these men was a Supi who I would later interview. Had I ignored the men that morning, as I was often inclined to do, I doubt I would have been well received when I went to one of their homes for an interview. Above and beyond that, it is necessary always to be sensitive to the levels of public privacy and expected communication, which can differ quite drastically from one place to the next, simply out of respect for the host culture. This is an extremely important aspect of field work to recognize.

By walking around the town, learning expected courtesy, and conversing with several of the townspeople I learned valuable lessons in communication. Furthermore, a few people were able and quite willing to discuss my project's subject matter at length with me. One woman even provided me with some brochures from her workplace which

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<sup>9</sup> The song, generally known by most children in Cape Coast and many other places in Ghana, is sung whenever someone with relatively light skin walks by, and it is usually repeated a few times: "Obrun/ How are you?./ I am fine/ Thank you..." I imagine children of many different societies have similar ways of acknowledging the presence of someone of obvious foreign extraction.

discussed Cape Coast development and Asafo Companies. Finally, by meandering about the town during those first few days I got to know its basic layout and several major taxi/tro-tro stops. I was therefore able to learn the quickest way from one place to the next. This is essential knowledge if one wants to make the most of a day. I could continue with more examples of becoming acquainted with the field environment, but I do not want to stray too far from the topic at hand.

My specific circumstances mandated how I conducted my study. Because my project had to fulfill requirements of my home university's degree program and those of my exchange program, while also attempting to meet at least some of the research needs of my academic supervisor, I had to follow a certain course which might satisfy all parties. However, many other avenues for exploration of the topic are available. A comparative photo essay juxtaposing current pictures of the town with historical photos, drawings, and maps of its features might be an interesting way to examine the development of the town. Another research option would be to spend time with the Asafo Companies participating in their communal work and attending various events for which they "turn out" (unfortunately, not many of these occurred while I was in Cape Coast) in effort to see exactly what Asafo does today. There are many religious issues at work in Asafo which I was not able to treat, but would make for a good study. A few works have already been published regarding the artistic aspects of Asafo, such as their music and flags, notably ones by Turkson and Nketia, but there might be room for new

interpretations or reinterpretations of this subject. Indeed, as one of my advisors told me,  
"No one has the last word in academia."

## **111. TRANS-SAHARAN TRADE**

**As intermediaries for this trade the people of the Sudan, that is, of the Savannah Belt, grew wealthy; wealth of course generates power and ambition and both give birth to states and kingdoms.<sup>10</sup>**  
**-Dr. Adu Boahen**

The trade Boahen is discussing is the trans-Saharan trade, which was flourishing in the early Middle Ages. In this trade products from North Africa and the Southern Mediterranean such as salt, leatherwork, beads, beasts of burden (camel and horses), crops, metal goods, and eventually books were exchanged for gold, kola nuts, ostrich feathers, iron, hides, and slaves from the sub-Saharan region. The three great empires of the Western Sudan, those of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, grew as a result of this trade from important posts located strategically along the Niger River. These empires dominated much West Africa from the sixth to sixteenth centuries, their wealth and social systems rivaling, if not surpassing, those of the great empires of South America, Europe, Asia, and Egypt. The success of the people of the Savannah Belt serves as testament to the incredible developmental potential created by wealth accumulated from trade with North African and European lands.

Throughout the Middle Ages this trade across the Sahara became quite extensive. In fact, by the fifteenth century this rich trade reached all the way to the forest regions

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. A. Adu Boahen. Topics in West African History. (Essex:Longman Group Ltd., 1966), 3.

and southern coast of West Africa, Mande traders taking products from these lands back to major Markets at Jenne and Timbuetu<sup>11</sup>.

In 1076, the first of the great empires of the Western Sudan, Ghana, was overrun by Islamic invaders -- the Almoravids. Territorial expansions by Muslim peoples began as early as the seventh century. These quests continued for centuries spreading across North Africa, and also into the Middle East and parts of Europe. By the thirteenth century Islamic lands reached into the Northern sections of modern day Ghana and Nigeria (see map section in the Appendix).

The Muslim presence substantially affected the trade between West Africa and the European Christian states. It is most probably a much greater burden on the Europeans, who were cut off from the south and the east, than on the peoples of sub-Saharan Africa, who were able to maintain trade with the northern parts of the continent. This is evidenced by the fact that as late as the eighteenth century, those who inhabited the hinterland of southern West Africa were still conducting important trade with the north<sup>12</sup>. Nonetheless, when viewed in conjunction with the wealth and success which the middlemen in the Savannah Belt enjoyed for hundreds of years at the expense of those at both ends of the trade routes, it becomes clear that both Europeans and the those people near the coastal regions in West Africa that much to gain by circumventing the intermediaries.

It is this grand framework in which any discussion of development of any of the coastal regions must be placed. The recognition of the mutual desire of the Europeans and the peoples of southern West Africa to commence direct trade is essential to understanding coastal development. for it was this trade that helped to draw people to the coast. Other major factors influencing the movement of people into the coastal region will be discussed in the following section. Though initial migration to this region was

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<sup>11</sup> Harvey Feinberg. Transactions of the American Philosophical Society: Africans and Europeans in West Africa -- Elminians and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast during the 18th Century. Vol. 79, Part 7. (Philadelphia:1989), preface.

<sup>12</sup> Tenkorang, 2.

originally caused by other factors, "because of their long involvement in overseas and long distance trade, the Akans had, by 1600, developed perceived needs and a taste for European products, items more readily available and cheaper than those coming across the Sahara."<sup>13</sup> These needs combined with the wealth and ambition which trade produced set important and long lasting precedents which have continued to affect development on the coast and in the hinterland throughout history.

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<sup>13</sup> Feinberg, 26.

#### **IV. SETTLEMENT OF THE COAST**

**The migrations of the Akan, or so-called Chi or Tshi-Speaking people, have given rise to various groups...**<sup>14</sup>

**–Report prepared by the British War Office, London, 1931**

The statement given by London's War Office regarding the settlement of Akan people in various regions of what was then the Gold Coast is about as specific as can be made without any dispute. It is generally agreed that the Akan people, defined in Meyerowitz as "neither a tribe nor a race but peoples of various origins or clans welded together into a state,"<sup>15</sup> came from an area far north of their present location. In the same text it is suggested that they and the Guan people have their origins in the Wangara region, south of the kingdom of Ghana. In fact, it was the idea that these people had their roots there that lead to the Gold Coast being renamed "Ghana" when it achieved independence in 1957.

Boahen also suggests the possibility of Akan origins in the ancient empire of the Western Sudan, but he purports the Guan people (who he defines as the Etsii, Asebu, Efutu, Senya Breku, and Kyerepon groups) to have settled on the coast long before the Akans arrived<sup>16</sup>. The Meyerowitz text holds that when the Efutu reached the coast, the Eguaffo, an Akan group, had already settled there. However, the entire theory of these origins of the Akan has recently been challenged by Merrick Posnasky, who claims that the Akan are not biologically related the people of the north. He hypothesizes that strong

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<sup>14</sup> ACC 777/66 Military Report on the Gold Coast, Ashanti, Northern Territories, and Mandated Togoland. Vol.1, prepared by the General Staff, War Office. (London: Harrison and Sons Ltd., 1931), 99.

<sup>15</sup> Nana Ekow Eyiku 1. "Ancient Elmina: Its Origins." Early History of the Akan of Ghana. ed. Eva Meyerowitz. (London:Red Candle Press, 1974),23

<sup>16</sup> Boahen, 65.

cultural similarities, which have long stood as evidence for this relation, was a result of the extensive trade between the southern forest regions and Jenne which prospered from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.<sup>17</sup>

Regardless of the uncertainty which surrounds the issue of the primary origins of the Akan people, we can be confident that the first major Akan settlement grew from the area of the Black Volta River basin, near Tekyiman in the present-day Brong Ahafo region. This state, generally referred to as the Bono kingdom, whose capital was at Bono Manso, was established around 1295. It remained prominent until it was conquered by Asante in 1723, having been weakened by Gonja attacks throughout the previous century. Successive migrations from this position on the Black Volta lead to the development of the other major Akan states: the Twifo, Adansi, Denkyira, Fante, Akyem, Akwamu, and Asante.

The first Akan group to reach the coast was lead by three fetish priests named Obunumankoma, Odapagyan, and Osono. Their migration can be reasonably placed in the mid-fourteenth century, as evidence suggests that Obunumankoma, who became a chief, was enstooled in 1363.<sup>18</sup> Around this same time the Efutu, under the leadership of Edwe and Etumpan, founded a small settlement on the coast called Amanforo, which would later become Cape Coast. The aforementioned conflict of opinion regarding the time of the arrival of the Guan precludes me from making a definite statement regarding the first people to settle the coast, though it appears the Efutu were the first specifically local to Cape Coast. This idea is supported by a statement written by Arthur Ffoulkes, District Commissioner of Cape Coast in the early twentieth century: "The original

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<sup>17</sup> Feinberg, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Nana Ekow Eyiku 1, 25



founders of the town are said to be the Bentils and the Inkoom [Asafo companies] from Sekyere, north-east of Kumase, who settled on Effutu land, and absorbed the Effutu."<sup>19</sup>

Successive migrations from the Bono kingdom by the Eguaffo, Mankessim, Abora, Anyan, Ekumfi, and Nkusukum groups, followed by those of the Gomoa and Adjumako groups, created a large Akan population which eventually grew to populate and dominate the coast from the Pra River west to the Ga-Adangbe state in the east. This Akan group became known as the "Fante". The etymology of this word has been used as evidence to support the idea that large numbers who left the kingdom in the north, as it can be separated in to two words: "fa" meaning "half"; and "nte" meaning "broke away", as half of the Akans had broken away from their homes in the north to come to the coast<sup>20</sup>.

There are several possible motives for migration to the coast from the Bono Kingdom. Steady population growth certainly stands as a reasonable consideration, though no figures are on record to fully substantiate this idea. Among those I interviewed, however, nearly all mentioned population pressure as a primary factor, as well as land disputes, which may well have been consequential. Furthermore, it has been suggested that French traders appeared on the coast in the mid-fourteenth century, which very probably would have attracted some numbers to commence trade. The possibilities of French presence are discussed in Barbot<sup>21</sup>, and the idea that they established a settlement, called "Adalia", is firmly supported in Meyerowitz<sup>22</sup>. However, this view is commonly

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<sup>19</sup> Ffoulkes, 1.

<sup>20</sup> Supi Kow Dadzie of the Anafo (No. 2) Company, interview by the author, 16 Nov. 1994, Cape Coast, transcription. Possession of the author

<sup>21</sup> Barbot, 147.

<sup>22</sup> Nana Ekow Eyiku I, 20.

refuted by evidence that the French at that time did not possess the naval technology to make such distant journeys to the west coast of Africa. Questions surrounding the time of arrival of certain groups and the specific causes of southern migration notwithstanding, the immigration to areas near Cape Coast can be said to have begun in the fourteenth century because, as was told to me, "There was more life here than in the hinterland."<sup>23</sup>

Development and expansion of the Oguaa area and of Cape Coast in specific was a gradual process. The first English ships which visited the area arrived in 1554 and 1556. An observer from the latter voyage estimated that there were only about twenty houses in the area at that time<sup>24</sup>. It is data from the early European voyages which we must rely on for early population figures, because, unfortunately, local tradition gives no specific accounts on this matter. Throughout the century trade increased and more people moved into the area, and by 1610 the Portuguese had built a lodge beside the growing village.

In 1662 the Swedes settled there and built a fort by the name of Carolusburg. Sources conflict over who built the Cape Coast Castle. Ffoulkes holds that Carolusburg and Cape Coast Castle are the same structure. Meredith wrote that it was the Portuguese who built the castle, and the War Office in London claimed credit for the British. Though the second two opinions are not widely substantiated, opinions appear to be split on whether it was the Swedes or the Dutch who were behind the operation. The current tour at the castle informs that it was the Swedes under the guidance of Henrik Caerlot. However several other sources, amongst them the members of the Aborofumba (No. 5) Company, whose ancestors were the ones who performed the actual construction, say that

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<sup>23</sup> Okyerema Kwarnina Pra, of the Anafo (No. 2) Company, interview~ Coast, transcription. Possession of the author.

<sup>24</sup> Sharp, 8.

it was the Dutch who commissioned them. Whether or not it was the Swedes of the Dutch who contracted the work, and it is possible that both were involved, the construction of the castle is widely regarded as a very important event in the growth of the town: "This was the beginning if the real expansion of Cape Coast."<sup>25</sup>

In 1693 thousands of Asedu and Twifo, invaded the land Efutu, who were then forced to move their capital to Cape Coast. The number of houses in Cape Coast had grown to five-hundred by 1695<sup>26</sup>. It should be noted that the town had by this time become known to the whole of Europe, as the Dutch and English fought a major war from 1664 to 1667 which was instigated by the actions of the British Captain Holmes who took Cape Coast Castle from the Dutch as commanded by King Charles II.

The growth pattern described above seems to fit well with the movement of the Fante as described by various historians . Though it is believed that the Akans moved towards the coast in the fourteenth century, the founders of the various Fante states remained at Mankessim for quite some time before expanding along the coastline. Webster and Boahen argue that this dispersion took place in the last three decades of the seventeenth century: "[A]s a result of population pressure they moved out to carve out kingdoms for themselves in the area left virtually empty by the decimation and assimilation of its original inhabitants, the Etsii."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Ffoulkes, 2.

<sup>26</sup> Sharp, 8

<sup>27</sup> Dr. A. Edu Boahen and J.B. Webster. The Growth of African Civilization. The Revolutionary year: Years: West Africa since 1800. (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1967), 124.

## V. EARLIEST ASAFO

**The key to understanding the political structure of Cape Coast is the Asafo Company.**

**-Professor Kwame Arhin,  
Director, African Studies  
Institute, University of Ghana,  
Legon**

"Asafo" is a word deriving meaning from the root word "sa", which means "war", and the suffix "fo", which is applied to any word to signify a plurality of people. Thus "Asafo" means "war people" or "the people who wage war." I have run across only one other explanation of the word which somehow defines the word "nsa" to mean "common," or "commoner," therefore describing the "Asafo" as common people or the representatives of the common people. Dr. Addo-Finling has refuted this theory, however, stating that it comes from the period of indirect rule by the British, when the traditional authorities acted in collaboration with the English officials. This system separated the members of the Asafo companies from the regal families, thereby the members of the Asafo became the representatives of the common people in the political realm<sup>28</sup>. If the suggestion here is that there was little or no class stratification before the period of indirect rule, evidence in Bosmans citing several distinct classes of citizens, disputes this<sup>29</sup>. However, most sources which I encountered presented the first explanation of "Asafo", and so lending credence to Addo-Finling's position that "commoners" is secondary meaning, which may well have come long after the institution

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<sup>28</sup> Dr. Robert Addo-Finling, interview by author, 14 November 1994, Department of History, University of Ghana, Legon, transcription. Possession of author.

<sup>29</sup> Bosman (ii), Letter IX

was established. Regardless, both interpretations offer valuable insight pertaining to varying conceptions of who the Asafo are.

The Asafo companies are most often recognized as a military organization. A journal dedicated to one of the biggest annual festivals in Cape Coast, one in which the Asafo play a major role, has described the institution as thus: "Every Asafo company, in modern military parlance, may be construed as militia in defense of the state."<sup>30</sup> The military aspect of Asafo certainly is the most prominent and recognized aspect of their institution historically. For this reason, membership to the company passes through the paternal line, which is traditionally believed to possess the martial spirit. This is contrary to other Akan systems of inheritance, which are maternal.

Asafo's role in the history and development of the coast, however, cannot be strictly confined to the area of military action. All of the company members who I met stressed that they are at the service of the Omanhene (the paramount chief), whatever it is that he may want done. Therefore W.S. Kwesi Johnson's description of the companies is more complete, as it does not limit the institution to an exclusively military role: "The organization is based on a system of mandatory service to the state through a form of conscription proceeding by patrilineal succession"<sup>31</sup>

Yet still there is more to the Asafo companies which has to be considered, for, historically they are not merely servants of the state -- in many ways they are the state:

**In the Gold Coast Colony each race, or "oman", consists of a number of small communities, living in their respective towns or villages, under their respective chiefs (Ohene, pl. Ahim) or headmen... the ordinary oman Consists of a number of scattered villages, or companies, under their respective captains, and these companies form the fighting force of the oman.<sup>32</sup>**

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<sup>30</sup> William Johnson. "The State Purification Rites- An Essential Element of the Fetu Festival." Oguaa Afahye Journal. Vol. 3, September 1993.

<sup>31</sup> W.S. Kwesi Johnson, 1.

<sup>32</sup> Ffoulkes, 6.

The crucial part of this statement lies in the fact that company and village are understood as synonyms. If companies and villages are the same thing, then the state, the collection of villages, is essentially the same as the collection of Asafo Companies. That the company and village were originally understood to be the same thing also indicative of a longstanding necessity at Cape Coast to defend land, thus pointing to a precedent of land dispute which extends back to the town's foundation. However, most evidence indicates that the land's population was sparse when the Fante arrived, therefore the disputes must have been primarily within the group.

A statement of Ffoulkes' in the preceding section declares that the town of Cape Coast was founded by two companies, the Bentsir and the Nkum. The oral tradition of the Asafo confirms this assertion. Though there was disagreement about whether or not the first Fante settlers were divided into two companies when they arrived, the basic idea remains that initially all Fante citizens of Cape Coast were Asafo. The current Tufuhene (general commander of all of the companies) in Cape Coast, Nana Kwame Edu III, traces the Asafo history back to the leader Nana Kwame Edu I and his right and left-hand men, respectively named Santa Kodwo and Abaka. It was these men who are supposed to have lead the Fante from Mankessim to their first settlement in an uninhabited area which would become the Oguaa state: "All this place was bush... nobody was here."<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Tufuhene Kwame Edu III, interview by author, 1S November 1994, Cape Coast, transcription. Possession of author.

## **VI. ASAFO ATSIKU ESON**

### *The Seven Companies*

**Formerly there were no division, but when braveness came, people wanted land.**

**-Supi Kow Dadzie of the Anafo  
(No. 2) Company**

The division of companies was initially a response to the growth of the population and consequent expansion into lands surrounding the original settlement. In this light the relationship between the establishment of the seven different companies and the development of the town is seen to be essentially a reflective one. By briefly examining the stories behind each company -- those recorded on paper, those of the oral tradition, and those which actually lie in the names of the company, the general pattern of the town's development emerges. Furthermore, in analyzing the hierarchy of the institution one can find evidence for Asafo's original relation to traditional authority. It is seen that the two institutions, though initially close, if not the same, have grown apart over the years.

The first division of was between the Nkum and the Bentsir Companies. The Nkum settled to the west, near present-day Victoria Park, and were named for the large tree under which they settled. Another theory is that "Nkum" is an abbreviation of "Nkolum Ekum", meaning, and "you cannot destroy me." The Bentsir Company settled to the north in the area where the Methodist Church, a major landmark, presently stands. The name "Bentsir" refers to the fact that they settled on a hill, near the top." This distinguishes them from the Anafo Company, who was later carved out of the Bentsir, as the company settled further down the Hill. "Anafo", meaning "the lower part," describes this development. The other name by which the Anafo Company is known, "Wombiri",

meaning "beginners," also links them to the original settlers. Two explanations of this name are acknowledged: 1) The company was there from the beginning; or 2) They were the younger of the group who moved to create a new company, and therefore were beginners. The sources which I encountered generally were in agreement regarding the formation of these three groups.

There are a few explanations of the origins of the Ntsin Company. The company's present Supi, Abow Johnson, simply said that it was formed over two hundred years ago to guard the Omanhene. Kwesi Johnson offers a more specific explanation, starting that the company formed from the friends, family, servants, and bondsmen of Birempon Kojo, the stepson of King Aggrey I, after an affair involving Kojo and the wife of the Governor. Johnson interprets "tsin" to mean, "straighten out," because the members of the company were originally employed to straighten out the problem<sup>34</sup>. He goes on to mention that traditionally the Ntsin is the largest company in Cape Coast, and that it includes a majority of the chiefs, thus the company is nicknamed "Abirempon Asafo" -- "the company of notables". Ffoulkes argues, however, that "tsin" means "stretch out", and that they formed out of the Nkum, whose population had grown dense. This explanation supports the theory relating town expansion and company division. Ffoulkes makes further claims that it was Europeans who ordered the Ntsin to move when the castle was being built, as the area was overcrowded, and 11 this view is supported by the current Tufuhene.

There is also some disagreement surrounding the origins of the Aborofumba Company, whose name means, "white man's children." This company is also known as "Aborofunkwa", which means, "white man's workers." Sources agree that the company was formed by those who worked to build the castle. In fact, their motto, emblazoned

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<sup>34</sup> W.S. Kwesi Johnson, 3



across their posuban, is "We built the castle," and one of their primary symbols is the clock, which they explain was given to them by the Dutch so that they could come to work on time.<sup>35</sup> However, whereas some written sources subscribe to the idea that the Aborofumba Company's members were brought from the Slave Coast, the company's oral tradition holds that they are all from Cape Coast, and that they formed to mobilize against those sabotaging the castle project.

The Akrampa Company's name comes from a Portuguese word meaning "intermediary." The name has two implications. Firstly, as witnessed by its Portuguese origin, the name describes people who were Portuguese -- mulatto children with European fathers. Because the company system is patrilineal, these people could not become members of existing companies. At first many volunteered to help other companies, but eventually they came to form their own. Thus the members are ethnic intermediaries. Their European heritage gave them a higher standing in the social system which the Europeans set up alongside, or on top of, the traditional systems already in place. The members of the company, then, often held positions of civic authority, becoming official intermediaries, as well: "Rumor has it that in the colonial days the mulattoes and elites of the society formed this company hence their [sic] reminiscent of the colonial governors. They are tasked with the duty of making peace between any feuding company captains (Asafohenfo)."<sup>36</sup> The last group to come to Cape Coast and establish themselves as a company was the Amanfur. This name means "new race" or "new settlement." They came from regions east of Cape Coast, possibly near Accra,

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<sup>35</sup> Supi Ahin of the Aborofumba (No. 5) Company, interview by author, 15 November 1994, Cape Coast, transcription. Possession of author

<sup>36</sup> William Johnson. "State Purification Rites -- An Essential Element of the Fetu Festival." Ogunu Afahwe Journal. Vol. 111 (Sept 1993), 32.

brought by the Danes, for whom they were working. Their company was officially recognized in 1850.

The order in which I have presented the companies is not necessarily the order in which they developed, though it is a plausible sequence. Kwesi Johnson orders the precedence of companies as follows: 1) Nkum; 2) Bentsir; 3) Akrampa; 4) Anafo; 5) Aborofumba; 6) Ntsin; 7) Amanfur.<sup>37</sup> The numbers by which the companies are known were ascribed to them by the British in the following fashion: No. 1 Company -- Bentsir; No. 2 Company--Anafo; No 3 Company—Nsin; No. 4 Company—Nkum; No. 5 Company -Aborofumba; No. 6 Company -- Akrampa; No. 7 Company -- Amanfur.

The current Tufuhene of the Cape Coast companies traces the numbering system back to the Battle of Nsamankow in January of 1824, in which a number of companies were mobilized and taken to the field in the country of the Nzima near Axim. The companies reportedly captured the enemy chief, Kweku Ackaa, who was "a cannibal who sucks the blood of anyone who offends him."<sup>38</sup> Upon returning to Cape Coast, the companies were assigned to retrieve cannons from the sea, and those who came to work earlier, for some were not so eager to aid the British, were given the lower number. It is widely recorded however, that in this battle the British were decimated by the Asante, eight of their officers and Sir Charles MacCarthy being killed during its course. Despite the major incongruencies between these two accounts, we can see an important conception of the significance of the company numbers -- that those who were more willing to perform arduous work with or for the British, represented by the task of fetching cannons from the sea, were given the lower numbers. A letter from the

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<sup>37</sup> W.S Kwesi Johnson, 3.

<sup>38</sup> Tufuhene Kwame Edu 111, 15 November 1994

Committee of Merchants dated January 26, 1780, supports this so far as Cos. 14 are concerned. It states that though the Nkum and Ntsin companies had "not given a single canoes man to unload the ship," but that "the good behaviour of the Lower Town [Anafo] and the Benterry people have fully made it up."<sup>39</sup> Unfortunately, I was not able to interview any of the Supi of the companies with higher numbers after hearing this story to hear if their versions differed.

The histories of the seven companies represent the development of the town. The original population grew, thus forcing territorial expansion. Emigration to the town, by Fante, Efutu, other Africans, and Europeans, greatly stimulated by increases in trade on the coast, caused the various villages of the town to identify themselves as distinct but integral parts of the state.

It is here that we must turn our attention to the internal organization of the companies and the relation of the companies to other traditional authorities. Supi Ahin has stated that "nothing has happened the Asafo since it came into existence."<sup>40</sup> This statement is quite accurate so far as the titles and internal functions have remained the same throughout time. However, as the town developed the structure of the traditional authority changed, and the Asafo were marginalized from political authority as a result.

Membership in the company is patrilineal, and is inherited by both sons and daughters. Females play important roles in the spiritual and provisional aspects of company activity, as well as participating in community labor. "Baatan" is the only title for which a female member is eligible, and it signifies the mother and counselor of the

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<sup>39</sup> Documents of the Company of Merchants. in Letters. February 1781-November 1798. (located at the Cape Coast Library)

<sup>40</sup> 15 November 1994

company, who commands much respect within the company. The company is summoned to meet at the post, and also lead in battle, by the "Kyerema", or master drummer, and his subordinate drummers, who can communicate with the group by means of their instruments. In procession the company is lead by the "Frankatufo" and the "Asekambafo" -- the two flag bearers and their bodyguards, who traditionally number in multiples of twelve. These positions are quite important, as it has been noted that," The principal object of fighting is to capture the flag." <sup>41</sup>The company's priests, "Komfo," perform the religious rites which, are integral to the success of a campaign or any other endeavor. The "Abrafo" are the company's executioners.

The company's elders, or "Panin," act as counsel to settle internal affairs. However, Bosman described the council of "old men" of Fant government as "aa sort of National Chancellors... not unlike European Parliament," whose power actually superceded that of the paramount ruler.<sup>42</sup> If this held true in Cape Coast, then the authority of the elders had markedly declined by 1889 when, in a petition protesting the proposed municipal government, citizens placed the panin far from the top of the hierarchy.<sup>43</sup> Any senior member of the company who is considered wise is eligible to hold this elected position.

The "Asafohenfo" are the junior captains, and above them is the "Supi", which means "pot containing water," who is the principal captain whose nature is supposed to represent the essence of the company. Captainship is generally inherited, but not always. The seven Supi of Cape Coast hold council with the Tufuhene, the general commander of

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<sup>41</sup> Ffoulkes, 10.

<sup>42</sup> Bosman (i), 57

<sup>43</sup> Pachai, 132

all the companies, who should no longer affiliate himself with one company once in office.

It is the Tufuhene who acts as the link between the companies and the traditional authority. He is the military head of the state, and is considered one of the principal officers of the Oman. The other members include the Omanhene, and the chiefs who surround him in procession -- the Tuafohene, Dentsifohene, Benkumhene, Nifahene, and Nkyidomhene. The Tufuhene is directly subject to the Omanhene and his council of sub-chiefs, none of whom are supposed to maintain company affiliations once enstooled. In the event of dispute, "The Tufuhene has nothing to say."<sup>44</sup>

The above description is the current general model for the state. An official at the Central Regional House of Chiefs, however, emphasizes that this is a theoretical, and certainly not a universally practical model. Many, if not all, traditional areas take exception to this model in one way or another.<sup>45</sup> Cape Coast's Ntsin company, for example, for decades, if not centuries, has had chiefs in its number. Evidence from Bosman indicates that at one time, the distinction between chief and captain might not have been made at all: "I have observed five degrees of men amongst the Negroes, the first of which is kings, or captains, for the word here is synonymous."<sup>46</sup> The names of the Omanhene's principal officers also indicate this relation, as they directly correspond to the position assignments of the companies: Tuafo -van guard; Dentsifo -- center guard; Benkum -- left flank; Nifa -- right flank; and Nkyidom -rear guard. Thus, again we find

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<sup>44</sup> Okyerema Kwamina Pra, 11 November 1994

<sup>45</sup> Harry Wilmot, Assistant Registrar, Central Regional House of Chiefs, interview by the author, 15 November 1994, Cape Coast, transcription. Possession of the author.

<sup>46</sup> Bosman (ii) Letter IX

evidence that as the town developed, the political clout of the Asafo diminished, for the chiefs are no longer supposed to be affiliated with the companies.

## VII. UNITY AND DIVISION

Oguaa Akoto Akoto dwerdwerba/ a wo da hon tur anno/ Eyee Oguaa den  
(The Crabs of Cape Coast/ The small ones/Who lie at the mouths of their  
holes/What did you do to guaa?)

-Traditional Fante Poem  
(translation by Ebenezer Preko)

By the turn of the eighteenth century three Akan groups were beginning large scale expansions, and one was realizing the height of its power. The Akwamu had begun acquiring the small Guan principalities which lay to the east, and over the course of the next sixty years conquered the Ga, Ladoku, and Agona groups. In 1693 they took possession of Christiansburg castle from the Danes, though holding for only a short while. Their state lay in the northeastern part of the Gold Coast (see maps section), and through the first decade of this century they were approaching the zenith of their power near the coast. The Akwamu were rivaled in the north-east by the Akyem people, who were also a rising force at this time, and had prevented the Akwamu from expanding westward. West of these two groups were various Oyoko clans, who in 1701 consolidated and jointly defeated the Denkyira, who were a dominant Akan group in the second half of the previous century. The Fante, too, were beginning to build up their state at the turn of the century. Bosman, who was writing during this time, noted the extraordinary strength of the four groups:

**Sometimes the number of what they [the indigenous people] call an Army does not amount to more than two-thousand. From what you may infer of what Force the Monarchies and Republics on the coast are, Fantyn and Acquamboe excepted; the first of which is able to bring an army of twenty-five Thousand Men, and the latter a much larger. But the inland potentates, such as Akim, Asiante, &c., are not to be**

**reckoned amongst these, they being able to overrun a Country by their numerous Armies.<sup>47</sup>**

After three decades of this century had passed, only the power of the Akwamu had waned. In 1730 they were defeated by the forces of the Akyom, Agona, and Kwahu, who had joined against them. The other three states, however, were still growing stronger (though the Akyem would be conquered in 1742).

The Fante, by this time, had become the dominant people along the Gold Coast. They controlled territory nearly forty miles wide, from the Ga kingdom in the east (which extended just west of Accra) to the river Pra in the west. The land under their authority also extended several miles inland. The nations which they conquered or assimilated included the Efutu, Komenda, Asehu, and Agona. It was in this early part of the eighteenth century which Cape Coast "became an integral part of Fanti and ultimately its capital."<sup>48</sup>

As the Fante were conglomerating states along the coast, the Asante too were amassing large sections of land by conquering surrounding territories. They accomplished a great deal of this feat under Opoku Ware I between 1720 and 1750. To the north they conquered the regions occupied by the Brong Ahafo, Gonja, and Dagomba people, while also expanding into the areas of the Kwahu, Aknapim, Akyom, and Sefwi to the south.

To maintain their vast empire the Asante needed two things -- wealth and firearms -both of which could be provided by access to the coast. The Fante, however, were determined to maintain their position as middlemen and to keep the people of the

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<sup>47</sup> Bosman (ii), Letter XI

<sup>48</sup> Margaret Priestley. West African Trade and the Coast Society. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 15.



hinterland from trading directly with the Europeans. They were able to holdfast to the coast by contracting a series of alliances with other coastal peoples:

**A potent threat to the existence of the Ashanti empire in the second half of the eighteenth century was the Wassaw -- Twifo -- Fanti -- Akyem alliance, renewed every now and then for defensive purposes against the Ashanti. The allies the most powerful of the southern middle states. Maintained it is a cardinal policy to prevent the Ashanti from accumulating firearms.<sup>49</sup>**

Control of the trade did not only mean preventing Asante access to the coast, but also preventing European access to the hinterland. Though Europeans might not have been pressing actively into the interior, keeping them from direct access to such profit great potential was no mean feat. Bosman described quite succinctly the relation between the Europeans and the Fante at this time: "From what I have said you may be informed what places the English and we the Dutch] possess in Fantyn, both of us having equal power, that is, none at all."<sup>50</sup> He then goes on to describe various methods which the Fante used to maintain their power, such as prevention of shipments of provisions from reaching the castles. Throughout the eighteenth century the Fante were able to prevent the two groups, Europeans and the Asante, from meeting each other directly, thereby allowing their settlements to remain economically viable and independent.

Relations between the Europeans and the Fante during this century, however, were not always entirely antagonistic. Letters from the Committee of Merchants written late in the century mention several British campaigns which they and the Fante undertook jointly. One set of letters details a British attack on the Dutch at Elmina and St. Jago in February of 1782. In this battle the British employed a number of companies from both

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<sup>49</sup> Tenkorang, 3.

<sup>50</sup> Bosman (i), 59

Cape Coast and Anomabo. Likewise, the Dutch had employed Elminian companies for themselves. However, these joint efforts do not necessarily represent more than business transactions, for in the description of the battle this statement is included: "It is impossible for me to transmit to you an account of the heavy expense I was at on collecting so large an army of Blacks and employing them in the field."<sup>51</sup>

Thus we may confidently say that the companies of Cape Coast were quite actively engaged militarily throughout the eighteenth century. Expanding along the coast in the early decades, the companies acted as a major unifying force for the coastal states, thereby allowing the Fante to maintain control over the trade. This allowed the town of Cape Coast to continue developing, and by the first decade of the nineteenth century the population was reported to be eight-thousand, excluding the villages which surrounded the town, which held at least that number in addition.<sup>52</sup>

We must remember here that the companies were also engaged in various forms of communal labor. Although these labors did not catch the eye of many European observers, nor have many specific projects other than the building of the castle by the Aborofumba, been remembered on the oral histories which I was able to collect, beyond general statements that whenever there was a problem, the companies came together to solve it. However, if we look at some of the companies symbols, we see that their labors have always been an essential part of the organization. The Aborofumba Company commonly uses representation of tools such as pickaxes and spades on their flags and

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<sup>51</sup> Documents of the Company of Merchants. in Letters. February 1781-November 1798. Public Records Office.

<sup>52</sup> Meredith, 95.

shrines as symbols of their labor. Also, Supi Ahin explains, that the crescent moon is used by the company to represent "how late we are willing to work to accomplish the task."<sup>53</sup> Similarly, the Ntsin Company uses the cock as a symbol of their dedication to work, "because when the cock crows, the Ntsin will come, ready to work."<sup>54</sup>

As Cape Coast was growing throughout the eighteenth century, it is reasonable to conclude that the its Asafo companies were regularly employed for civil service. As trade grew, so did the need for passable routes, and it was the job of the companies to clear the roads, which at that time were footpaths which quickly grew over with weeds. The roads were the responsibility of the companies well into the twentieth century, witnessed by frequent requests for such work made in correspondences between the Omanhene and the District Commissioner in the first two decades.<sup>55</sup> Another of the companies' responsibilities was cleaning the town, which was an especially important task during the epidemics which plagued the town throughout its history. This aspect of the companies' duties is recognized during the town's Afahye Festival, on the second Wednesday in August, called "Amuntumadeze: the day for cleansing the entire state of filth."<sup>56</sup> These and other duties, such as fire fighting and sea rescue, were traditionally performed by the companies before the town had specialized civil servants.

It was in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century when the Asafo companies made their most major contributions to unifying the coastal states with military action and helping the town develop with communal labor. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the British made their first of several attempts to establish municipal government at Cape Coast. Pachai's essay defines well the failure of the British municipal

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<sup>53</sup> 15 November 1994

<sup>54</sup> Supi Abow Johnson", 15 November 1994

<sup>55</sup> ADM 23/1 /134 Cape Coast Native Affairs: 6 May 1907 -- 29 June 1920. Case No. 2s/08.

<sup>56</sup> William Johnson, 32

systems to recognize traditional institutions, such as Asafo, in their scheme. The initial conflict which ensued, and the final institution of municipal government in 1908 was a major factor in the decline of Asafo's developmental contributions because "the companies were fed up with these cheats."<sup>57</sup> They have continued to provide communal labor for the Cape Coast community throughout this century, and they also played a part in the World Wars, but during the most recent decades their primary significance has been cultural rather than military or developmental.

While Asafo was in many ways responsible for fostering the growth of Cape Coast, it was also a primary limiting factor. Sharp notes, So long as 1681 Cape Coast indulged in its time honored past-time and organized a riot."<sup>58</sup> This was the first recorded riot in Cape Coast history, and it involved 18 slaves who had run away from the castle. They were given shelter by the people of the town, resulting in shots from Dutch cannons being fired at the town. In response, hundreds of men, most likely of the town's companies, retaliated against the Dutch. This riot set a precedent for a long history of violence within the town. Though there were several riots arising from conflict of companies and Europeans, and some were between traditional authority and the companies, for the most part violence occurred between companies, usually as a result of one company's denigration of another. The various media which the Asafo use to communicate -- drums, dance, song, and flags -- gave them ample opportunity to criticize or insult other companies. Rights to burial and succession disputes were also major motivators of inter-company tension.

It seems that often when the companies were not uniting against a common enemy, they were quarreling amongst themselves. Relatively few of the recorded riots occurred during the Fante expansion along the coast, or for the most part of the

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<sup>57</sup> Okyerema Kwamina Pra, 11 November 1994

<sup>58</sup> Dr. N.A. Dyre Sharp, 11.

eighteenth century. There was a major riot, however, in 1803, which, according to Meredith, destroyed much of the town.<sup>59</sup> This followed a period of tension and quarrels in the previous century, described in the letters from the Committee of Merchants. After the 1803 incident, Claridge records the next major conflict as one between the Bentsirs and Anafo in 1826.<sup>60</sup> The apparent internal peace during those twenty years could very well be related to the fact that this quarter of the century saw a great deal of conflict with the Asante. From the middle of the eighteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth, there was a series of successive riots which lead to an official inquiry into the matter by the British, which summed the half-century:

**In 1859 serious riots occurred between certain of the Cape Coast companies, and for the past fifty years the internal peace of the Cape Coast community has been constantly threatened, owing mainly to these riots which have lead to innumerable company disputes.<sup>61</sup>**

Laws were passed banning companies from drumming or displaying flags without specific written permission from the District Commissioner. In fact, the companies were ordered to remain absolutely silent as they were escorted by police to do road work, lest any offense spark more violence (see "Letters" in Appendix). Yet still the violent tendencies remained, culminating in a riot in 1932 which began between the Ntsin and Bentsir companies, who were in a dispute regarding the succession of the Tufuhene. Every company but the Akrampa eventually joined in the violence, which left the Ntsin and Bentsir companies bitter enemies for the next fifty years, until they finally formally reconciled with a traditional ceremony in 1982.

The Cape Coast Asafo, then, are seen to be an institution with a complicated and convoluted history. They were the effective founders and builders of the town, and they

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<sup>59</sup> Henry Meredith, 120

<sup>60</sup> quoted in W.S. Kwesi Johnson, 9.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

helped to unify the coastal states under the rule of the Fante, being the only group "able to dam the tide of Asante imperialism."<sup>62</sup> However, their rivalries amongst themselves proved quite detrimental to the town as it seemed that they established a tradition of riots along with the traditions of hard work and civil service.

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<sup>62</sup> Dr. A. Adu Boahen and J.B. Webster, 124

## CONCLUSION

The Western Sudanese empires of the Middle Ages demonstrated the enormous wealth and developmental potential made available as middlemen for international and intercontinental trade across the Sahara Desert. This trade, by the late Middle Ages, extended into the southern forest regions and even to the coast. When the Europeans, having been cut off from trade to the south and the east by various Islamic expansions into the Middle East and Europe, arrived on the coast in the fifteenth century, the peoples of southern West Africa were given the opportunity to eliminate the middlemen and deal directly with the Europeans.

The migrations of the Fante roughly coincided with this European arrival, and by the seventeenth century had begun a settlement on the shore, in what would become Cape Coast. Original settlers divided themselves into villages, or Asafo companies. These companies were the vital players in the early expansion and physical development of the town. However, as the municipal government began functioning, and as the need for a traditional militia subsided, the power and influence of the companies over the affairs of the town subsided drastically. Furthermore, arguments between the companies often lead to violent conflict, which disturbed the well-being of Cape Coast citizens as well as the progress of the town. One of the Asafo Company's mottoes, "Menamko nam bata," translated by Supi Abow Johnson to mean "If anyone meets us, there will be war,"<sup>63</sup> explains this phenomenon of company pride.

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<sup>63</sup> 15 November 1994

The institution has stood strong for centuries, but now "this system is fading out."<sup>64</sup> Amongst reason already described another is religious conflict -- many feel that their Christian or Muslim faiths preclude them from participating in an organization closely bound to fetish. Companies in large towns like Cape Coast are now active primarily in a ceremonial sense, but their place in the history of Cape Coast is one of great import. For there is perhaps no group who was more instrumental in the developmental affairs, for better or worse, of that great historical coast town.

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<sup>64</sup> Okyerema Kwamina Pra, 11 November 1994



## **Guide to Appendices:**

### A. Maps

1. Spread of Islam, 622-1400 a.d.<sup>65</sup>
2. States of the Gold Coast, 1629<sup>66</sup>
3. Coast of Guinea, ca. 1705<sup>67</sup>
4. Fante, Asante, and surrounding kingdoms in the early 19 century<sup>68</sup>

### B. Correspondences between the District Commissioner and the Omanhene 1907-1920<sup>69</sup>

### C. Variations of Spellingd of Ethnic Group Names

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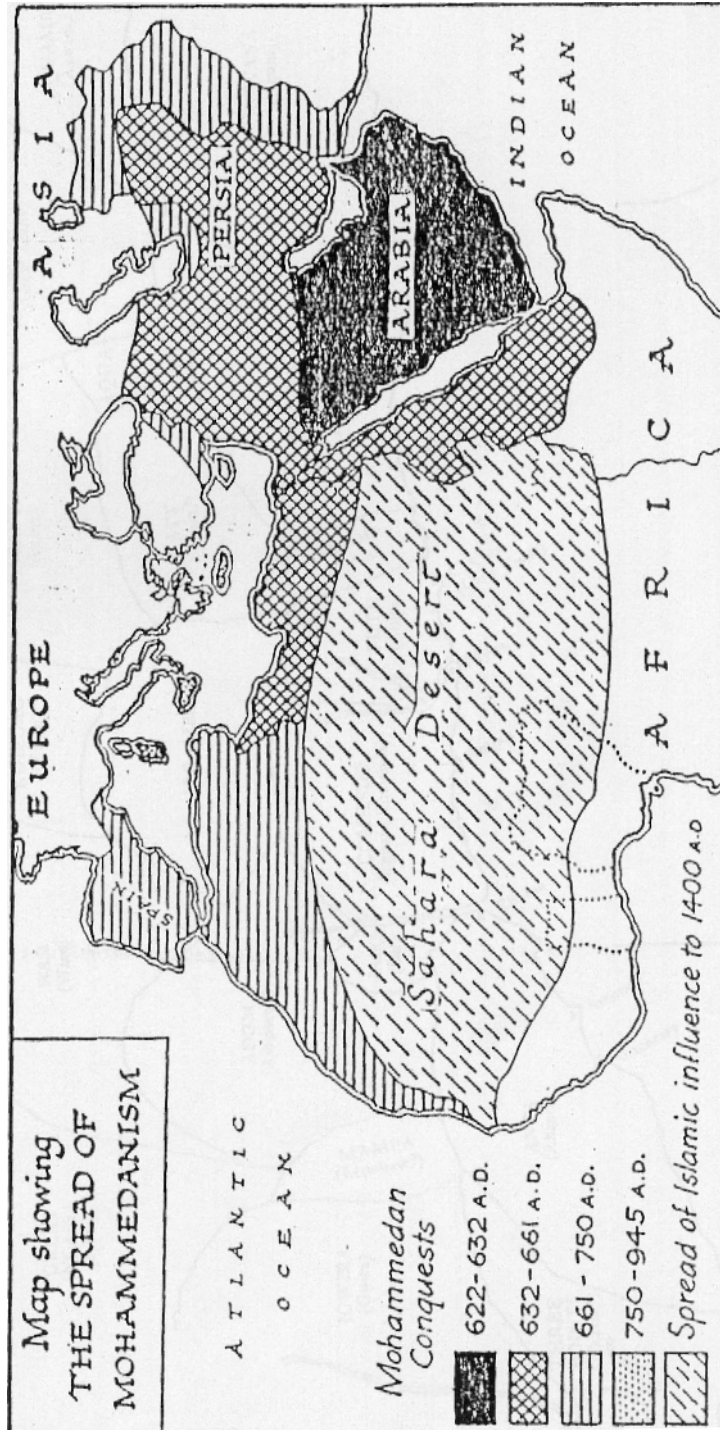
<sup>65</sup>Mate, 9

<sup>66</sup>Priestley, inlay.

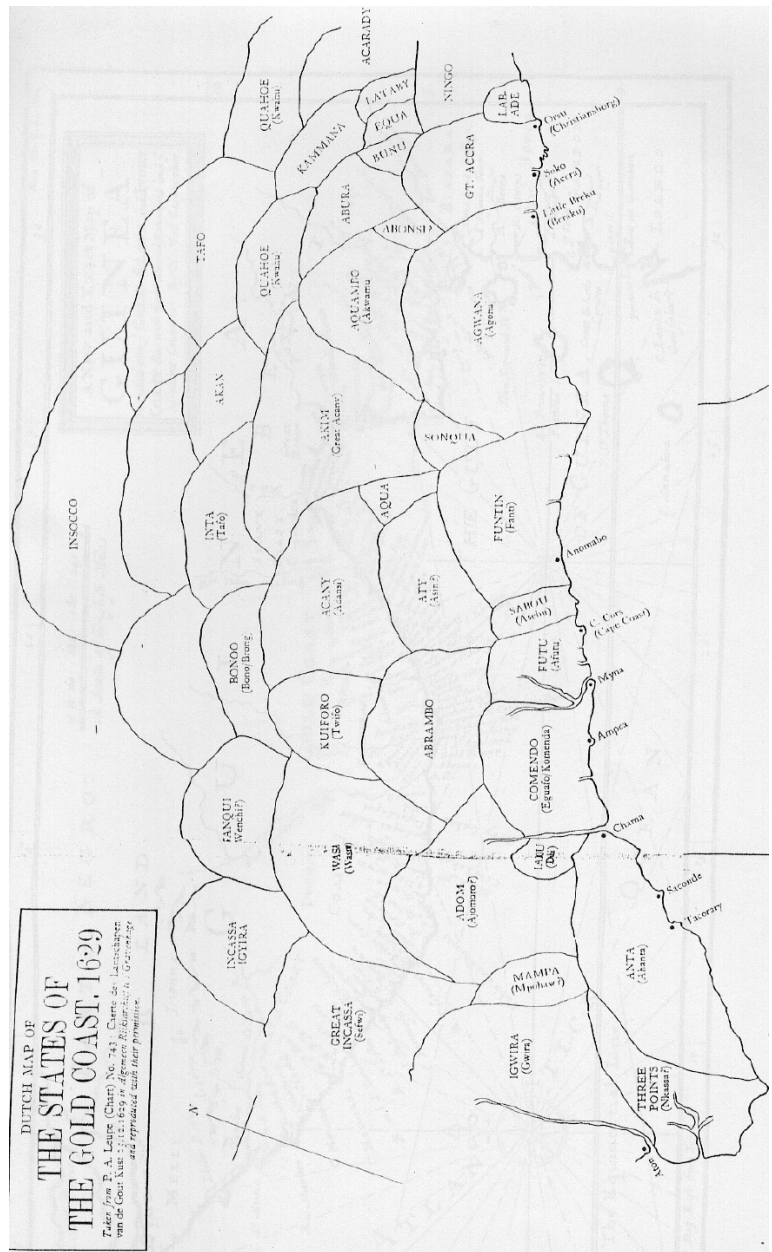
<sup>67</sup>Bosman (ii), inlay

<sup>68</sup>Crowder, 21 .

<sup>69</sup>ADM 23/1/134

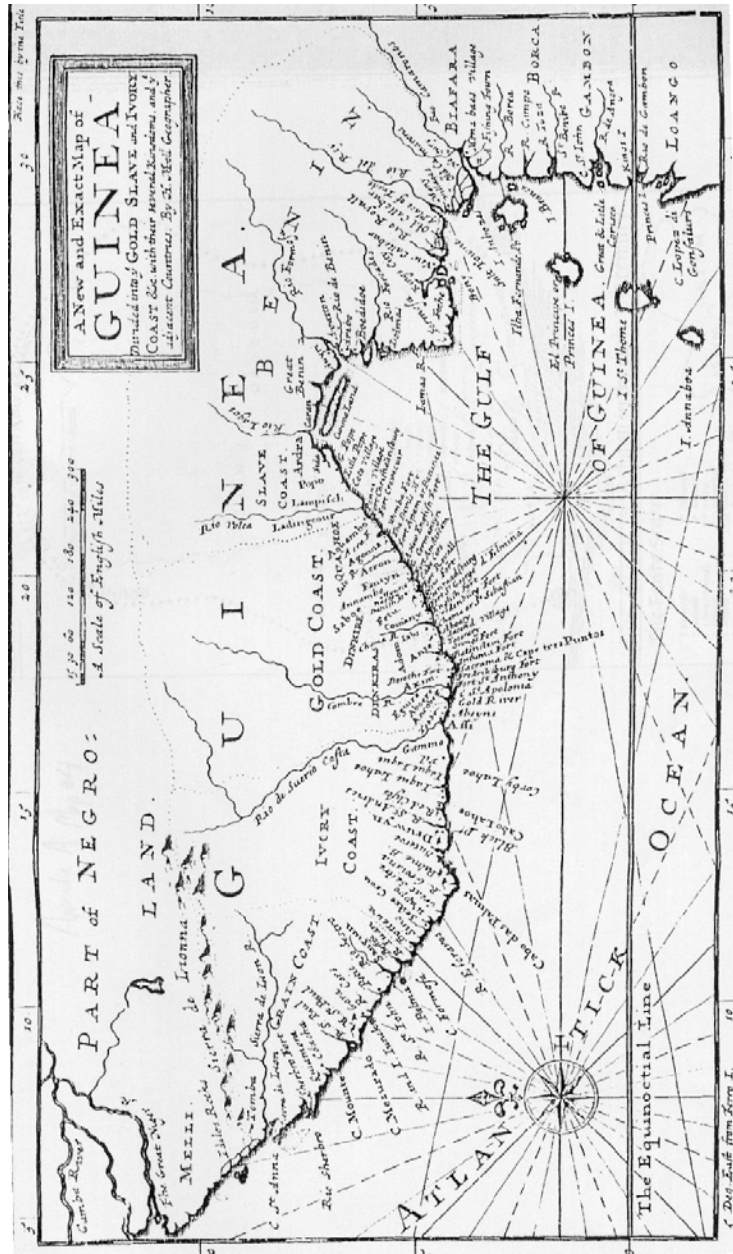


Appendix A: Map # 1

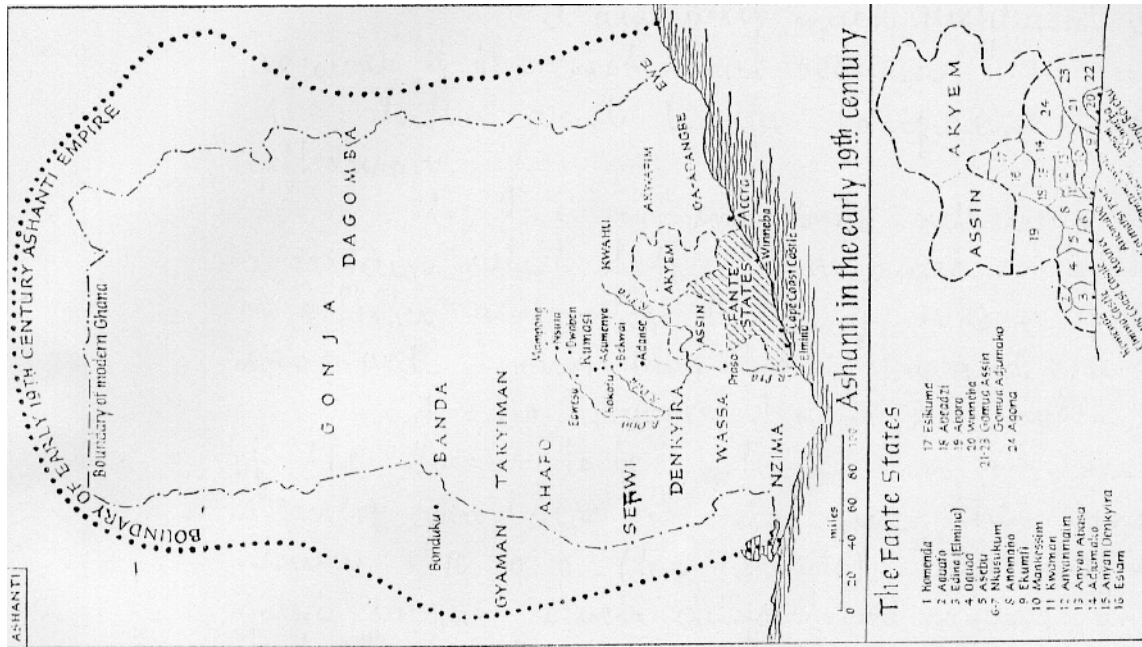


DUTCH MAP OF  
**THE STATES OF  
 THE GOLD COAST, 1629**  
 Taken from P. A. Leuze (Chart) No. 743. Carte de la Côte d'Or  
 van de Gout Noot: 112: 659 in *Algemeene Rijkskaart van Oost-Indië*  
 and reproduced with their permission.

Appendix A: Map # 2



Appendix A: Map # 3



Appendix A: Map # 4

## Appendix C

### **VARIATIONS OF SPELLINGS OF ETHNIC GROUP NAMES:**

Fante: Fanti, Fantyn, Funtin

Asante: Ashanti, Asiante

Akyem: Akim, Achim

Akwamu: Acquambo, Aquambo

Efutu: Futu, Afutu, Fetu

Agona: Agwana

Bono: Brong, Bonoo, Bonoe

Eguafo: Eguafo, Aguafo

Asebu: Sabo, Sabou

Wassa: Wassaw, Warsaw

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