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# Sustainable Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

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# Sustainable Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

## **Abstract**

Practically, the entire area of modern day Ghana was once dominated by the Asante Empire. How did such a vast empire come into existence? This empire was able to consolidate the multiple ethnic groups within the region into one unified nation. Who were some of these ethnic groups and how were they brought into the empire? The strength of the Asante's economy was extremely important to the longevity of their civilization. Their economic strength enabled them to procure funding which they utilized to build an army, to build trade networks, and to increase their reputation within the region. How did they build their economic strength within the region and how did their reputation help to safeguard them from hostile powers? The Asante influenced West African history by manipulating the pattern of trade within the region. The coastline of Ghana was coined, "The Gold Coast" due to the prominence of gold trading activities. However, this was by no means the only trade asset which the Asante possessed. Therefore, what were their other main trade commodities and with whom did the Asante engage in trade? Also, it is important to understand why trade was an important force in the establishment of the Asante's economic power and how they came to monopolize various trading networks. Then the question of how the Asante lost this economic power will also be explored. Before answering these inquiries, an ethnic profile of the Akan of whom the Asante evolved, must first be undertaken.

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History and Philosophy

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# Sustainable Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

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Departmental Honors in

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## I. Introduction

Practically, the entire area of modern day Ghana was once dominated by the Asante Empire. How did such a vast empire come into existence? This empire was able to consolidate the multiple ethnic groups within the region into one unified nation. Who were some of these ethnic groups and how were they brought into the empire? The strength of the Asante's economy was extremely important to the longevity of their civilization. Their economic strength enabled them to procure funding which they utilized to build an army, to build trade networks, and to increase their reputation within the region. How did they build their economic strength within the region and how did their reputation help to safeguard them from hostile powers? The Asante influenced West African history by manipulating the pattern of trade within the region.

The coastline of Ghana was coined, "The Gold Coast" due to the prominence of gold trading activities. However, this was by no means the only trade asset which the Asante possessed. Therefore, what were their other main trade commodities and with whom did the Asante engage in trade? Also, it is important to understand why trade was an important force in the establishment of the Asante's economic power and how they came to monopolize various trading networks. Then the question of how the Asante lost this economic power will also be explored. Before answering these inquiries, an ethnic profile of the Akan of whom the Asante evolved, must first be undertaken.

## II. Ethnic Profile of the Akan Peoples

There have existed and still remain in existence thousands of uniquely different ethnic groups within Africa. The vast majority of these groups relied on oral traditions to document their origins and history. Therefore, there is little to no written historical record of these groups prior to European colonization.<sup>1</sup> The first references to Asante in European writings occurred in the late seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup> When the European powers arrived they took shoddy records from the local peoples and rulers as to what their origins were. However, due to cultural and linguistic barriers between the two groups it should come as no surprise that the majority of this written knowledge is not only inaccurate but, in some cases erroneously bias toward the dominating European culture of the day. With this in mind and drawing upon fresh research into this area in conjunction with earlier historical records, an attempt will be made to reconstruct at least the outline of events which seem to have led to the emergence of the Asante civilization.

Currently, Ghana<sup>3</sup> is documented to have over 100 different ethnic and linguistic groups within its borders.<sup>4</sup> The largest of these can be broken down into the following population ratios: Akan 45.3%, Mole-Dagbon 15.2%, Ewe 11.7%, Ga-Dangme 7.3%, Guan 4%, Gurma 3.6%, Grusi 2.6%, Mande-Busanga 1%, other tribes 1.4%, other 7.8%;

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<sup>1</sup> Romer, Ferdinand. Ludewig. *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea*. New York; Oxford University Press, 2000. Pg. 7.

<sup>2</sup> Shinnie, Peter and Ama. *Early Asante*. Department of Archeology at the University of Calgary; 1995. Pg. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Ghana will be used in this study to refer to the modern West African state of Ghana or the British Gold Coast Colony.

<sup>4</sup> Ghana Home Page, "Ethnic Groups," [www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes](http://www.ghanaweb.com/GhanaHomePage/tribes).

based upon a census conducted in 2000.<sup>5</sup> The largest linguistic groups are comprised of the following population ratios: Asante 14.8%, Ewe 12.7%, Fante 9.9%, Boron (Brong) 4.6%, Dagomba 4.3%, Dangme 4.3%, Dagarte (Dagaba) 3.7%, Akyem 3.4%, Ga 3.4%, Akuapem 2.9%, other 36.1%; also based upon the same survey.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 is an illuminating pictorial allowing the full impression of the vast diversity which exists within West Africa. This map shows only a small portion of the area; specifically Ghana and portions of the three countries immediately surrounding it. Examining Figure 1 and the linguistic and ethnic statistics, two interesting points should be highlighted; the first, that it is the Akan peoples that comprise the largest single population within the country and the second, that the largest linguistic group is the Asante. These are even more striking realizations when the sheer number of competing ethnic groups is taken into account.

One would naturally ask how the Asante language and the Akan peoples spread to such an extent and if they had in the past exceeded this majority. Grasping at historical fragments, a short outline of where the Akan peoples emerged from can be deduced.

Akan, which include the Asante, believe that they originated from an old state located in present day southeastern Mauritania, eastern Senegal, and western Mali.<sup>7</sup> This old state was the Ghana Empire.<sup>8,9</sup>

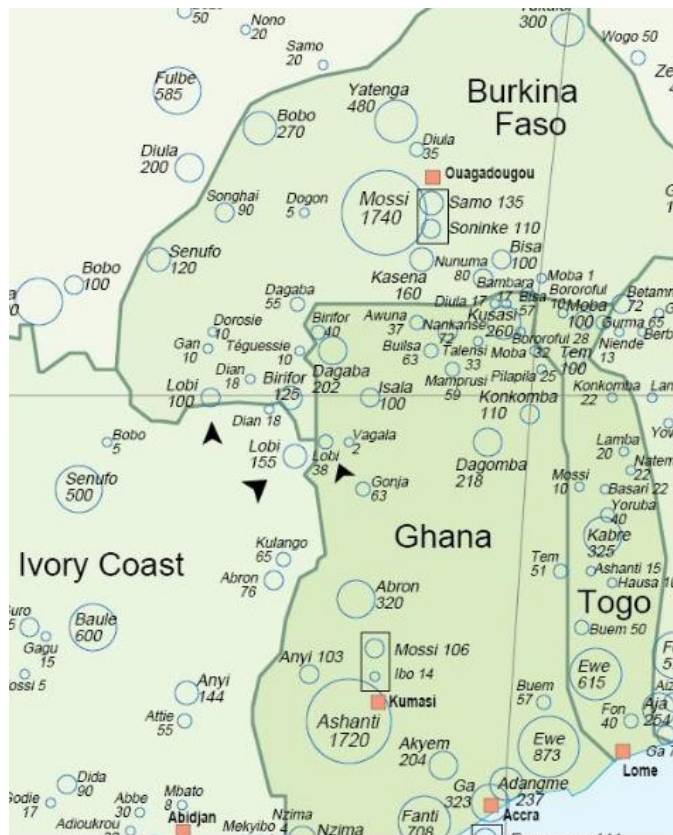
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<sup>5</sup> CIA: The World Fact Book, "Ghana," [www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/gh.html](http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/gh.html).

<sup>6</sup> CIA: The World Fact Book, "Ghana,"

<sup>7</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," *Cahiers d'Etudes Africanines* 20. (1980): 97-134. [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed September 5, 2008). Pg. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Unless otherwise stated, Ghana Empire will be used in the study to refer to the ancient Sudanic Empire.



**Figure 1:** An illustrative sampling of the large diversity of ethnic groups which exist in the immediate region of Ghana.<sup>10</sup>

The Mali Empire incorporated the Ghana Empire around 1240 C.E.<sup>11</sup> The Mali Empire is located across present-day northern Guinea and southern Mali and came into existence around 1230 C.E.<sup>12</sup>

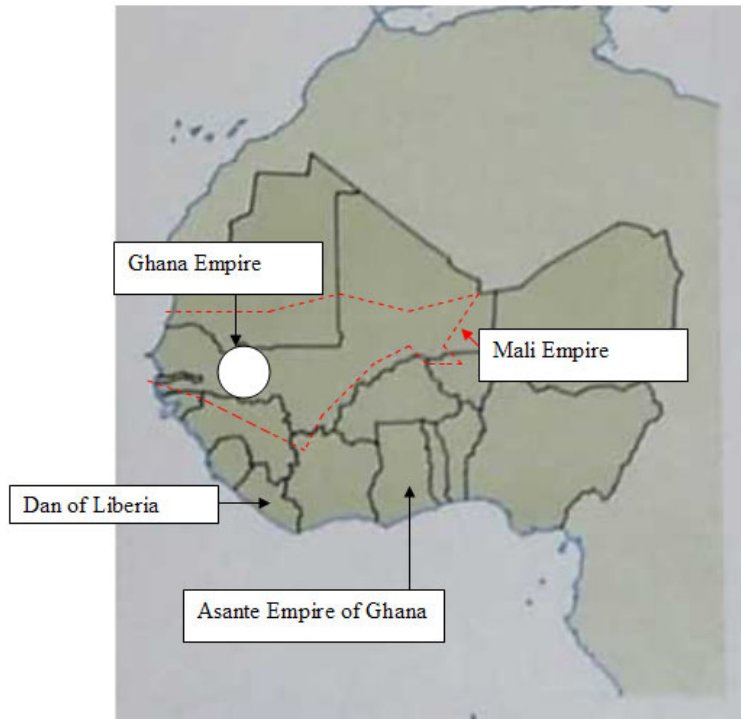
<sup>9</sup> Patrick J. Munson, "Archeology and the Prehistoric Origins of the Ghana Empire," *The Journal of African History* 21. (1980): 457-466. [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed September 10, 2008). Pg. 458.

<sup>10</sup> Julien Bosc, "Rand African Art". [www.randafricanart.com/Reference\\_materials\\_LOBI.html](http://www.randafricanart.com/Reference_materials_LOBI.html).

<sup>11</sup> Boyd Van Rensburg, *An Atlas of African Affairs* (New York: Andrew Boyd & Patrick van Rensburg, 1965), Pg. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Charles H. Cutter, "Mali: A Bibliographical Introduction," *African Studies Bulletin* 9. (1966): Pg. 75.





**Figure 2:** Major civilizations which contributed to the emergence of the Asante.<sup>13</sup>

The African country of Ghana derived its name through the Akan peoples. As this vast empire declined in power other groups moved into the region. One of the largest groups was the Mande-speaking peoples.<sup>14</sup> Prior to the Mande-speaking group, even an oral record for the other Akan groups within Ghana is not available. There is a tradition that a Mel group, the Kisi; were the original occupants of the Ghana region.<sup>15</sup> However, they were dominated by the Mande-speaking peoples and absorbed into their culture by the 16<sup>th</sup> century leaving little oral or written evidence for this hypothesis.<sup>16</sup> Figure 2

<sup>13</sup> Dorling Kindersley. "D. K. Images". [www.dkimages.com/.../Africa/Maps/Maps-05.html](http://www.dkimages.com/.../Africa/Maps/Maps-05.html). (accessed 14 October 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Charles H. Cutter, "Mali: A Bibliographical Introduction," Pg. 75.

<sup>15</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 109.

<sup>16</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 109.

outlines these empires' and civilizations' geographical locations across western Africa. This illustration also gives a rough guide as to the distance between these peoples and the country of present day Ghana where the Asante would come to reside. The Asante belonged to the Akan peoples which comprised a range of varying ethnic groups.

Figure 3 outlines many but, not all; of the varying ethnic groups which belonged to the Akan speaking peoples in Ghana. The term, Akan is a nonspecific term used to refer to an ethnically diverse group of people who are connected by their linguistic ties.<sup>17</sup> The Lobi are an ethnic group in northern Ghana famed for their wooden carvings.<sup>18</sup> This group of Akan participated in trade with the Asante before being brought under the control of the French government after 1898. The Frafra are an Akan ethnic group in northern Ghana who are mainly sedentary farmers.<sup>19</sup> The Akuapem are another ethnic Akan speaking group in Ghana who in 1730 formed their own state, the Akuapem state.<sup>20</sup>

The southwest region of Ghana is home to the Aowin, they are one of the many ethnic groups which comprise the Akan peoples.<sup>21</sup> They are known for their terracotta sculpture artwork within Ghana.<sup>22</sup> The Aowin interacted with the Asante on a trade basis and never governed nor, were governed by the Asante. The Kwahu people occupied a region immediately east of the Asante Empire and were considered to be part of the

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<sup>17</sup> Iowa State University, "Art and Life in Africa," <http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people.html>.

<sup>18</sup> Julien Bosc, "Rand African Art".

<sup>19</sup> Iowa State University, "Art and Life in Africa".

<sup>20</sup> Akuapem Kuronti, "Kuronti Division," [www.akuapemkuronti.org](http://www.akuapemkuronti.org).

<sup>21</sup> Patricia Crane Coronel, "Aowin Terracotta Sculpture," *African Arts* 13. (1979): 28-98. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (accessed October 10, 2008). Pg. 28.

<sup>22</sup> Patricia Crane Coronel, "Aowin Terracotta Sculpture," Pg. 28.

empire. They are also one of the Akan peoples however, in 1888 they openly rebelled and killed the Asante emissary; declaring their independence from Asante rule.<sup>23</sup>

The Fante are another Akan people occupying Ghana. Their territory resides south of the Asante Empire. The Fante group was never governed by the Asante. Instead they forged an alliance with the British against the Asante in 1874 and shortly after joined the Gold Coast Colony of Britain.<sup>24</sup> Their coastal positioning allowed them some degree of control over the trade which was conducted along the coast and that which was conducted within the interior of Ghana. The Fante acted as a buffer for the Asante against foreign invaders. It was not until after 1844, when the Fante aligned with the British that the Fante and the Asante groups engaged in years of war.

The Asante civilization extended from the Comoé River in the west to the Togo Mountains in the east.<sup>25</sup> Figure 3 shows an excellent depiction of the Asante's territory. Kumase is the Asante capital. The Asante are a conglomeration of the Akan people.

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<sup>23</sup> Iowa State University, "Art and Life in Africa".

<sup>24</sup> Iowa State University, "Art and Life in Africa".

<sup>25</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".



**Figure 3:** Showing separate groups of people who shared the country of Ghana with the Asante.<sup>26</sup>

They grouped together in an effort to defeat the Denkyira, a hostile neighboring clan.<sup>27</sup>

Their ability to unite, overpower their enemy, and establish an empire speaks volumes about their belief in their natural ability to succeed and improve themselves. It also illustrates that the Akan people had to have shared a certain set of principles and values which united them even before they became a unified force in West Africa. One of their unifying themes was that the leader of each family or clans' power was symbolized by his possession of a stool.

<sup>26</sup> Iowa State University, "Art and Life in Africa".

<sup>27</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

A family when influential enough will establish a stool, which is entailed, on the head of the family. As generations pass, the stool becomes the tangible emblem of the family fortunes, and represents, to the living, the terrestrial abode of the family names. Libations are poured over it and food placed near to it at stated intervals. The stool is washed with the idea of purifying the souls of the departed. The stool acquires all the virtues of a family shrine, besides remaining the outward sign of the occupants' status and authority.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore, each Akan household and clan recognized the stool as a symbol of authority and leadership. When the Denkiyra were defeated in 1698-1701; the separate Akan clans joined together under one leadership and under one empire; the Asante Empire.<sup>29</sup> In the early 1700's Osei Tutu, an Asante leader brought all the Akan states in central Ghana under the rule of the Asante. He also founded the Asante capital, Kumase. In 1712 or 1717 Tutu died and Opuku Ware I succeeded him.<sup>30</sup> He brought all the northern Ghana states under Asante's rule which would become the largest extent of the Asante Empire. When this occurred the family stool and local clan stools were banished and replaced with a single unifying symbol of authority for the entire empire. "From a family stool it is but one step to the formation of a stool for a congeries of family; thence to a tribal stool and so up the scale until the great national stool is reached".<sup>31</sup> This great symbol of national unity was a stool constructed entirely of gold; which was an extremely abundant metal in the Asante Empire.

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<sup>28</sup> Fuller, Francis. *A Vanished Dynasty: Ashanti*. London; Frank Cass and Co., 1968. Pg. 5.

<sup>29</sup> Lewin, J. Thomas. *Asante Before the British*. Kansas; The Regents Press of Kansas., 1978. Pg. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>31</sup> Fuller, Francis. *A Vanished Dynasty: Ashanti*. Pg. 7.

### III. Gold Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

The geographical area which is comprised of modern-day Ghana has an abundant supply of gold. Figure 5 outlines the natural gold resources which existed throughout the country of Ghana and her immediate neighbors.



**Figure 5:** A geographic map of Western Africa depicting the abundant distribution of gold deposits within the country of Ghana.<sup>32</sup>

The University of Iowa's "Art and Life in Africa" compilation, speaks of the rise of the Asante Empire as being directly linked to a single trade asset as follows, "The rise of the early Akan centralized states can be traced to the 13th century and is likely related to the

<sup>32</sup> Spilpunt. "Mineral Deposits and Africa". [www.gsr.com/images/WestAfrica04Feb2006.jpg](http://www.gsr.com/images/WestAfrica04Feb2006.jpg).

opening of trade routes established to move gold throughout the region.”<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it is the Asante’s trade in gold which should be examined in detail above and beyond any other area of their trade economy. Without this trade asset the Asante may not have been able to branch out into other trade areas and would not have had the economic and financial stability to blossom into an established civilization.

A closer re-examination of Figure 5 will clarify the answer to the question concerning how the Asante came to be one of the largest traders of gold in Africa. Figure 5 clearly shows that the great abundance of all gold deposits within Western Africa lay directly beneath the territory which the Asante had come to settle. No other known area in West Africa exists where the gold deposits are so densely concentrated. The vast abundance of gold in this small region enabled the Asante people to trade this asset with a seemingly inexhaustible supply line. In contrast to the other main trade items that the Asante utilized to expand their network, gold is unique in multiple ways.

The most important property of gold which distinguishes it from other trade commodities is that gold is not necessary to sustain life. There is no human need for gold which could explain its high demand throughout Africa which allowed the Asante to trade this asset as vigorously as they did. Therefore, the question must be asked: At such a time in human history when obtaining food and merely surviving captured the majority of a human being’s time, what would drive a person to waste a good deal of their hunting and gathering time mining, cleaning, and hoarding an asset which seems to have no direct value to human life? In other words, what is the value of gold in pre-colonial Africa? More importantly, who determined its value and who were the people who were willing to trade with the Asante for this asset. After the answers to those questions have been

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<sup>33</sup> Iowa State University, “Art and Life in Africa”.

established it is equally important to explain how the Asante's gold trade allowed them to build trade networks across Western Africa and how those trade networks opened the door for them to multiple new areas of trade. For it is the trade networks which the Asante established which allowed for an economic expansion and reputation which sustained them for so long.

The earliest mention of the metal, gold; is in stories which state that Neolithic man discovered nuggets of gold in riverbeds around the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium B.C.E.; however, they didn't find the metal to be strong enough to be useful for any of their present needs and therefore, didn't develop methods of utilization for this metal.<sup>34</sup> It has been estimated that the majority of a person's working hours were spent finding, collecting or hunting, and preparing food; before hierarchical structures were formed in societies. After hierarchical structures were formed in societies, the few people at the top now had a large portion of their day free from food-related activities. The Egyptian civilization is a good example of the first well documented hierarchical structured society. It was therefore, not until the time of the ancient Egyptian civilization that gold became a commodity to be regarded as valuable by mankind.<sup>35</sup> By the time of the Egyptians, people within the society had divided themselves into different economic classes. Some, like the ruling families of Egypt were so wealthy compared to the rest of society that they were able to hire people to take care of all their needs. This 'freeing up' of their time allowed them to focus on more trivial matters. This is when objects of beauty became valuable to the world because, the wealthy were willing to pay money to obtain them and

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<sup>34</sup> Thomas Hoving and Carmen Gomez-Moreno, "Gold," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (1972-1973), [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). (accessed September 20, 2008). Pg. 72.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Hoving and Carmen Gomez-Moreno, "Gold," Pg. 72.



the poor needed the money to purchase food so that they too could extract themselves from the daily activity of food procurement.

The malleability of gold enabled the poor to wield the gold that they mined from the ground into innumerable objects which they then could sell for money to the ruling classes of Egypt. As the wealthy were willing to pay greater and greater amounts for gold objects; the 'value' of gold increased. Now people began using some of that money obtained from their gold craft to purchase the manpower necessary to mine ever increasing amounts of gold and to help them craft the metal. Eventually, because gold is a finite natural resource; the source of gold would become exhausted in the immediate area. These craftsmen, not willing to end their lifestyle began trading at greater and greater distances for their desired metal. As these trade routes branched out across Africa; the value and reputation of gold correspondingly increased. This reputation and value had spread to such a degree that gold maintained its status even after the Egyptian empire collapsed. Smaller hierarchical civilizations throughout Africa consisted of leaders who imitated the Egyptians' love of gold and helped to maintain the gold trade throughout the African continent. It is a continuation of this tradition which enabled the Asante to begin trading their gold deposits to other civilizations across Africa for a considerable profit.

Gold possesses six traits which have assisted in its continued success as a valued trade commodity. Gold unlike other metals such as iron is easily malleable. Therefore, the number of shapes and forms which it can be fashioned into are only limited by the imagination of its maker. In combination with this trait gold is also long lasting; it will

not rust as copper will if left damp.<sup>36</sup> Even after centuries of neglect gold objects have been found and excavated from numerous sites and still were found to be in possession of their original beauty.<sup>37</sup> Gold's natural luster and beauty also attracted the wealthy to this metal; they could use it for numerous decorative means. The third trait is that gold is re-useable. It can be shaped into an object then melted down and reshaped. This process can be repeated indefinitely and the gold will not suffer in quality. Forth, gold is indeed a finite natural resource.<sup>38</sup> Gold can be reused; however, once it has all been extracted from the earth and purchased; no more will become available. The finite quality of gold also increases gold's value to people who wish to possess it. They fear that if they do not purchase this gold object then there is a possibility that it will no longer be available at a price they can afford in the future. This drives consumers to purchase the commodity. Lastly, gold is a valuable trade commodity because, it requires no maintenance and never spoils; in contrast to livestock and food which were also popular trade commodities.<sup>39</sup> This last attribute allowed gold to be traded across the world readily; not to mention across the continent of Africa. These six attributes of gold helped the Asante to maintain it as a valued trade commodity in West Africa.

After the fall of the Egyptian empire many smaller scaled civilizations came into existence throughout the continent. A number of these traded with the Asante for their gold deposits and were instrumental in building up the Asante's wealth and reputation.

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<sup>36</sup> Scott Turner, "Gold," *The Science News-Letter* (1933), [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (accessed October 31, 2008). Pg. 166.

<sup>37</sup> Scott Turner, "Gold," Pg. 167.

<sup>38</sup> Scott Turner, "Gold," Pg. 166.

<sup>39</sup> Scott Turner, "Gold," Pg. 166.

Before, examining who traded with the Asante let's first consider how the Asante discovered their gold deposits and how they mined the gold from these sources.

The Asante first discovered their territory contained gold deposits in the 14<sup>th</sup> century near the Bono Manso area of Ghana. Figure 6 depicts this region in the north-western section of the country, just south of the Black Volta River.<sup>40</sup> The gold discovery in this region encouraged local trade and small trading towns began to emerge and take root around the area. Figure 6 lists trade towns such as Begho and Wenchi as examples of towns which were able to emerge from the economic boost which the local gold trade brought to the region.

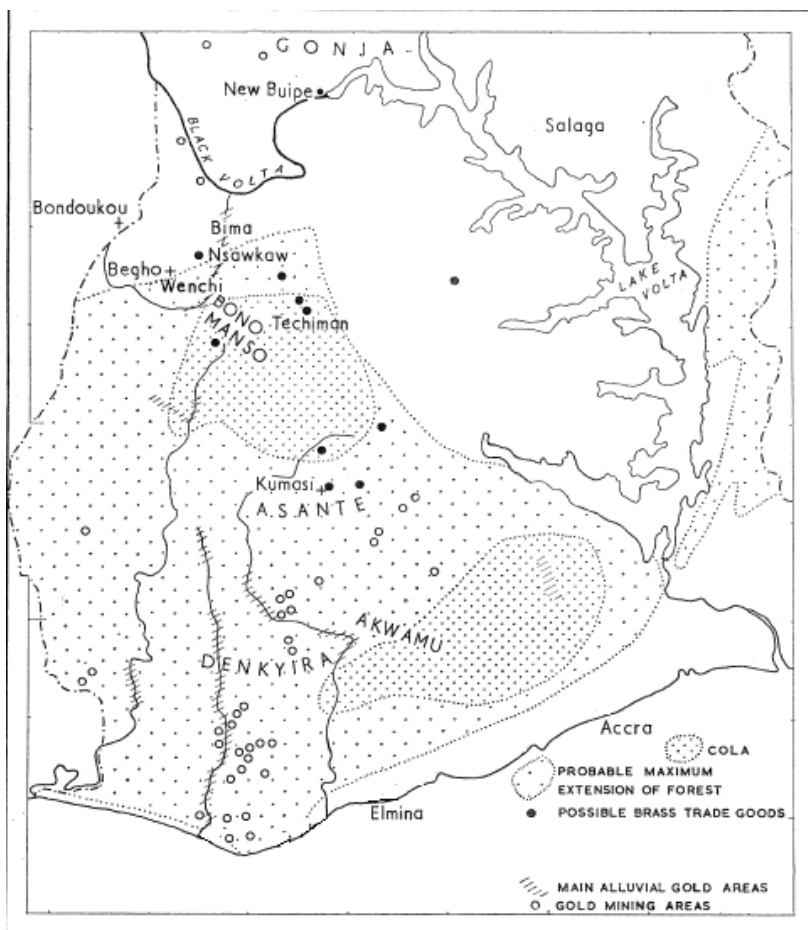
This gold discovery in the 14<sup>th</sup> century did not lead to an immediate economic boon for the Asante for two reasons. First the Asante lacked the knowledge of how to exploit this gold deposit for its maximum potential. There are several methods to mine gold; each leading the miner to higher yields for smaller amounts of effort. At the beginning of Asante's gold history they only utilized the most inefficient means of gold mining; that is they panned for gold. Panning for gold involves sifting through the sediments of riverbeds randomly in the hopes that the miner will visually be able to detect the presence of gold in their filter. Secondly, the Asante's trade routes were only roughly developed through Ghana and its vicinity at this time. Therefore, as the gold trade developed the trade routes developed simultaneously.

The mining of gold was open to every common citizen within the Asante Empire. Each miner was simply required to pay a two-third payment of the gold mined

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<sup>40</sup> Merrick Posnansky, "Aspects of Early West African Trade," *World Archaeology* (1973), [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org) (accessed August 21, 2008). Pg. 164.

to the king.<sup>41</sup> This open-ness encouraged the Asante people to discover more gold deposits for themselves and to trade as extensively as possible so that they could build their own personal wealth.



**Figure 6:** Illustrates the Ghanaian area of Bono Manso; where gold deposits were first located within the country by the Asante in the 14<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>42</sup>

It was not long before many other major gold deposits were discovered throughout Ghana. The locations of these sites are depicted in Figure 6. The king's

<sup>41</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* (1972), www.jstor.org (accessed August 12, 2008). Pg. 243.

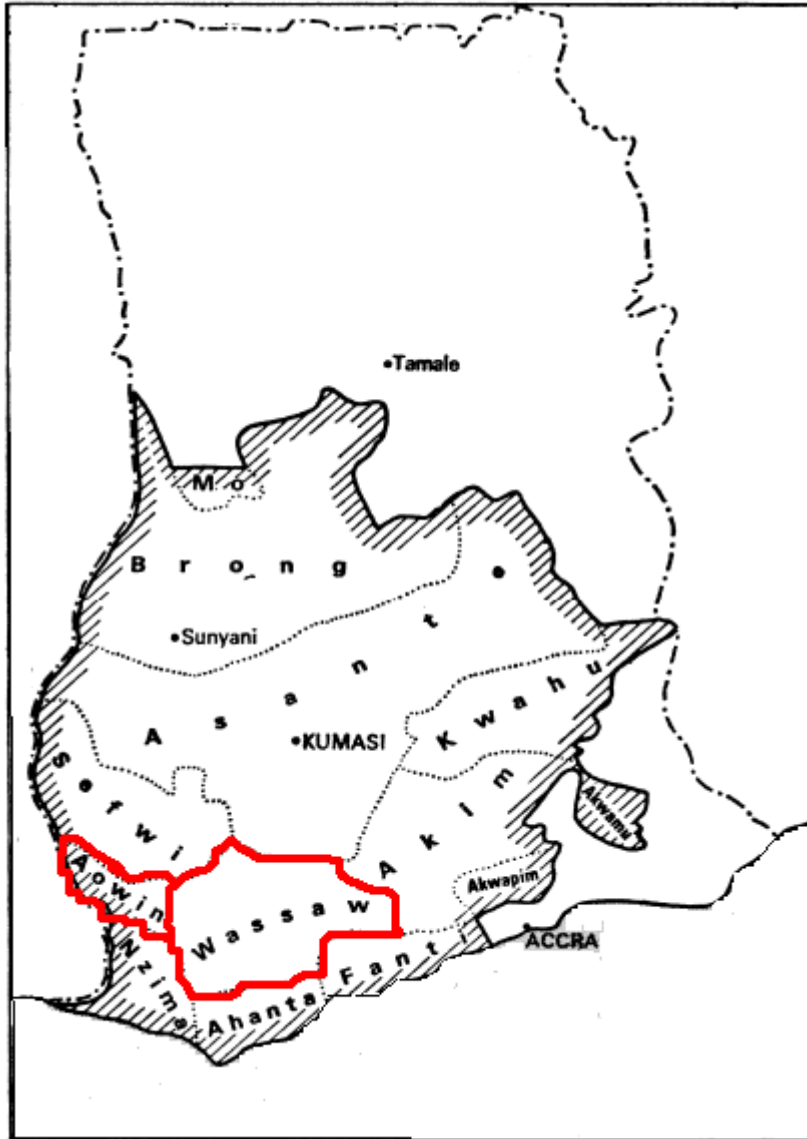
<sup>42</sup> Merrick Posnansky, "Aspects of Early West African Trade," Pg. 164.

refusal to demand a complete monopoly over the gold trade also allowed for the miners to develop a protective ownership of the land and a loyalty to the king. This discouraged revolts against the king's power and instead led to the surrounding Akan peoples' willingness to defend the Asante territory if necessary. As more people actively participated in the gold trade a net of people grew surrounding the capital of Kumase who felt loyal to the king and were willing to fight to protect the king's gold-rich territory; their gold-containing territory. The buffer zones protected the Asante Empire from possible hostile enemies because, it meant that the enemy would have to push through more and more Asante-friendly land before it could reach Kumase and overthrow the government. This made it increasingly unlikely that a foreign power would choose this option to obtain the resources they wanted thereby, leaving them with no other option but to trade with the Asante for their needs. In turn this led to a widening of the buffer zone and the pattern continued throughout West Africa; until the European invasion whose effects will be discussed later.

As more and more gold was discovered the Asante's reputation as suppliers of gold spread throughout Africa. The two main areas within Ghana at which the natural gold deposits were the most highly concentrated are Aowin and Wassaw.<sup>43</sup> The locations of these two regions are illustrated in Figure 7. With the discovery of these two much larger gold deposits the king of Asante began to place additional restrictions on trade.

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<sup>43</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 237.



**Figure 6:** Map of Ghana, depicting the location of the two main gold producing areas in Asante; Aowin and Wassaw.<sup>44</sup>

The major change which was exacted is that the only trade route that would be maintained from the southern two gold containing regions to the north of Ghana; would intersect through the capital, Kumase.<sup>45</sup> This decision to invest in the maintenance of

<sup>44</sup> K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast*, London. (1970). Pg. 236.

<sup>45</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 242.

trade routes is important in a country such as Ghana, whose climate is mostly of a tropical rainforest. The rate of agricultural growth in a rainforest environment is extremely high. Without continual maintenance, in regards to clearing the road from plant growth, the trade routes would quickly become overgrown. This overgrowth would make it difficult for the traders to transverse large quantities of trade goods through the rainforest environment. It was in this way that the king ensured that all mined gold could be calculated and the correct amount of the two-thirds royal contribution would be obtained from all gold trade.<sup>46</sup> This combination of bottlenecking the trade through Ghana but, still allowing the Akan peoples to openly mine, collect, and trade gold is what ultimately led to the Asante's economic boon which sustained their civilization for centuries.<sup>47</sup>

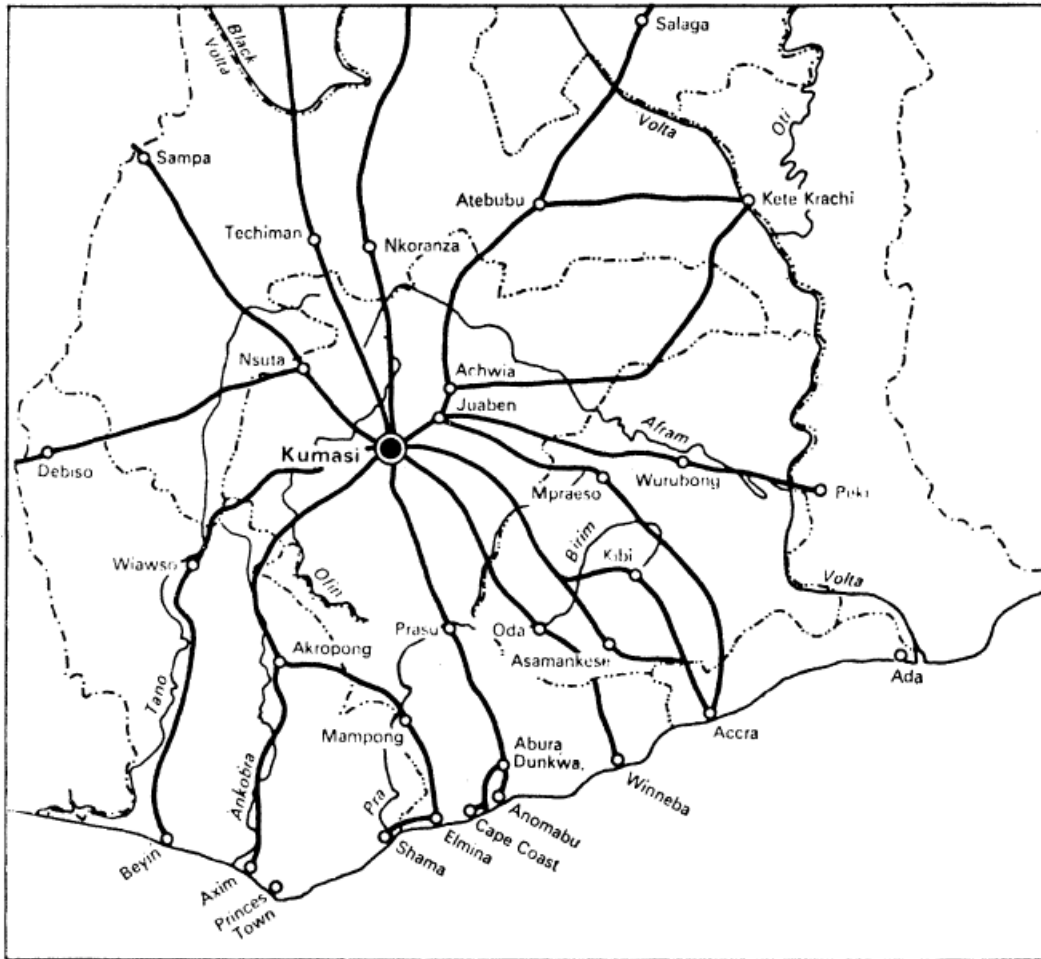
Figure 7 illustrates how the Asante king's decision to only maintain trade routes that led through Kumase, resulted in a bottleneck in the trade networks that developed throughout Ghana; allowing the Asante monarchy to control and gain direct wealth from the trade.

Soon all other aspects of trade which developed as offshoots of the gold trade were treated in a similar manner to the great benefit of the Asante. These other trade offshoots will be discussed shortly. Other major empires within West Africa soon came to trade extensively with the Asante for their gold.

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<sup>46</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 243.

<sup>47</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 245.



**Figure 7:** Illustrates how all major trade routes between the north and the south of the country of Ghana had to pass through the Asante capital of Kumase.<sup>48</sup>

Trade first spread directly around the Bono Manso region, north of Kumase, which is where the first gold deposits were discovered; resulting in the development of trading towns such as Begho and Wenchi. Djenné a city in the modern day country of Mali was under the control of the Songhai Empire in the 15<sup>th</sup> century and traded extensively with Bono Manso trade towns for gold.

After the two main gold producing regions to the south of Kumase, Aowin and Wassaw were discovered; the king enacted the bottleneck on the trade route throughout

<sup>48</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 242.



most of Ghana. When this occurred it resulted in a dispersion of the people from the trading towns,<sup>49</sup> and an extension of the trade routes outside of West Africa. Two main geographic areas which traded extensively with the Asante for gold, also traded with them for a much needed but, non-existent commodity within Asante's territory, brass.

Brass is an alloy of copper and zinc. It is utilized to construct multiple objects which require a more sturdy material than gold could offer. No copper deposits are found within the borders of Ghana.<sup>50</sup> One of the closest copper deposits within Africa to Ghana lay in the region of modern day Sudan. Extensive trading existed between the Funj Empire of the Sudan and the Asante Empire of Ghana after the 1500's. The great distance between these two empires helped ensure the spread of trade routes eastward of Ghana and more importantly helped to spread the reputation of the Asante across Africa.

The nearest copper deposit is located within present day Mauritania. The exchange of these two metals between these two regions sparked an increase in the north-south trade within Ghana. While multiple objects crafted of brass and gold were exchanged between the two regions; one of the more interesting exchanges grew into the development of an entire way of life for West Africa.

It had become a commonality for the people of Mauritania to construct brass boxes which they would use to hold their money; much like a modern day wallet. When the Asante began to trade with the Mauritians for their brass objects; it was one of the many which were exchanged.<sup>51</sup> It quickly grew in popularity among the Asante Empire,

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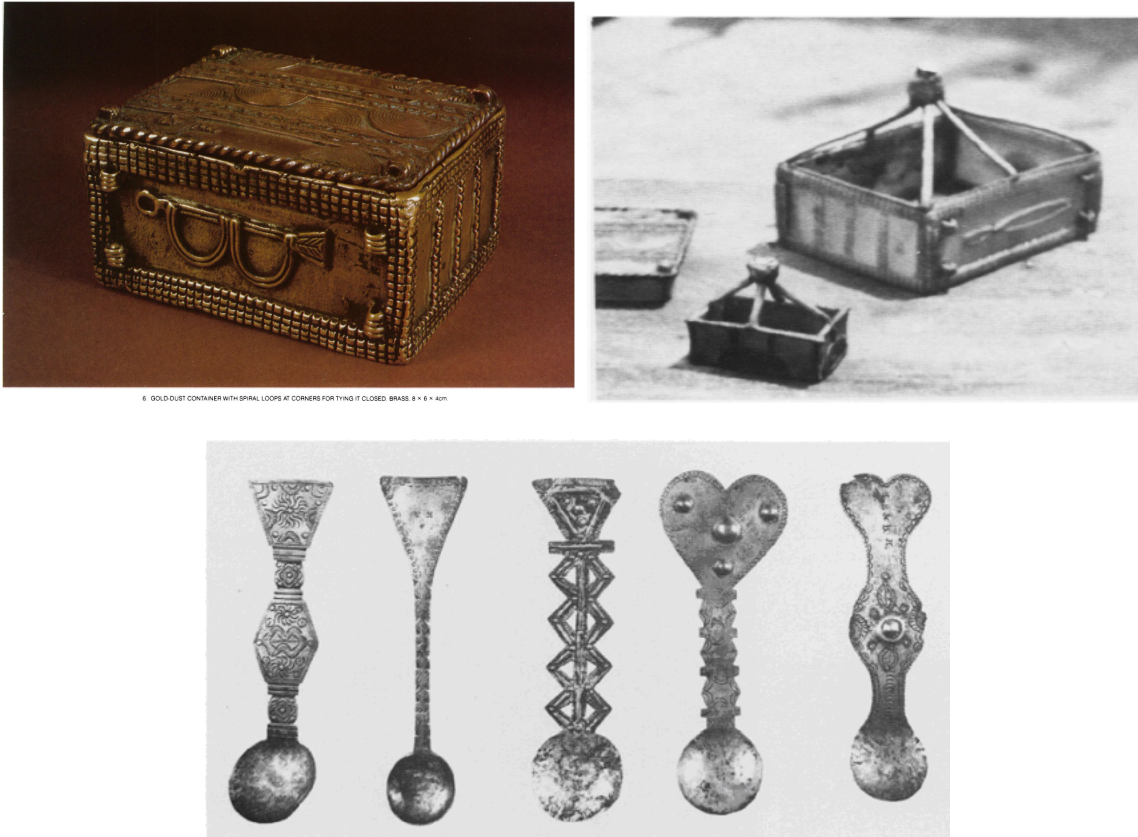
<sup>49</sup> Merrick Posnansky, "Aspects of Early West African Trade," Pg. 156.

<sup>50</sup> Merrick Posnansky, "Aspects of Early West African Trade," Pg. 151.

<sup>51</sup> Christine Fox, "Asante Brass Casting," *African Arts* 19 (1986): Pg. 66.

the Akan people in general, and neighboring tribes. Because the Asante would exchange gold in the form of gold dust, as their form of currency, a system developed in which gold dust was carried around in these brass boxes throughout the Asante Empire.<sup>52</sup>

Figure 9 depicts examples of the brass boxes.



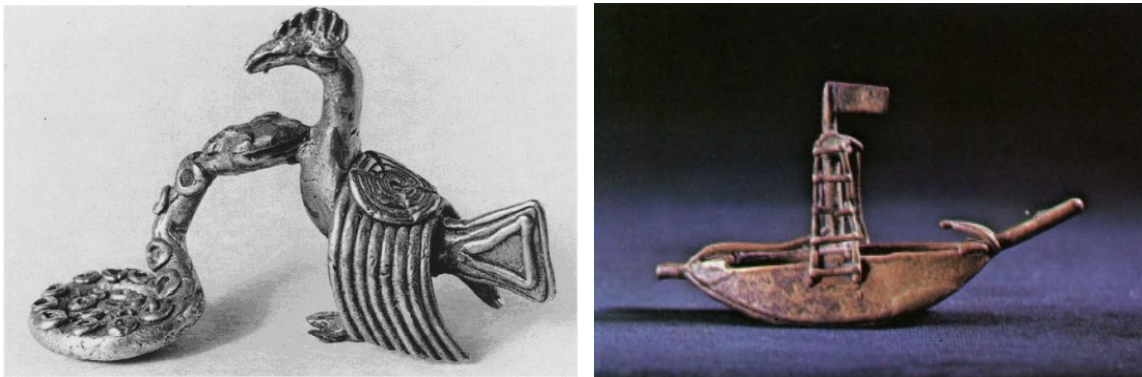
**Figure 9:** Elaborately decorated brass boxes used to store and transport gold dust as currency within the Asante Empire and Western Africa. Spoons used to place the gold dust into the boxes.<sup>53</sup>

During trade transactions, these brass boxes were placed on one side of a scale. Then weights of varying shapes and sizes, with known weight values; were placed on the

<sup>52</sup> Christine Fox, "Asante Brass Casting," Pg. 68.

<sup>53</sup> Christine Fox, "Asante Brass Casting," Pg. 69.

other side of the scale. The gold dust was then spooned into the boxes using the special spoons, until the appropriate weight was reached. Figure 9 also illustrates an example of the spoons used during these transactions. It was in this way that the Asante counted out their currency. Figure 10 displays examples of some of the numerous shapes and forms which the monetary weights were crafted into.



**Figure 10:** Gold weights used to measure the quantity of gold being exchanged during trade transactions.<sup>54</sup>

When the traders passed through Kumase, they stopped to have their gold weighed by the king. The gold weights he used were two thirds lighter than the traders' weights.<sup>55</sup> The difference is what the king would take as his share from the traders.<sup>56</sup>

All the Asante traders owned their own set of gold-weights. Throughout the Asante kingdom when a boy reached 'the age of discretion' his father would give him a small amount of gold dust and his own set of gold-weights along with miniature spoons so that he could learn how to measure the gold, trade with it, and to signify his passage

<sup>54</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," *African Arts* 5 (1971): 8-15. Pg. 12.

<sup>55</sup> Anti, A. A. *The Ancient Asante King*. The Volta Bridge Publishing Group Co.; 1974. Pg. 22.

<sup>56</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

into adulthood.<sup>57</sup> This practice signifies the importance which the Asante people placed on trade. These weights were passed down in a matrilineal line of descent through the family.<sup>58</sup> The family set of gold-weights was highly valued and kept carefully wrapped in leather or cloth when not being used.<sup>59</sup> In some instances the gold-weights would be buried along side the owner.<sup>60</sup> These boxes and weights were named Asante gold weights and even though modern day Western Africa has switched to paper currency and the units or values in this gold weighing system of measurements have been largely forgotten; the gold weights and brass boxes can still be found in numerous households as keepsakes of their heritage.<sup>61</sup>

While it was very common for the trade to consist of simply gold dust and gold nuggets, the Asante also created innumerable gold objects which they traded. As a result of their gold crafting, this civilization developed a technique known as lost wax-casting which allowed them to mold the molten gold into designs of their choosing.<sup>62</sup>

The Asante quickly exploited this technique with all other forms of metal such as silver, copper, and bronze.<sup>63</sup> The lost wax-casting technique involved creating a mold of the design from beeswax.<sup>64</sup> Then from the beeswax mold, a mold made from palm-nut

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<sup>57</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

<sup>58</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

<sup>59</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

<sup>60</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

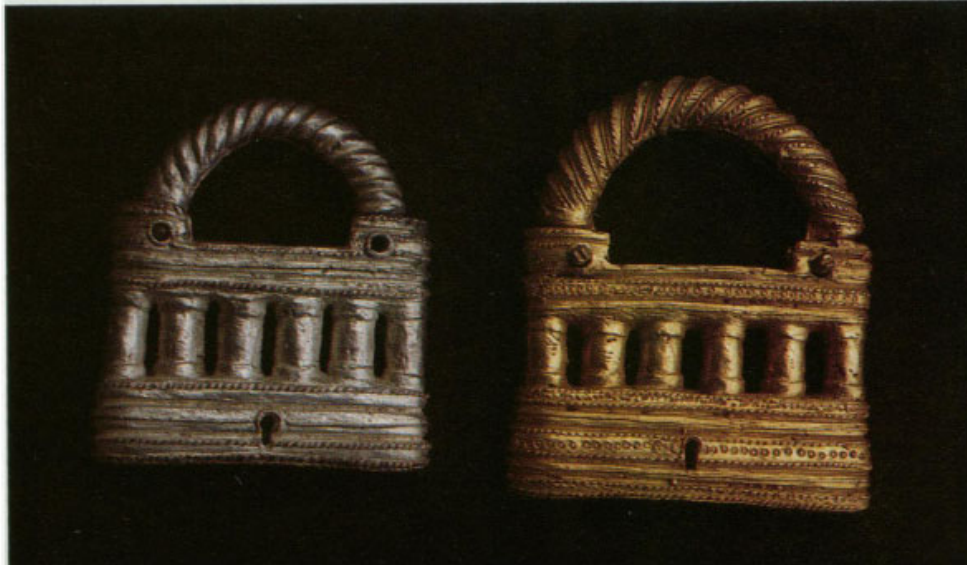
<sup>61</sup> M. D. McLeod, "Goldweights of the Asante," Pg. 8.

<sup>62</sup> Christine Fox, "Asante Brass Casting," Pg. 66.

<sup>63</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," *African Arts* (1984), www.jstor.org. (accessed July 20, 2008). Pg. 48.

<sup>64</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 48.

fiber would be crafted. Next, more wax would be poured into this palm-nut fiber mold and allowed to solidify. Then, a ceramic-like mixture is coated onto the wax mold and this is allowed to harden.<sup>65</sup> The beeswax is then melted away leaving only the negative space of the original.<sup>66</sup>



**Figure 11:** An example of objects created from the lost wax-casting technique.<sup>67</sup>

Lastly, the molten metal is poured into a hollow shell and once this hardens the metal object is extracted from the mold and is complete.<sup>68</sup> Figure 11 shows locks which were molded using the technique of lost wax-casting. The lock on the right is in gold but, the lock on the left is made from silver. This lost wax-casting technique was utilized for many different types of metal throughout the Asante Empire.

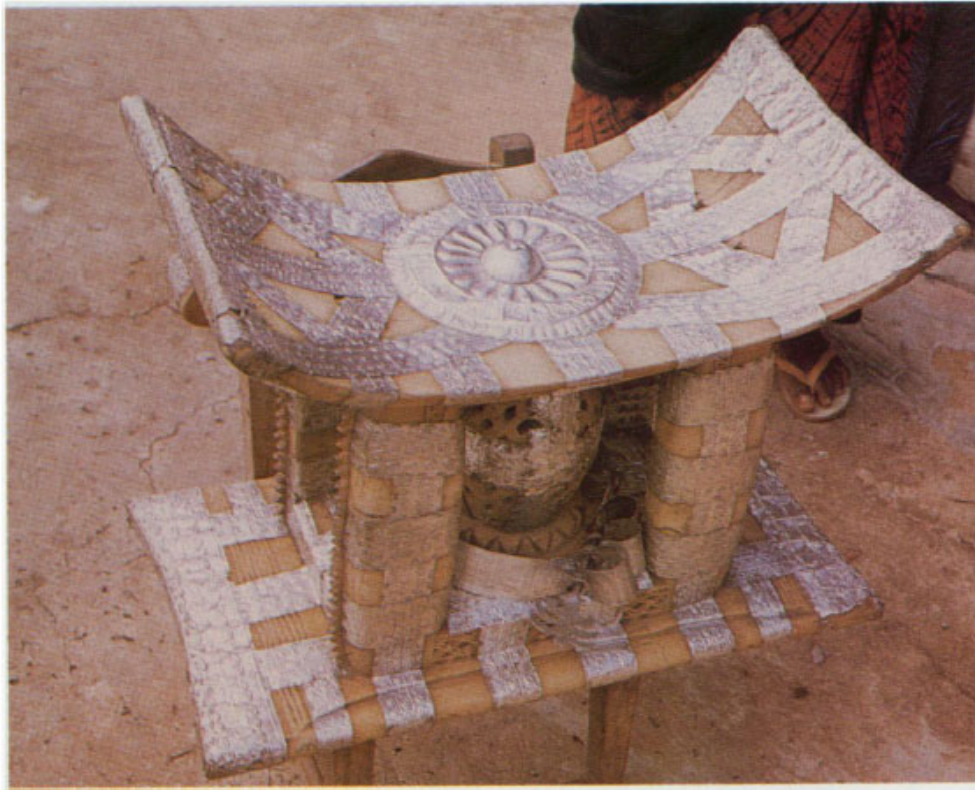
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<sup>65</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 48.

<sup>66</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 48.

<sup>67</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 51.

<sup>68</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 48.



**Figure 12:** An example of an object created from the manipulation of sheets of metal.<sup>69</sup>

A more common craftsmanship and one that is less labor intensive involves heating and pounding the metal into thin sheets then the sheets would be cut and manipulated into various shapes.<sup>70</sup> An example of an object formed from this technique is illustrated in Figure 12. This technique was widely used throughout the Asante Empire. These various techniques of gold craft were utilized to produce millions of varying shaped objects for trade throughout West Africa for centuries. While the trade of metal set Asante on its feet as a power trader in the region, Asante's trade did not end

<sup>69</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 51.

<sup>70</sup> Timothy F. Garrard, "Akan Silver," Pg. 48.

with gold and brass. On the contrary, the Asante used the gold trade and the routes developed across West Africa from the gold trade to branch out into several other areas including that of the kola trade.



## IV. Kola Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

The Asante's trade profits were dictated by the quantity and quality of goods which they exported and imported. They would commonly import salt, fish, iron tools, and silk cloth. The Asante extensively exported gold, palm oil, rubber, ivory, kente cloth, and kola nuts. The trade which they developed regarding the kola nut is unique to the region of West Africa. The high perish ability of this produce acted to restrict the trade distance that the Asante could operate within to sell this particular commodity.

Kola nuts in general are native to the forests of West Africa and have also been cultivated widely in the American tropic region of the West Indies and Brazil for centuries.<sup>71</sup> This tree belongs to the cocoa family but, more specifically is a member of the species called, Sterculiaceae.<sup>72</sup> This 60 foot tall tree species produces two inch nuts, which technically speaking are actually seeds that grow enclosed in protective coverings which develop into a variety of shapes and colors.<sup>73</sup> The three most common colorings of the nuts are a red-gray color, a brown color and a speckled white color. The leaves of the tree are oblong and strongly resemble the chestnut tree leaves in their shape and coloring. However, unlike the chestnut tree's leaves the Sterculiaceae's leaves have a unique

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<sup>71</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. "kola nut."

<sup>72</sup> *Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. "kola nut."

<sup>73</sup> James A. Duke, *Handbook of Nuts*. (Boca Raton, Fla.: CRC Press, 2001), Pg. 343.



texture to them which has been described to be reminiscent of leather. This leathery texture can be seen in Figure 13.



**Figure 13:** Leaves of Sterculiaceae.<sup>74</sup>(left) Fruit of the kola nut tree.<sup>75</sup> (right).

Before the nuts grow, the tree is abloom with bright yellow flowers which after pollination grow the pods containing the kola nuts.<sup>76</sup> The bitter tasting nuts are collected and then dried in the sun prior to consumption. This drying process releases a strong aromatic smell from the nuts. Sterculiaceae grows well in West Africa because; it tends to thrive in soil textures which have been classified as sandy loam.<sup>77</sup> This species also tends to grow well at low-lying elevations.<sup>78</sup> The entire country of Ghana has a maximum level of elevation which is below 200 m. The topographical canvas of Ghana

<sup>74</sup> Henriette Kress, “Photo: Cola nitida 1,” *Henriette’s Herbal Homepage*, [www.henriettesherbal.com/pictures/p04/pages/cola-nitida-1.htm](http://www.henriettesherbal.com/pictures/p04/pages/cola-nitida-1.htm).)

<sup>75</sup> N. Niemenak; P.C. Onomo; Fotso; R. Lieberei; D.O. Ndoumou. “Purine Alkaloids and Phenolic Compounds in three Cola species and Garcinia kola grown in Cameroon”. *South African Journal of Botany*. **2008**, 74, 4, 633.

<sup>76</sup> James A. Duke, *Handbook of Nuts*. Pg. 343.

<sup>77</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. “kola nut.”

<sup>78</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. “kola nut.”

is illustrated in Figure 14. The Akan forests stretch throughout the country of Ghana.

Therefore, for the Asante people the Akan forests were the primary source for this nut.



**Figure 14:** Ghana, topographic map showing that no region of the country of Ghana is above 200 meter mark which makes this geographical location particularly suitable for the growth of Sterculiaceae.<sup>79</sup>

Four edible types of kola species are grown in the forests of Ghana. *C. acuminata* and *C. verticillata* were grown in the forests of Yorubaland.<sup>80</sup> The Yoruba people created

<sup>79</sup> UNEP/GRID-Arendal, “Ghana, topographic map”. *UNEP/GRID-Arendal Maps and Graphics Library*, [http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/ghana\\_topographic\\_map](http://maps.grida.no/go/graphic/ghana_topographic_map) (accessed 20 October 2008).

<sup>80</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, “Kola in the History of West Africa,” Pg. 100.

the Oyo Empire located to the east of present day Ghana.<sup>81</sup> The first variety, *C. acuminata* was predominately used in local trading markets and the second variety, *C. verticillata* enjoyed exports to Borneo and the central Sudan.<sup>82</sup> *C. verticillata* is known for its slimy texture and therefore, was mainly used in cosmetics and did not fare quite as well as the other varieties in the Asante trade markets.<sup>83</sup> *C. anomala* was only native to Bamenda which is located in the modern day country of the Republic of Cameroon.<sup>84</sup> Geographically, this country is far removed from the Asante Empire and consequently, little trade was established with this variety and as a result, this nut species did not drive a strong profit with Asante's neighbors. The variety that did capture the most profit was the most admired variety, *C. nitida*.

The *C. nitida* variety has a limited native growth zone in the forests west of the Volta River.<sup>85</sup> The Volta River runs directly through the heartland of Ghana. This species of kola nut became the greatest trade asset to the Asante peoples, primary due to the geographical growth location of the nut in West Africa. As seen in Figure 15 this kola nut species grew in Ghana and throughout the West African coastline making it an accessible trade commodity for the Asante community. *C. nitida*, as shown in Figure 16; is a light brown colored nut surrounded by a dark green protective shell.

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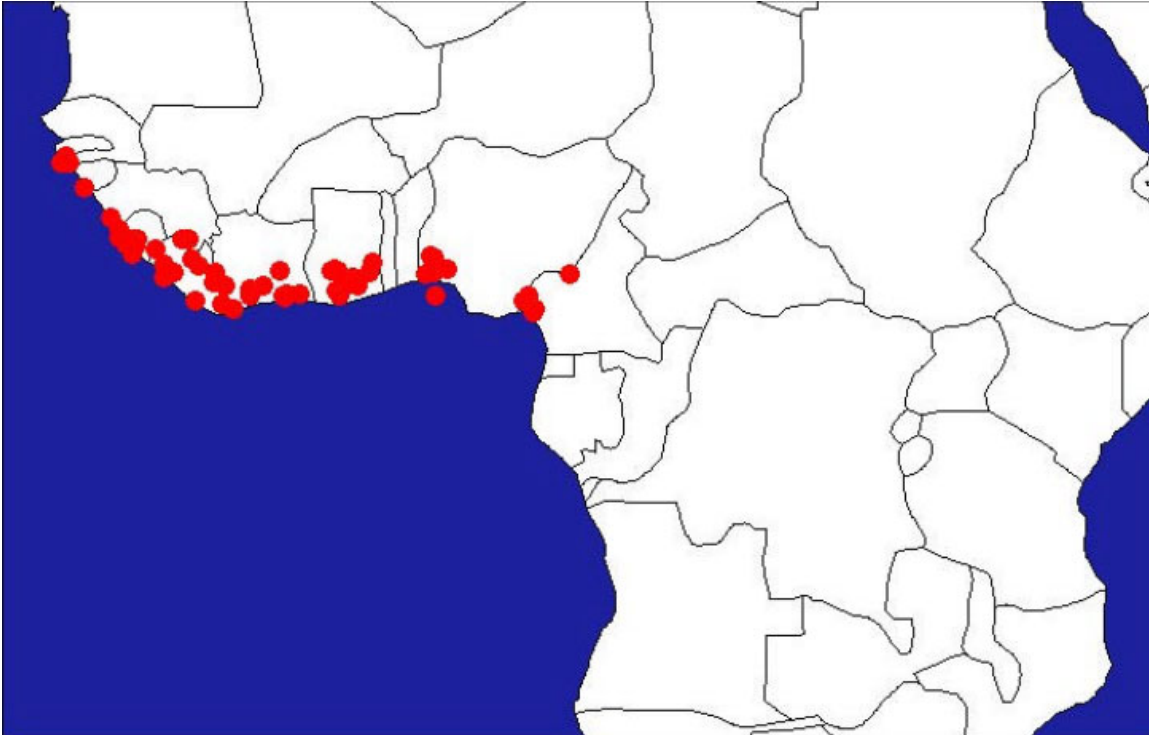
<sup>81</sup> Stephan Goddard, "Ago That Became Oyo: An Essay in Yoruba Historical Geography" *The Geographical Journal* 137. (1971): Pg. 207. [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed 3 October 2008)

<sup>82</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 100.

<sup>83</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 100.

<sup>84</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 100.

<sup>85</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 100.



**Figure 15:** Geographical location of non-cultivated *C. nitida* kola species trees.<sup>86</sup>

But, how did this nut species grow to such popularity in West Africa and were the Asante the first to recognize the economic power of such a small nut? The answers to these questions have been well documented and it is of importance to the history of Asante's trade to understand the kola nut's history in West Africa.

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<sup>86</sup> Tachie-Obeng, Emmanuel; Brown, Nick. "Cola nitida and Cola acuminata". Biodiversity Support Program. Washington D.C. [www.carpe.umd.edu/resources/Documents/report-tachieobeng\\_brown2001.pdf](http://www.carpe.umd.edu/resources/Documents/report-tachieobeng_brown2001.pdf).



**Figure 16:** The kola nut variety, *C. nitida* inside its protective pod (left) and removed from the pod (right).<sup>87</sup>

The earliest documentation which speaks of the kola nut, traces the nut's trade roots back to the Mali Empire. The Mali Empire traded kola with the savanna tribes as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century; reaching to the Mediterranean coast.<sup>88</sup> Due to the vast stretch of the Mali Empire, which at its peak comprised an area larger than all of Western Europe; the trade networks which they established helped to launch the popularity of the kola nut across West Africa.<sup>89</sup> As this vast empire declined in power other groups moved into the region. One of the largest groups was the Mande-speaking peoples.<sup>90</sup> While it is speculated that kola trade existed in Ghana well before the Mande-speaking peoples arrived; no solid evidence exists for Asante kola trade between the 11<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>91</sup> This is because, prior to the Mande-speaking group and prior to the establishment of the oral traditions of the kola zone, the historical record is not well-

<sup>87</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "Cola nitida," [images.google.com/imgres](https://images.google.com/imgres).

<sup>88</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 110.

<sup>89</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. "History of Mali."

<sup>90</sup> Charles H. Cutter, "Mali: A Bibliographical Introduction," Pg. 80.

<sup>91</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 111.

known in the Ghana region. There is a tradition that a Mel group, the Kisi; were the original producers of the kola nut as a trade commodity in the Ghana region.<sup>92</sup> However, they were dominated by the Mande-speaking peoples and absorbed into their culture by the 16<sup>th</sup> century leaving little oral or written evidence for this hypothesis.<sup>93</sup> Trade of the kola nut by the Asante was documented as far back as the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century when the Mande-speaking groups who settled in the area noted that it was a trade item in the Asante region.<sup>94</sup>

Areas to the west of the Akan forests of Ghana had been trading kola since before the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>95</sup> The region occupying modern day Liberia has long been a center of kola production and trade. The Dan of Liberia tended to cultivate the kola trees and harvest the nuts for trade in the same manner that grain is cultivated and harvested.<sup>96</sup> The location of the Dan of Liberia in relation to the Asante Empire can be seen in Figure 2. This is unique to how the Asante originally went about their kola trade practices. Prior to the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Asante tended to gather the nuts within the Akan forest instead of cultivating and harvesting the crop as the Dan of Liberia had done before them.

Everyone in the Asante society assisted in the collection of the kola nuts from the forest for trading. The kola trees were not planted for production in the same way as modern farms are planted with fields of the produce of interest. Instead, men, women,

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<sup>92</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 109.

<sup>93</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 103.

<sup>94</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 103.

<sup>95</sup> Martin Ford, "Kola Production and Settlement Mobility among the Dan of Nimba, Liberia," *African Economic History* 20 (1992): Pg. 52. [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed October 19, 2008).

<sup>96</sup> Martin Ford, "Kola Production and Settlement Mobility among the Dan of Nimba, Liberia," Pg. 54.

children, and slaves went into the Akan forests and collected these nuts. The Asante using this less honed method of product management were still able to exchange vast amounts of their kola nuts for various goods from their neighboring tribes. Perhaps, their ability to produce a strong profit with this method led to the Asante being disinclined to adapt a more stringent farming technique. The Asante at first tended to harvest the nuts as personal commodities. They would often exchange the nuts as presents among family members. It was not until the nuts became a stable trade commodity that their value increased exponentially within West Africa. Several factors led to the kola nuts' entrance into the trade markets and others limited the extent of the trade markets for the nut.

Several hundred tons of nuts were traded each year by the Asante to northern regions; the same northern regions comprising the area of Mauritania which traded with the Asante for gold in exchange for brass. At first the northerners traveled to Asante to trade livestock, iron agricultural tools, salt, and brass, for gold.<sup>97</sup> Exchanging these bulky items for gold dust left a lot of excess space available to the northern tribes on their return trip; therefore, they supplemented the gold dust with other commodities in the region which they hoped to sell once they returned home. The major commodity which grew in popularity from this practice was the kola nut. The Asante traded this nut with the northern tribes mainly for iron agricultural tools, livestock, textiles, brass, and salt.<sup>98</sup> One of these northern tribes, the Kooroko blacksmiths of Wasulu traded iron through the trade routes which connected Asante to the savanna.<sup>99</sup> This trade relationship was highly

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<sup>97</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 7.

<sup>99</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 112.

important for the Asante civilization. It grew to be their main source of all iron tools in general. This relationship allowed the Asante to focus their own production time on other assets which would bring them a larger profit for their efforts; mainly the mining of gold. Several thousand tons of kola nuts were traded with varying other parts of West Africa by the 16<sup>th</sup> century; however, trade with the Funj Empire of the Sudan did not fare as well as could have been expected due to the extreme perish ability of the nuts.

With the arrival of the Portuguese in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century; kola trade on the coastline grew to a minimum of 225 metric tons per year.<sup>100</sup> The kola sold along the coastline to the Europeans was sold at a much higher price than kola sold to the Asante's neighbors via inland routes. Also, due to the high rate of spoilage of the nuts; the Europeans could only transport limited quantities. These two reasons assured that the interior kola trade was on a much larger scale than the coastline kola trade. Besides the nut's light weight and esteemed flavor, the nuts had other attributes which made them valued among the various tribes of West Africa.

Kola nuts have been consumed for hundreds of years by people due to the beneficial effects which they conduce. The Ghanaian people have a proverb which says, "All plants are medicinal but, if you don't know you say some are useless."<sup>101</sup> This saying developed from the Asante people's recognition of the beneficial effects which the kola nut had on their society as a whole and on the health of the individuals who consumed them. It was well known throughout West Africa that the kola nuts had the ability to help people fight fatigue and to ease hunger. It was not until recently however,

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<sup>100</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 118.

<sup>101</sup> Christaller, J.G. *Three Thousand Six Hundred Ghanaian Proverbs*. The Edwin Mellen Press. New York. 1990. Pg. 86.



that science was able to determine what chemicals were present in the nuts that led to this effect in the human body.

In 2007 a study was published in the Journal of Agricultural Food Chemistry which detailed the chemical composition of the nuts.<sup>102</sup> The main molecules comprising the kola nuts are caffeine, theobromine, catechin, and glucose.<sup>103</sup> The large amount of caffeine which these nuts contain is the cause of the stimulatory effect which has been reported by consumers for centuries. The nuts contain 21.26 g/kg of caffeine in the *C. nitida* species.<sup>104</sup> In contrast coffee beans contain approximately 9.1 to 13.2 g/kg of caffeine.<sup>105</sup> The stimulatory effect of caffeine is also the main reason for the popularity of several other modern day beverages, especially coffee, tea, and carbonated soft drinks. Each of the four kola nut species which the Asante traded contained varying levels of these molecules. Figure 17 illustrates the physical differences between the nut species; which align with their molecular differences.

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<sup>102</sup> Sunday Ene-Ojo Atawodi; Beate Pfundstein; Roswitha Haubner; Bertold Spiegelhalder; Helmut Bartsch; and Robert Wyn Owen. "Content of Polyphenolic Compounds in the Nigerian Stimulants *Cola nitida* ssp. *Alba*, *Cola nitida* ssp. *Rubra* A. Chev, and *Cola acuminata* Schott and Endl and Their Antioxidant Capacity". *J. Agric. Food Chem.* **2007**, 55, Pg. 9825.

<sup>103</sup> Sunday Ene-Ojo Atawodi; Beate Pfundstein; Roswitha Haubner; Bertold Spiegelhalder; Helmut Bartsch; and Robert Wyn Owen. "Content of Polyphenolic Compounds in the Nigerian Stimulants *Cola nitida* ssp. *Alba*, *Cola nitida* ssp. *Rubra* A. Chev, and *Cola acuminata* Schott and Endl and Their Antioxidant Capacity". Pg. 9827.

<sup>104</sup> Sunday Ene-Ojo Atawodi; Beate Pfundstein; Roswitha Haubner; Bertold Spiegelhalder; Helmut Bartsch; and Robert Wyn Owen. "Content of Polyphenolic Compounds in the Nigerian Stimulants *Cola nitida* ssp. *Alba*, *Cola nitida* ssp. *Rubra* A. Chev, and *Cola acuminata* Schott and Endl and Their Antioxidant Capacity". Pg. 9825.

<sup>105</sup> Dessalegn, Yigzaw; Labuschagne, Maryke T; Osthoff, Gary; Herselman, Liezel. "Genetic Diversity and Correlation of Bean Caffeine Content with Cup Quality and Green Bean Physical Characteristics in Coffee". *J. Sci. of Food and Agric.* **2008**, 88, 10, Pg. 1727.



**Figure 17:** Different kola nut species such as *cola anomala*, *cola nitida*, and *cola acuminata* contain varying levels of molecules.<sup>106</sup>

Theobromine is another abundant molecule from which the kola nuts are composed. Theobromine also exists in chocolate which comes from the manufacture of cocoa beans. However, once again theobromine levels vary markedly between cocoa beans and kola beans. In cocoa beans theobromine levels are approximately 10.582 g/kg<sup>107</sup>; while in kola nuts theobromine levels reach approximately 464.5 g/kg in *C. nitida*.<sup>108</sup> Studies on these two molecules' effects on the central nervous system have been well documented. "Caffeine and theobromine produce central nervous system

<sup>106</sup> N. Niemenak; P.C. Onomo; Fotso; R. Lieberei; D.O. Ndomou. "Purine Alkaloids and Phenolic Compounds in three Cola species and Garcinia kola grown in Cameroon". Pg. 633.

<sup>107</sup> Eteng MU, Eyong EU, Akpanyung EO, et al. "Recent advances in caffeine and theobromine toxicities: a review". *Plant Foods for Human Nutrition*. 1997, 51, 3, Pg. 239.

<sup>108</sup> N. Niemenak; P.C. Onomo; Fotso; R. Lieberei; D.O. Ndomou. "Purine Alkaloids and Phenolic Compounds in three Cola species and Garcinia kola grown in Cameroon". Pg 636.

stimulation because of their effects on the brain cortex. Thus, both alkaloids are distinctly classified as central nervous system stimulants”.<sup>109</sup> A third molecule in kola nuts has a milder stimulatory effect, catechin.

Catechin is one of the main molecules in the kola nut. The catechin levels in various kola nut species have been averaged to be 26.44 g/kg. This molecule also acts as a milder central nervous system stimulant as compared to caffeine and theobromine. A popular U.S. commercial drink, Snapple has recently added another catechin additive, EGCG. Besides being a mild stimulant catechin has been related to other health benefits. Catechin has recently been linked to a decreased risk of atherosclerosis in mice by reducing any new evolving lesions; although this molecule has no effect on established atherosclerosis;<sup>110</sup> which is the hardening of the arteries. There have been no studies which link catechin to any negative side effects in the consumer. While little is known about the benefits or health hazards of catechin; vast research has been done on the kola nuts' last main molecule; glucose.

Glucose is a carbohydrate and as such serves as a source of energy for the human body and is also the major energy source for brain tissue. Therefore, low levels of glucose in the body inhibit a human being's mental faculties. Kola nuts are composed of 45% glucose and starch.<sup>111</sup> Their high amount of glucose makes them an excellent food

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<sup>109</sup> Eteng MU, Eyong EU, Akpanyung EO, et al. “Recent advances in caffeine and theobromine toxicities: a review”. Pg. 240.

<sup>110</sup> Kuang-Yuh, Chyu; Babbidge, M. Stephanie; Zhao, Xianoning; et. al. “Differential Effects of Green Tea-Derived Catechin on Developing Versus Established Atherosclerosis in Apolipoprotein E-Null Mice”. Pg. 2448.

<sup>111</sup> Tachie-Obeng, Emmanuel; Brown, Nick. “Cola nitida and Cola acuminata”. Biodiversity Support Program. Washington D.C. [www.carpe.umd.edu/resources/Documents/report-tachieobeng\\_brown2001.pdf](http://www.carpe.umd.edu/resources/Documents/report-tachieobeng_brown2001.pdf).

source. These molecules in the kola nut have led to their popularity as a food source throughout Western Africa. The Asante may indeed have recognized the beneficial effects that these nuts had against the detrimental nature of the West African environment. The Asante and the Asante's neighbors faced several difficulties in their daily lives which the kola nut helped to ease.

The Asante people and their neighbors lived in an environment which has unique detriments compared to some other regions in the world. One of the most pressing problems in the West African region is that of pernicious diseases. The Ghanaian peoples are affected by a wide variety of tropical diseases such as but, not limited to: sleeping sickness (trypanosomiasis), parasitic worms (bilharziasis), protein deficiency (kwashiorkor), tuberculosis, and yellow fever.<sup>112</sup> The most widespread of these is by far malaria. Malarial symptoms include lethargy. The stimulatory effects of the kola nut are therefore, very much a desirable feature in a food source for a malarial ridden population. Due to the savanna's lack of tea or coffee; the kola nut became a ready substitute. Also parasitic worms and protein deficiency rid the human body of its nutritional intake from food sources. Therefore, it becomes increasingly important in a region which is afflicted with these problems to have a food source which is high in glucose and can quickly restore the body's nutrient reserves.

The Asante people also traded across regions which had little natural food and water sources such as the Sahara Desert. Kola nuts are alkaloids and as such have a bitter taste which acts to refresh a dry mouth thus suppressing thirst.<sup>113</sup> The large amount of

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<sup>112</sup> Boyd Van, Rensburg. *An Atlas of African Affairs*. Pg. 40.

<sup>113</sup> Tachie-Obeng, Emmanuel; Brown, Nick. "Cola nitida and Cola acuminata".

glucose in the kola nuts also acts as an appetite suppressant by increasing the body's nutrient levels and thus reducing hunger. Even in regions where the West African peoples cultivated their own food sources other problems such as tsetse and locust flocks would often destroy large crops leaving many malnourished or undernourished individuals.<sup>114</sup> The kola nuts being protected in their thick green pods would go undestroyed during such insect raids and thus were still available to the people as a viable food source. The Asante people would then utilize this last remaining food source by thoroughly chewing the nuts to release or extract the beneficial molecules from the nuts.

The Asante people's ability to recognize the benefits of these nuts and then market them to their neighboring tribes established for their civilization a viable trade market in the region which financially supported them for centuries. The kola trade in the region strengthened the economic backbone of the Asante allowing them to provide security along the trade routes and throughout their territory which led to an increase in trade.<sup>115</sup> As the trade of gold with other regions of Africa had led to the trade of kola nuts; the trade of kola nuts led to the trade of other commodities. The Asante's trade market in this one area also encouraged them to diversify in their trade. From the trade of gold dust came the trade of kola nuts and from the trade of kola nuts came the trade of salt.

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<sup>114</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 115.

<sup>115</sup> Abaka, Edmund. *Kola is God's Gift: Agricultural Production, Export Initiatives and the Kola Industry of Asante and the Gold Coast c. 1820-1950*. Ohio University Press. 2005.

## V. Salt Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

Humans cannot live without sodium and their most common source of sodium is salt. The attributes of salt helped ensure its value as a major trade commodity for the Asante civilization. This particular trade commodity was unique because, the Asante's territory and the surrounding forest land had no major sources of salt. Therefore, they commonly imported their salt from three main sources; the Volta River, Daboya in northern Ghana, and Borno Empire of Niger. Less significantly, local people would commonly produce and consume their own small sources of vegetable salts.<sup>116</sup>

Therefore, the Asante controlled and profited from this trade commodity only due to their unique geographic location in West Africa. The Asante's geographical location helped them to establish themselves as trade leaders of salt in the region; securing and enhancing the Asante's power base. Understanding the benefits of this trade asset, examining the relationships which developed due to the salt trade, and understanding the different varieties of salt which existed in the region will help explain the Asante's unique position regarding this aspect of their trading history.

The human body requires sodium to function, without sodium humans would cease to exist. The largest dietary source of sodium for people is in the form of salt, NaCl. Figure 18 illustrates a crystal of sodium chloride. The human body requires sodium because; it utilizes this element as one of the main components of its extra cellular fluids, to help carry nutrients into the cells, to regulate blood pressure and fluid

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<sup>116</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," *The Journal of African History* 22 (1981): Pg. 44.

volume within the body.<sup>117</sup> Salt not only contains sodium but, it also contains potassium, magnesium, calcium, and other trace elements which the human body requires to function.<sup>118</sup> When a human becomes deficient in their sodium stores this can result in cramping of the muscles, vertigo, and fatal neurological problems brought on by an electrolyte imbalance.<sup>119</sup>



**Figure 18:** Illustration of a salt crystal.<sup>120</sup>

Even consuming an excess of water without balancing this intake with a sufficient sodium intake can result in hyponatremia which is known as water poisoning. Less

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<sup>117</sup> Alexandra Greeley, “A Pinch of Controversy Shakes Up Dietary Salt,” U.S. Food and Drug Administration, 1997, [www.fda.gov/fdac/features/1997/797\\_salt](http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/1997/797_salt) (November 1, 2008).

<sup>118</sup> Alexandra Greeley, “A Pinch of Controversy Shakes Up Dietary Salt”.

<sup>119</sup> Alexandra Greeley, “A Pinch of Controversy Shakes Up Dietary Salt”.

<sup>120</sup> Mineral Information Institute. “Salt”. [www.mii.org/Minerals/photosalt.html](http://www.mii.org/Minerals/photosalt.html). (November 10, 2008).

commonly, salt has also been used to treat diseases of the autonomic nervous system.<sup>121</sup>

A second major source of sodium for people in West Africa is natron.

Natron is mainly composed of sodium carbonate decahydrate.<sup>122</sup> Other constituents of natron include sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride, sodium sulfate, and halite.<sup>123</sup> Pure natron is a mineral formed from the evaporation of salt lakes which contain an unusually high level of sodium carbonate.<sup>124</sup> Natron varies in color from clear to white for purer forms of natron and from grey to yellow as environmental impurities increase. Figure 19 shows a chunk of mined natron.



**Figure 19:** Illustration of the natron mineral which constitutes the second largest source of sodium in Africa.<sup>125</sup>

People soon came to recognize the importance of salt as an essential need for their survival. Because, this need would never be eliminated in the human population, salt was

<sup>121</sup> Alexandra Greeley, "A Pinch of Controversy Shakes Up Dietary Salt".

<sup>122</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. "Natron."

<sup>123</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica 2005 Ultimate Reference Suite DVD, 1<sup>st</sup> ed., s.v. "Natron."

<sup>124</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 11. (1978): 629- 668. [www.jstor.org](http://www.jstor.org). (accessed October 5, 2008).

<sup>125</sup> Jeff Weissman. "Natron". [webmineral.com/data/Natron.shtml](http://webmineral.com/data/Natron.shtml). (accessed November 20, 2008).



secured as an important trade commodity by the Asante civilization. Examining how the Asante came to control the salt trade and who the Asante's main trade partners were reveals the influence which the Asante people had in the country of Ghana.

The first people to develop a relationship with the Asante as providers of salt through trade were the Mande-speaking peoples. As previously mentioned, this group settled in Ghana around the middle of the 15<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>126</sup> The Mande people carried on an extensive trade relationship with the Asante and one of the main trade items was salt.<sup>127</sup> Interestingly, the Asante's territory and surrounding forests had no salt sources.<sup>128</sup> Therefore, the Asante would trade for salt at a low cost with salt producers from outside their territory and then raise the price and sell the salt to neighboring tribes such as the Mande-speaking peoples. The Asante were able to accomplish this bottleneck in the salt trade because, their capital Kumase, ran along the only major north-south road through the country of Ghana. Therefore, any one wishing to trade salt from the one region of the country to the next by a land route had to pass through Kumase. The leaders of Kumase simply inserted themselves as middlemen in the process. The price they were able to charge changed depending on which source of salt they were trading. The salt quality and therefore, the price it was worth depended on the origin of the salt because, each origin produced salt from different methods which affected the taste and appearance of the potential product. Three main producers of salt traded with the Asante including; the people of Ada, the Mossi peoples, and the people of the Sahara region.

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<sup>126</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "Kola in the History of West Africa," Pg. 109.

<sup>127</sup> Poh-Kwamena, M., and J. Tosh and R. Waller and M. Tidy. *African History in Maps*. Longman Group Limited, 1983. Pg. 51.

<sup>128</sup> J. M. Grove and A. M. Johansen, "The Historical Geography of the Volta Delta, Ghana, During the Period of Danish Influence," *IFAN* section B, no. 4 (1968): 66-67.

To the south of the Asante near the Volta River's mouth the major source of salt producers were the people of Ada, who provided a good source of standardized cooking salt for the population in the region.<sup>129</sup> The Ada bestowed all of their time to the production of salt and to fishing; they traded with their neighbors for all their remaining needs.<sup>130</sup> Both practices were mutually sustaining because, the Ada used large quantities of the salt which they produced to preserve the fish which they sold to their neighbors. The salt production by the Ada peoples was so great that each household would commonly be seen to have one or two huts storing approximately 50 tons of salt which they had produced for trading purposes.<sup>131</sup>

Figure 20 shows that the mouth of the Volta River is at Ada; along the southeastern portion of the country of Ghana. The salt was extracted from the river and then commonly transported by canoe up the river and distributed to the peoples.<sup>132</sup> Figure 20 details the major and minor branches of the Volta River. This allowed the producers of the salt to bypass the Asante control of the trade but, only as far as the Volta River's length allowed. As can be seen in Figure 20; the river extended in all directions across the northern half of Ghana and through the entire portion of southern Ghana running north and south. However, no major roads stretched from the ends of the branches of the Volta River to trade routes further north. This limited the salt trade to small tribes who occupied the regions immediately surrounding the distributary's channels of the Volta

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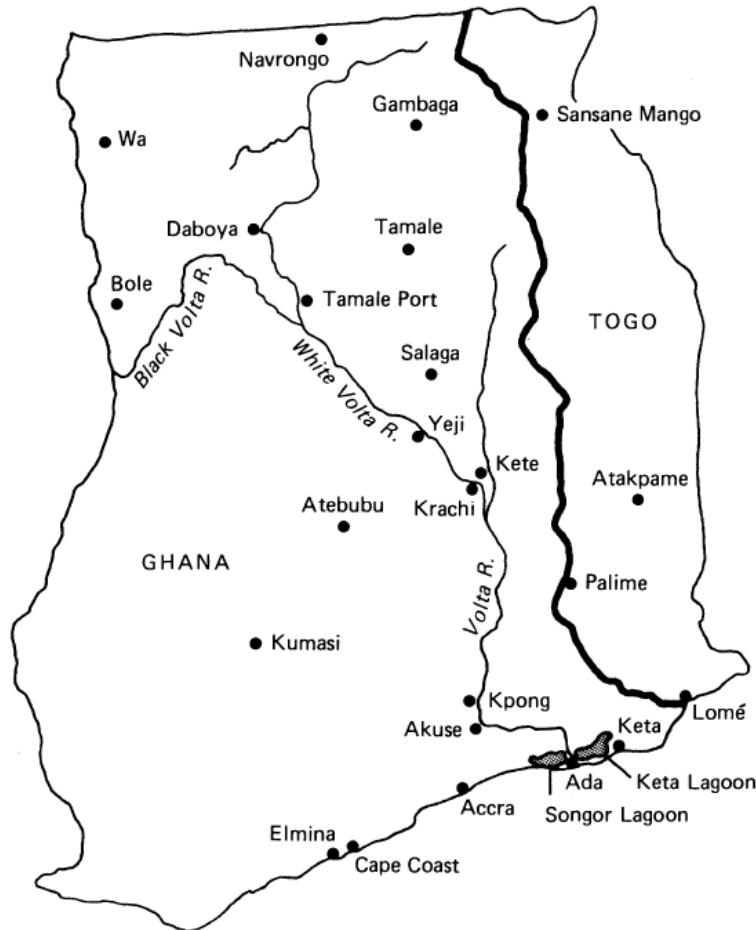
<sup>129</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 44.

<sup>130</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 44.

<sup>131</sup> J. M. Grove and A. M. Johansen, "The Historical Geography of the Volta Delta, Ghana, During the Period of Danish Influence," Pg. 67.

<sup>132</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 46.

River. Therefore, for the Ada to make a better profit they traded extensively over land routes with the Asante.



**Figure 20:** Map detailing the branches of the Volta River; whose mouth was a major production site of salt.<sup>133</sup>

This was the most widely traded source of salt within Ghana.

One of the reasons that this region of Ghana became the largest producer of salt was due to the climate in that section of the country. East of the city of Accra and west of the Volta River encompasses a region which is the driest portion of the country.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 45.

<sup>134</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 50.

Along the remaining coastline, the rainfall is much higher. Increased amounts of water in the region lead to a decrease in the concentration of salt in standing pools of water. This lowered the salt concentration of the water making it more difficult to harvest the salt. To understand this more fully it is important to briefly describe how salt is produced.

Salt is produced in two main ways, evaporation and mining. To produce salt by evaporation, the water which contains the salt is commonly portioned off into smaller pools of standing water, as shown in Figure 21.



**Figure 21:** Portioning off the salt water into smaller bodies for the evaporation method of salt production.<sup>135</sup>

Then the water is allowed to stand until all of it has evaporated, leaving salt crystals along with other minerals such as magnesium behind in the container. (See Figure 21) This method is common when salt is procured from naturally salty bodies of water such as the ocean. This is the method of choice for the production of salt at the mouth of the Volta River and along the Ghanaian coastline. Another evaporative technique included

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<sup>135</sup> Staffan. "Salt Mines" flickr.com/photos (10/30/08)

taking up the salt water in pots and boiling it until complete evaporation of the liquid was achieved, leaving the salt behind. This evaporation method was chosen during the dry season which lasted from January to March.<sup>136</sup> This method however, has many drawbacks as it is highly time consuming and therefore, more costly. The major advantage of this method however, is the appearance of the salt obtained. It is typically very white which increases the desirability of the product and therefore, the cost.

The second method of mining the salt occurs when large bodies of salt water have naturally dried up in an area, centuries earlier; leaving behind enormous quantities of salt and other minerals. Over time these sources are then covered over by dirt and sand. The pressure of the layers of earth covering the salt compresses it into rock salt which can then be mined from underground sources. Figure 22 shows an illustration of the rock salt after it has been mined from underground sources in West Africa. Rock salt is commonly sold in such slabs and then ground and placed in a pot of water where it is boiled till complete evaporation has occurred leaving the salt behind in the pot. As can be seen in Figure 22 the grayish coloring of the rock salt makes it less desirable and therefore, less prized as a trade commodity. The Volta River produced salt by evaporation while the Daboya area produced salt by mining.

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<sup>136</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Department of Geography, University of Ghana. 1969. Pg. 27.



**Figure 22:** Slabs of mined rock salt from mines in West Africa.<sup>137</sup>

To the north of the Asante was a state consisting of the Mossi peoples. These people occupied the modern day region of central Burkina Faso, living mostly in the Volta River Basin. The major salt city of this region was Daboya. The Daboya salt source was known for its grayish coloring which resulted in a decreased price for the salt and lowered its desirability to the buyers of the salt. This gray coloring is known to occur in salt when the salt has been left sitting out without being covered and rain water comes into contact with the crystals. This is due to other minerals commonly found in the rock salt source. As previously mentioned, the area between Accra and the West Volta River was the driest portion of the country which decreased this coloration problem for the Volta River salt sources. Therefore, the Volta River salt was more valuable. The Asante would trade with the Volta Basin for their salt and then trade this more desired salt to the northern tribes at an increased price; while trading the cheaper salt source to people in the

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<sup>137</sup> Staffan. "Salt Mines" flickr.com/photos (10/30/08)

south who could not afford the more expensive Volta River salt.<sup>138</sup> Other salt sources for the Asante existed at a much greater distance from their home territory.

One of the farthest salt import sources for the Asante lay east of their territory in what is today the north-eastern section of Nigeria. The Borno Empire was located west of Lake Chad and existed from 1389-1893.<sup>139</sup> It became a major exporter of salt to the Asante Empire during the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>140</sup> More salt was traded within the borders of Borno than within any other territory during the period prior to European colonization of Africa.<sup>141</sup> This salt exporting region was unique in that it exported the second major source of sodium in Africa, natron.

Natron is harvested from the evaporation of salt water. The natron which the Borno exported was from the evaporation of water from Lake Chad. The varying sources of natron which the Borno produced included; red natron near Dirkou, white natron from Muniyo and Mangari, and ungunnu natron. The last two types of natron were in high demand by the people of Asante.<sup>142</sup> Figure 23 shows an illustration of kunkuru orfoshi or slabs of natron which were harvested from the waters of Lake Chad. The ungunnu natron salt variety was not the desirable white color, non-the-less it was still particularly favored by the Asante because; it contained the highest levels of sodium bicarbonate which is also known to act as a acid reflux pacifier.

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<sup>138</sup> Sutton, I. B., "The Volta River Salt Trade: The Survival of an Indigenous Industry," Pg. 52.

<sup>139</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". Pg. 631.

<sup>140</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". Pg. 629.

<sup>141</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". Pg. 629.

<sup>142</sup> Paul E. Lovejoy, "The Borno Salt Industry". Pg. 636.



**Figure 23:** Kunkuru orfoshi or slabs of natron harvested off the coast of Lake Chad.<sup>143</sup>

The salt trade within Ghana provided an economic boost to the Asante because; they were able to control the trade between the different regions of Ghana by effectively instigating themselves as middlemen in the salt transactions. This not only provided them with an economic boost but, more importantly, a sustainable economic demand due to the eternal human need of salt for survival. Trade relations between the Asante's immediate neighbors such as the Mande-speaking peoples were solidified through the trade of salt. Peaceful trade relations between their immediate neighbors and the Asante widened the buffer area between the Asante territory and any of Asante's rivals which decreased the likelihood of a confrontation. To the extent that the immediate buffer zone could not guarantee peace for the Asante territory; a broadening of the Asante's reputation as agents of trade was developed by inserting themselves into trade negotiations between wider reaching neighbors such as the Mossi and Ada groups of Ghana. The Asante also increased their reputation across the continent of Africa by

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<sup>143</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica, "Natron," [images.google.com/imgres](https://images.google.com/imgres).



extending their trade network to such far-reaching partners as the Borno of the Lake Chad region. This allowed even further distanced groups of potential rivals to the Asante, to perceive them as trading partners, rather than as enemies.

## VI. Fish and Kente Cloth Trade in Pre-Colonial Asante

Along with the three major trade assets discussed so far gold, kola nuts, and salt; the Asante developed trade networks with many smaller commodities. A few which are of minor significance include but, are certainly not limited to: fish, ivory, kente cloth, palm oil and rubber. The two which were of the most importance to the development of Asante trade prior to the European arrival in Ghana included fish and kente cloth and are examined below.

Fish were a strong and stable trade commodity in Ghana. The coastal fisheries along the Gulf of Guinea traded in both fresh fish and salted and dried fish. The fishing industry grew quickly along the coastline of Ghana. The tribes there came to rely heavily on the fish trade as one of their sole means of income.<sup>144</sup> The Asante traded with the coastal peoples such as the Fante, Asebu, Fetu, and Komenda for fish.<sup>145</sup> These tribes would catch the fish using nets and bone tackle; with bait consisting of pieces of sugar cane.<sup>146</sup> Then the fish would be transported up the Volta River by dug-out canoes, of about 35 feet in length equipped with sails composed of rush mats.<sup>147</sup> The Volta River itself was also a main fishing ground for the region. The fishermen that fished most extensively in this region were from the Ada and Tongu regions.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 23.

<sup>145</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 21.

<sup>146</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 46.

<sup>147</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 46.

<sup>148</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 27.

The coastline fisheries also salted and dried large portions of their catch and then transported these preserved fish along the north-south trade routes, through Kumase; to be traded with peoples north of Ghana.<sup>149</sup> Peoples that they traded with included the northern trade towns of Bono Manso and the traders from the Mauritania region.<sup>150</sup> The two main gold producing regions to the south of Kumase, Aowin and Wassaw were devoid of reliable food sources and therefore, also heavily traded with the coastal peoples for dried fish.<sup>151</sup>

Multiple problems persisted in the fishing trade. The exporters had difficulty accumulating a large profit from their products because; they had to spend a large portion of their income repairing the fishing nets which deteriorated swiftly.<sup>152</sup> Also, the fishing season was a periodic one; which presented the fishermen with the problem of preserving the large amounts of fish that they did catch so that they could be sold in the off-season. Another profit bleeder occurred when people who lived along the coastlines would establish themselves as the chief fisherman of a section of the coastline.<sup>153</sup> The area chief would then require the fishermen using the coastline to pay a daily or annual fee for their right to fish in that area often up to one-third of the catch value.<sup>154</sup> Dried fish were often traded to the Asante capital of Kumase and the Asante town of Bonwire for cloth.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Boahen, Adu. *A New Look at the History of Ghana*. Oxford University Press; 1966. Pg. 12.

<sup>150</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 240.

<sup>151</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 237.

<sup>152</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 47.

<sup>153</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 47.

<sup>154</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 47.

<sup>155</sup> K. Y. Daaku, "Aspects of Precolonial Akan Economy," Pg. 237.

The Asante are renowned for their Kente cloth which they produce and trade. Their textiles are popular throughout Africa for their intricate weaves and their bright colors. However, the Asante cloth was not always so well made. At first the majority of the Asante population wore clothing which consisted of bark cloth.<sup>156</sup> Bark cloth was constructed by peeling long strips of bark from the trees. These strips were then soaked in water to soften them. They were then beaten with wooden mallets to further enhance their pliability. After these beatings the bark turned into a piece of cloth and could be wielded into clothing.<sup>157</sup> Poor families throughout Ghana still used this style of clothing up until the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>158</sup>

The village of Bonwire near the Asante capital, Kumase was the headquarters of the kente cloth production.<sup>159</sup> This cloth was simply the product of spun cotton. Akan women would grow, collect, and spin the yarn.<sup>160</sup> The cloth was then dyed and weaved on a loom into clothing.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 72.

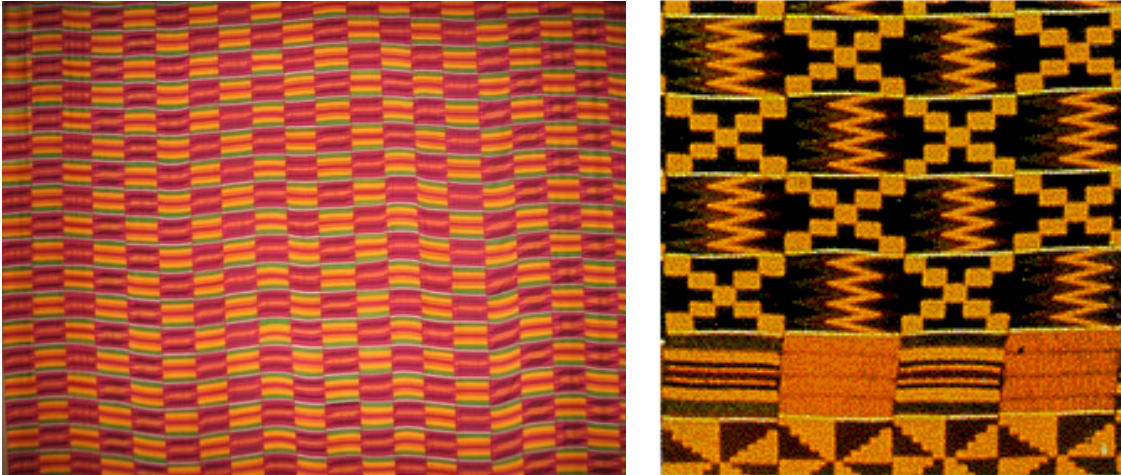
<sup>157</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 72.

<sup>158</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 72.

<sup>159</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 70.

<sup>160</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 73.

<sup>161</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 73.



**Figure 24:** Left: Depiction of a piece of Asante kente cloth.<sup>162</sup> Right: Another piece of Kente cloth; whose design represents the Akan phrase: “One person does not rule a nation”.<sup>163</sup>

The term Kente; simply is the Akan word for woven cloth.<sup>164</sup> The patterns woven into the cloth represent a variety of well-known phrases or meanings to the Akan people.

Figure 24 depicts a piece of Kente cloth on the right whose pattern represents the tenets against autocracy within a kingdom. The phrase, “One person does not rule a nation” was a cornerstone of thinking in the Asante Empire.<sup>165</sup>

<sup>162</sup> Purdue University. “Black Cultural Center”. [www.purdue.edu/.../connecting\\_the\\_dots.htm](http://www.purdue.edu/.../connecting_the_dots.htm)

<sup>163</sup> University of South Carolina. “Meaning of Kente Cloth Designs Exhibition”. [www.usca.edu/aasc/meankent.htm](http://www.usca.edu/aasc/meankent.htm)

<sup>164</sup> Dickson, B. Kwamina. *A Historical Geography of Ghana*. Pg. 74.

<sup>165</sup> University of South Carolina. “Meaning of Kente Cloth Designs Exhibition”.

## VII. Disruption of Pre-Colonial Asante Economic Power

The Asante Empire flourished for generations as its economy was driven by strong trade assets, emerging trade routes, and cloistered off from foreign hostilities by protective buffer zones around the capital of Kumase. The Asante Empire expanded over smaller neighbors in Ghana and absorbed them into their state.

In 1471 the Portuguese people sailed down to the West African region of Ghana.<sup>166</sup> The resources which they discovered there enticed them to build the first European trading post in 1482.<sup>167</sup> The Portuguese exported so much gold from the Asante Empire that the region quickly became known as the Gold Coast.<sup>168</sup> During the next few centuries the Asante were able to effectively manipulate the Portuguese traders by denying them access to the interior of Ghana.<sup>169</sup> This forced the majority of the trade relations which the Portuguese conducted to go through the Asante as the middlemen in the transactions. This action by the Asante king allowed the Empire to maintain their control in the region.

In 1642, the Portuguese trading post was captured by the Dutch and by the early 1700's the largest trade commodity in West Africa had shifted from gold to slaves.<sup>170</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>167</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>168</sup> Ellis, A.B. *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa*. New York; Negro University Press, 1969. Pg. 125.

<sup>169</sup> Ellis, A.B. *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa*. Pg. 125.

<sup>170</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

After, the early 1700's other European nations began building their own trading posts along the coastline of West Africa completely controlling the coastline.<sup>171</sup> The Asante Empire remained a strong force in the interior of the West African region. However, the Asante's control over the coastal regions was waning and in conjunction the European powers were gaining considerable influence over the coastal peoples especially, the Fante. The growing ability of the British to influence the coastal peoples developed after 1717 when it became a practice by the Asante leaders to exclude newly integrated ethnicities from any positions of power within the government, this made many feel less loyal to the Asante and therefore, allowed outside influences to negatively intrude and influence the minority groups within the Asante territory.<sup>172</sup> In 1807 Great Britain outlawed the slave trade.<sup>173</sup> The British now turned their exploitation of the West Coast from slaves to other natural resources.

When slaves were the main trade commodity, the British would hire coastal Africans to bring them slaves from the interior of West Africa.<sup>174</sup> This encouraged the British to remain on the coastline of West Africa. However, the shift in trade commodities, due to the outlawing of the slave trade; also resulted in a shift in the British intrusion patterns. No longer satisfied with their coastal trading resources; the British dug further into the interior of the West African territory. Soon they came into conflict with the

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<sup>171</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>172</sup> Boahen, Adu. *Topics in West African History*. Pearson Education Limited. 1986.

<sup>173</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>174</sup> Ellis, A.B. *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa*. Pg. 158.

Asante Empire for trade resources. “Declining trade relations and disputes over the Fante region caused friction over the following decade and led to warfare in the 1820s.”<sup>175</sup>

In 1874 the British attacked and destroyed Kumase.<sup>176</sup> By 1896, they had defeated the Asante and made their confederation a protectorate.<sup>177</sup> And in 1902 the British officially made Asante part of their Gold Coast crown colony.<sup>178</sup> The Golden Stool represented the people, the soul of the nation and the good fortune of the nation.<sup>179</sup> When the British defeated the Asante Empire and attempted to develop control over the Asante people, they were quick to recognize the importance of the stool, but misunderstood it:

The importance of the stool was crudely grasped by the British at a time of aggressive imperial expansion. In 1900, the British Governor of the Gold Coast, Sir Frederick Hodgson, demanded the Golden Stool in the most offensive manner possible at a meeting of Ashanti chiefs. “Where is the Gold Stool? Why am I not sitting on the Golden Stool at this moment? I am the representative of the paramount power; why have you relegated me to this chair?” (Verbatim transcript of Sir Frederick Hodgson's address to Ashanti chiefs January 1900.<sup>180</sup>

When Hodgson demanded the stool be brought to his residence it caused an uprising of Asante which only furthered their loyalty to the stool as a symbol of their unity. This feeling of unity had been deeply implanted within the Asante due to the gold trade and the king's refusal to monopolize the trade thus, allowing the Asante people to develop a sense of ownership of their gold rich territory. This is one aspect of Asante's

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<sup>175</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. “Asante Empire”.

<sup>176</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. “Asante Empire”.

<sup>177</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. “Asante Empire”. The Asante themselves have never officially conceded to the defeat.

<sup>178</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. “Asante Empire”.

<sup>179</sup> BBC World News. “West African Kingdoms”. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/africa/features>.

<sup>180</sup> BBC World News. “West African Kingdoms”.



culture which the British managed to strengthen instead of destroy when the Governor demanded the golden stool and incited the anger of the people.

An Asante Confederacy Council was established under British rule in 1926, and the Asantehene was restored as a figurehead sovereign.<sup>181</sup> Effective 1935, Britain ruled the Asante separately under the title of the Asante Confederacy.<sup>182</sup> The Asante population currently stands at about 10 million people.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica Inc. "Asante Empire".

<sup>182</sup> Kwadwo, Osei. *An Outline of Asante History: Part 2 Volume 1*. O. Kwadwo Enterprise; 2000. Pg. 45.

<sup>183</sup> CIA: The World Fact Book, "Ghana,"

## VIII. Conclusions

The Asante civilization has endured for centuries within a continent which has an indisputable reputation for instability. From the birth of their civilization they uniquely positioned themselves as doorkeepers to trade, within and through the country of Ghana. This position allowed them the ability to create buffer zones of peaceful peoples around their home territory and created for them reputable power across Africa. This reputation protected them further from hostile powers which chose to trade, instead of attempting to conquer them. It is therefore, a matter of importance to examine the main aspects of Asante's trade and to determine the relationship between the economic stability of the Asante civilization and its relations with their neighbors.

This study has shown that the Asante people of Ghana traded extensively in a wide variety of natural resources and manufactured products. The relationship of trade which developed between the Asante and their neighbors, economically speaking, established the Asante in West Africa. To facilitate this trade the Asante established a unique infrastructure between their territory and that of their trade networks. Their economic stability allowed them to exercise a great deal of control in the region which allowed them to further monopolize the trade profits.

An overview of the Asante's origin was undertaken to provide insight for an appreciation of their humble beginnings. Explaining in detail their main trade assets; how they were procured, what they were traded to procure, and how the trade of each asset led to increased trade opportunities with other peoples and other commodities; this

study will enable the reader to come to a deeper understanding of how the Asante were able to monopolize trade in Ghana. They were able to monopolize trade in such a way that their trade relationships grew into a symbiotic relationship between their economic stability and the consolidation of peaceful and long lasting relationships between them and their neighbors. The main trade commodities of importance to this history include: gold, kola nuts, salt, fish, and kente cloth. The study concludes with an overview of the last few decades leading up to colonization of Ghana by the British and reveals how the trade buffer which the Asante had built for themselves protected them from colonization but, in the end, ironically, led to the suppression of their power for a period of time.

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