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# FOODWAYS AND EMPIRE IN 19TH CENTURY ASANTE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

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This paper explores the foodways of the Gold Coast and Ghana in the nineteenth century. Foodways are defined as the cultural, social and economic practices relating to the production and consumption of food. Everything about eating including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it and who's at the table – is a form of communication. The methodological approach of this paper compares the firsthand accounts of two state dinners for Thomas Edward Bowdich, English Envoy in 1817 to Osei Bonsu, and Thomas Birch Freeman, Methodist missionary to Kwaku Dua I, in 1838. This paper is part of a larger project meant to establish the requisite historical basis for the foodways and cultural changes in the Gold Coast and in what would later become Ghana in 1957. The main questions to be addressed in this paper include the following: How did foodways shape inter and intra-regional cultural adaptations in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries? What is the history of the ritual significance of food in these regions and how does it relate to structures of power and state building? What do food production, transport, consumption, preparation, and food technology reveal about migration and about identity in Ghana? Using foodways as an approach to this topic will fill a gap in the coverage of the neglected nineteenth century by utilizing overlooked primary sources and interrogating known primary sources in a different way. Sources used include accounts of merchants, ethnographies, and colonial and missionary archives.

## INTRODUCTION

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When a chief has plenty of milk, then all people drink of him.

(Asante proverb)

The Asante or Ashanti are a nation and an ethnic group that inhabit the central forest zone of what is now Ghana. The growth of their empire beginning in the 17<sup>th</sup> century was largely achieved through the adoption of new starches that were introduced via the transatlantic slave trade. These starches, which included maize, plantain and cassava, prompted a massive internal migration of labour from the northern regions. This, in turn, allowed for the clearing of land and the production of a surplus for an army that began its military expansion to the south, north, and east from approximately 1700 to 1750. Europeans had a longstanding trade presence on the coast. The Dutch and Danes built forts on the coast from as early as 1593, to trade with populations on the coast as well as those inhabiting the forested interior for items such as gold, ivory, and then slaves.

Transition away from the slave trade began in earnest in 1807 with the British abolishment and successive enforcement of the ban on the trade. Subsequently, populations on the coast and the Asante searched for a more secure trade relationship with Europeans in the coastal forts. Asante problems with breakaway republics seeking independence—the Gonja in the north for example—triggered widespread conflicts, which disrupted trade. Thus, in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans changed their focus from the slave trade to exploring ways in which to trade directly with the northern and forested regions. They also had a vested interest in creating new customers for manufactured goods. This new mandate caused Europeans to look for residencies in Kumasi to establish direct trade contracts with the Asante, and to resolve issues of sovereignty on the Gold Coast that were the result of the internal power struggles and subsequent warfare. Between May 1816 and March 1820, the paramount chief of the Asante, Osei Tutu Kwame Asibey Bonsu, or Osei Bonsu (r.1800-24), received no less than nine representatives of the British and Dutch trading companies based respectively at the Cape Coast and Elmina forts, at his capital Kumasi.<sup>1</sup> These diplomatic missions were followed by missionary and other visitors in subsequent decades, all of which resulted in valuable accounts of interactions with the Asante. The resultant documented diplomatic relationships and protocols followed an etiquette which will be analysed in the following sections.

The topic of this paper concerns the interface between Europeans and their Asante hosts in the context of commensality and the exchange of food. When the Asante sat with their European visitors over a meal, more than words were being communicated. The state dinners of the Asante had at times the ceremonial splendour and protocol of formal dinners, while at others, the quiet power of a more intimate meeting. Both approaches were intended to impact political issues and to communicate messages of symbolic kinship and/or to define relationships of superiority and inferiority. As an ubiquitous tool in the art of Asante statecraft, the symbolic use of food was mobilised as a diplomatic tool whose impact can be decoded and analysed.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Fiona Sheales, "Sights/Sites of Spectacle: Anglo/Asante Appropriations, Diplomacy and Displays of Power 1816-1820" (doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 2011), 3 <https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/48152/>.

<sup>2</sup> Linda Morgan, "Diplomatic Gastronomy: Style and Power at the Table." *Food and Foodways* 20, no. 2 (2012): 146.

This work explores the multifarious nature of signs and symbols associated with diplomatic gastronomy by examining three state dinners and several diplomatic residencies, hosted by two Asante kings in the capital of Kumasi during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first section maps the underpinning beliefs surrounding the food culture of the Asante, including the history of food in folklore and ritual. This same section discusses the food security issues Europeans faced in the coastal zone, to provide context for their diplomatic encounter with the Asante in the forest zone. Lastly, specific encounters taken from primary sources will show how the Asante mobilised food as a diplomatic tool through setting, choice of meal, and seating, by carrying out a comparison with another contemporary African empire: Ethiopia.

## MISSIONS TO KUMASI: DIPLOMATIC FOOD GIFTING, EXCHANGE, AND DEPRIVATION

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Gift-giving may seem a voluntary, innocent, and non-partisan act when, in fact, it comes laden with expectations and is often based upon economic self-interest. Hierarchy is established by means of gifts, for to give something is to show one's superiority. Conversely, to accept gifts without reciprocation or repayment is tantamount to subordination in a relationship. Marcel Mauss' work on gift economies and comparative ethnology is the foundation for social theories of reciprocity and gift exchange. His original work entitled "An essay on the gift: the form and reason of exchange in archaic societies" was originally published in *L'Année Sociologique* in 1925. Mauss' essay analyses the economic practices of societies that are centred on reciprocal exchange and shows that early exchange systems centre around the obligations to give, to receive, and, most importantly, to reciprocate. This reciprocation circulates wealth and goods as well as building solidarity among humans. The Asante were using this economic principle to manipulate their relationships with their neighbours, defining their connection with food gifts that Europeans would find difficult to repay. This, in turn, created an affiliation whereby the Europeans were considered clients, while the Asante positioned themselves as magister.

Between May 1816 and March 1820, Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame (a.k.a. Osei Bonsu, r.1800-24) received no less than nine representatives of the British and Dutch trading companies based respectively at the Cape Coast and Elmina forts, at his capital, Kumasi.<sup>3</sup> Later in the 1830s, Kumasi received various missionary representatives, all with the aim of furthering European objectives in the region. This section tells the story of the Asante response to these diplomatic missions with emphasis on foodways. At this time, European relations with the Asante were dictated first by the British abolition of the slave trade in 1807, but also by a sequence of Asante military invasions of the Gold Coast in 1806, 1811 and 1816. The Asante's partial northern absorption of the Fante in 1816 and their subsequent demands for rents (notes) that were formerly paid to the Fante, along with the shift in trade priorities by European traders, marked the beginning of the transition to legitimate trade.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Sheales, "Sights/Sites of Spectacle", 3.

<sup>4</sup> Edmund Collins, "The Panic Element in Nineteenth-Century British Relations with Ashanti", *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 5, no. 2 (1962): 79.

Inhabitants of the Gold Coast soon found that the cessation of the slave trade up-ended the local economy. Relations with the towns surrounding the forts became volatile and it was increasingly difficult to maintain order. Robberies were becoming more commonplace. Governor Meredith of Winneba was killed in 1812 over abolition-related discontent. European powers sought stability by signing a trade treaty with Asante for goods, such as palm oil, to forestall the resumption of the slave trade with other nations like the French. In 1815, the Dutch Governor Daendels cooperated with the British in a three-pronged strategy of pacification that included education, Christianity, and spying on the interior.<sup>5</sup> Daendels had large scale plans:

Namely, to open from the West African coast ways of communication with the powerful empires of Bornou and Congo, and with the opulent cities of Timboctou and Housa; to reveal the secrets of the source and the mouth of the Niger, and to employ the resulting knowledge in bringing about the increase of commerce, and taking it away from the caravans of Tripoli, Mensurata, and others, to the extent of more than 100 million new customers.<sup>6</sup>

With this stated objective, Deandels surprised the English by deploying Willem Huydecoper to Kumasi to begin negotiations for a treaty with the Asante. This section will deal primarily with the experiences of English envoy Thomas Edward Bowdich in 1817, Methodist missionary Thomas Birch Freeman in 1839 and their encounters with Asante diplomacy, especially with regards to food and its role in the expression of Asante power and style.

## BOWDICH

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Bowditch's account of his party's official reception in Kumasi in 1817 has long been used by scholars to make observations about Asante culture and customs. The British envoy's goal was to create a treaty and to establish a road to the coast that would allow the Asante to bypass the Fante and trade directly with the English.<sup>7</sup> Fiona Sheales' historical ethnographical approach uses material history to examine displays of diplomacy in the Anglo-Asante relationship. She notes that during official state receptions, envoys were subjected to incapacitating sensory manipulation: "The effects of sensory over-stimulation and deprivation were also accentuated through the withholding of food and, more importantly fluids in temperatures that probably exceeded 90 c."<sup>8</sup> The absence of offers of food and water at official receptions that exceeded five hours in length suggests a conscious effort at manipulating envoys and impressing upon them their powerlessness in Kumasi.

The official state dinner on Monday 25<sup>th</sup> August was announced at 2 o'clock. Bowdich stated, "we were taught to prepare for a surprise, but it was exceeded." This was after the

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<sup>5</sup> Collins, "The Panic Element," 99.

<sup>6</sup> H. W. Daendels, "Letter from Governor H. W. Daendels to Simon Cock, Secretary to the African Committee" (dated Amsterdam, 14 August 1815), *Journal and correspondence of General H. W. Daendels, Governor-General of the Netherlands settlements on the coast of Guinea* (Balme Library, University of Ghana, Legon, 1964).

<sup>7</sup> Collins, "The Panic Element," 99.

<sup>8</sup> Sheales, "Sights/Sites of Spectacle", 93.

day started with a sumptuous breakfast in a building purpose-built for this meal. Expertly cooked soups, stews, plantains, and rice were served at breakfast, along with wine and fruit. Bowdich noted that the servants and messengers were “distinctly provided for.”

The dinner was held in the king’s garden, described to be about the size of one of London’s larger squares. Four large scarlet state umbrellas protected the king’s elevated feast table, giving the occasion a feeling of solemnity and pomp. The Asantehene did not sit with his guests, but a short distance away with his captains, although he visited his guests frequently, conversing and enjoying their ribald toasts. Although he did accord the guests the honour of being on the elevated feast table, seating himself apart indicates that the king wanted a level of separation and formality. Not only were their eyes feasting on sumptuous roast pig, duck, and other fowl, English pease pudding, port, Madeira, and Dutch cordials, in addition, the king himself presented them with gifts of gold, sheep, and a hog before they were even seated. Tables were elevated and laden with silver-gilt plates containing European and local food for the guests. The native food such as soups, fruits, dessert, and spirits were served on either side of the elevated central table, on the ground or on low tables. This picture of overflowing abundance was designed to impress, and it succeeded. Bowdich related: “We never saw a dinner more handsomely served, and never ate a better. On expressing our relish the King sent for his cooks, and gave them 10 ackies.”<sup>9</sup> He retired after the feast to allow his servants to clear the table, and then returned to send them home with the leavings of the feast. The entire dinner lasted approximately three hours, but included no entertainment. After dinner, the King gifted the guests’ servants the remainder of the wine and cordials, along with the tablecloths and napkins, and sent them all home with cold pork and fowl for their supper. Although generously providing for the requirements of his guests and their servants, the king did not spend much time getting to know this party on a personal level. The purpose of the abundant feast for the envoys and their retainers was to demonstrate the Asantehene’s social position in relation to the English.

## FREEMAN

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By the time English Wesleyan Methodist missionary Thomas Birch Freeman undertook his first mission to Kumasi in 1839, the political climate had changed somewhat. Freeman was born in Hampshire in 1809 to a British mother and an African freed slave. Fervent about his faith, he lost his post as head gardener on a Suffolk estate due to his Methodist activism.<sup>10</sup> The changed political reality Freeman encountered was due in part to the first Asante military defeat, which took place at Katamanso on the Accra plains on 7<sup>th</sup> August 1826. In contrast to Osei Tutu Kwame, Asantehene Kwaku Dua I (1836-1867) used a different approach with his guests. Per Freeman’s account of his first visit, the official reception only lasted an hour and a half, and he was refreshed: “While I was sitting to receive the compliments of some of the first chiefs who passed, His Majesty made me a present of some

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<sup>9</sup> Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 130.

<sup>10</sup> Boston University, “Freeman, Thomas Birch (1809-1890): British Methodist missionary to West Africa,” Boston University School of Theology, History of Missiology, <http://www.bu.edu/missiology/missionary-biography/e-f/freeman-thomas-birch-1809-1890/> (accessed 3 March 2016).



palm wine.”<sup>11</sup> Indeed, while en route from the Cape Coast fort to Kumasi, stopping at Korinchi, Freeman received a gift of gold from the king via messenger, ostensibly for his own and his retinue’s upkeep on the journey.<sup>12</sup>

Much like Huydecoper’s experience, Freeman’s encounter included the receipt of gifts on days that were of significance to him as someone accustomed to European holidays. Huydecoper received gifts on New Year’s Day and Freeman on Christmas Day:

At two, the King sent us a present, consisting of two fat sheep; one for the Princes, and the other for Mr. Brooking and myself. Apoko stated that His Majesty had heard that this was Christmas-day, and that he sent the sheep by way of congratulations.<sup>13</sup>

He followed up this gift later that day with palm wine. Freeman expressed the hope that one day thousands of Asante would celebrate this annual festival too. By ensuring he was kept abreast of English custom, the Asantehene ingratiated himself through a gift of food for Freeman’s party to enjoy during their celebrations.

At seven in the morning on 28<sup>th</sup> December, Freeman and his party received an invitation to a state dinner. Unusually, the king requested that Freeman loan him his cook to assist in the dinner preparations, which commenced at 2:45 pm. The reason for this request was to become clear later in the day. Freeman’s dinner included kidney beans “well served up in the European style”, roast fowl, roast mutton and fish. In a reversal of the dinner Bowdich was witness to, the King ate with his guests. The Asantehene’s table was lower to the ground and bedecked with Portuguese silverware. Freeman was placed at the head of the high table, flanked by the repatriated nephews of the Asantehene, William Quantamissah and John Ansah. (Part of Freeman’s mission, apart from sharing the gospel, was to escort the two nephews—who had been receiving an education in England—back home.) The king sat at the head of the lower tables, facing Freeman. This was a singular honour.

The tables were in a spacious yard measuring 80 by 45 feet, shaded by several large state umbrellas. This sounds similar to the space in which Bowdich was entertained. Instead of being presented with gifts as Bowdich’s party was, Freeman requested they give thanks before they sat down to dinner, a request to which the Asantehene happily acquiesced. The Asantehene was attended by linguists, the heir apparent, and another prince, all of whom sat near the table. The captains from the king’s own house sat behind the princes. Most remarkable was the band at the far end of the yard playing familiar music with European instruments. Asking a question that he well knew the answer to, the Asantehene inquired whether musical accompaniment was a feature of European dining.

When a roasted sheep was placed before him during the main course of the feast, the Asantehene asked another question of Freeman’s party, enquiring whether sheep were indeed roasted whole in Britain. Subsequently, the Asantehene cut the sheep with the assistance of his servants and doled it out to his guests. Indeed, this feast was unusual for the level of commensality taking place. Freeman had some soup and plum pudding prepared

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Birch Freeman, *Journal of Two Visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti, in Western Africa* (London: J. Mason, 1843), 48.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>13</sup> Freeman, *Journal of Two Visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti*, 134.

from his own stores. (At this point, the request for Freeman's cook becomes clear, in that the host was keen to produce food customary to European feasts.) The Asantehene gladly tasted these foods and doled them out to his entourage.<sup>14</sup> After dinner, Freeman drank to the Asantehene's health, the auspicious return of the princes, and to the hope that the Asante and the English would become one in spirit.

The entertainment at this official dinner did not stop with European music, but continued with a tour of the "stone house" where the collection of the Asantehene's European (and other) treasures were contained. Built by Osei Tutu Kwame as an "edifice of accumulation", foreign and domestic objects (principally of gold) were stored here. Gold, the yardstick of wealth against which all other objects were measured, was prominently featured.<sup>15</sup> After allowing the Asantehene to proceed, Freeman's party passed through a courtyard and an anteroom that was tastefully decorated with all manner of local and foreign manufactures, all adorned with gold or silver. No doubt, this display was intended to impress, as Freeman remarked, "The weight of pure barbaric gold which we saw, would probably be from eight hundred to one thousand ounces."<sup>16</sup> After a tour and a return to the courtyard for a fruit course, the guests were sent home with the band as escort, playing European tunes for them all the way back to their lodgings.

Freeman later reflected on the extraordinary events of the day, marvelling that the king of Asante who holds the power to influence life and death with his smile or frown, sat at the table with Christian Englishmen. Indeed, the circumstances were extraordinary, especially when a comparison of commensality is made between the official dinner in Bowditch's account and that of the Freeman party. Commensality, and its transmission of symbolic meaning, defines relationships, status and symbolic kinship. In both instances, the choice of location, in the king's private courtyard in Kumasi—the centre of Asante power—, was emblematic of the status of both parties in relation to each other. The official dinner in honour of Freeman, despite, as it seems, being held in the same venue, came across as more intimate. Seating indicates the level of intimacy desired—socially intimate or distanced—to either facilitate conversation or to keep the protocol by rank.<sup>17</sup> The layout of the table, with the Asantehene eating with his guests and in the presence of his family members, gives an indication of the more intimate and relaxed tone of the proceedings. At the official dinner attended by Bowditch, the two parties sat apart; a deliberate power play and an obstruction to conversation. At Freeman's dinner, the Asantehene's choice of food and entertainment were both the focus. The king was comfortable eliciting contributions from his guests as to the menu to ensure they felt welcomed and were satisfied with the manner of food preparation. The Asantehene cut meat for the main course with his own hand, signifying that he desired a closer connection with his guests, while simultaneously emphasising his status as host. Not to be overlooked are the two instances whereby the Asantehene tasted the English food he was offered. This offers up yet another theme of the "self" and "other", as well as the relationship between the two. To eat food produced by another person is to

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<sup>14</sup> Freeman, *Journal of Two Visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti*, 140.

<sup>15</sup> T. C. McCaskie, "Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History: I. To the Close of the Nineteenth Century", *Africa* 53 (1983): 28–9.

<sup>16</sup> Freeman, *Journal of Two Visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> Morgan, "Diplomatic Gastronomy", 146.



experience that person both physiologically and emotionally. Food contains the self and the feelings of its producer, and by demonstrating he was sharing his guests' food with them at the same table, this is indicative of a specific behaviour used as a political tool in the deliberate construction of social solidarity.<sup>18</sup>

## ANALYSIS

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Using the firsthand accounts from Bowdich, Freeman, and Winniett, it is possible to construct a normative Asante court food culture. It is also possible to consider the change in style between Osei Tutu Kwame Asiba Bonsu and Otumfuo Nana Kwaku Dua I in their dealings with their European neighbours from the coast. In each account, the Asantehene would leave after the banquet so that his servants could clear the tables. In the case of Freeman and Winniett, Kwaku Dua would retire to another area to receive his guests again in another part of the palace complex and thus continue the evening's entertainment. Both Bonsu and Dua took great care to ensure the servants of his guests were well fed, either at the time of the feast, or by sending food for the servants from the feast with his departing guests. At each banquet, the king's food was customarily served at a table lower to the ground, and the display of elaborate silverware was remarked upon by each guest. The Asantehene also took great care to dress the part, usually donning European military attire at each banquet.

On each occasion the king had an entourage, although its makeup did change from captains and officials with Osei Bonsu, to the inclusion of family members during and after the feast with Kwaku Dua. There was only one occasion in which the Asantehene sat at the table and ate with his guests. Kwaku Dua sat facing Freeman at the end of a long table. He tasted the foreign food offered and then gave it to his retainers. With Winniett, he sat directly across from his guest at the latter's table and consumed wine, but did not eat. The traditional arrangement of matrilineal Akan culture dictates that men usually ate alone.<sup>19</sup> Eating separately to the guests can be considered part of the normative palace food culture. Therefore, the fact that Kwaku Dua sat with Freeman with his family members in attendance meant that this occasion was a singular honour designed to imitate European and/or Christian commensality customs of which he must have been aware. It could be argued however, that Kwaku Dua never actually ate any food, but simply tasted it and passed it on to his attendants:

On sending the soup round, I asked, whether the King would take any, to which he answered, "Yes;" and when it was placed before him, he tasted it, and then, according to Ashanti custom, gave the remainder to some of his attendants who were near him. Osai Kujoh also tasted it. While we were taking our portion, a bountiful supply of native soup was placed before the King, which he sent round to his Captains and people.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Anna Miegs, "Food as a Cultural Construction" in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds. *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 103.

<sup>19</sup> Gracia Clark, *Onions Are My Husband: Survival and Accumulation by West African Market Women* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 346.

<sup>20</sup> Freeman, *Journal of Two Visits to the Kingdom of Ashanti*, 140.

Kwaku Dua's approach to commensality was in marked contrast to Osei Bonsu's attempts to overwhelm his guests with conspicuous displays of giving before, during and after banquet at every level of participant from the cooks to the carriers. He kept his distance during dinner and after the banquet, avoiding the provision of escorts for his guests on their way back. Osei Bonsu continued this more aggressive approach on other occasions with Huydecoper, Bowdich, and Dupuis. Public gift-giving ceremonies broadcast his power with hours of lavish spectacle, draining his guests, Bowdich and Dupuis, by forcing them to sit through lengthy ceremonies. This could all be reflective of the political situation that existed in Osei Bonsu's council, whereby he was being pressured to adopt more militaristic policies. His support of Dutch Governor Daendels was not popular with his council who were convinced that Daendels was an enemy to the Asante. Pressure from his warlike council also leads us to understand why Osei Bonsu took the field against the rebellious seceding Gyaman state in 1817. Osei Bonsu also had to contend with an abortive coup attempt by several royal wives and princes, whose conspirators he had executed in 1819.<sup>21</sup> His distant manner could be indicative of ambivalence and anxiety over the internal power struggle and lack of support he was experiencing, which in turn manifested itself in his diplomatic style.

Taking Freeman for a tour of the stone house and Winniett for a tour of the ladies' apartments demonstrated a level of trust on the part of Kwaku Dua, and perhaps a desire to communicate his wish for an increased level of familiarity, that contrasts sharply with Osei Bonsu's approach. He literally closed the distance between himself and his guests by sitting at the table facing them when they dined, attentively catering to their personal culinary tastes, and including his family in the feasts. Kwaku Dua shared his personal living space with his guests and ensured they had an escort after the banquet by providing the band in Freeman's case, or taking the time to escort his guests personally, as in Winniett's example. This new approach is reflective of the consolidation of peace interests on the council at this time due to good relations maintained with McLean's British administration. Ironically, Kwaku Dua ensured 34 years of peaceful reign by eliminating the ringleaders of a plot to depose him led by Gyaasewahene (Head of the Exchequer) Adu Dampite. During Freeman's visit in 1839, the *shaykh* of the Kumasi Muslims was being detained for his role in the plot to depose Kwaku Dua.<sup>22</sup> Yet, his commitment to a peaceful administration is reflected in his approach to diplomacy.

Intraregional comparisons can also be made within the same century, which can help decipher the political theatre on display with respect to the Asante feasts, specifically via an appraisal of James McCann's description of Ethiopian Queen (late Empress) Taytu Bitäl's feast in 1887. Queen Taytu's feast had three objectives: to consecrate the new church, Entoto Maryam, to mark the political ascendancy of her and Menelik's new empire, and to reinforce political ties via a diverse menu that drew from each region.<sup>23</sup> Thus the meal had a ritual, political, and social context. The culture of cooking in Ethiopia was firmly placed in the woman's domain, which was controlled at its summit by the Empress, whose culturally diverse upbringing was reflected in her feast. Food sourced from different regions signalled

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<sup>21</sup> Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 484-485.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 488-489.

<sup>23</sup> McCann, *Stirring the Pot*, 65.

their access to historical trade networks, served as a blueprint for a new elite hybrid cuisine and reinforced a new national identity that was becoming part of a centralised empire.

The official dinners recounted by Bowdich, Freeman, and Winniett offer up important differences and similarities to the then contemporary Ethiopia. Although cooking was in the woman's domain, the Asantehemaa (queen mother) who was considered the most powerful woman in their matrilineal society and responsible for the selection of the heir apparent, was not in fact at the apex of the culture of cooking. That dual political and ritual role belongs to the Asantehene and his *soodofoo* in their role as intercessors to their ancestors and gods. This is an important difference in social organisation that was observed in the official reception and during important events such as the Odwira. At the banquet in honour of Freeman, the Asantehene even carved the meat himself and served the food to Freeman's party and his own entourage.

What the Asantehene had in common with the Emperor and Empress of Ethiopia was access to food sourced from different regions. The Asantehene's gifting of bullocks sourced from the northern savannah, as opposed to the forest zone, was indicative of his access to, and absolute control of, trade in this region. Sheep were also sourced from the north and share the distinction of being an important ritual animal. The ability to gift and consume these animals with such regularity signified membership to the elite who dined regularly on meat, fowl and fish from the coast. Pork can be added to the list of meats sourced from the northern regions. As per Bowdich's account, most non-elites found it too expensive to slaughter animals regularly, relying instead upon a diet of starch and game. Eggs are another ritual food "forbidden by the fetish" to Asante, but freely gifted to European envoys.<sup>24</sup> Instead of laying out a blueprint for a new national cuisine and a new public political culture, this feasting was a symbol of the extent of the Asantehene's established empire and of the reach afforded to him by his vassals. Like the Ethiopian Queen, the Asantehene was serving his guests food sourced from different regions. This was his way of signalling access to historical trade networks, as well as, it could be argued, serving as a blueprint for a new elite hybrid cuisine in a powerful central empire.

As previously stated, like Queen Taytu, the Asantehene included food at his feast from different regions. Other than meats, the dried fish that Bowdich was served at his breakfast more than likely originated from the coast. The African rice he ate was the dominant cereal in the Volta River delta and in coastal Axim on the farthest western coast, grown along marshy river valleys. Historically, corn (maize) has been most prevalently cultivated on the coastal savannahs of the Gold Coast in the Fante-speaking region, as forest farmers like the Asante found that maize exhausted cleared land rather quickly, and was susceptible to the growth of deadly fungi when stored.<sup>25</sup> Before the 1500s, African yams were a staple carbohydrate in the forest zone where Kumasi lay, and remained so throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Millet (along with sorghum) was a staple in the savannah areas north of the forest and the grassland along the southeast parts of the coast. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, millet experienced serious competition from the cultivation of maize, which began over a long

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<sup>24</sup> Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 267.

<sup>25</sup> J. D. La Fleur, *Fusion Foodways of Africa's Gold Coast in the Atlantic Era* (Boston: Brill, 2012), 94-98.

period of experimentation as of the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the Fante who called it “overseas millet”.<sup>26</sup>

Unlike the Ethiopian Queen, the Asantehene surprised his guests with his access to foreign food and style of presentation, including tablecloths, napkins, and silverware. Access to foreign taste is power, and the elaborately presented food and material culture from Europe marked Kumasi and the Asantehene as occupying the peak of wealth accumulation, political power and elegance. The European preparation of food such as roasted mutton, beans, and pease pudding impressed those in whose honour the feast was being carried out. The message being conveyed at these dinners that functioned as political theatre was one of political dominance in the region. The guests’ surprise at this presentation of sumptuous food and style in a remote forest kingdom (items that not even they had regular access to), made known the extent of the Asantehene’s prevailing supremacy and influence.

Food is essential to the dominion held by the Asantehene, as explored by T. C. McCaskie in his analysis of hegemonic structures of power in the Asante state. Theatrical display, gift exchange and control of food supply are vital and neglected components in the exertion of influence on subjects and outsiders alike. The framework which consisted of the power of prestige, manipulation of food supply, food-gifting and diplomatic ceremony served as a barometer for political relationships and as a mirror reflecting the power struggles both within Asante and outside of the state.<sup>27</sup> Using soft power and cultural diplomacy to direct behaviour through perception, symbolism, and culture, the Asante mobilised food as a diplomatic tool. In so doing, Osei Bonsu achieved several diplomatic goals, one of which was to secure the rents or ‘notes’ due to them from their subjugation of the Fante on the coast, and another was the stymieing of direct trade between the Europeans and the northern savannah.

Kwaku Dua’s divergent objectives were also reflected in his approach to soft power and cultural diplomacy. His interest in the maintenance of peace and stability in trade and political relations is revealed in his warm treatment of Freeman:

When a commensal event has an overlay of diplomatic intention, such as a state dinner, any messaging takes on a particular importance. A basic example would be an honored guest, who may lack the splendor or power of his host, finding himself on equal footing to his host at a ceremonial meal. And messaging does not necessarily stop there. The elaborateness of a state dinner compared to other ritualized dinners communicates many symbolic messages to guests, such as grandeur and acceptance into a special group.<sup>28</sup>

Ensuring that Freeman’s personal culinary tastes were catered to, that he made the acquaintance of the important members of his family during the meal, and sharing personal living spaces within the context of the diplomatic meal, was all designed to make sure Freeman felt accepted and safe. This sent the message that Dua desired to continue the propagation of stable, peaceable relations with the English by treating this occasion as a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>27</sup> H. J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace* (Peking University Press, 1985, 87).

<sup>28</sup> Linda Morgan, “Diplomatic Gastronomy: Style and Power at the Table.” *Food and Foodways* 20, no. 2 (2012): 148.

formal diplomatic meal within which to communicate the presence of significant power relationships. Both Dua and Bonsei both successfully executed diplomatic commensality, achieving their political objectives using food.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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