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Careers of slaves and bonded individuals on the Western Gold Coast (17th-18th century)

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The history of dependency – in various eras and geographical contexts – certainly has no lack of such figures as servants, slaves and other bonded individuals that in differing circumstances attain eminent social positions, in spite of their personal status.

Non-free individuals could attain high social position as a result of their own enterprise, good luck, guile, attractiveness or superior's favour. There was no shortage of examples of how the subject person could climb the social ladder even as far as the attainment of positions at the summit of power and the establishment of dynasties.

Servius Tullius was one of the kings of ancient Rome and his name is testament to the fact that he was the son of a slave. In the wake of this illustrious precedent, Roman and more generally European antiquity provides us with innumerable examples of freed slaves and even actual slaves who were rich and powerful, and also owners themselves of other slaves and patrons of a great number of clients. We know of slaves who were wealthier and more influential than their own masters; we come across slaves who controlled the crucial levers of military, political, administrative and religious power. We know a great deal about the role played by slaves, servants and serfs of Romano-barbarian leaders and sovereigns in the consolidation of states in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, but especially in the genesis of the European aristocracies in the Middle Ages (consider for example the Frankish kingdom).

However, these examples are always perceived and treated as exceptions to the rule in a hierarchy of relationships that, if anything, was confirmed by such individual stories.

Without going into the extremely complex details and the minefield of specific variants, we can go as far as to say that similar cases were very common in subsequent eras, as they were in the Middle and Far East, sub-Saharan Africa, the Americas and – after taking into account changes in forms of social dependency (the gradual disappearance of slavery and therefore servitude) – even modern states in Western and Eastern Europe.

Taking an example that introduces the specific context of sub-Saharan Africa, this was the case of a very famous historical figure on the Atlantic coast and Nigeria in particular, namely Ja Ja of Opobo, a man bought as a slave who, in the second half of the nineteenth century, came to lead one of the great factions (“houses”) in Bonny, a political entity at the centre of the mercantile empire of the Niger Delta, and then seceded from Bonny to create the independent state of Opobo (1870). Rising from the bottom of the social scale, Ja Ja managed through his own abilities and initiative to achieve the highest position and obtain full recognition of this from the whole of society. Indeed, he founded a new dynasty. Ja-Ja was

not a Spartacus: he did not free other slaves and he had no plans to overturn the social hierarchy and established values (AFIGBO A. 1987: 463-469; LIPSCHUTZ M. - RASMUSSEN K. 1986: 91).

Besides, his story was not unique in the history of the coastal regions of West Africa. The case of Ja Ja was not an isolated one: there were several others in the Delta area of the Niger during this period, and in any event, such careers were recorded on various occasions in the wider region during the nineteenth century. Historiography has interpreted them as extreme cases – particularly sensational given the low and disadvantaged original status of the personalities in question – of a wider and more general process of shifting balances of power in local societies as a result of the changes in the economic system of the Atlantic coast, following the abolition of the slave trade, which in the area had been controlled by warrior aristocracies, and the development of “lawful” trade based on the export of agricultural produce (such as palm oil). Ja Ja and other *homines novi* would become the more visible exponents of a new social class whose star was rising rapidly and who strongly challenged the previous hierarchies of power and were more attuned to the organisational needs of a new kind of commercial presence, namely European and American capitalism (AFIGBO A. 1987).

This article, which examines the more or less successful careers of individuals whose status had been one of extreme bondage in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century Gold Coast, deals with a situation different from that of the *big men*/slaves of the Niger Delta. Whereas the accent is placed in the Nigerian cases on the revolutionary social outcomes of these changes in the Atlantic trade in a given historical period, our investigation into examples in the nearby Gold Coast aims to show the historical and cultural “normality” of this phenomenon over the long term. Here, it is a phenomenon that clearly demonstrates a distinction between the objective hierarchy of personal status and the potential to climb up the power structures in both the economic and politico-institutional spheres.

The Gold Coast was the historical region that covered the southern part of modern Ghana and the extreme south-eastern corner of the Ivory Coast. Together with the coastal regions of modern-day Togo, Benin and western Nigeria, this section of the West African coast had constituted one of the principal areas engaged in the slave trade and was associated with the African memory of slavery.

The image of the local societies projected by the colonial experience is one of extremely hierarchical systems in which the ranking of personal status and that of political and economic power more or less coincide with each other. Colonial anthropology (BUSIA K. 1951; FORTES

M. 1950; RATTRAY A. 1923; 1929) has played a crucial role in creating this model, which has proved lasting in the academic world.

It is clear, however, that the situation that could be recorded in the late-nineteenth century and the initial decades of the twentieth is largely the product of the administrative policies of the colonial period, and of the way these redefined, consolidated and set in stone the official workings of the local “aristocracies”.¹

On the other hand, sources from the period preceding European colonization and, more particularly for this article, from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, provide the careful observer with evidence and indications of a very different situation.

It is unusual for this evidence to be very explicit, and it is rarely expressed in a sensational manner, but it is implicit underneath the veiled reference. In reality, the available material principally goes into the details when it relates to figures who aspire to powerful positions, but in some way fail to achieve their goals while climbing the ladder, or are defeated, rejected or replaced. In these cases, the attribution of a non-free status to the unlucky contender becomes a topos and often a demonstration that this status was the primary cause of his defeat. On the other hand the censorship surrounding an individual who managed to consolidate his power was rigorous, very effective and also convinced contemporary European accounts.

¹ There was a complex phase of restructuring local socio-political institutions in the first half of the twentieth century in the interests of the colonial administration, particularly during the 1920s and 1930s. This period of so-called Indirect Rule was the main reason for defining and setting up a “system” of “traditional” political power based on the “rationalization” of an accumulation of customs, elements of law, de facto situations more or less legitimised by history or majority consent, as well as European rule, and on the other hand, the marginalisation or abolition of other customs, elements of law, de facto situations and precedents that had fallen out of favour, particularly with the colonial power. It goes without saying that the essential coefficient of rationalisation in this process was dictated by the requirements of administrative efficiency (the indigenous institutions had to be used as grassroots governmental bodies), as long as such requirements did not interfere with the local balances of power that met with the approval of the colonial power.

Colonial manipulation was primarily interested in standardising the procedures for accessing appointments and official positions across all levels. It was necessary to avoid the situations of conflict, instability and institutional paralysis that are typical during periods of succession. These were obviously disadvantageous to the proper functioning of a public administration, but on the other hand they were important moments of political vitality and renegotiation of the fundamental balance of power between institutions and the collectivity. However, the colonial administrators were interested in security and continuity, and not alternative possibilities. They emphatically preferred a limited number of lineages and “houses” that could provide heirs for important offices, rather than multitudes of qualifying bodies that contended the succession through procedures that could often be violent and disruptive. The tendency was therefore to exclude, to cut, to circumscribe and, in short, to bring pressure for a reduction in number of the lines of descent within a matrilineage that had a right to qualify office-holders and a clarification of the manner in which they were to operate. In this manner the colonial power contributed considerably to the creation and endorsement of privilege for restricted groups.

Apart from extensive studies into kinship (FORTES M. 1950; 1969; RATTRAY A. 1929), research into forms of dependency in this region has mainly been interested in slavery, which was highly visible up to the colonial period.² There were two markedly different types of slavery in the region, although they were in some cases interrelated: a) as a region exporting slaves on a massive scale in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was involved in the creation of the type of slavery practised in the Americas; b) the region perceived the presence of an “indigenous” slavery as one of the levels of dependency that characterised the organisation of local society.

L. Yarak has convincingly argued that there is no significant evidence of the first type, which typified the plantation systems, taking root locally, even after the abolition of the Atlantic trade and not even in the small but significant European and mixed-race populations in towns on the Gold Coast (YARAK L. 1989). Indeed the forms of slavery that have been detected at local level were all variants of the “indigenous” type. As early as the nineteenth century, this type was variously and in some cases unconvincingly described as a “mild” or “benign” form of slavery that contrasted with the American plantation slavery. In many ways, these arguments reappeared in the twentieth-century categorization of “domestic slavery”, which was widely taken up and further examined by colonial anthropology to the point of becoming an interpretative model for particularly binding forms of dependency in African contexts.³

² DUMETT R. 1979; GETZ T. 2004, HAENGER P. 2000; KEA R. 1982; KLEIN A. N. 1981, 1994; MEMEL-FOTÊ H. 1999; PERROT C.-H. 1982: 157-170; TERRAY E. 1975a; 1975b; ; VITI F. 1998: 280-292; 1999; YARAK L. 1989.

³ “Domestic slavery” as an anthropological model is without question a twentieth-century invention, but it is equally certain that it interprets a representation of relations of dependency that has a much longer history and – a startling fact – has genealogy that is immediately recognisable to anyone who is familiar with nineteenth-century documents concerning the west coast of Africa. For example, the extant descriptions of the types of dependency on the Gold Coast, especially slavery, that were recorded in the first half of the nineteenth century by Europeans and Euro-Africans fully integrated into the coastal society, already contain all the salient features of anthropological definition “African domestic slavery”, which was coined a century later: “The condition of the slaves in the countries under our protection is by no means one of unmitigated hardship. In ordinary cases, the slave is considered as a member of his master’s family, and often succeeds to his property, in default of a natural heir. He eats with him from the same dish and has an equal share in all his simple enjoyments. He intermarries with his children, and is allowed to acquire property of his own, over which, unless under very extraordinary circumstances, his master exercises no control. He sometimes even acquires wealth and consideration far superior to his master, who may occasionally be seen swelling his importance by following in his train. They address each other as ‘my father’ and ‘my son’, and differ in little in their relations from the respect and obedience implied in these endearing epithets” (B. Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years*, 1853, vol. 2, p. 240). Cruickshank lived on the coast, and belonged to a network of local interests, alliances, and clienteles. Under him he had slaves and persons held as security, and everything else that accentuated his characterisation of a paternalistic idyll. However, we cannot dismiss his description as no more than that: his analysis of the relationship between slave and master reflects an idiom that we constantly encounter in accounts of the local

The status of slave was the consequence of a process of often violent desocialisation: being taken prisoner of war, kidnap and often the subsequent sale, but also reduction to the state of slavery and sale to pay off debts, etc. A foreign slave, particularly if from an area that was geographically and linguistically distant, was undoubtedly in a more disadvantaged position than a slave who came from a nearby area, a linguistically similar or identical society or indeed from the very same group. The distinction between the various categories was usually very clear.⁴

The process of being reduced to slavery necessarily involved an “expropriation” of one’s original position in relation to territory, family, status, etc. This total privation of one’s identity was followed by absorption into a new social body, that of the buyer, of which one was a weak and isolated member, at least during the initial phase.

However, a slave’s position tended to stabilise itself and in many cases, a slave would be integrated in very effective manners, and also involved slaves of remote and foreign origin. Indeed there was normally a process of integration up the social scale, which was obviously necessary in order to reduce the possibility of potential devastating social conflict.

For example, we find examples of slaves in nineteenth-century accounts, who shared the rights of free men, such as the possession of personal firearms (YARAK L. 1989).

Moreover the condition of slave was not inheritable. The children of a slave were not slaves, but rather belonged to the owner’s matrilineage (*abusua*). The status of slave was not perpetuated down the biological line, but instead gave rise to forms of dependent status integrated into the social group itself through the cooption to a so-called kinship group.

As Peter Haenger has observed (2000, p. xiv) in relation to the nineteenth-century Gold Coast, the spectre of various forms of dependency and patron-client relations was so broad and so complex that it was – and here Haenger quotes M. Klein – “more a continuum of different degrees of social bondage than a dichotomy between slave and free man” (Klein, M. 1993, p. 5).

In reality, the condition of “slave” was only one of the levels in the hierarchy of dependency – the one with the greatest degree of bondage and the least amount of personal guarantees, when compared with the entire gamut of other forms of subjugation, such as

society and provides us with the key element in the formulation of the historical discourse on dependency in West Africa. That element was the ability of the language of kinship and alliance to integrate. This was an undeniable fact and appears in a very transparent manner even in the older existing sources for the history of this region, such as the Portuguese and Dutch documents of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

⁴ A freeman could in some circumstances – for instance if he had committed certain crimes – be expelled from his own society and lose the legal status he derived from it. He would be reduced to a state of bondage that was defined as *akoa pa* in the Twi language (MCCASKIE T. 1995: 98).

descendants of slaves, individuals handed over as security, the poor (in relation to the rich), the young (in relation to the old), sons (in relation to their fathers), wives and concubines (in relation to their men), clients (in relation to their patrons), and those without title (in relation to the titled) (VITI F. 1999).

A person in a state of dependency was properly referred to in Twi by the term *akoa* (pl. *nkoa*), which can be translated as bonded, subject or subjugated (MCCASKIE T. 1995: 289-290). *Akoa* expresses a wide group of people and includes all the forms of dependency, from the bond that ties a slave to his master, to the one between a free man and his superior (his father, his chief, his military captain and his sovereign), or the one between a possessed person and a supernatural entity.

But at whatever level – even one very distant from the status of full slavery – the *akoa* status is full of implications which had a decisive effect on the person they referred to. In the literature on this region, one can often read that the condition of extreme personal vulnerability in particular situations of ritualised social disorder particularly concerned slaves, if not exclusively so. A typical example is that of the so-called human sacrifices or rather the killings that took place during specific periodic festivities and especially funerals of great personages in order to recruit retinue for them in the next world. But a careful reading of the sources from before twentieth century throws a very different light on such events. Indeed, the victims appear to have come from the entire range of the social spectrum,⁵ and – at least as far as the western section of the Gold Coast is concerned – traditions tend to emphasise a distinct preference for those who spoke the dead person's language well (ACKAH J. 1965: app. 1, GODOT J. 1704, p. 255) or, in other words, those who were well integrated into the local reality: the wife, the dependent, the client's son, rather than the foreign slave. In such situations, the range of potential victims covered practically the entire community with the exception of those of the very highest rank (VALSECCHI P. 2003). Nearly all members of society

⁵ Some scholars have attempted to explain the phenomenon of ritual murders and human sacrifices in Asante and other Akan areas in terms of political and juridical rationalism. The murdered were supposed to have been either condemned criminals and the methods and timing of the executions were made to coincide with particular feast days, political rituals, funerals of important personages, or prisoners of war, dissidents and defeated political adversaries (i.e. individuals who were an inconvenience and potentially a danger to those in power, and whose elimination was a purely political matter). This opinion is shared by WILKS I. 1975: 592-595; COLLINS E. 1962. For another functionalist analysis, this time of an extremely economic-determinist nature and referring to West Africa as a whole, see MEILLASSOUX C. 1975: 79-90: the ritual killings affected slaves – whose uncontrolled numerical growth constituted a threat to the power system – and it was a procedure by which the state defended its own hegemony. However a body of undeniable evidence has demonstrated the inadequacy of these explanations: in reality this kind of violence tended to strike the social body in its entirety, far beyond the bonded and marginal fringes (cfr. VALSECCHI P. 2003). See in particular WILLIAMS C. 1988, with a critique of the positions of Wilks, who partially modified his interpretation in WILKS I. 1988, and returned to the argument in WILKS, I. 1993. For very important contribution to this debate, see MCCASKIE, 1989 and the short article by TERRAY E. 1994.

were *nkoa* of one kind or another, and therefore nearly everyone – at least in principle – could be called upon, when necessary, to lay down their lives in some form of extreme service to the powers who were their ultimate masters throughout their corporeal existence.

As has been previously said, the framework for reducing the fundamental distinctions that determined the system of dependency was provided by the institutions of matrilineage (*abusua*) and by the line of paternal descent, i.e. the kinship system or more properly the system of alliances ratified by various kinds of exchange: primarily marriages and services.

There was a very specific term used to categorise collectively all those non-free persons that had been assimilated into the *abusua*: the term *gyaasefo* meant literally “the people of the hearth” (*gyaase*). The *gyaase* acted as a corporate entity in the direct service of the head of the household. Thus it was made up of his servants, attendants and guards, but also his closest and most influential advisors. The sons of the head of household would be in charge of the *gyaase*, and they could be either the sons of free women and therefore belonging to matrilineages other than the one the head of household belonged to, or the sons of non-free women and therefore assimilated directly in his matrilineage. A member of the *gyaase* took on a series of responsibilities in relation to his master: he worked his land as a tenant farmer, prospected for gold in his behalf, traded for him, fought for him or served in his house and, when the *gyaase* member died, he left all his assets to the head of the household (WILKS I. 1982: 243; YARAK L. 1996: 234-235).

Institutions of this kind had the function of constantly re-establishing stability in social bodies subject to a continuous process of assimilation of considerable numbers of individuals and groups of individuals of a non-free provenance, whether they were slaves, prisoners, foreigners, refugees, allies or dependents.

If we examined the historically observable reality, we frequently encounter individuals from backgrounds based on high levels of dependency, who came close to the highest levels of a socio-political system or even reached the highest positions. The frequency is such that we have to ask ourselves why.

It appears then that condition of personal dependency and the control of political, military and economic power were not mutually exclusive. Moreover, many cases have been variously verified, although their implications have not been fully examined. A famous example is that of the *bantamahene* Amankwatia Panin, the real creator of Asante’s military power and the first officeholder of what is still today one of the most important and influential positions in that state and the Kumase establishment.

Amankwatia was an *akoa* of Osei Tutu, the founder of Asante. His status was a highly dependent one – more precisely he was a *akonwasoani* or “chair-carrier” for Osei Tutu. He belonged to a category of servants linked to the person of the lord and destined to accompany and serve him after death in the next world (*soro*). These people could be killed on their master’s death or during the early phases of the funeral rituals. According to tradition, Osei Tutu, who was to succeed to the Kumase stool, was required to provide companions to his predecessor and maternal uncle Obiri Yeboa, by sacrificing them during the funeral. Short of suitable victims, he decided that his *akoa*, Amankwatia, should be killed, but the latter managed to escape death and embarked on his brilliant career as a military leader (WILKS I. 1993: 241-246).⁶

The story of Amankwatia Panin, linked as it is to the inception of a great imperial state, could undoubtedly be perceived as an early case of individual promotion relating to the increasing power of a king and centralization, which involved a strengthening of the body of servants of the state who were directly dependent on the sovereign. This process is

clearly detectable in the case of Asante and some scholars have taken this as evidence that some kind of rudimentary “bureaucracy” was taking root (WILKS I. 1966; HAGAN G. 1971; WILKS I. 1987 for biographies of the officials concerned).

However, the cases we will examine refer instead to socio-political realities on the coast where there were no central institutions of such force and, as far as we can see, no comparable growth in the state. The protagonists of these stories come from a range of different forms of dependency. One of them was a royal *akoa* in Assini in the extreme eastern section of the Ivory Coast in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth centuries. In the other two cases, they were subject to a lesser degree of bondage, although still a significant one: the son of a slave in Axim in the seventeenth century and a hostage or person handed over as security who came from a royal *abusua*, once again in seventeenth and eighteenth century Assini.

I believe it important to emphasise that contemporary Europeans writing about these events considered it legitimate to refer to such people as “slaves” when specifying their status, even though the Europeans in question had had a prolonged and first-hand experience of these local societies and in some cases were themselves an integral part of the social order on the Coast – as long-term residents – and were therefore fully aware of the exact degree of

⁶ According to the different traditions, Amankwatia survived by suggesting an alternative to his own suppression by volunteering to lead a military expedition to capture a large number of prisoners to be killed, or having been saved by another big man who, having the noted Amankwatia’s loyalty to his lord and the high quality of his services, offered to provide the replacement victims (WILKS I. 1993: 244-246).

dependency affecting the individuals in question. “Slave”, in this case, is a translation of *akoa* (or *akulu*, the equivalent term in the more westerly areas) and its use applied to different degrees of subjugation that, by way of comparison, ranged from forms of bondage similar to that of the servant class in Western Europe in the same period to other that were similar to those of American slavery in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries or indeed even more extreme forms of expropriation of the individual.

The son of the slave woman

Antonio Koloko (*Coroquo*) was a native of Axim whom mid-seventeenth Dutch sources portrayed as a ‘murderer of men and most abominable traitor and robber’, and presented as some kind of vile adventurer and mercenary. But Koloko could clearly boast a sizeable following, and enjoyed considerable prestige and influence in the region. He was an important merchant and was capable of mobilising substantial military forces.⁷

In 1642, the Dutch West Indies Company had captured Fort Saint Anthony in Axim from the Portuguese. The men of the WIC had several reasons for feeling ill-disposed towards Antonio Koloko. The Dutch accused him of being the instigator of the 1647 rebellion and responsible for sending a delegation from Axim to the English in Kormantin to offer them Fort Saint Anthony, which the rebels promised first to free from its Dutch garrison by annihilating it. The plan was abandoned when it encountered a refusal from the English. Moreover Koloko was supposed to have only just failed in his attempt to assassinate the *directeur-generael* Van der Wel, while the latter was travelling overland from Elmina to Axim.

Moreover, Koloko had become the principal ally and local reference point for a company that flew the Swedish flag but was in reality made up of ex-employees of the Dutch company and had been set up with Dutch capital (it was a so-called “interloper” company): the purpose of this organisation was to infiltrate in a parasitic manner the network of commercial relations established by the West Indies Company. After leaving Axim, Koloko supposedly assisted the men of the Swedish company in their plans to establish settlements in

⁷ FC N7, 1656-57, VII, pp. 22-47, ‘Deduction of Johan Valckenburgh, 16th September 1656’ (ARA WIC 116). The definition of Koloko as mercenary and paid killer is examined in VAN DANTZIG A. 1980: 42.

Takoradi and Cape Appolonia.⁸ He would be treacherously murdered in 1654, almost certainly on Dutch orders (Valsecchi P. 2002: 160-166).

What interests us here is the manner in which the sources described the social position of this individual, which provides us with information that, amongst other things, raises doubts about the accusations of banditry and absolute and mercenary unscrupulousness the Dutch made against Koloko:

Anthony Coroquo...born subject of Axem, sprung from a bond lineage; his mother having been a Quaqua slave woman belonging to Maria Soares, born at Axem; which Maria Soares had herself first been a slave of the wife of her "mede" brother, Gaspar Baffo, who, for money, emancipated the same Maria into the hands of the Portuguese Fitoor Louis Soares, by which Soares she, Maria, being freed from the yoke of slavery, has afterwards possessed the mother of this Coroquo. Which Coroquo...[was] also emancipated by her.⁹

There must be some doubts about the actual nature of these relations described as 'slavery' (for example Maria Soares' original state of slavery) and of the concept of 'emancipation' as it is used here.

However it is very clear that the network of relations in which Koloko was positioned made him an expression of the system of power that had existed in Axim at the time of the Portuguese.

The direct matrilineal component was nullified by slavery, whereas the dependency on Maria Soares was central to Koloko's standing in the society of Axim, because it linked him with Gaspar Bofo (*Baffo*) and Louis Soares, the fort's Portuguese *feitor* in the early part of the seventeenth century.

It is entirely unsurprising that Koloko was so fiercely and actively hostile to the arrival of the WIC and its negation of all the props to his position as a member of the 'upper' circle of the previous system of power in *Axiema*: he was probably a member of some importance (a 'son' of the *feitor* and an influential woman of his, Maria). Because of his questionable pedigree, he would have owed his personal status almost entirely to his protectors and guarantors and with their removal he could have slipped to the lowest levels of local society.

⁸. FC N7, 1656-57, VII, p. 70, [ARA OWIC 12] "E. Man, Fiscal: Attestation by A. Hogenhouck, fiscaal of Axim, and A. van Steelant, Assistant, Axim, 25th Nov. 1656".

⁹. FC N7, 1656-57, VII, p. 70, "E. Man: attestation...", Axim 25 Nov. 1656" (ARA OWIC 12). The document contained the information provided by the two "captains" and the other chiefs of Upper and Lower Axim.

Koloko fought for social and probably economic survival (he was a merchant) by leading the resistance to the new masters of the fort and mediating between the various local ruling groups in *Axiema* and other European interests that were potential alternatives to the WIC, first the English and then the ‘Swedish’ company.

The crucial point to emphasise is that, even in the new political and economic order brought by the West Indies Company, Koloko remained a “big man”, retained a large retinue and continued to have a decisive role as power-broker between the communities in the region, in virtue of the position acquired in the “family” of Gaspar Boafo.

The hostage “prince” and the “favourite slave”

The next two cases are connected to another important chapter in the history of the coastal regions to the west of Axim. This concerned the French activities that led in the late-seventeenth century to a short-lived settlement in Assini, in the extreme south-eastern corner of the modern Ivory Coast.

The *Compagnie du Sénégal, de la Côte de Guinée et de l’Afrique*, which was established in January 1685 at the wish of Louis Luigi XIV, attempted to establish itself at Komenda but encountered fierce resistance from the WIC, which at the beginning of 1687 drove the French from Takoradi, destroyed their trading post and brutally attacked locals who had collaborated with their competitors. This episode resulted in France dispatching an expedition under the command of J.-B. Ducasse, who sailed down the coast between November 1687 and February 1688. A further attempt to establish a base in Komenda also ended in failure, but Ducasse visited new Assini, where he signed an agreement with the principal chief, *Zena*. *Zena* and his people were newcomers in Assini, where they had settled only a few years before after moving out from areas to the west and after being granted hospitality and land by the local Ewutire communities. Ducasse left after having obtained two hostages of high status from *Zena* and left six Frenchmen and a quantity of merchandise in Assini.¹⁰

The two hostages, two boys, *Aniaba* and *Banga*, were educated in France and then returned home at different times: *Banga* around 1695 and *Aniaba* in 1701. The second, who became Louis XIV’s godson, achieved a certain notoriety in France (ROUSSIER P. 1935, particularly the introduction; WILTGEN R. 1956: 78-88). On his arrival in Paris, *Aniaba* was

¹⁰. DUCASSE J.-B. 1687-1688, in ROUSSIER P. 1935: 29.

presented to the court as the “heir to the throne” of Assini, or in other words eligible to be the successor to *Zena*.¹¹

Leaving aside the extremely interesting events during Aniaba’s stay in France (his education, his relations with the court and the church, and his admission to the army), we will examine the ambiguous role of distinguished “hostage” that this individual fulfilled during his stay in Europe. A detail that appears to have escaped others who have studied Aniaba is that before handed over to the French, he had had a similar role in Assini as a member of the royal Ewuture matrilineage handed over a hostage to *Zena*, the Esuma chief. Indeed, when *Zena* emigrated to the Ewuture lands, he asked for hospitality and was greeted as a member of the same ‘family’ (matriclan) as the *ebia* (royal stool) of the Ewuture. Aniaba was without doubt an exponent of this kinship group or alliance, and Tibierge draws attention to the fact that his name was the same as the one of the “family” or rather matriclan of *Akassini*: namely *Aniaba* (TIBIERGE 1692, in ROUSSIER P. 1935: 67).¹²

Moreover, Aniaba was also the “son” – i.e. patrilineal descendent – of the Esuma royal line – or to be exact, he had been adopted as a son by Nyamek____, the younger brother of *Zena*’s successor, *Akassini*, and as such he was a high-ranking member of his chief’s *gyaase*. In his capacity of *heneba* or “son of the king”, *Aniaba* was received in France as the “heir to the throne” of Assini. At the root of this French assumption there was probably a difficulty in understanding Aniaba’s position with a context of matrilineal succession. However, their interpretation was not entirely without foundation: as a *heneba* and important member of the *gyaase*, Aniaba was in effect eligible to occupy the throne in the event of the matrilineage not being able to produce a *odehye*____ who fulfilled all the requirements or of his being simply strong enough to impose himself on the succession.

Aniaba’s value to the French as a hostage was particularly significant, given that he was a link between them and the highest levels of both components of the ruling group in the area, the Esuma and the Ewuture, and he was therefore a guarantor of these new relationships.

¹¹ For information on their lives, see Roussier, 1935 (particularly the introduction); see also Wiltgen, 1956, pp. 78-88

¹² According to Loyer, the name of the matriclan to which both *Zena* and the Ewuture chief belonged was *Aumoiïans* (LOYER G. 1714, in ROUSSIER P. 1935: 187). This name could be interpreted as the plural of Boïne, the name of one of the six modern Ewuture lineages, which is attributed with a kind of political pre-eminence (cfr. PERROT C.-H. 1988: 461). Like the name *Aniaba*, it appears, in any case, to be very close to that of the matriclan Al nw ba, which is spread throughout the entire Nzema and Anyi area.

The rigid interpretation of this status by the court of Versailles was later tempered by greater knowledge of African customs. Although by 1692 Tibierge had reported that Aniaba was not even what he personally could define as the true son of Nyamek— and *Akassini*'s younger brother, but rather a prisoner or hostage taken from the Ewutire (Tibierge, 1692, in Roussier, 1935, p. 67), this did not stop him from being set home in 1701 with all the honours due to the rank accorded him by the French court as a member and heir of a friendly royal family.

More precisely, Damon appears to have come up with the idea that he could take *Aniaba* back to Assini to sit on the supreme stool, as he believed that *Akassini* would be ready to surrender his place to *Zena*'s legitimate successor (Roussier, 1935, p. XXVIII).

On 15 June 1701, Damon returned to Assini at the head of an expedition of three vessels with the task of constructing the first French fort, where they garrisoned thirty men, including officers and a few missionaries. Aniaba was part of that expedition.¹³

Immediately after landing, dangerous tensions developed between the French and the Ewutire. According to Damon, the Dutch, who opposed the French settlement in Assini, had convinced the chiefs of this group – and also some of the nearby populations – to boycott the building work on the small fortified base. For a certain period, there was hostility between the Ewutire and the Esuma, who were allies of the French. However, a peace agreement was negotiated, and only after the French had paid out considerable sums of money (DAMON 1702, in ROUSSIER P. 1935: 96-100).

It must be emphasised that during this period, the supreme stool of the Ewutire was vacant and one of the leading contenders to occupy it was *Aniaba*, who had just returned from France.

During the years that the French base had struggled on in Assini, the French had acquired a fairly clear perception of *Aniaba*'s potential position beyond his personal status as a hostage or prisoner, because he was a significant cog in the system of matrilineal succession, or at least in the complex business of relations and alliances between local groups.

From the French point of view, *Aniaba*'s accession to the highest office in Assini would have meant that the local sovereign was a man formed and educated under the patronage of the French monarchy and Church (*Aniaba* had become a Christian). Moreover, he would have

¹³ The history of the small fort was short: it was attacked on 13 November 1702 by the Dutch, who were repulsed and suffered considerable losses. The fort was then evacuated in 1703, once relations between the French and the locals started to deteriorate. For the events surrounding the French attempt to establish a presence on the Gold Coast, see Roussier, 1935, particularly the introduction (pp. v-xxxix); Van Dantzig, 1980a, pp. 56-66.

been completely dependent on the French from a financial point of view, unlike *Akassini* who was an important merchant and had considerable personal wealth, including a great number of slaves (Loyer, 1714 in Roussier, 1935, p. 168). Finally this succession would have had the advantage of having the country led by a man who could have attracted the loyalty of both the Esuma and the Ewuture, the two groups whose cooperation was essential in commercial terms.

However, relations between Damon e *Aniaba* changed for the worse during the voyage from France to Assini: something happened, but it is not clear what. After his arrival, the French commander perceived his former protégée as an obstacle to his plans, or perhaps even an adversary.

Leaving aside any personal matters between Damon and *Aniaba*, this cooling of relations was clearly also related to contrasting aims in terms of local politics, which we will not examine here. It probably became clear that any attempt to challenge the status quo established after *Zena*'s death and his succession by *Akassini* would have endangered French interests, both because of opposition within the ruling group in Assini, and because it was now clear that the Ewuture were susceptible to the WIC's offers and manoeuvres. After his arrival, Damon attempted to discredit *Aniaba* in the eyes of *Akassini* and the other chiefs, and he was assisted in this by *Aniaba*'s own hostility towards some of the leading figures of the local power group, in particular *Aymont* (Amon?), the principal military leader and the strong man of Assini (GODOT, 1704, p. ?), who he clearly perceived as the exponents of his disqualification from succession to the throne.

The young man was marginalised by the French, while Louis XIV's gifts intended for him as the 'King of Assini' were given to *Akassini*.

Aniaba appears to have developed his own political designs, in which the Esuma and Ewuture were components that counterbalanced each other. For example, Damon reproached him for putting pressure on *Akassini* to force the French to establish their main trading post not on the coast but on the Island of Ns k . This was not only the Esuma capital, but also the point where this group was in constant contact with the Ewuture, who came every day to its local market and supplied the necessary food provisions, which could not be produced in the sandy area to the south. The positioning of the European trading post in Ns k would therefore allow for its more immediate control by the Esuma ruling group, but also direct Ewuture access to this important market and its related transactions without the mediation of

the 'host' group settled in the coastal areas (Damon, 1702, Loyer, 1714, in Roussier, 1935, pp. 95, 181).

A few sources make it fairly clear that *Aniaba*, at least for a period, was entertaining the idea of creating a power that extended over the whole area controlled by the Esuma and the Ewutire. It cannot be excluded that these aspirations had been actively encouraged by Damon, before their relationship deteriorated.

This was certainly not just the question of the manipulated and soon frustrated ambitions of an individual whose rare and privileged experiences stretched across two distant worlds. The Ewutire chiefs explicitly asked *Akassini* for *Aniaba* so that he could be established as the successor to their supreme stool.

But his candidature failed after the Ewutire and the French improved their relations. The position was taken by a certain *Coucrocou*, whom Loyer defined as an *esclave favori* (favourite slave) of the previous chief, who left him in control of his own substantial wealth.

The sources do not tell us whether *Coucrocou* had been bought or captured, or whether he was the son of his predecessor and one of his predecessor's slave women, or his servitude originated elsewhere. However, his was undoubtedly some form of extreme servitude.

Coucrocou appears to have been the chief of the deceased's *gyaase* and evidently enjoyed widespread support in the royal *abusua* and the community. This support, together with his control of substantial assets, made it easy for him to get the better of other contenders with formally better claims to the legitimate succession.

One of the defeated candidates to whom G. Loyer referred was clearly *Aniaba*.¹⁴

The French settlement in Assini, whose existence was undermined by the enmity of the Dutch and the increasing disillusion of the indigenous population over the lack of the real advantages that could accrue from hosting a stable European presence, did not last very long and was definitively and ingloriously evacuated in 1703.

Four years after the departure of the French, *Aniaba* also left Assini and joined a French ship with the intention of returning to Paris. But the captain abandoned him on land when the ship was in port at Keta, on the most easterly section of the Gold Coast. There he established himself quite successfully and benefited greatly from the knowledge he had acquired in Europe. The last sighting of him was in 1718, when an employee of the Dutch West Indies Company met him in the coastal town and noted that *Aniaba* had achieved a position of great prestige and social importance (VAN DANTZIG A. 1980: 62).

¹⁴. See Tibierge, 1692, Damon, 1698 and Loyer, 1714, in Roussier, 1935, pp. 66, 100, 179).

From *nkoa* to *odehye*__

While *Coucocrou* was successful in climbing the social ladder, Koloko and Aniaba were to varying degrees unsuccessful and there came a point when their careers “failed”. For different reasons, they did not achieve their final aims: Koloko was killed by his enemies and Aniaba came into conflict with his principal allies.

But only the “hindsight” of the sources that tells their stories could attribute their misfortune partially or wholly to the precariousness of their social legitimacy.

It is clear from their stories that, if they had been successful, the same pedigree attributed to them in defeat could have equally provided the basis for the celebration of the power and eminence: in the event of Koloko having obtained victory, he would have been exalted for his high paternal connection and his privileged relationship with the European power at Axim Fort before the Dutch, and in the event of success for Aniaba’s plans, he would have been celebrated for connections with two royal lines.

A fundamental characteristic shared by the persons mentioned above is that when it came to their position within the system of matrilineal kinship they would all have been defined as *gyaasefo* , “people of the hearth”, “sons” or assimilated members. Their very doubtful personal status, when you consider it in relation to the category of *odehye*__ (with the possible exception of Aniaba), did not prevent them either in principle or in practice from aspiring to and obtaining high office and positions of prestige.

If we want to fully understand this logic, which is of a structural nature in Akan societies – at least from the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries – we cannot neglect the *gyaase* as a key social institution.¹⁵ By closely associating lords, dependent, masters, slaves,

¹⁵ The importance of this question is highlighted in the brief mention of it in WILKS, 1994, a response to KLEIN A. N. 1994. Important theoretical suggestions for understanding the eighteenth and nineteenth-century Asante state (and empire), with references to the Weberian category of patrimonialism, can be found in Yarak, 1983; 1990 and 1996. See also McCaskie, 1996, pp. 18-9, 248-52 and 346, no. 73. Apart from the macroscopic differences in terms of size and development that separated Asante from all the other political formations in the region, many of these considerations can be considered valid also for the Akan states. More specifically, Yarak (1990, pp. 282-7) critically reviews I. Wilks’s interpretation of the Asante imperial administration as a system of formalised bureaucracy in Weberian terms (see in particular 1966; 1967; 1975). On the other hand, Yarak sees Asante ‘patrimonialism’ as close to the variant of oriental patrimonialism with aspects of arbitrary behaviour (‘sultanism’), rather than the western variant, whose fullest expression was the feudal state (Weber, 1999, pp. 225-37). Moreover, on the basis of the most effective mechanisms for rapid integration of slaves into the body of society, he (Yarak, 1996) also challenges the interpretation in terms of a specific ‘slave-based means of production’ in the case of some of the large Akan states (such as Asante and Gyaman), as proposed by E. Terray (1974; 1975). Yarak emphasises on this point the fundamental role of the *gyaase*. In order to explain relations between power, this system of relations of servitude and the society in general, he uses the categories of ‘feudal means of production’ (or ‘coercive rent-taking’) and the ‘fiscal means of production’ (or ‘tax-raising’), as

rulers, subordinate allies through the pervasive forms of kinship, the *gyaase* de facto acts very effectively as a kind of intermediary filter – a pressure chamber – between the demands of kinship and those of social class.

The “nobility” of a line of descent, which was of those who could define themselves as *odehye*— in the full sense of the term – was undoubtedly the ideal and meaningful reference point in pre-colonial times, but picture that emerges from pre-twentieth-century documents and more particularly pre-nineteenth-century ones is that it was not an obligatory and exclusive paradigm in the local political lexicon, which it would become in the twentieth century, as the corollary of a selection process for official “aristocracies” linked to the creation of colonial state.

Close observation of the historical context in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries appears to contradict the image of the Akan societies that became current in the twentieth century. This was an image that colonial anthropology contributed to in a decisive manner, and one in which personal status and the politico-economic hierarchy tended to be one and the same thing. On the contrary, it demonstrates how a condition of personal dependency and high office controlling political, military, and economic power were not mutually exclusive.

Without challenging the importance of ascribed status, the condition of an individual was often – and obviously – determined by other crucial factors linked to his ability to take appropriate action within society. Returning to the examples of Bantamahene Amankwatia and *Coucorou*, their status as slaves was in some way resolved and entirely incorporated into the process of redefinition of their objective condition within the social body.

Through war and his own blood, Amankwatia “buys” his “freedom”: spilling blood for the group “emancipated”, and taking part in the effort to build and defend a community guaranteed integration into the community itself. In reality, slaves did not use their own blood to buy “freedom” – an ambiguous term in this context – but rather full membership of the group, by demolishing the separation wall that divided the foreigner or stranger from the

elaborated by C. Wickham (1984; 1985) on the basis of materialistic approach to the historical situations of the European Middle Ages and of Asia. The first (‘feudal’) case perceives a relationship in which landowner not only collects rent in money or services from his tenant, but also has non-economic control over that tenant which can be formal (for instance the administration of justice) or informal. In the second (‘tax-raising’) case, the surplus is extracted by the producers through taxation implemented by a ‘state class’ based on a public institution, which uses political law to exploit a sector of society that does not directly control the management of the land. In practice, the relationship between the chief and the *gyaase* represents a variant of the ‘feudal means of production’ within a wider relationship between the chief and society which is of the fiscal kind. However, the integration of the former into the latter occurs from a subordinate position, given that the members of the *gyaase* are still subjected to taxation just like the other subjects, as well as their specific obligations. (Yarak, 1996, pp. 234-5).

group member and that, in the case of a slave, served to prolong and justify his exploitation by the person who had purchased him. War was the most important producer of slaves, but war was also the most important emancipator of slaves.

Work too could emancipate: serving one's master, contributing to the payment of his debts, and defending and taking care of his assets. This was the key to *Coucrocou's* promotion.

Lovejoy, in the wake of Meillassoux, argues that "slavery is the profound antithesis of kinship, and slaves are valuable precisely because they are not relations and cannot become them." There can be no doubt that the first assertion is historically verifiable: a slave belonged to the family but was not a member of the family, he was one of its possessions and therefore he was part of it in a purely passive sense.

However existing evidence makes it difficult to accept the second part of the sentence as an essential feature in defining slave status in the history of the Gold Coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In other words, the slave might well "become a relation", in spite of all the forms of social stigma that were very publicly attached to servitude. Whereas property was the essential criterion in the classical definition of the status of slave, in this particular case ownership by the master was transformed into something different – into a relationship that was completely reinterpreted through the logic of belonging to the master's group.

In conclusion, it can also be added that it is extremely difficult to identify a status of individual "freedom" as a widespread or normal condition. This concept could be abstractly translated into the Akan one that underlies the condition of *odehye* (pl.. *adehye*), meaning freeborn.¹⁶

The fact is, however, that freedom at birth often proved to be an extremely volatile and transient condition: at any stage in his or her life, it was very easy for an individual to lose this free status in a voluntary or coerced manner and thus return to the status of dependency (as security, as a hostage, as prisoner or as the voluntary vassal of a powerful figure). On the other hand, the condition of *odehye*, even when it was not lost, only constituted a potential in terms of enjoying effective and continuative guarantees and privileges. In other words, it was implemented only in particular conditions shared by an extremely small proportion of the social body: the citizen with full rights, the "freeman or freewoman" by definition, was the

¹⁶ The etymology of the term *odehye* is probably to be found in a combination of *de* – to own something, to hold, to have – and a *hy* – to be appointed or raised to a status. The term is commonly used in the sense of "noble" and legitimate heir in a matrilineal succession. See MCCASKIE T. 1995: 279.

abusua panin, the head of lineage, who was defined in drum language as he or she “who is not put up for sale” (VITI F. 1998: 277), at least while a superior power does not decide otherwise, as in the case of the Asante state.

But once again, it is different when you come to review and define this condition in the clear realities of observable historical situations. On this point, it has to be emphasised that it would be very difficult for any assertion of “freedom” or autonomy from powerful figures or structures to be disassociated from a parallel assertion of autonomous financial muscle. Persons were free only if they were capable of guaranteeing their own person and their subordinates against the constant danger of running into debt, receiving a fine, being captured or suffering similar ever-present misfortunes.

As a result, an *akoa* was very often capable of creating areas of autonomy – “liberty” – for himself and his own group, and this autonomy could be more far-reaching and indeed more real than what could be achieved by many *odehye*__, particularly if these were not rich.

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