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Transformation Within the Asafo ("Warriors") Institution of Ghana, 1700-2000

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Introduction.

Compared to the Asante kingdom, with its glitter and pomp, and its sensational history of empire building and resistance to colonization, the other populations of Ghana tend to draw relatively little attention from scholars working in this part of West Africa. One notable exception to this rule are the asafo companies of southern Ghana, which have awed, and puzzled, scholars of many stripes--including historians, art historians, anthropologists, musicologists and political scientists. Simply put, an asafo company is a community association made up of most, if not all, of the inhabitants of any given town in southern Ghana. They are particularly prevalent among the Fante population, who inhabit most of the area between the major coastal cities of Takoradi and Accra. Each Fante town will have anywhere from one to a dozen or more companies within it, depending primarily on the size of the town and its proximity to the coast, as the asafo are less prevalent as one moves inland from the sea. Asafo companies are most visible and active on special public occasions, such as funerals, installations of chiefs, and annual festivals. On these occasions, the younger men-and sometimes women-of the town organize according to their companies and parade through the streets displaying colorful "company" flags and other pseudo- military paraphernalia-including guns and other weapons, singing songs that speak of the company's past triumphs and the humiliations of other companies, and creating a general mood of excitement among those present.^[1]

The asafo play less visible but extremely important roles in the daily workings of local government, society, and religious practice, above and beyond their more visible presence at public events. In many towns, for instance, the asafo elders are consulted during the process of selecting a new chief, and they must approve a candidate

before he can be installed. The installation of a new chief might also require particular rites to conciliate gods and ancestors, that can only be performed by asrafo companies. Also, the traditional councils of coastal states often include the heads of the asrafo companies. And on funeral occasions, the asrafo company to which the deceased belonged is often obliged to make a financial contribution toward the requisite expenses, thereby taking on a social responsibility that otherwise falls on the immediate family and members of the deceased's matrilineage. The asrafo are also the key players in important annual festivals and ceremonies, such as the Akwambo, or "path clearing" festival, and the Ayeye festival in which people remember and pray to their ancestors. In these ways and others, depending on location, the asrafo participate in fundamental, everyday social processes and constitute an important social institution, the significance of which surpasses the aesthetic value of their fantastic displays of art, music and military pageantry, which are so often noted by outside observers.

These many aspects of the asrafo companies have attracted much scholarly interest, as already noted. But in attempting to explain the subtler social, political and spiritual aspects of the asrafo, scholars have stumbled over seemingly irreconcilable contradictions in the way the asrafo, as an institution, function within the broader field of social life. The confusion has centered around two main features of the asrafo institution, one of which has been the subject of a primarily anthropological debate, and the other the subject of a primarily historical debate. Membership in an asrafo company is based on the patrilineal principle, which goes against the grain of the otherwise matrilineal Fante social structure. Every person automatically belongs to the asrafo company of his or her father and is bound up with certain deities that are worshipped within the father's patrilineal descent group. Also, in Fante society, when a man dies, any weapons, protective charms or other asrafo-related paraphernalia he might have possessed are inherited by his children, while his other properties will be inherited by his maternal kin. Furthermore, succession to certain offices within asrafo companies is often restricted to a particular paternal line. Many of the higher ranking positions within an asrafo company, including the position of "Captain," are thus passed on to members of a single patrilineal descent group. The wealth and privileges passed down through this patrilineal system, as well as the social obligations required by it, are minimal compared to those involved with a person's matrilineage. Nevertheless, the patrilineal element within asrafo companies strikes an apparent imbalance with an otherwise strictly matrilineal system of succession and inheritance. Most notably, when rivalries erupt between asrafo companies in the same town, members of a matrilineage, who are deeply invested in one another's well-being, can find themselves be pitted against each other in violent conflict or serious litigation.

The patrilineal networks created by one's membership in an asrafo company, and the inherent conflicts that exist between these ties and one's matrilineal ties, have caused some anthropologists to label the Fante as practicing a system of "double descent," meaning simply that a person can be a member of two different descent groups—one matrilineal and one patrilineal, for separate purposes.^[2] But a debate has arisen as to whether or not this pattern of double descent is really a product of a European patrilineal influence on coastal society. The implication being that if the pattern of inheritance and succession within the father's line was adopted from European practices on the Ghana coast, it is somehow less authentic or "indigenous."^[3]

Historians have stumbled over some rather different aspects of the asrafo institution, most notably the origins of the military structure and symbolism displayed by asrafo companies. The asrafo described in the anthropological literature of the colonial era displayed many features reminiscent of European military groups. For instance, a typical Fante traditional state will have the equivalent of an army general (Tufohen), a senior commander (Supi), multiple captains of subdivisions (Asafohen), and a variety of lesser officers including linguists, executioners, flag carriers, hornblowers, drummers and priests/priestesses.^[4] In addition, each company has a number, such as No. 1 Company or No. 2 Company; they normally march in procession, use musketry salutes, carry distinctive company flags, and build shrines that structurally resemble European forts. Historians have argued over the extent to which these features, and the asrafo generally, were the product of some kind of cultural borrowing from European armies, which were present on the Ghana coast in greater and lesser numbers from the 15th century. In a 1971 article in the *Journal of African History*, Datta and Porter attempted to assess the extent to which asrafo was an indigenous institution, or one resulting from the overall impact of European contact.^[5] In support of the view that Europeans on the coast had a strong influence on the formation of asrafo companies, it has been pointed out that flags bearing a strong resemblance to those used by European armies were being flown by coastal military groups from the 17th century or earlier.^[6]

Both of these lines of inquiry are oriented around the question of "European influence" and its role in the formation of the asafo institution over time. But by framing investigations of asafo development in terms of European culture gradually "rubbing off" on coastal peoples, scholars have confused the point and failed to take into account the complexities of the relationship between coastal societies in West Africa and the broader Atlantic World. For instance, Datta and Porter note that as you move inland from the coast, "the companies are fewer in number, have fewer offices, are less elaborate in their paraphernalia, and are generally of more limited significance, especially in the political field."^[7] They attribute this to the fact that Europeans were on the coast, which caused asafo companies to be more highly developed there. But this perspective does not take into account that the nature of so-called European contact changed dramatically over time, and that developments on the coast were also very much affected by the changing relationship between the coastal and inland states, as well as subtler local developments related to migration, urbanization and economic change. Because the broader range of historical influences has not been fully explored, it remains unclear when the asafo came into being and why; when they adopted particular features such as the numbering system or the practice of performing civic and religious duties, and why; and when the patrilineal pattern of organization and succession came into being and why.

This paper is an attempt to reorient the asafo as a product of the complex historical experiences of the Fante people, and to thereby begin to explore the nature of the asafo as a multifaceted social institution that has taken shape in response to local, regional and trans-Atlantic pressures and opportunities. It also represents an initial effort to explain what seems to be the most obvious point of confusion about the asafo, namely that they have retained a definite military focus in their organization and material culture in spite of the fact that their military role was, in effect, trumped by Britain's military agenda in Ghana nearly 200 years ago. I will do this by highlighting key turning points in Fante history, in terms of major shifts in local, regional and trans-Atlantic power relations, and by making some preliminary observations about the connections between these historical processes and the evolution of particular features of the asafo institution. In order to understand the asafo at any point in time-be it the asafo of today, the asafo of the colonial era, or the asafo of pre-colonial times-one must take into account the developmental process and the ways in which different aspects of this institution have been added or altered in response to changing conditions.

Origins.

It is impossible to say when the asafo came into existence, partly because the term, "asafo", in Akan, simply means warriors, or literally, "people of war." Thus, the term has probably been used by Akans for as long as there have been violent conflicts involving organized groups of fighting men and women.^[8] It would be highly problematic to attempt to identify specific characteristics that would mark the transition from some more generic type of military organizations in Fanteland to the more distinctive "company" formation that has been known in recent centuries as the asafo companies.

The most rigorous attempt to trace pre-colonial developments in the military culture of southern Ghana is that of Ray Kea, who is very likely more familiar with early Gold Coast documentation-particularly Dutch and Danish sources- than anyone.^[9] Kea provides substantial evidence to indicate that the asafo came to be a widespread social institution around the end of the 17th century and beginning of the 18th century, as he describes a major shift in military organization and mobilization at this time.^[10] Kea argues that slaves and other subordinate members of elite families constituted the main military forces in the 17th century, whereas the masses of free commoners were either not recruited in wartime, or were subject to low levels of mobilization, since commoners primarily met society's demand for agricultural production and other types of non-military labor during this period. During the 17th century, the productive labor of peasants was "deemed more important in the eyes of the abirempon and afahene [nobles and chiefs],"^[11] than their potential use in military activities, Kea argues. He believes this system remained dominant in the coastal states for most of the 17th century, but that by the 18th century a range of significant changes occurred throughout this region, resulting in part in the mobilization of free commoners in times of war. At the same time, the labors of slaves and other retainers was largely diverted toward agricultural production and other non-military services required by the elite.

This was a shift from an elitist military force with professional soldiers, to the impressment of large numbers of freemen organized within towns and led by a hierarchy of local commanders. According to Kea, this shift was part of a larger process whereby imperial state systems, especially the interior states of Denkyira, Akwamu and Asante-gradually replaced smaller, autonomous kingdoms during the second half of the 1600s. This shift was particularly important on the coast and in the new urban areas that had grown up there as a result of the thriving gold trade in the 15th-17th centuries. The new asafo companies on the coast were attached to town wards, or quarters. This was an "urban phenomenon," according to Kea, that was linked to coastal growth and the development of towns. Towns were divided into wards that were on the one hand the "basic administrative, economic, and social units of the towns," and at the same time the "primary urban military units." [12]

That the asafo institution had taken on many of its modern-day features by the early 19th century is clear from the description provided by Brodie Cruickshank, who lived in this part of West Africa for 18 years, beginning in 1834. Cruickshank described Fante towns as being divided into wards or departments, within which people were formed into companies, each with its own distinctive flags, drums, and other paraphernalia. He remarked that these companies were composed of a head men, or advisors, a flag-bearer, a drummer, and a general body of members. Within a town, he noted, there was considerable jealousy and rivalry between companies, which often led to violent conflict. [13]

From this information, it is safe to conclude that while something like asafo companies may have existed prior to 1700, the institution changed dramatically during the 18th century, becoming an association of free commoners who mobilized according to town quarters for purposes of war. The shift from private armies made up of slaves and retainers to armies of freemen in every town makes sense in light of two important events of the 18th century. The trans-Atlantic trade taking place on Ghana's coast changed at the beginning of the 1700s from a primarily gold-exporting trade to a primarily slave-exporting trade. And at the same time, the Akan population of the forest hinterland allied under the first Asante king and began building up the region's most powerful empire. The compounded effects of these two events necessitated greater defensive capability among the Fante, as warfare, raiding and kidnapping escalated. The asafo were also involved in Fante slave raiding. [14] The Fante fought innumerable battles with neighboring peoples during the course of the century in order to protect their middleman role in the slave trade, and to preserve their autonomy in the face of repeated attacks from the Asantes. [15]

The 18th century can thus be seen as a critical moment of generation in the development of asafo institution, in the sense that this was a time when war and defense outweighed all other interests, and the asafo were first and foremost fighting forces. The political, social and economic conditions associated with the slave trade and the rise of Asante necessitated a major military response in Fante society, and this took the form of the organization of armies of commoners, according to town wards. The Asante invasion and brutal subjugation of the Fante in the early 1800s would mark the end of a distinct period in Fante history, as the autonomous and militarily effective Fante states ultimately lost the battle for control of the coast. From this point on, I suggest, the military aspect of the asafo began to take on a different purpose and meaning.

Fante and the British.

Two major events in the first decade of the 19th century forever altered the Fantes' position within the region in terms of the balance of power between them and Asante on the one hand, and the British on the other. Both of these must be seen as having a substantial impact on the development of the asafo institution. Following the conquest of the coast by Asante in a series of massive invasions between 1807 and 1816, the Fantes were hopelessly weakened militarily. Meredith speculated that some 8,000 Fantes were killed in the 1807 Asante invasion of Anomabo, alone. [16] The other major event of the early 19th century was the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by Britain, which compounded the effects of Asante invasion for the Fante, who had built up a thriving business as middlemen in the slave trade between Asante and the coast.

The Fante, and other coastal peoples, faced an entirely different regional politico-military landscape following Asante's invasion. They could no longer hold their own militarily against Asante, nor could they use their middleman position in the slave trade-which had previously allowed them to check the flow of firearms to

Asante-to their advantage. The 19th century was one of gradually increasing British influence, with the exception of a brief moment in the late 1820s, when Britain nearly disappeared from the Ghana Coast. The interdependence of Fante and the British was solidified by 1830, when George Maclean began negotiating peace between Asante and the southern states. British power in Fanteland only strengthened in following decades, with the Bond of 1844 which gave Britain the right to play an active role in law-making and the judicial system in general, and then the outright annexation of the coast in 1874 forming the Gold Coast Colony.

In this period, the *raison d'être* of local militias had relatively little to do with defending borders and protecting against slave raiders. An important transition took place over the course of the 19th century, as British colonial rule gradually took hold on the coast, and then the entire country. I suggest that in this period, the asafo companies-while maintaining and possibly enhancing their military flair in terms of pageantry, music, marching, etc.-began to channel their efforts toward the new challenges of the Fantes' peculiar alliance with the British, and the changing regional balance of power and the major economic upheaval associated with abolition, the transition from slave trade to palm and cocoa trade, and the continued animosity of Asante. The two main tasks of asafo companies in the 18th century-defense and raiding-were removed from the social/economic/political landscape in the 19th century. As David Kimble stated it, the asafo were "deprived of [their military] function by the British *pax*."[\[17\]](#) The question stands, then, why did these military companies continue to exist? How exactly did this institution make the transition from town militias to civic/government/religious groups? Why did they continue to be known as "asafo companies" when the fighting aspect had been gradually phased out?

Colonial rule and mass protest.

It is clear from the records of the Colonial Secretary and the District Commissioners that the asafo companies were very active during the colonial period, primarily in inter-asafo rivalries within towns or between neighboring towns. Much of the early descriptions of asafo were in fact motivated by the colonial administration's attempt to understand, and do away with, this institution. De Graft Johnson, Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs in 1932, was commissioned to undertake a study of the asafo, in which he describes the central role of the asafo in the social and political life of coastal peoples.[\[18\]](#) Other colonial officials repeatedly recommended the abolition of the asafo company system. But they were constantly restrained from doing so by the fact that, according to their own observations, the asafo institution was so central to the functioning of traditional government that to do away with it would cause a deterioration of the "fabric of the state".[\[19\]](#).

A cooperative project begun in 1996 between the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, and the Institute of African Studies at Legon, Ghana, has taken up the question of how the asafo may have functioned as the voice and organizational mechanism of mass protest to both colonial and chiefly rule during the 19th and 20th centuries.[\[20\]](#) The ideological basis of this project is the notion that the asafo represent an indigenous system of checks and balances, that has, historically, helped to moderate relations between power holders and commoners.[\[21\]](#) This body of research has gone a long way towards explaining the significance of asafo companies in the colonial period, and is particularly strong in local case studies of asafo activity and particular power struggles during that time. Others have also highlighted the range of ways in which asafo companies served as an organizing mechanism for social and political action during the colonial period. Kimble describes a crisis caused by the drop in the price of cocoa in 1921, when Akwapim farmers formed an association and established a minimum price for their cocoa. He attribute's the campaign's success, in part, to the diversion of old asafo group loyalties into "this new form of economic self-defense."[\[22\]](#)

But if the asafo took on new forms of self defense in the colonial period, how had the institution changed from its origins as a primarily military body? What were the processes of change taking place during the period between the era of the slave trade and the era of direct colonial rule, that enabled the institution to meet the dramatically changing needs of society? The answers to these questions should be explored more fully.

Conclusions.

In general, it is my contention that the asafo institution has its military roots primarily in the 18th century, but transformed dramatically during the 19th century in response to a new set of demands related to the end of the

trans-Atlantic slave trade on the Ghana coast and the expansion of Asante into the coastal territories. In the 18th century, asafo's primary feature was military, and this was related to the exigencies of the trans- Atlantic slave trade. During the 19th century, as British government and military took on a greater role, especially in the Fante area, the asafo became more of a tool for political gains and empowerment of the people within contested spheres of governing power. These political, social and spiritual functions seem to have taken on even greater importance under direct colonial rule. And since independence, as the national government and military forces of Ghana have taken over as the more or less endorsed authorities in the country, the asafo have become perhaps more local than ever, responding to local needs ranging from the religious and governing duties to clearing gutters and building public structures. More specific research needs to be done before a satisfactory explanation of the asafo is attainable. The reasons for and significance of the patrilineal element in the institution remain very elusive. But any explanation of this complex institution will have to take into account the layers of historical experience and regional change that have in a sense added up to the asafo company institution that we see today.

Endnotes

1. The principal studies on asafo are B.I. Chukwukere, "Perspectives on the Asafo Institution in Southern Ghana," *Journal of African Studies* 7, no. 1 (1980); Ansu K. Datta and R. Porter, "The 'Asafo' System in Historical Perspective," *Journal of African History* 12, no. 2 (1971); Doran H. Ross, *Fighting with Art: Appliquéd Flags of the Fante Asafo* (Los Angeles: UCLA Museum of Cultural History, 1979).
2. See especially, James Boyd Christensen, *Double Descent among the Fanti* (New Haven: Human Relations Area Files, 1954).
3. Kwame Arhin, "Diffuse Authority among the Coastal Fanti," *Ghana Notes and Queries* 9 (1966); Datta and Porter.
4. Ross.
5. Datta and Porter, p. 279.
6. Ross.
7. Datta and Porter, p. 295.
8. Ray Kea states that the first use of the term "asafo" in the European documentary record occurred around the middle of the 17th century. Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1982), p. 132.
9. *Ibid.*
10. *Ibid.*, Ch. 4.
11. *Ibid.*, 109.
12. *Ibid.*, 132.
13. Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa Including an Account of the Native Tribes, and Their Intercourse with Europeans*, 1966 ed. (London: Cass & Co., 1853), vol. I, p. 245.
14. See for instance Akosua Perbi, "The Relationship between the Domestic Slave Trade and the External Slave Trade in Pre-Colonial Ghana," *Research Review* 8 (New Series), no. 1 & 2 (1992); and T70/31 19 Jan 1764, Mutter, CCC, as cited in Fynn.

15. John K. Fynn, *Asante and Its Neighbors*, Legon History Series (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1971); James R. Sanders, "The Expansion of the Fante and the Emergence of Asante in the Eighteenth Century," (1979).
16. Henry Meredith, *An Account of the Gold Coast of Africa, with a Brief History of the African Company*, 1967 ed. (London: Cass, 1812), p. 144.
17. David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism, 1850-1928* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963), p. 142.
18. J. C. De Graft Johnson, "The Fanti Asafu," *Africa* 5, no. 3 (1932).
19. ADM 23/1/760, No. 664/528/1937. "The Company (Asafu) System, by A. Mcauly, District Commissioner, 26 March 1942." In *Central Province Native Affairs: Company system, 1929-48*, Call no. DT510.43.F35As1. Asafu History programme, Legon.
20. See *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 2 (1998), which is entirely dedicated to this subject.
21. Per O. Hernæs, "Asafu History: An Introduction," *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 2 (1998).
22. Kimble, p. 50.

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