State and society in pre-colonial Asante

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Introduction

Analyses of Asante oral histories and traditions of origin in relation to evidence contained in contemporary European records have furnished a broad portrait of the materialist evolution of the Asante social order and the Asante state. The crucial enabling factor in this general model is the existence of substantial, accessible deposits of alluvial and shallow reef gold in parts of Asante. The pivotal development in it is the inception and establishment of a rural economy based on subsistence agriculture. The significance of both of these elements is richly and diversely documented in Asante tradition. Both are matters that we will return to below. The evolutionary model in summary outline – from the fifteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth – is as follows.[1]

Gold-producing Akan, including the 'proto-Asante', were inexorably drawn into the world economy of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries by the European mercantile presence along the Gold Coast.[2] Gold was exchanged for slave and otherwise unfree labour, much of it imported into the Gold Coast by Europeans from other parts of western Africa. This sustained demographic increment made possible the arduous, protracted transformation of the mode of production in the hostile forest environment from hunting and gathering to subsistence agriculture. From the seventeenth century onwards, the rural economy was centred in the production of staple crops, and agriculture was supplemented by hunting and gathering activities. Matriliny – structurally the most efficacious system in the circumstances – was the mechanism by which imported labour was assimilated, organized and deployed in work gangs, and through which novel social relations of production based in agriculture were realized.[3]

Asante traditions and European evidence concur in documenting a sequence of developments over time. The embedding of the agrarian order in the forest led successively to the realization of surplus, the emergence of differentiation, and the eventual political institutionalization of that socio-economic differentiation in chiefdoms.[4] Towards the close of the

seventeenth century, the nascent Asante state centred on Kumase (Kwaman) achieved a decisive military supremacy among these competing chiefdoms.[5]

In the eighteenth century Asante became an expansionist power. With the agrarian order firmly established as the basis of the subsistence economy, Asante no longer needed the massive labour inputs of the previous centuries. Indeed, it supplied its own diminished requirements by regulated tributary exaction and raiding, and it exported a substantial surplus of captive labour, mainly from warfare, into the transatlantic slave trade in exchange for guns and other European goods. In the first decades of the nineteenth century, the Europeans unilaterally abolished the transatlantic slave trade. Warfare to procure captives became unprofitable – as is evidenced from as early as the 1820s – and thereafter the Asante export economy was successfully modified and restructured into alternative channels.[6]

All of the foregoing is well understood, and parts of it are the subject of highly detailed empirical research. However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the political economy of Asante agriculture was in the process of significant but under-studied modification. The changes wrought in food production were a fundamental indicator of major ongoing transformations in the nature of the relationship between the state and the social order.

Society and agriculture: ordering subsistence

Subsistence agriculture was the indispensable basis of historic Asante society. That there is no detailed history of Asante agriculture in the precolonial period reflects the extreme difficulty of any such undertaking. With the arguable exception of certain geographically restricted areas – those parts of Adanse and Amansie lying along or adjacent to the 'great road' (*akwantempɔŋ*) running from Kumase to the Bosompra river, the Mponua towns to the north and west of Lake Bosomtwe, and sections of Asante Akyem lying to the east of Kumase – discrete historical data are extremely sparse.[7] However, some important general observations can be advanced.

First, all of our evidence indicates that the technological and other factors of production remained constant throughout the precolonial period. The axe, cutlass and bill hook were the implements used in land clearing; and for the maintenance of land under crops, as Bowdich noted in 1817, the Asante 'use no implement but the hoe'.[8] The same basic technology was still employed in the twentieth century, and its use continued to depend on large inputs of human labour.[9]

Second, the core crop association was characterized by very long-term

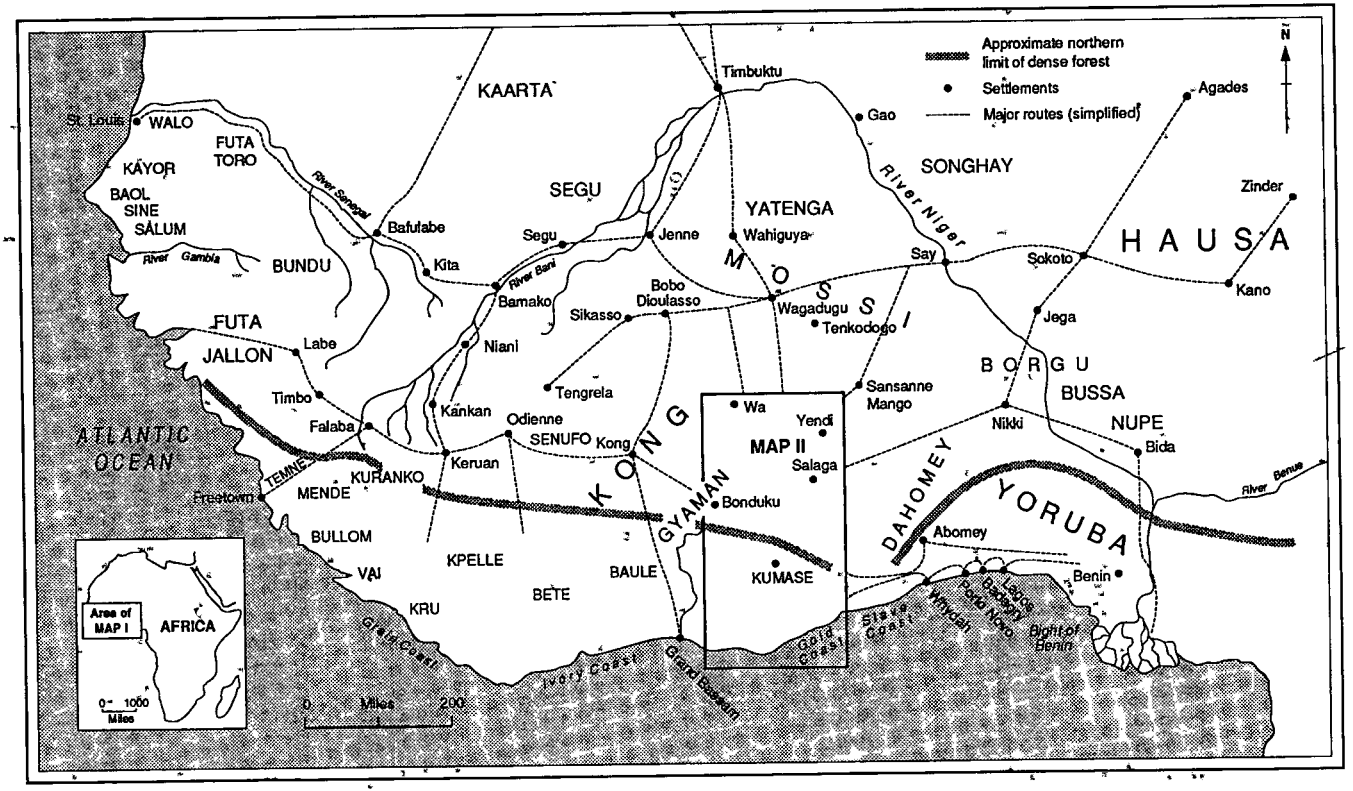
invariability and consequent stability. Asante subsistence agriculture was, and is, based on the intercropping of high-yielding bulk foodstuffs; yam (*Dioscorea spp.*: many varieties, but generically *ɔde*), plantain (*Musa paradisiaca*: *ɔbɔdeɛ*, *ɔborɔdeɛ*), cocoyam (*Colocasia esculenta*: *amaŋkani*), and cassava (*Manihot utilissima*: *ɔbaŋkye*).[10] Historic variants on this core association have taken the form of limited adjustments to meet changes in specific needs or preferences. Thus, the cultivation of maize or Indian corn (*Zea mays*: *aburo*), which was mainly geared to the provisioning of field armies, declined between 1800 and 1900 with the military tradition.[11] By contrast, cocoyam consumption has greatly increased in the twentieth century; this is because *Colocasia esculenta*, which contains high levels of calcium oxalate, an irritant of the human digestive tract, has been replaced by the much more palatable *Xanthosoma mafaffa*, a West Indian variety introduced into the Gold Coast in the 1840s.[12] And cassava, which is easier to grow and requires less labour than either yam or cocoyam, has long been used in Asante to make up periodic shortfalls in more desirable crops.[13]

Third, these core bulk foodstuffs were supplemented by other important sources of nutrition. As T.B. Freeman noted of mid-nineteenth-century Asante:

> In these bright and sunny regions nature is also bountiful in its supplies of suitable vegetables and fruits – the yam, cassada, Indian corn, sweet potato, cocoa-bulb, or *Caladium Esculenium [sic]*, millet, rice, sugar-cane, ginger, tomato, onion, ground-nut, orange, lime, plantain, banana, sour-sop, custard apple, and last but not least, the noble pineapple, all flourish in Ashantee, under ordinary cultivation.[14]

Sheep, fowls, goats and pigs were kept as domestic animals, but habitual consumption of these in the rural economy was restricted by availability and relative cost. Moreover, sheep and fowls were preferred sacrificial animals, and their slaughter in any number was dictated by the calendar of ritual and oblation.[15]

Although displaced as the dominant mode of production by the beginning of the seventeenth century, hunting and gathering retained a significant role in support of subsistence crop production. Uncultivated vegetable produce – oil palm fruits, palm wine, fungi, wild yams – continued to be gathered into the twentieth century. The sharp twentieth-century decline in hunting has served to mask its importance in former times as a source of animal protein. Nineteenth-century European sources attest to an abundant variety of game, even in central Asante. Thus, in the 1840s, elephants were still being successfully hunted for food along the Bosompra river; and as recently as the 1920s, game hunting was an intensive and valuable economic activity in north and west Asante, in Asante Akyem to the east of Kumase, and still further to the east on the broad floodplain of the Afram river.[16] Freshwater fish, generally smoked,



Map 1 West Africa in the early nineteenth century

and crabs were also important sources of protein. So too were snails (*ŋwaa*: sing. *ɔwaa*). Snails were 'one of the richest kinds of animal food' in nineteenth-century Asante; they were 'found in all parts of the forest country', but in particularly dense numbers in western Asante, Ahafo and Domaa.[17] Cardinall, in the 1920s, gave a graphic account of the large-scale organization and continuing significance of snail gathering in Ahafo; by then, snails were important not only as subsistence food and as items of barter, but also as retail merchandise in the partially monetized colonial rural economy.

> Snails are one of the most important articles of food among the forest people. I do not think any estimate has ever been made of the value of the trade in them, but it must be quite colossal. In the district of Ahafo lies one of the most valuable areas for catching snails in the country... The proper season for collecting the snails is at the beginning of the rains, and lasts for about six weeks. Whole villages – men, women and children – migrate into the forest, leaving only the old and infirm to look after their homes... There are a hundred snails on each skewer, and twenty skewers are made into a bundle. Two such bundles make a load of the average weight carried by these people – approximately sixty pounds... The value of this trade to the Ahafo people must be very great. A skewer varies from ninepence to one shilling and ninepence, so that with an average price of one shilling one will get forty shillings for a load. It may seem extraordinary that one could get snails in such quantities. But once one has learned to detect them among the leaves, one will soon perceive thousands.[18]

Fourth, it is clear from all of our sources that throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries fully established rural subsistence agriculture, augmented by the activities just described, furnished Asante society with a basic and generally adequate, if somewhat monotonous, diet. Thus, deficiency diseases recorded in the nineteenth century tended to be related to protein shortages, or to failure to maintain a balanced diet, rather than to absolute calorific insufficiency, malnourishment or starvation.[19] In the entire corpus of Asante tradition and European commentary, the only accounts of severe food shortages, widespread hunger and regional or sectoral famine are associated with the virtual collapse of subsistence agriculture in areas directly affected by the five years of civil war in the 1880s.[20]

The overall sufficiency of Asante food production was guaranteed by a number of factors. Once the laborious task of clearing the land had been accomplished, the growing environment was generally favourable.[21] Rural agriculturalists practised a calculated system of both land and crop rotation; the basic Asante *afuo* or farm comprised the *afuwa*, the land currently under crops, and the *mfufuwa*, the 'non-farm' or land currently under fallow.[22]

Above all other factors, however, was the favourable ratio of population density to available land. There is some dispute over the total size of the

Asante population in the nineteenth century.[23] However, it has been calculated, on the basis of admittedly crude data, that the actual maximum density of population in central Asante in the nineteenth century never approximated to more than 60% of a conservatively estimated critical density, or the point at which the land could no longer sustain the number of people living on it.[24] These absolute figures are speculative and beside the point, but in providing a suggestive scale of magnitude they fully confirm a great deal of informal evidence. In the central Mponua area in the nineteenth century, for example, by no means all available land had been brought under cultivation.[25] Large parts of western Asante remained virgin forest until the emergence of the cocoa and timber industries in the twentieth century.[26] And even in the 1980s, with Asante and the remainder of Ghana confronting a crisis in population growth, the World Bank noted that 'the total area cultivated, as against the potential cultivable area, is still low', and also that average staple crop yields 'are very low'.[27]

Twentieth-century cash cropping gave Asante farmers a heightened sense of the economic value of land. Even so, there still remained a degree of slack in the rural land economy. In the 1940s, a full generation into the cocoa revolution, the *Goasohene* of Ahafo described the impact of change, but within an overall pattern of land availability that showed marked continuity with the nineteenth century. He is cited here *in extenso* as being representative of much informal testimony that is dedicated to making the same points:

> Each elder was in early days given a direction – you go and eat there, you go and eat there, etc. Now a new farmer is sent to an elder and first approaches the odekro [*odekuro*: village head] through an elder. The new man gives drink to the odekro and elders – maybe only 7/-, 13/- or more – [it] doesn't depend on the size of the farm, but more on relationship with sponsors, e.g. a man who had lived long in the town will be let off cheap. Then the elder is sent to show him where to farm.
>
> Land is getting scarce now, but the system is as follows: The farmer is shown a place to farm and is told you can farm ahead from here (*wo dɛ wanim*). He is not shown boundaries. Suppose it is all forest. He starts at a point and he farms out in all directions establishing a line. He is permitted to go on farming 'in front of him' as far as he can go. Later other people will come along. Anyone placed in front of him will be placed in such a way as to leave a substantial strip of forest anything from 20 to 30 to 100 yards or even more ... The second farmer is told to farm ahead; he must not farm towards the first. A third man may come along to farm on the 'left' or the 'right' of the first man. He would start from the very 'edge' of this man's farm, leaving perhaps just a yard or two of bush in between and he might farm parallel to number one (the first man) or to the 'left' or 'right' of number one. It is these very narrow strips that give rise to farm boundary disputes as one party or the other tries to take them up ... It is an offence to 'cut off the head' (*twa ne tiri*) of the farmer behind or beside you – i.e. to enter the unfarmed strip ahead of him.[28]

An additional source of potential conflict was that part of some farms

termed *mfufuwa nini*, or 'barren fallow'; this was land belonging to an *afuo* that had once been cultivated, but that had lain unused for some time. Such land has been the focus of much twentieth-century litigation between established farmers and intrusive cultivators. In the nineteenth century, however, it is surely significant that Asante law – usually precise in matters relating to land – was notably vague in defining the length of time that *mfufuwa nini* might remain in the hands of its original cultivator.[29] The presumption must be that disputes between individual farmers over 'barren fallow' were relatively uncommon at a time when there was very little pressure on land resources in much of the rural economy.[30]

The general picture, then, for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, is of a mixed rural economy in which fully established subsistence farming was the dominant mode of production. The availability of cultivable land and the productive capacities of agriculturalists guaranteed that Asante society – with the aberrant exception of the 1880s – was not subject to cycles of massive deprivation, and cannot remotely be classified as an economy of generalized want and hunger. This is not to deny the existence of specific cases of poverty and immiseration in Asante society, but it is to argue that instances of this sort must be set in the broader context outlined above.[31]

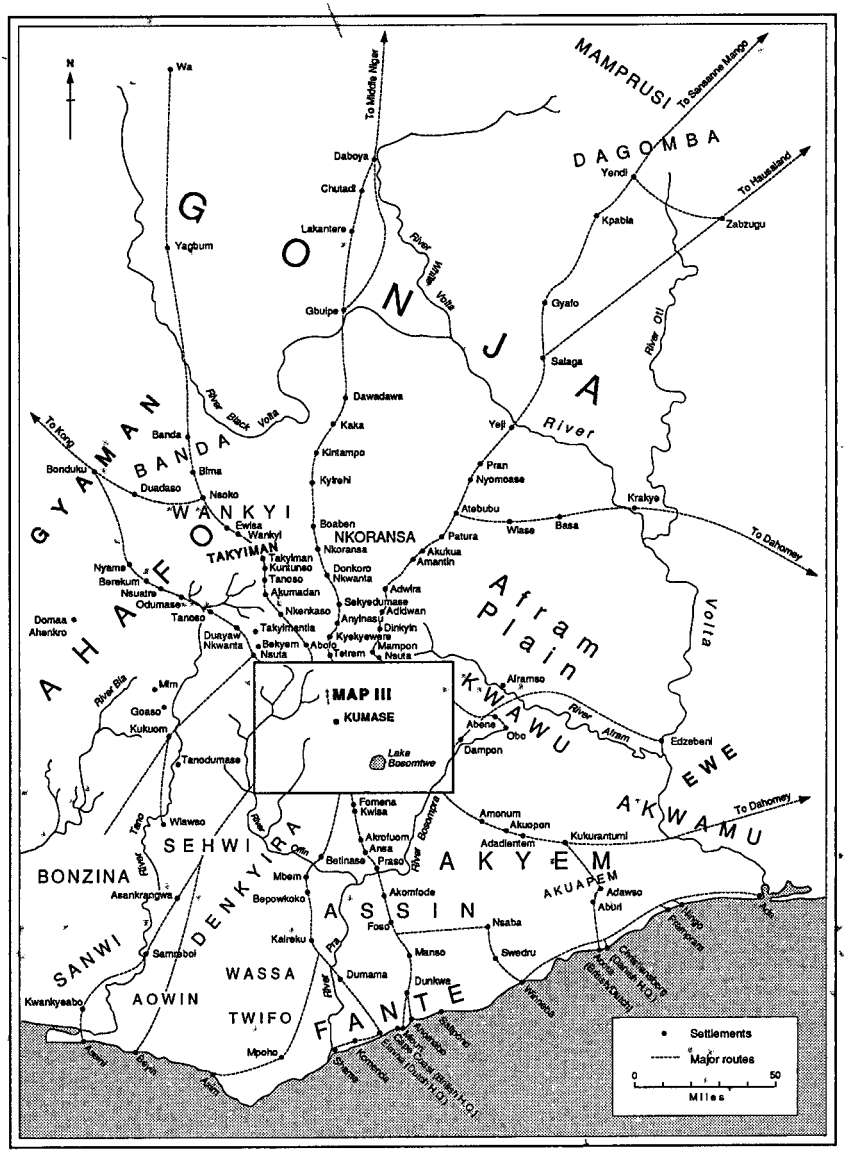
State and agriculture: ordering differentiation

Thus far, we have discussed the leading features of a successful but largely undifferentiated rural subsistence economy. But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, there is clear evidence of sectoral change, and of an identifiable underlying factor of differentiation in one key area of the political economy of Asante agriculture.

Nineteenth-century Europeans commented in detail and with approbation on the organized intensity of food production in the vicinity of the Asante capital. In 1817, Bowdich noted the following concerning the half dozen miles between 'Sarrasou' (Esereso, on the Oda river) and Kumase.

> There are large plantations of corn around Sarrasou, which is a great nursery for pigs... The soil from Sarrasou [to Kumase] was a rich black mould, and there were continued plantations of corn, yams, ground nuts, terraboys and encruma: the yams and ground nuts were planted with much regularity in triangular beds, with small drains around each, and carefully cleared from weeds.[32]

Elsewhere, Bowdich registered surprise at the 'extent and order', and the 'neatness and method' of the farming system around Kumase; two crops of maize and one of yam were harvested each year, and the yam fields were well fenced in and planted in regular lines.[33] In 1820, just north of Amoafo and only 15 miles from Kumase, Dupuis noted a number of large, fenced fields that had been prepared for the planting of yam and maize.[34] And at



Map 2 Greater Asante and its neighbours in the early nineteenth century

Esereso, which contained some 8,000 'soldiers, slaves, and vassals' of the Kumase *Bantamahene/Krontihene* Amankwatia, he contrasted the 'difficulty of clearing spots, for the reception of grain' with the fact that the 'plantations are extensive'.[35] Hutton, who accompanied Dupuis, recorded that some 6 miles south of Kumase the British mission

> passed several plantations which were well inclosed, and in different places there were as much as two acres of ground cleared, and laid out in small beds not greatly dissimilar, or much inferior, to the country gardens in Europe; eschalots, ground nuts, yams, and other vegetables were plentiful.[36]

Agricultural enterprise of this sort encroached upon Kumase itself. 'The grass close around the town', so Freeman recalled of his visits to Kumase in the 1830s and 1840s, 'attains a height of from fifteen to twenty feet, and the farms in the immediate neighbourhood produce the finest crops of corn, yams, and all kinds of vegetables indigenous to the soil'.[37]

The sheer numbers and demographic concentration of peasant cultivators impressed those very few Europeans who were sanctioned by the Asante state to travel with some freedom in the environs of Kumase.[38] In 1848, the Wesleyan-Methodist missionary Hillard visited, by his own estimation, most of the villages in a 5 mile radius around Kumase, and was 'surprised at their number', for 'I have visited above forty – and some of them very large.'[39] Clearly, there existed around Kumase a much more intensive and systemic form of production than the type of rural subsistence agriculture described above, for example, in the words of the *Goasohene* of Ahafo. To European observers, all of this agricultural industriousness around Kumase seemed in very marked contrast to the life of the capital itself. In Kumase, as West typically remarked in 1862, 'the people seem to have but little to do', and 'their time is chiefly occupied in eating, and drinking, public processions, and custom making'.[40]

Observations of this sort unknowingly reflected the fact that with the eighteenth-century growth and elaboration of the expansionist state, Kumase had become significantly detached from the subsistence – and matrilineage – bases of the social order. In effect, it came increasingly to preside over them, with a consequent further weakening or progressive dilution of the older, historic ties of organic continuity between state and society. By the early nineteenth century, the Asante state capital had a permanently resident population of some 20,000 to 25,000.[41] The overwhelming majority of these were fully involved in the transaction of government business; in the time-consuming performance of elaborate state ceremonial; or in servicing the state sector through ancillary functions, such as the production of luxury artefacts.[42]

The office holders and administrative cadres of Kumase, together with their urban retinues, were entirely provisioned and maintained by the

intensive agricultural enterprise reported by Europeans. In 1817, Bowdich observed that

> the higher classes could not support their numerous followers, or the lower their large families, in the city, and therefore employed them in plantations, (in which small crooms were situated) generally within two or three miles of the capital, where their labours not only feed themselves, but supply the wants of the chief, his family, and more immediate suite. The middling orders station their slaves for the same purpose, and also to collect fruit and vegetables for sale, and when their children become numerous, a part are generally sent to be supported by these slaves in the bush.[43]

The *Asantehene's* household alone daily consumed large quantities of food produced in this manner, together with a leavening of imported delicacies. The *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin (1834–67) took breakfast about 8 a.m.; meat, plantain and yam 'in large quantities' were distributed to the *Asantehene's* wives and children. The main meal of the day was taken at 2 p.m., when the *Asantehene* and his household officials made a selection from 'mutton, turkeys, ducks, fowls, wild game of all kinds, except the buffalo; and fish from the lakes, and adjacent rivers ... also yams, plantains, beans, rice, European biscuits, tea, sugar, wines, liqueurs, etc.'.[44] Immediately afterwards, 'large dishes containing the great family dinner' were distributed, like breakfast, to the royal wives and children.[45]

Gifts of food liberally bestowed upon foreign visitors were a further indication of the privileged consumption patterns enjoyed by Kumase office holders. The Dutch envoy J. Simons, who visited the *Asantehene* Osei Yaw Akoto (1823–34) in 1831–2, scrupulously recorded all such gifts; these varied in size and extravagance, but they were offered on a virtually continuous basis.[46] Obviously, the *Asantehene* made the most lavish presentations. Thus, in Kumase on 15 October 1848, Sir William Winniet, the British Governor of the Gold Coast, received a 'magnificent present' from the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin. This comprised

> 2 bullocks; 4 sheep; 4 turkeys; 6 ducks; 20 guinea fowls; 6 pigs; 20 fowls; 20 pigeons; 400 yams; 303 bunches of plantain; 4 dishes [of] native rice; 5 dishes ground nuts; 6 calabashes of honey; oranges; eggs; palm nuts; sundry vegetables; 40 logs of wood; 10 baskets of corn ... [These were] brought before me by 550 men, every one of whom had some share in the work of conveyance. These were accompanied by several officers of the King's household and their retinue, amounting to not less than 300 men. Thus, about 850 men were employed in presenting to me this token of the King's goodwill.[47]

Kumase enjoyed a special status, and this was reflected in the maxim that – with the exception of the *Asantehene* and other members of the royal *Oyoko Kɔkɔɔ* lineage – no one claimed the Asante capital as his or her village (*akuraa*; pl. *nkuraa*) of birth or origin.[48] Everyone, so to speak, came from somewhere else. And they came to Kumase in an attempt to secure the

attention or favour of the *Asantehene* or some other powerful individual. Their object was to obtain admission to an office holder's retinue in the ranks of the *nhenkwaa* (sing. *ahenkwaa*: lit. 'servant of an *ɔhene*' or office holder) or *asomfoɔ*, and by performing services, and carrying out designated tasks, to participate as members in the state's powers and privileges. The captive French trader Bonnat gave some account of this process during the reign of the *Asantehene* Kofi Kakari (1867–74). He observed:

Cette énorme importance du roi d' Achanty amène à Coumassie une grande quantité de jeunes gens, appartenant aux meilleures familles du royaume. Ils viennent dans le rayonnement du trône, non-seulement, comme ils disent, pour servir le roi, mais ils sont attirés surtout par l'espoir de se faire venir du souverain, et ils ne négligent aucune occasion pour lui plaire. Semblables aux courtisans des anciennes et nouvelles cours, on les voit continuellement sous les pas du monarque, sollicitant ses faveurs et ses sourires. Tels sont ces *Oinqua* [*nhenkwaa*] . . . missions de confiance donnent à ces jeunes gens de grands priviléges.[49]

The Asante capital was the province of the *Asantehene* and of the state over which he presided, and therefore its food supply was earmarked for their upkeep. In essence, the provisioning of Kumase was the provisioning of the state apparatus. Thus, provisioning was substantially determined by command, and effected by redistribution. Producers, office holders, and the latter's kin, clients and retinue, formed a closed system. It is true that office holders possessed of food surpluses might release these into the urban retail market in pursuit of profit; and equally, very wealthy office holders might choose to indicate their substance by marketing the bulk of their own foodstuffs, and by conspicuously supplying their own dependants with the monies to obtain sustenance at market prices. But the market sector was clearly a secondary mechanism in terms of bulk foodstuffs. Thus, the main Kumase market of *dwaberem* had no permanent stalls or fixtures, because the space itself was often commandeered for other purposes by the state; it did contain some provisions, but its principal attractions were imported luxury goods.[50] Freeman intuited something of all this, and was duly puzzled by it. He observed:

Coomassie possesses nothing deserving the name of a market. There is . . . a large area in that town called 'The Market Place' (native name – Adjebirim) [*dwaberem*] but nearly all that can be said of it is, that it is a large open space, where a kind of market is statedly held; but there are no sheds or stalls . . . Pieces of Manchester goods, cottons, silks, velvets, damasks, etc., may be seen . . . and lumps of elephant-beef, cow-beef, joints of wild monkey, deer, wild-hog, and all dry articles of food produced in the neighbouring farms, are seen exposed on rude stages or trellises . . .[51]

A host of ingrained attitudes and practices mirrored the understanding that equated Kumase with the *Asantehene* and the state. Licit or not, the

proprietorial assumptions of the *nhenkwaa* – towards food, drink and much else – are fully documented. 'Munis de l'autorité royale', noted Bonnat in the 1870s, the *nhenkwaa* 's'emparent sur leur route de tout ce qui leur plaît; les boissons et les victuailles surtout sont fréquemment l'objet de leurs réquisitions'.[52] As we shall see, the seizure of provisions by individuals acting in the name of the state was of questionable legality. However, the fact that it was a very common practice is significant in attitudinal terms, and it also points to a related aspect of life in Kumase.

Many of those who immigrated into the Asante capital had to wait some considerable time before being recruited into an office holder's retinue. Others never achieved their goal, but remained in Kumase either in forlorn expectation, or because the decisive act of going up to the capital had effectively severed their ties to village and lineage. Moreover, for an individual to return home was to admit failure and, as in other societies, to court humiliating comment.[53] People of this sort lived a marginal life in Kumase. Detached from the rural subsistence economy, but without the official status that guaranteed survival in the Asante capital, they were sometimes forced into stealing in order to eat. It says much about the ruling perception of the *meaning* of Kumase that, in addition to outright robbery and theft, desperate individuals often tried to survive simply by arrogating to themselves the status, attitudes and behaviour of actual *nhenkwaa*. It is equally significant that the state took the most serious view of any such illegitimate usurpation. Thus, in Kumase in March 1845, the Wesleyan-Methodist missionary G. Chapman recorded a not untypical case in which

> a youth of precocious genius thought well to adopt the practice of the attendants upon Royalty, and began in the open market to seize upon such articles of food as best suited his fancy, taking care at the same time to announce to the owner that he was of the Royal Household. Certain parties ... who knew the youngster confronted him, and as a matter of course he was taken before the King, where it is said sentence of death would be passed upon him.[54]

By the early nineteenth century, then, the rural subsistence economy had been modified and restructured in one important regard. The intensification of agricultural production around the Asante capital, so extensively noted and commented on by Europeans, was directed at the maintenance of those non-producers, the inhabitants of Kumase, who constituted the membership of a state increasingly detached from and interventionist in relation to the social order. That this increased production was concentrated in a tight concentric ring around Kumase was dictated by the perishability of foodstuffs, the difficulty of bulk transportation, and the need for planning and oversight. No significant technological innovation was involved in this. Intensification of production far above the level of rural subsistence was achieved by a calculated reduction in the length of fallowing periods, and

by a systematic rationalization and concentration of labour inputs.[55] Very obviously, these modifications were ordained, mediated and given structural direction by the state itself. How, and on what terms, was all of this effected?

Conceptualizing accumulation and wealth

The preliminary key to understanding what made all of this possible – and 'how it *could* be so' in Peel's phrase – lies in a consideration of the knowledge derived by the Asante from interpretation of the horizon of (their) existence. This knowledge constituted a referential framework of valid(ated) understanding and action that was formulated in fundamental imperatives, *grundnorms* and values, and that underpinned, informed and reinforced the historic and ongoing Asante experience of the social.

Both the underlying general characteristic and the dominant thrust of the experience in question were about the conceptualization of ideas of wealth and surplus, and their historical realization. Wealth and surplus – in gold (the *ur* substance), and in food, and also in people, in goods and in artefacts – were located in Asante experience and so knowledge as *the* engines of insertion, embedding, enlargement and success; they constituted a ready typology or computation of progress. Their metaphorical ubiquity in Asante tradition reflects the *knowledge* that societal and individual achievement was, and historically always had been, built upon assiduously pursued processes of accumulation. Hence, the accumulation of wealth as imperative and as yardstick, and the deeply resonant meaning of wealth as symbol and as mnemonic, were abiding and central features of Asante life, history and self-knowledge.

The state was initiated and entrenched through the aspirant effort and tenacity of the most successful accumulators. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the state structured and channelled imperative and yardstick, symbol and mnemonic, in order both to mould the idea of wealth in its own image, and to shape the processes of accumulation to its own ends. Its success in attaining these objects certainly depended on coercion, or at least on coercive potential. But it was ultimately rooted in the perceived veracity of an ingrained, undeniable consensus over the drives, norms and values that flowed from and were enshrined in historical knowledge.

The state's structuration of all of this depended upon precision in its especial and particular acts of interpretation. In its role as *hermeneus* it had to work within a vital, pre-existing context of knowledge – one that was the experiential basis of society, and in which its own personnel shared – while at the same time trying to reserve to itself shaping control over emphasis and direction. In attempting to reduce argument to statement by imposing

its own definition on the possible interpretations implicit in knowledge, the state, at the very least, had to innovate and promulgate change within a simulacrum of continuity. Its capacity to structure knowledge both depended on and was constrained by the continuing potency and resonance, for society and individual, of that knowledge itself.

Wealth in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was measured in gold (*sika*) in all of its forms – negotiable gold dust (*sika futuro*), crude rock gold, and gold worked into regalia and ornaments for display; in investment in subjects (*nkoa*; sing. *akoa*), both slave and free, and control over their and their descendants' labour and services; and in the acquisition, by purchase, usufruct or usucaption, of rights in enough land to enable subjects to support themselves at subsistence level and generate a surplus. At a simple level of analysis all of this was no more than a logical enlargement and situational refinement of the accumulative process, and proof of an ongoing adherence to the imperative to create wealth and surplus. The objects of accumulation – gold, people, land and food – were the same as they had been in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But two things had changed.

First, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, participation in the office-holding structures of the state became the key to accumulation of these resources; membership in the state became the only certain avenue to the possibility of acquiring great wealth. The state sought ways in which to monopolize the (re)sources of enrichment, and means by which to determine access to them. These features are the subject of much research, and will be returned to when we consider illustrative cases.[56]

Second, in the same period, there developed a notable differentiation by value among the objects of accumulation. This may be simply described. In the course of the very protracted struggle to establish subsistence agriculture, people, in terms of their labour inputs into land clearing and food production, acquired a virtually absolute value. Nothing could be achieved by exchanging them for some other good. But with the successful embedding of the agricultural mode of production, and the eighteenth-century expansion of the slave raiding state, a plateau of stability was reached; people remained indispensable as producers, but the new imbalance between need and numbers created a system of relative values. People acquired a novel value as an export commodity, and a greatly augmented value as subjects rather than as producers *per se*; *nkoa* in large numbers, as a following or a train of armed retainers, became an indispensable item in the public exhibition of an office holder's power and prestige. Exchange within this system of relative values was measured against the absolute value of gold. After all, gold was the ultimate basis of the international economy in which the Asante state was enmeshed. Thus, people, and the land to support them, became goods readily convertible against gold. But gold

assumed a sovereign position in the processes of accumulation and exchange for a further, very specific reason. By the nineteenth century in Asante, gold – quite unlike people, land or food – was in limited supply.

After the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, all goods purchased by the Asante from the Europeans on the Gold Coast had to be paid for in gold; guns, powder, cloth and other articles were bought with gold that was removed from circulation and lost to the Asante economy.[57] Similarly, office holders from the *Asantehene* downwards took substantial quantities of gold out of circulation in order to convert it into regalia and ornaments.[58] Perceived shortages exacerbated the existing tendency, inherent in the imperative to accumulation, to hoard and to secrete gold; and this simply compounded the problem by taking yet more gold out of circulation. Problems of hoarding and liquidity were still apparent in the colonial period.[59] Thus, in nineteenth-century Asante, the demand for gold exceeded the supply available in circulation.

We can observe the effect of this discrepancy in interest rates. Loans in gold were very expensive. Under *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame (1804–23), the flat rate of interest on borrowed gold was 33% for a 42-day period.[60] Later in the century, the average rate of interest was fixed at 50% per half year. In Kumase, however, 'the rate was higher, and was regarded as extortionate'; in one extreme case 'the charge was 20% every ten days'.[61] The British specified a maximum rate of 50% per year on an unsecured loan.[62] As late as the 1940s, however, illegal money lending was still widespread in Kumase, and the British acknowledged privately that the interest rate on the granting of short-term loans continued to be based on the system that had operated in the precolonial period.[63] They noted that

> Short-term loans are usually at the rate of 50 per cent interest for a specified period, not necessarily a year and sometimes as short as three months. In this case, if the capital is not repaid, but interest is paid, the debt remains at the same figure for another agreed period. Failure to repay either capital or interest results in a new loan, the capital now being the sum of the original loan plus interest. It not infrequently happens therefore that a borrower is left with a debt larger than the original sum borrowed, although he has already paid [as] interest over a period of years a sum much in excess of the original loan.[64]

The shortage of gold and correspondingly high interest rates on loans had a direct bearing on the ways in which the state sought to arbitrate access to wealth and to regulate the processes of accumulation. In its application of legal sanctions – fines, imposts, tributes, taxes, levies – the state always insisted in principle upon settlement in gold. But in virtually no case other than the very trivial was payment actually made from accumulated gold resources. The very few who possessed such resources were determined to hoard them; and the great majority, from office holders to lineage

segments to individuals, simply did not have substantial assets in gold at their disposal. Two general solutions were possible.

First, other assets could either be sold outright to realize the sum required, or they could be offered directly to the state in lieu of payment in gold (that is, 'sold' to the *Asantehene* or another office holder, who then paid the purchase price into the state treasury). A famous instance of this took place in or about 1785, when the *Asantehene* Osei Kwame (1777–1803) attained his majority. The Kumase *Adontenhene* Kwaaten Pɛtɛ, who had discharged the function of regent, was unable to account for the very considerable amount of 1,000 *mperedwan* (£8,000) of state assets. The office holders of the Adonten *fekuo* or group were held corporately responsible for the debt. Payment in gold of such a sum was out of the question. Instead, five Adonten villages, their lands and people, were surrendered in settlement; the *Asantehene* 'bought' Ahwia and Abira from the *Adontɛ̀nhene*, and Esaso and Adidwama from the *Amakomhene*, and similarly the *Asantehɛ̀maa* 'bought' Krobo from the *Adausenahene*.[65]

Second, assets could be placed in mortgage in exchange for gold. This was a widespread but complex practice. The word *awowa* (pl. *ŋwowa*) connoted surety, pawning or pledging, but it applied equally to land, to groups of people and to individuals. The situation was complicated further by the fact that rights in *awowa* were transferable; an original lender, now a borrower, could pass them on to a new lender, and so on via a chain of such transactions. In nineteenth-century Asante, the pawning of the labour and services of individuals was very extensively resorted to by indebted lineage segments. As small debts were incurred, or some capital was required, an individual might find himself or herself pawned and redeemed several times over. The socio-psychological effects of being alienated by one's kin are well documented. A typical case was that of Kwabena Amponsa, a member of the royal *Bretuo* lineage at Dɔmɛabra, who was first pawned at Obogu in the reign of the *Asantehene* Mensa Bonsu (1874–83), and who was put to work carrying kola nuts in the northern trade.

> Kwabena Amponsa, my father, had a very bitter experience in his youth, for he was pawned seven times – the first time for [the equivalent of] 30/- when a relative of his became in debt. This experience made a great impression on his character. He became callous, too materialistic, and hoarded money, for he had been taught to appreciate the value and importance of money. He married too late, for the time he might have spent in courtship and love affairs was spent in servitude.[66]

Numerous small-scale debts to the state were settled in this manner. In the case of very much larger debts, financially embarrassed office holders might put land as well as *ɲkoa* in *awowa*. The advantage of this method of settlement was that pledged land, like people, was theoretically redeemable in law against repayment of the capital loan plus a fixed rate of interest. In

actual practice, putting land in *awowa* on any large scale preserved only the fiction of ownership. Some account of the 'inequitable and oppressive' customary system was given by the British.

> Though the land is always redeemable, in practice the mortgage is often ruinous to the borrower . . . the lender is entitled to the use and produce of the land (and of the people on it if these were included in the agreement), until the principal money and agreed interest (if any) is repaid. No credit is given to the borrower for such use of produce, whatever their value, against the principal sum or interest. As a general rule the borrower has no other income than that which he derives from the land, and consequently he is seldom in a position to repay the loan or to redeem his land.[67]

Enforcing the conversion of assets by demanding gold in settlement of all manner of obligations gave the state substantial powers of intervention and redistribution. That this was a directed rather than a blunt instrument may be illustrated very concisely from the history of the legal application of the principle of *atitɔdeɛ* or 'buying one's head'. In principle, a range of offences carried a mandatory death sentence in Asante law.[68] In practice, the *Asantehene* sitting in session with the *asetena kɛsɛɛ* (the supreme court: lit. 'the great sitting down together') could exercise discretion, and substitute *atitɔdeɛ* for capital punishment. In tradition, this innovation is attributed to the humane impulses of the *Asantehene* Kusi Obodom (1750–64), but the same sources suggest that many held the practice to be illegitimate.[69] Certainly, the *Asantehene* Kofi Kakari (1867–74), who was habitually in need of gold, is remembered as having overused the device to the point of triviality in order to raise revenue.[70] More germanely, Asante sources suggest that *atitɔdeɛ* was particularly employed in those cases where, for whatever reason, the state wished to ruin a rich office holder and confiscate his assets.[71] This is borne out by the way that the law operated in practice. Unlike the fixed penalties attached to many offences, *atitɔdeɛ*

> was any amount the Asantehene cared to name. From all available information it was generally very high. And while the instances of £800 or £1,000 live on in popular memory, it is also known that there were several instances where whole lineages had to be sold into slavery to raise Atitodie demanded by the Asantehene.[72]

It would be naïve to presume that Asante case law was anything other than partial in a great deal of its application. That is, Asante case law was no more and no less impartial than many other codes legislated and executed by a state apparatus. It was inextricably bound up with the political dynamic, and while it existed to reflect Asante constructions of justice, it also served to reinforce the power and interests of the state. It is important to make this point, for the ethnography of Asante law habitually presents a very idealized portrait by collapsing the historical dynamic of the civil and criminal law into the category of immemorial custom.[73] We shall see presently that the Asante distinguished between the categories of the juridical and the immemorial.

State and wealth: the *abirɛmpɔn*

In the era prior to the emergence of chiefdoms, the most successful individual entrepreneurs had been accorded community recognition of their capacity to accumulate by being called, with accurate simplicity, 'big men' (*abirɛmpɔn*: sing. *ɔbirɛmpɔn*). The most tenacious and ambitious among these had eventually institutionalized their wealth in chiefship, *inter alia* converting their economic clients into a political following of retainers (*gyaasefoɔ*: der. *gyaase*, 'under the fire', hearth), and indicating their new political authority through possession of a symbolic spear (*pɛmɛ*: pl. *mpɛmɛ*) and other regalia.[74] A number of such *abirɛmpɔn* were incorporated into the state at its creation, and these retained the dignity of the title; equally, some individuals who had distinguished themselves militarily in the same period were raised to the title of *ɔbirɛmpɔn*.[75]

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Asante state politicized, structured and formalized this crucial appellation. The capacity to accumulate on the largest scale – at different times by commanding the state's armies, by conducting the state's trade, or by being a favoured beneficiary of the state's law – was itself in the gift of the state. Moreover, the state reserved to itself the right to bestow the title of *ɔbirɛmpɔn* in recognition of an individual's success in accumulating wealth; and only the state could grant the use of the insignia of the elephant tail (*mena* or *mmra*), the heraldic badge of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn*. The state deliberately reinforced the significance of this ultimate mark of recognition by instituting a graduated series of titles that led up to it, and by surrounding the actual award of the title of *ɔbirɛmpɔn* with very complex ritual and ceremonial.

These ritualized procedures combined public display with public acclamation, and they were punctuated throughout by very deliberate symbolic, mnemonic and historical references. The fullest traditional account of the complexities involved was supplied by the Kumase *Akyeamehene* and *Domakwaehene* Kwasi Apea Nuama in 1925.

> Those chiefs who were allowed to use elephant tails were called Abrempons. A chief who lives on his own land with his own subjects is known by the King as Abrempon. An Abrempon must exhibit his wealth publicly by presenting £9-6-0 to all the Abrempons in Kumasi; and 10 peregwans (£80) to the King. He would then go to Tafo and pay £1-6-0 to the chief there who would give him an egg to throw against a silk cotton tree. He would then return to Kumasi. He would then go to Essumja Santimanso and buy a carpet (*nsa*) for £24 (3 peregwans) from the subjects of the chief there. He must only dance on it and leave it after presenting Essumjahene with another £24. Your going and coming expenses (including the £48) will cost you some 20 peregwans [£160]. He would buy an elephant tail from the Assinhene (son of Essumjahene) for £9-6-0. He would tie the elephant tail around the waist of one of his slaves and he must then pass round the outskirts of the town lying on the leaves of palm trees which have been strewn around the town, firing at his slave with

blank fire from time to time. The slave falls down eventually and he then cuts the string to which the tail is fastened and takes the tail – then the ceremonies are completed and his people applaud him. Next morning he would get mashed yam mixed with 30 peregwans [£240] and be carried on a litter round the town of Kumasi scattering largesse of the yam mixture. On the following morning he would be carried in a litter with all his regalia, his skin plastered with white clay. Then he would fix up a spear at Dwebirim (the market place) and challenge those of the same rank to remove it. After this he is called Brempon. On the last day anyone who aspires to the rank of Abrempon takes out the spear and appoints a time for performing the same ceremonies.[76]

The state orchestrated this complicated sequence. But the promiscuity of reference contained within these performative acts is such that contingent matters can only be touched upon. Thus, the smearing of the silk-cotton tree (*Ceiba pentandra*: *onyaa*) with an egg was a common ritual; it propitiated the tree's living 'spirit' or *sasa*. Acts of this sort affirmed the historical fact that culture was derived from a hostile nature that constantly needed to be placated or reckoned with. The *nsa* was a coarse covering or blanket, and it featured in many ritual contexts.[77]

The visits by the candidate *ɔbirɛmpɔn* to Tafo and Asantemanso ('Essumja Santimanso') made pointed allusion to crucial passages in Asante history and myth. Tafo was barely 3 miles from Kumase. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it was a flourishing centre of gold production and trade, and the seat of a successful *ɔbirɛmpɔn*. The *Tafohene* Safo Akenten was prominent among those *abirɛmpɔn* conquered by the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu (died 1712 or 1717), and then incorporated into the nascent Asante state.[78] Asantemanso, 20 miles south of Kumase in the territorial division of Asumegya, has a central significance in Asante myths of origin and early history. At Asantemanso 'the first human beings, belonging to certain of their ruling clans, came forth from the ground'.[79] That is, the founders of Kumase traced their origins to Asantemanso. Thus, on 9 February 1832, Simons traversed 'the beautiful open forest' of Asantemanso, where 'in olden times Koemasie town stood, according to the reports of the Assiantijns'; and in the 1920s, Rattray found pottery fragments and other evidence of extensive settlement there, dating from 'some remote period', in what was still 'the most hallowed spot' in all Asante.[80]

The dance or mime of hunting the elephant in order to secure its tail was of central significance. Possession and display of the *mena* was the public mark of the achieved status of *ɔbirɛmpɔn*. Clearly, the mime itself made reference to the remote past of hunting and gathering, prior to the creation of the agrarian order. In that past, the killing of an actual elephant (*ɛsono*: lit. 'the big one') signified heroic individual success, and it was very probably one of the distinguishing characteristics of the first *abirɛmpɔn*. The elephant was both unpredictably dangerous – spiritually as well as

physically – and the largest single source of animal food in the Asante forest. The idea of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* in his critical historic roles of provider and protector is perhaps best encapsulated in a maxim: *obiakofoɔ na okum ɛsono, na amansam nyina di* ('It is one man who kills the elephant, but many people who eat its flesh').[81]

The symbolism of the *mena* itself is open to two related readings. The Asante classified the elephant as being a supreme animal, not only on account of its size and strength, but also because it had overcome its most evident and anomalous disability. The matter is distilled in an aphorism: *ɛsono dua eye, ode saa ara na epra ne ho* ('The elephant has a short tail, but it can still brush away flies').[82] That is, the elephant's status derived in part from struggle and achievement in 'brushing away' petty distractions. The thrust of the metaphorical association was that the aspirant *ɔbirɛmpɔn* should likewise pursue the struggle for mastery or supremacy through a single-minded accumulation, and not be deterred from this goal by inconsequential obstacles or distractions. It is also the case that the elephant's tail 'presided' (in a structuralist sense) over the production of excrement, and that this was volumetrically the largest such 'transaction' in the Asante cognitive universe. As has been noted elsewhere, there were clear associations in the Asante mind between wealth in gold and excrement.[83] Both 'substances' were mediated, uncertain and ambiguous by nature; both possessed clearly parallel associations – through evident processes of convertibility – with ranges of other substances or alternative constituents of reality. Thus, food 'converted' to nourishment (wealth) and waste; and gold bearing rock or soil 'converted' to wealth (nourishment) as dust; ornaments and the rest, and left a residuum of dross (waste). The volatility of both wealth in gold and excrement, and most particularly their capacity to transgress and to rupture categorical boundaries by conversion, exists cognitively in cultures other than that of Asante.[84]

In Kumase on 29 March 1862, the Wesleyan-Methodist missionary W. West recorded the imminent 'display of wealth, by an old chief, in order to be entitled to the honour of having the elephant's tail carried before him; an honour to which only the wealthy can aspire'.[85] On the next day, West witnessed the mime of hunting the elephant; his bemused description is the only extant nineteenth-century account of this part of the proceedings.

> A very ludicrous part of the anticipated ceremony, 'catching the elephant', came off in the afternoon... A slave had been selected to enact the part of elephant. Besmeared all over with chalk, holding in his hand a small tusk, which he occasionally applied to his mouth, and having an elephant's tail attached by a piece of string behind, he was started off; while some forty or fifty men, armed with muskets, and supplied with blank cartridges, followed in pursuit, keeping up an almost constant fire. His elephantship, as we were informed, made his way,

according to usage, to a small kroom [village] not far from Kumasi, where he fell down as if shot, and lay there, until the chief himself appeared to cut off the tail; who, having thus hunted the elephant, and possessed himself of its caudal appendage, was considered, as I suppose, entitled to have it borne in triumph before him.[86]

The piece of land (West's 'kroom') over which the 'elephant' was hunted by the candidate *ɔbirɛmpɔn* was ceded to him for this purpose by a senior Kumase office holder. In 1844, for example, the Kumase *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo performed the mime of hunting the elephant on land granted to him by the Kumase *Akwamuhene* and *Asafohene* Akwawua Dɛnte, who was himself an *ɔbirɛmpɔn*.[87] The land in question was at Adeɛbeba, immediately to the south of Kumase. Such land retained its place as a commemoration and key symbol of an individual's achievement. Thus, in *Manwere* traditions, it is recounted that Kwasi Brantuo used to ride out in a palanquin from Kumase to Adeɛbeba, surrounded by *nkoa* chanting his praise names; and while in residence there, he reportedly used to delight in observing his young granddaughters playing amidst his accumulated gold dust. The intimacy of the association is summarized in the aphorism, 'Where is *Manwere* without Adeɛbeba?'; and as recently as 1951, the then *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo IV observed to the *Asantehene* Osei Agyeman Prempeh II (1931–70) that, 'I am now beginning to take an interest in Adiebeba (Brantuokrom) ... it is the original place you honoured me.'[88] Land at Adeembra, close to Adeɛbeba, served the same function when the Kumase *Ankobeahene* Kwaku Tawia mimed hunting the elephant, also in the reign of Kwaku Dua Panin; this land had originally belonged to the Kumase *Akwamuhene* and *Asafohene*, and at least one other *ɔbirɛmpɔn* – the *Denyasehene* Aduonin – had previously used it for the same purposes as Kwaku Tawia.[89]

Following the mime of hunting and killing the elephant, and securing its tail, the aspirant *ɔbirɛmpɔn* submitted the credentials of his candidacy to public scrutiny by distributing largess, and by making a display of his accumulated wealth in gold. According to West, this phase of the ceremonies 'occupied the best part of three days'.[90] The liberal scattering from a palanquin of pounded yam impregnated with gold dust joined together crucial objects of accumulation, wealth and surplus in one highly visible gesture of actual and symbolic extravagance, and made potent reference to the concept of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* in direct relation both to history and to continuity. The actual display of wealth was a great public occasion. Gold was worked into new ornaments and regalia, and these were set off amidst gold dust and a host of other elaborate, rare or costly artefacts. In November 1817, W. Hutchison, the British resident in Kumase, witnessed the public display of wealth made by the Kumase *Gyaasewahene*, Opoku Frɛfrɛ.

This week past Apokoo and several of the captains have been making an exhibition of their riches... It is done by making their gold into various articles of dress for show. Apokoo, who sent for me before his uproar began, shewed me his varieties, weighing upwards of 800 bendas [1,600 ozs.] of the finest gold; among the articles, was a girdle two inches broad. Gold chains for the neck, arms, legs, &c. ornaments for the ancles of all descriptions, consisting of manacles, with keys, bells, chairs, and padlocks. For his numerous family of wives, children, and captains, were armlets and various ornaments. A superb war cap of eagle's feathers, fetishes, Moorish charms, &c. Moorish caps, silk dresses, purses, bags, &c. made of monkey skin. Fans, with ivory handles, made of tiger skin, and decorated with silk. New umbrellas made in fantastical shapes, gold swords and figures of animals, birds, beasts, and fishes of the same metal; his drums, and various instruments of music, were covered with tiger skin, with red belts for hanging them. Ivory arrows and bows, covered with silk and skins, and many other weapons of war or fancy, such as the mind in a like situation would devise.[91]

The significance of the *Gyaasewahene* Opoku Frɛfrɛ's exhibition of his wealth in 1817 was still recalled in oral testimony given in 1940.[92] Similarly, on 15 July 1844, Chapman conveyed something of the importance of such an occasion, when he observed the following of the public display of wealth made by the *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo and one other office holder.

Two of the principal chiefs have, at the King's command, been "showing themselves, and their Gold" today. One of them (Brentu) is a treasurer of the King's. The other (Afarqua) is reckoned to be among the most wealthy among his aristocratical compeers. All their people were in attendance, as well as their numerous wives. The King and all the principal Chiefs were seated in the Market. These two, 'Gentlemen' whose turn it is to be thus honoured, appear to feel their vast importance. Nor are they at all insensible to the fulsome praises, bellowed forth by their equally vain attendants. At the close of the ceremony a variety of presents were made by each of the two, to His Majesty. It is expected that these will be returned tomorrow, with interest.[93]

It is known from an entirely different source that, following the display of his wealth, the *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo received from the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin the gift of some *nkoa* confiscated from the *Saamanhene*, and that these subjects were then settled at Adeɛbeba.[94]

In the last of this highly complex series of ritual enactments, the newly recognized *ɔbirɛmpɔn* made public affirmation of his achieved status by planting *pɛmɛ* – the symbolic accoutrement of the original *abirɛmpɔn* – in the soil at *dwaberem*. By so doing, and by challenging his peers to remove the spear, he was linking his personal attainment to the military and other virtues of the original *abirɛmpɔn*, and insisting upon his own achieved right of belonging in a hallowed tradition. He was also simultaneously encouraging other office holders to emulate him in the drive to accumulate, and challenging them to put their achievement forward for public assessment as

he had done. Moreover, the planting of a spear possessed resonances and connotations other than the obviously military ones.

In authoritative recensions of tradition, the planting of a spear is symbolic of those facets of accumulation that are embodied in human fecundity. Thus, it is recounted that spears were planted in order to determine whether Opoku Ware or Boa Kwatia should succeed Osei Tutu as *Asantehene*. Opoku Ware's spear, planted in Kumase at *pampaso*, produced *kahire* (pads) containing both harmless and venomous reptiles; Boa Kwatia's spear, planted in Kumase at *asaaman*, yielded nothing. Opoku Ware was duly selected as *Asantehene*, the reading being that only his spear – interpreted as producing a succession of good and bad rulers – guaranteed the continuity of the royal dynasty and of Asante.[95]

The bestowal of the *mena* by the state was reserved to a very small minority of office holders. These were model individuals who had accumulated on the largest scale. That scale was itself notional, because the state left it deliberately unspecified. In effect, this placed the onus firmly on the individual accumulator; it was up to him to initiate his candidacy, and to present his wealth for scrutiny and assessment. Thus, the state both controlled and restricted access to the status of *ɔbirɛmpɔn* by injecting an element of calculated risk into the application procedures. In 1817, Hutchison made reference to this factor when he observed that the public display of wealth 'is generally done once in life, by those who are in favour with the King, and think themselves free from palavers'.[96]

Even in his own lifetime, the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* was inhibited from spending lavishly, or otherwise squandering his riches. The possession of the *mena*, and the enormous social prestige of the 'big man' that derived from it, were indicators that the individual thus honoured was the benefactor of a collective posterity. Such a person was recognized and acknowledged as having added significantly to the increase of Asante society. Thus, nothing was considered more shaming to the name and to the posthumous reputation of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* than that he died bankrupt – or, in the very precise Asante locution, that he 'boiled and ate the elephant tail' – for such behaviour was disgraceful because it was profoundly and literally anti-social.[97] It was understood as an act of theft from the future wellbeing of Asante society.

The state assiduously reinforced this received construction of the nature and purposes of wealth. The key symbolic artefact deployed by the state was the *sika mena* or 'Golden Elephant Tail', which took precedence – in a sense analogous to parenthood – over all of the elephant tails of the *abirɛmpɔn*. Each *Asantehene*, from Osei Tutu onwards, created his own *sika mena*. Thus, for instance, the *sika mena* created by the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin was placed for safekeeping in the custody of the *Manwerehene*

and *ɔbirɛmpɔn* Kwasi Brantuo.[98] Such creations symbolized the commitment of each successive *Asantehene* to uphold and to transmit the inheritance of values and practices embodied in the concept itself.

The Asante understood the *sika mena*, symbolizing wealth, as being in an intimate binary relationship with the *sika dwa kofi* or 'Golden Stool', symbolizing political authority and legitimate power. Physical possession of the *sika dwa kofi* was crucial to the legitimation of an *Asantehene*. In metaphysical terms, the *sika mena* was conceptualized as 'enfolding' or 'being wrapped around' (*nnuraho*) the *sika dwa kofi*. This type of metaphorical conceit is common in Asante thought, and it is intended to express notions of support, help and enabling assistance; that is, the *sika mena* was construed as being the 'helper' of the *sika dwa kofi*. This encapsulated the historic perceptions already adumbrated. That is, just as Asante culture and society were held to have been 'helped' into being by processes of accumulation, so it was understood in enlargement that the state's political authority was rooted in and rested upon – that is, was 'helped' into being by – effective controls over the right to amass and to dispose of wealth.

It has been argued that mental representations of the systems of wealth and authority in Asante thought can be read symmetrically as complementary homologues.[99] That is, the *sika mena* was the representation and symbol of the highest level at which wealth could be appropriated (*ogye*); and the *sika dwa kofi* was the representation and symbol of the highest level at which political authority could be exercised (*otumi*). The appearance of symmetry is figuratively or expressively correct, but historically misleading. The very concept of *nnuraho* evidences the lesser or supporting status of the *sika mena*. This representational imbalance was an accurate reflection of Asante thought. That is, the objective value of wealth was always firmly situated in relation to purpose – the embedding of culture, the increase of society, the articulation of political authority.

The concept of *ogye* symbolized in the *sika mena* was articulated through a number of mechanisms. Two of these are especially noteworthy. Death duties or *awunnyadeɛ* were levied by the state on an individual's self-acquired movable property. Similarly, inheritance taxes or *ayibuadeɛ* might be imposed on the immovable part of an estate, and notably land, before the residue was restored to the heirs or successors. These imposts were discretionary, at least in the limited sense that the state determined equity of assessment in each and every individual case. Accordingly, state demands varied, but the principles themselves – and most especially death duties – were very widely and vigorously enforced. There is much detailed evidence concerning the operation of these mechanisms; and their overall significance may be readily summarized.[100]

The implementation of *awunnyadeɛ* and *ayibuadeɛ* underlined the dominant understanding of the purposes of accumulation, not least by denying ultimate rights of disposition to the individual. This was essentially a closed and self-replicating system. By fixing assessment levels in each case, the state was in a position to prevent the dynastic transmission and consolidation of wealth. In consequence, the emergence of a class of hereditary property owners was blocked, and the state effectively retained a monopoly over access to wealth and its redistribution. Tax evasion was construed as being scandalously anti-social, and it was punished with due severity. Instances of it were correspondingly rare.[101]

This system was threatened only when the norms and values underpinning it were called into serious question. In the 1880s, the liquidation of the state's authority and a widespread interrogation of its meaning and role coincided with the exposure of many Asante to new models of individualism and capital accumulation derived from the British Gold Coast Colony. Accordingly, battle was joined over the state's insistence on death duties and inheritance taxes. And, as late as the 1930s, individuals who had accumulated wealth under the colonial dispensation continued to fear that a restored *Asantehene*, with tacit British approval, might seek to resurrect historic forms of appropriation.[102] We will return to these issues below and set them within an appropriate historical framework.

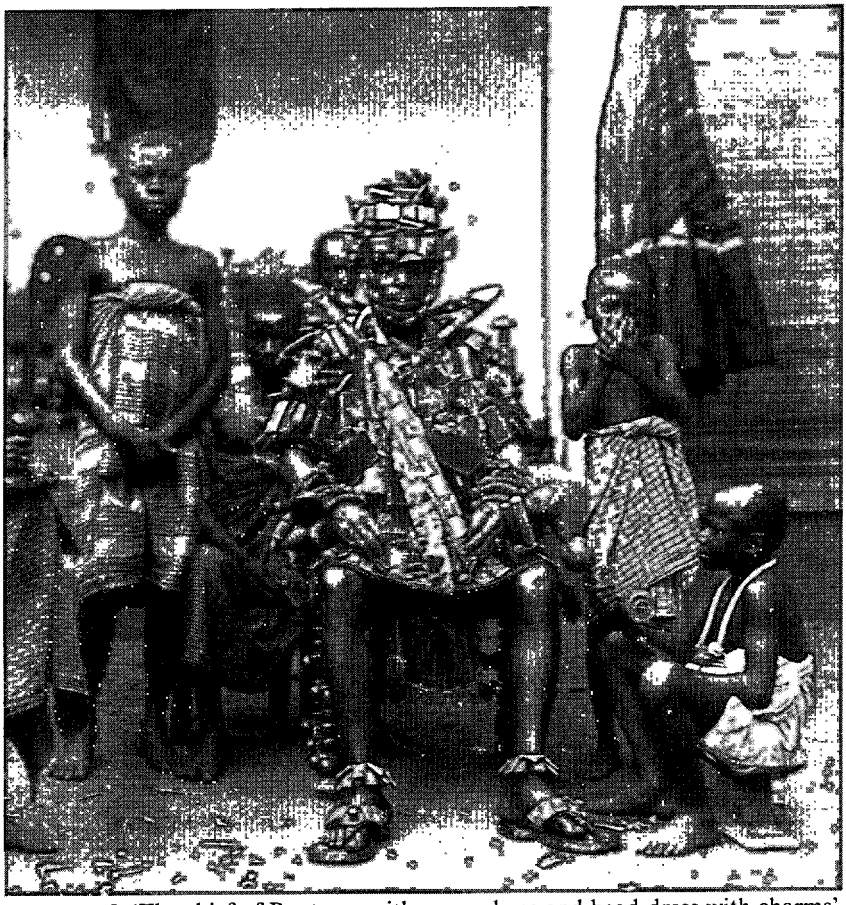
State and wealth: anatomies of power

The beginnings of the system analysed above date from the period of the eighteenth-century expansionist state. Thus, for example, *awunnyadeɛ* and *ayibuadeɛ* are innovations traditionally attributed to the *Asantehene* Opoku Ware (*c.* 1720–50).[103] And, as we have noted, serious disintegration occurred in the 1880s. The system was at the height of its operational integrity between the reigns of the *Asantehenes* Osei Kwadwo (1764–77) and Kwaku Dua Panin (1834–67), or more appositely between the careers in state service of the *abirɛmpɔn Kyidomhene* and *Ankaasehene* Yamoa Ponko (*c.* 1730–85) and *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo (*c.* 1791–1865).[104]

At its zenith this system was characterized by a number of features. As noted, the period described coincided with the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, and a consequent decline in the profitability of warfare. The *ɔbirɛmpɔn Gyaasewahene* Opoku Frɛfrɛ (*c.* 1755–1826) took many captives and much booty in his 1811 campaign in Akuapem and the southeastern Gold Coast, but the majority of his field commands had specifically political objectives, and in 1817 he complained that 'there were too many slaves in the country'; the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* Yamoa Ponko's sole military venture was a punitive expedition undertaken in the early 1780s against the

1 'Two seated men: wicker chair'. The man seated on the right is the Kumase *Akwamuhene/Asafohene* Asafo Boakye (*c.* 1832–1925), a son of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin (reigned 1834–67). Asafo Boakye was a leading figure in Asante politics from the 1870s to the 1890s. He married *inter alios* Akua Afriyie (d. 1921), fifth child of the *Asantehemaa* Afua Kobi, and full sister to the *Asantehenes* Kofi Kakari and Mensa Bonsu. In 1896 he was among those arrested by the British and sent into exile with the *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempe. Asafo Boakye is remembered as having sworn that he would survive exile. He did – in Elmina, Freetown and the Seychelles – and he returned to Kumase in November 1924. He died there in April 1925, aged over ninety.

dissident *Mamponhene* Owusu Sekyere Panin; and the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* Kwasi Brantuo never commanded an army.[105] By contrast, legitimate commerce flourished in this period as an important means of accumulation. As a young man, Yamoa Ponko acquired substantial wealth in the northern trade with the Gonja towns of Gbuipe and Daboya, which lay on the commercial route that linked Asante with the Middle Niger; and following the Anglo-Asante treaty of 1831, the southern trade in cloth and other



2 'The chief of Bantama with a war-dress and head-dress with charms'. The Kumase *Bantamahene/Krontihene* Osei Bonsu. Osei Bonsu was a member of the *botaase* lineage of the royal Mampon *Bretuo*, and so was an *ɔdehyeɛ* of the Mampon stool. His elder half-brother was the *Mamponhene* Atakora Kwaku Mensa (d. 1882); his sister's son was the *Mamponhene* Kwaku Dua Agyeman (1931–5). Osei Bonsu fled Asante in the 1880s, prospered in the Gold Coast Colony as a rubber trader, and in 1901 was appointed to the office of Kumase *Bantamahene/Krontihene* by the British. He held that stool for fifteen years, and was then himself made *Mamponhene* (1916–30). In this portrait he is wearing an elaborate protective war coat and head-dress festooned with *asumaŋ* and Muslim charms (inscribed on paper, then folded up and sealed in leather or metal containers). A century earlier, in 1817, Bowdich was informed that the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame had paid 'the value of thirty slaves' to the *Ya Na* and Muslims of Dagomba to purchase a 'fetish or war coat', similar to that illustrated here, for the *Gyaasewahene* Opoku Frɛfrɛ. A photograph of Osei Bonsu taken at the same time, but showing him standing, is in R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford, 1927), Fig. 16.

3 'Warrior with fetish-covered smock'. An (unnamed) Asante clad in the same type of protective war coat and head-dress as in plate 2. His garments are richly studded with Muslim charms, and sewn on the left shoulder of the coat is the *sumaŋ kwasadwaŋ* ('turning away'), containing a piece of ram's horn. Hunters in pursuit of animals with a dangerous *sasa* favoured protective clothing of a similar sort.

European merchandise afforded retail opportunities and considerable profits.[106]

Access to the possibility of amassing great wealth in either warfare or trade was mediated by the state. By definition, the model or paradigmatic career that led from *ahenkwaa* to *ɔbirɛmpɔn* could only be pursued within the office-holding echelons of state service. All of the successive levels of upward mobility, from insertion through aggrandizement, advancement

and reward, depended on having access to opportunities sanctioned by the state. Progress measured as output or visible achievement was highly structured and demarcated. But input or the pursuit of progress combined access and talent with instrumental, opportunistic and adventitious elements.

The operation of these elements can be observed in the beginnings of the careers of successful *abirɛmpɔn*. As a youth, Opoku Frɛfrɛ was summoned to Kumase from his natal village of Anyatiase in order to serve the *Oyoko Abohyenhene* Buapon in the lowly capacity of keeper of the bedchamber door (*dabinî*). Buapon buried a quantity of gold dust and, after he had died in the early 1770s, Opoku Frɛfrɛ disclosed this act of concealment to the *Asantehene* Osei Kwadwo. Both the gold dust and Opoku Frɛfrɛ were taken as *awunnyadeɛ*. The *Asantehene* transferred Opoku Frɛfrɛ into his own service, appointing him an *ahenkwaa* to be trained in fiscal matters under the *Fotosanfoɔhene* Esom Adu.[107] Kwasi Brantuo's father was a royal *ahenkwaa* from Atwoma, and a close associate of the *ŋkwaŋtanaŋhene* Boakye Yam Kuma. His mother was an *akoa* of the *ŋkwaŋtanaŋhene* from Asoromaso. As a young man, Kwasi Brantuo was appointed *mmagyegyeni* (personal servant; 'nanny') in the service of Fredua Agyeman, the youthful son of the *ŋkwaŋtanaŋhene* Boakye Yam Kuma by his marriage to the *Oyoko Kɔkɔɔ* royal Amma Sewaa. This association proved crucial. In 1834, Fredua Agyeman was enstooled as the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin, and Kwasi Brantuo's preferment began with appointment to a senior post within the *ahoprafoɔ* (elephant tail bearers).[108] In the manner described by Bonnat, both Opoku Frɛfrɛ and Kwasi Brantuo succeeded in securing the *personal* attention and patronage of the *Asantehene*. For each, this was the start of a career that led to the award of the *mena*. 'Berantuo [Kwasi Brantuo] was his [Kwaku Dua Panin's] baby nurse', and so, noted a tradition recorded in 1915,

> the King promoted him [Kwasi Brantuo] over all his other dignitaries, and consequently he Berantuo became very rich. Only the King surpassed him in elegance. Today, the fortune of Berantuo's family has decreased, but still his children are very respectable. 'Though gunpowder has been fired, it is not (lacking) in Akowua's bottle' [i.e. Though the fortune of the very wealthy like Berantuo may decrease, he will never become a pauper].[109]

The state expected opportunity to be matched by talent and achievement. Bowdich observed in 1817,

> It is a frequent practice of the King's to consign sums of gold to the care of rising captains, without requiring them from them for two or three years, at the end of which time he expects the captain not only to restore the principal, but to prove that he has acquired sufficient of his own, from the use of it, to support the greater

4 'Kobina Asabonten before the Tribunal'. This photograph was taken by Rattray in Kumase in September 1921 at the Commission of Inquiry into the Desecration of the Golden Stool. The man pictured (in a mourning cloth, befitting the sombre occasion) is the Kumase *Gyaasewahene* Kwabena Asubonten, who was arraigned and convicted on a charge of culpable negligence, in that the *sika dwa kafi* was entrusted to his care (the *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempe being in exile) when it was defiled, and its

dignity the King would confer on him. If he has not, his talent is thought too mean for further elevation. Should he have no good traders amongst his dependents, (for if he has there is no difficulty) usury and worse resources are countenanced, and though more creditable than a failure, ascribed to want of talent rather than to a regard of principle.[110]

Oral sources confirm these practices. The *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame reportedly entrusted the Kumase *Ankobeahene* Amankwa Abinowa with the sum of 1,000 *mperedwan* (£8,000), and sent him to the Gold Coast with four hundred carriers to purchase guns and ammunition. Amankwa Abinowa was ambushed by the Akyem, but managed to extricate his party and return to Kumase. Because of Amankwa Abinowa's skill in executing this manœuvre, Osei Tutu Kwame 'promised to assist him financially to become a rich man'.[111] Yamoa Ponko kept such a careful accounting of his investments and profits that, when his 'servants returned from trading expeditions, he insisted on examining their boxes to find out what they had brought back'.[112]

The *Asantehene* himself was a participant in and a beneficiary of this system. When Osei Tutu Kwame was preparing to invade Fante in 1807, he received financial assistance from the *Gyaasewahene* Opoku Frɛfrɛ, the *Adumhene* Adum Ata, the Bantama *ɔkyeame* Kwaku Yeboa, the *nsenieni* or court herald (and subsequently *ɔkyeame*) Kwadwo Adusei Kyakya, the *Hiawuhene* Kankam, Oti Panin (son and eventual successor of the wealthy *ɔkyeame* Boakye Yam Panin), and the *Nkonŋwasoafoɔhene* Yaw Kokroko. In 1819, following the conclusion of the campaign against the *Gyamanhene*

Caption for Plate 4 (*cont.*)

gold accoutrements plundered, by Kwasi Nsenie Agya and twelve others. Kwabena Asubonten acknowledged his responsibility in the matter, was sentenced to removal from office and, in accordance with his own wishes, was exiled from Asante. The desecration incensed all Asante, the British feared insurrection, and Kwabena Asubonten was condemned in – and by – this charged atmosphere. Privately, the British minuted that he was greatly esteemed by his stool subjects, and that he was a victim of unfortunate circumstances rather than the perpetrator of any criminal act himself. Kwabena Asubonten was a member of the *gyaasewa mmamma* – the successor in office, as son and paternal grandson, of celebrated figures in nineteenth-century Asante history. His father was the *Gyaasewahene* Adu Bofoɔ (d. *c.* 1883); his father's father was the *Gyaasewahene* *ɔbirɛmpoŋ* Opoku Frɛfrɛ (d. 1826). Kwabena Asubonten himself became *Gyaasewahene* in 1906, after sustained protest from the *gyaasewa mmamma* and *nkoa* persuaded the British to depose their usurpatory client Kwame Tua from that office.

Kwadwo Adinkra, in which much gold was seized, the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame acknowledged his obligation by repaying all of these loans with substantial interest. It is recorded that Osei Tutu Kwame particularly rewarded 'Obuabasa ["breaker of arms", a nickname of Opoku Frɛfrɛ, and of subsequent occupants of the *Gyaasewa* stool], to whom he gave very much money which enabled him to exhibit himself (*yi ne ho adi*) to the public as a wealthy man'.[113] The chronology of the tradition is marginally in error; Opoku Frɛfrɛ displayed his wealth in 1817 not 1819. But it is the overall sense of the tradition that is significant, illustrating as it does the factors of lending and repayment, and of reciprocity and reward, in the circulation and accumulation of wealth.

By far the most salient and explicit feature of this system was what I have termed elsewhere a flourishing market in subjects and in the land needed to support them.[114] The use of the term market in this context requires some qualifying definition. It is not intended to imply a commoditization of subjects and land within the framework of a capitalist agriculture. In precolonial Asante, land and labour were not marketable as strictly economic resources within this or any other such rigorous structure of commodity valuation. Thus, anything generally approximating to capitalist agriculture only emerged in Asante with the widespread monetization of land and labour as resources that derived from the insertion of the cocoa-based cash crop economy in the colonial era.[115]

The term market is used here because, as we have observed, the alienation of subjects and land within an exchange nexus based on gold was a principal feature of the precolonial political economy. But the purely economic worth and desirability of these resources, far from being defined by any stringent commodity valuation, were subordinated to a range of socio-political and ideological determinants. The linked attributes of the *sikani* (man of wealth) and the *okanniba* (the good citizen), which were expressed at their highest level in the person of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn*, were understood within a frame of reference that was sociological rather than economic. The possession of subjects and land validated and represented influence, attainment, status and rank. Some indication of the primary emphases and conditional priorities that prevailed within the precolonial market was furnished by the *Akyeamehene* and *Domakwaehene* Kwasi Apea Nuama. He observed,

> In the olden days I might have a child and make him an Asafohene [a captain of an *asafo* or company of *nkoa*] controlling slaves whom I would obtain and give him. I might see the entire population of a village being tendered for sale and I might buy them and put them under the Asafohene whom I had created. Such an Asafohene would be my Gyasi [*gyaasefoɔ* or retainers]... It was quite common for them

[indebted office holders] to sell their lands, people, and entire villages, and even their rank and become subordinate to the purchaser.[116]

The state arbitrated access to procedures and mechanisms whereby wealthy and influential office holders were able to purchase subjects and land, both around Kumase and beyond, from impecunious fellow office holders, from indebted lineage segments, and from families and individuals in straitened circumstances. We have already taken note of the way in which the endemic shortage of gold and high interest rates in conjunction with state policy exacerbated this situation. Furthermore, powerful office holders were often allocated subjects and land as favoured members of the state apparatus following the sequestration of these items, for whatever reason, by the state's legal machinery. There is much evidence to suggest that seizures of this sort reached a volumetric peak in the reign of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin (1834–67).[117]

It is certainly the case that subjects and land acquired in these ways were utilized in the intensification of agriculture around Kumase. But such resources were not commoditized. Labour requirements afforded virtually no distinction in inputs between slave and free cultivators, and the system of intensive production was a form of *métayage* or share-cropping. Cultivators simply surrendered the bulk of their product to tenurial office holders, retaining a one third share (*abusa*) of the crop for consumption.[118] The objectives of this system were political and social. An export economy based on cash crops – or unrestricted commerce in any commodity – was perceived as being inimical to the established interests of office holders. Bowdich, who thought that marketable cotton would grow well in Asante, adverted to this point.

The chiefs are fed bountifully by the labours of their slaves, and sharing large sums of the revenue, (the fines their oppression has imposed on other governments), with incalculable fees for corruption or interference, refine upon the splendor of equipage even to satiety, and still possess a large surplus of income daily accumulating. Were they to encourage commerce, pomp, the idol of which they are most jealous, would soon cease to be their prerogative, because it would be attainable by others...[119]

If the workings of the market in the alienation of subjects and land created no impetus towards strict commodity value, then such transactions did have the effect of accelerating the rationalization of existing food production in favour of already wealthy office holders and their privileged urban retinues. And by liberating urban citizens from production into the pursuit of yet more wealth, the workings of the market contributed – by default at the very least – to the progressive and inexorable monetization of life in the Asante capital. Thus, we have noted the secondary status of food retailing in Kumase. We might add, quite unsurprisingly, that such food as

was available for retail purchase was extremely expensive. Bowdich intuited something of the cause if not the underlying reason. 'The surprising exorbitance' of foodstuffs and other items in the Kumase market, he noted, 'is to be accounted for by the relative abundance of gold'; however, compared with these prices inflated by a relatively high level of urban monetization, the commodity valuation of 'labour and manufacture' was static and 'was moderately purchased'.[120]

Rights in subjects and land were quintessential features of the political and social dynamic, and consequently they were of the utmost importance. This is reflected in the sheer volume of the evidence concerning them.[121] Shifts in such rights over time – the movement of subjects and land onto and out of the market – functioned as a ready measure of an individual office holder's wealth, influence and access, and as a highly public indicator of upward and downward mobility. Such shifts mirrored and described major changes in the balance of power within the political superstructure. They also served to define a crucial interface between the state and the social order. The state's interventionist regulation of rights in subjects and land was ubiquitous, and it touched upon and affected the lives of kin groups, families and individuals.

The operation of this market in and over time, and in relation to the system it served, is overwhelming in its historical detail.[122] Succinct illustration and analysis are perhaps best provided by starting with the life, career and achievements of a single *ɔbirɛmpɔn*, and by then looking at the issues and implications that arise from this within a longer temporal context and a broader explanatory framework. The individual case used here as a basis of discussion is that of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn Kyidomhene* and *Ankaasehene* Yamoa Ponko (*c.* 1730–85).[123] As we have noted, Yamoa Ponko's life and career were coincident with the first stages of that period in which the system we have described reached the height of its articulation.

State power exemplified I: the system ascendant, *c.* 1700–1840

After 1701, when Denkyira was supplanted by Asante as the principal Akan power, many of its inhabitants migrated northwards to seek the protection and patronage of the victorious *Asantehene* Osei Tutu.[124] Among these was Yamoa Ponko's father, Gyesi Kuo. Either Osei Tutu or his successor the *Asantehene* Opoku Ware eventually rewarded Gyesi Kuo's loyalty by advancing him to occupancy of the minor stool of *Kra Amponsem* in the village of Ankaase; this office belonged to the *Kyidom fekuo* or division, then under the headship of the Kumase *Hiahene*. About 1730, Yamoa Ponko was born as Yaw Amoa, probably in Ankaase. Nothing is known about his mother, but he did have two paternal brothers

– Yamoa Asuman and Nti Kusi. We have already noted how, as a young man, Yaw Amoa began to accumulate wealth in the northern trade. His sobriquet *ponko* (horse) marked his commercial success, for the title was current as a praise name among his Gonja trading partners.

In the 1760s, Yamoa Ponko was able to make his earliest known purchases of land and subjects from an indebted office holder. Following the Asante conquest of Takyiman in 1722–3, a number of defeated refugees from there took an oath of allegiance to the *Asantehene* Opoku Ware.[125] He gave one such group as *nkoa* to the *Ahenkurohene*. These subjects incurred a debt of 60 *mperedwan* (by conventional equivalence, £480 sterling), for which the *Ahenkurohene* was held responsible.[126] He was unable to pay. With the *Asantehene's* approval, Yamoa Ponko purchased the defaulting *nkoa* from the *Ahenkurohene* for 40 *mperedwan* (£320); simultaneously, he bought a piece of land at Anyinasu from the same vendor for 30 *mperedwan* (£240).

In the customary manner prescribed for the ambitious accumulator, Yamoa Ponko put his acquisitions to work in furthering his interests. He donated the Anyinasu land to Gyesi Kuo's stool at Ankaase, thereby asserting his own claims to his father's office by enriching it; his paternal brother Yamoa Asuman was given responsibility for the land with the rank of *Asafohene* under the *Ankaasehene*. By reclassifying title to the land from the status of self-acquired, individually held asset to that of stool property, this transfer insured Anyinasu against any possible demands that might be made through the personal tax categories of *ayibuadeɛ* or *awunnyadeɛ*. Yamoa Ponko then asked the Ankaase stool for the use by lease of the northern part of the Anyinasu land he had given to it. There he settled the Ahenkuro *nkoa* as traders in the new village of Sekyedumase. This settlement was situated on the road that led north from Kumase to the commercial entrepôts of central Gonja, and it was ideally located for the further advancement of Yamoa Ponko's trading interests.[127]

Yamoa Ponko was duly promoted to occupancy of the *Kra Amponsem* stool of Ankaase, but soon thereafter a much larger opportunity for advancement presented itself. Shortly after his accession in 1764, the *Asantehene* Osei Kwadwo exercised a prerogative of his office in imposing *apeatoɔ*, a special levy on office holders designed to raise revenue for military purposes.[128] The Kumase *Hiahene*, the head of the *Kyidom fekuo* to which Yamoa Ponko's office belonged, was assessed for *apeatoɔ* in the sum of 30 *mperedwan* (£240). He was unable to pay. With the approval of the *Asantehene*, Yamoa Ponko settled the debt by purchasing from the *Hiahene* – in the manner described above by Kwasi Apea Nuama – the headship of the *Kyidom fekuo* and the rank and title of *Kyidomhene*.

Now *Kyidomhene* and *Ankaasehene*, Yamoa Ponko maintained influence

and access under the *Asantehene* Osei Kwame (1777–1803); on the instructions of the *Asantehene* Osei Kwadwo, Yamoa Ponko had previously served as guardian to Osei Kwame during three years of the latter's infancy. Thus, in the closing stages of his life, Yamoa Ponko was able to make further acquisitions. He was awarded, for example, *nkoa* from the *awunnyadeɛ* levied on the estate of the *sikani* Akwasiwaa of Domeabra. And he was able to advance one of his own sons to the rank of *Asafohene* to the *Ankaasehene* with a following of one hundred subjects.[129]

It was most probably very shortly prior to his death in or about 1785 that Yamoa Ponko made a public display of his wealth, and was awarded the *mena* and the title of *ɔbirempɔn*. The occasion is very well remembered in oral tradition, for after Yamoa Ponko had 'exhibited all the beautiful things he had made, and declared himself a wealthy man', he made an extremely unusual and probably unprecedented request.[130] He asked, contrary to established custom, that the *Asantehene* Osei Kwame attend and preside over his funeral custom in person. It was presumably in acknowledgement of Yamoa Ponko's especially outstanding achievement in the accumulation of wealth – and perhaps too because of attachment or personal sentiment – that Osei Kwame agreed to this request. Equally, this signal mark of recognition may have been prompted by the fact that Yamoa Ponko was a pioneer in that his method of accumulation – trade rather than generalship – ran counter to the prevailing orthodoxy of the eighteenth century. In due course and for whatever reason, Osei Kwame did indeed preside over Yamoa Ponko's extravagant funeral custom.

In receiving the *mena* and in having the *Asantehene* as his principal mourner, Yamoa Ponko in effect had asserted his achievement and status, at the highest and most public level, not once but twice. This created a new measure of attainment and recognition for the very wealthiest and most ambitious individuals to aspire to. Yamoa Ponko's name has survived as a byword for the accumulation of wealth. It was one, moreover, that Asante traditions have utilized ever since to underscore the norms and values attaching to the concept of legitimate achievement in the accumulation of wealth.

Thus, in 1935, in a case (*Ankaasehene* vs. *Mampon Gyamasehene*) *in re* the issue of the proper allegiance of *nkoa* at Asekyerewa, the Kumase *Akwamuhene* gave it as his opinion that

> Yamoa Ponko who was occupying the Ankasi stool was one of the rich Chiefs in Ashanti in those days, and he bought the allegiance of many subjects to make that stool great. I am therefore inclined to agree with Ankasi that the allegiance of these people were bought by the Ankasi stool. In the olden days it was the common practice for poor Chiefs to sell the allegiance of some of their royals to enrich their Stools, and this may be a similar case.[131]

Yamoa Ponko's drum refrain – *kyerɛkyerɛ me wo bɔtɔm, mehwɛm, mehwɛm* ('Show me your coffers, I am looking in, I am looking in') – is still well known. Its sense encapsulates the ethic of competitive accumulation among the *abirɛmpɔn*, for it is said that Yamoa Ponko used to have this refrain played to invite anyone who considered themselves to be as rich as he was to show him their assets in gold.[132] The commonest epithet used of him in modern Asante is that he was *ɔpɛpɛɛfo* – that is given to avarice, but in the admirable sense of being careful in the husbanding and maximizing of his wealth.[133]

As early as the reign of the *Asantehene* Osei Yaw Akoto (1823–34) the *Akuroponhene* Kwadwo Gyamfi, himself an office holder under the *Kyidomhene*, consciously tried to emulate Yamoa Ponko. He buried pots allegedly containing his entire fortune in gold dust. He showed his *nkoa* these sealed pots. He then informed the *Asantehene* that he wished him to preside over his funeral, and so devout was this desire that in return for its fulfilment he had instructed his subjects to hand over the pots containing all of his wealth to Osei Yaw Akoto. Kwadwo Gyamfi died, and Osei Yaw Akoto attended his funeral custom. The pots were opened, but they were found to contain only charcoal and brass filings (*dutu*). Kwadwo Gyamfi's corpse was reportedly disinterred, put on trial, and posthumously found guilty of the capital crimes of trafficking in false gold and of lying to the *Asantehene*. Sentence was duly passed, and the corpse was solemnly beheaded. These events gave rise to a maxim concerning the premium placed on legitimate achievement: *se aturuwhyeɛ sua agyɛnkuku su a ne tiri pa* ('If the thrush [Kwadwo Gyamfi] tries to imitate the cry of the cuckoo [Yamoa Ponko], its head splits').[134]

One feature of the precedent set by Yamoa Ponko – the asking of a special boon from the *Asantehene* on the occasion of the awarding of the *mena* – is known to have been repeated in November 1817, when the *Gyaasewahene* Opoku Frɛfrɛ was raised to *ɔbirɛmpɔn* status. In the course of the ceremony, Opoku Frɛfrɛ was seen to be weeping. Pressed to explain his distress, he stated that his only sister, Amankwaa Yaa, had borne only three female children. Thus, he had no close male kin of matrilineal descent who might hope to emulate his achievement in the accumulation of wealth, and perhaps some day follow him in the office of *Gyaasewahene*. Although individual appointments to the Gyaasewa stool were (and remained) in the gift of the *Asantehene*, Opoku Frɛfrɛ then requested that his own sons and grandsons (*mmamma*) be granted the privilege of corporate rights of preferential access to it. This represented a major departure from established custom. But the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame granted Opoku Frɛfrɛ's request in recognition of his personal achievement and of the wealth he had bestowed on the Gyaasewa stool, and in commemoration of

the personal ties of sentiment that existed between the two of them.[135] The office of *Mmammahene* to the *Gyaasewahene* was then created and vested in Opoku Frɛfrɛ's male descendants. In gratitude, Opoku Frɛfrɛ paid an *aseda* (an offering of thanks) of 30 *mperedwan* (£240) to Osei Tutu Kwame.[136]

It was Opoku Frɛfrɛ – then a *fotosanaani* under the *Fotosanfoɔhene* – who was ordered by the *Asantehene* Osei Kwame to evaluate Yamoa Ponko's estate, and to assess it for death duties and inheritance taxes. The *nkoa* settled at Sekyedumase were taken as *awunnyadeɛ*, and transferred as subjects to the Kumase *Nsumaŋ*kwaahene in the *Gyaase fekuo*.[137] One hundred of Yamoa Ponko's other *nkoa* were impounded in the same way, and assigned to the newly created office of *Atipinhene* in the *Ankobea fekuo*; at the same time, one of Yamoa Ponko's sons was appointed *ɔkyeame* or counsellor to the Atipin stool. The *nkoa* who had themselves been acquired from the *awunnyadeɛ* imposed on the estate of Akwasiwaa of Domeabra were retained by the Kyidom stool. However, a number of Kyidom subjects at Mpobi were taken and assigned to serve in the royal *afenasoafoɔ* (swordbearers).[138]

The Anyinasu land was not subject to *awunnyadeɛ*, for it had been gifted outright to the Ankaase stool and remained its property. Thus, although the Sekyedumase *nkoa* were taken as *awunnyadeɛ*, the village itself – built on part of the Anyinasu donation – reverted to Ankaase following the lapse of Yamoa Ponko's personal lease of user rights in the land. Unlike *awunnyadeɛ*, which was a mandatory tax because it involved gold, *ayibuadeɛ* seems to have been a more discretionary imposition. In Yamoa Ponko's case, there is no evidence as to whether or not his personal belongings in land and houses were subject to *ayibuadeɛ* before his designated heirs assumed title. Perhaps, as with the Anyinasu land, he had taken the precaution before his death of transferring ownership rights in his immovable property to his legatees.

Yamoa Ponko was an *ɔbirɛmpɔn* and an extremely wealthy trader. He must have possessed a substantial estate in gold dust. Unfortunately, no accounting of this part of his legacy has come to light. However, some understanding of the scale of magnitude involved may be gleaned from relevant comparisons. The *ɔkyeame* Boakye Yam is known to have amassed considerable wealth during the reign of the *Asantehene* Osei Kwadwo (1764–77) and thereafter. When he died about 1814 his estate included, so Bowdich was told, 'five jars (said to hold about four gallons each) and two flasks' of gold dust.[139] The 'flasks' were presumably the standard containers known as *apem brontɔa* ('bottles of one thousand *mperedwan*'), which were imported one-gallon wine flagons. In all, then, Boakye Yam left an estimated estate of 22 gallons of gold dust. Bowdich's unit of measure was the Queen Anne gallon, which was not replaced by the

Imperial gallon until 1824. Since the density of pure gold dust is in excess of 19 grams per cc, the Queen Anne gallon packed at a less than critical density of 18 grams per cc would comfortably accommodate the equivalent of 1,000 *mperedwan* – 1 *peredwan* being an Asante weight of 2.25 troy ounces. If we assume the maximum case (that the jars and flasks were full, and that their contents were unadulterated), then Boakye Yam's estate in gold dust comprised some 22,000 *mperedwan*. This converts to £176,000 sterling at the conventional nineteenth-century rate of equivalence of £8 to 1 *peredwan*.[140]

In 1817, when the acting *Anantahene* Apea Nyanyo was disgraced for military and other derelictions, Bowdich recorded that 'three jars [of gold dust] were seized' by the state.[141] The implication is that this hoard represented a maximum amount of 12 gallons of gold dust or 12,000 *mperedwan*, with a sterling equivalent of £96,000. Let us set these estimates against one further figure. The display of wealth by a candidate *ɔbirɛmpɔn* involved the conversion of some proportion of his gold into artefacts. In 1817, as we have noted, Hutchison assessed Opoku Frɛfrɛ's 'varieties' or golden ornaments for display as weighing in excess of 1,600 ounces. That is, some 710 *mperedwan*, or £5,680. This was only a small fraction of Opoku Frɛfrɛ's accumulated wealth. Ornaments were displayed as a central focus for the unworked gold that surrounded them, and the number created for a single occasion was presumably subject to the technical constraints on mass production.[142]

The problem of drawing any very precise conclusions from these figures is compounded by additional considerations. First, neither Boakye Yam nor Apea Nyanyo was awarded the *mena*, or indeed ever applied for it. Apea Nyanyo's career was aborted, and Boakye Yam had a specific motive for not exposing his wealth to public scrutiny; it is known that he practised tax evasion in favour of his son and successor, the *ɔkyeame* Oti Panin.[143] Second, some wealthy office holders had reasons other than Boakye Yam's for sacrificing keen ambition and public acclamation to prudent silence. We should recall that the onus of applying to become an *ɔbirɛmpɔn* rested on the individual concerned. Accumulated wealth was the indispensable qualification. But there was no fixed scale. An aspirant had to gauge this indeterminacy in conjunction with other potentially treacherous pitfalls. Was his current political stock ascendant? Was he free from all entangling obligations and expensive claims? Above all, was he secure from pending litigation or even arraignment on charges brought by the state? This last consideration was of the utmost importance, for crimes prosecuted by the state were often 'allowed to sleep for years', in order 'to impose the confidence on the accused that the principal witnesses are dead'.[144] There must always have been a number of wealthy office holders who, for a host of reasons and however reluctantly, would not or could not and did not

apply for the *mena*. Thus, it is extremely difficult to determine whether individuals such as Boakye Yam or Apea Nyanyo, irrespective of all other contingencies, actually possessed the purely financial credentials sufficient to support the status of an *ɔbirɛmpɔn*.

Whatever the Asante understanding of the arithmetic of great wealth, it will be apparent that the figures mentioned represent fairly substantial sums of money even by the standards of contemporary early nineteenth-century Europeans.[145] Nor are these figures unacceptable exaggerations. Many accounts assert that at the death of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin in 1867, the *adaka kɛsɛɛ* or great chest that contained the state's disposable currency reserves was full. It has been calculated from its known dimensions that when full the *adaka kɛsɛɛ* held in excess of 400,000 ounces of gold dust, or nearly 180,000 *mperedwan*, with a sterling value of approximately £1,440,000.[146]

Let us return to Yamoa Ponko. Whatever the actual value of his estate in gold dust, it was subjected to *awunnyadeɛ* before the state restored a discretionary residue to his brother and principal heir, the *Kyidomhene* and *Ankaasehene* Nti Kusi. There was no fixed scale of death duties, but the state customarily took the overwhelming bulk of the gold dust in any estate. This practice reinforced and promoted the idea that wealth, particularly in gold, resided in individual achievement. It also explains why even the immediate successors of very wealthy office holders were sometimes embarrassed by relatively modest financial demands. Accumulation was also conditioned by changing circumstances, as may be briefly seen from the ensuing history of the office of the *Kyidomhene* and *Ankaasehene*.

Yamoa Ponko, as noted, was succeeded in office by his brother Nti Kusi, who died very shortly thereafter, and was succeeded in turn by Gyesi Tenten, a son of Yamoa Ponko.[147] Gyesi Tenten became blind, and in 1819 the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame replaced him as *Kyidomhene* with the aged *ɔheneba* Owusu Bannahene, a son of the *Asantehene* Osei Kwadwo. Prior to his elevation, the *ɔheneba* Owusu Bannahene had enjoyed a long and active career, but not one in which he had accumulated great wealth. He had held office as an *ɔkyeame* and as *Adomasahene*, and he had represented the Asante state in its diplomatic and commercial relations with the European authorities at Accra. In 1826, he was killed while commanding the *Kyidom fekuo* against the British at the battle of Katamanso.[148]

Among those taken as *awunnyadeɛ* from Yamoa Ponko's estate was one of his widows. This woman was an *ɔdehyeɛ* (pl. *adehyeɛ*: 'royal') of Gyakye, and she was married by the reigning *Asantehene* Osei Kwame. In the late 1780s this union produced a son, the *ɔheneba* Owusu Dome. As a

young man, the *ɔheneba* Owusu Dome impressed the Danes in Accra as being *vredbarn* ('an angry young man'), and he was briefly exiled by the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame. Restored to favour, he became prominent in diplomatic negotiations with the British, and was apparently appointed as *Atene Akotenhene* within the *Ankobea fekuo* when that office was created about 1816. In 1826, he was taken prisoner by the British at Katamanso. In 1827, following his release, he was appointed *Kyidomhene* by the *Asantehene* Osei Yaw Akoto in succession to the *ɔheneba* Owusu Bannahene. In 1837, about fifty years after Yamoa Ponko's death, he died in office in Kumase.[149]

None of these four successors of Yamoa Ponko accumulated great wealth, and none was awarded the *mena*. Their 'wealth' resided in the fact that they held an important office, and administered the lands and *nkoa* attached to it. But resources such as these were quite distinct from the assets in gold that were the mark of the successful *individual* accumulator. Gold was mobile and fluid, desirable and convertible. It possessed immense social value, conferred the highest prestige, and bespoke purchasing power. It was the currency of the state's taxes and impositions, and it was internationally negotiable. High office, unsupported by personal resources in gold, was hardly an adequate insurance against recurrent liquidity problems.

Thus for example, in or about 1836 the *Kyidomhene ɔheneba* Owusu Dome incurred a relatively small court fine of 10 *mperedwan* (£80). He was unable to meet this modest obligation. In settlement, he sold to the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin the descendants of that group of *nkoa* that had been acquired by Yamoa Ponko from the estate of Akwasiwaa of Domeabra. In turn, the *Asantehene* awarded these subjects to the future *ɔbirempɔn* and *Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo. And in the 1840s, during the incumbency of the *Kyidomhene ɔheneba* Owusu Dome Kuma, Kwasi Brantuo purchased another group of Kyidom *nkoa* and settled them at Ahodwo.[150]

State power exemplified II: the system undermined, *c.* 1840–1900

In ways and for reasons that are well understood – and that are discussed below when and where they are relevant to the argument – the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin (1834–67) was more interventionist and more authoritarian than his predecessors. During his long reign, the volume of transactions in the market in subjects and land reached an apex. But the same period also witnessed stirrings of dissent, and the hesitant beginnings of an interrogation of the system's legitimacy. Consensus over the historic understanding of the purposes of accumulation, and of the relationship of such purposes to received ideas of advancement and prestige, was

disfigured and undermined by a perceptible increase in illegitimate demands, in arrests and confiscations, and in clientage and favouritism.[151]

Thus, the career of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn Manwerehene* Kwasi Brantuo – by common consent one of the wealthiest individuals in Asante history – was qualitatively different from that of any of his predecessors who had received the *mɛ̀na*. Unlike the early eighteenth-century *abirɛmpɔn* who had forged and enlarged the polity, he never commanded an army; unlike the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* Opoku Frɛfrɛ, he did not have a long, varied and distinguished career in all of the major areas of state service; and unlike the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* Yamoa Ponko, his wealth was not grounded in youthful trading ventures. As we have seen in the case of Yamoa Ponko and Opoku Frɛfrɛ, the *mena* was customarily applied for and awarded late in life, as the formal, public seal of approval on a life spent in the service of state and society. But Kwasi Brantuo was raised to *ɔbirɛmpɔn* status in 1844, more than two decades prior to his death in 1865. And it was only in or around 1844 – perhaps concurrently with the bestowal of the *mena* – that Kwasi Brantuo was appointed *Manwerehene* as head of the new *Manwere fekuo*, the tenth and last created of the major Kumase office groups. This was his first (and last) office at the highest level, for until then he had held a household post with fiscal responsibilities within the *ahoprafoɔ* group.[152]

Kwasi Brantuo is still commemorated as *Nana Brantuo a otuo sika pɛɛ*, to signify a man of very great wealth, and traditions attest to his riches in gold. His career is known in some detail, and there can be little doubt that his capacity to accumulate wealth and his political advancement were all but totally dependent on the personal patronage of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin. This relationship is summarized in the gloss that is placed on Kwasi Brantuo's horn call: *Akyampon Kwasi ɛi, yɛsere wɔ twɛtwɛ, yɛsere wɔ twɛ twɛtwɛtwɛ* ('Akyampon Kwasi, you are the subject of mockery, [are] the subject of mockery'; i.e. 'Once I was mocked because I was poor, but [not] now that I am wallowing in wealth').[153] It is argued that the sedulous advancement of Kwasi Brantuo by Kwaku Dua Panin was a surrogate act of assertion by the *Asantehene* against those who had mocked his own youthful self and denigrated his own dynastic status and position.[154] More bluntly, it is stated that Kwaku Dua Panin fostered the promotion and influence of his dependant Kwasi Brantuo because 'there were many who did not like the *Asantehene* at all'.[155] Certainly, as a purchaser of land and *nkoa* from indebted office holders, and as a favoured recipient of commissions from the collection of state fines and fees, Kwasi Brantuo – the erstwhile *mmagyegyèni* – was afforded seemingly unprecedented access as the most favoured personal client of Kwaku Dua Panin.

Upon his accession as *Asantehene* in 1834, Kwaku Dua Panin made a grant to Kwasi Brantuo of land and *nkòa* at Heman; it was here that

Kwaku Dua Panin's *sika mena* was kept, under the guardianship of Kwasi Brantuo.[156] Outright gifts followed, as has already been noted in the case of the *nkoa* surrendered by the Kyidom stool. In the 1840s the *Tafohene* Buadu Kwadwo was fined in the considerable sum of *mperedwan ɔha aduasa* (i.e. 120 × £8 or £960). Kwasi Brantuo was sent to collect this fine. But the amount raised by Buadu Kwadwo was short by *mperedwan aduasa* (£240). The *Asantehene* himself paid the balance outstanding, taking in settlement the Tafo *nkoa* at Drobonso, and gifting them to the recently appointed *Manwerehene*.[157] In the late 1850s, a number of *nkoa* at Apaaso – the property of the disgraced royal Osei Kwadwo – were impounded by Kwaku Dua Panin and transferred as subjects to Kwasi Brantuo.[158]

The *Asantehene's* favour was also evident in court proceedings. Kwasi Brantuo was both an habitual and a favoured petitioner. Thus, in an oath case with the aforementioned Osei Kwadwo concerning disputed authority over *nkoa* at Toase, judgement was given in favour of Kwasi Brantuo; the Toase *nkoa* were transferred to Heman, one of them being given by the *Manwerehene* to the *Asantehene* as a 'thank offering' (*aseda*).[159] Underpinning all of this preferment was the fact that Kwasi Brantuo was widely employed by Kwaku Dua Panin as a fiscal agent, a role from which numerous fees accrued. Entirely typical of such transactions was the occasion in the late 1850s when Kwasi Brantuo presided over the lucrative transfer of Patriensa from the heirs of the *Ntaherahene* Oduro Koko Bereko to the ŋkwaŋtanaŋ stool.[160] Kwasi Brantuo was also given preferential opportunities for purchase, and he invested Kwaku Dua Panin's gifts and benefices in land and subjects. His purchase and settlement of Kyidom *nkoa* at Ahodwo have been noted. In the 1850s he purchased some Tafo *nkoa* in Kwawu and settled them at Drobonso; and he paid 10 *mperedwan* on behalf of Nyameani and Sobonkuo, taking in settlement the *nkoa* of the Nkonson stools of Deduaku.[161] In all of his transactions Kwasi Brantuo fulfilled the imperative of the maxim *wonni sika a, anka wɔfre no nhwea kwa* ('If gold was not made use of, then one would call it sand').[162]

The degree of patronage enjoyed by Kwasi Brantuo may be instructively contrasted with the case of the Manso Nkwanta *sikani* Kwasi Gyani. In 1862, Kwasi Gyani fled into exile in the British Gold Coast Protectorate, after having been accused of failing to surrender a quantity of gold nuggets to the state. His reasons for seeking asylum were stated to and recorded by the British at Cape Coast: 'he is a man of property [*sikani*], and declares that the King [Kwaku Dua Panin] desires only to entrap him, take his head, and afterwards possession of his property'.[163] That illicit seizures of this sort breached the compact that governed wealth and its disposition is clearly illustrated by the outcome of an analogous case from an earlier period. Bowdich reported the following intervention made by the *ɔkyeame* Asante

Agyei – a concise formulation of the agreed rules and objectives of accumulation – when it appeared that the *Asantehene* Osei Tutu Kwame was contemplating an illegitimate act of confiscation.

> The King [Osei Tutu Kwame] confessing a prejudice against a wealthy captain, his linguists [*akyɛame*], always inclined to support him, said, 'If you wish to take his stool from him, we will make the palaver'; but Agay [the *ɔkyeame* Asante Agyei] sprung up, exclaiming 'No, King! that is not good; that man never did you any wrong, you know all the gold of your subjects is yours at their death [i.e. through *awunnyadeɛ*], but if you get all now, strangers will go away and say, only the King has gold, and that will not be good, but let them say the King has gold, all his captains have gold, and all his people have gold, then your country will look handsome, and the bush people fear you.'[164]

The precedent continuity and coherence of Asante history was decisively ruptured in the 1880s, but signs of accelerated movement towards that point can be dated from the authoritarian reign of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin, and more particularly from his death in 1867. External factors unquestionably played a significant role. The burning of Kumase in the Anglo-Asante war of 1873–4 was not only a profound psychic shock, but also the prelude to increasing British pressure; this took the form of an insistent if ill-thought-out meddling in Asante affairs, and it had the effect of exacerbating political divisions and conflicts.[165] At the same time, Asante – hitherto, as we shall see presently, a 'closed' society – was indiscriminately exposed to novel ideas and influences. There are echoes here of the end of the *Tokugawa bakufu* in Japan in 1868, and the beginnings of the *Meiji* era.[166] But in the case of Asante, the problems of a weakened and uncertain central authority were not resolved by a revolution from above. Instead, Asante's rulers pursued a course in which indecisiveness and aborted initiatives gave way to increasingly desperate, arbitrary and punitive behaviour, and ended in a cynical struggle for power and a murderous civil war.[167]

The consensus that framed the historic meaning of accumulation, wealth and the place of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* was dissolved in the reigns of the *Asantehenes* Kofi Kakari (1867–74) and Mensa Bonsu (1874–83). Both practised and in some ways enlarged the arbitrary tendencies that had existed under Kwaku Dua Panin, but neither possessed that ruler's secure tenurial authority or presided as he had done over a stable and confident society. It is significant that, following the 'generation' of Kwasi Brantuo and Kwaku Dua Panin, there is no very clear evidence of any individual making a public exhibition of his accumulated wealth in order to have the *mena* conferred upon him.[168]

Our best cursory guide to what transpired is the Asante oral sources themselves. Kofi Kakari, it is severally stated, was perennially short of gold, and notoriously spendthrift. He is traditionally given the character of having been *akyɛmpɔ* (a beneficent distributor of gold and largess, with

connotations of buying popularity as well as of being philanthropic); he is also described as having been *ɔsape* (spendthrift, with connotations of duplicity as well as of prodigality). From his palanquin, he freely scattered packets among the Kumase crowd, each one containing a small measure (*suru*) of gold dust. It is said that he spent his early life in comparative poverty, and that he wept when he saw the amount of gold that had been bequeathed to him as *Asantehene* by his predecessor. Certainly, he is known to have disbursed much of this inherited wealth – which was state and not personal property – to his individual favourites and concubines. It is said that he justified his behaviour in redistributive terms: 'There is this much gold', he is said to have observed on examining the state treasury, 'while people suffer amidst hunger and poverty.' Whatever the (somewhat unlikely) truth of this, it is the case that his profligacy was compounded by a marked insensitivity to historic norms and practices. Kofi Kakari freely adjusted legal procedures to generate revenue; he tried to shift the entire cost of the Fante campaign of 1872–3 onto the generals and the soldiery; he appointed favourite children to office; and he flagrantly advanced the careers of his personal household servants, without any reference to seniority or to any proven capacity to accumulate wealth, and without the personal authority and will necessary to impose even reluctant acceptance of his wishes. His many fiscal derelictions were among the charges preferred against him when he was removed from office in 1874.[169]

Arguably, Kofi Kakari's illicit practices were expedients prompted by financial incompetence and habitual irresponsibility. No such case can be made for his brother and successor, the *Asantehene* Mensa Bonsu. Chronically short of revenue, and personally avaricious (for women as well as gold), Mensa Bonsu carried punitive exactions to new and insupportable levels. In mitigation, it must be said that in the early part of his reign Mensa Bonsu's misdirected behaviour was at least partially dictated by the desire to reverse the declining authority of the state. But the situation proved intransigent, and Mensa Bonsu resorted to extreme measures to preserve his personal power. These are well documented, and they were a major contributory cause of his destoolment in 1883.[170]

The popular view of Mensa Bonsu subscribed to by contemporary Asante witnesses emphasized the shortcomings of his character and the corruption of his personal nature.

> Anini [Mensa] Bonsu was very mean. He had an unpleasant and frightening disposition. He was not given to mirth. He was huge. He was wicked. He delighted in killing people. He had people prepared for execution while [he was] eating, and as soon as he had finished, the executioners took the culprit away to be killed before Mensa Bonsu went off for his sleep.
>
> An illustration of his wickedness is his attempt to disprove the Asante saying: 'It

takes one day to die, and therefore it is nothing to be apprehensive about'. Bonsu had a man tortured by pushing a knife through his mouth [*sɛpɔ*]; then the man was put in a room for about three or four days. He started to decay before Bonsu had him executed. People who roamed about at night were often executed. He was so greedy for money that he heavily fined those whose lives he had spared for breaching the *ntamkɛsɛɛ* [the great oath]; this bankrupted their families. He had innumerable wives, so was unable to pay adequate attention to many of them. Because of this, six of the youths who were in charge of these wives had affairs with some of them. This matter was quickly exposed. The women and the young men involved were murdered so brutally that it caused much consternation throughout the nation.[171]

Mensa Bonsu died in British captivity at Praso in 1896. In 1911, his corpse was disinterred and brought to Kumase for appropriate obsequies and burial. On the occasion of this funeral, the native Twi speaker N. Asare of the Basel Mission recorded opinion then current in Kumase concerning Mensa Bonsu's reputation as *Asantehene*. His account is an indictment, and a telling summary of the widespread belief that Mensa Bonsu had contributed to the collapse of historic norms by subverting them.

This King [Mensa Bonsu] was the most cruel amongst all the Asante sovereigns, he beheaded plenty of people in his time. He was not only cruel, but very wicked and avaricious. He killed many noble men privately because he liked to own their fine looking wives and personal effects. When he saw or heard of a man who was well off in life, he cunningly created false charges upon him, then sent his executioners to kill him by night in order to possess his property... He was a great miser and proud too... The chiefs of Kumase did not mingle themselves much in the funeral as it was expected. The chiefs have still ill feelings against the King because some of them suffered much in his reigning time... Those who saw the golden time of Asante Kingdom mourned greatly and [were] very much cast down.[172]

The testimony of participants indicates that the internecine violence and chaotic disorder of the civil war period (1883–8) were of a severity and duration such as to produce societal incoherence and personal anomie.[173] This catastrophic situation starkly illuminated the ethical and ideological as well as the material bankruptcy of the Kumase political elite, and it all but liquidated the bases of non-Kumase subscription to that elite's historic claims to authority. In the course of the civil war(s) Kumase squandered its coercive power. More gravely, it forfeited its capacity to elicit support and to mediate consensus. At one obvious level of reading, the civil war(s) appeared to be little more than a seemingly endless cycle of destructive struggles between self-interested Kumase dynasts and cynical political factions. In consequence, there emerged two reactions against the corrupt abuse of the system that had regulated and rewarded the accumulation of wealth throughout much of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The first of these reactions was formulated by Asante refugees resident in the British Gold Coast Colony. In echo of Kwasi Gyani, such men

complained of illicit confiscations, of state violence, and of a notable deterioration in the 1880s of general conditions making for the security of life and property. Taking as their model the individual's rights of disposition over wealth in English law, and the low level of taxation apparent in *laissez-faire* capitalism as practised in the Gold Coast Colony, they totally repudiated the fiscal and political authority of the Asante state. In statements addressed to the Governor of the Gold Coast in 1894, they excoriated the *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempe as 'robber King', and all of his predecessors as 'the late thief Kings'; highly significantly, in rejecting the practice of *awunnyadeɛ*, and the very concept of the *ɔbirɛmpɔn* to which it was linked, they called for the abolition of the *mena*, characterizing elephant tails as 'useless and good for nothing'.[174] The ideological descendants of these dissident individuals were the *akonkofoɔ* – a term defying exact translation, but carrying implications of wealth, of capitalist individualism, and of 'modernity' – and the other businessmen of the early colonial era.[175]

The second of these reactions was internal to Asante. It must be seen as distinct from the first in origin and in personnel, although there are clear congruities in the general objectives pursued by both groups. By 1888, Kumase supporters of the two rival candidates with claims to be *Asantehene* – Yaw Twereboanna and Agyeman Prempe, the son of the *Asantehemaa* Yaa Kyaa – had exhausted their resources in years of inconclusive conflict. In that year, Yaw Twereboanna's provincial supporters, the *Mamponhene* and *Kokofuhene*, finally broke the deadlock and gained an apparently decisive advantage. In June 1888, the *Asantehemaa* Yaa Kyaa convened a meeting in Kumase in a last-ditch attempt to rally support to Agyeman Prempe's cause.

In the course of that assembly, provincial office holders led by the *Edwesohene* Kwasi Afrane Kɛsɛɛ, together with the rump of Agyeman Prempe's near-bankrupt Kumase faction, demanded as the price of their military support that Yaa Kyaa take a solemn oath that 'any property that had been seized by Prempeh's [Agyeman Prempe's] predecessors should revert to the original owners'.[176] Yaa Kyaa tried to prevaricate, but she was in no position to dictate terms, and she eventually swore as required. By the end of July, Agyeman Prempe's reinvigorated cause had triumphed, and Yaw Twereboanna and thousands of his supporters were refugees in the Gold Coast Colony.[177] The *Edwesohene* now took the lead in forcing the implementation of Yaa Kyaa's oath. Land and *nkoa* were transferred wholesale from the Kumase office holders to provincial authority; and in the anarchy of the moment, Kumase office holders themselves pressed claims and counter-claims against each other.[178]

An entirely typical transaction involved the Anyinasu land that had been

acquired from the *Ahenkuroɔhene* by Yamoa Ponko. Edweso now pressed a claim to Anyinasu, and to all of the *nkoa* living on it of *Asona* lineage descent.[179] The incumbent *Kyidomhene ɔheneba* Kofi Boakye Adwene, a son of the *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin, had opposed Agyeman Prempe and was now, at best, a lukewarm supporter of the winning side. In 1888, the most influential of Yamoa Ponko's direct descendants was Kwame Boaten, a great-grandson on his mother's side, and an experienced negotiator; he was to succeed to the Kyidom stool in 1890, on the death or abdication of the *ɔheneba* Kofi Boakye Adwene. Neither the *ɔheneba* Kofi Boakye Adwene nor Kwame Boaten was in a position to resist the Edweso demand, although there is some evidence to suggest that the *Kyidomhene* did try to retain the land while surrendering the *Asona nkoa*. This ploy failed, and Yaa Kyaa sanctioned the transfer of both land and subjects to the *Edwesohene* Kwasi Afrane Kɛsɛɛ.[180]

In 1889 the beneficiaries of redistribution demanded a further oath in confirmation of the irreversibility of the new arrangements. The oath was administered at *Ahyiamu* ('a place of meeting'), a piece of land near Edweso. The contracting parties were represented by Kwasi Deekye, a nephew of Kwasi Afrane Kɛsɛɛ, and Agyeman Badu, the younger brother of Agyeman Prempe. Kwasi Deekye swore perpetual loyalty to the *Asantehene* on behalf of the assembled office holders. Agyeman Badu reciprocated by solemnly 'drinking the gods', 'to the effect that no one would alter or change or interfere with the properties which had been restored to the fighters'.[181] Evidently – and logically – the *Ahyiamu* oath also encompassed the abolition of *awunnyadeɛ* and *ayibuadeɛ*. In 1930, a group of *akonkofoɔ* commented as follows:

> In order to assure Ashanti people of the annulment of this law of taking percentage of any deceased's property, Nana Prempeh [Agyeman Prempe] deputed his sister by name Nana Akua Afriyie and his brother named Nana Agyeman Badu, to Ejisuhene [*Edwesohene*], the then powerful King was to drink fetish that Nana Prempeh should never at any time ask for any estate of any deceased Ashanti man.[182]

The intended effect of all of these proposals and measures was to end the interventionist authority of the historic state presided over by the *Asantehene* and the Kumase political elite. The dissenters in the Gold Coast Colony wanted to pursue accumulation on their own terms, and certainly outside of the definitions and constraints imposed by the Asante state. By analogy, the authors of the *Ahyiamu* oath wished to remove the Asante state's absolute rights of dispensation or regulation over the market in subjects and land. It was indisputably the case that the operations of the historic state – between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries – had favoured and benefited the Kumase office holders at the expense of the remainder of Asante society. This tendency had been set in motion by the

phenomenal territorial expansion of the eighteenth century. It was then entrenched by the much enlarged central place status of Kumase, and by the progressive imperial enrichment and elaboration of the state apparatus located there.

The coercive capacity of the state centred in Kumase played an important role in maintaining the imbalance just described, whether in relation to individual accumulator, to provincial office holder or to lineage segment. But, as we shall see, the factors of subscription and consent that we have already adumbrated played the crucial enabling part in the installation, embedding, ideological articulation and long-term survival of the system of control over wealth and (re)production that we have described and analysed in this chapter.