

THREE



105. Akan (Ghana). Linguist staffs, twentieth century. Wood and gold, heights left to right 5', 5'4", and 4'7½" (1.53, 1.63, and 1.41 m). Musée Barbier-Müller, Geneva.

Court linguists' staffs carved of wood were decorated in goldwork, showing their high status and the power of the ruler they served. Here an elephant with a buffalo represents the adage "If the elephant were not in the forest, the buffalo would claim to be a large animal" – in other words, everyone has a superior. In the final on the right we see a man eating from a bowl as another watches hungrily, referring to ideas of power and economic difference.

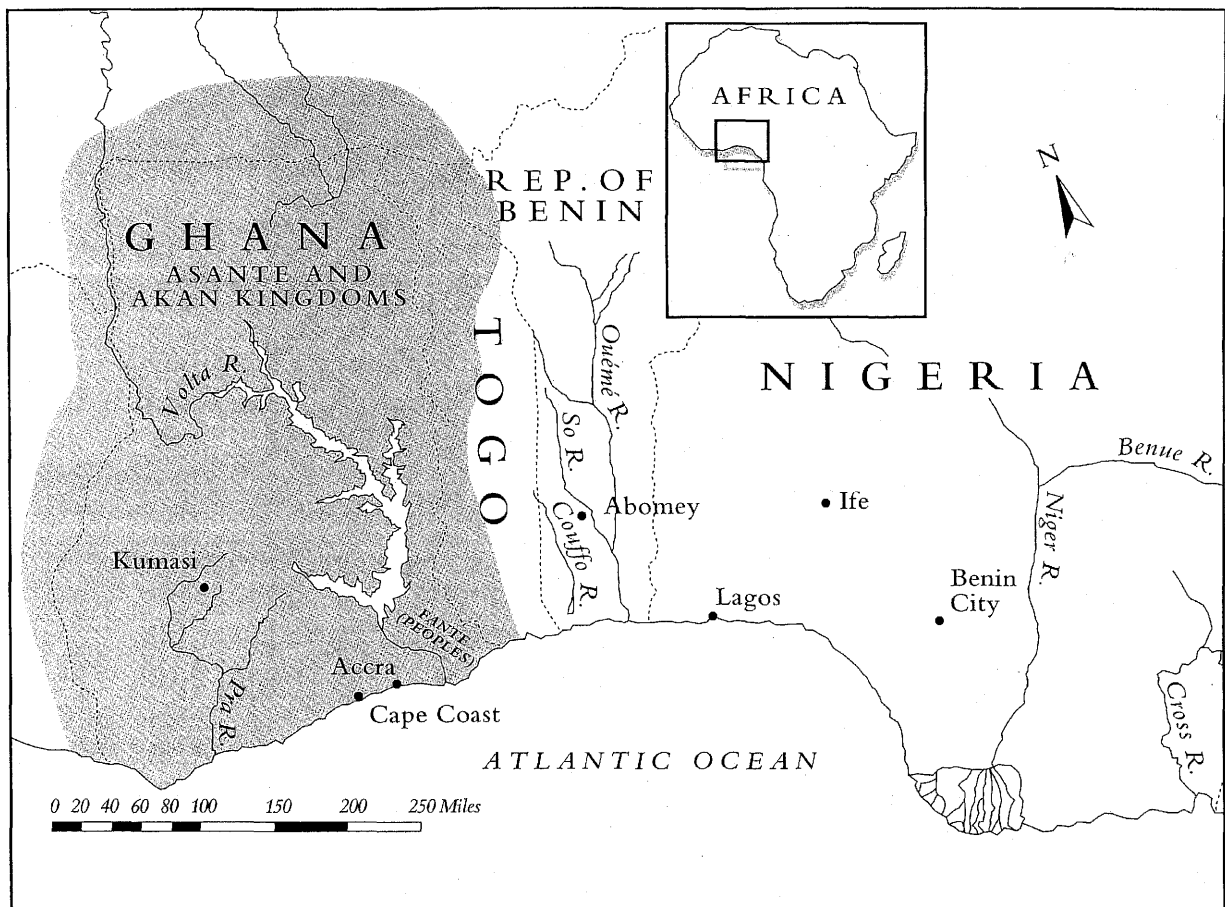
The Asante Kingdom: The Golden Ages of Ghana

European travelers reaching the West African coast of what is today modern Ghana once called this area the Gold Coast. In this region of abundant gold, a powerful and art-rich kingdom known as the Asante (or Ashanti) rose to power in the early 1680s. The founder of this kingdom, a man named Osei Tutu, defeated a range of local chieftaincies and established his capital in the town of Kumasi. At its height, the Asante polity extended its influence, if not absolute political control, over a diversity of nearby groups and these various peoples, all speaking the language called Akan, today share key art and cultural traditions. Boasting a population of three to five million inhabitants, Asante political hegemony reached some 400 miles (640 km) north-south and 200 miles (320 km) east-west, from the coast, through the central forests, and into the northern savanna.

The Capital's Architecture and the Construction of Status

The Asante capital city of Kumasi is situated on a rise overlooking several streams. While the city had its origins as an early gold trading site, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Kumasi grew into a vibrant cosmopolitan center of about 20,000 inhabitants. The main north-south avenue through the city was



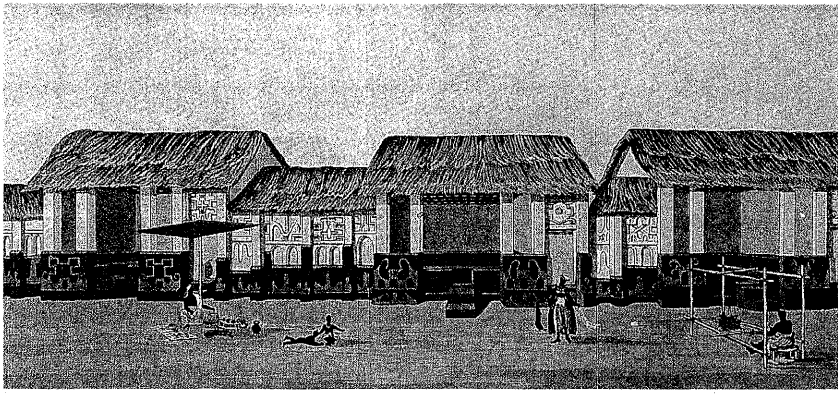


THE ASANTE KINGDOM

intersected at right angles by narrower lanes or streets which formed blocks, each street being named after its designated chief. Ironsmiths, goldsmiths, court officials, and Muslims lived in distinctive wards or quarters.

The British traveler T. E. Bowdich published a book of his experiences among the Asante in 1817, *A Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, which was illustrated with drawings of Kumasi and other towns. While these illustrations are of course the work of a Western outsider, they still provide invaluable clues to the appearance of Asante art and architecture. In one of these we see Kumasi's Adum Street in 1817 with its richly decorated court officials' residences (FIG. 106). In the foreground Bowdich depicts a street scene. On the left, a market woman sells various wares under the shade of a large canopy as two children play nearby. She holds scales in her left hand to weigh out the gold dust currency. To the right a priestess in a richly patterned skirt waves a horse-tail fly whisk as she performs a dance. On the far right a royal weaver makes a strip of *kente* cloth on a long, horizontal loom.

The houses of important Asante court officials characteristically displayed open porticoes (*adampan*) which were reached by polished clay steps. Here officials received visitors, oversaw business and administrative affairs, observed pageants, and relaxed

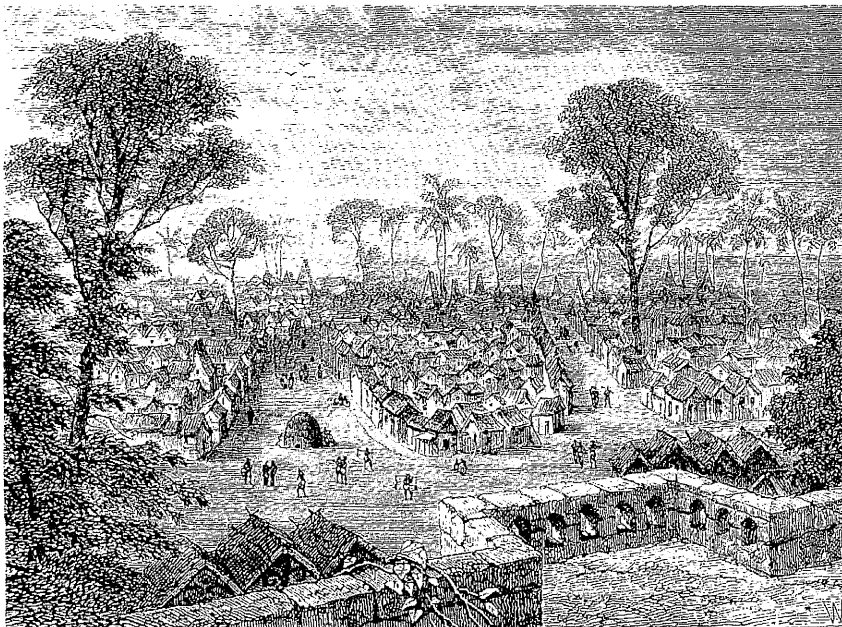


106. Asante (Ghana).
View of Adum Street in
Kumasi, the Asante capital,
1817, from T. E. Bowdich's
*A Mission from Cape Coast
Castle to Ashantee* (1818).

in the evening. Inhabitants entered by a small door at the side. The interior space was divided into alternating areas of light and darkness as defined by courtyards, verandas, and rooms. As elsewhere in the Akan-speaking area, wall size, roof height, the degree of decoration, as well as the number and scale of rooms, were important status indicators.

The quality and upkeep of the capital's architecture was a central concern of the Asante royalty. Osei Bonsu, an early nineteenth-century king, promised his captains money from the state treasury after a victory so that they could enlarge and redecorate their houses. He also promised to modernize the capital's streets and to widen and straighten the road to his country residence. Osei Bonsu's architectural interests extended to new designs. Among other works, he is credited with overseeing the construction of a modern "stone palace" (FIG. 107) modeled after European buildings on the coast.

Like other important avenues in this city, Adum Street was straight and broad – some streets were over 100 yards (91 m) wide, giving them the appearance of large squares. Such streets, which were cleaned daily, served as parade grounds, reception areas, and ceremonial centers. Special platforms were constructed there for royalty to view important events. In Asante architecture, walls of woven canes were packed with moistened earth, then decorated with geometric or figurative motifs, before being plastered. Patterns were framed in separate design fields that juxtapose solids and voids. Most of the decorative relief work was done freehand, with some use of molds.



107. Asante (Ghana).
View of Kumasi from the
king's (or *Asantehene's*)
stone palace, completed in
1822.

The stone palace functioned as a storehouse for royal treasure as well as foreign gifts and curios. This drawing was published in *The Countries of the World*, by Robert Brown, in the nineteenth century.



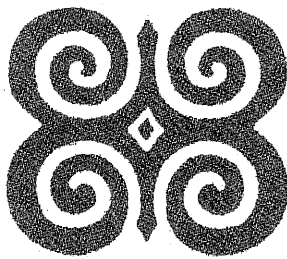
108. Akan (Ghana). The palace of the paramount chief of Kokofu in the 1880s.

Historically, Asante architecture – both royal and non-royal – was built through a process analogous to weaving. Cane or palm ribs were placed vertically into the ground and were interwoven by others secured horizontally (FIG. 108). In this technique, which is likened in Akan myth to the web-making of the trickster spider Ananse, the walls

were given distinctive decorative shapes by bending the poles into curvilinear or rectilinear patterns and tying them into place with raffia cord.

Since many Asante wall-decoration designs suggest the curving patterns of Islamic script, some writers have argued that they derive from this source, possibly a reflection of the important role that Muslims played as scribes and advisers at the Kumasi court almost from its foundation. However, because these motifs show considerably more variation than Arabic calligraphy might indicate, my inclination is to accept Bowdich's suggestion that the designs grew out of the woven patterns of the wall substructure; probably, Islamic elements were added to this indigenous decorative base. The fact that area temples were similarly decorated supports a local source.

The meanings conveyed by the wall designs also point to local origins. Among the various bas-relief themes, indigenous religious and political concerns are common. It has been suggested, for example, that spiral designs symbolize wisdom; looping motifs beneath a horizontal line refer to enemy jaw-bones; hearts symbolize difficulties which must be overcome. One of the most prominent design elements shows a double spiral, alluding both to ram horns (and physical strength) and to the sky god Nyame. This motif on palace buildings may underscore the sacred identity of the ruler. In those few examples in which more naturalistic forms are depicted, ideas of political power predominate. A temple bas relief showing a crocodile biting a mudfish, for example, refers to the proverb "whatever the mudfish acquires ultimately will go to the crocodile," which suggests both that chiefs benefit from their subjects' success, and that the weak are exploited by those in positions of power.

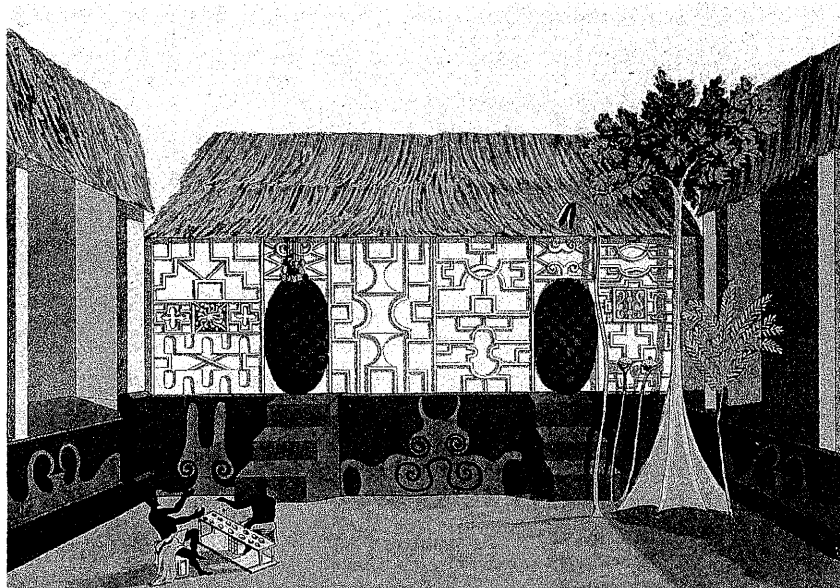


RAM'S HORNS. SYMBOL FOR HUMILITY, EXCELLENCE, WISDOM, KNOWLEDGE

Apart from their great size and complexity, the plans of Asante palaces and temples were little different from commoner residences in the area. Most such structures were defined by one or more interior courtyards (*gyase*) circumscribed by four rectilinear rooms (*adampan* or *pato*), whose three-foot high (1 m) earthen plinths faced the center. Adjacent verandas served many functions, including sleeping, relaxing, entertaining, and the storage of regalia, musical instruments, and shrine materials.

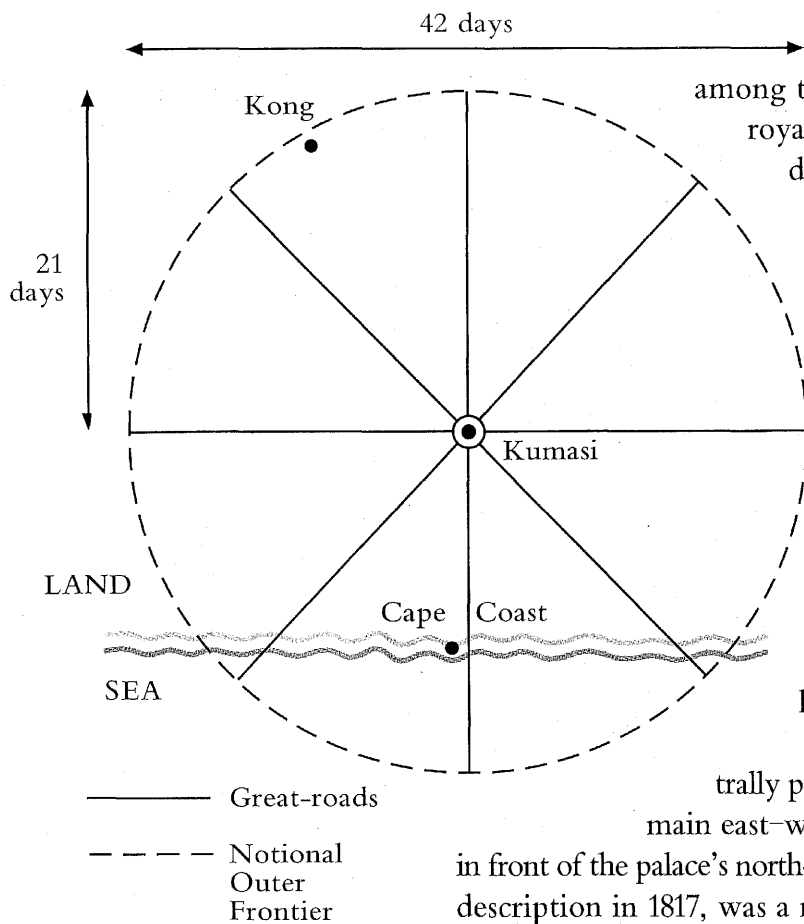
With its proliferation of interior courts, the Asante royal palace was a vast labyrinthine structure spreading over five acres (two hectares). In terms of both scale and decoration it constituted by far the most important architectural complex in the capital. The exterior was distinguished by a 600-foot (200 m) passage that ran along the front. The main entrance into the palace was through a corner door large enough to allow open royal parasols. Rooms leading off this passage were occupied by court personnel, with servants residing near the exterior and high-ranking officials situated closer to the interior. The latter's residences were the most extensively decorated. Also gained via this passage was the beautifully ornamented Main Court (*Pramakeseso*), where daily discussions and debates took place. An immense forty-foot-high (12 m) Judicial ("Palaver") Hall nearby was marked by an arcade and exuberant entablatures in fan and trellis work. The king's bedroom (FIG. 109) with its gold and silver filigree wall ornamentations, pillow covered bed, and oval (rather than rectilinear) access doors was also striking.

Housing for the king's wives was located behind the palace. The residences of these women were said by Bowdich to have been



109. Asante (Ghana). The king's sleeping room in the Kumasi palace, from T. E. Bowdich's *A Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 1819 edition.

One of the most beautiful sections of the palace was the square bedroom of the king. Checkerboard fabrics were hung inside the doors, offering privacy and protection from the elements. In the corner of this compound ritually important trees were planted. "Symbolic trees" taking the form of small staff-like tripods supported offering bowls. Called *nyame dua*, "god's tree" (*nyame* being the name of the sky god), these supports were also positioned in the corners of key residential and temple courtyards. Vessels placed on top of such posts held offerings for the gods.



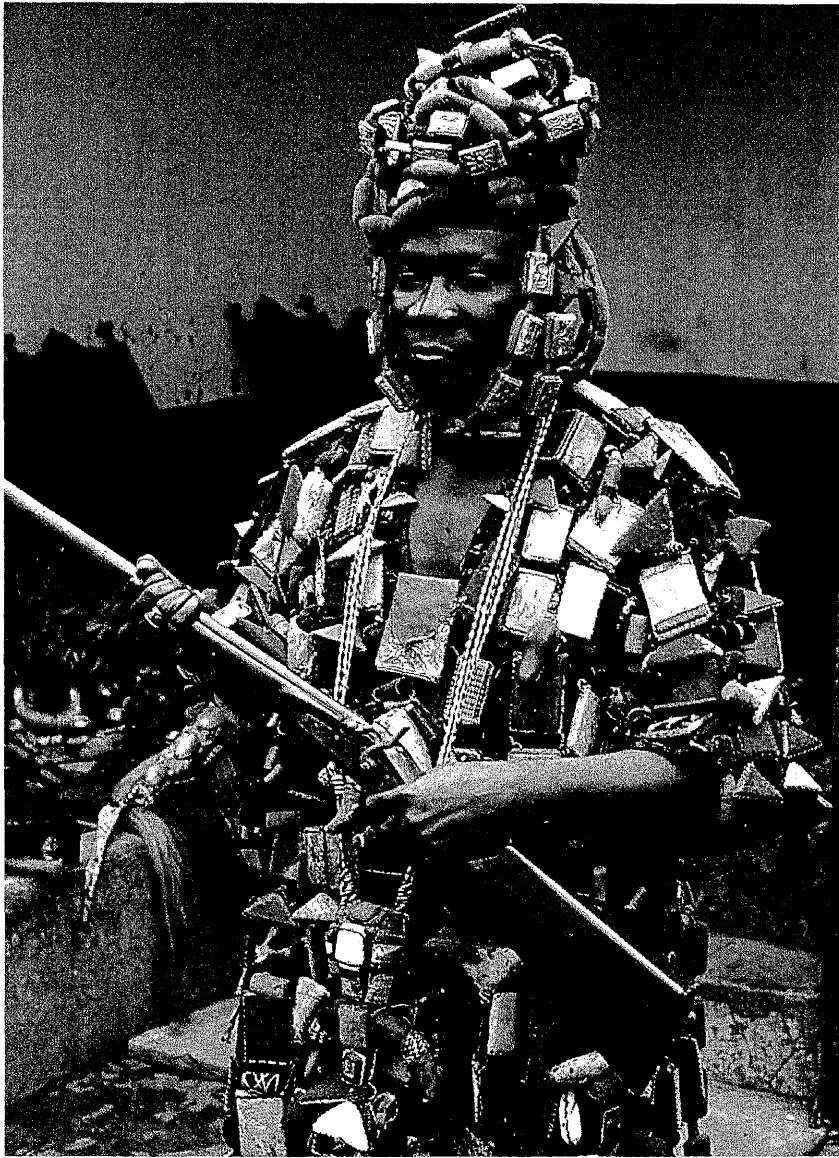
110. Akan (Ghana).
A conceptual map of the Asante state as a disk or wheel with Kumasi at the center.

The width of the state (and conceptually the diameter of the disk) could be traveled in about forty days of walking, a period complementing the Asante forty-two-day month.

among the most extensively decorated in the royal precinct. No doubt it was they who did much of the ornamentation. Since many of these women were brought to Kumasi from conquered northern communities - Dagomba and Gonja among others - it may be that the women introduced their own decorating styles. Behind the wives' quarters at the Kumasi palace were gardens and a marshy area, in accordance with the tradition of locating bathing facilities, houses for menstruating women, latrines, and refuse at the rear of each house.

The Asante palace complex was centrally positioned at the intersection of Kumasi's main east-west and north-south avenues. Directly in front of the palace's north-facing entrance, according to Bowdich's description in 1817, was a royal temple. Nearby were the houses of the king's linguists, goldsmiths, ironsmiths, and parasol makers. The sisters of the king (who had important political roles in this matrilineal society) also had houses in this vicinity. Two broad streets ran from the palace at diagonals. That on the right led to the royal mausoleum at Bantama several miles away; that on the left to the market, the largest open space in Kumasi. Royal trumpeters stationed in the market used to signal the end of each day at midnight. Beyond the market was a sacred grove, and beyond that, the numerous plantations which provided food for Kumasi; artisan villages and communities of prisoners of war completed the outskirts.

With its seventy-seven wards divided by avenues radiating from the palace, the capital (and Asante state generally) is said to have assumed the shape of a disk or wheel (FIG. 110). Further roads extended like spokes to the secondary centers of the realm. Because of the economic importance of these roads, heavy fines were levied if any of the major avenues leading to and from the capital was blocked. This web of spatial organization also had considerable military importance. Armies affiliated with the Asante (FIG. 111) were merged during major battles, as in 1873-74 when an Asante army of 60,000 was massed in the unsuccessful attempt to keep the kingdom independent in the face of the British colonial invasion.



111. Akan (Ghana). The ruler of Ejisu, Nana Diko Pim III, wearing the "great" war shirt and helmet, 1976.

High-ranking individuals in the army wore a special armor of war shirts and helmets covered with thick hardened leather amulets. While the shirts themselves offered considerable protection, so too did the Koranic verses and medicinal materials held by the amulet packets.

Both political and ritual concerns are addressed in Asante (and other Akan peoples') landscaping traditions. Large trees of the *ficus* variety (*gyannua*) were positioned along most roads and streets (see FIGS 107 and 108), providing shade for the many activities which took place outdoors. The name Kumasi (*kum*, a tree; *ase*, under) itself is said to have derived from this tradition. These trees were connected with royalty since each new ruler (who was often referred to as the "shade tree" of the nation) planted a new tree at the time of his accession. The royal oath of office was given under local ancestral trees, because they were important dwelling places for the deceased kings' spirits. Before battle, a ruler would present offerings beneath his tree; after battle, the heads of fallen enemies were buried there. As markers of royal history, other trees were planted to commemorate major events during the reign.



112. Akan (Ghana). Figure of a Tano priest, nineteenth–twentieth century. Wood, 19¼ x 7 x 6¼" (49 x 18 x 16 cm). British Museum, London.

In his right hand he holds a sword with the distinctive Akan barbell-shaped handle and curving blade. The priest extends his other hand to request or receive offerings. The protective headband displays gold amulets similar to those worn by Akan royals; his cloth, in contrast, suggests raffia, a material worn by commoners as well as ritual specialists.

The Role of River Gods in State Religion

Among the most important Asante deities were local river gods, who are referred to as early as the seventeenth century. Because of the life-sustaining local rivers, their gods and the associated priests became vital intermediaries between humans and the higher deities. In the western, central, and northern Akan areas, one of the most powerful river deities was Tano. Although originating with the Bono (Bron), the Asante assimilated Tano worship in the early years of the dynasty and made it into something of a state religion. As with many other gods, this foreign deity (and its priests) was brought to Kumasi in the wake of conquest; warfare accordingly figured centrally in Tano and other river-god worship. Gifts were carried to Tano shrines before major campaigns to ask for the gods' support. Following successful battles, Tano gods and their priests were rewarded with gold and silver regalia, among other riches. These river gods also promoted fertility, well-being, and protection. A wooden shrine sculpture (FIG. 112) suggests these diverse roles.

The Golden Stool: Seating a Sacred King

The foundation of the Asante state was associated with one of its most important ritual objects, the Golden Stool (*sika dwa kofi*, "the Friday-born Golden Stool"; FIG. 113). Legend maintained that on a certain Friday in 1701 the Asante founder Osei Tutu was seated under a tree, when out of the thunder and lightning-filled heavens a golden stool floated down from the abode of the sky god Nyame and came to rest on his lap. Interpreted by Osei Tutu's priest, Okommofo Anokye, as representing the soul or spirit (*sunsun*) of the Asante nation, the stool became a symbol of the kingdom's unity and vitality. The gold used in its construction was said both to represent the essence of the sun and to symbolize life's vital force or "soul" (*kra*), thus making it essential to power and well-being. Gold was further identified with endurance (through the sun's perpetuity) and life (unlike the moon, the sun never "dies"). So sacred was this stool that it could never touch the ground and was always placed on its own special European-style chair (as here) and elephant-skin mat, the ensemble reinforcing Asante ideas of political hierarchy with the ruler being seen to surpass both European and natural forces.

Since the stool carried the soul of the entire nation, no one except the king (or Asantehene) could rest against it, and then only in the course of installation and state ceremonies. Perhaps

113. Asante (Ghana). The Golden Stool displayed sideways on its own *asipim* chair next to the Asantehene (king) during the 1986 Yam Festival in Kumasi.

So important was the Golden Stool to Asante ideas of power and independence that when colonial officials sought to remove it, a revolt was led by the Asante queen mother. The Golden Stool was then buried for protection, only to be unearthed by construction workers, who in turn desecrated it in 1921. The remaining parts of the stool were reworked into a new Golden Stool, the historical, ceremonial, and political importance of which is still considerable today. The current stool has a wooden core and a hammered gold covering.



recalling earlier Akan stools, the base of the Golden Stool is disk shaped. The seat is created by a tripartite support comprised of a cylindrical column and two diagonal arms, like the altars (*dua*) to the sky god Nyame: they perhaps reinforce Asante royal ties to Nyame.

The political significance of the Asante Golden Stool was considerable, with Osei Tutu granting permission to loyal chiefs to purchase new stools. The Golden Stool legend thus played a vital role in unifying the various area chiefs and chieftaincies around the Asante king. The creation of new stools made political loyalty highly visible. Associated with the Golden Stool was a new set of laws, a new national ideology, and a new all-Asante ruling council.

The importance of the Golden Stool is reinforced by the items added to it – among them figured and plain brass bells and fetters. The bells serve as a means of contacting the dead and were rung during related ceremonies (they were also believed to warn the ruler of portending danger); the fetters symbolize victory and the desire to keep the soul of the nation secure; the hollow human-form bells represent defeated enemies of the state, the first such

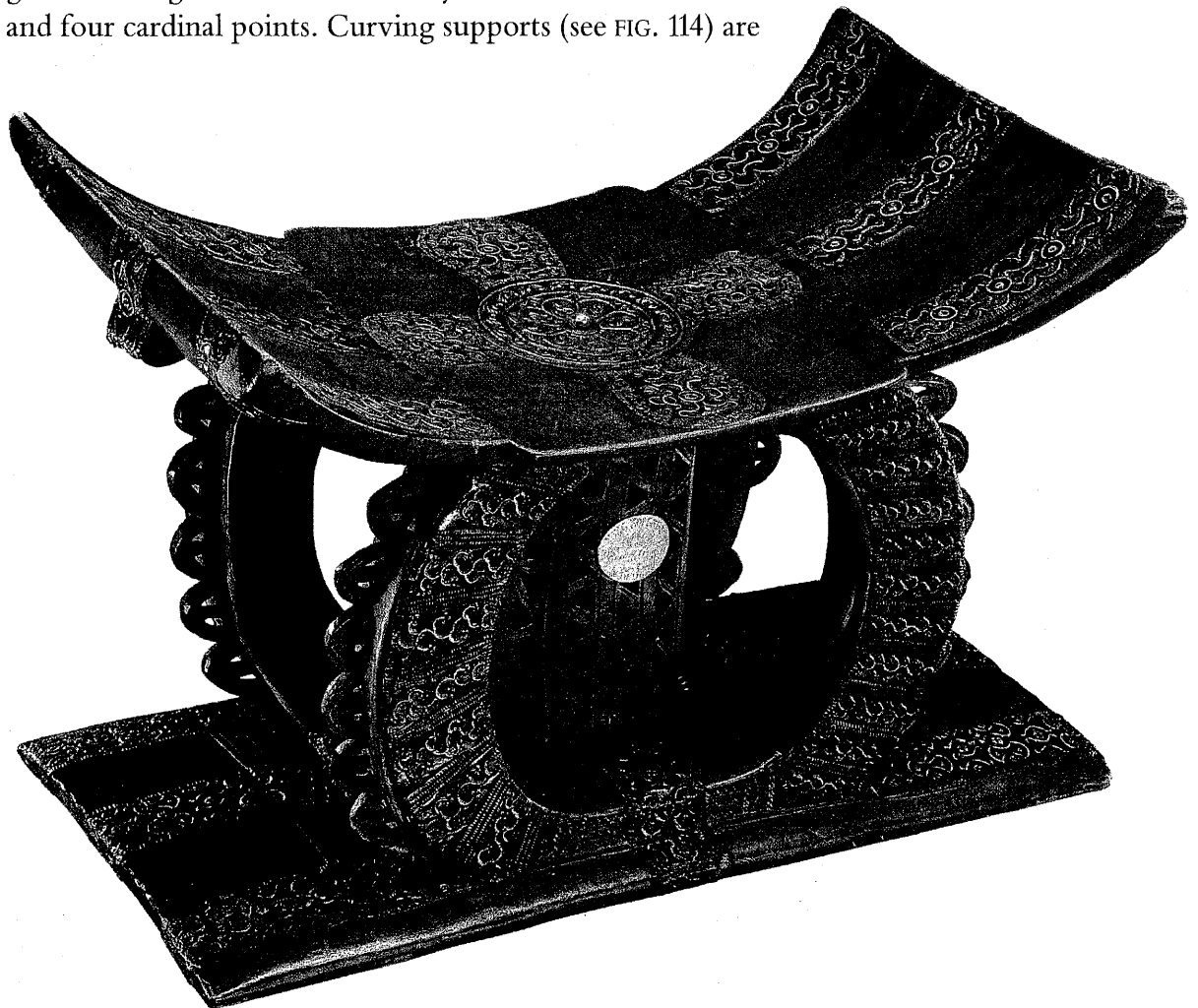
sculpture being said to depict the king of Denkyera, whom Osei Tutu vanquished soon after he came to power. This victory meant political independence and economic viability, since the Asante state could then control the coast and its European trade. The central support of the Golden Stool may serve as a symbolic equivalent of the king's dynastic tree, under which the heads of defeated enemies were buried.

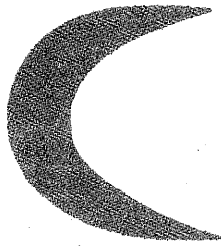
Other Akan royal stools (FIG. 114) also assumed political functions. Historically, the right to use certain stool patterns was tightly controlled, the king granting permission to employ them to only a limited number of supporters. Many stools were given as gifts in the nineteenth century to those loyal to the Asantehene: in one case, the queen mother of a northern ally was offered a stool by King Osei Bonsu for her help in bringing about victory by supplying effective war charms. While in the past stools were never sold on the open market, increasingly they have become available to non-royal individuals.

The most common form of stool incorporates five support posts (one at the center and four at the periphery), which suggest the king and four subsidiary chiefs or the zenith sun and four cardinal points. Curving supports (see FIG. 114) are

114. Akan (Ghana). A royal stool, late nineteenth century. Wood and silver, 15 x 23½ x 13¼" (33 x 59.5 x 34.5 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City.

Each stool bears a wealth of anthropomorphic symbolism: the support symbolizes the neck, the seat for the face, protrusions at the lower ends of the seat for ears, the bottom of the seat for the back of the head, and the holes carved in the seat top for the mouth. These holes also allude to the ability of ancient stools to communicate power and well-being to living chiefs.





MOON. FEMININE SYMBOL
FOR FIDELITY, PATIENCE,
DETERMINATION

said to suggest rainbows, and more naturalistic supports include such royal animals as the elephant and lion, especially during the twentieth century.

Like the Golden Stool, the thrones of rulers, queen mothers, and chiefs were often covered with precious metal. The choice of metal and variations in size as well as other decorative features served to distinguish rank, gender, occupation, and so on. A range of messages were conveyed through the geometric patterns of the supports, including rainbows, moons, serpents, gunpowder kegs, padlocks, amulets, and references to defeated kings. Other motifs allude to military prowess, and wisdom.

When a new ruler came to power he would lower himself three times over his predecessor's stool, the transfer of power occurring when he lightly touched the seat. In some Akan areas, the new king was led blindfolded into the room containing his predecessors' stools and asked to touch one stool, his selection being viewed as an indication of the type of reign he would have. Offerings were made before the tree used to carve the stool was felled: these included gold dust, which was linked to wealth and the life force, and an egg, which symbolized both long life and the care the ruler needs to take in handling the nation.

The death of a leader was spoken of by saying "a stool has fallen," an allusion to the practice of turning over the ruler's stool when he died. Then the chief's body was washed on his stool before burial and his stool was blackened by special offerings and ritual smoking. Because "blackening" a stool necessitated considerable financial resources, it was reserved for persons of great stature and wealth. This process transformed the stool into a memorial for the deceased and a sacred icon through which the dead could be contacted (smoke and offerings serving as vehicles of this transference). "Blackened stools" (*nkonnua tuntum*) were placed on a clay altar or bench in the family stool room on their sides in order not to wake up the deceased (see FIG. 113).

Non-royal stools were distinguished by their color and decoration. Called generally "whitened stools" (*nkonnua fufuo*), their name derives from the periodic scrubbing of the surface with sand and lime juice to bring out the light wood color. Court officials and ordinary residents were presented with such stools at the time of important transitions. When a child began to crawl, for example, a stool was given to symbolize long life. At puberty, a girl was placed ceremonially on a stool to mark her approaching womanhood. At marriage, a bridegroom would present a stool to his wife as a sign of marital longevity. These stools were generally without the metal covering and complex iconic decoration of royal stools.

Queen Mother Figures and the Power of Gender

The queen mother (*asantehemaa*; FIG. 115) was a key figure in area kingdoms and art. Among the Asante and other Akan matrilineal groups, rulership was determined through the female line. For this reason the queen mother has frequently been described as the most important person in the state. Like the king, the official Asante queen mother was selected from a pool of candidates. She served as both the symbolic mother and sister of the king and the primary kingmaker. She participated in the royal council, and became ruler-in-residence whenever the king was away from the capital. The female complement of the king and Nyame, the queen mother was linked to earth goddesses, playing a ritual role in agriculture, judicial mediation, and procreation.

Sculptures representing Akan queen mothers (FIG. 116) were housed in the royal stool rooms, or were made for shrines dedicated to river gods, among these Atano (or Tano). A large number of sculptures representing royal mothers and children were created between 1870 and 1930, a period when matrilineages witnessed a dissipation of their power as a result of the increasing colonial presence. Political and social disintegration was addressed

115. Akan (Ghana). The queen mother and her court, nineteenth century. The political importance of the queen mother in Asante and other Akan polities is suggested by the rich traditions of gold jewelry, *kente* textiles, state swords, and other regalia which she and her retinue display.





at this time through various antiwitchcraft movements in which members of local matrilineages were accused of stopping fertility within the lineage.

The dominant stress on fertility – and female children in particular – in these figures appears to have reinforced the vital role of local matrilineages in familial well-being and regeneration. The sculptural emphasis on the child's dependence on the mother for nourishment and security (as shown in the mother's gesturing toward her breast and her support of the infant's head) may refer at the same time to the dependence of each individual on the matrilineage. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century concerns among the Asante with fertility, the future, and the family may thus be alluded to in this figure. From the 1920s to 1940s popular music groups displayed mother and child figures of this sort at performances. In addition to local patronage, sculptures representing royal mothers were commissioned on the encouragement of a British colonial officer, Robert Rattray, as objects representing Asante culture at the 1924 British colonial exposition at Wembley, London.

In the various queen mother portrayals, the figures are shown naked, perhaps recalling the tradition that rulers remove their clothes during enthronement rituals. Gold body paint reflects not only the use of gold dust as a royal cosmetic but also the historic importance of gold in the local economy. Just as many Akan women today have become wealthy as traders in cloth and other goods, women in the area once took full part in the mining of gold. It was women who monopolized not only alluvial river mining but also the labor-intensive process of prospecting, panning, washing, and transporting this metal. In southern Akan areas, figures were sometimes painted white, complementing the practice of covering one's body with white kaolin as a mark of reverence and devotion on important days of worship. These figures were also sometimes painted black, in keeping with the tradition of blackening stools.

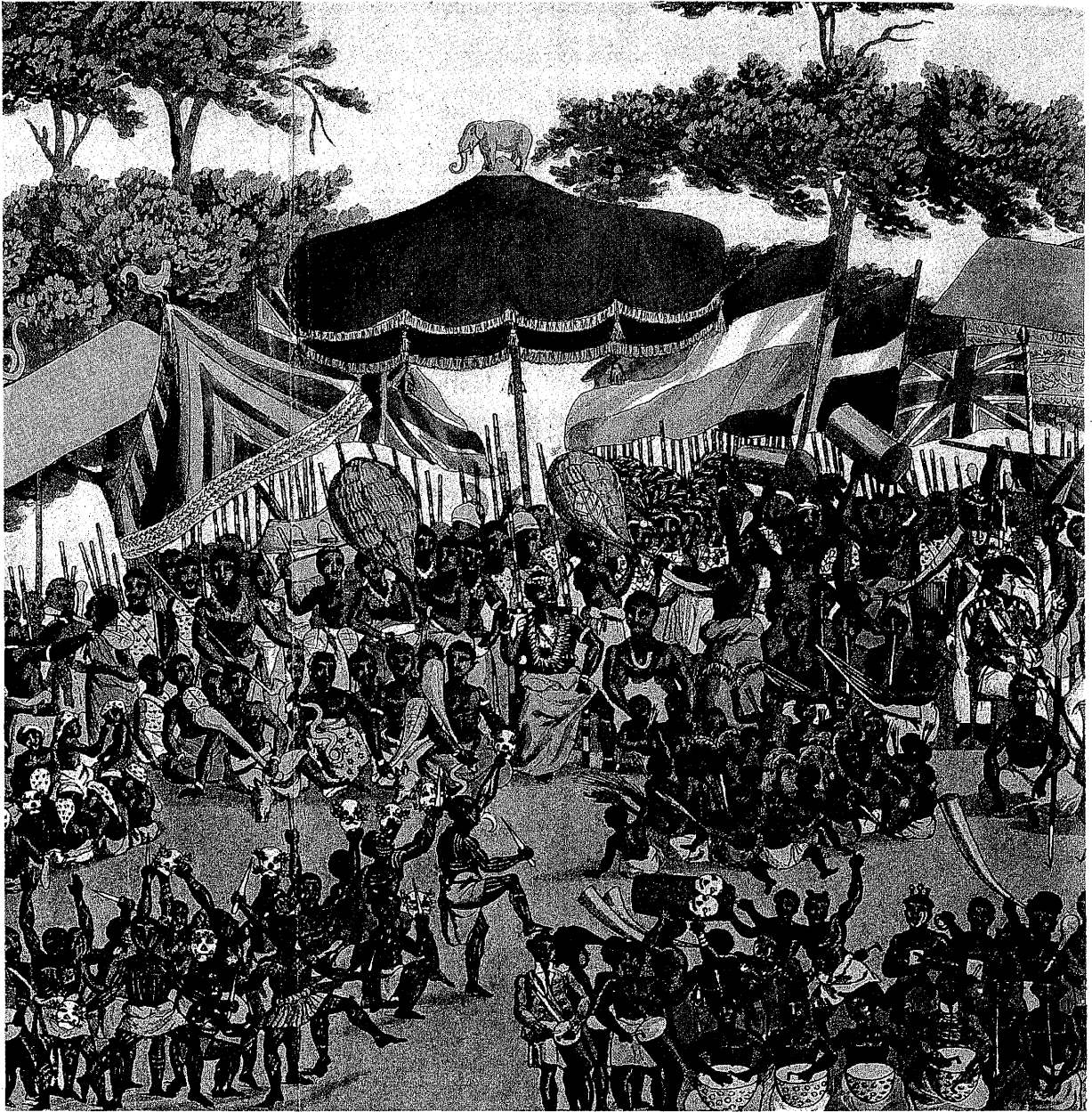
Regalia and the Art of Display

When Asante queen mothers, kings, and other Akan dignitaries appeared in public they were accompanied by large retinues (FIG. 117). The king's youthful sword-carrying "soul" protectors were arranged on *dwa* stools in two flanking rows in front. Linguists, bodyguards, drummers, bell-ringers, and parasol-bearers would be positioned behind the king, those to the left being princely office holders, those to the right non-royal authorities.

116. Akan (Ghana).
Mother and child sculpture,
by Nana Osei Bonsu, early
1930s. Wood, 17¾ x 5¾ x
6½" (45 x 14.6 x 16.5 cm).
Seattle Art Museum.

The prominence of mother and child images in Nana Bonsu's oeuvre is of interest with respect to Asante carvers: it was common to call carvers the "wives" of the chiefs for whom they worked. In the same way that the queen mother served as a transitional figure between the present, past, and future royal line, the carver, because he created vital forms of regalia such as stools, was seen as giving "birth" to important icons of the state.

Accordingly, certain social privileges and judicial prerogatives held by women were granted to important Asante artists.



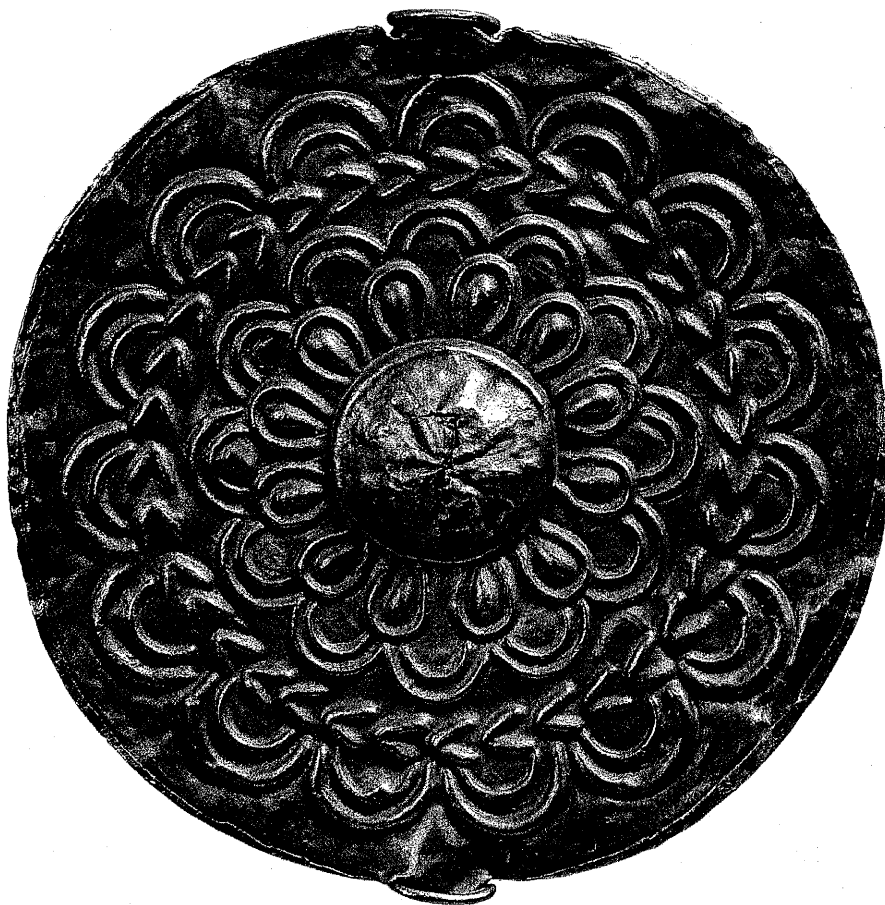
117. Asante (Ghana). The Asantehene Osei Bonsu of Kumasi, seated with officials, from T. E. Bowdich's *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee*, 1819.

Gold figures prominently in royal jewelry, each motif carrying its own meaning. Gold animal teeth signify the ruler's aggression; gold eagle talons allude to fearlessness, a hen refers to the ruler's role as guardian. Bell-shaped beads call the attention of the spirits. Sandals, often elaborately decorated with gold, were worn by the king because it was believed that once "enstooled," a ruler's feet could not touch the earth without potentially polluting the soil and causing widespread illness or famine. Other members of the retinue generally went shoeless. Similarly, whenever a king was expelled from office, his decreased status was symbolically marked by the forcible removal of his sandals. Islamic script sometimes was written on the soles of the royal sandals.

Like the sandals, the ruler's umbrella was a potent rulership icon. Such umbrellas served both to shield and "frame" the ruler as he journeyed inside and outside the palace. The carved finials of these umbrellas displayed kingly symbols: here the royal elephant, while others include a bird which turns its head to the rear, a reference to the proverb "Pick it up if it falls behind," meaning that whatever mistakes one has made in the past can be corrected.

Gold assumed an aesthetic and symbolic function in these and other rulership displays. To some degree identified as the sun's earthly complement, the king, like the Golden Stool, represented the soul and vitality of the nation, an idea reinforced by the extraordinary quantity of gold in his regalia. Gold icons were incorporated into royal headdresses (see FIG. 113) and jewelry to display status, protection, and well-being. The tradition that palace goldsmiths originally came from the Denkyira and Akim communities in the south, whose power had been usurped by the Asante monarchy, added to the association of gold with power. That many gold regalia were said to have derived from war booty reinforced their potency. In addition to being the currency, gold had prominent associations with the giving and safeguarding of life. Gold dust, accordingly, was sometimes smoothed over a ruler's face and body before court ceremonies and during the rites preceding burial.

One of the most important Akan gold regalia is the round "soul disk" (*akrafokonmu*, "soul washer's disk"; FIG. 118) worn by the ruler, the queen mother, and certain members of the court (swordbearers, linguists, and military leaders). Like many African gold jewelry forms, these disks were believed to protect the wearer



118. Asante (Ghana). A "soul washer's" disk (*akrafokonmu*), nineteenth century. Gold, diameter 3¾" (9.8 cm). The Cleveland Museum of Art.

This disk once belonged to the Asante king Prepeh I and was made before his exile (forced by the British) to the Seychelles in 1896. Radiating rosette designs on these disks appear to draw their imagery in part from the radiating sun, the ultimate source of each person's *kra*, the spirit essence given to a child at birth and removed at death. Similar radiating patterns also are seen both in the conceptual plan of the Asante state (see FIG. 110) and in African Islamic pectoral traditions such as those worn by the Tuareg and other Sahara groups.



119. Akan (Ghana).
A "soul washer" with his
disk and state sword, 1986.

As living symbols of the vitality and destiny of the king, "soul washers" (or purifiers) tasted the king's food before he ate to make sure it was safe; historically, when a king died, his "souls" were under obligation to accompany him to the tomb.

been a prisoner of war, the nephew of a defeated king (hence a potential heir) brought back to Kumasi by Osei Tutu after his victory over the Dormaa. Bowdich notes that subsequent "soul" bearers were usually slaves, country prisoners of war – the whitened raffia fiber cords that once supported Akan soul-disk pectorals reinforce this rural identity. In addition to symbolizing the sacrosanctity of the ruler as "soul" of the nation, the disks and their "washers" make it clear that a ruler's authority is dependent on status difference. Soul washers would also carry state swords (*afena*; see FIG. 117) in front of the ruler, and would often wear both special gold-decorated leather headdresses, and amulets made of the hides of dangerous animals such as crocodiles and lions.

Afena swords were carried by military officers, ambassadors, and messengers representing the ruler on state business as markers of their official status. With their distinctive curving metal blade and gold foil-covered handles of barbell shape, swords had important political functions, among these the making of oaths. In the late seventeenth century, the king of the Denkyira in the south is said to have sent officials carrying such swords to Kumasi when demanding their gold-dust tribute. Local traditions suggest that Asante kings adopted this type of sword after Osei Tutu's

from danger. For this reason, similar disk-shaped pectorals were worn by women during puberty rites.

Akan kings frequently employed special "soul" bearers (FIG. 119), whose headdresses and pectorals incorporate disks of this sort. Called *akrafo* ("souls" or "soul washers"), such officials conducted the ceremonies to purify (wash) the chief's soul in the course of renewing it. Selected as children both because their birthdays fell on the same day of the week as the king, and because their physical attractiveness was seen to complement the beauty of the king, the royal "souls" were positioned in front of the king on formal occasions, constituting a symbolic shield.

Class difference was an important part of the "soul washers'" identity. The first "soul" was said to have



120. ALBERT ECKHOUT
Akan (Ghana) man from the
Fetu kingdom, 1641. Oil on
canvas, 8'10¼" x 5'6" (2.7 x
1.68 m). Department of
Ethnography, National
Museum of Denmark,
Copenhagen.

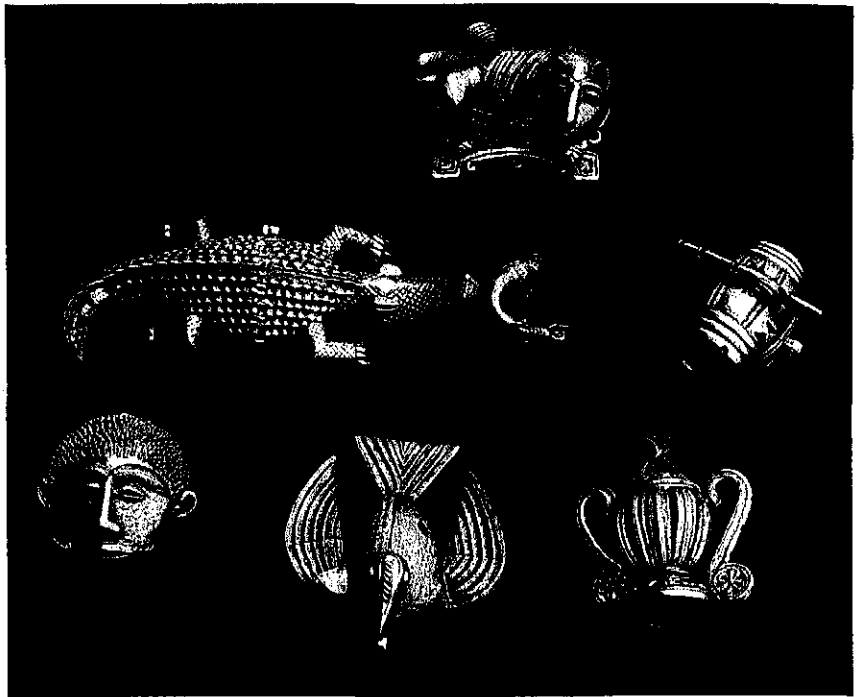
The horse-tail decoration on the sword hilt indicates the figure as an officer. The red cockle shell on the scabbard also marks his status, for such shells were imported into the area from the Canary Islands in exchange for gold. The sea shells in the foreground may allude not only to the importance of the coastal Akan people to European overseas trade interests but also to the role of cowrie shells as African currency. To the figure's left is a palm tree, a prominent European symbol for the Gold Coast. An Akan symbol of eternity, the palm tree provided local oil, bark cloth, and the wine used in various royal and religious ceremonies. Lying at the foot of the palm tree is an elephant tusk, an important trade good as well as a key Akan royal signifier. The vine appears to be a yam, a vital local food source.

victory over the Denkyira. Although it was probably in use here much earlier, this legend is in keeping with other Asante traditions which credit the creation of key art forms to foreigners brought into the Asante confederacy, especially through war.

A 1641 painting by the Dutch artist Albert Eckhout shows an Akan warrior in an indigenous cloth wrapper with a handsome sword of this type (FIG. 120). The political importance of *afena*

121. Akan (Ghana). Gold ornaments on state swords. State Treasury of Nsutahene Ghana.

These portray a range of royal themes, including royal animals such as the lion (symbolizing a ruler's bravery), powder kegs (suggesting the ability of Asante kings to travel widely with their armies), European serving vessels such as sugar bowls (representing the responsibility of the king for the material wealth of his subjects), a night bird (referring to the dilemma of making state decisions), and a crocodile devouring a mudfish (a symbol of the ruler's strength as war leader).



122. Asante (Ghana). A gold head. Height 7½" (18 cm). Wallace Collection, London.

Important enemy leaders slain by the Asante were commemorated by gold portrait heads such as this. They were attached to state swords as ornaments and historic artifacts which honored the military prowess of the victorious Asante monarch and reinforced Kumasi political supremacy over other groups in the area. This head was once part of the treasury of the Asante King Kofi Kakari, the ruling monarch in 1874 when Kumasi was sacked by the British.

swords is reinforced by the various gold ornaments (*abosodee*; FIG. 121) which were sometimes attached to the handle or blade (see FIG. 119). Although each king chose his own sword symbols, one of the most frequently seen comprised a head cast of gold representing a defeated enemy (FIG. 122). Like the sword itself, these supplemental gold heads held special meaning for Asante royal and military history: one of the earliest heads of this type is said to have represented the king of Denkyira, defeated by the Asante founder, Osei Tutu, in the seventeenth century. Such heads, with closed eyes and gagged mouths, recall traditions of decorating swords with skull trophies.

Other types of gold sword ornaments came into use in the period of 1925–40 after the Asante king was allowed to return from forced exile in the Seychelles and an attempt was made to reestablish royal prerogative. Sword ornaments from this period frequently refer to the ruler's authority (see FIG. 119), showing symbols such as two crocodiles sharing a single stomach, meaning that members of the same family should cooperate rather than fight.

Akan court officials were similarly identified through distinctive regalia. Among the most important of these ministers were the court linguists. Called *okyeame*, the linguists were generally non-royal officials who served not only as royal spokesmen but also as valued advisers, military attachés, judicial advocates, translators, instructors in protocol, ambassadors, foreign ministers, historians, and priests. It was their aim to "make the chief's words

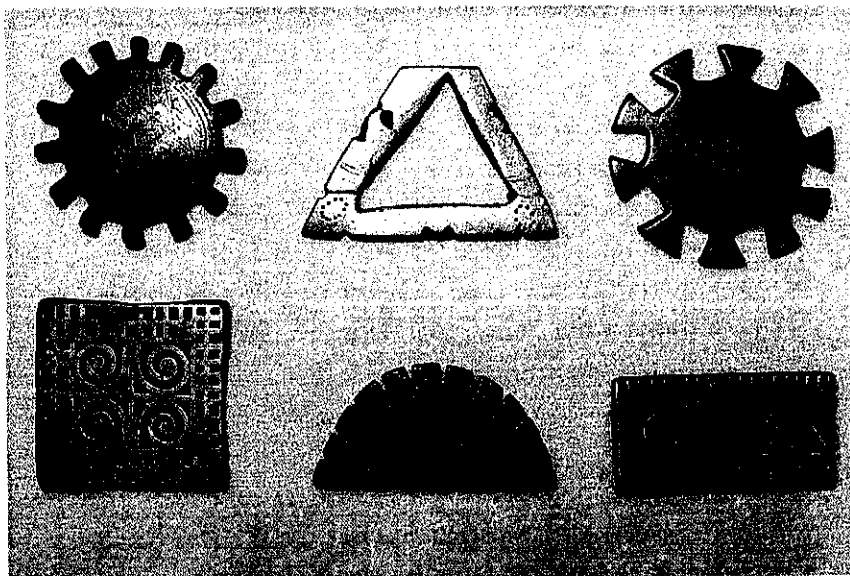


sweet.” Reflecting their prominent court positions, each linguist carried a special staff (*kyeame poma*; see FIG. 105), whose three-part structure included an elaborate finial. The form of the linguist staff is said to have evolved from the walking stick used by the first Asante linguist, a man who was lame. Such staffs also incorporate important features of the European canes that were widely imported from the beginning of the eighteenth century.

The elaboration of linguists’ staff finials with gold-leaf figurative scenes appears to have occurred relatively late, probably in the nineteenth century. Like many other Akan regalia, most finials have prominent verbal components which refer to the power and prerogative of the ruler, such as a bird pecking a tree, recalling the proverb “Woodpeckers hope the silk cotton tree will die,” that is, like woodpeckers, small things can do little but hope that the mighty will fall. In the twentieth century, the tradition is continued by non-royal trade groups such as carpenters and fishermen, with suitably decorated finials.

123. Akan (Ghana).
Goldweights, eighteenth
and nineteenth centuries.
Brass, width c. 1" (0.4 cm).

The earliest Akan cast weights are said to have conformed to the weighing system employed by Islamic traders to the north, who at this time oversaw the transportation of gold from the region north across the Sahara. These early weights are characterized by their geometric shapes (circles, squares, and pyramids), and abstract patterns of a generally flattened form. As European navigators gained dominance on the coast, the traders of gold also began to use European weighing systems and figural traditions, which slowly replaced the earlier abstract forms as goldweights. The overall shift from abstraction to naturalism complements differences in Islamic and European artistic canons. Abstract weights, however, continued to be produced alongside the more naturalistic ones into the twentieth century.



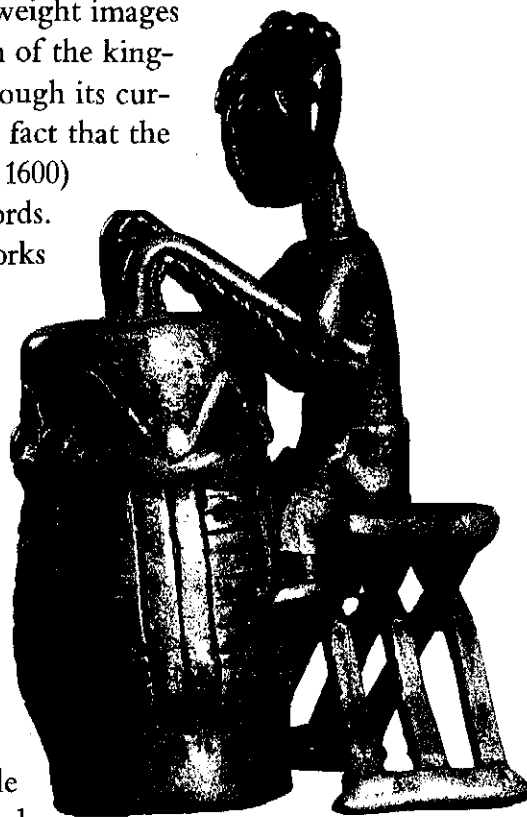
The Art of Weighing and Storing Gold

The gold which covered the linguist staffs and other regalia was the subject of an artistically rendered weighing system. Originally, seeds were used for this purpose, but eventually they were replaced by small standardized weights of cast brass and other copper alloys. Cast weights of this sort (known as *abramo*; FIGS 123 and 124) were employed to measure the dust or nuggets of gold in economic transactions, fines, and levies.

With the rise of the Asante confederacy, goldweight images became more representational, possibly a reflection of the kingdom's desire to create a new identity for itself through its currency and other arts. This idea is supported by the fact that the earliest representational weights (beginning around 1600) often show simple court regalia such as fans or swords. More three-dimensional and figuratively complex works with animals and humans generally date to the period around 1700 to 1900. Direct castings of seeds, pods, nuts, snails, beetles, locusts, crabs, fish, and other forms from life were also commonplace, demonstrating a keen interest both in natural phenomena and in the nature of casting.

Regardless of form (and weight standard), the Akan goldweights often carry important messages identified with political relationships and social values. Since gold was associated with the soul (*kra*), it is tempting to speculate that processes of weighing gold dust may have helped to reinforce ethics and social values. Because most Akan people knew the proverbs and the political and intellectual bases of their messages, such concerns were continually reinforced through the weighing process, especially the need to work together as a group and the obligation to obey the king. While proverb references are particularly recognizable in the naturalistic weights, abstract forms may also have carried iconic meaning. One abstract weight symbolizing a fern is said to allude to the dangers of "abuse," the term for fern (*aya*) having a similar pronunciation. The fact that people of diverse regions, cultures, classes, and occupations used these goldweights made their imagery all the more significant.

The specific weight that each object represented added to its social and political meaning. Bowdich reports in 1817 that the king's weights were one third heavier than those of others in society. This meant that there was a sizeable and ongoing enrichment for the palace (and court officials) each time that a transaction was made with the royal weights. Such sums were a primary form of payment for court members. Because gifts to the king were weighed with the royal weight set, linguists in their roles as ambassadors and spokesmen benefited through this process. The extra income gave them the added incentive to remain in the king's good graces and make his words "sweet." Whether or not one was actually engaged in the king's business, the widespread knowledge of the enormous differentials in the local gold-



124. Akan (Ghana). A goldweight showing a drummer, nineteenth–twentieth century. Brass, 2¾" (7 cm). British Museum, London.

Kept in a special money bag, such weights belonged not only to rulers, but also to traders and others involved in commercial activities. A man might give his son-in-law a set to help to assure his livelihood.



weights must have made the potential meanings of their proverbs all the more salient. These differences were made wider still by the tradition that one fifth of all gold dust melted down in making jewelry and other objects was set aside for the king.

Small amounts of gold dust and nuggets weighed with these counterweights were sometimes kept in specially cast brass ritual containers called *kuduo* (FIG. 125) along with other valuables and offerings. Manufactured for over five hundred years, beginning around 1400, the largest number of extant *kuduo* were created in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of increasing wealth and stratification in Asante society. Similar vessels were used to hold gifts for royalty. As a symbolic container of the soul (*kra*), the *kuduo* featured prominently in soul-washing rites, puberty ceremonies, enthronements, and funerals.

Kuduo visual roots are complex, revealing at once indigenous, Islamic, and European origins. Local pottery vessels used for religious offerings appear to have been an early source. Representational motifs such as leg irons, fetters, and keys reflect the concern with keeping one's *kra* secure. The striking similarities between *kuduo* surface decorations and Arabic script suggest that Islamic traditions were important to their stylistic development. The large number of export vessels from Europe which reached the Asante and other Akan groups in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also important to their manufacture: European brass vessels were frequently used in royal and religious functions.

The lids of some of the royal *kuduo* display complex scenes – a leopard devouring an antelope or a group of court figures is characteristic. Here (see FIG. 125) a king smokes an enormous pipe, surrounded by a group of musicians. While anomalies in this scene (such as the ruler's unusual scarification marks and his lack of sandals) might suggest that the work was made by artists outside the Asante area, it has also been argued that it may represent an "inverse" image of the king during the Odwira yam festival, a yearly court pageant.

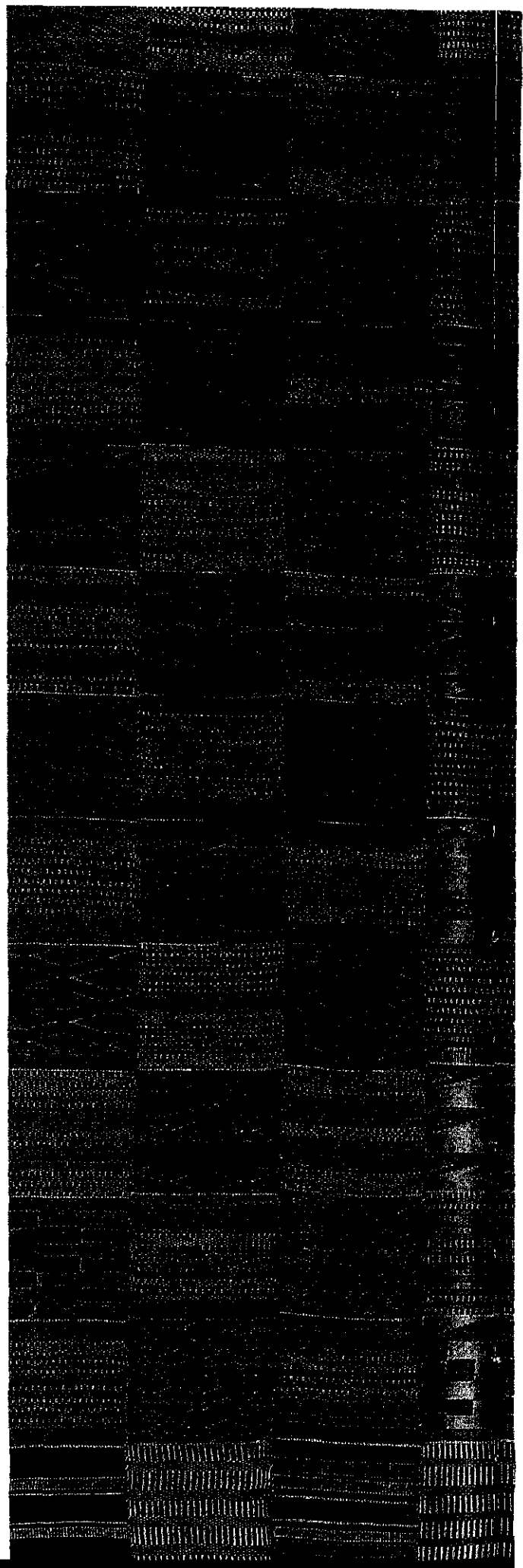
The Odwira festival, which took place at the end of the agricultural year in early September, was an event in which the kingship was symbolically "taken apart and put back together." During the Odwira harvest festival, ordinary time was suspended: gold dust was sprinkled on the king to suggest that he had ritually died. Odwira had a larger, political role. During the festival, all court officials and heads of tributary states were required to come to the capital for rites and pageants; key court cases were tried and oaths were taken to defeat enemies of the king. Odwira

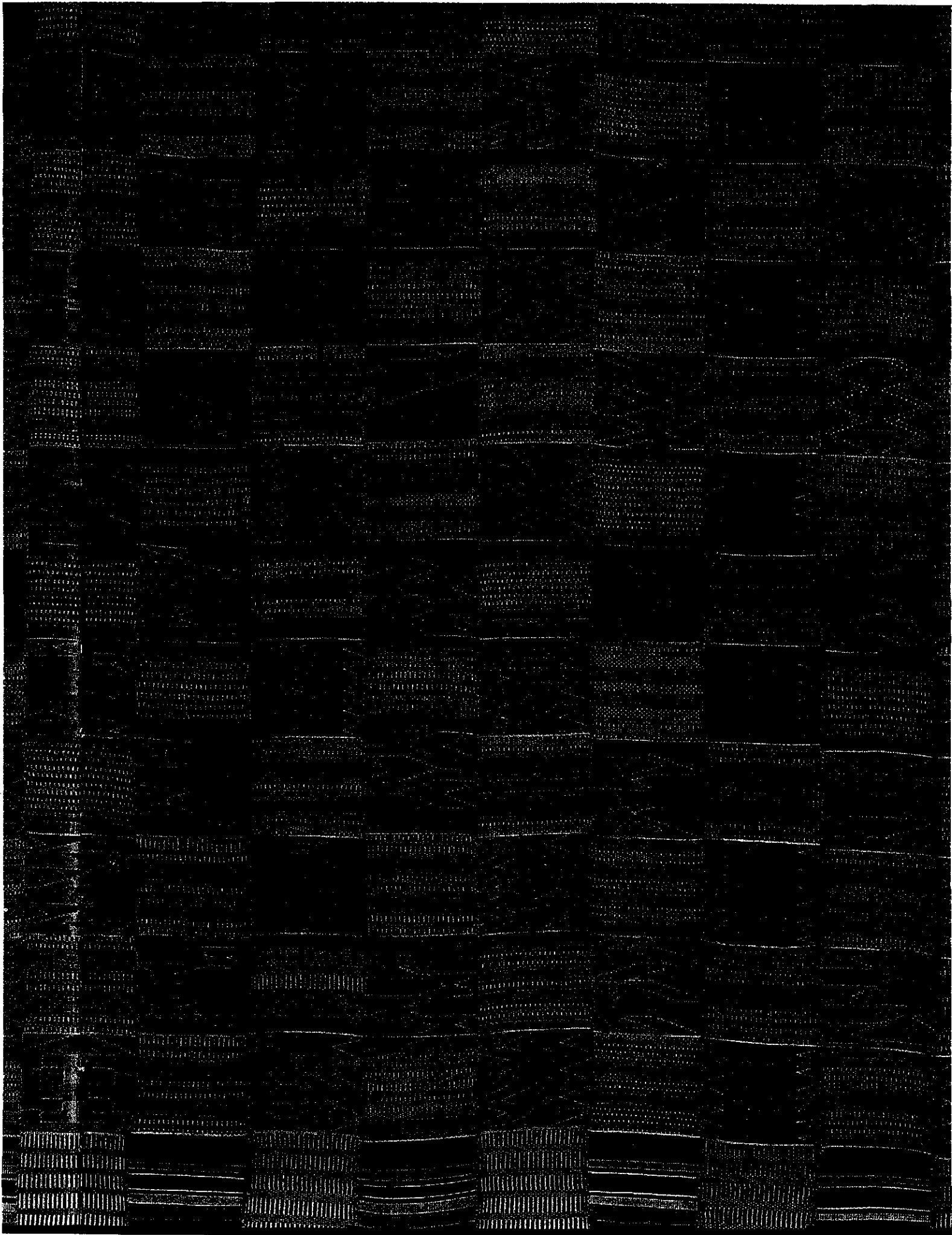
125. Asante (Ghana). A *kuduo* vessel, eighteenth–nineteenth century. Brass, height 10" (25.4 cm). Musée de l'Homme, Paris.

While the term *kuduo* refers to a broad range of both commonplace and more elaborately decorated vessels, ornamental ones such as this were largely the prerogative of kings and chiefs. Royal *kuduo* were kept near the royal "blackened stools." Following an important person's death, gold-filled *kuduo* might also be placed on (or in) the tomb.

126. Asante (Ghana). A *kente* textile of the type called Sika Futura ("Gold Dust Aweaneasa"), nineteenth–twentieth century (details). Whole textile 5'10½ x 5'11" (1.79 x 1.8 m). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

Some *kente* designs honor specific people, especially rulers, queen mothers, artists, and their families. Other patterns refer to plants, animals, everyday objects, and themes such as wealth, poverty, peace, and well-being. Still others have their basis in the event or occasion on which the cloth was first worn. Design complexity is an important source for weaving names, as in this cloth called "skill is exhausted."





was also a complex rite of purification (*dwira* means to “purify” or “cleanse”) in which past kings were honored and the whole nation was cleansed from defilement. At the beginning of the rite, the king went to the royal mortuary house at Bantama to “borrow” gold dust from the associated *kuduo* caskets for the ceremonies. Not surprisingly, Odwira was a time of enormous artistic creativity. During the 1817 Odwira rites all the extant royal gold ornaments were reportedly assembled then melted down and recast into new forms.

The importance of artistic creativity during Odwira illustrates the extraordinary demand placed on Asante kings to promote new artistic works. Not only were rulers expected to safeguard the inherited royal treasures and to exhibit them in the course of public ceremonies such as Odwira, but they also were obliged to add to the whole kingdom’s artistic corpus. Failure to do so was sometimes enough to warrant removal from office. In some cases court obligations for artistic creativity became a kingdom-wide endeavor, as when in 1701 at the beginning of the confederacy, previous regalia purportedly were melted down and new ones were created for officials and loyal chiefs. While heavy new taxes and oaths of loyalty necessarily accompanied these and other artistic programs, this process also fostered new artistic forms in the Asante kingdom. Such objects became both icons of prestige and markers of the kings’ creativity.

Communicating Value with Cloth: Royal Textile Traditions

The status and ritual associations of regalia are complemented in traditions of royal textiles, among these *kente* cloth (FIG. 126). While the word *kente* is from the south, of neighboring Fante origin (from the word *kenten*, meaning basket), the term has been more generally associated with cloths from the Asante area which Fante traders disseminated along the coast. Despite *kente*’s local associations, its technological roots appear to come from further north, in early textiles such as those found in sites near the Sahara in the eleventh century. Myths link the origins of *kente* to the trickster and wisdom-symbolizing spider Ananse (nature’s weaver). The process of narrow-loom weaving was ritually marked: no cloth was initiated or terminated on Fridays and offerings were made to the looms after major transgressions.

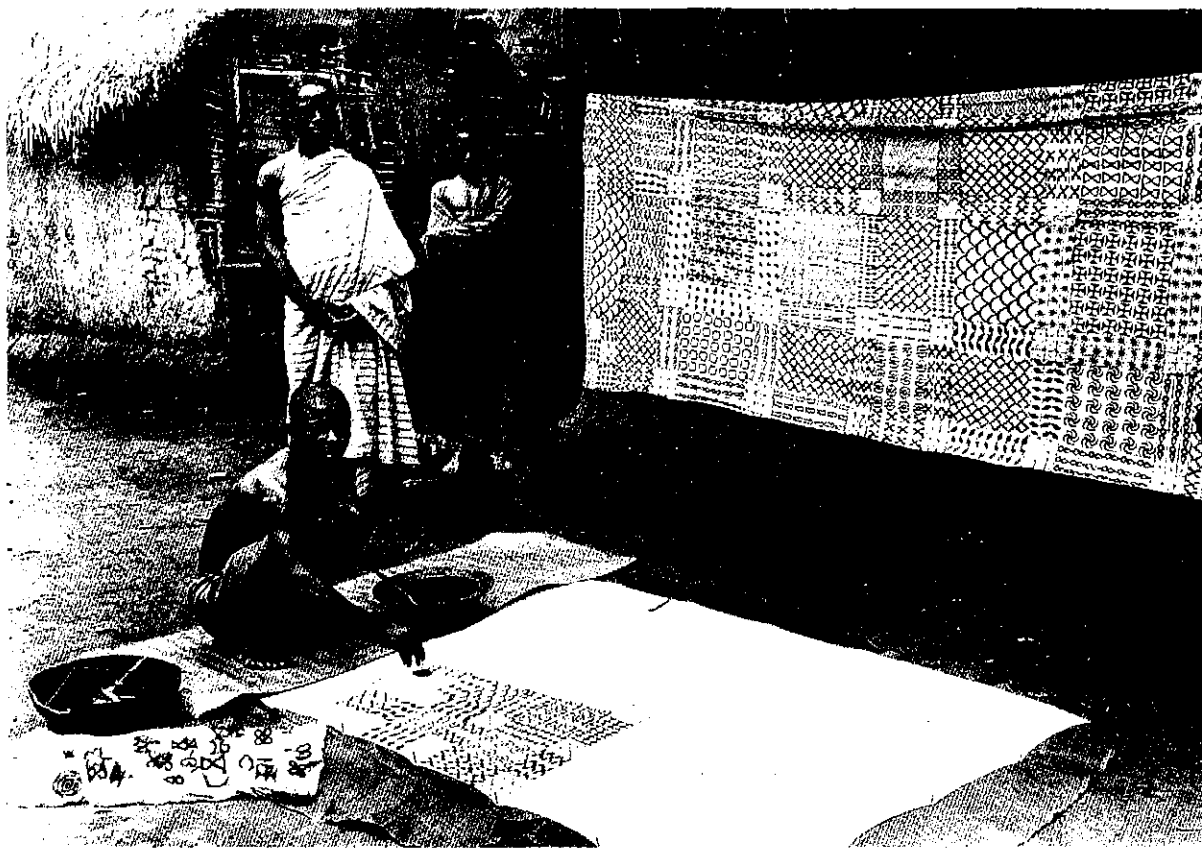
While the first *kente* cloths were made of white cotton with indigo-dyed motifs woven in the weft, brightly colored imported silk (the threads derived from unraveling a whole cloth) soon

replaced native cotton and indigo, creating rich and shimmering compositions. Today rayon is more frequently used instead. Distinguished by their design complexity, the most vibrant *kente* patterns were created through the use of a second pair of heddles (the frames of vertical cords on which the warps are threaded). In the finest such cloths, “floating-weave” patterns (called thus from their appearance) conceal many of the warp threads. Under the late Ghanaian president Kwame Nkrumah (who governed from 1957 to 1966), *kente* came to assume a Pan-African identity. A 1966 cloth created in honor of his wife, Fatia, signified “a nation is not built by one person,” an aphorism as important to ethnic pride and nation-state building as it is to kingship itself.

Each *kente* pattern has its own name. More than three hundred warp and weft patterns have been documented. Names may derive from visual features of the cloth itself; for example, “liar’s cloth” incorporates sharp shifts in the warp design and an alternating movement from right to left. This cloth was said to have been worn when the king held court, as a means of questioning the veracity of the people who came before him. Men usually wore and still wear their *kente* cloth over the left shoulder and upper arm, the left being the arm of potential danger.

127. Asante (Ghana). Making *adinkra* cloth in Kumasi, 1888–96.

Political themes figure prominently in *adinkra* cloth design. A simple cross, for example, is said to represent the two-story house, symbolizing authority and power; a series of concentric circles represents the king and thus ideas of greatness and magnanimity. A Maltese cross refers to the dictum “if the hen steps on its chicks, it does not die,” a reference to both the need for royal and familial protectiveness and the reality of power differences. A crescent moon is associated with women and ideas of faith and patience.

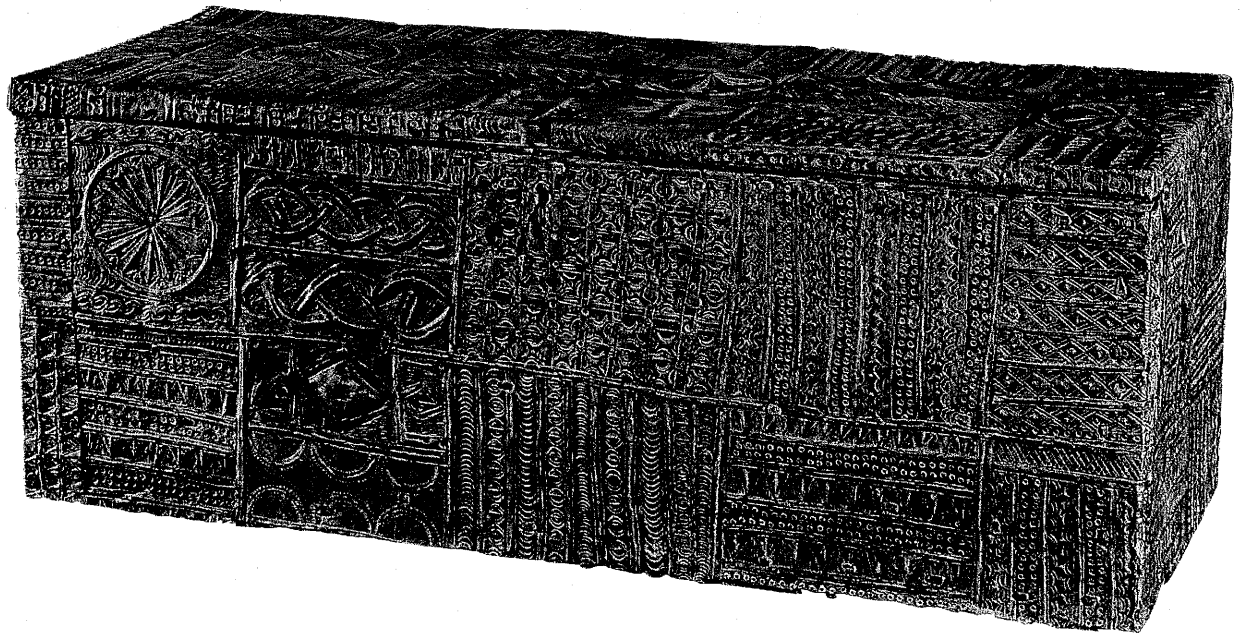


Women generally wear two somewhat smaller cloths as a skirt and bodice.

Asante kings had considerable control over *kente* cloth production and use. Centered at Bonwire, a village twelve miles (19 km) east of Kumasi, royal weaving was established here in the seventeenth century. Historically, kings maintained control over design through a form of royal "copyright." A new *kente* design would be shown first to the king so that he could reserve the pattern for himself if he so wished. Even in recent decades it would be unthinkable for an ordinary person to wear the same cloth as a ruler. The great expense of imported silk meant that many such cloths cost more than a full year's wages. The richness, design complexity, and expenses of *kente* cloth present a striking contrast to the rough bark cloth coverings which were historically worn by hunters, rural residents, slaves, and certain priests. Bark cloth, because it was produced from local materials, was at once far cheaper and more widely available. The bark cloths' visual and monetary contrast with *kente* clearly increased social distinctions.

Adinkra (FIG. 127), another important textile identified with the Asante court, is made of cotton stamped with bark-dye designs. Like many other Asante arts, this cloth was said to have been introduced into the kingdom after a military campaign, in this case following the Asante victory over a king named Adinkra in 1818. When King Adinkra was taken to Kumasi as a prisoner, he is said to have worn a stamped cloth of this type, its pattern chosen to express his great sorrow at his loss of freedom and the deaths of his soldiers. *Adinkra* cloth has continued to be employed by the Asante primarily as a funerary textile. In keeping with this idea, Prempe I chose to wear *adinkra* when he was forced into exile by colonial officials in 1896. While historical evidence indicates that the cloth's use in the area predated King Adinkra's defeat in 1818, the linking of the textile to a military victory shows the need (and drive) of Kumasi rulers to be identified with military prowess and artistic change. There is also an important lesson about royal prerogative in Adinkra's story, for it is recounted that he had commissioned a golden stool for himself, which (with his arrogance and disrespect) so angered the Asante ruler that he forced Adinkra to be brought to Kumasi in chains.

Like many other Asante arts, *adinkra* cloth was seen to carry important messages to its viewers (the term *nkra* itself means message). As with goldweights, such messages were often linked to the soul, and the source of the message and its insight were said to come from the gods. The dye stamps used in *adinkra* cloth



design take both naturalistic and abstract form, many being similar to early Akan goldweights, headgear ornaments, and sandal decorations. The earliest such motifs were said to have been done freehand, but the majority of cloths from recent years are stamped.

Funerary and Fertility Arts: Links between Past and Future

An unusual form of casket (FIG. 128), decorated with repoussé designs of brass similar to those found on kuduo vessels, once functioned as a royal ossuary. The ruler's skeletal remains were placed in this small box after the body had been desiccated and the period of ritual mourning had come to a close. This unique work was housed at the royal mausoleum at Bantama, now a suburb of Kumasi, where each late king had his own enclosure.

Distinctions in the royal afterlife are exemplified in this royal casket. While deceased kings and court officials were said to take up residence with the gods, continuing their life of luxury and renewal, the spirits of lower-class persons were believed to remain on earth at the periphery of the village, living a life of continuing drudgery. Similarities in the royal casket decorations to those found on *kuduo* gold dust containers reinforce these differences between kings and other members of society in the afterlife.

Terracotta vessels and statuary constitute the great part of Akan funerary art. So important were these vessels to rituals of death that the word for tomb, *asensie*, means literally "place of pots." Known as "family pots" or "matrilineage pots" (*abusua kuruwa*;

128. Asante (Ghana). A casket from the royal mausoleum at Bantama, near Kumasi, nineteenth century. Brass, wood, length 31 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (81 cm). British Museum, London.

The decoration on the casket reinforces the concern with both social difference and cosmology. Crocodiles figure prominently, in reference to family cooperation, authority, and the watery route to the afterworld. One adage notes that "only when you are safe on the river bank should you tell the crocodile that it has a lump on its snout," (i.e., be wary when in the presence of those who have greater power). Soul washer disks are another widespread motif.



129. Asante (Ghana). A mortuary vessel, nineteenth–twentieth century. Terracotta, height 10" (25.4 cm). National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Themes of death are, of course, prominent on Akan funerary vessels. Nearly all "family pots" display a "ladder of death" to signal death's universality. As noted in a proverb, "it is not only one man who climbs the ladder of death." Locks and keys allude to the soul and ideas of security. Other common motifs – snakes, lizards, frogs, and crocodiles – represent creatures of the earth in whose realm the deceased now rests. These animals also have proverbs associated with them. A python encircling the vessel's neck, for example, refers to the proverb "the rainbow of death encircles every man's life." Like the ladder, this motif alludes to the fact that death forgets no one.

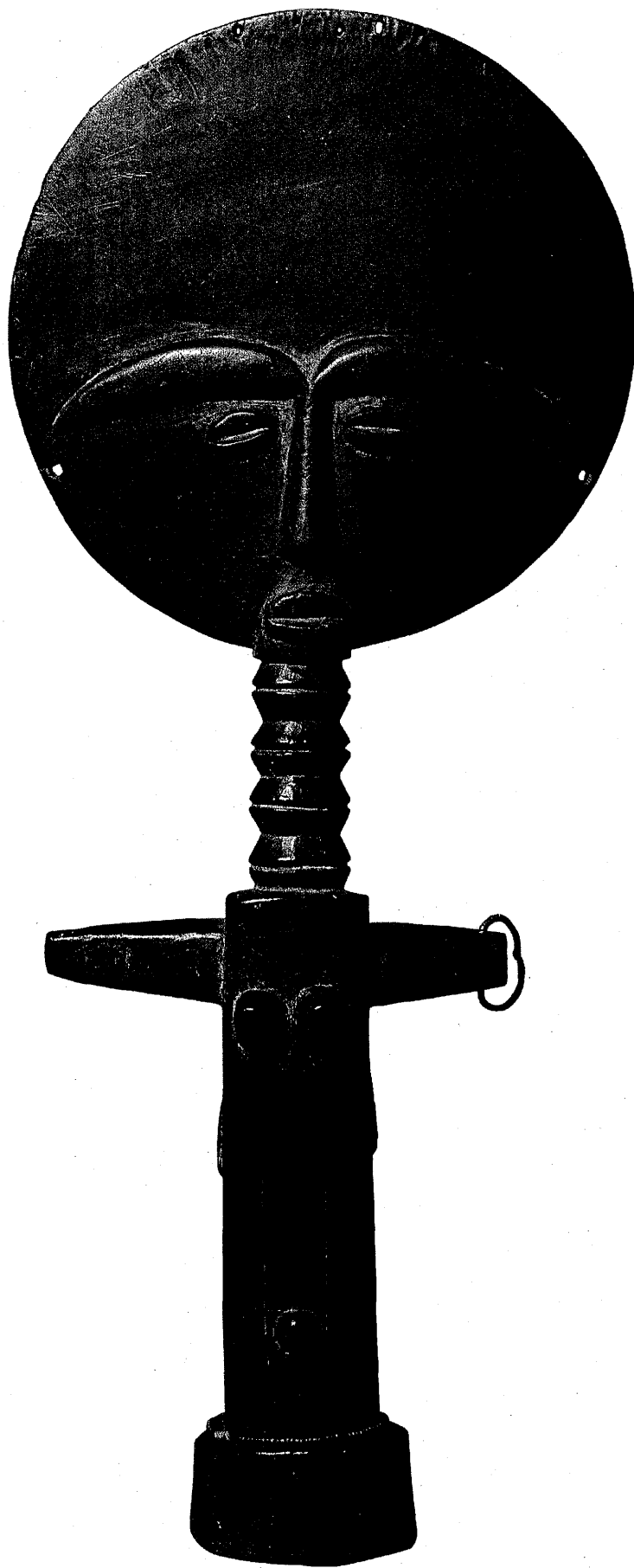


130. Akan (Ghana). A funerary head (*mma*) from the Adanse area, probably nineteenth century. Terracotta, height 9 $\frac{1}{8}$ " (23.2 cm). British Museum, London.

The features and styles of terracotta funerary heads show striking regional variations. Most, however, have a number of distinctively Akan attributes such as a somewhat flattened face, a wide forehead, protruding narrow eyes, and curving brows. Many also incorporate prominent neck rings, a characteristic sign of beauty in this part of Africa. Made after living models *mma* include individuating features such as distinctive coiffures, beards, scarifications, crowns, and amulets. The shaved head pattern and additive shell ornaments seen here were characteristically worn by paramount chiefs and court elders at the end of the nineteenth century.

FIG. 129), the most prestigious of these terracotta vessels are distinguished from domestic pottery by their more complex decorative patterns. Terracottas of this sort were used both as tomb markers and to serve the concluding meal of the funeral, an occasion when the family brought food to the deceased. They suggest through their motifs that in the end, kings are no different from commoners, for they too eventually will die.

Portrait heads constitute a distinctive grouping of Akan funerary terracottas (FIG. 130). These heads, as well as busts and full figures, were largely reserved for rulers, queen mothers, senior chiefs, and respected court officials. Works of this sort appear to underscore the links between royalty and values placed on individuality and identity. The earliest of the terracotta portraits



131. Akan (Ghana). An *akuaba* figure, nineteenth–twentieth century. Wood, height 13 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (34.7 cm). British Museum, London.

If an Akan woman had difficulty conceiving she would be encouraged to visit a local shrine accompanied by a senior woman in her family. There she might purchase a figure such as this, which would be placed for a period on the altar, later to be reclaimed by the woman along with certain medicines. The sculpture was then carried, fed, bathed, and otherwise cared for by its commissioner as if it were a living baby. Once the woman conceived and had a successful delivery, she would return the figure to the shrine as a form of offering. If the child died, the *akuaba* would be kept by the woman as a memorial. In some areas, larger *akuaba* were commissioned specifically as shrine figures. The rigid and highly stylized features of the *akuaba* complement the idea that the fetus and infant are still incomplete and devoid of identity and personality. Early types of *akuaba* are particularly highly stylized, showing rudimentary arms but generally no hands, legs, or feet. The thinness of the *akuaba* carving derives from the fact that they were carried on a woman's back.

date to around 1600, but Akan portrait heads and figures continued to be produced into the middle of the twentieth century, mainly in the southern Akan areas of both Ghana and the Ivory Coast (among the Anyi, Kwahu, Adanse, Twifo, Wassa, and other cultures).

Terracotta funerary portraits were generally unknown in the northern Akan area of the Asante and their neighbors, but there is little doubt as to the figures' prominent court and status associations. In his 1602 description of the artistic traditions, Pieter de Marees observed that the rulers and those that served them commissioned various "pictures" of clay. According to scholars working in the area more recently, artists specializing in the terracotta figures would often be called to an ailing person's death bed to gaze at the face, later working from memory to make an associated "likeness." Known as *mma* ("infants") or *nsodie*, works of this sort sometimes represented several generations of rulers, along with members of their courts and priesthoods. In addition to serving as memorials, the *mma* were said to help promote fertility. With this in mind, women who had trouble conceiving often tended the grave sites near where the vessels were placed and presented food offerings to the deceased, the dead being encouraged to intercede on their behalf through this means.

When full figures were made, emphasis was generally given to the head, reflecting the importance of this body part to ideas of identity and rulership. It has been suggested in this light that figures with complete bodies and fully articulated arms, hands, legs, and feet represent persons of greater status than those portrayed through simple heads. Whatever their features, *mma* were often decorated with paint and special clothes. Like kings and queen mothers, they were sometimes displayed under the protection of a multicolored umbrella. More rarely they were placed on European-style chairs, suggesting the royal entourage. Miniatures of food vessels, musical instruments, and other necessities were presented nearby. The importance of the funerary terracottas (and the role of their images) was such that without this sculpture and the funeral rites it was thought that no deceased person could enter Asaman, the land of the dead.

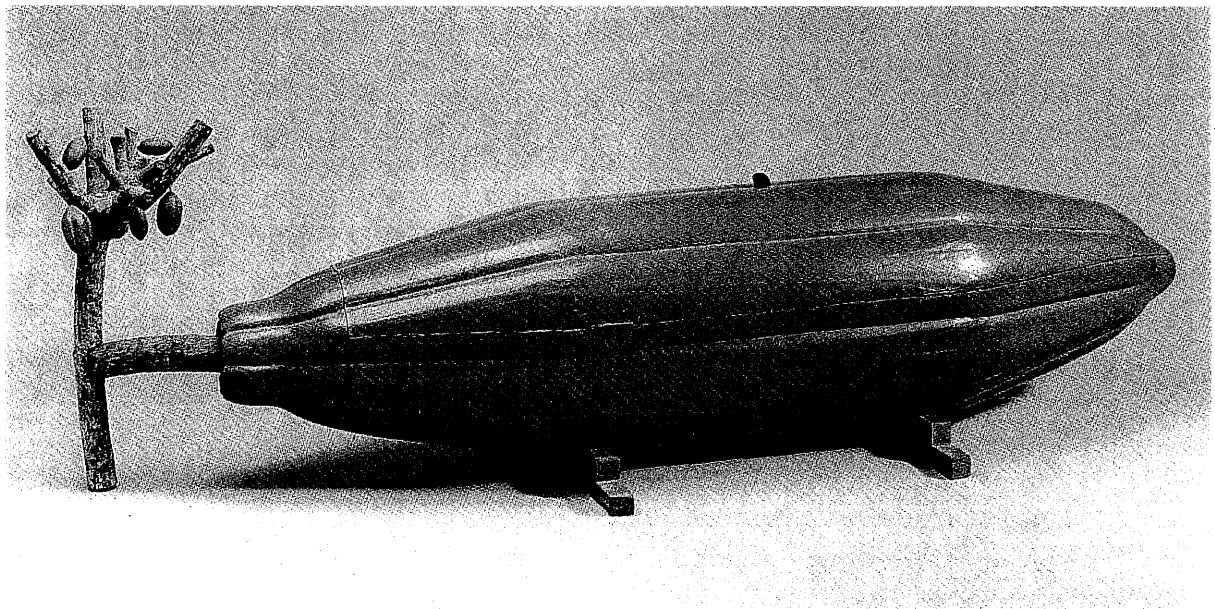
Mma terracotta figures share striking similarities with Akan figures in wood known as *akuaba* ("Akua's child;" FIG. 131). These sculptures were named after a woman called Akuua, who, unable to bear children, commissioned a wooden image. Soon this woman became pregnant and because her first child was a daughter, *Akuaba* largely represent girls. (The political prominence of women in this matrilineal society is also reflected in this tradition).

132. Fante (Ghana). A coffin in the form of a cocoa bean, by Kane Kwei (1924–92), early 1970s. Wood and enamel paint, length 8'9" (2.66 m). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

The cocoa plant and pod represented here are a subject of economic significance, particularly for local farmers. During the 1950s, when Ghana was the world's largest producer of cocoa, many Ghanaian families became rich with this crop, offering them new avenues for status and well-being. Like other coffins by Kwei, this contrasts with and continues the traditional royal funerary art forms such as caskets and terracotta figures.

Akuaba identity and meaning are conveyed in part through color. Black, the most frequent *akuaba* color, links these works to the ancestors ("blackened stools"), and to night, the period of spiritual power. The vital connections between *akuaba* and the ancestors are important to this symbolism, for deceased family elders are believed to promote conception, since they serve as intermediaries between the unborn and the living. The similar features of *akuaba* and some terracotta funerary heads (whose name *mma*, we recall, means "infant") thus reinforce the prominent role that the ancestors play in bringing new children into the family.

In addition to promoting childbirth, the *akuaba* figures convey ideals of beauty, for such works are thought to encourage beauty in infants. Like the *akuaba*, round or oval heads are considered ideal, and women would sometimes help to shape the heads of their babies with warm compresses in order to achieve a high, wide, flat forehead. Stylistic variations between *akuaba* from different areas suggest that aesthetics are not the only basis for their head and body shapes, however. Disk-shaped heads predominate among the central Akan, rectangles or cone shapes often distinguish the heads of Fante and Brong *akuaba* in the south. Although the first descriptions of *akuaba* appear relatively late – in 1885 – works of this type clearly existed before this time. Nonetheless, with increasing colonial power, and its consequent social disruption, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the production of *akuaba* may have increased, as concerns for family and social order and continuity became pronounced.





133. Fante (Ghana). This drum represents Queen Victoria, produced c. 1920. Wood and fiber, height 40" (101.7 cm). Fowler Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles.

As in the carvings of Asante queen mothers and other women, Victoria's breasts are prominent. Symbols of colonial power depicted on the drum include a rifle, bugle, key, and handcuffs. Fez-wearing police affiliated with the colonial authorities appear around the top of the drum. Below are displayed other figures, among these a local chief in *kente* cloth who is seated on a stool under an umbrella. Nearby are members of his court – a linguist, swordbearer, stool keeper, umbrella holder, and trumpeter.

Modern political and economic conditions in coastal Ghana led to the development of other art traditions. A carpenter named Kane Kwei (1924–92), who lived near Accra, created caskets (FIG. 132), royal palanquins, and linguist staffs. In the mid-1970s, Kwei's dying uncle requested that he make a special canoe-form coffin to commemorate the uncle's life as a fisherman. The coffin was much admired and other individuals came to Kwei requesting that he create special coffins for them as well. Among his more interesting shapes were a Mercedes-Benz (for the head of a taxi fleet), an airplane (for a frequent traveler), a hen and

134. Fante (Ghana). A flag, 1978. Silk appliqué, length 4'5½" (1.35 m). British Museum, London.

In contemporary flag decoration, the elephant is often shown, as here, with its trunk around a palm tree (an important source of revenue and a symbol for eternity). The motif calls to mind several local proverbs which convey ideas of power – “only the elephant can uproot the palm tree” and “Unable to defeat the palm tree, the elephant made friends with it.” The elephant and palm tree motif also became a common European symbol for the Gold Coast. The Union Jack refers to the importance of the British trade (and foreign trade generally) on the coast.

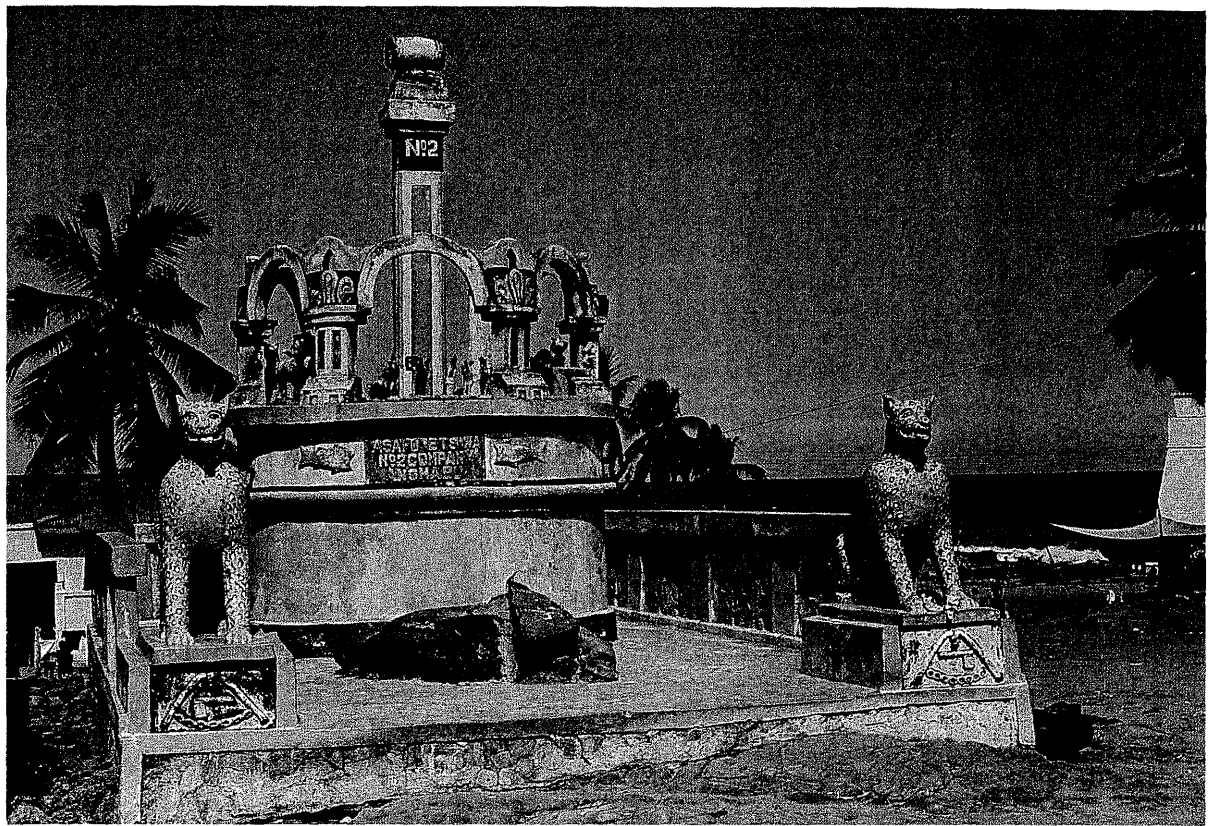
chicks (for a woman with many children), and a traditional stool (for a chief). Though expensive (each costing the equivalent of the average per capita annual income), these coffins have become important symbols of status in Ghana.

Popular Traditions: Drums and Banners

During the twentieth century, richly carved drums were created in the Fante area of coastal Ghana by dance bands wishing to display distinctive drums as well as music. As with many other Akan arts, verbal complements to the drum's music were a central part of the drum's meaning. Because drums served as instruments of kingly commands, communicated through their rhythmic speech, they conveyed ideas not only of history and social mores, but also honor and status. Elaborately sculpted drums also underscore the shifting power balance in the colonial era (FIG. 133). In part reflecting the above, the drum shown here portrays Queen Victoria. Her Golden and Diamond Jubilees in 1887 and 1897 respectively saw an influx of related imagery in Ghana and other parts of Anglophone Africa.

Bright appliquéd flags and sculptures of cement identified with social groups which gained prominence in Fante communities along





the coast during the twentieth century display a complex mix of royal and colonial motifs (FIGS 134 and 135). The banners served both as religious shrine markers and as objects of display during parades. One of the most widespread flag symbols is the elephant, a symbol of royal power. An elephant-tail fly whisk was a key Akan status symbol and ceremonies accompanying the acquisition of an elephant's tail required a vast quantity of wealth.

The Asante kingdom was characterized not only by a striking diversity of arts, but also by a real sense of history in the linking of new art forms – stools, cloth, decorative sword elements and the like – to events of the past. Whether or not artistic changes were drawn specifically from these contexts, the practice of crediting actual (often foreign) individuals with these innovations is a recurring theme. The promotion of artistic creativity in the course of yearly festivals such as Odwira and in conjunction with royal events is longstanding. The continuing importance of status differences in the arts of this area is revealed in local architecture, funerary arts, textiles, jewelry, and gold weighing traditions. In the colonial and post-colonial eras, the shift in patronage from the court to local dance groups, military associations, and trade organizations saw similarly striking iconic changes incorporated into their arts.

135. Fante (Ghana). Asafo company cement military shrine (*posuban*), 1952.

The shrine displays local and foreign imagery, including royal power symbols such as leopards, a crown-like composition of Western-style arches and columns, and a powder keg. These fanciful monuments serve as meeting places for male and female Asafo members. Historically, the Asafo of this area have helped in the selection of local rulers and played an important role in the enstoolment rites.

The Royal Arts
of Africa
The Majesty of Form

Suzanne Preston Blier



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