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WAR PEOPLE

A Cultural History of Violence among the Fante Asafo



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Abstract

This thesis examines the asafo company system, a paramilitary organisation indigenous to the Fante-speaking communities of the Gold Coast, now south-central Ghana. The asafo emerged to protect coastal towns from external threats in a period of political turmoil during the eighteenth century. Yet their cultural significance continued long after this period had ended. Although the asafo's formal military role was prohibited under the growth of British colonial rule, members engaged in frequent episodes of violence until the mid-twentieth century. The thesis explores the activities of the Fante asafo from its origin in the eighteenth century until the twilight of British colonialism in the mid-twentieth century, with a particular emphasis on the final hundred years of this chronology. It interrogates the social identities integral to asafo companies by exploring the contexts within which violence erupted and the ways in which it was instrumentalised, historicized and remembered. It is argued that the military character so fundamental to the asafo at its inception propelled the institution forward even in the face of substantial political change. The company system's expansion into spheres which were not essentially military - the aesthetic, the spiritual and the social - allowed for the continuation of a warrior culture into the twentieth century. The thesis is organised along broadly thematic lines. Chapter One grounds the Fante asafo in the broader military culture of the Gold Coast. Chapter Two analyses the ways in which violence was memorialised and perpetuated through material culture and language. Chapter Three unpacks asafo cosmologies, emphasising the intersection between spirituality and violence. Chapter Four explores gendered and embodied notions of asafo identity. Finally, Chapter Five examines the role of place-making and attempts to regulate the physical landscape both by asafo members and by the British colonial officials.

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Glossary

obosom (pl. <i>abosom</i>)	titular deities
abusua	matrilineal clan
adzewa	women's musical group
Ahoba	Akan festival
Akomase	Akan harvest festival
Akwambo	Path clearing ritual
amanko	inter-asafo civil war
asikamabzi	protectors and apprentices of the flag bearer
Fetu Afahye	Cape Coast festival
fraankitayi	asafo flag bearer
mmobomme	women's war ritual
nananom nsamanfo	ancestral spirits
ntam	oath
ntoro (Fante: <i>egyabosom</i>)	patrilineal spirit
Nyame	supreme creator God
oguaahene	chief of Cape Coast town
okyeame	linguist/spokesperson
ohemma	female chief
ohene	chief

oman	town or state
omanhene	town chief
okofokum	common soldiers, precursors to the asafo
okomfo	priest
opanyin (pl. <i>mpanyinfo</i>)	elder
posuban	asafo shrine
safohemma (pl. <i>asafohemma</i>)	female asafo sub-captain
safohen (pl. <i>asafohen, safohinfo</i>)	asafo sub-captain
supi	head captain of a single asafo company
tufuhene	overall head of all town asafo companies

Introduction

In 1932, African intellectual John Coleman de Graft Johnson published an article detailing the activities of an indigenous militia organisation local to the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana) known as the *asafo*. As the Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs, De Graft Johnson held a prominent position in the bureaucracy of the then British colony. His article, which focused on the town of Cape Coast, was commissioned by his superiors and responded to anxieties regarding these local military companies. Concerns about violent episodes instigated by *asafo* companies were rife amongst colonial administrators. Yet from his position as a member of the Western-educated local elite, De Graft Johnson concluded that although there were instances of ‘sanguinary riots with fatal consequences’, such events were infrequent and exaggerated.¹ This divergence is indicative of the central problematic underpinning much of the discourse on the *asafo* company system over the last three centuries. How endemic was the violence associated with these militia groups? Was their position in Gold Coast society one of deep cultural importance, or were they simply a rabble of young men provoking erratic riots? What was the driving force of the *asafo* company system?

Despite these underlying questions, there are general sociological elements that can broadly be said to constitute the *asafo* company system. Evidence suggests that the *asafo* originated among the Fante-speaking peoples who inhabit the south-central reaches of the Gold Coast, although companies can be found elsewhere among the Akan and neighbouring ethnic groups. In their original manifestation, the *asafo* acted as town militias – the term

¹ J. C. de Graft Johnson, ‘The Fanti Asafu’, *Africa* 5: 3 (1932), p 307.

itself is often translated from the Fante as ‘war people’ (*sa*: war; *fo*: people of). Asafo companies existed as a sort of reserve army, with their members engaged in other forms of employment – usually agriculture or fishing. The system is hierarchical, headed by senior functionaries, with internal structures allocating specific roles to office holders. Within each town there may be anywhere between one and eleven asafo companies, and affiliation is inherited through the male line alongside the father’s deity (*egyabosom*). In contrast, political status and material wealth is passed down through the matrilineal clan (*abusua*) within the Akan communities which the asafo is a part of. Asafo companies are usually given both name and number and alongside the characteristics noted above are evocative of European military formations. Companies operate along territorial lines, each laying claim to a specific area, or ‘quarter’, of the town. Renowned material culture of the asafo include company houses, shrines (*posuban*), and their distinctive appliqué flags which are today frequently exhibited in art galleries and museums across the global North. Although predominantly a male organisation, women have long been associated with the asafo. Fante women would inherit company allegiance from their father just as their brothers did, and as inter-company marriage was rare until later in the twentieth century, their husbands would usually be from the same asafo faction. Women were engaged in company life either through the support they gave to their husbands, brothers, and fathers during battle, by forming parallel organisations which served to formalise this support, or in some cases, by achieving positions as female asafo captains (*asafohemma*).

The asafo emerged as a result of the social flux inherent to the era of Atlantic commerce in gold and later in enslaved peoples on the coast of West Africa. Economic competition on the Gold Coast often led to conflict between neighbouring towns, exacerbated from the mid-seventeenth century by Dutch and English attempts to secure as much of these lucrative trades as possible. Migration to the coast by those seeking to access ‘luxuries’ sold from across the ocean was coupled by the displacement of those looking to

avoid the potential of being sold back across the ocean themselves.² Yet the resulting turbulence and insecurity led to the creation of new political, social and cultural structures. In the face of existential threats arising from violence generated by Atlantic commerce, the asafo company system grew out of pre-existing military culture in order to defend Fante coastal towns. After the British abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807, the Fante speaking communities of the Gold Coast were passed backwards and forwards between company and crown administration for a generation, before crown rule became permanent in 1844. Despite an attempt in the late 1860s by the reformist and modernizing Fante Confederation to declare a degree of autonomy under British protection, in 1874 what had been a vague British sphere of influence became a formal Crown Colony. As British power and influence deepened in fits and starts throughout the nineteenth century, the military role of the asafo was gradually curtailed. Although the Fante asafo often fought alongside British forces in the first half of the century, against foes in Nzema to the west and against the great forest kingdom of Asante to the north, the militia element of the company system was prohibited entirely with the formal imposition of colonial rule in 1874. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this did little to allay asafo instigated violence. Throughout the period of British rule, the military activities of the company system turned inwards and the colonial archive contains vast quantities of documentation by officials complaining about its propensity for civil disorder. Inter-company violence in this instance was usually portrayed as primitive savagery. In one early attempt at amateur anthropology, Arthur Ffoulkes, the District Commissioner (DC) at Cape Coast in the first decade of the twentieth century, identified the root cause of asafo riots as jealousy and intoxication.³ This tone was echoed throughout the bulk of official documentation. Nevertheless, motivations for violence aside, the propensity for internecine conflict between asafo companies clearly did increase around

² Ty M. Reese, "Eating" Luxury: Fante Middlemen, British Goods and Changing Dependencies on the Gold Coast 1720-1921', *William and Mary Quarterly* 66: 4 (2009).

³ Arthur Ffoulkes, 'The Company System in Cape Coast Castle', *Journal of the Royal African Society* 7 (1908).

the 1850s and continued well into the twentieth century. An analysis of this violence lies at the heart of this thesis.

Asafo Structure

Asafo companies are organized along military lines. This is the case both within a company and – where more than one company inhabits a town – in their relationship with each other. At the top of each company sits the *supi*, or head captain. De Graft Johnson locates the title *supi* in the Fante word for a water pot, so called because the *supi* ‘figuratively speaking, acts as a reservoir for all the waters of the Asafu’.⁴ Usually passed down along patrilineal lines, the *supi* must guide the asafo, settle disputes, and hold responsibility for company property. In war, the *supi* would command his company with assistance from his sub-captains, or *asafohen*. Although there is only ever one *supi*, there may be many *asafohen*. Numbers of *asafohen* may fluctuate as the position can be awarded for bravery as well as inherited from the father. Recognizable by their customary whip, a *safohen* plays a key role in battle by guiding the other members of his company and ensuring the *supi*’s orders are carried out. In larger companies each *safohen* would be responsible for certain sections of the membership, therefore providing further organization within military campaigns. There are also a number of company offices attached to specific roles or obligations, such as the flagbearer (*frankakitanyi*), the executioners (*abrafo*), and the lead drummer (*kyirema*). Beneath these sit the rest of the members, all of whom were granted automatic inclusion in the company due to their patrilineal allegiance with the group. Within the time frame of this thesis, nearly all male inhabitants of the Fante towns would have been active members of their companies. As such, most companies discussed in this thesis would have had around 1,500 members.

The majority of towns on the Fante coast are home to more than one company. In this case, the various factions would be required to come together as a united army when

⁴ De Graft Johnson, ‘The Fanti Asafu’, p 312.

their town was under threat. All companies in a town are overseen by one commander-in-chief, the *tufuhene*. Under the *tufuhene's* guidance each company occupied a specific position in battle. In smaller towns with two companies, this position is usually reflected in their names. Where two companies are called Dentsefo and Tuafo respectively, such as in Apam, Moree, Mumford, and Gomoa Dago, Tuafo holds the position of vanguard or scouts, while Dentsefo makes up the main body of the army. The name Tuafo has its root etymology in the words *twa*: to cut, to move in a line, and *fo*: people, the vanguards being those who cut a path through the bush that the main body could pass through. *Adontin*, the root word for Dentsefo, and also for company names such as Ntin (No. 3 Company, Cape Coast) and Dontsin (No. 3 Company, Anomabo), literally translates as the main body of an army. In larger towns where the companies are numerous, the position of rearguard, bodyguard to the chief, right flank or left flank, may be allocated. The latter position in particular has given rise to a common company name of Nkum (a derivation of *benkum*: left), used in Cape Coast, Moree, and Saltpond.

As the formal military role of the asafo was suppressed by British colonial rule, some aspects of asafo hierarchy and organization became less relevant. The positioning of different companies on the battlefield, for example, was largely relegated to a matter of status and memory, rather than practicality, as the latter half of the nineteenth century folded into the twentieth. The office of *tufuhene* was less frequently called upon to command asafo troops in war, but still held a critical position in town politics. The *tufuhene* had been an integral component of the council of town chiefs since the early development of Fante society, and this remains the case into the present day. The increase of inter-company disputes and fights in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw a number of *tufuhenes* act as important mediators, although in some cases the *tufuhene* could himself cause conflict between rival companies. Within individual companies, the hierarchy remained unchanged into the 1950s. The offices of *supi*, *safohen*, *kyirema*, and *frankakityani* were used in

inter-company fights instead of within a larger town army, but often still operated within the same military capacity. The *asafohen* would still use their whips to encourage their members, and the *kyirema* and *frankakityani* would still herald their company's passage into battle – albeit battles of a smaller-scale. There were cases where the relevant *supi* attempted to reign his members in to avoid conflict, a significant divergence from their predecessors. Yet in many other instances of inter-company fights featured in this thesis, the *supi* could be found driving his men forward, just as holders of his office had done for centuries.

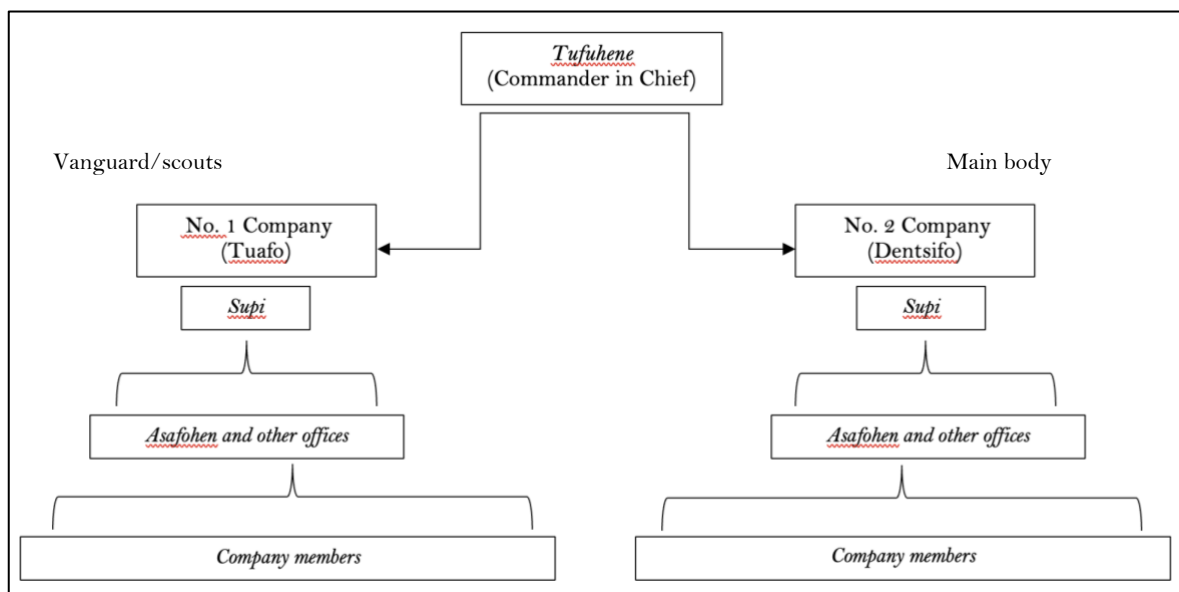


Fig 1: Diagram of asafo hierarchy. Made by author.

Asafo Historiography

The literature on the asafo company system can be divided broadly into two camps, the historical and the artistic. Although there are points at which these two bodies of work interact, the scholarly aims inherent to these disciplinary projects are generally distinct. Most of the historical scholarship uses asafo violence in the twentieth century as a prism through which to examine these groups in their social and political context. Despite its prominence in the historical record, however, there is still no sustained monographic

treatment of the Fante asafu, with research limited to journal articles.⁵ An ambitious attempt to provoke more research through the Asafu History Programme (AHP) launched by the University of Ghana, Legon, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, has produced stimulating but brief analyses of company activity.⁶ The scholarship which *has* been produced tends to represent the asafu - and asafu unrest - as a local medium for working class expression. Class-based analysis is evident even in the pioneering work of De Graft Johnson, who compared the nomenclature '*kwasafu*' to 'the third estate or common people'.⁷ This categorization fits into a basic taxonomy of Gold Coast politics, wherein traditional authority, or chieftaincy, was usurped and drawn into the British system of indirect rule, maintaining an uneasy relationship with the Western educated, intellectual elite.⁸ Underneath both social groups sit the asafu, where they have been championed by some historians as the political underbelly of Gold Coast society.

The literature on asafu interactions with various forms of authority has often sought to demonstrate their capacity as an indigenous vehicle for political mobilization across the Gold Coast Colony. The first wave of asafu historiography, kickstarted by Datta and Porter's articles in the 1970s, sought to investigate how power refracted through the company system.⁹ In their Ga manifestation in Accra and its surrounds, the asafu have been identified as 'the organisation and ideological mouthpiece of commoner interests'.¹⁰

Protesting against a tax levied by the Municipal Corporations Ordinance in 1924 and acting

⁵ But see John Kwadwo Osei-Tutu's study of the asafu among the Ga peoples of the eastern Gold Coast: *The Asafoi (Socio-Military Groups) in the History and Politics of Accra (Ghana) from the 17th to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Norwegian University of Science and Technology: Trondheim, 2000).

⁶ See the special edition of the *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* New Series 2 (1998).

⁷ De Graft Johnson, 'The Fanti Asafu', p 308.

⁸ Kweku Nti, 'Nana Egyir's Loud Voice: A History of Cooperation Between the Educated Africans and Indigenous Political Authorities in the Confrontation of British Power in Cape Coast, 1840-1932', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* New Series 7 (2003); On traditional authority and indirect rule in Asante, see Sarah Berry, *Chiefs Know their Boundaries: Essays on Property, Power and the Past in Asante 1896-1996* (James Currey: Oxford, 2001); and on the terminal phase of colonial rule in the Gold Coast, Richard Rathbone, *Nkrumah and the Chiefs: The Politics of Chieftaincy in Ghana, 1951-60* (Ohio University Press: Athens, OH, 2000).

⁹ Ansu K. Datta and R. Porter, 'The Asafu System in Historical Perspective', *Journal of African History* 12: 2 (1971); Ansu Datta, 'The Fante "Asafu": A Re-Examination', *Africa* 42: 4 (1972).

¹⁰ Dominic Fortescue, 'The Accra Crowd, the Asafu, and the Opposition to the Municipal Corporations Ordinance 1924-5', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 24: 3 (1990), p 349.

independently from the Accra educated elite, the asafo in this instance are depicted as class warriors who effectively mobilized the local community. In contrast, asafo companies on the Fante coast have been seen to be deployed by the Western-educated intelligentsia as a 'traditionally legitimated source of power and a means of mobilizing the people for a variety of political causes'.¹¹ At Cape Coast (often referred to by the local name Oguaa), where companies are numerous and extensively documented in the colonial archive, riots such as that which took place in 1932 have been understood as factional violence resulting from opposition to elements of the local elite.¹² Frequent references to the role of the asafo in destoolment, or the dethroning of 'traditional chiefs', further emphasises the companies as political forces to be reckoned with.¹³ Indeed, Maxwell Owusu goes so far as to characterise the inter-war period, which witnessed a high number of asafo instigated riots and destoolments, as 'the age of rebellions'.¹⁴ Despite the origins of the asafo in the Fante region of the central Gold Coast, a disproportionate number of these analyses focus on case studies from what is now the Eastern Region of Ghana. Within these contexts, the revolutionary nature of the asafo is greatly emphasised. In the inland Akan state of Kwahu, their ability in 1915 to force Omanhene Kwaku Akuamoah into signing a charter which, among many other laws, prohibited the chief from 'cohabitation with a commoner's wife', has been lauded.¹⁵ Subsequent attacks on local representatives of indirect rule as a result of increased taxation further serve as a testament to the political clout of the asafo in Kwahu.¹⁶ In neighbouring Akim Abuakwa, companies united as one in uprisings against the paramount chief, arguably

¹¹ Terrence J. Johnson, 'Protest, Tradition and Change: An Analysis of Southern Gold Coast Riots 1890-1920', *Economy and Society* 1: 2 (1972), p 173.

¹² Stanley Shaloff, 'Cape Coast Asafo Company Riot of 1932', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 7: 4 (1974).

¹³ Anshan Li, 'Asafo and Destoolment in Colonial Southern Ghana, 1900-1953', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28: 2 (1995).

¹⁴ Maxwell Owusu, 'Rebellion, Revolution and Tradition: Reinterpreting Coups in Ghana', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31: 2 (1989).

¹⁵ Jarle Simensen, 'The Asafo of Kwahu, Ghana: A Mass Movement for Local Reform under Colonial Rule', *International Journal of Historical Studies* 8: 3 (1975), p 384.

¹⁶ E. A. E. Asiamah, *The Mass Factor in Rural Politics: The Case of Asafo Revolution in Kwahu Political History* (Ghana Universities Press: Accra, 2000).

indicative of anti-colonial sentiment.¹⁷ There are, of course, significant differences between the coastal Fante asafo and their inland counterparts. With less attention paid to ‘flags, emblems, and asafo annual customs’, the inland Eastern asafo have also been identified as ‘more militant than their contemporaries’.¹⁸ We should be wary, therefore, of extrapolating outwards from these instances of grassroots mobilization into broad generalisations inclusive of all Fante asafo activity.

This is not to say that the political capacity of the asafo during, and indeed before and after, colonial rule should be dismissed. As is clear from the existing scholarship, the companies played their part in ensuring that within the framework of indirect rule, traditional authority was held accountable to the people that it was supposed to serve, especially on the eastern Gold Coast and its hinterland. Nor should we overlook the class position of most asafo members, the majority of whom were engaged in manual labour such as fishing and farming. Yet political agitation alone does not account for the many episodes of violence among the Fante asafo which were not explicitly motivated by formal political dissatisfaction. Indeed, those instances of company conflict which were rooted in more nebulous notions of identity and culture have been dismissed by some scholars as having little historical relevance. Writing in the 1970s, Stanley Shaloff contended that ‘traditional violence between rival military formations’ of Cape Coast – which he saw as distinct from political unrest which rocked the town in the 1930s – ‘would not merit extended scholarly concern’.¹⁹

Such interpretations fail to adequately consider the aesthetic, spiritual or gendered elements of the asafo company system on the Fante coast. Framing asafo unrest through the lens of working-class expression can be seen as typical of the 1970s vogue within African

¹⁷ Jarle Simensen, ‘Rural Mass Action in the Context of Anti-Colonial Protest: The Asafo Movement of Akim Abuakwa’, *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 8: 1 (1974)

¹⁸ Asiamah, *Mass Factor*, p 32.

¹⁹ Shaloff, ‘The Cape Coast Asafo Company Riot’, p 591.

historiography to focus on popular protest and moments of anti-colonial nationalism. Yet although the literature has sought to reinterpret the asafo as a politically autonomous force, this construction is still defined in reaction to British colonialism. To better comprehend the asafo on their own terms and to evaluate changes in their activities over time, it is necessary to consider the longer history of the company system and its cultural reach beyond the strictly military.

It is the second body of literature on the asafo, that which falls within the discipline of art history, which takes into account some of these key cultural aspects. The focus on artistic production and on material culture more broadly illuminates the multifaceted nature of the company system, and as such I draw on these insights here. However, there are some limitations. Literature on the material culture of the asafo is dominated by a focus on company flags. Across Europe and the North America, asafo flags, many of which were confiscated by the colonial government in the early twentieth century as punishment for inter-company conflict and subsequently acquired by museums and collectors in the West, have been exhibited as fine examples of African art. As will be discussed in the second chapter of this thesis, much of the scholarship on asafo flags which accompanied these curatorial efforts lacks historical depth. Yet asafo flags should be seen as historical documents in and of themselves, an attribute recognised by a few scholars in the field.²⁰ Often alluding to past conflicts, the idiomatic images stitched onto flags represent a ‘visual dialogue’ emphasising the identities of a company in opposition to their rivals.²¹ The status of flags as a symbolic embodiment of company spirit is evident also through their positionality within the company structure, where they are carefully administered by the flag-bearer (*frankaatikani*) and his bodyguards. Moreover, the ownership of particular

²⁰ For example, Eric Appau Asante and Kofi Adjei, ‘Historical Discourse of Selected Fante Asafo Flags and Public Sculptures from Winneba and Mankessim’, *Critical Interventions* 9: 3 (2015).

²¹ Kwame A. Labi, ‘Fante Asafo Flags of Abandze and Kormantse: A Discourse between Rivals’, *African Arts* 35: 4 (2002), p 37.

symbols and colours was often fiercely contested by rival groups.²² The capacity for flags to cause inter-company conflict was often regarded by the British colonial administration as the root cause of riots. It is a notable failure of the existing scholarship – with some exceptions – that little attempt has been made to push past these narratives of basic causality in order to gain a richer analysis about what was at stake during asafo instigated violence.

There have been fragmented analyses of other aspects of asafo culture, often with a contemporary focus. Literature on the elaborate asafo shrines (*posuban*) which pepper the coast of Ghana has in some cases acknowledged the historical basis to aesthetic choices. Research on the decorative nature of the *posuban* has demonstrated the influence of European power on ritual objects, with cannons, ships and architecture similar to coastal slave forts being common.²³ Ethnomusicological scholarship on Akan musical styles also touches on the asafo. Pioneering scholar J. H. Kwabena Nketia identified asafo music as a typical ‘occasional’ form, deployed ‘in connection with the rites and other activities’ of the relevant company.²⁴ Localised analysis of music in Winneba undertaken by Nketia’s successors further emphasise the significance of the genre to the company system as a whole, not least in recalling historical events such as invasions by the inland empire of Asante.²⁵ Although there is some discussion of asafo music in Nate Plageman’s recent work on the emergence of popular music in Ghana, this relates to the development of musical styles themselves rather than to the activities of asafo companies.²⁶ There has been little written about other forms of asafo performance and celebration. Brief mention has been

²² John Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution* (Frank Cass: London, 1968 [orig. 1906]), p 26-7.

²³ Doran H. Ross, ‘“Come and Try”: Towards a History of Fante Military Shrines’, *African Arts* 13 (2007); Kwame A. Labi, ‘The Transformation of European Forts, Castles and Flags into Local Fante “Asafo” Iconography’, *Institute of African Studies Research Review* 22: 1 (2006).

²⁴ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *African Music in Ghana* (Longman, Greens & Co: Accra, 1962), p 13.

²⁵ Ato Turkson, ‘Effutu Asafo: Its Organisation and Music’, *Journal of International Library of African Music* 6: 2 (1982).

²⁶ Nate Plageman, *Highlife Saturday Night: Popular Music and Social Change in Urban Ghana* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2012).

made of asafo involvement in the masquerade Fancy Dress festival held over Christmas in Winneba, renowned for its links with the Caribbean Jankunu carnival.²⁷ Yet despite passing references to the intersection between asafo performances and violence in primary sources, this coincidence has not fully been examined.

Towards A Cultural History of Violence among the Fante Asafo

This thesis therefore seeks to bring together the cultural aspects of the Fante asafo system with its long history of violence and militarism. It interrogates the societal identities so integral to asafo members by exploring the contexts within which violence erupted and the ways in which violence was instrumentalised, historicized and remembered. By using violent episodes as compelling ‘cultural texts’, it is possible to garner insights into the company system which paved the way for a more sophisticated understanding of asafo histories.²⁸ It is argued that the military character so fundamental to the asafo at its inception, which allowed coastal towns of the Fante to defend themselves in the era of Atlantic trade, propelled the institution forward even in the face of substantial political change. The asafo company system’s expansion into spheres which were not essentially military - the aesthetic, the spiritual and the social - allowed for the proliferation of warrior culture, and consequently violence, into the twentieth century. Asafo experiences in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century provided foundational group identities. Rising to prominence in the cosmopolitan port towns on the Gold Coast in an era of inter-cultural exchange, the asafo absorbed the socio-historic context of their birth. They fought battles

²⁷ On Fancy Dress, see Awo Sarpong and De-Valera Botchway, ‘Freaks in Procession? The Fancy Dress Masquerade as Haven for Negotiating Eccentricity during Childhood: A Study of Child Masquerades in Cape Coast, Ghana’, in Markus P. J. Bohlmann (ed), *Misfit Children: An Enquiry into Childhood Belongings* (Lexington Books: Lanham ML, 2017); Courtney Micots ‘Performing Ferocity: Fancy Dress, Asafo and Red Indians in Ghana’, *African Arts* 45: 2 (2012); Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (UCLA Museum of Cultural History: Los Angeles CA, 1977), ch. 10. On Jankunu see Kenneth M. Bilby, ‘Surviving Secularisation: masking Spirit in the Jankunu (John Canoe) Festivals of the Caribbean’, *New West Indian Guide* 84: 3-4 (2010).

²⁸ I draw here on anthropological and foundational cultural history modes, such as Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books: New York: 1973); and Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (Basic Books: New York, 1984).

against encroaching or threatening enemies, such as Nzema and Asante, often alongside the forces of the Dutch and the British forts in their midst. These histories, albeit often compressed into sentiment rather than detailed narratives, were then expressed through the art, the music, the rituals and the cosmological universe of asafo companies. After the formal military function of the asafo was suppressed by British colonial power from the 1870s, companies began to engage in sporadic internecine conflict, especially when relationships between the asafo and their respective town authorities, the *ohene* or the *omanhene*, were sour. These episodes of unrest usually occurred at moments when the historical memory of companies was brought into sharp relief by the exhibition of flags and emblems, by the proximity of spiritual actors such as military deities and ancestral spirits, and by the performance of company music, dance and displays at festivals and funerals. Moments of tension were further exacerbated by gendered notions of the asafo. Militarised masculinities were reinforced by women's actions, who often contributed to hostilities by threatening, taunting and urging men to fight. The history of the asafo was also inscribed onto the physical landscape through the organization of space into distinct territories, demarcated by *posuban* shrines representative of company ancestry and power. Incorrectly navigating town cartographies by crossing into the territories of rivals, also amounted to an offence which could provoke violence. Inter-asafo conflicts which emerged in the wake of all these factors provided more fodder for company identities, more emblems, more songs and more entrenched rivalries. Histories of violence were perpetually memorialised, expressed and added to. Despite colonial attempts to regulate asafo activity through restrictions on public space, internecine outbursts continued to shape the landscape of company life until the middle of the twentieth century.

The attention which violence received, both in the historical memory of asafo companies and in the anxious surveillance of the colonial administration, also provides evidence for local histories in and of themselves. Companies were deeply embedded in the

social fabric and identity of the Fante coastal towns. A cultural history of asafo violence therefore represents an important contribution to a deeper understanding of broader currents of social change in these hybrid urban centres. The microhistories of these outbursts of company unrest therefore speak to the broader experiences of Fante littoral communities over time.

The constraints of this project are to some extent guided by this shared Fante experience. Spatially, it covers the littoral region from Cape Coast in the west to Apam in the east, with particular focus on these two towns as well as Moree, Birwa, Anomabo, Saltpond, Ekumfi Akra, Ekumfi Narkwa, Ekumfi Ekumpoano, Ekumfi Otua, Gomoa Dago and Mumford. There are two notable omissions in this geographical focus: Elmina to the immediate west of Cape Coast and Winneba to the east of Apam. Although they fall within Ghana's contemporary Central Region – the area of the nation state understood to be dominated by the Fante – the culturally specific nature of Elmina and Winneba, neither of which are strictly Fante towns, requires greater research than this project would allow. The expansion of the Fante from the small polity centred around Mankessim to a wider socio-linguistic grouping spread across the central Gold Coast and its immediate hinterlands occurred in tangent with the growth of the Atlantic slave trade.²⁹ These developments also underpinned the evolution of the asafo company system. As such, the temporal focus of this thesis covers the period from the eighteenth to the mid-twentieth century, although more emphasis is placed on the better-documented final one hundred years of this chronology. It ends shortly before the Gold Coast became the independent nation of Ghana in 1957. The motivations behind this curtailment are two-fold. First, inter-company violence declined significantly from the 1940s, which therefore represents a juncture in asafo history. Second, independence brought with it new political and social developments which deserve more

²⁹ Rebecca Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester, NY: 2011).

rigorous engagement than this project could allow in order to adequately contextualise the changing position of the asafo in the era of decolonization.

My key arguments are therefore as follows: Firstly, that the asafo absorbed the historical context within which they emerged. A product of militarized Fante expansion and the turbulence of the Atlantic Slave Trade, companies took many of their fundamental attributes and identities from both intercultural exchange and the violence endemic to the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. These experiences were overlaid by the narratives born out of early European colonisation and the role that the asafo played in waging wars alongside the British. Although the actions of the asafo changed over time, there was significant continuity within company culture that harked back to this era. Secondly, after the prohibition of the asafo's military role in the established Gold Coast Colony, military identities were instead expressed through inter-company rivalry and conflict. These identities were reinforced through various cultural modes: cosmology, material culture, language, gendered expectations, and the activities of place-making. At times when martial spirits were venerated, material culture was exhibited, and oaths and lyrics were uttered, violence was made more likely. When gendered notions of militarism were wielded, and invisible cartographies were disrespected, inter-company fights frequently erupted. Thirdly, the established literature on asafo history does not allow for this more holistic approach to company violence and therefore the subtleties of what violence meant for those who participated in it are disregarded. Finally, that in the last fifty or so years of the Gold Coast Colony, the British colonial state responded to company violence with severe restrictions which served to inhibit the expression of asafo culture. Despite the potentially catastrophic impact of these restrictions, companies remained a fixture of the vibrant communities which inhabited the Fante littoral.

We can also organise our chronology into three – somewhat overlapping – time periods in order to better track continuity and change within asafo history. The temporal

boundaries of these three eras are slightly fuzzy due to the geographical spread of the Fante coast, and the divergence between some company histories. In the first instance, we have the period from asafo emergence in Fante society until the early restrictions on asafo activity by the colonial state, broadly the stretch of time between the mid-seventeenth century to the 1850s. During this time, asafo companies came together to fight as a united army for the Fante and for their home towns. Company identities which perpetuated in the centuries that followed were forged in this period. Secondly, from the 1850s until the dawn of independence, asafo activity was characterised by inter-company conflict. This marked a significant change from the earlier role the asafo played in Fante warfare. Nevertheless, the continuity in identity and culture between these two periods was substantial. Finally, our third period covers the years between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1950s, when restrictions on company identity accelerated. It is of note that, despite colonial endeavours to the contrary, there was continuity in asafo culture even during these fifty years, although inter-company violence seemed to have decreased somewhat from the mid 1940s. As will be discussed below, the broad structure of this thesis fits into this periodization.

War and Violence in African History

The early activities of the Fante asafo fit within a history of militarism in West Africa during the era of Atlantic trade, and in Africa more broadly. The literature on this subject has gone a long way to constructing detailed pictures of warfare in pre-colonial Africa. Richard Reid has done great work on pre-colonial war practices, particularly in Eastern Africa, which elucidates the productive capacities of organised violence, pushing back on

stereotypes of African savagery which had so often been propagated.³⁰ Military conflict often acted as a catalyst in the creation of centralized states. Much has also been written about the political nature of military actors, and the role of a warrior class in kingdoms such as Bunyoro and Zulu.³¹ Recent analyses have also highlighted the importance of militarism in defending and protecting smaller, more diffuse, polities, with low-intensity conflict maintaining balance between neighbouring communities.³² These studies are indicative of the sophisticated use and varied outcomes of warfare in pre-colonial Africa.

The political and social implications of militaristic communities in West Africa in the era of Atlantic trade have also been subject to much scholarly scrutiny. J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith have demonstrated the sophistication of Yoruba warfare in the nineteenth century.³³ Robin Law's work on Dahomey and Oyo in the same period speaks to the capacity for the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to generate higher rates and different methods of warfare on the so-called Slave Coast and its interior.³⁴ This is not to say that there was an instrumental relationship between European power on the coast of West Africa and the war waged by African societies. Indeed, Law's work captures the nuance required to comprehend these complex and shifting interactions. Rather, the political context shaped by the slave trade, and the involvement of actors on both sides had ramifications for military culture in affected regions. African warfare in and of itself had equally important

³⁰ Richard Reid, *War in Pre-Colonial Eastern Africa* (James Currey: Oxford, 2007), *Warfare in African History* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), and *Political Power in Pre-Colonial Buganda: Economy, Society and Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (James Currey: Oxford, 2002).

³¹ See for example G. N. Uzoigwe, 'The Warrior and the State in Precolonial Africa: Comparative Perspectives', in Ali A. Mazrui (ed), *The Warrior Tradition in Modern Africa* (E. J. Brill: Leiden, 1977); Robert Smith, *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial West Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1976).

³² William Fitzsimons, 'Warfare, Competition and the Durability of "Political Smallness" in Nineteenth Century Busoga', *Journal of African History* 59: 1 (2018).

³³ J. F. Ade Ajayi and Robert Smith, *Yoruba Warfare in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1964). See also Toyin Falola and Robin Law (eds), *Warfare and Diplomacy in Pre-Colonial Nigeria* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

³⁴ Robin Law, 'Dahomey and the Slave Trade: Reflections on the Historiography of the Rise of Dahomey', *Journal of African History* 27: 2 (1986), *The Oyo Empire c. 1600-1836: A West African Imperialism in the Era of the Atlantic Slave Trade* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1997), and 'Warfare on the West African Slave Coast, 1650-1850' in R. Brian Ferguson and Neil L. Whitehead (eds), *War in the Tribal Zone: Expanding States and Indigenous Warfare* (School of American Research Press: Santa Fe, 1992).

ramifications for the trade in enslaved peoples, as argued in Phillip Curtin's analysis of Senegambia.³⁵ Thornton's study of warfare in West and Central 'Atlantic' Africa also speaks to the interconnection between wars and the slave trade, a relationship which he considers to be 'inseparable'.³⁶ Such social developments could impact on identity, as demonstrated in Mbah's work on Ohafio-Igbo communities where it is argued that military slaving altered gendered positionalities.³⁷ The introduction of firearms by European traders also had implications for the culture and practice of warfare.³⁸ The emergence of the asafo company system on the Gold Coast reflects this trend of changing patterns of warfare born out of political flux exacerbated by external interaction, a process which will be explored in the first chapter of this thesis.

The literature on popular violence in sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in the colonial past, also has resonance for an understanding of the asafo. The complexities of working with interpersonal violence, rather than that which is *explicitly* directed against the state, have been well illustrated by work on ritual murder within the Gold Coast. Rathbone's analysis of a ritual murder in Akim Abuakwa and Gocking's analysis of another in Elmina demonstrate that acts of violence were often entangled with the dynamics of colonial rule.³⁹ Elsewhere, White's work on East and Central Africa illustrates the use of supernatural violence as a way to explain the specific socio-cultural contexts of the colonial every day.⁴⁰ The phenomenon of so-called man-leopard murders across West and Central Africa also

³⁵ Phillip Curtin, *Economic Change in Precolonial Africa: Senegambia in the Era of the Slave Trade* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1975). See also Martin A. Klein, 'The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on the Societies of the Western Sudan', *Social Science History* 14: 2 (1990).

³⁶ John K. Thornton, *Warfare in Atlantic Africa 1500-1800* (UCL Press: London, 1999), p 146.

³⁷ Ndubeze L. Mbah, *Emergent Masculinities: Gendered Power and Social Change in the Biafran Atlantic Age* (Ohio University Press: Athens OH, 2019), esp. ch. 2.

³⁸ R. A. Kea, 'Firearms and Warfare on the Gold and Slave Coasts from the Sixteenth to the Nineteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History* 12: 2 (1971); W. A. Richards, 'The Import of Firearms into West Africa in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of African History* 21: 1 (1980).

³⁹ Richard Rathbone, *Murder and Politics in Colonial Ghana* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1993); Roger Gocking, 'A Chieftaincy Dispute and Ritual Murder in Elmina, Ghana, 1945-6', *Journal of African History* 42: 2 (2000).

⁴⁰ Luise White, *Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa* (University of California Press: Berkeley, 2000).

speaks to the complex nature of such traumatic events within a shifting colonial landscape. Indicative of this approach is Pratten's work on south-eastern Nigeria, which warns of 'the trap of expecting an overarching explanatory theory', behind such violence.⁴¹ A recognition of the unknown here is critical. Constructing a deterministic causation for acts of violence ignores the 'irreducible contingency and inexplicability' therein.⁴² Instead, those situational elements which surround violence can be analysed to speak to the role it plays and the frameworks within which it manifests. An exemplary study of this kind is Glassman's analysis of outbreaks of violence on the Swahili coast in the latter half of the nineteenth century, which speaks to the 'rebellious consciousness' present in crowds of holiday feast-makers who engaged in civil unrest.⁴³ Violence here erupted in similar contexts to that frequently enacted by the Fante asafo: during festivals imbued with spiritual connotations and the changing of the seasons. Pointing also to chronic economic tension and contested notions of citizenship, Glassman's work is indicative of the potential that histories of popular violence hold more broadly.

Critical Framework: Violence, Gender, and Militarism

As this thesis interrogates the cultural history of violence among the Fante asafo, it is necessary to unpack the concept of violence itself. There are essentially three forms of violence which dominate this research topic. In the first instance, military violence as it manifested in the actions of the early asafo, coming together as an army to defend their towns or to wage wars as part of a broader Fante force. By military violence, I am referring simply to battles fought under the guise of formal warfare, although the nature of militarism

⁴¹ David Pratten, *The Man Leopard Murders: History and Society in Colonial Nigeria* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2007), p 20.

⁴² Florence Bernault and Jan-Georg Deutsch, 'Control and Excess: Histories of Violence in Africa', *Africa* 85: 3 (2015), p 387.

⁴³ Johnathon Glassman, *Feasts and Riot: Revelry, Rebellion, and Popular Consciousness on the Swahili Coast, 1856-1888* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH, 1995), particularly ch. 7.

will be discussed further shortly. In the second instance, the physical, interpersonal violence inherent to the intercompany fights which dominated asafó history from the late nineteenth century to the 1950s. Finally, this thesis explores the structural violence exerted by the colonial state in its endeavour to restrict the activities of the Fante asafó. A final mention should be made of psychological violence wielded by the colonial state, on which many words have been written.⁴⁴ Although this is undeniably a potent force, it is not one which this thesis deals with.

The majority of this thesis deals overtly with episodes of physical violence between rival asafó companies. Physical violence, as Galtung outlined in his seminal article, is where 'human beings are hurt somatically, to the point of killing'.⁴⁵ The corporeal impacts of these episodes are not always evident in sources on asafó violence, although the evidence on bodily harm that is available is discussed in Chapter Four. Instead, this thesis interrogates the cultural contexts within which physical violence erupted, and asks why this violence was perpetuated until the 1950s.

Restrictions placed on asafó companies, especially in the latter part of our chronology, constituted an act of structural violence by the colonial state. Laws and regulations which prohibited asafó activity were enforced by severe fines and the threat of incarceration with hard labour.⁴⁶ Such actions should be understood as structural violence in so far as they amounted to a form of social injustice with the intention of eradicating asafó instigated disorder. As Galtung has argued, structural violence does not necessarily eradicate physical violence. Nevertheless, assumptions along these lines were pervasive among colonial authorities.⁴⁷ The interaction between the physical violence enacted by asafó

⁴⁴ Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (Grove Press, New York NY: 1963).

⁴⁵ John Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', *Journal of Peace Research* 6: 3 (1969), p 169.

⁴⁶ On the violence of colonial incarceration in Africa see Florence Bernault, 'The Shadow of Rule: Colonial Power and Modern Punishment in Africa', in Frank Dikötter and Ian Brown (eds), *Cultures of Confinement: A History of the Prison in Africa, Asia and Latin America* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 2007), p 60-69.

⁴⁷ Galtung, 'Violence, Peace, and Peace Research', p 181. See also, John Galtung, 'A Structural Theory of Imperialism', *Journal of Peace Research*, 8: 2 (1971).

companies and the structural violence enacted by the colonial state is one which will be explored particularly in the last chapter of this thesis.

It should also be noted that the first chapter of this thesis confronts the legacies of the Atlantic Slave Trade, a historical process imbued with violence in all its many forms. Although the violence of the Atlantic Slave Trade is not a major component of this research, the implications it had for the Gold Coast were profound. It is impossible to discuss the asafó without a recognition of their origins in this crucible of trauma, as will be explored in Chapter One. Yet it would be reductionist to suggest that interpersonal asafó violence was a product solely of the era of conflict within which the company system emerged. As William Beinart writes in his survey of violence in Southern African history, “violence requires particular forms of agency, and the actions and predispositions of those agents were not simply created by broader lines of conflict”.⁴⁸ It is necessary, therefore, to turn to the identities of the asafó – our agents of violence – and how they relate to established concepts in the study of war.

Asafó companies are referred to in this thesis variously as martial, military, and paramilitary. This is, in part, due to the difficulty of categorising the asafó, a unique cultural phenomenon. Nevertheless, these terms will be unpacked here. The term ‘martial’ has particular connotations in the colonial context, given British racialisation of certain communities. Ethnic groups such as the Hausa in Northern Nigeria, or the Nepalese Gurkhas, were labelled as inherently martial.⁴⁹ It is of note that the Fante asafó were never racialised in this fashion. Rather, companies were utilized as a military force only in the early stages of British colonisation and, subsequently Hausa men were sought after for

⁴⁸ William Beinart, ‘Introduction: Political and Collective Violence in Southern African Historiography’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 18: 3 (1992), p 473.

⁴⁹ For a deeper analysis of this topic see Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture 1857 – 1914* (Manchester University Press, Manchester: 2004).

the Gold Coast military and police.⁵⁰ Where the word martial is used in this thesis it is meant simply as an adjective to describe cultural elements that were related to war, for example, martial gods.

Whether to understand the asafo as military or paramilitary is a more complicated question. In so far as the asafo were never the official armed force of a nation state they are more akin to a paramilitary organisation, especially in their actions from the mid 1800s onwards. Yet at their genesis the asafo were the army of the Fante – the political composition of which will be discussed in Chapter One. They were integral to Fante wars with expansionist empires and other coastal polities. In this sense, the asafo can be understood purely as a military force. Moreover, companies considered themselves to be the official armed forces of their towns even after British colonial rule was established. This self-perception of militarism influenced company identities and priorities throughout the chronological focus of this thesis, not least in terms of gender.

The relationship between gender and militarism has long been analysed by feminist scholars, especially in the field of International Relations (IR). Critical work by authors such as Cynthia Enloe has illuminated the gendered notions of warfare and foreign policy in contemporary geopolitics.⁵¹ Within this framework we can locate core concepts which influence the treatment of gender and militarisation in this thesis. Feminist IR scholarship has prioritised an analysis of ‘militarisation’ - the expansion of military practices into other spheres of society to the point that the lines between war and peacetime become blurred.⁵² Although our site of analysis differs substantially from most of those in the field of IR, the concept of militarisation has some resonance with the history of the Fante asafo companies.

⁵⁰ David Killingray, ‘Imagined Martial Communities: Recruiting for the Military and the Police in Colonial Ghana 1860-1960’, in Carola Lentz and Paul Nugent (eds), *Ethnicity in Ghana: The Limits of Invention* (Macmillan, London: 2000).

⁵¹ Cynthia Enloe, *Manoeuvres: The International Politics of Militarizing Women’s Lives* (University of California Press, Berkeley CA: 2000). See also, Christine Sylvester, ‘War Experiences/War Practices/War Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 40: 3 (2012).

⁵² See Catherine Baker, ‘Introduction’, in Catherine Baker (ed), *Making War on Bodies: Militarisation, Aesthetics and Embodiment in International Politics* (Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh: 2020), esp. p 6-9.

The practices and activities of war expanded outwards from the asafo into wider Fante culture: military gods, military rituals, uniforms worn at celebrations and at funerals, material culture which commemorates military activity, and so on. The gendered identities of those living in the Fante towns also intersected with militarisation, particularly – although not exclusively – for local masculinities. For most male asafo members, the idea of being a man was bound up with their military prowess. As Sandra Via explains, ‘militaristic behaviour is a path by which men and masculine states can prove their masculinity’.⁵³ In short, the masculinities of coastal Fante men were militarized through their affiliation with the asafo.

A Note on Language

The nature of asafo violence throws up complex questions about terminology. In much colonial correspondence, inter-company fights were frequently referred to as riots. This language also crops up in contemporary oral histories, likely in part due to the feedback loop between colonial administrative parlance and oral histories. Yet riot as a word has distinct connotations, implying that the violence in question is mindless hooliganism and lacking in purpose. The application of the word riot to moments of popular violence is, of course, frequently deployed in reference to colonized or marginalised groups whether at the periphery or in the metropole. Civil unrest instigated by Black communities in the United Kingdom or the United States, underpinned by experiences of oppression, have long been called riots by both media and government.⁵⁴ In multiple colonial contexts too, episodes of violence have been labelled riots to the detriment of engagement with the motivations of those participating. As Judith Van Allen has outlined, the uprising of women in south-

⁵³ Sandra Via, ‘Gender, Militarism and Globalization: Soldiers for Hire and Hegemonic Masculinity’, in Laura Sjoberg and Sandra Via (eds), *Gender, War, and Militarism: Feminist Perspectives* (Praeger, Santa Barbara CA: 2010), p 44.

⁵⁴ On the UK, see Eddie Chambers, ‘Reading the Riot Act’, *Visual Culture in Britain* 14: 2 (2013); Martin Kettle and Lucy Hodges, *Uprising! The Police, the People, and the Riots in Britain’s Cities* (Pan Books: London, 1982); on the US, see Sheila Smith McKoy, *When Whites Riot: Writing Race and Violence in American and South African Cultures* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 2001), pp 21 -24.

eastern Nigeria in 1929 was labelled the 'Aba Riots' by British colonial administrators in order to justify forceful and often brutal policing of those involved.⁵⁵ Continued use of the name Aba Riots by historians, rather than the Igbo label 'Women's War', serves only to further obfuscate the complexities of why and how violence broke out.

With this in mind, there are legitimate criticisms to be made of referring to asafo fights as riots. The Fante term *amanko*, (from *oman*: town, *oko*: to fight) which specifically denotes inter-company violence, is perhaps more directly applicable to such episodes. Yet unlike those instances addressed above, much of the asafo violence enacted in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was not in direct response to political authorities or discriminatory practices. Although asafo activity was at times restricted by the colonial government, most episodes of violence among the Fante companies were not explicitly directed at the administration. This is not to say that the experience of colonisation did not contribute to the context within which violence erupted, but rather that the primary motivations for conflict were usually rooted in identity and rivalry within the asafo universe. While some episodes of unrest were exacerbated by antagonism towards those who sought to occupy local positions of power, many others were born out of the cultural position of the company system. As such, this thesis draws on the whole gamut of terminology used to delineate violence, guided by the language used in the evidentiary material. Although it is critical to interrogate the discourse of colonial sources, it is equally necessary to meet asafo violence on its own terms. While the word riot is still used here when discussing colonial perceptions of asafo violence, inter-company conflict will more frequently be referred to with the Fante term *amanko*.

⁵⁵ Judith Van Allen, 'Aba Riots or the Igbo Women's War? – Ideology, Stratification and the Invisibility of Women', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 6: 1 (1975).

Methodology and Structure

This thesis draws on a range of both oral and written sources to reconstruct the histories of the Fante asafó companies. Early European visitors to the Gold Coast frequently wrote travelogues which contain passing detail about military culture in the period when the asafó company system was emerging. Combined with the records of the Royal African Company (RAC) and the subsequent Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (CMTA), these accounts provide some fragmentary evidence about early asafó activity. The advent of British colonial rule on the Gold Coast brought with it a higher volume of written reporting on the Fante asafó. Drawn from The National Archives in the UK (TNA), and the central and regional archives of the Public Records Archives and Administration Department (PRAAD) in Ghana, these sources provide great detail on asafó violence from the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Although much of this evidence was explicitly colonial, including correspondence between officers, enquiries and police reports, local voices did seep through. Petitions written by asafó companies and witness testimonies in court cases allow for some insight into events as understood by residents of the Fante towns. Archival sources have therefore been read both with and against the grain in order to garner as much nuanced information about company activity as is possible from the colonial archive.⁵⁶ In order to supplement the Eurocentric perspective of written sources, the thesis also draws on oral histories from asafó companies themselves. As part of the Asafó History Project (AHP) in the 1990s, a great number of interviews were conducted with asafó companies by the local researchers. These interviews are currently held at the Asafó History Office at the University of Ghana and have provided important cultural detail for this thesis.

I also conducted more focused oral history interviews for this project. While the work undertaken by the AHP tended to be sweeping surveys which covered the entirety of

⁵⁶ Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Thinking Through Colonial Ontologies* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, (2009).

Introduction

company life, my own oral history work focused on important events and their specific cultural contexts. A total of twenty-six semi-structured interviews were conducted in total, most of which were made up of small groups but a minority of which took place with one key company representative. Although I was only able to speak to most companies on one occasion, there were a few instances where I was able to return for follow up sessions in order to clarify specifics, and to delve deeper into relevant topics. In most cases, the sessions began with the asafo members introducing their company history. This was done without prompting or questions (beyond small clarifications) and allowed me to identify which events or themes were particularly poignant for those recounting the narratives. It is important to note that historical memory among the Fante asafo is often extensive. Knowledge about the past is inherited through familial recollections and through the institutions of companies themselves. Newly appointed officers within the asafo undertake week-long training sessions, during which the head captain (*supi*) grooms the officer on his responsibilities and the history of the company. The initial recitations of company history shared with me at the beginning of our interviews were therefore grounded in these inherited narratives.

Once this introduction to the company history was complete, I then proceeded to ask specific questions, most of which had been prepared in advance. There were standard questions on company culture which I asked in every interview: which gods (*abosom*) did the company hold, what oaths did the company swear by, and what designs featured on their shrines (*posuban*) and on their flags. Company oaths typically commemorate traumatic or impactful events, and flag or shrine designs often depict important people or episodes. As such, these questions were designed to be revealing both of company material and spiritual culture, but also to further uncover which events or episodes were significant for the interviewees. Every company was also asked about the role of women, which elicited varying degrees of detail. From this point I began to ask about specific events. These

questions were informed by the oral history work conducted by the AHP, the archival material that I had consulted, and any significant topics which emerged in the beginning of our discussions. I would also produce copies of relevant photographs, such as those taken by Cape Coast DC Arthur Ffoulkes in 1930s, in order to prompt greater discussion. Interviews were undoubtedly guided by the topics and themes which asafo representatives were most knowledgeable about.

Nearly all the asafo representatives that I spoke to were men, with the important exception of two female captains (*safohemma*). As will be discussed in Chapter Four, one of these *safohemma* in particular – from No. 1 Company Cape Coast (Bentil) – provided considerable insight into women’s historic activity in her company. Where the interviews involved multiple asafo representatives there was apparent consensus on the answers that were given, although it is more than possible that any disagreements on historical detail were not shared with me.

Methodologically, these sources can be characterised as a blend of ‘collective memory’ and semi-formal ‘oral traditions’, and the pervasive influence of the present on the past does throw up some obstacles.⁵⁷ Asafo narratives which have been passed down often serve to portray a glorious past which casts the company in a heroic light. As such, they are as much a product of contemporary company culture as they are of historic events. Many asafo oral histories unsurprisingly centre around tales of violent conflict and military bravery. Questions asked about commemorative oaths, or the design of a *posuban*, usually elicited answers about past *amanko* between the town’s companies. In this sense, asafo oral histories, just like the colonial archive, reproduce a focus on violence. Yet instead of being

⁵⁷ Anna Green, ‘Individual Remembering and ‘Collective Memory’: Theoretical Presuppositions and Debates, *Oral History* 32: 3 (2004); B. Jewsiewicki and V. Y. Mudimbe, ‘Africans’ Memories and Contemporary History of Africa’, *History and Theory* 32: 4 (1993); Wulf Kansteiner, ‘Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory’, *History and Theory* 41: 1 (2002); Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins, ‘Social Memory Studies: From “Collective Memory” to the Historical Sociology of Mnemonic Practices’, *Annual Review of Sociology* 23 (1998); Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition: A Study in Historical Methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright (Routledge: London, 1965).

an imposition born out of the anxieties of the colonial state, oral histories are concerned with violence as a thread which ties together company members past and present. The commemoration of conflict, from smaller *amanko* to large-scale warfare, allows the asafo to hold on to their military origins even as this role has little relevance in present-day Ghana.

Nevertheless, this focus on moments of conflict does throw up considerable problems for the analysis of asafo oral histories. These obstacles are exacerbated by the cross-generational nature of company narratives, which have been handed down through several subsequent members with their own contexts and priorities. As will be discussed below, triangulation with other sources was critical for unpacking the methodological complexities of these interviews.

I was supported by local research assistants, some of whom came from the towns where we were working. This was the case in Apam (with Joseph Dadzie) in the Ekumfi district (with Abeku Adams) and in Mumford (with Isaac Ansah). In these contexts, I received support and translation from individuals who – although they were not themselves actively involved in an asafo company – had their own interests in local histories. The absolute professional integrity of these three men notwithstanding, it is possible that their relationship to their own communities had some influence on our conversations with asafo representatives. The remaining interviews were conducted with support from William Kobina Otoo and Okyere Ramzy. Both had their origins elsewhere in southern Ghana, but both still had their own approaches to the asafo and issues concerning spirituality and culture more broadly. I am indebted to all the above for their patient explanation of complex cultural phenomena both during and after our interviews. Regardless, the evidence gathered through our oral history sessions should be viewed through the prism of both their and my positionality.

As a white outsider, there were certainly topics that asafo members were less comfortable discussing with me. In particular, the nature of asafo spirituality and company deities. Such matters were sometimes obfuscated in order to protect the integrity of these spiritual actors, as will be discussed further in Chapter Three. It should be remembered, therefore, that there were areas of company history and culture which I was not able to access. It may well be the case that Fante researchers could elicit greater nuance on these esoteric details. Ultimately, the decision of whether to share such knowledge remains the right of asafo companies.

Nevertheless, there is much utility to be gained from asafo oral histories. My interviews with asafo elders were carefully triangulated against archival sources and previous oral histories conducted by the AHP in order to draw out the pertinent thematic and substantive detail which underpins the arguments laid out here. Where possible, I have endeavoured to provide multiple perspectives throughout this thesis, especially when asafo sources contradict each other. Yet by examining oral histories and archival material in tangent it is possible to infer which details can be taken as accurate reflections of historical events. Where my own interviews were triangulated with interviews conducted by the AHP over twenty years prior, it was possible to identify which elements had been subject to change in local narratives and which remained consistent. Oral histories have also illuminated cultural specificities which were referenced in colonial correspondence but frequently misunderstood or misinterpreted. In doing so, using oral histories has allowed for a richer understanding of the contexts within which the asafo operated. Discussions with asafo representatives have also pointed me towards events or details which would have been challenging to identify in archival material without local knowledge. Even when topics introduced in oral histories diverged from other sources, they contributed to a broader comprehension of the company system which was critical in the writing of this thesis.

The thesis follows a broadly chronological thrust, while also being organised thematically. The first and last chapters bookend the temporal limits of this project, beginning with the emergence of the asafo company system and its early activity on the Gold Coast and ending with the terminal phase of British colonial rule. The aim is to provide the reader with a clear sense of the rise and decline of asafo militarism in order better to contextualise the internecine violence which occurred across such a long stretch of time. Yet chapters are also organised in line with the cultural aspects of the asafo so integral to the company system. Although most of these phenomena were at play throughout all of asafo history, they are disaggregated in order to explain the complexities of the various spheres of influence within which the asafo resonated. As such, Chapter One considers the emergence of the asafo, the dynamics of military culture on the Gold Coast, the interaction of companies with British power, and the beginning of colonial regulation. Chapter Two explores the material and verbal forms through which warrior identities were expressed, namely flags, emblems, lyrics and oaths, which both provoked and memorialised violence. Chapter Three contextualises the use of these forms in festivals and funerals, as well as in their engagement with spiritual actors and rituals. Chapter Four focuses on gender and the body, unpacking women's positions within the asafo and the ways in which gender refracted through company violence. Finally, Chapter Five analyses asafo activity through the prism of space and place, demonstrating how local cartographies dictated company engagement and how increased colonial restrictions on public space towards the end of the period of colonial rule limited the opportunity for asafo expression.

Chapter One

Military Culture on the Gold Coast and the Birth of the Fante Asafo

The inter-asafo *amanko* which plagued the Gold Coast Colony in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries must be understood in the context of regional histories prior to formal British colonial rule. Much of the culture of violence and military identity that became so provocative in the period of colonial rule were born out of the social processes inherent in the Atlantic trade in gold and, subsequently, enslaved people. The growth of military culture in the wake of this political flux paved the way for the consolidation of the asafo company system in its modern form. Yet it is critical also to investigate the extent to which the discursive universes of individual asafo companies grew out of this period. Indeed, it is this cultural detail which can be understood as having contributed to the ongoing prevalence of violence among the asafo after their involvement in formal military activity decreased. This chapter examines the historical contexts within which asafo company culture developed. After consideration of the period prior to the late eighteenth century, it explores the genesis of the asafo, with reference to the ways in which these origins have been understood by companies themselves. The focus then shifts to a more detailed investigation of their relationship with the British forts and their inhabitants from the late eighteenth century. This includes the mythologization of British figures, asafo involvement with British military expeditions, and the early restriction of asafo activity by an administration increasingly frustrated with the civil disorder that the company system provoked. Above all, the chapter serves to demonstrate that although asafo infrastructure existed before the eighteenth century, company identities were often forged towards the end

of the era of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, and in the early years of legitimate commerce and colonial rule.

Prior to the mid-nineteenth century, the asafo companies of the Fante seaside towns appear in the historical record only sporadically. Reconstructing asafo activity from their birth up to this point is largely dependent on the accounts written by European traders and other visitors to the area. The establishment of the Dutch at Fort Lijdzaamheid (Fort Patience) in Apam, and Fort Nassau at Moree until 1868 means that detail from these towns before the transfer of the forts to the British is not regularly deployed in this thesis. Given the position of Cape Coast as the headquarters of the African Company and subsequent British administrations on the Gold Coast, much of the available evidence is concerned with the companies of this town, although effort has been made to include detail about the smaller coastal towns.

The Gold Coast Before the Eighteenth Century

The stretch of Atlantic coast between Cape Coast and Apam underwent significant change in the centuries preceding formal British colonial rule. An area which had been sparsely populated with small rural communities of Guan and Etsi peoples became a string of bustling, dynamic towns.¹ By the sixteenth century, a collection of small coastal polities dominated the littoral region: Eguafo, Fetu, Asebu, Borbor Fante, Abrem, Wassa, and Acron. In the centuries that followed, a degree of cultural homogeneity became apparent along the coastal littoral. Although the complexity of this development should not be undermined, two important processes were paramount; the trade in gold and enslaved peoples across the Atlantic, and the expansion of the Fante. The interaction between these two factors set the stage upon which the asafo would become leading actors. European

¹ John Kofi Fynn, 'The Pre-Borbor Fante States', *Sankofa* 1 (1975).

presence on the coast began with the arrival in 1471 of the Portuguese, driven by a quest for riches and legends of a Christian patriarch, Prester John. Focused around Fort São Jorge da Mina – later Elmina Castle - Portuguese trade infrastructure was built primarily around the gold industry. Due in part to their naval supremacy, Portugal enjoyed a near monopoly over Atlantic trade for almost a hundred years, although there were occasional trade voyages by the English. From the 1630s, northern European powers began to compete in the market: the English, Danes, Dutch, Swedes, Brandenburgers and French. In 1637 the Dutch West India Company (WIC), which Daaku argues was ‘better organised and equipped for the trade than any of their predecessors’, captured Elmina and ousted the Portuguese to become the dominant European merchant power.² However, this attempted monopoly was brief. Thornton writes that ‘the Dutch had been incapable of maintaining the monopoly they had wrested from the Portuguese’.³ As a result, the two centuries which followed were characterised by intense competition between European nations, all seeking to gain alliances with local African communities to facilitate their own commercial interests, first in gold and then increasingly from the turn of eighteenth century, in slaves. While the traffic in enslaved peoples was already well established elsewhere in Western Africa prior to this point, gold remained the dominant export until it was overtaken by slaves in the opening decades of the eighteenth century, a result of ‘the vast market for slaves created by European capital in the New World’.⁴ Early European cartographies which carved up the Guinea coast according to their perceived most desirable export, the Grain Coast, the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast and the Slave Coast, gradually disintegrated in the face of the expanding plantation economy in the Americas. In the first decade of the eighteenth century, an average of 8,000 enslaved people a year were exported across the Atlantic from

² Kwame Yeboa Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast 1600-1720: A Study of the African Reaction to the European Trade* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1970), p 10.

³ John Thornton, *Africa and Africans in the Making of the Atlantic World, 1400-1680* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1992), p 64.

⁴ Walter Rodney, ‘Gold and Slaves on the Gold Coast’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 10 (1969), p 15.

the Gold Coast, most departing from the port towns of Elmina, Cape Coast, and Anomabo.⁵ This shift in commercial focus served to further competition between European traders, most dominant of whom were the Dutch WIC and the British through the Royal African Company (RAC), the later Company of Merchants Trading to Africa (the Company), and from 1698 onwards a minority of private British traders known as the ten percent men. Rivalry between these merchant representatives were further frustrated by periods of Anglo-Dutch warfare throughout the seventeenth century.

The impact of international trade on local communities of the Gold Coast and its hinterland cannot be overstated. Commercial power refracted across the region in ways which reformulated social organisations and hierarchies. From at least the early fifteenth century, Akan societies were engaged in gold and kola trade with Sudanese empires to the north, while 'the rise and fall of empires in western Sudan kept pushing peoples southwards nearer and into the forest zone'.⁶ Upon their arrival on the Gold Coast, the Portuguese were able to tap into the existing trade infrastructure between Akan communities and the north.⁷ In pace with European commercial expansion, Sudanic trade grew in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, an increase which Kea understands as 'linked to the expanding commercial activities of Dyula mercantile groups in the Western and Central Sudan'.⁸ Throughout the seventeenth century, the trade routes from the coast through the gold mines of the Pra-Offin basin and on to the northern markets were dominated by the so-called Akani trading organisation. So substantial was their grasp on the gold trade that by

⁵ Paul E. Lovejoy, *Transformations in Slavery: A History of Slavery in Africa*, 3rd edition (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 2012), p 57.

⁶ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, p 4.

⁷ Ivor Wilks, 'Wangara, Akan and Portuguese in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: The Matter of Bitu', *Journal of African History* 23: 3 (1982), and 'Wangara, Akan and Portuguese in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries: The Struggle for Trade', *Journal of African History* 23: 4 (1982).

⁸ Ray A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1982), p 12.

the middle of the seventeenth century, 'it was estimated that they sold two-thirds of the gold that the European trading companies exported annually from the Gold Coast'.⁹

Competition for gold, the mines of which were controlled by interior polities, required Europeans to enter into trade alliances with Africans. For much of the seventeenth century, captains of Akani trade groups residing on the coast acted as brokers between the caravan merchants and the European companies in the port towns. Captains had the power to 'forbid members of his captaincy from trading with his factors' and were compensated for their facilitation by the Europeans dependant on their services.¹⁰ Contracts and treaties with coastal polities and inland states were also critical to allow the flourishing of trade.

European companies were obliged to pay ground rents in the areas where they built their forts and factories, depending on coastal communities for support against attacks. On the central Gold Coast, the polities of Eguafu, Fetu, Asebu and Fante all entered into alliances with European merchants which allowed the latter to gain footholds on the coast.¹¹ Yet contractual relationships were not always considered binding by many coastal Africans, who 'at best interpreted them as agreements which only gave the Europeans a share in their trade'.¹² As opportunities for employment, wealth and status born out of the gold trade grew, the coastal port towns became increasingly cosmopolitan. Although this trend was already in motion in the sixteenth century, 'by 1660 each principal port had a big daily market where a range of commodities were bought and sold'.¹³ These thriving economies attracted those wishing to trade, as well as masons, carpenters, bricklayers and other artisans required by the inhabitants of the forts and the local populations. European companies also needed intermediaries to promote their interests among polities further

⁹ Ibid, p 248 and pp 249 – 287.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 262.

¹¹ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, ch 3; Harvey M. Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans in West Africa: Elminans and Dutchmen on the Gold Coast During the Eighteenth Century* (American Philosophical Society: Philadelphia, 1989).

¹² Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, p 59.

¹³ Kea, *Settlements*, p 57.

inland. Within this dynamic population certain individuals rose to prominence, often referred to as ‘merchant princes’. Men such as John Kabes of Komenda, John Konny of Elmina, John Currantee at Anomabo, and Cudjo Caboceer at Cape Coast grew to exert significant influence over the port towns and their immediate interior in the latter years of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth.¹⁴ The latter, also known as Birempong Kojo (from *obirempong*: big man), was a ‘paid agent of the Royal African Company’ whose influence grew so compelling that his descendants held the position of Cape Coast *amanhin* (town chiefs).¹⁵ His lineage and the authority of his progenitors speaks to the hybrid nature of coastal towns. Political power was derived not from ascribed local status but from status acquired from interaction with the European fort.

Many of the European companies became engaged with local politics on the coast. Despite the reticence to sell firearms to locals in the sixteenth and first half of the seventeenth century, in part because ‘officially, the Portuguese were forbidden to sell firearms to non-Christians’, this practice did increase from the 1650s onwards.¹⁶ The introduction of firearms into the region, alongside competition for control of a slice of the gold trade, had substantial implications for the Gold Coast and the interior. Smaller states on the coast went to war in an attempt to gain a foothold in commercial dealings. European involvement in such conflicts often complicated matters, most notably in the case of the Komenda wars of the late seventeenth century.¹⁷ Inland, the proliferation of firearms allowed for territorial expansion and the growth of centralised states such as Akwamu and Denkyira. Akwamu extended its dominance over the Accra coastal area and east to Ouidah

¹⁴ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, ch 6; David Henige, ‘John Kabes of Komenda: An Early African Entrepreneur and State Builder’, *Journal of African History* 18: 1 (1977).

¹⁵ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 37; See also Augustus Lavinus Casely-Hayford, ‘A Genealogical History of Cape Coast Stool Families’, Unpublished Doctoral Thesis: SOAS, University of London (1992), pp 58-92.

¹⁶ Kea, ‘Firearms and Warfare’, p 186.

¹⁷ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, pp 78- 95; Robin Law, ‘The Komenda Wars, 1694-1700: A Revised Narrative’, *History in Africa* 34 (2007).

on the Slave Coast by the end of the seventeenth century.¹⁸ Denkyira too expanded rapidly in the mid-seventeenth century, spreading out from the Pra-Offin basin both north through the forest and south to the coast, contributing to the decline of the Akani trading organisation in the process. As Shumway explains, ‘the Akani could not compete because they lacked military strength in a region that began to rapidly militarise in the late seventeenth century’.¹⁹ Atlantic trade was dependant on positive relationships with the new centralised states of the interior. The decline of Akani caravans and trade networks also provided further opportunities for new forms of social mobility, allowing for increased power for middlemen and the ‘merchant princes’ of the coast. Underpinning these developments was an atmosphere of instability which extended through the second half of the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth, further exacerbated by the growth of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. War became a predominant feature of coastal life.

Early Military Culture on the Gold Coast

Manifestations of military organisation in the seventeenth-century Gold Coast have been examined in some detail by Ray Kea, who tracks a shift in structures of warfare throughout this period. Perhaps the most decisive of these developments were the move towards a *levée en masse*, and the introduction of firearms in the latter half of the century, which led to a ‘growing military imbalance among the competitive central townships’.²⁰ These changes are evident in the descriptions by European merchants such as Jean Barbot, a French slave trader who visited the Gold Coast in the 1670s and 1680s, who wrote that, ‘all the Blacks in general are soldiers, as long as the war lasts, if they are able to bear arms, or have any given

¹⁸ Ivor Wilks, ‘The Rise of the Akwamu Empire, 1650-1710’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 3: 2 (1957).

¹⁹ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 40.

²⁰ Kea, *Settlements*, p 130.

them by their chief; but as soon as the war is ended, every man returns to his particular employment'.²¹

In the coastal towns, the military infrastructure which would pave the way for the modern *asafo* was evident from the early seventeenth century. Pieter de Marees, a Dutch trader who visited the Gold Coast in 1601, reported the existence of commoner soldiers (*okofokum*), in the coastal states.²² Often referred to by the Portuguese term *mancebos* ('young men' or 'youth'), the tendency of *okofokum* (lit. a fighter in a group) to engage in festivals, consume copious amounts of alcohol and fight their rivals with abandon certainly resonates with the *asafo* of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. *Okofokum* were also organised into distinct territorial groupings, representing an area or ward of the port towns, much as the *asafo* would be. Yet unlike the company system in its later manifestation, *okofokum* appear to have acted as a professional occupation. Datta and Porter have also identified earlier military structures on the Gold Coast which bear similarities with the *asafo*, such as the *manceroes* who can be found in written sources from as far back as 1645. Likely an etymological corruption from the Portuguese *mancebo* in conjunction with the Fante *mbrantse* - both words signifying youth - these bodies of young men appear to have been divided into wards, involved in warfare and prone to outbreaks of heavy drinking and violence.²³ Another similarity between the two institutions, as noted by the Fante intellectual John Mensah Sarbah, is that both also exercised a degree of legal jurisdiction through tribunals - a clear indication that the role of the *manceroes*, like the *asafo*, extended beyond the military.²⁴ As with the *okofokum*, it is highly probable that the *manceroes* were a

²¹ P.E.H. Hair et al, *Barbot on Guinea: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678-1712, Vol I* (Ashgate Pub Co: Surrey 1992) p 610.

²² Pieter de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea (1602)*, translated and edited by Albert van Dantzig and Adam Jones (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1987) 191-2.

²³ Datta and Porter, 'The *Asafo* System', p 288-290.

²⁴ Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution*, p 31.

precursor to the asafo, a basis from which the military aspects of the company system were developed.

By the turn of the eighteenth century, warfare had become more frequent, with wider participation and more sophisticated tactics. Smaller military forces linked to royal houses gave way to commoner armies. The new centralized states of the interior had also been characterised by intense military organisation. Akwamu and Denkyira were probably the first polities to employ the *levée en masse*, and ‘the wholesale adoption of missile tactics.’²⁵ Such tactics were reinforced by ritual notions of warriorship. As Daaku argues, the symbolic use of the sword and the executioner’s knife as sacred objects in Denkyira provided a ‘convenient means to render mystical the military power of the state founders’.²⁶ The expansion of these highly organised states in the forest interior only exacerbated the propensity for war on the coast.

Kea’s analysis of military developments largely omits to mention the cultural aspects of warfare which would reverberate throughout the modern formulation of asafo companies. European merchants and visitors to the Gold Coast in the era of Atlantic commerce frequently recorded descriptions of warfare which they had witnessed or heard about. Many of these accounts focused on the striking appearance of Akan warriors, many of whom were the organisational predecessors to the asafo company system. As early as 1693, coastal people waging war were described in vivid terms by Michael Hemmersam, a goldsmith from Nuremberg working for the WIC in Elmina. Of local warriors he wrote, ‘some drape themselves with feathers, ox-tails and elephant tails, or wear all kinds of horns. They paint and smear themselves in all kinds of colours, just so that they may look cruel’.²⁷ Although Hemmersam’s account has been criticised as being poor in ethnographic detail, this imagery

²⁵ Kea, *Settlements*, p 156.

²⁶ Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, p 156.

²⁷ Adam Jones, *German Sources for West African History 1599-1699* (Franz Steiner Verlag: Weisbaden, 1983), p 116.

is reflected in the narratives of many of his contemporaries.²⁸ Wilhelm Müller, writing about Fetu peoples in the 1660s from his position as a pastor at Fort Frederiksborg, notes the wearing of caps decorated with ‘two gilt horns, with teeth of a sea-horse or precious red shells; they may also hang from it a horsetail, black, white or dyed red or blue’.²⁹ Around a century later, Ludwig Rømer also described the tendency for Gold Coast warriors to adorn themselves with elaborate outfits, but also noted explicitly the intense claims over certain forms of dress, wherein ‘if a Black finds out that another has an outfit like his in which to go war, he will most certainly change his, in order not to be mistaken for the other one’.³⁰

Müller’s description of celebratory practices among Fetu warriors – which he terms ‘days of triumph’ – also bear a striking resemblance to the victory parades of the asafo a century or so later.³¹ In his vivid descriptions, severed heads are exhibited and desecrated, tales of martial prowess are recited and the most impressive soldiers are festooned with armour and cloth. Müller records the presence of musical displays where, ‘the drums are vigorously played, the horns or elephant tusks are loudly blown and all the people rejoice beyond measure, shooting, exulting, dancing and capering. They continue this pantomime until the inhabitants of the place have presented them with spirits or palm wine’. Moreover, the presence of spiritual actors and objects are also evident in Müller’s portrayal, wherein ‘*summàn* or *fitiso*’ were brought to the celebrations by the crowd. Barbot also noted the prevalence of post-battle festivities which celebrated ‘the glory of their nation’, sometimes lasting as long as ‘fifteen to twenty days.’³² These jubilant celebrations of military victory certainly remained with the evolution into the asafo system. De Marees also referenced the use of ritual talismans by coastal warriors, who would ‘take their Rosaries, with which they

²⁸ Ibid, p 98.

²⁹ Ibid, p 196 (Muller).

³⁰ Ludwig Ferdinand Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea [1760]*, translated and edited by Selena Alexrod Winsnes (Diasporic Africa Press: New York, 2013), p 166.

³¹ Jones, *German Sources*, p 199.

³² Hair et al, *Barbot on Guinea*, p 607.

make their *Fetisso* [i.e., fetish], and hang them around their bodies: they think that if they wear them, their *Fetissos* will protect them and that they will not be slain'.³³ The aesthetic and related cosmological facets of Gold Coast militarism were clearly well established in the region before the advent of the asafó, providing a strong cultural basis which the company system could draw from.

The Growth of the Fante

The period of increased competition for the gold trade, endemic warfare and constant renegotiation between the coastal polities and interior kingdoms saw the transformation of the so-called *borbor* (lit. 'big walk' or migration) Fante from one of many smaller states into a dominant littoral force. Around the same period that the Portuguese began their foray into Gold Coast trade, the *borbor* Fante were migrating south, oral traditions identifying their origins in the Bono-speaking Tekyiman region on the forest-savanna fringe. Moving south 'under the leadership of three war-lords (*asahin*), Oburumankoma, Odapagyan and Oson', they settled first in Kwaman and then eventually in Mankessim, sometime before the fifteenth century.³⁴ Shortly after Mankessim became the capital of the Fante people, new waves of migration dispersed the community further, to Abora, Ekumfi and elsewhere. Although Mankessim remained the political and spiritual centre of the Fante peoples, home to the oracular deity Nananompow, new polities grew along the coastal region. It has been argued that this spread of Borbor Fante states remained tightly linked. Fynn suggests that 'before they left Mankessim to form territorial states, the various groups left a chief apparently to be in charge of the Borbor Fante shrine, *Nananom Pow*'.³⁵ This trend would

³³ De Marees, *Description and Historical Account*, p 89.

³⁴ AHP, J. K. Fynn, 'Who are the Fante?' Paper presented at the Seminar on Ghana Culture, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana (1975), p 11.

³⁵ J. K. Fynn, 'The Political System of the Fante of Ghana during the Pre-Colonial Period', *Universitas*, 9: 1 (1987), p 111.

continue during the period of Fante expansion in the following centuries. Yet even before this move towards regional dominance, the Fante are argued to have been a militarily organised state. In Fynn's words, 'as an intrusive group surrounded by real or potential enemies, the Borbor Fante saw themselves not merely as a body of settlers but warriors. Indeed, they regarded themselves as being in a permanent state of war with their neighbours, and their primary consideration was to find military solutions to their problems'.³⁶ The extent to which this is a retrospective reflection based on Fante perceptions of military supremacy in oral histories is debatable, but this depiction certainly reflects the extent of warmongering resulting in Fante dominance on the coast.³⁷

Seventeenth-century Fante political organisation has been subject to varying models of analysis. European sources cast Fante as an aberrant political system, a decentralised polity described as a confederacy or 'commonwealth'.³⁸ This approach has been reproduced in much of the historiographical literature on Fante, something which Law critiques as lacking 'a solid empirical base'.³⁹ Political influence among the Fante at this time was stratified. To the extent that the hierarchy was linear, the most important position was that of the Brafo, the Fante head of state who resided at Mankessim and commanded the national army until at least the eighteenth century. Alongside the Brafo sat the Curranteers, or councillors, between which the balance of power has also been debated. Law suggests that 'while the Brafo was constrained by the Curranteers, the reverse was also the case'.⁴⁰ In Mankessim, influence also stemmed from the oracle Nananom Mpow. Beyond the capital, disparate Fante states were governed by Caboceers, or captains, who travelled to Mankessim for critical political discussions as well as for the celebration of festivals.

³⁶ Ibid, p 111.

³⁷ Robin Law, 'Fante 'Origins': The Problematic Evidence of "Tradition", in Toby Green and Benedetta Rossi (eds), *Landscapes, Sources and Intellectual Projects of the West African Past* (Brill: Leiden, 2018).

³⁸ William Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea*, (Frank Cass: London, 4th ed, 1967 [orig. 1705]), p 5 and 57.

³⁹ Robin Law, 'Government of the Fante in the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of African History* 54: 1 (2014), p 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p 42.

Whereas other historians have debated the degree to which decentralisation impinged upon stability of the coastal polity, Law argues that ‘the central authority of the capital Mankessim in the seventeenth century had greater substance than earlier historians have assumed’, and that the extent of political divisions among the Fante have been exaggerated.⁴¹ Yet as the extent of Fante controlled territory expanded, and the focus of European commerce became the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, Mankessim’s influence declined. The predominance of Anomabo, the Fante outpost for Atlantic trade, and the move of the Brafo’s seat to Abura after the 1750s, fundamentally altered the balance of power on what had become the Fante coast.

The spread of Fante control manifested throughout the period of endemic warfare towards the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, although Law contends that process of expansion began earlier.⁴² From the early 1600s, Fante was engaging in conflict with its neighbours. Although Asebu was not brought under proper Fante control until in 1708, it was invaded in 1618, 1653, and 1667. Likewise, Fetu, which was finally conquered in the middle of the eighteenth century, endured Fante attacks in 1679 and 1688. Nevertheless, it is undeniable that Fante was a key player in the era of coastal conflicts. Shumway locates the period of recurring warfare as beginning with ‘a joint Borbor Fante-Sebu attack on Fetu in 1688’, which incorporated an army of all able-bodied men available.⁴³ Yet warfare, she argues, allowed for ‘coalition building’ rather than simply territorial expansion. As the slave trade gained traction, ‘the victors could offer military protection to communities threatened with the constant risk of capture and enslavement, and thereby accumulate political dependants’.⁴⁴ The expansion of Akwamu, and Denkyira

⁴¹ Ibid, p 49.

⁴² Robin Law, ‘Fante Expansion Reconsidered: Seventeenth-Century Origins’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 14 (2012).

⁴³ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 43. On panyarring see Paul E. Lovejoy, ‘Pawnship, Debt, and ‘Freedom’ in Atlantic Africa During the Era of the Slave Trade: A Reassessment’, *Journal of African History* 55: 1 (2014).

⁴⁴ Ibid, p 96.

exacerbated the risk of capture through *panyarring* (the seizure of people or property in response to unpaid debt) and other forms of enslavement, and in 1701 Asante defeated Denkyira to become the dominant interior kingdom, further underscoring the need for protection.⁴⁵ Fante's military capabilities and sphere of influence grew in this period, as Eguafo, Fetu, Asebu, Acron and Agona came under the control of Fante warlords and their independent royal institutions crumbled. This transition was eased by intermarriage between old and new authorities: 'according to tradition the mother of Kwegya Akwa [a Fante warlord] married an Asebu chief, thereby establishing kinship ties between families in the Borbor Fante towns of Anomabo and Asebu'.⁴⁶ The turbulence of the early eighteenth century allowed for the unification of the central Gold Coast under the umbrella of Fante culture. Shaped by the insecurity generated by the expanding slave trade, a broader sense of what it was to be Fante emerged. It is in this context that we must locate the origins of the modern asafo company system.

The Origins of the Asafo

Questions surrounding the origins of the asafo have dominated the literature on the company system. This fixation is in part indicative of a broader 'invention of tradition' style dialogue, whereby the underlying focus is on proving that the asafo are either indigenous in origin or influenced by external factors.⁴⁷ In this light, the attribution of the asafo to purely indigenous roots is as much a political endeavour as it is a historical one. Given the multifaceted nature of the institution, with elements seemingly so distinctly European yet centred around complex Akan notions of spiritual power, the positionality of the asafo is hotly contested. From an aesthetic perspective, the asafo companies reflect a long-lasting

⁴⁵ T. C. McCaskie, 'Denkyira in the Making of Asante c. 1600-1720', *Journal of African History* 48: 1 (2007).

⁴⁶ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 102.

⁴⁷ Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1983).

trans-cultural interaction specific to the Atlantic world, although Shumway has criticised art historians for not explicitly acknowledging this material legacy.⁴⁸ Many of the asafo company shrines (*posuban*) bear similarities to the slave forts and castles built by the European, and indeed, many have at times been direct copies from this architecture.⁴⁹ The famous and distinctive appliqué flags, emblazoned with the Union Jack in the top left hand corner, can be seen to pay homage to the British tendency to march into battle with national banners held aloft.⁵⁰ The highly organised, hierarchical military structure of the asafo in war has, as we shall see, also been attributed to organisational attempts by European merchants to regulate local soldiers. Yet asafo material culture, organisation and the more esoteric aspects of the institution all bear the hallmarks of Fante culture. Shumway's assertion that the expansion and refinement of Fante identity was itself a product of historical processes which included European trade reinforces the fact that attempts to label the asafo company system as either internal or external are inherently flawed.

Attempts to trace the company system back to its origins are further complicated by the paucity of evidence. Although visitors to the coast in the seventeenth century did make passing references to military groups which appear in some regards to be similar to the asafo of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these do not necessarily provide a clear chronology of the evolution of the company system. It is tempting to accept that such details may be confined to the murky depths of the past. Indeed, Nigerian scholar B. I. Chukwukere, after analysing the genesis of the asafo for a good nine pages, resorted to imploring his readers, 'what sense is there in speculating?'⁵¹ Yet there is much that can be learned from both written and oral sources on the origins of the asafo.

⁴⁸ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 145.

⁴⁹ Ross, 'Come and Try'

⁵⁰ Labi, 'Transformation of European Forts'.

⁵¹ B. I. Chukwukere, 'Perspectives on the Asafo Institution in Southern Ghana', *Journal of African Studies* 7: 1 (1980), p 48.

Whether the asafo is an indigenous phenomenon or was strongly influenced by the European forts is a question complicated by efforts of some scholars in the 1970s and 1980s to categorize such a noteworthy institution as uniquely Ghanaian. In one of the few regularly cited articles on the company system, Datta and Porter encapsulate this tension between local and foreign claims to the asafo, albeit at a time when the external/internal debate was still being developed.⁵² It is of note that of the literature cited by Datta and Porter, not all those who have viewed the asafo as wholly autochthonous are Ghanaian scholars. Scholars such as J. O. Annobil and J. E. Ekubin are supplemented by, for example, the American anthropologist James Christensen.⁵³ Nevertheless, all of these scholars should be seen in the context of the zeitgeist of decolonization and independence, wherein historiographical trends focused on anti-colonial resistance and the value of indigenous institutions. Nevertheless, given the prominence of military culture in the region prior to the eighteenth century, it seems reasonable to conclude that, as Christensen has argued, the asafo represent the next stage in the evolution of Akan warfare and ‘not a copy of the European military pattern’.⁵⁴ Given that the European presence on the coast was pretty well established by this time, it is perhaps unsurprising that many elements of the company system appear to be borrowed from the aesthetics of Atlantic power.

Yet, the continuity in other, perhaps less explicitly military, elements of the company system should not be neglected. George Nelson Preston also emphasises those aspects of the asafo system which can traced back to ‘ancient Akan origin’.⁵⁵ Through an analysis of material culture, Preston argues that the essence of the asafo is located in its ritual power, embodied in the objects so integral to the company system. Although the

⁵² Datta and Porter, ‘The *Asafo* System’.

⁵³ J. A. Annobil and J. E. Ekubin, *Mfantse Amambu Mum Bi* (Cape Coast, 1944); James Boyd Christensen, *Double Descent Among the Fanti*, (Human Relations Area Files: New Haven, 1954).

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p 5.

⁵⁵ George Nelson Preston, ‘Perseus and Medusa in Africa: Military Art in Fanteland, 1838-1972’, *African Arts* 8: 3 (1975), p 36.

notion of 'ancient' is inevitably vague, the brief references to aesthetic and cosmological aspects of militarism by European visitors in the seventeenth century do indicate a connection between the asafo and their forebearers. Yet these sources do not address the company identities which dominated asafo self-perceptions from the eighteenth century onwards. It is necessary, therefore, to turn towards the histories from the asafo themselves. Traditions of origin, transmitted orally and passed down from generation to generation, offer an alternative framework from which to explore the nature of asafo beginnings.

Oral histories of the Fante asafo companies, though rich in thematic content, have little to offer on the topic of explicit chronology of asafo origins. Vague sentiments such as 'time immemorial', 'in ancient times', or 'long, long, ago', frequently employed in retellings of the past offer little except a romantic air of mystery. Yet histories of origin have substantive utility beyond simply providing the dates from which the asafo were present on the coast. Both locally produced pamphlets and interviews conducted with current asafo elders provide explanations of how, why, and from where the company system came to be. These accounts provide something altogether more interesting than chronologies, pointing towards the self-perceptions which have continued to inform the Fante asafo companies until the present day. In other words, asafo understandings of their beginnings are just as significant, if not more so, than scholarly investigation into the emergence of the institutions.

Local retellings of how and why the asafo came to be are as diverse as the companies they flow from. It is possible however, to find several common threads which run through a number of origin myths articulated by asafo elders across the Fante coast: virtuous sacrifice, divine provenance and an irrefutable connection with the essence of the town which they served. These three dominant themes will be explored in turn, yet it is also important to note that the creation of the asafo structure is also attributed to the militarised context of the seventeenth century examined by Kea and others.

This need for a clearly delineated military formation is perhaps the most pragmatic explanation for the rise of the asafo companies offered within local histories. It should be emphasised that conflicts between Fante communities, as well as incursions from other polities, were rife in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The asafo have therefore been understood as a response to this turmoil, providing the organised force needed to fend off advancing enemies. For some asafo histories, this began in the early migrations of the *borbor* Fante from Tekyimán.⁵⁶ During these journeys south, the frequent dangers lying in wait from opportunistic bandits and similar threats were of such intensity that the migrant Fante ‘came out with the war formation’ that would come to be known as the asafo.⁵⁷ Although other narratives transpose this threat onto the static towns and villages born out of the eventual settlement of these migrant communities, the asafo are still posited as a reaction to the fact that ‘wars among villages, towns and states were frequent’.⁵⁸

One history presented by the *oman okyeame*, town linguist, of Ekumfi Ebiram went into further detail about the creation of the specific characteristics of the asafo in response to the frequency of conflict.

In the olden days there were numerous wars. Inter-state wars were a common occurrence. As a result of the wars, it was decided to group the people of the town together to be able to fight any invaders. In order to send the message of the invaders to the people, drums were made. So the beating of the drum indicated that there is trouble or danger. Anyone who heard the beating of the drum had to run to

⁵⁶ This is in line with Fante origin myths more broadly, which emphasize processes of migration, as opposed to traditions of origin from holes in the ground or similar which suggest autochthonous peoples. See Kwaku Effah-Gyamfi, ‘Archaeological Reflections on Ghanaian Traditions of Origin’, in Kwasi Konadu and Clifford C. Campbell (eds), *The Ghana Reader: History, Culture, Politics* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2016), p 69-75; J. K. Fynn, *Oral Traditions of the Fante States*, 7 vols. (University of Ghana: Legon, 1974-6).

⁵⁷ AHP, Saltpond Tuafohen interview with Amoako Anthony, undated, Saltpond; see also Ray A. Kea, ‘“I Am Here to Plunder on the General Road”: Bandits and Banditry in the Pre-nineteenth Century Gold Coast’, in Donald Crummey (ed.), *Banditry, Rebellion and Social Protest in Africa* (James Currey: London, 1986).

⁵⁸ AHP, Dentsefo Safohen interview with Amoako Anthony, 1 August 1997, Lower Saltpond,

the meeting place of the group. The people were divided into groups, each with its own leader called *safohen*.⁵⁹

What is significant about this narrative is the reference to the division of the asafo into wards or companies with clear territorial boundaries. Datta and Porter trace written evidence of the ward system at Cape Coast to the 1770s and 1780s, which represents a shift away from the more loosely organised presence of the *okofokum* or *manceroes*.⁶⁰ These divisions of the town asafo into various companies is sometimes explained through differing waves of migration, but this thesis inevitably carries more weight in dynamic port towns such as Anomabo, than in smaller, more homogenous communities like Ekumfi Ebiram. Regardless, this location of the asafo in a period of social and political flux ridden with warfare corresponds with the estimations of the genesis of the institution made by scholars relying predominantly on sources from European travellers and merchants. Elaborations on the need for a decentralised military organisation in oral traditions only serves to support this thesis.

In some cases, asafo origin stories have become entangled with Biblical notions of divine provenance. Speaking with a representative of the University of Ghana's Asafo History Project in 1997, one *safohen* argued that the company system 'was God's creation', which started with the beginning of the world.⁶¹ For No. 1 Company Moree (Bentil), the borrowing from Abrahamic narratives is more explicit. Bentil claim to have their heritage in the Israelite tribes whose escape from captivity is recorded in the Book of Exodus. Their ancestors are said to have been led from Egypt by their ancestor Kwegya, in search of the promised land.⁶² Here the story becomes intertwined with local historical consciousness, as

⁵⁹ AHP, Oman Okyeame interview with Ebenezer Monney, 10 September 1997, Ekumfi Ebiram.

⁶⁰ Datta and Porter, 'The Asafo System', p 284.

⁶¹ AHP, Tuafu Safohen, interview with Ebenezer Monney, 29 July 1997, Ekumfi Otuum.

⁶² Bentil Asafohen and Okyeame, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Moree, 16 March 2018.

Kwegya is also understood as brother of the fabled giant Asebu Amanfi.⁶³ Similar narratives argue that it was under Asebu Amanfi's instruction that Kwegya settled Moree town, wherein he became the chief fisherman and founded Bentil Company.⁶⁴ This layering of local traditions and Christian sensibilities demonstrates just how murky oral histories can be.

Nevertheless, asafo origin myths are also instrumental in reinforcing company identities. They speak to a value system which exalts the virtues of sacrifice, bravery, and military strength. Recounted during episodes of initiation and evident in material culture and ritual activities, these myths continue to bear weight in contemporary Fante society. A poignant example of this can be found in the widespread legend of Agya Ahor, a man who exemplified selfless commitment to his community.⁶⁵ Although there are inevitable variations in the story of Agya Ahor, the events that elevated his position from everyday citizen to an almost saint-like status are the same in essence. In the early days of the Fante nation, a catastrophic plague afflicted the people. Death, destruction and suffering were widespread. In a desperate attempt to halt the famine's rapid spread, the elders appealed to the gods for advice, as was customary in times of crisis. Through the mouthpiece of an *okomfo* (a ritual specialist or priest) 'the gods requested a human sacrifice whose blood would purify the community, and as such rid their society from the grip of famine. The only man to volunteer his body and his life was Agya Ahor, who paid the ultimate price in order to save his people.

Variations of this parable can be found across what is now south-central Ghana and it is recited during libation and honoured within the Akan calendar. The sacrifice of Ahor is

⁶³ C. C. Reindorf, *The History of the Gold Coast and Asante: 2nd Edition* (Ghana Universities Press: Accra, 1966 [orig. 1895]), p 20.

⁶⁴ This also accounts for Moree's position under the paramount stool of Asebu as detailed in Ranghild Overå, 'Institutions, Mobilities and Resilience in the Fante Migratory Fisheries of West Africa', (CMI Working Papers, 2001).

⁶⁵ Agya, or Egya, translates as father, as in *egyabosom*, the father's deity.

ritually commemorated through the *ahobaa* festival throughout a range of Akan societies of which the *asafo* play a key part.⁶⁶ *Ahobaa*, understood as to honour Ahor, a shortening of the expression *yerekɔbo n'abaa do*, 'we are going to honour Ahor'.⁶⁷ In some cases, it is also understood explicitly as a launch pad from which the *asafo* was born. One captain, or *safohen*, of the Ekumfi Otuam *asafo* stated that the actions of Agya Ahor directly inspired the formation of the company system. He explained that, 'after he had been sacrificed, all the men in the states wanted to follow what Ahor has done. So the young men all came together to do things to demand bravery.'⁶⁸ Such an interpretation of *asafo* origins repositions the need for pragmatic military organisation as a secondary motivation for the creation of the company system. Instead, the *asafo* represent the perpetual memorialization of a man who gave his life to protect his kin, a sacrifice which is re-enacted in the continued existence of the company system.

Even those companies which emerged on the stage relatively later on in *asafo* history explain their formation as a result of acts of outstanding heroism. No. 7 Company Cape Coast (Amanful - literally, a new town), claim an origin myth which again serves to honour feats of bravery undertaken by their ancestors. It is said that shortly before the formation of Amanful Company, a ferocious leopard prowled the thick forest which then enveloped the area to the west of Cape Coast town.⁶⁹ Due to the loss of life befalling those

⁶⁶ Abura Safohen and Okomfo, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Okyere Ramzy, Abura, 20 May 2018. This link between *ahobaa* and Agya Ahor is most commonly found amongst Gomoa communities: see Anthony Ephirim-Donor, *African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Workshop among the Akan* (Hamilton Books: Lanham, MA, 2012), p 103. Ahor is also celebrated in the Agona Akwanbo festival: see A. A. Maineson and P. B. Mireku Gyimah, 'The Changing Audience of the Oral Performance in Africa: The Ghanaian Experience', *Journal of Communication and Cultures* 3: 2 (2012). Although *ahobaa* is celebrated throughout a range of Fante communities, not all now contain an explicit reference to the actions of Ahor; rather, *ahobaa* or *ahuba* acts as broader commemoration of the dead. On the *ahobaa* in Anomabo see E. H. Meds, 'Some Aspects of Periodic Ritual Ceremonies of the Anomabo Fante', *Ghana Journal of Sociology* 5: 1 (1969); for a brief but general description of the events of *ahobaa* in Fante areas, see Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution*, p 13.

⁶⁷ AHP, Tufuhene, Safohen and Asafoakyere, interview with Alex J. Wilson, Ekumfi Otuam, 7 February 1988.

⁶⁸ AHP, Akrayefo Safohen interview with Ebenezer Monney, Ekumfi Otuam, 8 June 1997. It is of note that in some versions of the Agya Ahor legend, the epidemic was limited to the Gomoa area, which includes Ekumfi Otuam as well as Apam and Mumford. It appears that the story is best preserved in this region, and therefore may have predated Fante expansion to the region.

⁶⁹ In Amanful retellings, as in Akan parlance more generally, the word tiger is used to represent a leopard.

who had the misfortune of coming face to face with the beast, the six pre-existing companies of Cape Coast tried to capture the leopard, but failed in their task. The ancestors of Amanful, who populated the area at that time, therefore took it upon themselves to launch an expedition to finally slay the big cat. In the end, 'it was the people of Number Seven Company that was able to capture the leopard and kill it, so the British Governor decided to reward them by creating that company of Amanful'.⁷⁰

The ferocity with which this story is maintained is reflected in the Amanful reaction to an attempted formation of a new asafo company in 1967, which would have been the eighth company of Cape Coast.⁷¹ This proposed group, rallying under the name Sayu, was met with open hostility from No. 7 Company (Amanful). As recounted by one elder of Amanful, as if in direct conversation with a representative from Sayu, 'it is because of their achievements that they were given the number seven, and you people. . . what achievements have you people achieved that you wanted to be the number eight?'⁷² For the Amanful at least, then, a company is required to demonstrate the virtues historically embodied by the asafo, in order to be accepted as a rightful addition to the system. The legacy of the leopard itself, proof of Amanful legitimacy, is reflected in the image of the big cat used on many of the Amanful flags, paraded at times of war and celebration. Although the formation of Amanful Company was seen to be granted to its members by the authority of British imperial rule, a process quite distinct from an organic desire to emulate the gallantry of Agya Ahor, the story brings the same message to bear on the self-perception of asafo companies. That is, that the emergence of the asafo was predicated by extraordinary feats of daring.

⁷⁰Amanful Asafohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 9 February 2018.

⁷¹Anafu elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 7 February 2018.

⁷²Amanful Asafohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 9 February 2018.

The significance of these narratives lies in their importance for asafo members today, and over the last century or so. It is unlikely that we will ever know for certain the details of Agya Ahor, or whether or not his actions prompted the first asafo companies. Yet in many ways these myths are more important to the cultural historian than endeavours to trace the military forbearers of the asafo in the seventeenth century. They are true in that they have meaning, in that they are believed and remembered. They tell us how asafo members understand themselves and their position in Fante society. What complicates them, however, is that they are continually reinterpreted in new cultural contexts.

Despite the challenges in identifying the definitive origins of the asafo system as a whole, it is possible to uncover the origins of certain companies. This is, of course, markedly easier in places where literate individuals lived and left their mark on the historical record, be these European traders or indigenous intellectuals. One of these such companies which lays claim to substantial evidence on its origins is that of No. 6 Company Cape Coast (Akrampa). Akrampa is perhaps unique among the Fante towns for being comprised of the descendants of European men and Fante women, although a similar company exists in Elmina. Due to the practice of educating the sons of European traders either in the Castle or abroad, Akrampa also has a long history of mediation between the local population and colonial powers. It is said that the name Akrampa itself is a corruption of a Portuguese word for intermediaries.⁷³ Such pre-eminence has resulted in disproportionate attention paid to the company both in British sources, and indeed, in the insights given and written by Fante informants, most of whom were members of Akrampa themselves.

Our ability to identify the birth of the Akrampa is due to the notoriety of its reputed founding father, Thomas Edward Barter, known locally as Tom Ewusi.⁷⁴ Born of an

⁷³ Akrampa Supi, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 9 March 2018. Despite many attempts to find some etymological root for the name in both Portuguese and Dutch, I have been unable to do so. Whether there is linguistic basis for this story or not, it has certainly been fiercely supported by members of Akrampa company for years.

⁷⁴ And myriad nominative variants therein.

English father and an African mother from Cape Coast, Ewusi spent the early years of his life on the Gold Coast before moving to London in around 1690. In England he was educated in 'reading, writing and the elements of the Christian faith', and was married, before leaving his wife behind and setting sail back to Cape Coast some five years later, carrying his professed Christian beliefs back with him.⁷⁵ Once reinstated in his hometown, Barter/Ewusi used his considerable skills and intellect as a trading agent working for the Royal African Company. It is here that he appears most clearly in the historical record, being sent on expeditions to polities such as Denkyira and Asante to represent English trading interests, collecting debts from local leaders, and providing advice for RAC officers on how best to negotiate with the indigenes.⁷⁶

Barter/Ewusi's status in Cape Coast society is perhaps best encapsulated by the observations of Willem Bosman, a Dutch merchant on the Gold Coast toward the end of the seventeenth century. Barter, Bosman writes, 'is very much respected, honoured and served by the principal people around him'.⁷⁷ This influence also stretched to the British agents in the town, who were apparently 'guided by him'.⁷⁸ Barter is noted to have lived in a house right next to Cape Coast Castle, 'not unlike a small fort, with a flag on it and some cannon', the proximity and appearance of which speaks to the man's engagement with British power. Important, too, is Bosman's recognition of Barter as the leader of what was essentially a military organisation: he was able to 'raise a large number of armed men, some whereof are his own slaves, and the rest free men that adhere to him'.⁷⁹ This is probably one of the

⁷⁵ Hans Werner Debrunner, *Presence and Prestige: Africans in Europe* (Basel 1979), p77; Daaku, *Trade and Politics*, p 98-99.

⁷⁶ Bayo Holsey, *Routes of Remembrance: Refashioning the Slave Trade in Ghana*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 2008); S. Tenkorang, 'The Importance of Firearms in the Struggle between Ashanti and the Coastal States, 1707-1807', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 9 (1968)

⁷⁷ Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description*, p 51.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

earliest written descriptions that can be found of the Akrampa, and speaks to its strength and influence even in the early days of the company's history.

The connection between Thomas Edward Barter, the literate merchant, and Tom Ewusi, the founder of one of the most renowned asafo companies on the coast, is often missed in written scholarship. Yet the knowledge of Ewusi's role in asafo history is prominent in oral traditions passed down by Akrampa elders. In what is probably the seminal piece of work on the asafo of the twentieth century, J. C. de Graft Johnson, Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs in the British colonial administration, Fante intellectual, and member of Akrampa himself, detailed Ewusi's role explicitly in his 1932 article on the company system. De Graft Johnson notes that Ewusi set up the Akrampa in 1665, drawing on Euro-African men 'from the Nkum and Bentsir quarters', that is from the territory of Number One and Number Four companies, respectively.⁸⁰ From his position as a powerful Euro-African broker, Ewusi created a company which – like him – straddled two continents. Even after he defected to Dutch Elmina, where he died in 1703, Ewusi's legacy lived on. Akrampa members continued to engage in a dialogue with British interests, while using their education and clout to create institutions which would further the financial and political interests of their community. As will be seen later, Akrampa held considerable sway on the actions of the Cape Coast asafo in the centuries that followed. In her discussion of the Fante asafo, Shumway argues that 'substantial evidence of asafo origins in the era of the slave trade are in the continuing traditions of what asafo companies do', including road-clearing practices and acting as local security.⁸¹ The continued influence of No. 6 Company (Akrampa), born out of Ewusi's position in the era of the gold trade, suggests that the origins of the asafo in the eighteenth and even the late seventeenth centuries, lingered on in the apparatus and the identity of the asafo. Indeed, so pronounced is Shumway's assertion

⁸⁰ De Graft Johnson, 'The Fanti Asafo', p 309-10.

⁸¹ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 146.

that the asafo were fundamentally shaped in the crucible in the era of Atlantic trade that the omission of Edward Barter in her analysis is surprising. It should be briefly noted that a similar process was at play in Elmina, where the local asafo was influenced by the Dutch presence in town.⁸² There too, a company of mixed-race men also known as Akrampa held considerable influence over the community. Although Elmina is beyond the bounds of this project, and Dutch sources are not utilized here, it must be acknowledged that the influence of European forts on the formation of the asafo extended both east and west of the Fante littoral.

The Asafo and the Oman

As the asafo emerged within coastal communities, new forms of political organisation were being consolidated in the towns that they inhabited. As mentioned above, prominent self-made men who gained wealth and influence by mediating between European forts and inland traders were afforded positions of authority in eighteenth century Gold Coast. In Cape Coast, Birempong Kojo set the wheels in motion for a new, distinctly Fante, lineage of political leaders to occupy the paramount position of *Oguaahene* (from *Oguaa*: the indigenous name for the area of Cape Coast, and *omanhene*: paramount chief). The positions of power that would be held by Birempong Kojo's descendants marked a step away from Efutu control and a strengthening of ties with other Fante states.⁸³ Birempong Kojo himself was said to be from Ekumfi. The seat of *Oguaahene* – which would be the subject of great controversy for the Cape Coast asafo in the centuries to come – was therefore a poignant representation of Cape Coast as a centre of power. In Anomabo, Eno Baisiue Kurentsi - or John Currantee as he was known to the British – also leveraged influence over European

⁸² Feinberg, *Africans and Europeans*, p 104–109.

⁸³ Yann Deffontaine, 'Pouvoir Monarchique et Création Étatique sur la Côte de l'Or au XVIIIe Siècle: Birempong Kojo et la création de l'Etat d'Oguaa (Cape Coast)' in Pierluigi Valsecchi and Fabio Viti (eds), *Mondes Akan: Identité et Pouvoir en Afrique Occidentale* (L'Harmattan: Paris, 1999).

merchants in order to gain such authority that he became *omanhene*.⁸⁴ Military power was critical to the success of such leaders, who could draw on the power of early asafo companies to bolster their authority. Kurentsi's successor, Amonu Kuma I, was 'probably a captain of an Anomabo milita company' even before he became the *omanhene* of the town.⁸⁵ From the genesis of the company system then, the asafo were delicately interrelated with the political hierarchy of their communities.

As the eighteenth century gave way to the nineteenth, the various town *omanhene* remained dependant on support from their local asafo. *Omanhene*, or *ohene* in smaller settlements, could not gain, or keep, power without sufficient backing from the town's companies. When the various companies could not agree on the rightful leader of their communities, rivalries between different factions did, at times, last for years. As will be seen, when power vacuums opened up, and an appropriate *omanhene* or *ohene* could not be found, inter-company disagreement boiled over into violence.

The Asafo and the British: Early Sources

Written evidence of asafo activity on the Gold Coast is infrequent for much of the eighteenth century.⁸⁶ Neither do oral histories ascribe any specific detail to events prior to the nineteenth century, with the exception of origin myths and vague thematic references. When the asafo do appear in the historical record, it generally refers to their involvement in British conflicts. 'Mulatto' soldiers, presumably of Akrampa membership, were used to

⁸⁴ Shumway, *The Fante*, p 96 – 87.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p 82.

⁸⁶ It should be noted however that this thesis rarely draws on Dutch sources.

defend Cape Coast when the French attacked the town in 1757 during the Seven Years War, for example.⁸⁷

It is not until the 1780s, some thirty years after the dissolution of the RAC and its replacement by the Company of Merchants Trading to Africa, that more detailed evidence of asafo activity is available. From the records left behind by merchants and administrators at Cape Coast Castle it is possible to garner a general idea of what the asafo were doing. At the very least, it is clear that by the latter years of the eighteenth century, the Fante asafo companies were sufficiently familiar with the manifestations of British power on the coast to take advantage of it where possible. In 1781, in the fort town Tantom, now known as Ekumfi Otum, the local asafo were gaining a reputation for causing a nuisance – one which extended well into the twentieth century. The Governor of Cape Coast Castle, Jerome Barnard Weuves, reported just such an incident in October 1781. It appears that Mr Bartlett, a British merchant, was undergoing preparations to leave the Tantomquerry fort when ‘he was prevented from going off the beach by a party of the Town’s soldiers’.⁸⁸ The town’s soldiers, a common label applied to asafo companies by early British merchants on the coast, threatened Mr Bartlett with cutlasses and muskets due to his refusal to comply ‘in giving them liquor’.⁸⁹ While Mr Bartlett finally escaped when an officer at Tantomquerry fort fired grape shot into the crowd, the asafo attempted to blockade the fort for several hours afterwards, albeit unsuccessfully. The demand for gifts among the coastal Fante was been remarked upon extensively by British officers, although predominantly in reference to the caboceers and other principal men of society. That the asafo also sought to extract as much material benefit from the British presence is hardly surprising but does reinforce the

⁸⁷ J. J. Crooks, *Records Relating to the Gold Coast Settlements: 1750-1874* (Browne and Nolan Ltd: Dublin, 1923), p 30.

⁸⁸ TNA T70/33, Weuves to Committee, 26 October 1781.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

view that the members of the company system had a great deal to gain from their dealings with European merchants.

Asafo rivalries in the eighteenth century also appear to have been entangled with conflicts between European powers on the coast. In the midst of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, tensions between the Dutch and the British were exploited on an ad-hoc basis by the companies of Cape Coast. Jerome Weuves noted one such instance when he reported that on 15 July 1781, a canoe manned with 'Dutch Blacks' from the neighbouring town of Elmina appeared 'astern of the Portuguese', a British man of war moored at Cape Coast.⁹⁰ On spying the canoe, the 'townspeople' of Cape Coast went to Weuves 'to beg I would grant them permission to go off and take her, telling me at the same time that as the Dutch had panyared a number of English Blacks they were determined to retaliate'. Weuves gave his permission for the townspeople to capture the canoe-men, in order that he could later exchange them for the Cape Coasters detained in Dutch Elmina. There is little doubt that the nineteen Elminas seized by the townspeople were members of the Elmina asafo. Indeed, Weuves noted that 'two of these prisoners happen to be men of consequence being captains of soldiers at Elmina'. Given the proximity of the two towns, and the frequent conflicts between them, it seems reasonable to suggest that the Cape Coasters may have had an inkling as to the significance of the men they had proposed to capture. Whether or not it was an intentional attempt to provoke the various companies of Elmina we cannot be sure, yet there is no doubt that the Elminas perceived it as such. On 25 June, the people of Elmina 'gave out that they might try and fight these townspeople [of Cape Coast], but finding us prepared they thought better of it'.⁹¹ Although a full-blown battle was averted and the captured Elminas were eventually returned to their canoe, this episode is instructive. It

⁹⁰ TNA T70/33, Weuves to the Committee, 27 June 1781

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

demonstrates the ability of the Fante asafo to utilize European conflicts to further their battles with rival towns.

By the 1780s, the British were already attempting to suppress internecine fights between asafo companies of the same town. At the end of July 1781, tensions rose between two warring factions. Although the company names were not given in the documentation produced by the council at Cape Coast, they were divided in their support for Captain Aggerie and Captain John Quamino respectively. On the 29th, a fight broke out 'occasioned by a quarrel between the drummers of both parties which rose at length to such a pitch that the soldiers on both sides turned out to fight'.⁹² This altercation between the drummers most likely refers to the exchange of proverbs through drum languages between companies which occurred when one entered the other's territory. The governor launched an enquiry into the dispute, resulting in an order for the company members 'to shake hands together and swear in the usual matter of the country that no bad blood should subsist between them'.⁹³ Rather more effective it seems, was the gift of '3 ankers of liquor', after which members of both companies 'departed quite satisfied'.⁹⁴ Be they involved in inter-European, inter-*oman*, or inter-company conflicts then, the asafo drew utility from the British presence on the coast.

However, the usual norms of interaction between the asafo and British power were at times disrupted. In 1803, a serious breach of trust between the two resulted in a sizeable *amanko* in Cape Coast.⁹⁵ Perhaps the most interesting source on this episode is a lengthy explanation of the events that sparked the disturbance titled 'Natives Account of the Unfortunate Misunderstanding at Cape Coast', which although has no explicit signatories,

⁹² TNA T70/33, Weuves to Committee, 27 July 1781.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ A comprehensive analysis of this episode with particular reference to British power structures can be found in R. Porter, 'The Cape Coast Conflict of 1803: A Crisis in Relations Between the African and European Communities', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 11 (1970).

was clearly written by principal men of the town.⁹⁶ It transpires that the *supi* of No. 2 Company (Anafu), approached independent trader Frank Swanzy in order to buy cloth in exchange for gold. According to the Cape Coast townspeople, after the sale had been completed, Swanzy decided that the gold given to him by the captain, Kofi Badu, was 'bad gold' (i.e., adulterated), and when Badu's associate Tawia insisted that the gold was pure, Swanzy 'struck the boy'. Whether or not Kofi Badu returned the cloth to Swanzy is unclear. Certainly, the townspeople protested that he had done so. In any case, Swanzy detained Badu under the accusation of fraud. Not only did this represent an affront to Badu's dignity but, as Porter notes, also carried with it the risk 'that he might have been sold into slavery if decisive action had not been taken to help him'.⁹⁷

On hearing of their *supi*'s confinement, around two hundred Cape Coasters, presumably from Anafu, marched to Swanzy's house bearing arms and drums.⁹⁸ Soldiers were called from the fort to clear the crowd, who 'began to fling stones' and were not deterred.⁹⁹ After a period of commotion and confusion, the Anafu asafo broke into Swanzy's house. Governor Mould, who Porter describes as 'weak and indolent' and seemingly unable to resolve the issue himself, called upon King Aggery and Caboceer Ando to disperse the crowd and keep the peace.¹⁰⁰ Eventually, after the townspeople continued to barrage his house, Swanzy conceded defeat and released the Anafu *supi*. Yet resentment on the part of the Anafu continued to simmer, quite understandably, towards the British authorities. Swanzy himself did little to ease the tension, cajoling his colleagues to join him in demanding that Governor Mould should order the townspeople to pay compensation. Mould, the perennial pushover, did as he was told. Those present were ordered to pay a

⁹⁶ TNA T70/1581, 'Natives Account of the Unfortunate Misunderstanding at Cape Coast'.

⁹⁷ Porter, 'Cape Coast Conflict', p 54.

⁹⁸ TNA T70/34, Mould to Parr, 25 December 1803.

⁹⁹ TNA T70/1581, 'Natives Account'.

¹⁰⁰ Porter, 'Cape Coast Conflict', p 49. Mould's mention of King Aggery in his reports refers to the third Omanhene of Cape Coast holding such a title, derived from the local name 'Egyir'. The Aggery in question, Egyir-Ansa, descended from the line beginning with Birempong Kojo, or Cudjoe Caboceer and is widely considered to have died in 1814.

compensation of forty ounces of gold within one hour of being asked. Unsurprisingly, the inhabitants of Cape Coast resisted this demand. As Africa Company officer Henry Meredith described the ensuing atmosphere ‘thus, on both sides, appeared deliberate preparations for war’.¹⁰¹ Chaos broke out once the Cape Coasters began firing their muskets and, in doing so, setting the town on fire. Hostilities increased as the townspeople made towards the castle, despite being fired upon from the fort. This stalemate continued for three weeks, both sides fighting with intensity, although the Cape Coasters suffered a much higher rate of casualties with only one white man, Sergeant Baston, killed in the unrest.¹⁰² A ceasefire was only achieved once the British took pawns into the castle as leverage for the perceived debt of forty oz of gold. Relations between the British and the Cape Coasters remained uneasy in the weeks that followed. As described by Fountaine over a month after the crisis, ‘nor do the natives (altho’ they have patched up a sort of peace with us) appear disposed to rebuild their houses, or resettle themselves under the present Government’.¹⁰³ The damage done to the relationship between castle and town would not be repaired easily.

Even in the aftermath of the 1803 disturbances, the Cape Coast asafos were ready to use the new, tentative peace as leverage to advance their own material interests. A letter from Commodore Brown from January the following year noted that the locals of Cape Coast had asked for some ‘trifling articles’ including ‘a war cap, sword and gun’ for each of the ‘four Captains of the town’.¹⁰⁴ These markers of military leadership had apparently been accorded to the captains, presumably the *supi* of No. 1 Company (Bentil), No. 2 Company (Anafu), No. 3 Company (Ntin) and No. 4 Company (Nkum), during the previous administration of Governor Miles. In his correspondence to London a week later, Mould also reported that the ‘mulattoe volunteers’, i.e., No. 6 Company (Akrampa), had asked for

¹⁰¹ Henry Meredith, *An Account of the Gold Coast of Africa: With a Brief History of the African Company* (Frank Cass and Company Limited: London, 1812), p 102.

¹⁰² TNA T70/34, Mould to Committee, 31 October 1803.

¹⁰³ Ibid, Fountaine to Committee, 16 December 1803.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, Commodore Brown to Committee, 2 January 1804.

rights and privileges which reflected their European ancestry. This included ‘to hoist the castle flag half mast, furnish a coffin for the deceased and fire three guns on the internment of each person’, upon the death of an Akrampa member.¹⁰⁵ It was argued that this respect was accorded to the Elmina Euro-Africans by the Dutch, and as such should be matched by their British counterparts.

By the early nineteenth century, it appears that inter-company skirmishes had become common in many of the coastal towns. In 1805, Governor Torrane reported that ‘the Bentsils and Incooms who had frequently fought’ and who had ‘long been enemies to each other’, had engaged in battle on the seafront.¹⁰⁶ In a somewhat self-congratulatory tone, Torrane also noted his involvement in a four-day palaver to settle a dispute between the people of Tantum (Ekumfi Otum) and Lagoe (Dago). There is little doubt that this quarrel was as afo instigated, especially given the long and brutal rivalry that persisted between the companies of these two communities in the centuries that followed. Yet the presence of British traders on the coast went beyond simply fulfilling the role of mediators.

It is of note that, in some cases, the British may have been instrumental in deepening divisions between as afo companies. In late eighteenth-century Cape Coast, there were four established companies, as noted above. The descendants of Tom Ewusi’s soldiers in No. 6 Company (Akrampa), although a legitimate company in their own right, were understood as a different beast by the British, and No. 7 Company (Amanful), operated at that time only beyond the boundaries of Cape Coast town. What would later become known as the fifth company of Cape Coast was comprised of the Company’s slaves who worked for the castle. Part of a wider institution known as castle-slavery, this community were considered the legal property of European merchants and usually, but not always, lived either in or in close proximity to the respective forts. Yet as with their contemporaries in Elmina Castle,

¹⁰⁵ TNA T70/34, Governor and Council of Cape Coast Castle to Committee, 10 January 1804.

¹⁰⁶ TNA T70/34, Torrane to Committee, 26 July 1805.

Christiansborg Castle in Accra and elsewhere, the castle slaves of Cape Coast are argued to have experienced 'special privileges and freedoms' especially towards the latter half of the eighteenth century, while still being subject to the potential of deportation to the Americas if they fled the ownership of their masters.¹⁰⁷

The position of No. 5 Company position is evident in the company name Brofomba, literally translated as white man's children. Relationships between those so-called castle slaves and the townspeople of Cape Coast were often hostile in the latter years of the eighteenth century. As early as 1772, in a Council meeting at Cape Coast Castle, it was noted that 'frequent disturbances happened betwixt the town's soldiers and the Company's slaves' including 'at the time they made their annual custom'.¹⁰⁸ In the midst of civil disorder in 1800, members of Brofomba also joined in what was likely an asafo skirmish, which led to the result that 'two of them were killed, and several received musket shot wounds'.¹⁰⁹

Yet during the 1803 crisis some members of Brofomba 'appeared in arms against the Castle', alongside their asafo counterparts.¹¹⁰ This action seems to have caused intense anxiety among British officers. In his letter to London in May 1804, Governor Torrane suggests that the involvement of Brofomba was due 'solely to their mixing with the townspeople and marrying free people'.¹¹¹ He went so far as to argue for the creation of a law within which 'it would be considered as highly criminal [for company slaves] to . . . in anyway, form a connection with the Townspeople'.¹¹² It is true that tension between the Brofomba and the rest of the Cape Coast asafo companies may have been a result of the

¹⁰⁷ Rebecca Shumway, 'Castle Slaves of the Eighteenth-Century Gold Coast (Ghana)' *Slavery & Abolition* 35: 1 (2014), p 89. See also Per Hernaes, "'Fort Slavery" at Christiansborg on the Gold Coast: Wage Labour in the Making?', in Per Hernaes and Tove Iversen (eds), *Slavery Across Time and Space* (NTNU Department of History: Trondheim, 2002); Ty M. Reese, 'Facilitating the Slave Trade: Company Slaves at Cape Coast Castle, 1750-1807', *Slavery & Abolition* 31: 3 (2010).

¹⁰⁸ Crooks, *Records*, p 38.

¹⁰⁹ TNA T70/34, Dalzel and Council to Committee, 11 November 1800.

¹¹⁰ TNA T70/34, Torrane to Committee, May 1804.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

position of the former as outsiders. Nevertheless, attempts by the British to stop integration can only have exacerbated the poor relationship. It is perhaps unsurprising that the pejorative slur, *brofonkwa* - white man's slave - persisted as a common insult against the Brofomba in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

British Influence on Asafo Culture

The influence of Atlantic trade and early colonial architecture on asafo culture can also be located in the persistent glorification of certain British men serving on the Gold Coast. These individuals were often instrumental in consolidating relationships between the foreign power and indigenous systems of authority. Many embedded themselves into the Fante communities on the coast. The strength of influence held by Richard Brew, for example, independent British trader at Anomabo, has been well documented.¹¹³ Some of these men also left legacies in the local historical consciousness which informed asafo identities long after their departure. Individuals such as Brodie Cruickshank, whose interactions with the asafo at Anomabo included a special relationship with Kodwo Kwegyir Aggrey, the linguist (*okyeame*) of Anomabo and the chief (*supi*) of Akomfudzi Company. Such was Cruickshank's military reputation that he was said to be immune to bullets, and he was even replicated in the fabric of a company flag.¹¹⁴

Perhaps the most influential of these men among the Cape Coast asafo was Governor Charles MacCarthy. Born in Cork in 1764, MacCarthy is perhaps most famous for his death and decapitation at the hands of the Asante in the battle of Nsamanko in 1824. Given that he also oversaw British interests in Sierra Leone, the time MacCarthy spent on the Gold

¹¹³ Randy J. Sparks, *Where the Negroes Were Masters: An African Port in the Era of the Slave Trade* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 2014), particularly ch. 3.

¹¹⁴ Edwin W. Smith, *Aggrey of Africa: A Study in Black and White* (Garden City Press: Letchworth Herts, 1929), p 25.

Coast was limited. Nevertheless, predominantly due to the heroic status assigned to war deaths, his spectre lingered on in the collective imagination of the Cape Coast asafos, particularly No. 1 Company (Bentil). The transfer of the Gold Coast settlements from the Company to the Crown in July 1821 rendered the British forts under the authority of MacCarthy as the Governor of Sierra Leone. From his arrival on the Gold Coast in March 1822, the Governor was plunged into the ongoing tensions between the coastal peoples and the Asante in the interior. With his time split between both colonies, and little in the way of advice from the resentful ex-Company officers, MacCarthy embarked upon a series of misinformed decisions which did nothing to quell the ill-feeling between Asante and the coastal towns.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the rhetoric under MacCarthy's regime served to further a picture of Asante savagery as the governor geared up for confrontation.¹¹⁶

After two years of quarrels, scuffles and offence taken, MacCarthy cobbled together a military force of less than five hundred men with which to advance to meet the Asante on the banks of the River Pra. Among this body of fighters, made up of various Fante communities, Denkyiras, Wassas, and around eighty white officers, were between one and three hundred men of the Cape Coast Volunteer Militia.¹¹⁷ These latter corps would undoubtedly have included members of the Oguaa asafos companies, and their involvement in the mission is well recorded in oral histories. Moreover, Major Ricketts, who was present for the fight against the Asante forces notes the presence of Mr de Graft, 'linguist of Cape Coast and lieutenant in the militia'.¹¹⁸ Joseph de Graft, whose relationship with the

¹¹⁵ W. E. F. Ward, *A History of Ghana* (Allen and Unwin Ltd: London 1948), p 175.

¹¹⁶ Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge 1975), p 169-170.

¹¹⁷ A. B. Ellis records one hundred and seventy soldiers of the Cape Coast Volunteer Militia: *A History of the Gold Coast of West Africa* (Chapman and Hall Ltd: London, 1893), p 154; Crooks supports this but with the addition of another forty Cape Coast natives in a separate troop: *Records*, p 183; Reindorf goes further however, noting three hundred members of the Cape Coast Militia: *History*, p 183.

¹¹⁸ H. I. Ricketts, *Narrative of the Ashantee War* (Simpkin and Marshall: London, 1831), p 62.

Asantehene was particularly antagonistic, is reported as being in the thick of the battle, retreating through the forest while under fire.¹¹⁹

On 21 January 1824, MacCarthy and his troops met an Asante army at a small village near the Pra called Nsamanko. The outcome was nothing short of catastrophic. Overcome by the strength of the enemy, who were said to number ‘considerably more than ten thousand men’ and weakened by the desertion of many Fante and Wassa fighters, the British soldiers and their coastal allies were defeated.¹²⁰ Governor MacCarthy was captured and decapitated, his head claimed as a triumphant talisman of Asante victory. His secretary, Mr Williams, was also captured, and was detained for several months in a room with the severed heads of MacCarthy and other officers. According to Major Rickett’s retelling of Williams statement once he was returned to Cape Coast, the decapitated heads of his colleagues ‘owing to some peculiar process, were in a perfect state of preservation’.¹²¹

The battle of Nsamanko did not hold the same decisive position in the British historical record of their endeavours on the Gold Coast as the decisive victory against Asante which followed in 1826. Yet for the Fante asafos, whose involvement in later conflicts with the inland empire were minimal, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that the Nsamanko bore significant connotations, particularly in the historical memory of Cape Coast. While MacCarthy’s legacy is clearly embodied in the geography of the Gold Coast, with his name most notably given to a large hill on the western outskirts of Accra, he also survived in the metaphorical landscape of Cape Coast society. The events of Nsamanko, and MacCarthy’s role in the battle, were memorialized in the town oath (*ntam*), ‘Mankata Wukuda’.¹²² It appears that this oath had fallen out of usage by the early twentieth century, likely to have been eclipsed by the ‘Oguaa Wukuda’ oath which sprung up in the middle of

¹¹⁹ On Joseph de Graft, see Casely-Hayford, ‘Genealogical History of Cape Coast’, p 111-114.

¹²⁰ Ricketts, *Narrative*, p 55.

¹²¹ Ibid, p 83. See also, W. Walton Claridge, *A History of the Gold Coast and Ashanti* (Oxford University Press: London 1915), p 351-352.

¹²² Mankata as a local corruption of MacCarthy, *Wukuda* being the Fante word for Wednesday.

the nineteenth. In an enquiry into the constitution of Cape Coast launched by the colonial administration in 1916, 'Mankata Wukuda' was already registered as 'obsolete'.¹²³ The results of the enquiry also recorded that No. 6 Company Cape Coast (Akrampa), were exempt from honouring the Mankata Wukuda oath. It is of note that the information on this issue almost definitely came from a member of Akrampa itself, and the reasons given for their exemption should be read with this in mind. Nevertheless, the enquiry found that the Akrampa 'were so tenacious in battle, that out of the 800 strong that took the field at Nsimankaw [sic], refusing to accept a defeat, not 500 returned after the retreat.'¹²⁴ For the Akrampa then, Nsanamkow was held up as an example of the bravery of the company.

Present-day oral histories from No. 5 Company Cape Coast (Brofomba), also commemorate Nsanamkow, although the specific details of the battle are less well remembered. Like No. 1 Company, the Brofomba also claim that they were given rewards for their participation in the battle of 1824, in the form of 'big, big shells' that could be worn 'as a necklace, as a medal'.¹²⁵ Although information shared today about Brofomba involvement in the battle of Nsanomkow is fragmented, it is notable that this topic was brought forward by a Brofomba female captain (*safohemma*) without prompting or in answer to questions regarding the incident. The events of 1824 are still visible in Brofomba oral histories and would perhaps have been more clearly recollected in previous generations.¹²⁶

For No. 1 Company Cape Coast (Bentil), their role in the battle of Nsanamkow was testament to the special relationship the company had with MacCarthy. An inter-company dispute over the rights to a flagpole in 1928 resulted in a flurry of petitions to the colonial administration reasserting their participation in the battle wherein, 'No. 1 Company

¹²³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1759, Cape Coast Constitution.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Brofomba Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

¹²⁶ Representatives of Brofomba commented on the failure of their elders to pass comprehensive historical knowledge down to their generation.

(Bentsir) volunteered and went with Sir Charles and we suffered a loss of 99 men'.¹²⁷ Bentil's commitment to supporting MacCarthy in battle was seen to have been rewarded by certain gifts, which were fiercely protected by the company. As one petitioner explained, the presents comprised of, 'an old Flag Staff given to our ancestors by Sir Charles MacCarthy [sic] about the year 1822 before our ancestors went with him and fought the battle of Insimakow [sic]. It was not that alone, he also gave them a big red Flag which is still in use, and a Holy Bible.'¹²⁸ Ownership of the flagstaff gifted to Bentil by MacCarthy was valued so highly that when No. 2 Company of Cape Coast (Anafu), attempted to erect a similar iron flag pole (*dadikur*) this perceived imitation was met with outrage by Bentil. They argued that as their *dadikur* was 'a memorable thing given to us by Sir Charles, no other Company should use any Flag Staff.'¹²⁹ From this we can infer that such was the gravity of Bentil's historical connection with the Governor that even an attempt to copy the gifts that were given to them was considered sacrilege.

Although the current whereabouts of the flagpole are unknown, there are still some suggestions that MacCarthy's gifts remain the custody of No. 1 Company. A Bentil *safohemma* informed us that 'one of their fetish priests when she's in the mood of prophesizing she uses a very old Bible, and that Bible is in the *posuban* [shrine] right now.'¹³⁰ Although it is not possible for outsiders to lay eyes upon the book, given that the object is highly sacred, it seems fair to conclude that this Bible is understood to be the same as that given to Bentil in the early nineteenth century. The power embodied in Charles MacCarthy, representative of British power and mythologised war hero, should therefore be understood as having permeated throughout Bentil. That the objects he presented to the

¹²⁷ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/493, Supi, Asafuhinfo and Elders of Bentil No. 1 Company to SNA, 23 January 1928. Bentsir is an alternative spelling of Bentil.

¹²⁸ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/493, Supi, Captains and Elders of Bentil No. 1 Company to SNA, 8 January 1928.

¹²⁹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/493, Supi, Asafuhinfo and Elders of Bentil No. 1 Company to SNA, 23 January 1928.

¹³⁰ Bentil Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 March 2018.

asafo continued to have ritual significance in the centuries that followed his death is testament to the ability of asafo companies to draw upon manifestations of power which extended beyond their immediate contexts.

MacCarthy is also attributed, although inconsistently, with the organisation and ranking of the Cape Coast asafo. As one Bentil *safohemma*, using an endearing localisation of the governor's name, explained, 'Kobina MacCarthy, he gave them [the asafo] emblems'.¹³¹ This process of crediting each company with a specific number, colour, and set of defined emblems, is also recorded in oral histories from previous scholarship. Roger Gocking, apparently informed by a representative of No. 2 Company (Anafu), suggests that Charles MacCarthy gave the companies of the town numbers 'to indicate the position that he wanted them to take in his battle line'.¹³² However, it is not entirely clear whether these contentions are strictly accurate or, as will be shown shortly, a result of evolving oral histories which sometimes became distorted over time.

The consensus among all Cape Coast companies, a rare thing indeed, is that No. 4 Company (Nkrum) were actually the first to settle in the Cape Coast area, shortly followed by No. 1 Company (Bentil). This claim is also evident in reports written by District Commissioner Arthur Ffoulkes in 1908 and by Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs J.C. de Graft Johnson in 1932, and as of yet there appears to be no evidence to the contrary.¹³³ What is puzzling therefore, is the prioritization of Bentil, ranked as Number 1 Company, in contrast to Nkrum, ranked as Number 4. It is true that not all Fante towns number their companies in order of origin, but this does tend to be the general rule. Indeed, Number 7 Company of Cape Coast, Amanful, are ranked seventh due to their late arrival on the scene. If we take the findings presented to us by Gocking, it appears that Bentil were given the

¹³¹ Anafu Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 7 February 2018.

¹³² Roger Gocking, 'The Historic Akoto: A Social History of Cape Coast Ghana, 1848-1948', PhD Thesis, Stanford University (1981), p 56.

¹³³ Ffoulkes, 'The Company System in Cape Coast Castle'; De Graft Johnson, 'The Fanti Asafu'.

highest ranking in Cape Coast could be understood as reflective of the relatively high size and strength of the company. MacCarthy, seeking to shore up his resistance against the Asante in the early 1820s, therefore gave Bentil the position of front guard in his battle formation.

However, the oral histories which emphasise MacCarthy's role in shaping the formation of the company system appear to have become tangled up with another military episode which befell the Gold Coast some twenty odd years later. In an article written by Brian Perkins in the 1990s, we can see the two narratives become intertwined. Drawing on conversations from Tufuhene Kwame Edu in 1994, Perkins writes,

the current Tufuhene of the Cape Coast companies traces the numbering system back to the Battle of Nsamanko in January of 1824, in which a number of companies were mobilized and taken to the field in the country of the Nzima near Axim. The companies reportedly captured the enemy chief, Kweku Ackaa.¹³⁴

What we see here is the amalgamation of two different events: the Battle of Nsanamkow in 1824 and the 1848 expedition into the kingdom of Nzema (or Appollonia) in search of the riotous warlord Kweku Aka. Both were led by the British and both involved the Cape Coast asafo. Both revolved around a discourse of external threats to security and trading routes, which impacted upon the inhabitants of Cape Coast, local or foreign, and both are used to explain the rankings of the town's asafo companies. Nevertheless, MacCarthy's persistent presence in the oral histories of the Cape Coast asafo does demonstrate the sizable impression that the British officer made on the town.

¹³⁴ Brian L. Perkins, 'Traditional Institution in Coastal Development: Asafo Companies in Cape Coast History', *African Diaspora ISPs* 33 (1994), p 30.

The Capture of Kweku Aka

Few episodes demonstrate the impact of the British presence on asafo culture quite as clearly as the 1848 mission to halt the reign of Nzema warlord Kweku Aka. Although an important victory for British forces in regards both to trade and a superficial adherence to the civilizing mission discourse, the companies of Cape Coast have for the most part been written out of this history in academic texts. Nevertheless, narratives surrounding the capture of Kweku continued to be pervasive in company identities in the centuries that followed. Recent calls from representatives of Nzema to return the stool of Kweku Aka to his kingdom have been met with shock and anger from members of No. 1 Company (Bentil) in particular. As with many oral histories relating to the first half of the nineteenth century, details about the expedition prioritized by asafo members are not evident in written sources. This oral history is particularly poignant due to the inter-company conflict it caused many years later.

For some years preceding the 1848 offensive, reports of Aka's supposed savagery had been flitting between British representatives on the coast. Shortly after succession from his predecessor Yenzu Aka, the newly enstooled chief was said to have 'sacrificed over a hundred and fifty victims at the funeral customs'.¹³⁵ Ships which had moored at Appollonia before sailing east to Cape Coast reported being 'grossly insulted and robbed' by Aka's subjects.¹³⁶ Brodie Cruickshank, who took part in the 1848 expedition, reported that Aka was said to have 'cut off the heads of a party of Wassaw traders, and hunted to death every stranger whom he could find near his borders'.¹³⁷ It is possible that Aka's brutalities may have been subject to a degree of exaggeration by Europeans on the Gold Coast, yet the

¹³⁵ G. E. Metcalfe, *The Life and Times of George Maclean, 1908-1947* (Oxford University Press: London, 1962), p 158.

¹³⁶ Claridge, *History*, p 420.

¹³⁷ Brodie Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast of Africa* (London, 1853), Vol. 1, p 198.

quantity of evidence from local sources also points towards a tendency for extreme violence on the part of the Apollonian warlord.

Kweku Aka's fierce reputation is also reflected in his mythologization in oral histories. It has been argued that even some of Aka's own subjects in Nzema believed that he was a changeling.¹³⁸ Representatives of No. 4 Company Cape Coast (Nkum), described Aka as a 'mixture of spirit and human' similar to the giant Asebu Amanfi, and his spiritual power is said to have enabled him to jump 'from coconut tree to another coconut tree like a monkey'.¹³⁹ Aka's gymnastic capabilities notwithstanding, it is clear from all sources that the Nzema chief was a figure of profound threat in the asafo imaginary.

After continued aggression from Aka, and various unsuccessful attempts at appeasement, the first attempt to take up arms against the Nzema warlord was proposed by Governor George Maclean. Appointed as a result of the temporary withdrawal of the British government from the region in 1828, Maclean technically served as president of a committee of merchants trading on the Gold Coast, rather than as a representative of the crown. Yet Maclean kept the title of Governor on the ground from his arrival in 1830, apparently in order to convey an appearance of continuity.¹⁴⁰ In 1835, Maclean embarked upon military intervention to halt the activities of Kweku Aka. However, 'upon the very first sign of danger, the whole of Cape Coast Militia . . . were seized with panic, refused to fight, and deserted', necessitating Maclean's hasty retreat from Apollonia.¹⁴¹ Metcalfe's book on Maclean describes this mishap in even more florid terms, claiming that a substantial portion of the attacking force 'cried out "We are lost", and on their commander paying them no attention, dropped their loads and fled'.¹⁴² It was not until after the resumption of Crown

¹³⁸ Metcalfe, *Maclean*, p 158.

¹³⁹ Nkum Asafohen, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 February 2018, Cape Coast; Ntin Safohen, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

¹⁴⁰ Crooks, *Records*, p 264; J. D. Fage, 'The Administration of George Maclean on the Gold Coast, 1830-44', *Transactions of the Gold Coast & Togoland Historical Society* 1: 4 (1955).

¹⁴¹ Claridge, *History*, Vol. 1 p 421.

¹⁴² Metcalfe, *Maclean*, p 160.

control over the forts in 1844 that a renewed offensive on Aka was considered. In the intervening years he had continued to ravage traders and lay threats against Cape Coast Castle, and under the leadership of Governor Winniett, an expeditionary force was once again assembled in 1848.

Although oral histories in Cape Coast today do not explicitly reference the desertion of Maclean by local troops, they do bear witness to the impacts born out of previous incursions into Appolonia. As an Nkum *safohen* noted, ‘the Nkum asafo had been fighting and going to the one who comes to hunt [Aka] for a long time, so they were exhausted.’¹⁴³ It was this exhaustion, often portrayed as refusal or laziness in the narratives of rival companies, which paved the way for No. 1 Company (Bentil) to take the lead in the 1848 mission against Aka. ‘The Governor came to them and they said they can go, so they went to capture Aka together with his stool and brought it back to Cape Coast.’¹⁴⁴ Upon his death in Cape Coast, ‘it was Bentil that buried that Aka man.’¹⁴⁵ It is claimed that as a result of these activities ‘the Governor gave them the number one company.’¹⁴⁶ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the colonial records of the 1848 expedition do not detail asafo involvement, rather crediting the capture of Aka and his family to Mr Swanzy, the commandant of Dixcove.¹⁴⁷

Brodie Cruickshank’s journals from the 1848 expedition provide some insight into events as they unfolded on the battlefield. As the governor had supplied him with a ‘carte blanche to raise such a Native Force as would ensure success’, Cruickshank played a critical role in the preparation for the mission into Nzema, as well as commanding half of the troops in the battlefield.¹⁴⁸ Unfortunately, the local men that he presided over were predominantly

¹⁴³ Nkum Asafohen, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 February 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Bentil Safohemma, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 March 2018.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Dispatch from Winniett to Earl Grey, 24 May 1848, in Crooks, *Records*, p 313.

¹⁴⁸ SOAS, MS 173088, Papers of Brodie Cruickshank, preface, p 6.

from Anomabo, a result of the close personal link Cruickshank had with that town. The Cape Coast asafo were instead commanded by the aforementioned Mr Frank Swanzy, who does not appear to have left behind written reports on the exhibition.

Nevertheless, Cruickshank's records do provide some insight into the involvement of No. 1 Company (Bentil), in the capture of Aka. In his descriptions of Cape Coast in the lead up to battle, Cruickshank remarks upon 'a great stir in town, drums beating for recruits, and Black Dandies flaunting about with red sashes and long swords'.¹⁴⁹ This extract, written on 16 March – just under ten days before the mission commenced – is fairly conclusive evidence that Bentil took it upon themselves to take the lead in the drive for recruitment in Cape Coast. Red sashes, a colour apparently granted to Bentil by McCarthy some twenty years prior, will have undoubtedly been a garment that was fiercely guarded as distinct to the company. The reference to 'black dandies' presumably draws upon an aesthetic style more commonly used in regard to diasporic communities in the Americas, one which borrowed from formal European styles of dress. Although one might typically attribute this uniform to members of No. 6 Company (Akrampa) in light of their Euro-African parentage, (and they may indeed have been present) Bentil also had their own share of gentlemen who may have participated in this fashion.

On 25 March, Frank Swanzy led a force of around 1,000 Cape Coasters west to Nzema, only to be met with an ambush from the people of neighbouring Elmina. Most likely a response to the sight of a significant proportion of the Cape Coast asafo on parade with full display, tensions between the companies of the two towns often being fraught, the attack caused large-scale panic in Cape Coast once news reached those who had stayed behind. Cruickshank wrote that that in his attempts to restore order, he 'went out and dispelled the foolish fears of the women and drove them home to their houses'.¹⁵⁰ One

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 16 March 1848.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 25 March 1848

particularly feisty asafó elder named only as 'old Ottoo', who was apparently 'drunk as an owl', even attempted to gather some sort of rear guard in response to the attack before Cruickshank reportedly sent him back to bed.¹⁵¹ With tensions calm back at the fort, and the ambush from the Elminas rebuffed, the Cape Coast forces marched out of the picture until Cruickshank and his band of soldiers caught up with the advance guard outside the town of Nzema.

The majority of Cruickshank's journal entries for the rest of the exhibition are dominated by practical organisation of the troops under his command – mostly that everyone was sick and/or hungry but were perked up with regular sips of gin, Cruickshank's panacea. After meeting Swanzy and the rest of the local forces at Nzema, where Kweku Aka was nowhere to be found, the exhibition marched out into the bush in search of the evasive warlord. The description of this scene given by Cruickshank is worth quoting here, a clear indication of the mish-mash of military forces which made up the bulk of the mission.

Drums beating and bugles blowing at an early hour this morning announced to our forces the necessity of leaving the town. . . . When all had assembled, and taken up separate positions upon the long plain, their appearance was extremely picturesque. The variety of colour in their dresses, the ridiculous costumes of some made according to their fancy without any uniformity, the showy look of the Chiefs in their richest cloths and ornaments of beads and gold – for they go to war in all their finery – the strong contrasts, the glinting of the sun upon their long array of arms, the confused murmur of the crowd, the drum calls of different companies, the loud warlike notes of their horns . . .¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid, 11 April 1848.

Cruickshank's judgements of style aside, this portrayal of the entire military force that constituted the mission to Apollonia emphasises that the Cape Coast asafos, and No. 1 Company (Bentil) in particular, were by no means the sole reason for the undoing of Aka. However, after this apparent moment of unity, the exhibition divided again. Cruickshank and his men marched east while Swanzy and his men marched west, both hoping to uncover Kweku Aka hiding in the bush. Aided by fleeing Apollonians, it was Swanzy and the Cape Coast branch who finally managed to capture the king, who was brought before the governor before being carried back to Cape Coast.

In the aftermath of Aka's defeat, Cruickshank noted, the Cape Coasters had indeed plundered Aka's hideout. Apparently Aka had 'carried his treasures with him to his marshes', which were then stolen by the 'Apollonians and Cape Coast people who seized him'.¹⁵³ Although Cruickshank's attempts to identify individual looters were in vain, and details of what exactly was stolen are vague, it is tempting to see this episode in line with the Bentil narrative and their subsequent claim to Aka's stool. Perhaps it was at this juncture that the symbol of Aka's authority was lifted and transferred into the hands of Bentil representatives. It is notable that Cruickshank does not explicitly reference the disappearance of the Aka stool – and given later colonial obsessions with ownership of the Asante stool one might presume that this would have been on the British radar – but this is not definitive evidence of absence.

What is clear, however, is that by the early twentieth century, the Aka stool was understood to belong to the overall head (*tufuhene*) of the Cape Coast asafos, a position which is held within No. 1 Company (Bentil). During an enquiry into the potential destoolment of *Tufuhene* W. Z. Coker in 1929, a British officer claimed to have laid eyes on the stool. Deputy Secretary of Native Affairs Hugh Thomas, who led the enquiry, reported that on visiting

¹⁵³ **Ibid**, 18 April 1848.

Coker's house he was 'shewn a chair said to have been captured in the Aka War by Kumi'.¹⁵⁴ Kumi, who was recorded in the enquiry as having been the *tufuhene* during the mission into Apollonia, would presumably have belonged initially to the Bentil Company, although this allegiance would have been relinquished with his appointment to the overall head of the entire Cape Coast asafo.

By the time I interviewed members of the Cape Coast asafo in 2018, the Aka stool was once again a subject of public dispute. I was told that around one year before I sat down with an elderly Bentil *safohemma*, 'an entourage came from Nzema to take the stool back'.¹⁵⁵ This demand from the descendants of the long dead king was met with outrage from many among Bentil Company. During a conversation fraught with emotion, the *safohemma* explained 'if they give out the stool then there is no Bentil, there is no Oguuahene, [*omanhene* of Cape Coast] there is no *tufuhene*, and there is no asafo company in Cape Coast'.¹⁵⁶ This sentiment was reinforced by a *safohen* from No. 3 Company (Ntin), who explained that if the stool was returned, 'then that fight that the asafo companies went to fight would be in vain'.¹⁵⁷ It is clear that ownership of the Aka stool has implications far beyond the organisational structure of the Oguaa company system. Annually brought out for pacification at the Cape Coast festival Fetu Afahye, the Aka stool is embedded in the ritual activity of Bentil Company.¹⁵⁸ To remove the stool from its resting place would crumble the foundations on which the company system was built. The Aka stool acts as the essence of the Cape Coast asafo, a material embodiment of military prowess which connects even the company system in the post-colony to the strength of their ancestors.

¹⁵⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1691, Report by Hugh Thomas, 19 September 1929.

¹⁵⁵ Bentil Safohemma, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 March 2018.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. After the Nzema delegation attended the Oguuahene, consultations were made with the Cape Coast branch of PRAAD. The main source examined there was Claridge's 1915 history. As a result of this consultation and the strong feelings of Bentil Company, the stool remains in Cape Coast.

¹⁵⁷ Ntin Safohen, Interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

¹⁵⁸ No other asafo company is permitted to interact with the stool.

Early Restrictions on Asafo Activity

Despite the utility of the asafo as a ready-made military force for expanding British influence, attitudes towards the company system became increasingly distrustful in the middle of the nineteenth century. In a proclamation given by Acting Governor J.C. Fitzpatrick on 24 August 1849, the ceremonial use of guns was prohibited. It seems likely that this order was prompted at least in part by asafo related activity. The justification given for the order noted that ‘serious riots have from time to time taken place in consequence of the habit of custom making in the towns of Cape Coast’, and the banning of gun fire during customs was accompanied by an additional prohibition; ‘to march in triumph in commemoration of any ceremonies, within the precinct of any town or village’.¹⁵⁹ Skirmishes in Cape Coast from the 1850s caused frequent complaints from British officers residing in the town.¹⁶⁰ This degree of angst reached a peak when a local of Cape Coast was shot by Private W. J. King of the Fourth West Indian Regiment while trying to suppress an *amanko* on 4 September 1865.¹⁶¹ In a petition from Chief Aggery and those expressing solidarity with him, the locals caught up in this episode were said to have been ‘slaughtered in their sleep’.¹⁶² This sentiment appears to be a reflection on the vulnerability of the Cape Coasters rather than a claim on their physical status at that time. Nevertheless, it is clear that British attempts to suppress asafo activity, whether celebrating local customs or engaging in violent disorder, were going awry. A move towards legislative restrictions on the asafo was on the horizon.

¹⁵⁹ PRAAD Accra, SCT 4/4/20, Judicial Assessors Notebook p 42.

¹⁶⁰ Particularly in February 1856: PRAAD Accra, ADM 1/2/8, Connor to Labouchere, 2 February 1856; in November 1859: ADM 1/2/10, Bird to Committee, 5 January 1860; in October 1865 and January 1866: ADM 1/2/14, Conran to Cardwell, 27 January 1866.

¹⁶¹ Private King was given a death sentence, later commuted to imprisonment with hard labour for life. PRAAD Accra, ADM 1/1/25, Downing Street to Blackall, 14 February 1867.

¹⁶² PRAAD Accra, ADM 1/1/25, Petition from Aggery, 7 September 1865.

The British presence on the Gold Coast was deepened following the resumption of Crown Control, when in 1844 the so-called Bond sought to extend the legal jurisdiction of the forts to much of the Fante region. Signatories from Anomabo, Cape Coast, Abura, Assin and elsewhere officially acknowledged the authority of the Queen's judicial officers in 'the protection of individuals and properties'.¹⁶³ Serious criminal acts such as murder would thereafter 'be tried and inquired of before the Queen's judicial officers and the chiefs of the district, moulding the customs of the country to the general principles of British law'.¹⁶⁴ This blend of approaches was to be presided over by a British Judicial Assessor (JA) – initially the demoted George Maclean – whose role, Addo-Fening argues, served to 'gradually usurp the criminal jurisdiction of the Kings of the Protectorate'.¹⁶⁵ A series of ordinances between 1853 and 1866 also established and strengthened a Supreme Court in which English law was imposed. In the 1853 ordinance, provision was made for plaintiffs to appeal a decision made by their local *omanhene* to the British court. The authority of the Supreme Court caused hostility in some cases, such as during the tension between Oguuahene Aggergy and the Governor in the 1860s over rights of imprisonment.¹⁶⁶ Although the 1883 Native Jurisdiction Ordinance formalised Native Tribunals as a distinct legal structure, it also reinforced British dominance over criminal law.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the introduction of African juries into the court system through the 1853 Ordinance and later refined in the Criminal Procedure Ordinances of 1876 and 1898 would have implications for how cases involving asafo conflicts would be tried.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶³ Crooks, *Records*, 'Bond with Protected Tribes' p 296-7; see also J. B. Danquah, 'The Historical Significance of the Bond of 1844', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 3: 1 (1957).

¹⁶⁴ Crooks, *Records*, p 296.

¹⁶⁵ R. Addo-Fening, 'Colonial Government, Chiefs, and Native Jurisdiction in the Gold Coast Colony 1822-1928', *Universitas* 10: 1 (1988), p 134.

¹⁶⁶ David Kimble, *A Political History of Ghana: The Rise of Gold Coast Nationalism 1850-1928*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1963), pp 201-220.

¹⁶⁷ Rodger Gocking, 'British Justice and the Native Tribunals of the Southern Gold Coast Colony', *Journal of African History* 34: 1 (1993).

¹⁶⁸ Although women could not be jurors until 1953. J. H. Jearey, 'Trial by Jury and Trial with the Aid of Assessors in the Superior Courts of British African Territories: I', *Journal of African Law* 4: 3 (1960), p 141-143.

Armed with a strengthened legal system, the colonial authorities were able to regulate, and punish, asafo companies. An early milestone in the British attempts to restrict asafo ritual activity was that of the Regulation of Native Customs Ordinance passed in 1868. Most striking of all its various stipulations was the prohibition of the 'Yam Custom', and of other 'native customs entailing firing of guns, drumming, processions and other offensive noises and acts'.¹⁶⁹ This prohibition could be overridden by written permission from an officer of the Government, but if an accord was not obtained, punishments for celebrating native customs ranged from a forty shilling fine to one month imprisonment for individual members, and fines of up to twenty pounds leveled against company heads and captains. The 1868 ordinance in its first manifestation only applied to the limits of the town of Cape Coast, although it would be extended towards the end of nineteenth century, gradually applying to more and more towns up and down the coast.¹⁷⁰

The catalyst for the legislation appears to have been an outburst of asafo celebration in Cape Coast in June 1868. In a Legislative Council meeting, Governor Ussher brought those in attendance to the attention of 'reckless firing of guns' which was 'perfectly deafening and sustained for a long time' in the days immediately preceding the meeting.¹⁷¹ Not just an annual observation of local festivities, this celebratory firing of muskets was apparently due to the heightened tensions, or as Ussher put it 'the disturbed and excited state,' emerging from the return of the Oguaa companies home from war.¹⁷² Evidence given at the meeting by the influential Euro-African resident Thomas Hughes put paid to the rumours that company firing was a result of anti-British sentiment. Hughes argued that firing should be attributed 'not to hostility on part of the people to the Government, but simply and only to the general excitement arising out of the war'.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 4/1/596, Minutes from the Legislative Council, p 303.

¹⁷⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 4/1/125, Gold Coast Laws Volume 2, p 1185.

¹⁷¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 14/1/1, Minutes from the Legislative Council, p 287.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid, p 292

Indeed, June 1868 marked the withdrawal of Fante troops from their battle camp near Elmina, a base from which they had been attempting to drive out the Dutch.¹⁷⁴ As Ussher complained to the Governor of Sierra Leone, Arthur Kennedy, 'there is now between two and three thousand well-armed, turbulent men in this town, ready to fight any cause but the right one'.¹⁷⁵ This conflict did not have the support of Ussher, who viewed it in part as indicative of 'the spirit of disaffection so glaringly evident in the whole conduct of the people of Cape Coast'.¹⁷⁶ Perhaps if the Cape Coast asafo were firing muskets upon the return of a war fought with the full authorization and support of the British Government, his attitude towards this celebration of custom may have been somewhat kinder. As recorded by Sierra Leonian surgeon in the West India Regiment, J. A. B. Horton, the people of Cape Coast were initially reticent to participate in the incursion into Dutch Elmina due to pressure coming from the Castle. Yet after an attack on a 'village belonging to Cape Coast', presumably one of the Company bush branches,¹⁷⁷ by the Elminas, Horton narrates: 'they now flew to arms and marched into the field, amidst the hurrahs of their women and children, with their "Headman" Attah as their leader, despite the remonstrance's of the chief of the Executive Government'.¹⁷⁸ Ussher's frustration with the celebratory musket firing of the Cape Coast asafo upon their return to the town should therefore be understood in light of his wider anger towards the Fante leaders in embarking upon what he saw to be an unnecessarily conflict.

The 1868 conflict was by no means the sole motivation behind the Ordinance. In the autumn of 1867, Ussher had already written to Downing Street reporting disturbances which had taken place during 'the observance of yearly customs', and stating his intention

¹⁷⁴ Kimble, *Political History of Ghana*, p 224-229.

¹⁷⁵ TNA CO 96/76, Letter from Ussher to Kennedy, 7 June 1868.

¹⁷⁶ Dispatches from Ussher to Kennedy CO 96/76, cited in Kimble, *Political History of Ghana*, p 229.

¹⁷⁷ Bush branches are those small villages on the outskirts of Cape Coast which fall under the jurisdiction of one of the town companies.

¹⁷⁸ James Africanus B. Horton, *Letters on the Political Condition of the Gold Coast* (Frank Cass: London, 1970 [orig, 1870]) p 44.

‘of passing an Ordinance to abolish the customs in the town of Cape Coast’.¹⁷⁹ Ussher’s disdain for such company activities was clear also during the second reading of the ordinance, on 18 June 1868, when he read aloud an extract from Brodie Cruickshank’s work on the Gold Coast. The section chosen, recorded in the Legislative Council Minutes as ‘pages 245 to 248 relative to the evil effects of the barbarous native customs’, includes an embellished description of an inter-asafo dispute at Kormantine in 1841.¹⁸⁰ After due mention of his own heroic attempts to break up the conflict, Cruickshank writes of a mother who ‘sobbed convulsively over the body of her son.’¹⁸¹ This rhetoric, of the asafo as a savage institution in need of restriction, seems to have done the job. After a third reading on 23 July, the Native Customs Regulation Ordinance was passed. Cape Coast bore the initial brunt of the restrictions on local customs.¹⁸² Although local festivals were still celebrated in Cape Coast and its surrounds, the 1868 ordinance set the tone for British efforts to curtail asafo activities, which would culminate with the eventual banning of Fetu Afahye in 1932.

Conclusion

The undoubted European influence on the asafo should not be seen as an attempt to paint the company system as an essentially external phenomenon. The asafo are a uniquely Gold Coast institution. Yet just as the towns along the coast were profoundly shaped by their role in Atlantic commerce, so too were the asafo which defended them. It is clear that the company system emerged as a reaction to the growing insecurity of life on the Gold Coast in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the migration of the *borbor* Fante to the establishment of coastal settlements in Anomabo, Cape Coast and elsewhere, the asafo protected communities from existential threats to life and security. The companies became

¹⁷⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 1/1/25, Cardwell to Ussher 18 October 1867.

¹⁸⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 14/1/1 Legislative Council Minutes, p 294.

¹⁸¹ Cruickshank, *Eighteen Years on the Gold Coast*, p 248.

¹⁸² PRAAD Accra, ADM 4/1/596, p 303.

embedded in the networks of power that spanned the Fante region, while engagement with the British provided them with new historical narratives onto which they hitched individual and collective identities.

These narratives are not simply interesting in and of themselves. They clearly emphasise the cross-cultural nature of many institutions of the Fante coast. Moreover, these narratives came back to haunt later generations of asafo members. By the nineteenth century, and throughout the twentieth, they had been used to claim prestige, to bolster reputations and to reinforce the critical position of the asafo in changing societies. Much of the rest of this thesis deals with the ways in which these historical identities were presented and perpetuated in ways which made violent conflict endemic throughout the period of colonial rule.

Chapter Two

Violence Remembered and Violence Provoked: Flags, Emblems, Oaths and Lyrics

There is much in common between the various asafo companies of the seaside towns along the Fante coast. Yet each company has always had its own distinct character. These identities, usually grounded in the historical context in which the company emerged and developed, are fiercely defended. The perceived attempt to undermine the status and identity of a rival company was one of the most prominent factors in the internecine *amanko* which characterised the asafo company system up until the mid-twentieth century.

Company identities are expressed through a number of mediums, including proverbs, flags, colours, emblems, oaths and music. These devices serve to emphasise company superiority, and to recall historical episodes when a company proved its military strength. They also pay homage to ancestors and great warriors who lost their lives on the battlefield. Such is the profound spiritual power of these mediums of company identity, that when mobilized they often caused fresh waves of violence.

This chapter will explore the power of these markers of company identity with an emphasis on flags, emblems and oaths. These three aspects of asafo culture both provoked and memorialised violence in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Within this line of enquiry, other areas will also be touched upon, such as the role of music in commemorating inter-asafo fights. Exploring these aesthetic and linguistic forms as representations of company character and as markers of historic events, the chapter has a particular focus on a number of Fante towns: Mumford, Gomoa Dago, Ekumfi Otua, Ekumfi Ekumpoano, Ekumfi Akra and Moree. This is not to suggest that these towns were characterized by

particularly pronounced company identities or the rivalries which followed, although the overlapping networks of hostilities prevalent in the Ekumfi region was particularly profound. Many of the themes emerging from the examples used in this chapter are evident in the modern histories of much of the Fante asafo. Nevertheless, the history of asafo identities are most visible in the violence that they provoked. Inter-company fights acted as a key arena in which mediums of historical memory were weaponized.

It will be argued that these modes of historical consciousness, so carefully curated by asafo companies, served not only to memorialise past conflicts but also deliberately to provoke new hostilities and strengthen old rivalries. Conflict and historical asafo identities should therefore be seen as having a reciprocal relationship with each other. Just as visible renderings of asafo identities provoked violence, so too did those moments of conflict provide more substance to company identities and the cultural phenomena which demonstrated these identities. Although it is clear that British colonial authorities recognised the capacity for some of these phenomena, in particular flags, to spark violence, the deeper meaning of all these devices has been neglected in the academic literature. By examining the visual and the linguistic devices used by asafo companies to reinforce their idiosyncratic characters, it is hoped that light will be shed on the frequent violence enacted by the asafo for much of their histories.

Flags and Emblems of the Fante Asafo

The one aspect of the Fante asafo which has attracted a high level of interest from wider audiences is that of their distinctive appliqué flags. Since the era of British colonial rule, asafo flags have appeared in museums and private collections in Europe and North America, and Western audiences have flocked to exhibitions of the colourful banners for decades. Many of these flags were confiscated by colonial officials. Asafo flags have also acted as

inspiration for, or have been co-opted by, Western artists – such as Grayson Perry in his contributions to the Royal Academy of Art's 250th Summer Exhibition in 2018 and in his 2017 exhibition at London's Serpentine Gallery.¹ Although there have been significant undertakings to reposition asafó flags within their socio-historic context, this is a very recent development.² It appears that there was some discussion within the African Reparations Movement (ARM) about repatriation in the 1990s. Established by Labour MP Bernie Grant, the ARM sought reparations through the cancellation of debt and infrastructure investment in postcolonial nation states and, in Grant's words, an insistence that 'sacred, religious, historic artefacts are returned to their countries of origin'.³ This latter aim included an investigation into the question of stolen asafó flags. ARM representatives corresponded with curator and historian Augustus Casely-Hayford, who confirmed that most flags in European collections had been confiscated by the colonial government in the early twentieth century.⁴ Indeed, as part of an attempt to control asafó activity in 1909, the DC of Cape Coast forced all Oguáa companies to surrender provocative flags, an endeavour which will be discussed in Chapter Five. Yet it appears that the ARM's commendable endeavour to repatriate flags to their rightful owners did not go any further than initial investigatory research.

Although there have been exhibitions of flags which have engaged with the social and historic contexts of their asafó companies, especially in the last five years, much of the curatorial literature has been somewhat superficial.⁵ Exhibitions of asafó flags have often been accompanied by catalogues and collection books which focus predominantly on the

¹ Grayson Perry, *Summer Exhibition*, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 12 June–9 August 2018, and *The Most Popular Art Exhibition Ever*, Serpentine Gallery, London, 8 June–10 September 2017.

² In particular, the publication of asafó flags and their histories online by Barbara Eyeson at www.asafoflags.com, and work done by Ghanaian artist Elisabeth Efua Sutherland in the recent exhibition *One Does Not Take It Anywhere*, Gallery 1957, Accra, 21 November 2017–10 February 2018.

³ Bishopsgate Library, BG/ARM/16/4/4, Bernie Grant, 'Reparations or Bust', speech given at Birmingham Town Hall, 12 November 1993.

⁴ Bishopsgate Library, BG/ARM/16/5/11, Casely-Hayford to ARM, 4 April 1995.

⁵ More rigorous engagement is evident in Doran Ross and Silvia Forni (eds) *Art, Honor, and Ridicule: Asafó Flags from Southern Ghana*, (Royal Ontario Museum: Ontario, 2017).

reproduction of imagery. The best known amongst these, Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard's *Asafo! African Flags of the Fante*, was produced to accompany a major exhibition of flags in London 1992.⁶ The quality of the images in this volume is high but, as noted by one reviewer, *Asafo!* lacks historical depth and in-depth knowledge of local culture.⁷

However, there has been some excellent work produced by scholars concerned with the details of Akan aesthetics, most notably Kwame Labi and Doran H. Ross, who seek to demonstrate how the imagery of asafo flags is embedded in historical meaning. Often pertaining to past conflicts, idiomatic images depicted on flags represent a 'visual dialogue', which emphasises the identities of a company in opposition to their rivals.⁸ The ownership of particular symbols and colours on flags, company uniforms, shrines and other paraphernalia has often been contested by rival asafo groups. Consequently, the capacity for flags to cause inter-company conflict was noted by the British colonial administration as the root cause of *amanko*, leading to the frequent confiscation of the appliqu  banners. The act of confiscation and the subsequent journey of asafo flags into the art market in Europe fundamentally altered the perceived state of this material culture. From their original role as discursive objects with agency, asafo flags became appealing but ultimately mute items to adorn the walls of collectors. Since the advent of internet shopping and successful exhibitions in the 1990s, demand has increased to such an extent that workshops in Ghana now produce replica flags to sell abroad and to tourists. In 2010, Doran Ross estimated that '95% of flags were produced for the international art market'.⁹

In their original contexts, asafo flags act as historical monuments, memorialising (usually violent) events which shaped the past. Yet their meanings are not always clear even

⁶ Peter Adler and Nicholas Barnard, *Asafo! African Flags of the Fante* (London, 1992).

⁷ George Nelson Preston, review of Adler and Barnard, *Asafo!*, *African Arts* 26, 2 (1993).

⁸ Labi, 'Fante Asafo Flags of Abandze and Kormantse', p 37. See also, Eric Appau Asante and Kofi Adjei, 'Historical Discourse of Selected Fante Asafo Flags and Public Sculptures from Winneba and Mankessim', *Critical Interventions* 9, 3 (2015).

⁹ Doran H. Ross, 'True Colours, Faux Flags, and Tattered Sales', *African Arts* 43: 2 (2010), p 2.

to younger members of the company system. Often the appliqué images are representations of proverbs and are divorced from their original context and meaning. The role of explaining the asafo flags therefore falls onto the flagbearer (*fraankakitayi*), and his juniors. Each asafo company on the Fante coast will have had at least one *fraankakitayi*, often with younger apprentices and protectors (*askikambai*), who would surround the flag bearer when on parade. When flags are displayed at festivals or funerals, these members ‘will be explaining the meaning of the flags to the people’.¹⁰ As explained by asafo elders of Anomabo in 1997, this is done because ‘maybe someone has heard that there was an incident that happened some time ago, but do not know the full story’.¹¹ By displaying company flags, therefore, historical episodes are discussed and explained to younger or less knowledgeable members of the company.

Yet even to the uninitiated, asafo flags clearly speak to the historical context within which companies emerged and grew. Perhaps the most striking insignia curated by the asafo is the inclusion of smaller national flags in the corner of company banners. There is written evidence of Fante martial forces using a range of European ensigns as early as the 1730s, when Jean Barbot noted that ‘those who live under the European forts commonly carry the colours of the nation under whose protection they are’.¹² Those produced from the later end of the nineteenth century up to Ghanaian independence in 1957 would typically have included a miniature Union Jack, representative of their engagement with British power. Presumably, companies which emerged in the shadow of Danish and Dutch forts would have once used these respective national ensigns before ownership of these settlements was passed to the British, although there is little photographic material showing flags in this style available today. The Leiden Textile Research Centre does include an asafo flag among its collection, said to be from No. 10 Company (Akrampa) in

¹⁰ AHP, Anomabo Okyeame, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Hair et al, *Barbot on Guinea*, p 607.

Elmina, which uses the colours of the Dutch flag.¹³ Like their contemporaries in Cape Coast, the Elmina Akrampa company served as the asafo group for mixed race members of the town. Their use of the Dutch colours therefore speaks not only to the influence of the fort on the Elminan community, but also to the importance of their European forefathers within Akrampa company identity.

This trend has continued into the present day. Most asafo banners created since 1957 have replaced the Union Jack with the black star flag of Ghana, emblematic of the free nation which the asafo now inhabit. Yet the use of European colours in flags created up until independence speak both to asafo tendencies to harness those aspects of foreign military power which they found useful, and also to the hybrid nature of the coastal communities within which the asafo emerged.



Fig 2: Flag belonging to No. 2 Company, Kormantse c. 1980s. © Barbara Eyeson

¹³ <https://trc-leiden.nl/trc-needles/regional-traditions/sub-saharan-africa/an-elmina-dutch-asafo-flag>

This ability for asafo flags to act as mnemonics was apparent during the collection of oral histories conducted for this project, when a discussion of company flags often allowed for otherwise neglected narratives to come to the forefront of the conversation. For example, asafo involvement in the capture of Kweku Aka, which has been overlooked in the historical literature, is memorialized by a flag belonging to No. 4 Company Cape Coast (Nkum). Although the details relayed to me by the representatives of Nkum at the interview were somewhat vague, the story of the warrior giant remained prominent in the historical consciousness of the company.

Even before asafo flags are displayed by their respective companies, they are endowed with profound ritual power. In an interview with a flag tailor from Cape Coast conducted by Professor Irene Odotei of the University of Ghana's African Studies Department, the extent of this power is clear. Before sewing a new flag, the tailor is given a bottle of schnapps in order 'to pour libation to our gods and ancestors to assist us to produce a neat work,' and once the flag has been completed, the asafo 'present a goat or sheep with a schnapps before collection.'¹⁴ The making of the flag itself would be conducted discretely, as 'it is not supposed to be seen by anybody until it is ready for collection.'¹⁵ However, this could throw up potential disturbances for the tailor himself.¹⁶ When asked if it is possible to 'feel the spiritual element in the flags while sewing it', the tailor responded in the affirmative, contending that 'you feel it in the night. You will be having fearful dreams at night.'¹⁷

The power contained within the flags was recognised to some extent by the officials of the Gold Coast Colony. Throughout the duration of British rule, asafo companies and their members were frequently restricted and regulated in their use and exhibition of flags.

¹⁴ AHP Cape Coast Tailor, interview with Dr Irene Odotei, Cape Coast, undated but probably 1998.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ The sewing of asafo flags and uniforms would traditionally be a male occupation.

¹⁷ Ibid.

There is no doubt that colonial officials, especially those who became embedded in the communities within which they worked, understood the capacity that flags had to cause unrest. This was demonstrated through the court system of the colony. Many cases brought from the Central Province for crimes such as assault or causing a riot had their roots in the exhibition of provocative company flags. In 1857, a case was brought before Brodie Cruickshank regarding a company fight in Anomabo which started because 'a certain flag was introduced'.¹⁸ In 1860, an appeal against a judgement by the Civil Commandant of Anomabo heard by the Supreme Court turned on the legitimacy of the exhibition of a flag by the asafo of Ekumfi Akra. The appellant, Kofi Ansah represented the asafo of neighbouring Ekumfi Ekumpoano, which had taken issue with the flag due to its inclusion of the emblem of 'a cock covered in a basket', said to belong to them.¹⁹ The Ekumfi Akra asafo were subsequently instructed not to 'display or use the new flag until the government's permission be obtained'. In 1897, asafo members in Saltpond were convicted under Section 7 of the 1893 Native Customs Ordinance for the 'exhibition of company flags without the permission of the District Commissioner' and were sentenced to three months hard labour.²⁰ These examples are just a small number of those cases heard in colonial courts which made mention of asafo flags and their capacity to provoke violence. As will be demonstrated in more detail, this prevalence of asafo *amanko* seemingly caused by the display of certain flags was recognised and legislated against by the British colonial government.

Yet the capacity of flags to stir up fierce company rivalry was not limited to the images stitched onto their fabric. The entire apparatus of flag display, which allowed the applique banners to be exhibited on poles or at posts had a provocative capacity in and of

¹⁸ PRAAD Accra, SCT 6/4/20, detail of defendants illegible, 15 January 1857.

¹⁹ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/4/28, Cofee Ansah v Cudjoe Mensah, Evidence given by Quabina Atchin, 18 January 1861.

²⁰ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/3, Regina v Kwamin Abba & others, 8 January 1897.

itself. Just such a contest struck the town of Moree in January 1889, when the town's *ohene* contacted the District Commissioner of Cape Coast to report that two companies, No. 1 Bentil and No. 3 Nkum, 'were quarrelling and that he feared a disturbance'.²¹ The provocation was bound up in the fact that 'one company had a small post on which to exhibit their flags and the other company was building a post like it'.²²

In the subsequent three weeks, the DC attempted to keep the peace. This included, 'sending for them [the companies] several times, and threatening and warning them,' alongside the paying of a bond, directly ordering the company 'to cease from building a post', and the issue of 'twenty summonses'.²³ Nevertheless, the dispute continued unresolved for the better part of a month, while the offending company continued to build their new flag post. On the evening of 7 February, the day before the Moree *asafo* were due to appear in court in front of the DC and several indigenous intellectuals from Cape Coast, violence broke out. Due to the small number of police on hand, who the DC thought 'would have been useless against these companies who number two or three hundred apiece', they did not immediately appear on the scene.²⁴ Instead, the Cape Coast Volunteers – or as they are also known, No. 7 Akrampa - proceeded to Moree apparently of their own accord. The DC reported that he had 'distinctly told them that I in no way countenanced their action and they went at their own wish'. The Volunteers returned at 2 a.m., informing the DC that 'firing had ceased on their arrival, and the people had promised not to resume it,' but that 'the town was set on fire by the women'.²⁵

Reports suggest that the violence which took place was severe. Certainly, graphic rumours were circulating the local area in the days that followed. A resident of Elmina 'who went to Moree to pay a visit to his relations there after the disturbance' reported that one

²¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, DC Cape Coast to CS, 8 February 1889.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Moree captain 'was drunk before the disturbance took place and [was] therefore locked up in his room'.²⁶ Having sobered up some hours later, the captain 'strayed into the enemy's camp', not knowing about the altercation which had taken place. The unfortunate captain was subsequently 'captured, his chest opened while alive and his heart taken out'.²⁷ It is not entirely clear whether this grisly event took place as recounted. The Elmina resident who passed on the narrative did not give the name of the murdered captain, and apparently there was no endeavour to substantiate the rumour. By the time Police Inspector Newenham arrived in Moree to assess the scene the town was deserted, and the dead had already been buried.²⁸ None of these corpses were exhumed, and no autopsies were performed. Nevertheless, the death toll was placed at thirty-five, and at one point sixty-four men were held in custody awaiting trial.²⁹ Clearly, company claims to the contested flag pole were held with extraordinary zeal.

To understand the gravity behind the flagpole itself it is necessary to turn to the oral histories of the Moree companies. According to No. 1 Bentil, their flag staff has a mythical status and is closer to an *abosom*, or small god, than it is to a functional piece of equipment. Known as *dade kese* (lit. great iron) the iron flag staff appeared in the early days of the Moree settlement and 'nobody knows where it comes from'. For the Akan, powerful ritual objects are often accorded a degree of personality, and therefore referred to with a personal pronoun. *Dade kese* is considered to be male. He was initially revealed to Bentil Company in the old days, when 'every night you see a light, and smoke coming from a place'. After tracing the shining light to its source, the asafo reconnaissance party found 'an iron, like a sword', on top of the hill. In order to understand the object, 'they did some rituals', after which 'it revealed itself to them.'³⁰ Bentil members contend that the *dade kese*

²⁶ Ibid, Registrar of Correspondence to CS, 15 February 1989.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid, Police Inspector to DC Cape Coast, 14 February 1989.

²⁹ Ibid, DC Cape Coast to CS, 2 April 1889.

³⁰ Bentil Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Moree, 16 March 2018.

embodied the spirit of a hunter, who was ‘just protecting them’, and assured the company members that ‘nothing [bad] will come.’ He therefore became a profound ritual object for Bentil and ‘formerly every year they have to protect it by fencing it’, a ritual activity which paid due homage to the spirit.³¹ Contemporary asafo members were adamant that *dade kese* belonged to ‘Bentil only’ and that no other company could be involved in the necessary rituals.³² This narrative speaks to Moree origin stories as recorded by Reindorf. In his retelling of the first settlement of the town, Asebu Amanfi and his brother Kwagya were followed by the earliest citizens of Moree who emerged out of the sea and on their journey climbed ‘Iron Hill’.³³ Some retellings of Moree’s founding include another character, a hunter named Adzekese, whose spirit is that presumably embodied in the eponymous flag pole.³⁴ The claim to *dade kese* by Bentil then, speaks to their position as originating from the great ancestors of the past.

If this lens is applied over the events of 1889, it is much easier to understand why No. 1 Company (Bentil) were so outraged at the endeavours of No. 3 Company (Nkum) to build a flag post of their own. Bentil ownership of their *dade kese* was rooted in a spiritual connection to the initial settlement of Moree. The significance of *dade kese* is also evident in the stool of the *ohene*, which is held within Bentil Company. Atikase, the stool name for the *ohene*, is a corruption of *dade kese*, (and is moreover a possible variation of Adzekese.) Any imitation of this object could therefore be construed as an attempt to undermine the status of Bentil as the first and primary company of the town. As such, the violence that followed was most likely rooted in much deeper undercurrents than simply company envy.

As a result of the disturbances, the asafo of Moree were fined £20 and if not paid within three weeks, ‘a detachment of Hausas would have to be billeted in the town to

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Reindorf, *History*, p 20.

³⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/184, ‘Abura Inquiry’, Statement by Abura Omanhene Ababio II.

preserve order'.³⁵ Fifteen men were eventually sentenced to three months hard labour in Elmina prison for the charge of riot.³⁶ The DC, moreover, 'destroyed the posts of the Incooms and Bentils at Moree', and 'obtained possession of their flags'.³⁷ Such restrictions on asafo culture would be increasingly imposed on companies in the decades to follow, as colonial officials tried to limit the extent of asafo activity.

The 1889 battle over flag staffs at Moree has also been memorialised linguistically. It is likely that the episode is that evoked by the oath (*ntam*) of No. 1 Company (Bentil), *Yawada*. *Yawada*, the Twi word for Thursday, reflects the day on which events fell on 7 February 1889. Both Bentil and Nkum oral histories of the *amanko*, as told in 2018, are somewhat slim. Indeed, the flag staff itself was not mentioned explicitly in connection with the *ntam*. What is remembered, however, is that Bentil Company drew upon ritual medicine and emerged victorious from the fight. As told by a Bentil *safohen*, No. 3 Nkum, had 'more numbers than them', but as Bentil 'are indigenous and they are great hunters', and 'in those days they had juju', they were able to defeat their rivals.³⁸ This narrative is also incorporated into a flag, now very much decaying, belonging to Nkum Company.

³⁵ TNA CO 96/218, Ag Governor to Secretary of State, 26 September 1891.

³⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, DC Cape Coast to CS, 2 April 1889.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Bentil Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. By William Kobina Otoo, Moree, 16 March 2018.



Fig 3: Flag belonging to No. 3 Company (Nkum) Moree, 2018. Photograph taken by author

Emblems and Identity

Although a large part of the power held by asafo flags is located in the material of the banner and its accompanying apparatus, the content of the flags themselves are of crucial significant. The appliqué designs include a number of emblems, some of which work together to paint a picture of a certain moment in time, but many of which work as stand-alone images depicting certain idioms or proverbs. These emblems are also used to decorate other asafo objects, such as *posuban* shrines, clothes and musical instruments. Many of them are used to demonstrate a company's readiness for battle. In Abura, a village which acts as a bush branch for No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin), flags depicting men walking with baskets on their heads have a particularly explosive reaction from rival companies.³⁹ This

³⁹ The main rival for Abura is Kwapro, another village on the outskirts of Cape Coast which was allied with No. 4 Company of Cape Coast (Nkum).

image portrays the act of carrying gunpowder and therefore implies that ‘they are ready to fight at any moment’.⁴⁰ This theme of military strength and willingness to fight is of course a common thread throughout much of asafo material culture.

Emblems on flags or *posuban* shrines are also used to demonstrate a company’s position in the town. In Anomabo, for example, No. 1 Company (Tuafo) holds the symbols of the sword and the key ‘meaning that they hold the key to the town and move so the town is under their control.’⁴¹ This status reflects the Tuafo history in the Asante-Fante wars of the nineteenth century. In the words of Nyanfueku Akwa, scholar and native of the town, Tuafo ‘was formed, among other things, to fight the Ashanti’.⁴² This military role is reflected in the inclusion of the sword in their emblems. Tuafo control of the town, as indicated by the key, includes leading local festivals, where, for example, ‘it is only the Tuafo which can lift the ban’ on drumming.⁴³ Any attempt to use these devices by a rival company therefore serves to undermine, or worse, to erase, the unique history which the Tuafo pride themselves on.

⁴⁰ Abura Ntin Safohen & Okomfo, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Okyere Ramzy, Abura, 30 May 2018, Abura.

⁴¹ AHP, Anomabo Okyeame, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997.

⁴² Nyanfueku Akwa, *Anomabo: Asafo Companies and Their Shrines Alive* (Luna Marketing: Amsterdam, 2005), p 8.

⁴³ AHP, Anomabo Okyeame, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997.



Fig 4: Cap belonging to No. 4 Company Cape Coast (Nkum), 2018. Photograph taken by author. The clock emblem in the centre denotes that Nkum are ever ready for battle

Emblems also serve to reinforce the historical origins of a particular company. In Cape Coast, No. 5 Company Brofomba, use emblems that represent building materials such as the shovel and the axe. As discussed in Chapter One, Brofomba, literally translated as the white man's children, was initially founded by castle slaves who lived and worked in the fort. The use of building materials in their flags therefore represents that 'they helped in the building of the castle'.⁴⁴ Emblems which represent specific historical events are also located on the *posuban* shrines. In Saltpond, the *posuban* of No. 2 Company (Nankesido) is decorated with a mural including three men with 'a basket, *brefi*, with a human head put on it'.⁴⁵ This image illustrates that 'a situation arose which required a human head, so this wicked person's head was cut'. Such was the gravity of this occasion that it also resulted in a town slogan, *brefo amon iyi adze a owom* (fresh basket, do you know what is inside).'

It is perhaps unsurprising, given the critical messages enclosed in emblems, that their display often resulted in an *amanko*. The evocative power of an idiomatic image which represents company origins, status, identity and strength should be understood as a key driver for proving superiority through inter-asafo violence. Indeed, this tendency was noted by the colonial authorities, who frequently referred to asafo images as 'tribal' emblems. This term, used both in correspondence and in legislation, was reflective of colonial preoccupations rather than any ethnic division between asafo companies. In the colonial imaginary, the tribe was an atavistic repository of tradition, from which culture and identity was drawn. Denoting asafo materiality as 'tribal emblems' implied a juxtaposition with Western modernity which belied the dynamism of asafo aesthetics and the distinctly modern origins of the company system itself. Yet the capacity for emblems to cause conflict was clear. Although the causal relationship between emblems and conflict was evident across the asafo companies of the Fante coast, it was particularly inflammatory in Mumford.

⁴⁴ Brofomba Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

⁴⁵ AHP, Nankesido Elder, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, 7 August 1997.

From the late 1880s to the 1920s, violence as a result of provocative asafo aesthetics loomed large for the people of this coastal town.

The Serpent and the Palm Tree: Emblems and Violence in Mumford

Some sixty miles west of Accra and 47 miles east of Cape Coast lies the small fishing town of Mumford. The name Mumford originated in the era of Atlantic commerce, as amongst local inhabitants the town was, and often continues to be called, Dwomma. Dwomma is a corruption of *Edwemba* – literally, the children of Edwe – Edwe being one of the first founders of the Efutu town.⁴⁶ As with many of the coastal towns, including neighbouring Apam, the two companies take the names Tuafo and Dentsefo which would delineate their positions in battle: Tuafo meaning vanguard (lit *twa*: to cut through, *fo*: people) and Dentsefo referring to the main body of the army. In most of these communities, Tuafo are accordingly given the position of Number One Company, and Dentsefo that of Number Two. Yet in Mumford, the ranking is inverted. Explanations for this are varied and contested, in some cases referring to the victorious actions of Dentsefo when in battle against Asante, and in others the result of misguided analysis by an early colonial official.⁴⁷ Regardless, the rivalry between these two companies has a long and dynamic history, littered with disputes and disturbances. There were noteworthy episodes of violence throughout the nineteenth century. In 1868, for example, an outbreak of inter-asafo violence resulted in 45 lives lost.⁴⁸ Yet the underlying provocations for multiple *amanko* between the 1880s and the 1920s provide poignant insight into the role of emblems and other forms of material culture in asafo culture. It is important to bear in mind that throughout this period

⁴⁶ Dentsefo Supi and Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

⁴⁷ Dentsefo Asafohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018; Tuafo Asafohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Isaac Ansah, Mumford.

⁴⁸ TNA, CO 96/137, Governor to Secretary of State for the Colonies, 1 February 1882.

the number of Mumford inhabitants probably averaged around 1,000.⁴⁹ The deaths that occurred in these *amanko* therefore represent a substantial blow to the local population.

By exploring two major *amanko*, one in the late 1880s and one in the early 1920s, it will be demonstrated that the emblematic representations of company identity played a significant part in maintaining asafo rivalry in Mumford. Of course, this is not a phenomenon limited to Mumford alone: the narratives outlined here are echoed in asafo histories up and down the coast. Nevertheless, the persistence of emblems across time is starkly demonstrated through the detail on these events in the colonial archive and in oral histories.

On 15 August 1890, the DC of Winneba wrote to inform the Colonial Secretary that the two asafo companies of Mumford had ‘applied for permission to keep their annual custom of Black Christmas’ in early September.⁵⁰ This was standard procedure: from the early days of formalized colonial rule, asafo companies would often be required to seek permission and pay a financial bond in order to celebrate their local festivals. Nevertheless, for the Mumford asafo in 1890, the request was denied. The police officer in charge at Mumford telegraphed the DC sometime before the event was held to inform him that ‘there would be a serious breach of the peace, as Company No. 2 had stated their intention of holding their custom and that Company No. 1 had declared they would fight them if they did’.⁵¹ This apparent rivalry and the DC’s decision to cancel the festival had profound historical underpinnings both in the actions of the colonial state and in the role of emblems in asafo culture. As the DC explained, the dispute between the two companies arose from

⁴⁹ In 1911 the population was given as 1,205 inhabitants, all of whom were indigenes. PRAAD Accra. ADM 11/1/108, ‘Sanitary Report on Mumford’.

⁵⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, Letter from D.C. Winneba to Colonial Secretary, 15 August 1890.

⁵¹ Ibid.

the fact that, 'No. 1 Company was jealous of No. 2 Company because when Doctor Smith was Commissioner here all six of their flags had been taken away by him.'⁵²

The events which led to the confiscation of flags in 1887 is concisely explained by today's elders of the Mumford asafo companies. As purported by the *supi* of No. 1 Company (Dentsefo), in the 1880s 'during the festival days, some people will want to just entertain themselves, so they will come out with flags to also remind others of something unpleasant, so that caused [a riot]. And so the *tufuhene* and then the chief of the town went to Winneba and informed them [the colonial authorities]. So they came from Winneba and confiscated those flags'.⁵³ Unsurprisingly, the casual retelling of this narrative is indicative of the frequency with which such events unfolded. The idiomatic emblems on asafo flags and similar aesthetic devices were frequently deployed by Fante asafo companies in order to provoke a reaction from rivals. Local authorities were aware of the propensity for violence in the wake of such displays and acted accordingly, drawing on support from colonial officials when necessary.

Indeed, just three years later the Winneba DC reported that some headmen of Mumford had come to him complaining that asafo members were resistant to control from local authority. These five men, who had 'been elected by the two companies jointly', presumably held positions as councillors to the Ohene.⁵⁴ As relayed by the DC, the councillors had for some time 'been disobeyed, abused, and insulted' and as such 'had resigned and given back the stick of office to the care of the two companies'. As with many similar incidents across the Fante coast, tensions between asafo members and those holding political office emerged when company rivalry was heightened. Occupants of town stools were supposed to be above company allegiances, and therefore sought to inhibit any

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ *Dentsefo* Supi and Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

⁵⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, DC Winneba to Colonial Secretary, 15 August 1890.

potential conflict between asafo factions. Not only were they at risk of harsh fines from the colonial administration if violence erupted in their communities, but their duties as headmen of the town were to ensure some semblance of harmony amongst their people.

However, it appears that in 1887, the overall head of both asafo companies, the *tufuhene*, and the head of the town, the *ohene*, were not the only ones to draw on support from colonial officers. Around two weeks before the 1887 festival, various captains and headmen of No. 2 Tuafo petitioned the DC. They contended that No. 1 Dentsefo, had displayed 'some new flags' in preparation for the upcoming festival, which were 'not good for the town', and that 'they know it by themselves are not good for them to bring it out in our presence'.⁵⁵ Moreover, the petitioners argued that No. 1 Company had 'refused to deliver the flag to the chiefs', despite this potential for conflict having been noted.⁵⁶ As such, the representatives of No. 2 Tuafo sought some assistance from the DC's office to quell potential violence if these flags were displayed.

It appears that the DC did indeed step in. Later that month prominent members of No. 1 Company were arrested 'on the charge of attempting to commit riot in the town of Mumford,' and six of their flags were seized.⁵⁷ Although according to three elders of Dentsefo those arrested were 'discharged in consequence of there being no evidence to sustain the charge against them', the flags themselves were not returned.⁵⁸ However, the confiscated flags were sketched by the DC of Winneba, whose rendition in black ink was accompanied by a description of their colour schemes.⁵⁹

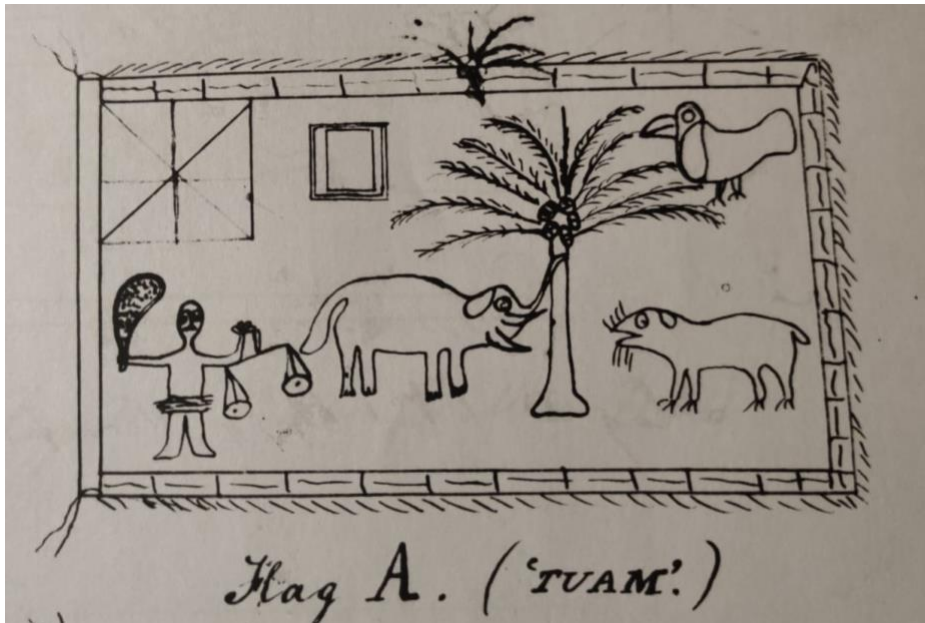
⁵⁵ Ibid, Quaminah Bondu, et al to DC Winneba, 12 August 1887.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

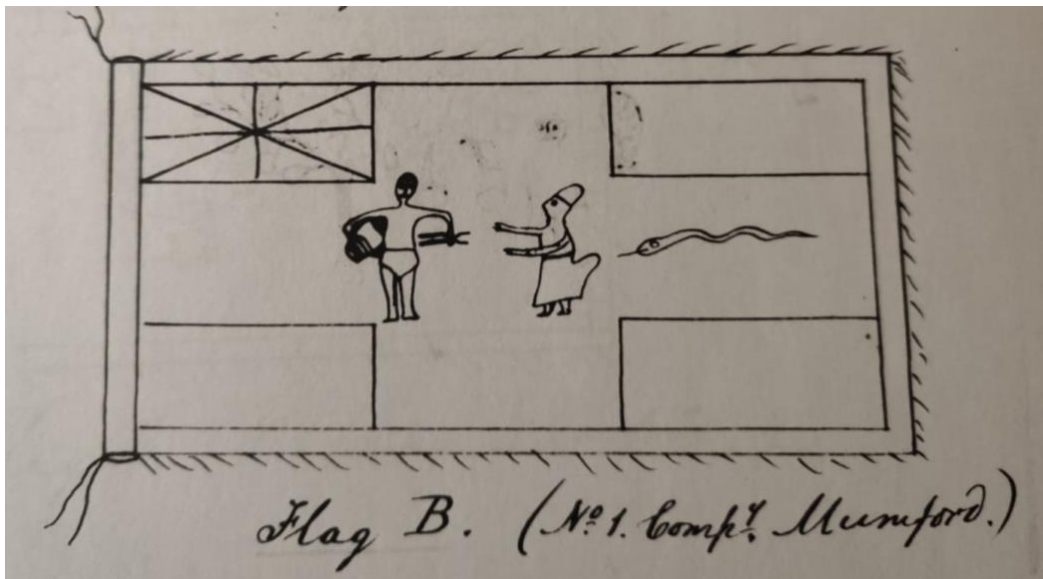
⁵⁷ Ibid, Cobina Quachie, et al to DC Winneba, 27 September 1887.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

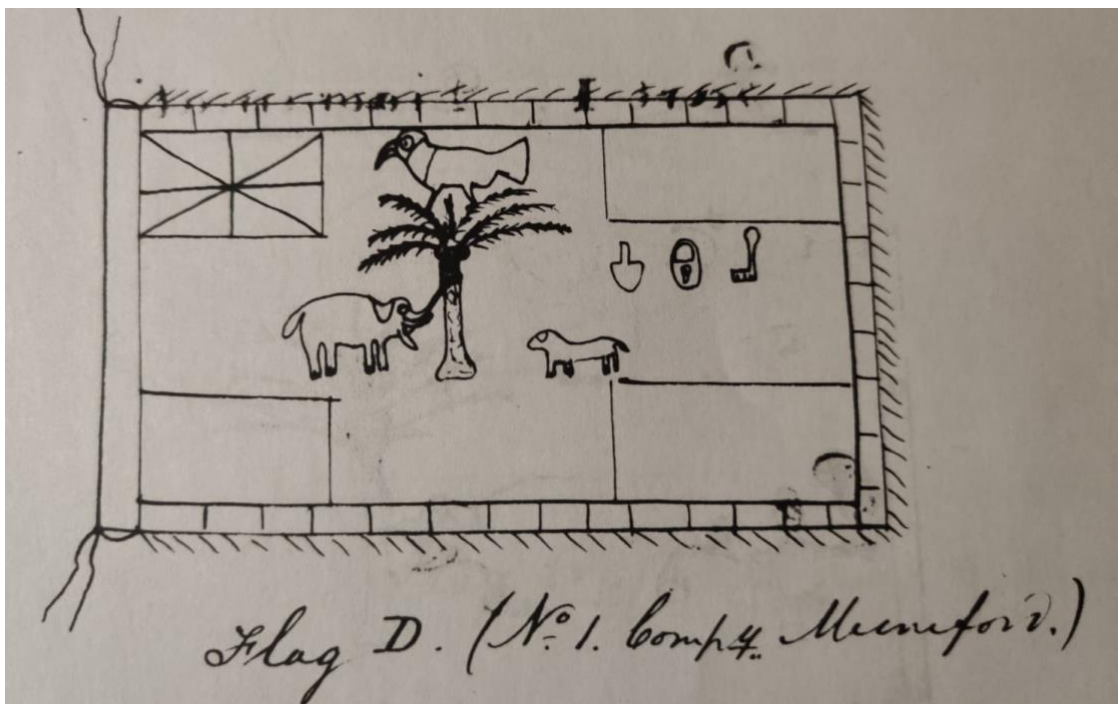
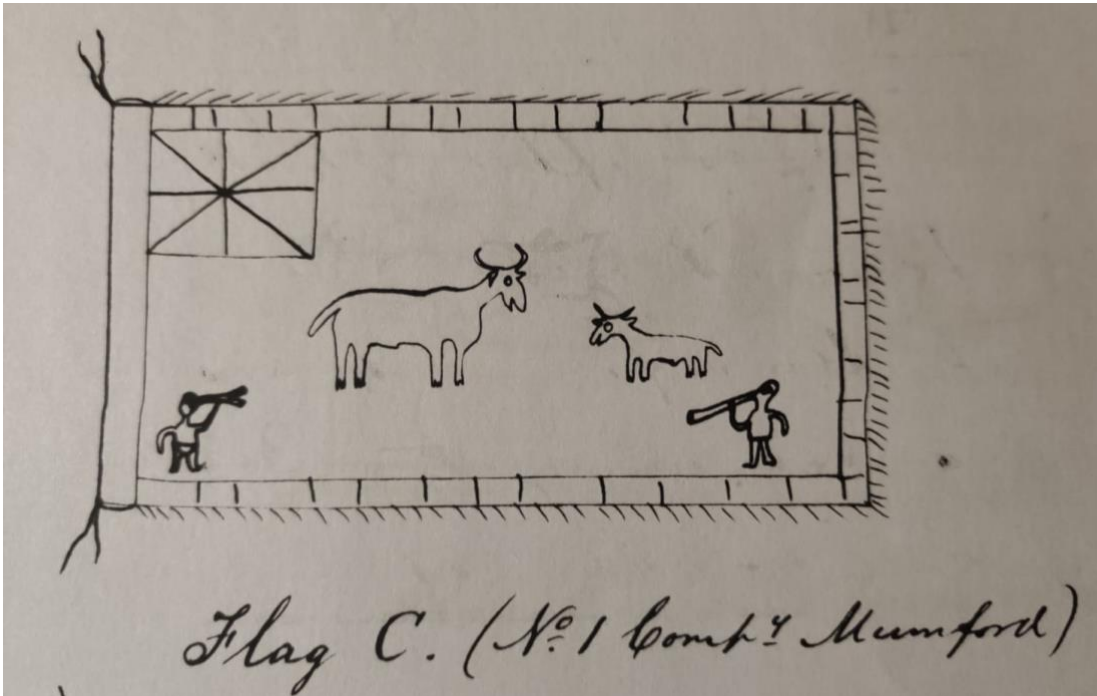
⁵⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, 'Descriptive and General Account of the Flags seized at Mumford', 22 October 1887. These pictures have also been reproduced in Kwame Amoah Labi, 'Fights, Riots, and Disturbances with "Objectionable and Provocative Art" among the Fante *Asafo* Companies', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* New Series 2 (1998), p 108-111.



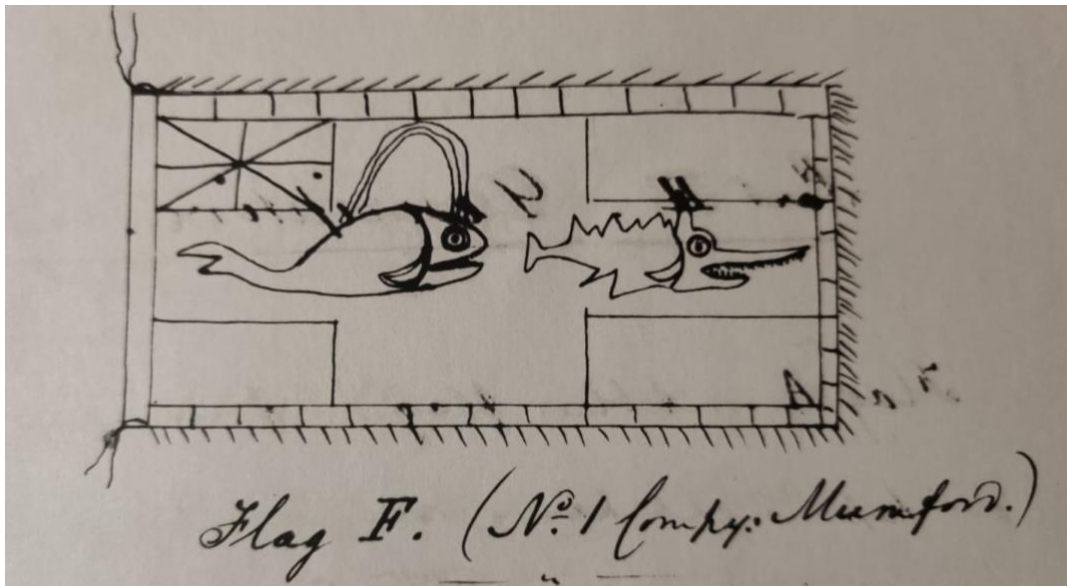
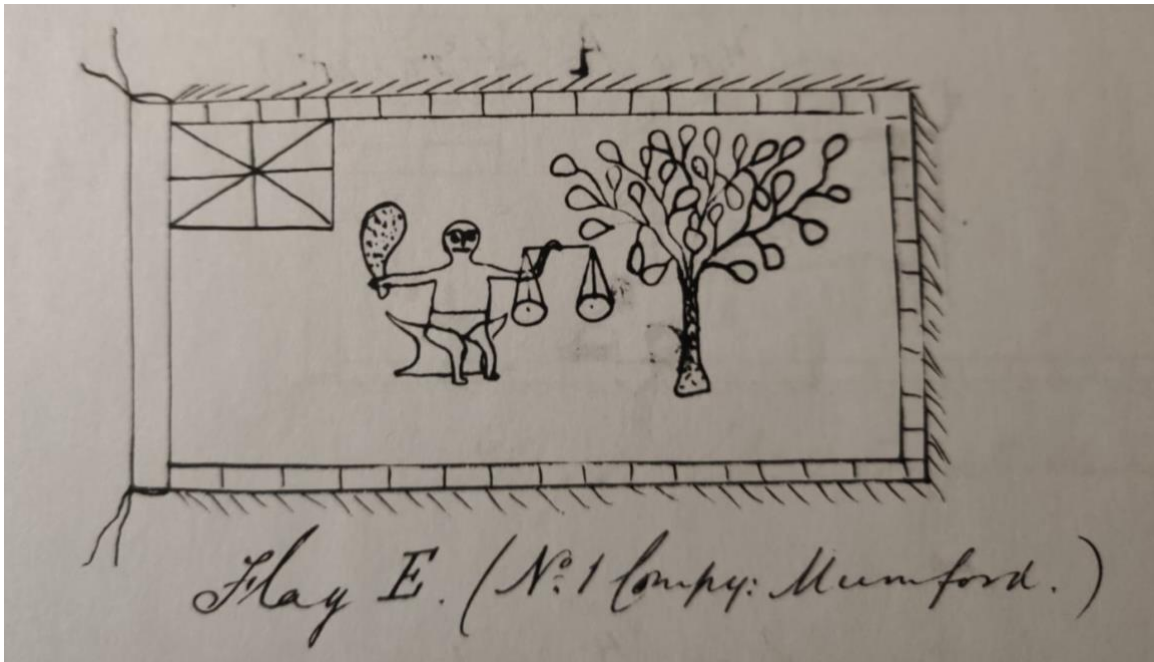
No. 1 Company claimed that they had been lent this flag by No. 2 Company of nearby Ekumfi Otuam.⁶⁰ The bears depicted in both this flag and flag D, are 'supposed to typify the No. 2 Company', an accusative of diminutive status.



⁶⁰ Ibid, Cobina Quachie, et al to DC Winneba, 27 September 1887.



Images of padlocks and keys usually demonstrated the closure of a festival. This flag would most likely have been paraded on the final day of the upcoming ritual celebrations.



As described by the DC, the common element in these flags is that the images ‘were indicative of contempt’, including that of ‘the elephant approaching the palm trees’.⁶¹ In particular, the image of the crow in flags A and D was ‘an especial object of detestation to the No. 2 Company because it is supposed to take a prominent position and laugh at the discomfiture of this company’.⁶² The image of the palm tree in flags A and D was explained by Mumford asafo elders in the 1990s as meaning ‘I am not afraid of threats or danger’.⁶³ As a collection then, these flags served to emphasise the military might and superiority of No. 1 Company at the direct expense of No. 2.

As a result of this apparent provocation, the DC of Winneba in 1887 recommended that either ‘the use of these emblematic flags by native “companies” and “associations” be abolished entirely,’ or ‘permission for the use of these emblematic flags be placed under legislative and legal enactment’.⁶⁴ By 1889, senior officials agreed with this proposition. While the acting governor did not ‘desire to stop these customs’ completely, certain limitations were suggested, including that ‘no pass is to be given for the exhibition of tribal flags and emblems and that the law in this respect is to be strictly enforced’.⁶⁵

Despite the confiscation of these provocative flags, the emblems held within them did not disappear from Mumford culture. Although over three decades seems to have passed without any significant episodes of violence, save a small fight in 1907, Mumford found itself in turmoil again in the early 1920s. On 3 May 1921, a fierce *amanko* broke out between the two asafo companies. Armed with guns and a strong sense of company identity, the men of Mumford fought with such intensity that 46 lives were lost – coincidentally ‘composed of 23 of each company’.⁶⁶ The underlying causes of this *amanko* were twofold; the wider

⁶¹ Ibid, ‘Descriptive and General Account of the Flags seized at Mumford’, 22 October 1887

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ AHP, Dentsefo and Tuafo Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Mumford, 14 February 1998.

⁶⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, ‘Descriptive and General Account of the Flags seized at Mumford’, 22 October 1887.

⁶⁵ Ibid, Assistant CS to DC Winneba, 29 July 1889.

⁶⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/108, DC Winneba to SNA, 9 November 1921.

contextual backdrop within which the *amanko* took place, and the proximate display of a familiar, forbidden emblems.

The morning of 3 May 1921 was already fraught with company activities which honoured the military and ritual aspects of the asafo system. According to the oral histories of the Mumford asafo, 'it was on that day that they were going to participate in battle with Apam'.⁶⁷ Although this military expedition to the neighbouring town was planned in advance, it appears that No. 2 Company (Tuafo) decided at the last minute to opt out.⁶⁸ Present-day representatives of No. 1 (Dentsefo), contend that their company embarked to Apam without their counterpart, and 'defeated the Apam people'.⁶⁹

However, evidence given to the Supreme Court by residents of Mumford gave a slightly different explanation for the absence of Dentsefo on the morning of the *amanko*. As explained by Kwesi Saapah, a local fisherman and elder of the town, early on 3 May Dentsefo 'went to cut the boundaries . . . between the Appam [sic] and the Mumford people'.⁷⁰ Boundary cutting, an activity cited by many witnesses including *ohene* Kwesi Dadzi, should be understood as both a pragmatic and spiritual activity.⁷¹ Akan ritual topography identified the liminal space between settled communities and the bush as a zone of spiritual encounter.⁷² Alongside path clearing, a frequent aspect of many Fante festivals, boundary cutting involved an engagement with the natural world, and therefore, the spirits that resided there.

⁶⁷ Dentsefo Supi and Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, 22 May 2018, Mumford.

⁶⁸ It is of note that oral histories from both companies support this claim, so it is unlikely to be a narrative constructed simply to imply superiority of No. 1 (Dentsefo).

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangnan & others, Evidence of Kwesi Saapah, 9 August 1921.

⁷¹ Ibid, Evidence from Kwesi Dadzi

⁷² T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1995) p 119-20.

Nevertheless, it is equally possible that this excuse of boundary cutting given in the Supreme Court was a believable cover-up for the rather more violent intentions of No. 1 Company that morning. In a letter to the Commissioner of Central Province, the DC of Winneba reported that ‘I did hear a vague rumour that the Mumford people were making preparations to attack Apam [sic] when they quarrelled between themselves’.⁷³ The DC himself dismissed this idea as pure fabrication, explaining that ‘both the Senior Superintendent of Police and myself made exhaustive enquiries but we could gain no confirmation of this rumour and I feel sure there was nothing in it’.⁷⁴ Oral histories recorded in Mumford in the 1990s, however, also make mention of a ‘war’ with Apam, in which ‘they fought with corn cobs’.⁷⁵ Although this event is not given a date in these histories, it is clear that it occurred before the 1921 *amanko* between the two Mumford companies. Whether an attack on Apam was rumour or reality is difficult to determine, yet given the persistence of oral histories which emphasize the latter almost a century later, it seems that there was at least an intention to do so.

It was on their return from the Apam/Mumford border that No. 1 Dentsefo, stumbled upon the immediate trigger which provoked an *amanko*. When the Dentsefo returned from Apam at 10 a.m. having defeated their rivals there, they found the Tuafo ‘in a jubilant mood’, ‘celebrating’ and ‘carrying a drum’.⁷⁶ This celebration is clearly recognized across archival records and oral histories as being a performance of a musical group attached to Tuafo, called *Korenkyia*. It is likely that this performance was a process of ‘outdooing’, an inauguration ceremony of the musical group.⁷⁷ Nearly all members of *Korenkyia* were children belonging to Tuafo, although as clarified during the trial by a

⁷³ PRAAD, Accra, 11/1/803, DC Winneba to CCP, 4 May 1921.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ AHP, Dentsefo and Tuafo Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Mumford, 14 February 1998.

⁷⁶ Tuafo Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

⁷⁷ *Tuafo* Safohen and Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

Mumford woman Adjua Atta, ‘they were not small boys or girls.’⁷⁸ Evidence given in the Supreme Court suggested that there were about 65 of these young adults proceeding with the drum, along with various onlookers who had joined the procession. This merry band of dancers and drummers began their performance or so-called ‘play’ in front of the Methodist chapel in the Tuafo quarter on the west side of the town. As the parade continued towards the post office, more onlookers gathered and the crowd increased. As the members of Dentsefo, returned from the Apam/Mumford boundary and joined in the congregation surrounding *Korenkyia*, the mood soured. According to oral histories from current Dentsefo elders, those onlookers from Tuafo ‘were also singing songs that will make you angry, including lyrics which contended ‘oh you Dentsefo you are not men’.⁷⁹

As reported by a member of *Korenkyia*, prominent members of Dentsefo immediately ‘came and took hold of the drum’.⁸⁰ In the ensuing struggle, ‘the skin on the face of it’ was torn, and ‘stones were thrown’, before the drum was eventually pulled out of the grasp of its owners.⁸¹ As the situation escalated, many of the younger members of *Korenkyia* fled to the bush, some as far as Dago a mile and half away. However, by that point older members of Dentsefo had joined the affray. Oral histories suggest that the escalation from a verbal argument to a full-blow fight was triggered by ‘a man called Kusa, who is not normal [translator’s note: insane]’ who had ‘hit someone’s head with a stick’.⁸² As described by the *ohene* of Mumford, captains from both companies were ‘urging their men on’, by ‘whipping them’ and calling for them to ‘go forward’.⁸³ With the company elders cheering their soldiers on, the altercation soon became a fierce battle ‘with stones and clubs’ and the firing of muskets.⁸⁴ The detail included in the deposition from William Ryan, a medical officer

⁷⁸ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangnan & others, Evidence of Adjua Atta, 12 August 1921.

⁷⁹ *Dentsefo* Supi and Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

⁸⁰ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangnan & others, evidence of Kofi Ayarnsah, 5 August 1921

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² AHP, Dentsefo and Tuafo Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Mumford, 14 February 1998.

⁸³ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangnan & others, evidence of Kwesi Dadzi

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

stationed at Winneba who treated those involved in the *amanko*, goes some way to portray the severity of this fight. Fatal injuries included a 'gunshot wound in the heart' and 'a cutlass wound on the head severing the bone and scalp'.⁸⁵ This was a battle fought with great ferocity.

According to official correspondence, the *amanko* was only stopped once Mr Hutchinson, a building inspector based in neighbouring Dago, arrived in Mumford. In the words of the Police Commissioner, 'his appearance apparently so astonished the fighters that they dropped their guns and fled'.⁸⁶ It is likely that this account is accurate. The appearance of white colonial officials at the site of *amanko* nearly always resulted in arrest and detention of those asafo members involved in violence, and fleeing the scene would have been the best way to avoid this fate. Arrests did come later, with five men from both companies facing charges of manslaughter and aiding and abetting. Yet all that was left by the time the DC turned up in the afternoon were the 'dead and wounded lying in the square'.⁸⁷

What was it about the *Korenkyia* performance that incited such extreme violence? As has been discussed, an underlying atmosphere of military masculinity may well have been already present on the morning of the *amanko*. The more pressing motivation, however, seems to be located in the drum that the *Korenkyia* group had been using in their first ever performance as a musical group. The drum in question had apparently been subject to scrutiny before the *Korenkyia* play on 3 May. A member of *Korenkyia*, a Mumford fisherman by the name of Kojo Ayansah, testified that a meeting had taken place when the drum was initially purchased to discuss the emblems carved on it. Ayansah explained that after 'Kyini

⁸⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, Depositions before the Supreme Court, evidence given by W. A. Ryan, 14 May 1921.

⁸⁶ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/107, Commissioner of Police to Inspector General of Police, 9 May 1921.

⁸⁷ Ibid, DC Winneba to CCP, 5 May 1921.

Kweku [the head of *Korenkyia*] called the two company captains to come and look at the drum' ... No. 1 company objected to the emblems of the serpent and the palm tree'.⁸⁸ The *ohene* of Mumford reported that 'the snake is the emblem of the Dentsifu Company, also the palm tree,' and that 'the company drums are not engraved with emblems as a rule'.⁸⁹

Apparently, *Korenkyia* were required to pay a fine of twelve shillings 'as rum money' in compensation, and 'employed a carpenter to remove all the emblems', thus neutralizing the drum.⁹⁰ However, testimony from one Adjua Atta suggests that there was an alternative explanation: that 'when the drum was first exhibited the emblems had not been scraped off. After the fight the emblems were scraped off. The snake and the palm tree were on it when it was first played.'⁹¹ Whether the illicit emblems had been removed from the drum or not by the time it was played, it appears that they remained present in the minds of Dentsefo members.

The snake and the palm tree emblems are those applied onto two of the provocative flags in 1887. In 1921, however, they were appropriated by No. 2 Tuafo. It is more than possible that by displaying these emblems themselves, Tuafo could have been referencing the confiscation of those flags, memorialising a past wherein their rivals came off worse at the hands of the colonial government. Whether this is the case or not, it is evident that the appropriation of company devices, be they on a flag, a shrine or a drum, served to undermine the reputation of those who claimed original ownership.

What is especially interesting about these emblems is that they appear to have been borrowed from a neighbouring community. One of the flags confiscated in 1887, flag A or 'Tuam', was recorded as borrowed from Ekumfi Otuam, a community some seven miles

⁸⁸ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/803, Depositions before the Supreme Court, evidence given by Kojo Ayansah, 14 May 1921.

⁸⁹ Ibid, evidence of Kwesi Dadzi, 8 August 1921.

⁹⁰ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangnan & others, evidence of Kofi Ayansah, 5 August 1921.

⁹¹ Ibid.

west down the coast known as Tantom by British officials. It seems possible that the drum, inscribed with the same offensive emblems, also came from Ekumfi Otuam. *Korenkyia* member Kofi Ayansah gave evidence to suggest that before the musical group had acquired the drum, the group had 'borrowed a drum from the Tantom people'.⁹² If Otuam was the town that supplied drums for musical groups in this area, it could have been the location where a suitable drum maker resided. This interaction between asafo of different towns is notable. Although many of the relationships between asafo companies of nearby towns are characterised by violence and rivalry, there were clearly instances where the relationships were more amicable.

The events in Mumford from the 1880s to the 1920s demonstrates the capacity that these devices had to sow discord and enmity within Fante coastal towns. Violence, or the threat of violence, could be triggered by the display of these emblems on all company objects, not just the famous asafo flags. Although there were often wider contextual factors which made the situation more conducive to violence, almost all asafo *amanko* throughout the period of colonial rule involved one or more of these provocative emblems. Asafo emblems acted both as drivers of historical episodes and as mnemonic devices for past events, ensuring the perpetual military identities which drove the company system.

Oaths and Lyrics among the Asafo

Common among the Akan peoples of the Gold Coast and their neighbours is the use of commemorative oaths. Known as *ntam*, or in the case of dominant town oaths *ntam kese* (literally, big oath), these linguistic constructions mark moments of importance for the community within which they are held sacred. *Ntam* should be understood as part of a broader set of linguistic techniques among Akan speaking communities. Like proverbs,

⁹² PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/14, Rex v Kofi Ghangan & others, evidence of Kofi Ayansah, 5 August 1921.

these techniques act as a complex text through which cultural norms, identities and histories are reinforced.⁹³

Swearing by a commemorative oath is understood as a highly sacred act. If one was to swear by a *ntam* and was then found wanting, a heavy price would be paid in terms of financial compensation, the exchange of alcohol through which to pour libation and participation in ritual acts in order to appease the relevant ancestors. To swear by an *ntam* is to invoke the historical trauma of the event which it memorializes a ‘reminiscential oath by evocation’ as termed by linguist Kofi Agyekum.⁹⁴ Undertaking this process lightly, or without integrity, is to undermine the sacrifices made by those lost in the episode which the *ntam* marks. So grave is this process that the *ntam* and the past contained within it often remains unsaid.⁹⁵ History then, is remembered in silences.

These reminiscential oaths play a highly important role within the company system of the Fante asafo. In this context, *ntam* usually serve to memorialize great feats of military power, be they inter-company fights or full-scale wars against external enemies. As such, oaths are fundamental to the identities of the asafo. As contended by elders of the Mumford companies, ‘the asafo which has never fought has no oath’.⁹⁶ It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the oaths of the various coastal Fante towns commemorate some of the most significant asafo *amanko* of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Although historical literature on asafo violence has had a tendency to portray company conflict as explicitly politically motivated, nearly all oaths explored in relation to this project focus on internecine *amanko* between companies without direct implications for political authority. The notable exception here is *Oguaa Wukuda*, the oath of Cape Coast which eclipsed the earlier oath *Mankata Wukuda*, as noted in Chapter One. *Oguaa Wukuda*

⁹³ See A. Quamie-Kyimah, ‘The Customary Oath in the Gold Coast’, *African Affairs* 50: 199 (1951).

⁹⁴ Kofi Agyekum, ‘Ntam ‘Reminiscential Oath’ Taboo in Akan’, *Language in Society* 33: 3 (2004), p 317.

⁹⁵ T. C. McCaskie, ‘Unspeakable Words, Unmasterable Feelings: Calamity and the Making of History in Asante’, *Journal of African History* 59: 1 (2018).

⁹⁶ AHP, Dentsefo and Tuafo Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Mumford, 14 February 1998.

itself ‘refers to what took place on Wednesday January 23, 1856 when all the Companies of Cape Coast except one [No. 1 Company Bentil] fought against their Omanhin Kofi Emissa.’⁹⁷ Although this oath was used by all asafo companies of Oguaa, it held a particular place of solemnity in No. 1 Company (Bentil), because they ‘suffered greater losses than all the other Companies’.⁹⁸ Said to have been ‘the most bloody riot that has ever occurred in Cape Coast’, this battle was specifically focused on factional disagreements between the Cape Coast asafo over who should hold the ultimate position of power in their town.⁹⁹

Although many oaths honour *amanko* which did not have explicitly political underpinnings, they nevertheless resulted in high death tolls and wide-scale damage to property and infrastructure. These conflicts frequently had just as much impact on the historical memory of the community as those which determined positions of office. The events of Mumford in 1921, as explored above, are commemorated by the town oath *Dwomma Benada*. As explained by elders of No. 1 Dentsefo, *Dwomma Benada* ‘is a very strong statement’ which when wrongfully used ‘means that the wars will haunt you.’¹⁰⁰ The ghosts of the 1921 *amanko* therefore, continued to stand sentinel over the historical memory of the town.

In most cases, asafo oaths are held in common by all the companies of a town. Yet occasionally individual companies will have experiences so profound that they are commemorated by their own oath, especially when the company holds a position of power in the community. This is the case in Anomabo, where No. 6 Company (Kyirim) possesses the oath *Kyirimfo Gyuso Fida*, underpinning its long-held reputation as the town’s most tenacious asafo *Kyirimfo Gyuso Fida* was born of a rivalry between Kyirim and the Etsiwa

⁹⁷ PRAAD Cape Coast, ACC 153/ 64, ‘The Origin of the Oaths of the Omanhin Cape Coast’, 1922.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Dentsefo Supi and Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

company. During a period only chronologised as ‘in the olden days’, both Etsiwa and Kyirim went to farm. Both companies had their own agricultural lands, but shared a border. According to Kyirim, members of Etsiwa incurred upon the border, killing many members of Kyirim and striking up ill-feeling and distrust. As an act of revenge, members of Kyirim waited until both companies were out at sea fishing and then ‘chased them [Etsiwa] and cut off their heads’.¹⁰¹ After decapitating the unfortunate Etsiwa fishermen, Kyirim sent the severed heads ‘back to their wives in the drag nets’.¹⁰² *Kyirimfo Gyuso Fida* therefore serves not only to memorialise asafo ancestors lost in battle, but also as a thinly veiled threat. The military power of Kyirim remains ever present as long as the oath prevails. Kyirim’s propensity for war on water is said to be encapsulated in their company shrine (*posuban*) which takes the shape of a ship: supposed to remind potential enemies that ‘they challenge people to fight at sea’.¹⁰³

At the other end of the spectrum, there are cases where oaths transcend both company and town borders. These *ntam* usually commemorate historical moments where asafo from neighbouring towns clash, often due to company parades through enemy territory. Nowhere is this more prevalent along the coast than in the Ekumfi region. The small communities in this area have long experienced a turbulent relationship with each other, as reflected in the oaths of the Ekumfi towns and of nearby Gomoa Dago. A past where the coastal asafo united, however, is evident in the *ntam Ekumfi Benada*, which commemorates a united front fighting against an Asante incursion. Yet more readily remembered are the many oaths which recall internecine *amanko* between the asafo of the

¹⁰¹ Kyirim Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. William Kobina Otoo, Anomabo, 25 May 2018. This narrative is also said to be depicted on a Kyirim flag by images referring to the proverb ‘a fish that has no head is very rare to eat or come by’. This flag is said to have provoked further violence between Kyirim and Etsiwa: AHP, Kyirim Elder, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 15 August 1997.

¹⁰² Ibid. Some retellings of this story suggest that the severed heads were delivered to Etsiwa wives in baskets rather than drag nets.

¹⁰³ Akwa, *Anomabo*, p 14.

various Ekumfi towns. *Narkwa Dwoada*, for example, commemorates a ‘major conflict’ between Ekumfi Ekumpoano and Ekumfi Narkwa which broke out over lagoon fishing rights, probably at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁰⁴ Not only do these oaths mark the profound tension which existed between the Ekumfi towns for the majority of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, they also reveal details about how conflicts unfolded and what was at stake in the violence that followed.

The tensions endemic to inter-company strife were also captured in songs written and performed by asafo members. Many of these explicitly referenced the victories of the singers, the failings of their rivals and specific episodes of violence. Like the *ntam*, song lyrics acted as a linguistic vehicle through which to mark moments of historical importance for the asafo. As one element in the growing suspicion towards popular, proto-highlife music on the part of the colonial government in the early twentieth century, asafo songs sometimes came to the attention of the courts.¹⁰⁵ While songs could be more ephemeral than the *ntam*, colonial attempts to restrict the performance and distribution of provocative lyrics left a residue in the archives. Two asafo *amanko* from Ekumfi, which in turn sparked four separate *ntam* and a number of provocative songs, will be explored here. They demonstrate the power of violence to shape historical identity and the linguistic forms through which *amanko* have been remembered.

Otuam Fida/Dago Fida

The *ntam kese* of Gomoa Dago commemorates a clash between members of Dago and the neighbouring town Ekumfi Otuam on 3 December 1920. The scale of the battle was vast,

¹⁰⁴ Narkwa Oman, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Adams Abeku, Ekumfi Narkwa, 20 April 2018.

¹⁰⁵ Plageman, *Highlife Saturday Night*, p 64.

with 167 houses destroyed in Dago, in a town of around 500 inhabitants.¹⁰⁶ Fourteen people were killed in the affray and many more wounded.¹⁰⁷ Such was the gravity of this battle that it reverberates extensively throughout both oral histories and the colonial archive. The same oath is also held by the inhabitants of Otuam, referred to there as *Otuam Fida*. As explained by captains in the Otuam company, ‘since Otuam asafo fought in so many wars, it was two major oaths. . . .Whenever two people are disputing and one of them makes a statement that I swear by the Oath of Otuam Friday or Ekumfi Tuesday the person is to be stopped. Sheep has to be slaughtered. This shows the seriousness of the matter’.¹⁰⁸ The 1920 conflict between Dago and Otuam was by no means the only clash between the two towns, but appears to have become rooted in local historical consciousness as well as attracting particular attention from the colonial administration. A lengthy and detailed court case, *Rex v Kwamin Kain & others*, commenced in January 1921. This case, brought against the *supi* and eleven asafo captains from Otuam, includes countless testimonies from the inhabitants of Ekumfi Otuam and Dago.

At the heart of the conflict was the death of an Otuam *safohen*, Kweku Yedu. Yedu had fallen ill so was taken to a village called Amoanda between Dago and Mumford. Amoanda, now known as a ‘ghost town’, was renowned in the region for its healers.¹⁰⁹ The occupants of Amoanda were ‘predominantly farmers, so the closeness with nature and herbs led to the evolution of their knowledge of the use of herbs.’¹¹⁰ That Amoanda is frequently referred to as a ghost town in oral histories appears to be due both due to its abandonment in the late twentieth century and to the high number of deaths which occurred there. Indeed, despite the attentions of local healers, Kweku Yedu died there in late 1920. As

¹⁰⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, List of Houses Burnt at Legu; ADM 11/1/1472 *Rex v Kwamin Kain & others*, Evidence of Eduafo II, 27 January 1921.

¹⁰⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Charges at Criminal Assizes Court, Winnebah, 26 January 1921.

¹⁰⁸ AHP, Otuam Safohen, Okyeame, and Elders, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Ekumfi Otuam, 26 June 1997.

¹⁰⁹ AHP, Otuam Tufuhene, interview with Asafohen and Safoakyere, Ekumfi Otuam, 7 February 1998.

¹¹⁰ Tuafu Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Adams Abeku, Gomoa Dago, 19 May 2018.

safohen in Otuum, his company embarked on a journey to collect the body. As Amoanda lay to the west of Gomoa Dago, it was necessary for the asafo of Otuum to pass through the rival town in order to meet *Safohen* Yedu's family on their way back from Amoanda. On the night of 2 December, around thirty members of the Otuum asafo paraded in company formation through Dago, in order to return the corpse home.¹¹¹

However, according to an interview with Akini III, the *omanhene* of Ekumfi district, conducted by the colonial officer Mr Atterbury, the Otuum people travelled 'without first obtaining the consent of the Chief of Leggu' (i.e., Dago).¹¹² The gravity of this insult should not be underestimated. A procession of an asafo company through a neighbouring town – particularly one with which there was a long-standing rivalry – was nothing short of sacrilege. As the *ohene* of Dago, Eduafo II, testified, 'I was surprised when I saw these Tantum people going through my town ringing their bell and blowing their bugle and with cutlasses and spears'.¹¹³ 'This would be regarded by the people whose town was passed through as an open defiance or challenge', he continued, 'and fighting would result'.¹¹⁴ Later in the trial, Eduafo II explained that 'if a company has arrived in the point mentioned in a foreign town without company emblems and without singing company songs they can, I say, pass through the town to get the body without asking any permission.'¹¹⁵ To add insult to injury, this aggressive procession was exacerbated by the singing of an established offensive song:

¹¹¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of James Enin Essandoh, 4 February 1921.

¹¹² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/371, Acting CCP Atterbury to SNA, 4 May 1921.

¹¹³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of *Ohene* of Dago, Eduafo II, before Criminal Assizes Court, Winneba, 27 January 1921.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of Eduafo II, 28 January 1921.

'A shady tree we belch on you

We shit upon you. Legu we don't like

*We want Mumford people.'*¹¹⁶

Although the Otuam procession seems to have passed through Dago unscathed on their way to collect the body of the *safohen*, their return journey was not so sedate. After meeting the family of the deceased on the road between Dago and Amoanda, the corpse was passed from the *abusua* to the *asafo*. James Enin Essandoh, a native of Apam residing in Dago as a missionary agent, describes the re-entry of the Otuam back into the town. 'When the people were returning they were carrying a corpse. The corpse was wrapped in something and carried by two men. It was carried in a cloth slung up like a hammock.'¹¹⁷ While the Otuam *asafo* paraded back through the centre of Dago carrying Kweku Yedu's corpse, it was reportedly seized.¹¹⁸ Essandoh relayed the information he had been given by representatives of Otuam; 'They said when they reached Legu the people of Legu stopped them and said they were not notified and took the dead body from them and took it to the chief's house.'¹¹⁹ James Francis Yankson, a police corporal stationed at Saltpond who was in the area confirmed that 'the Legu people then took the dead body from them and flogged them.'¹²⁰

These may well have been the actions of the Dago *asafo* companies, acting without the approval of the *ohene*. As Eduafo II explained, 'when I got back to my house I saw a dead body in front of it . . . I formed the opinion that it was the body of a Tantum man'.¹²¹ Under cross-examination, Eduafo reiterated that 'I did not give directions that this dead body

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of James Enin Essandoh, 4 February 1921.

¹¹⁸ Tuafu Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Adams Abeku, 19 May 2018, Dago.

¹¹⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence given by James Enin Essandoh, 4 February 1921

¹²⁰ Ibid, Evidence given by James Francis Yankson, Corporal of Police stationed at Saltpond, 6 February 1921

¹²¹ Ibid, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of Eduafo II, 27 January 1921

should be dragged of the front of my house, and that ‘I did not swear the thirty fifth Gomoa oath to take the body from the Tantum people.’¹²² The involvement of Eduafo II in the provocation, however, is evident in a statement given by Kofi Musu, a fisherman and *safohen* in Otuum’s Tũafo Company. Musu contended that ‘the Chief took hold of the dead body and ordered his men to take the body from us, he also told them to fight us there. They took the body from us and dragged us on the ground when they start beating us with their cutlasses and sticks.’¹²³ The colonial authorities also concluded that Eduafo II played a key role in inciting the *amanko*. Recalling the episode a year later, the Commissioner of Central Province wrote that ‘the riot had its origin in action taken by the Ohene of Legu and some of his people when the body of one of the company captains of Tantum was being conveyed through Legu’.¹²⁴ Nevertheless, it seems that there was little love lost between the Dago asafo and their Ohene. In 1919, the DC reported that ‘Eduafo II had apparently insulted the people of the town; both companies’.¹²⁵ In 1925, less than four years after the *amanko* in question, Eduafo II had been destooled.¹²⁶ Whether or not the *ohene* had been an active instigator in the conflict between Otuum and Dago, it seems unlikely that he would have had much sway over the Dago asafo.

The next morning, the Otuum asafo were met by James Francis Yankson. Kwamin Kain, the one of the two supis of Otuum, told the police detective that ‘Legu took a dead body from us and they are laughing at us. We are preparing to go and take out our dead body’.¹²⁷ In the face of an impending *amanko* Yankson set off to warn the DC of Saltpond. The Omanhene of Ekumfi, Akini III also attempted to divert members of the Otuum asafo from provoking violence at Dago. Apparently, Akini ‘went down on his knees and begged

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, Statement given to A. W. Amoyaw by Kofi Musu, 6 December 1920.

¹²⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, CCP to the CS, 6 May 1922.

¹²⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/311, CCP to DC Winneba, 18 March 1919.

¹²⁶ Ibid, Tufuhin Kojo Edwin to DC Winneba, 4 March 1926.

¹²⁷ Ibid, Evidence of James Francis Yankson 5 February 1921

his captains not to go and fight'.¹²⁸ Although the two supis, Kain and Kwesi Amissah, 'swore by the Omanhin's foot that they would not go and fight', this promise was very quickly broken. Clearly, just like Ohene Eduafo II, the Ekumfi Omanhene was unable to dissuade the companies in his territory from engaging in violence.

Elders of Dago were initially alerted to the return of the vengeful Otuum asafo by local women who had spotted the advancing army on the road connecting the two towns.¹²⁹ Upon receiving this report, Eduafo II ventured to the outskirts of the town, only to 'enact a hasty retreat once the Otuum asafo began firing their guns.¹³⁰ By 23 December the Omanhene of Ekumfi and the Omanhene of Gomoa Asin – the headmen of the two wider districts into which Otuum and Dago fell - had signed bonds at the extraordinary cost of one thousand pounds against any further disturbances.¹³¹ In the case of *Rex v Kwamin Kain & others*, all the accused pleaded guilty of manslaughter. Ten men were served with fourteen years imprisonment with hard labour and a £50 fine, with the remaining two given twenty years imprisonment with hard labour and the same fine.¹³²

The fact that at least nine of these men were emphatically referred to as 'young captains' in evidence given by the local superintendent of police, Alexander William Amoah, speaks to the potential generational divide within the community.¹³³ Although there is no greater substantive evidence beyond the policeman's description, the implication that younger, perhaps more reckless, men were leading the fight is one echoed elsewhere in narratives about asafo violence. Moreover, it is clear that the senior men of the two towns – most notably Dago Ohene Eduafo II and Ekumfi Omanhene Akini III – were not well respected by their respective asafo. Eduafo II clearly had a rocky relationship with the Dago

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid, Evidence of Eduafo II, 29 January 1921.

¹³⁰ Ibid, Evidence of Eduafo II, 29 January 1921

¹³¹ Ibid, Telegram, DC Winneba to CS, 23 December 1920.

¹³² PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, *Rex v Kwamin Kain & others*, Sentencing by Judge S.K.F. Nettleton, 14 February 1921.

¹³³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, Evidence given by Alexander William Amoah, 6 January 1921.

companies for the entirety of his tenure, as discussed above. As for local opinion on Akini III, there were certainly rumours regarding his inability to keep the peace in Ekumfi. Colonial officials distrusted Akyini III, especially towards the end of his life. The DC of Saltpond wrote in 1937 that, 'he has been guilty of encouraging the bloody Company fights in the different places in Ekumfi from which he makes plenty of money as for the hire of Lawyers and in some cases he has fined the parties large sums of money apart from punishments inflicted by the courts'.¹³⁴ This allegation is not returned to elsewhere in the colonia archive, and is perhaps better understood as a reflection of the frequent outbursts of inter-company rivalry in Ekumfi during Akini III's time on the stool. Nevertheless, the lack of respect accorded to the Omanhene of Ekumfi and the Ohene of Dago at the time of the conflict between the two towns should be considered an important factor in the eventual outburst of violence.

The material and economic implications of the *amanko* clearly remained at the forefront of Legu consciousness for many years. In February 1922, Eduafo II sent a petition to the DC of Winneba asking for money and resources to rebuild the community, noting that 'houses were damaged and burnt to ashes', and that 'all our canoes were destroyed, the only method of making livelihood has been taken away from us'.¹³⁵ The events of December 1920 were also remembered in two popular songs which were prevalent in Dago long after the *amanko*. In May 1930, the Commissioner of Central Province wrote to the Colonial Secretary asking that the sale of particular gramophone records, in which these songs were recorded, to be prohibited. He argued that 'the words appear to be highly provocative, and as such there is . . . a danger of their being used to the disturbance of the public peace'.¹³⁶ Although the Acting Governor declined to act, it is easy to see why the commissioner felt

¹³⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/527, Mackay, DC Saltpond to CCP, 16 November 1934.

¹³⁵ Ibid, Petition from Eduafo II & others, 11 February 1922.

¹³⁶ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/377, CCP to CS, 2 May 1930.

these songs could be provocative.¹³⁷ A transcription of the lyrics attached to his letter is worth quoting in full:

Song 1:

'Ay wukũ nyi á; ay wukũ nyi á;
Osafuhin e wukũ ara nyi á
Ay wuku ara nyi a; Kwesì a wukũ ara nyi:
Ay wukũ ara nyi;
Osafuhin entum ankũ
Osa ye m'menyindzi O
Osafuhin entum ankũ
Osa ye m'menyindzi O
Wonyã ku á wonyi hen ampa
Osafuhin e wukũ ara nyi:
Akitsi e w'asem nyi a; Akitsi e w'asem nyi a:
Kwesì e w'asem nyi á: Ay w'asem nyi á
Kwesì e w'asem nyi á: Ay w'asem nyi á
Kwesì entum ankũ
Osa ye m'monyindzi O
Ohene Kwesì entum ankũ
Osa ye m'menyindzi O
Wonya Ku á woyi mu ampa

Translation:

Aye! Is this your way of fighting? Aye: is this your way of fighting;
Aye Safuhene; is this all your fighting?
Aye is this all your fighting: Aye Kwesi; is this all your fighting?
Aye is this all your fighting:
Safuhene has failed to fight:
O! Fighting is bravery:
Safuhene has failed to fight

¹³⁷ Ibid, CS to CCP, 17 May 1930.

O! Fighting is bravery
At war truly they credit us:
Safuhene: is this all your fighting?
Aye Akitsi: is this your palaver: Aye Akitsi: is this your palaver:
Aye Kwesi: is this your palaver; Aye is this your palaver:
Aye Kwesi: is this your palaver; Aye is this your palaver:
Kwesi has failed to fight;
O! Fighting is bravery
Ohene Kwesi has failed to fight;
O! Fighting is bravery
Truly they credit us at war

Song 2:

Otuam kyerm e; Otuam kyerm e;
Wodzi amandzi riba o;
Wodzi amandzi riba á wo nfa mbra:
Otuam kyerm e; Otuam kyerm e;
Wodzi amandzi riba o;
Wodzi amandzi riba á wo nfa mbra:
Oye de wa tsina asi á wodzi amandzi esi wabuanu:
Amandzi o amandzi; Amandzi o amandzi;
Amandzi o amandzi; Amandzi o amandzi:
Amandzi wara se de asem bi nka ba n'na asem aba yi;
Amandzi wara se de asem bi nka ba n'na asem aba yi;
Irikũ omankũ á ma wu tsir du na da kur asem á.

Translation:

Aye Otuam Kyirem; Aye Otuam Kyirem;
They are bringing trouble;
They are bringing trouble: (let) them bring it;
Aye Otuam Kyirem; Aye Otuam Kyirem;
They are bringing trouble;
They are bringing trouble: (let) them bring it;

As if they are seated they have placed trouble at your door
Trouble O! trouble; Trouble O! trouble;
Trouble O! trouble; Trouble O! trouble;
Trouble! You say that no trouble will arrive but trouble has come;
Trouble! You say that no trouble will arrive but trouble has come;
When fighting in (engaged) in civil war lift up your head for it's only one day's affair'.¹³⁸

It is undeniable that these songs, as disseminated through gramophone records, served both to provoke and to threaten. Lines such as *Ohene Kwesi entum anku* – 'Ohene Kwesi has failed to fight' serve to undermine one of the *supis* from Otuum and therefore amounted to a personal attack on a senior asafo member. General taunts against the town as a whole, such as *Otuam kyirim wodzi amandzi riba o* – 'Otuum Kyirem; they are bringing trouble' – alongside the reference to the infighting between the two Otuum asafo companies, further aggravated the sensibilities of the community. Yet the songs also acted as a linguistic memorialisation of the conflict between Otuum and Dago. In contrast with the *ntam*, which memorialised asafo histories through what went unsaid, musical retellings of violent episodes loudly professed the tensions of inter-company rivalry. However, songs such as those recorded from the Otuum asafo were generally transient. The sacred nature of oath-making rendered the *ntam* much weightier historical landmarks, commemorating outbreaks of unrest for decades, and sometimes centuries, to follow.

Ekumpoano Akra Yawada / Akyeamfo Yawda

Ekumpoano Akra Yawada commemorates a clash between the two towns of Ekumfi Ekumpoano and Ekumfi Akra on Thursday 7 February 1907. The fight is memorialized in Akra as *Akyeamfo Yawda*, an eponym of the *omanhene* of Ekumfi at the time, Akini III, also known as Nana Akyeam. *Akyeamfo* therefore translates as the people of Nana Akyeam and

¹³⁸ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/371, 'Lyrics from Gramophone Records'. The diacritics used in the colonial transliteration are now outdated but are included as recorded.

reflects the position of the *omanhene* in the lead up to the *amanko*. The *amanko* between Ekumpoano and Akra was also memorialised in a song that remained popular into at least the late twentieth century. Sung by the Akra asafo, the lyrics were recorded by the Asafo History Project in 1997;

“Akyeamfo yiara yesaa ye baye Nkumfo.

*Yiara yese a obo ye ho.”*¹³⁹

The song is a direct reference to the ‘determination by the Akra Nkumfo asafo to go to war with Ekumpoano’.¹⁴⁰ As explained by the town elders, the conflict followed an ongoing dispute that had in theory been settled. Despite this resolution, the Akra people continued in their preparations for war. As a result, the *omanhene* went ‘to Akra [to] investigate the matter himself.’ When he arrived in Akra, ‘he saw that the people were mending their nets’ and told him ‘that they had just come from the sea’. In that case, the Akra people explained to the Omanhene ‘how then were they going to war?’ Of course, the reality of the situation was far less diplomatic. Although the Akras had put on a good show of attending to the day-to-day chores of fisher folk, ‘the people had already armed themselves’. The core meaning of the song is therefore, ‘once they have said to go to war, they were determined to go.’

The bare bones of the events of the *amanko* itself are still contained within oral histories prompted by the oath *Ekumpoano Akra Yawda*: ‘The genesis of the fight was that the other community, Akra, sewed a new asafo flag, which they informed this community that they were going to dip the flag in the lagoon at Narkwa.’¹⁴¹ This act is best understood as a process of sanctification for the new aesthetic representation of the asafo. In order for the company to reach the lagoon, however, it was necessary for them to pass through Ekumpoano. Despite giving due notice to senior members of the Ekumpoano *oman*,

¹³⁹ AHP, Akra Opanyin, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Ekumfi Akra, 11 July 1907.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid

permission for the Akra to pass through was not given. As the current *asafohinfo* of Ekumpoano explained, ‘you have to look at it in the context of how did they see the flag. It is an act of war to sew a new flag and say “oh we’re going to pass through your land”’.¹⁴² In order to prevent such an egregious act, the elders of Ekumpoano lodged a complaint with the *Omanhene* of Ekumfi district, Akini III.¹⁴³ Their undertakings proved unsuccessful. Akini III did not step in, and instead bid the people of Ekumpoano to settle the case themselves.

As in the case of the Otuam-Dago *amanko*, it is necessary to consider the position of Akini III here. From the perspective of the Ekumpoano *asafo*, the *omanhene* did not sufficiently act to prevent the 1907 *amanko* from taking place. Current elders from Ekumpoano suggested that Akini III had ‘a weakness in that direction because his father was from that community [Akra] so when they went to report the incident to him initially he was a bit biased.’¹⁴⁴ It should be remembered that holders of political office such as *ohene* and *omanhene* were supposed to leave their company allegiances behind once they occupied town stools. Of course, this could just be the griping of an *asafo* company who ultimately suffered great losses as a result of the conflict. Yet the recurring theme of Akini’s inability to curb *asafo* conflict suggests that, at the very least, he was at times an ineffective deterrent against company rivalry.

And so, on 7 February 1907, the Akra *asafo* crossed through the territory of Ekumpoano. As summarised by the DC of Saltpond, ‘probably considerably over 500 armed men preceded and followed by a rabble of women, left Akra at daylight’, reaching Ekumpoano at around seven o’ clock in the morning.¹⁴⁵ Such was the gravity of the violence which followed that a case was brought before the Supreme Court against the Chief of Akra,

¹⁴² Ibid

¹⁴³ Installed November 1905.

¹⁴⁴ Ekumpoano *Asafohen*, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Adams Abeku, Ekumfi Ekumpoano, 28 April 2018.

¹⁴⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907.

A. B. Blankson. *Ohene* Blankson himself was charged with ‘exhibiting tribal emblems without the permission in writing from the District Commissioner’.¹⁴⁶ The evidence points to a highly charged procession of the Akra asafo through Ekumpoano on both their outbound and return journey from the lagoon. A Methodist catechist residing at Ekumfi Narkwa reported seeing the Akra asafo pass his house, ‘armed with guns, powder, pouches’, carrying ‘a flag pole’ without a flag, ‘a company bell’, and ‘a native mat’ decorated with ‘some fetish charms’.¹⁴⁷ Quamin Dadzie, a tailor from Saltpond residing at Akra, also reported seeing ‘guns and pouches, also three company drums’, ‘one flag carried, also a mat’, and noted that ‘the Company were dressed in their special company clothes and they had on their company head dresses’.¹⁴⁸ Given that Quamin Dadzie was tailor to the Akra asafo, his judgement on their clothes was likely to be sound, noting further that Chief Blankson was wearing ‘an orange baft’, meaning ‘that the occasion is an important one; it is worn at funeral customs’.¹⁴⁹ Although funeral dress among Fante communities, as with much of the Akan, was usually confined to a red and black colour scheme, anthropological work has argued that ‘at Fante funerals one many see non-matrilineally related mourners wearing a dark orange cloth’.¹⁵⁰

Ansah and Dadzie both reported seeing a mat carried by the Arkra asafo. Abbah Korsima, a fish seller and a *safohemma* or female captain of Ekumpoano, confirmed this, explaining that she saw ‘four people were holding out the mat like a banner’.¹⁵¹ As Ansah explained, ‘a native mat is a company emblem’, while Akyini III noted that ‘company emblems of mats of whatever sort is understood to be a dangerous emblem of annoyance’,

¹⁴⁶ PRAAD CC, ADM 23/1/133, Supt Reffel v A. B. Blankson, Supreme Court Saltpond. Charges in accordance with Section 7 of Ordinance 11 of 1892.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, Evidence of Francis Kokyiraim Ansah, 17 June 1907.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, Evidence of Quamin Dadzie, 17 June 1907

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, Evidence of Quamin Dadzie, 8 July 1907.

¹⁵⁰ Paul S. Breidenbach, ‘Colour Symbolism and Ideology in a Ghanaian Healing Movement’, *Africa* 46: 2 (1976), p 138.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, Evidence of Abbah Korsima, 8 July 1907.

which, ‘provokes and causes disturbance to a bad result.’¹⁵² The *omanhene* went so far as to implore the Commissioner to ‘strictly prohibit all company emblems of mats of whatever nature’ throughout the district.¹⁵³ The inclusion of the mat with the company parade of the Akra asafo through Ekumpoano, alongside guns, flags, company dress, drums, bells, whistles and – unusually - a telescope, represented a provocation which the Ekumpoano asafo could not ignore. Just before the procession passed the house of catechist Ansah, he was greeted by the chief of Ekumpoano, Thompson, who warned him that ‘the Ekumpoano people were getting ready to defend their town.’¹⁵⁴ Indeed, when the Akra asafo travelled back through Ekumpoano, having sanctified their flag in the waters of the Narkwa lagoon, violence struck.

The events of the *amanko* are recorded in a resulting criminal trial, *Rex v Kobina Monko et al*, in which seventeen men were charged with either murder or abetting murder, later downgraded to a charge of rioting with offensive weapons.¹⁵⁵ This decision appears to have been reflective of general practice in the Central Province to charge those involved in company fights with rioting or rioting with offensive weapons, in part due to a suspicion that Cape Coast jurors would never convict for murder. As with the case brought by the Superintendent of Police against Blankson, many of the witnesses were women, which brings with it a relatively rare insight into the actions of women during an asafo *amanko*. Abbah Korsima, the Ekumpoano *safohemma*, testified that ‘the Akra women fought with the Ekumpoano women’.¹⁵⁶ In a report by the DC of Saltpond, it was noted that ‘a sand fight appears to have gone on for an hour between the two women in the absence of the Akra

¹⁵² Ibid, Evidence of Quamin Dadzie, 17 June 1907; PRAAD CC, ADM 23/1/111, Ekumfi Omanhene to Chief Justice Cape Coast, 18 May 1907.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ PRAAD CC, ADM 23/1/133, Supt Reffel v A. B. Blankson, Supreme Court Saltpond, Evidence of Francis Kokyiraim Ansah, 17 June 1907.

¹⁵⁵ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/8, *Rex v Kobina Monko & 16 others*, 7 May 1907; *Rex v Kobina Monko & 16 others II*, 15 May 1907

¹⁵⁶ Ibid, Evidence of Abbah Korsima, 15 May 1907

company, during which time the Ekumpoano women said to their men that ‘if the Ekumpoanos allowed the Akras to put their town to shame then no Ekumpoano women would marry with their own men again’.¹⁵⁷ This taunt, typical of the those used by women associated with Fante asafo companies, seems to have insult to injury. Once the Akra asafo returned to Ekumpoano, tensions continued to rise until unrestrained violence erupted in the town. It was then, once guns were being fired and the town was burning, that apparently ‘all the women ran away’.¹⁵⁸

Womanhood was also wielded metaphorically by the men of the Akra asafo. On their return through Ekumpoano, they were reported to have been singing offensive songs and calling out insults. Some of these were fairly innocuous: ‘Cowards, we are passing with our flag. If you can, you must fire’, ‘we are coming’, and ‘today be today’, presumably a direct translation of the Fante to the effect of ‘today is the day that war will happen’.¹⁵⁹ Yet both *Safohemma* Korsima and Essi Adama, a fish trader of Ekumpoano, testified to the rather more egregious mockery of Ekumpoano masculinity. Apparently, members of the Akra asafo spread the mat which had been carried in the procession, saying ‘Ekumpoanos are women, they must come and lie down’, and ‘women, come sleep’, the mat being a typical bed for an older woman. Such connotations explain Omanhene Akini’s warnings about the provocative nature of mats. As will be explored in more detail in Chapter Four, attempts to emasculate asafo members through idiomatic language and actions frequently acted as the trigger for violence.

Tension between the two communities was clearly exacerbated by the wielding of the mat and the gendered insult therein. Shortly after the spreading of the mat, ‘something was thrown into the town’ by the Akras, apparently some sort of firebomb as it killed two

¹⁵⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907

¹⁵⁸ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/8, Rex v Kobina Monko & 16 others, Evidence of Essi Adama, 15 May 1907.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, Evidence of Essi Adama and Abbah Korsima.

people and the next event reported is that ‘the town was burning’.¹⁶⁰ The tone of colonial correspondence suggests some disbelief at the possibility of a bomb being thrown, possibly stemming from that fact that these witnesses were female.¹⁶¹ Be that as it may, by the time the *omanhene* arrived on the scene, the Ekumpoano people were surrounded. Akyini III informed the Chief Justice that ‘he found some of the Akras on the Narkwa side, some on the Akra side, and others on the sea side of Ekumpoano, and the Ekumpoano, with their town in flames, were being hemmed in on the three sides.’¹⁶² It is likely that the *amanko* itself was constituted of the usual barrage of guns, throwing of stones and burning of thatch houses. The fighting is reported as having continued until one o’ clock, although it was not until five o’ clock in the afternoon that the Superintendent of Police turned up and began arresting suspects.¹⁶³

Although the exact number of those killed was never confirmed, ‘fourteen bodies were carried to Akra, and five were handed over the people of Ekumpoano’.¹⁶⁴ At least one body - that of an Akra man, Kwasi Anoo - was never recovered. Ekumpoano town was devastated and, in the immediate aftermath, was deserted. Writing at the end of May 1907, the DC of Saltpond remarked that ‘the Ekumpoanos are now gathering together from the bush – where they have been practically out-lawed for the last three months’.¹⁶⁵ Correspondence from elders of Ekumpoano clamouring for financial support in order to rebuild their homes further demonstrates the extent to which the community was affected. Not only had the Ekumpoanos suffered extreme loss of property, but also had to countenance the destruction of ‘many of their canoes’ and were ‘unable to attend to their

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, Evidence of Araba Saguah; Evidence of Abbah Korsima; PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907

¹⁶¹ Ibid, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907

¹⁶² Ibid, Chief Justice to CCP, 18 June 1907.

¹⁶³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, Report by CCP.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907.

farms since February', as their crops had been burnt to ash.¹⁶⁶ Over two years later, a visiting British officer noted that 'the village [is] still very far from being completely rebuilt'.¹⁶⁷

Ekumpoano and Akra, together with neighbouring villages Mbroto and Narkwa, were placed under the Peace Preservation Ordinance and a fine of £200 was imposed upon both the *ohene* of Akra and the *ohene* of Mbroto, a bush village of Akra.¹⁶⁸ Blankson was found 'guilty in a minor degree' – the case for the crown having been weakened by the perceived reliability of the witnesses: 'Ekumpoano people, three of them women.'¹⁶⁹ He was fined a quarter of the maximum penalty; £25 or three months imprisonment with hard labour.

Although the original murder charges were downgraded, members of the British colonial administration were certainly willing to make their own judgements in private correspondence. According to Chief Justice Brandford Griffiths, Kobina Monko of Ekumpoano was undoubtedly guilty of murder: 'he rushed out from among the other Ekumpoanos and attacked and killed an Arka called Breffua who was endeavouring, up to his waist in the sea, to pass the village'.¹⁷⁰ However, due to miscommunication between the Acting Solicitor and the Seargent of Police, Kobina Monko was released before the trial could take place. Despite issuing a warrant for his arrest, he subsequently 'could not be found', and managed to evade capture and sentencing.¹⁷¹ Fourteen Ekumpoano men were found guilty of rioting with offensive weapons, with sentences ranging from one to nine months. The frustration of Chief Justice Brandford Griffith notwithstanding, nobody from Akra was founding guilty of murder. Despite instructions to the contrary, it appears that

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, CCP to CS, 31 May 1907.

¹⁶⁷ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/133, C. H. Hart Davis to CCP, 4 March 1909.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, Acting CCP to CS, 13 September 1907; CS to CCP 13 September 1907.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, Supt Reffel v A. B. Blankson, Judgement by DC Saltpond, 11 July 1907.

¹⁷⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, Chief Justice to CCP, 18 June 1907.

¹⁷¹ Ibid, Report by Acting Solicitor General, 23 June 1907.

the jury 'decided that the Arkras were not guilty on the grounds that the Ekumpoanos fired the first shot.'¹⁷² All told, the unfortunate inhabitants of Ekumpoano appear to have drawn the short straw in the meting out of punishments, destruction to property and loss of life.

Yet the Ekumpoanos still managed to use the events of the 1907 *amanko* to antagonize the Akras. Although his body was never recovered, the spectre of Kwasi Anoo loomed large in asafo discourse for years afterwards. In 1908, the *Ohene*, councillors and captains of Ekumpoano were induced to give an official statement regarding the body in front of the DC:

We do not know what became of the body of Kwasi Anoo after his death. That we hereby guarantee that the body was not intentionally kept back by the Ekumpoanu people. We further undertake that the people of Ekumpoanu will not at any time refer to the fact that the body of Kwasi Anoo was not recovered by the people of Akra, nor will we in any way record this fact on any of our company flags and emblems.¹⁷³

There can be little doubt that this statement was given as a result of Ekumpoano taunts to this effect. In 1920, the Ekumfi *omanhene*, Akini III, reported to the Commissioner of Central Province that an inhabitant of Ekumpoano had again used the unrecovered body as a taunt. One Kwa Abiw, 'had challenged that if the Arkra Company are being brave they might force to Ekumpoanu and fetch their dead body.'¹⁷⁴ Although the *omanhene* was able to settle the matter, he warned that 'if it had not been for my rapid actions that would have surely been a disturbance'.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷²PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, Chief Justice to CCP, 18 June 1907.

¹⁷³ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/133, Statement from the Ohene, Councillors and Captains of Ekumpoano, 27 November 1908.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, Ekumfi Omanhene to DC Saltpond, 17 August 1920.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

The Akra-Ekumpoano *amanko* of 1907 left ripples in the historical consciousness of both communities. A decade later, details of the event itself were being mobilized as a medium through which the Ekumpoanos could ridicule the Akras. Ninety years later, songs celebrating Akra determination to go to war were still sung by the elders of that community. Over a century later, the oath *Ekumpoano Yawda* remains, a lingering, unspoken reminder of the inter-company violence which so disrupted the region.

Conclusion

Asafo oral histories are usually organised in line with the martial episodes that companies participated in. Whether these were larger battles involving the Fante as a whole or the inter-company fights that grew in volume from the late nineteenth century onwards, the militarism inherent to the company system shaped local chronologies and narratives about the past. This historical sense of military identity was expressed through a number of mediums, most prominently the famous appliqué flags but also other emblems, slogans, shrines, oaths and songs. The memorialisation of specific events and the representation of a general company character provided by these material and linguistic forms allowed asafo identities to endure.

As a result, asafo material culture was often deliberately provocative. Competition over ownership and display of flags and other emblems resulted in violence because the historical identity encapsulated within them was profound. To claim an emblem was, in effect, to make a claim for a specific identity. When emblems and the like were appropriated by rivals, the very identity of the offended company was thrown into question. Songs which referred to long-held hostilities or momentous episodes of conflict also reinforced the boundary between companies. Displays or performances which worked to inflame rivalry were also more likely to occur at times when figures of local authority, *ohene* or *omenhene*,

were unable or unwilling to mediate between opposing companies. Moreover, the more inter-company fights which occurred, the more flags, emblems and songs were developed to respond to these events and the more opportunities there were to stoke the embers of hostility. As will be seen in the following chapter, the exhibition of asafo emblems and singing of company songs often occurred at moments of great spiritual tension, when company identities were particularly poignant.

This perpetual process of conflict, the rendering of violence through art and music, and the subsequent provocation of more conflict underpinned asafo activity until the middle of the twentieth century. It created complex and overlapping company histories which were preserved by the asafo. The *ntam* which memorialised the most poignant, and often the most destructive *amanko*, grounded company histories in the sacred fabric of Akan societal norms. Largely unuttered, the *ntam* lingered as a reminder of past violence into the twenty-first century. As historians of their own companies, the asafo curated narratives predicated on the same military prowess and bravery which had propelled the company system through the turbulent years of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Chapter Three

Asafo Cosmologies

The cosmological beliefs of the Fante asafo system have received little or no attention in the academic literature. There are a number of possible reasons for this. The spiritual life of the asafo is complex and sometimes obscured by idiosyncratic variations in the cosmological spectrum of both towns and companies. There are also significant methodological challenges to exploring the spiritual realm, which is reported patchily within the colonial archive. Written sources do not therefore offer a comprehensive survey of spiritual and religious beliefs across the towns of the Fante coast. Earlier published European accounts of the Gold Coast do touch on local cosmologies, but again, these provide a somewhat fragmented depiction of spiritual life. Anthropological work from the early twentieth century does capture a fuller picture of local belief systems, especially work done on Asante by R. S. Rattray, and on the Ga by M. J. Field. Yet there was not the same level of ethnographic investment in Fante communities. Oral histories which include discussions of gods or ancestral spirits also have their own inherent challenges, especially when requested by outsiders. Indeed, No. 7 Company Cape Coast (Amanful) reported that in the late twentieth century, one of their gods ‘was stolen by a white person’.¹ Although the thief is said to have fallen ill and died as a result of their crime, an understandable reticence to discuss spiritual matters remains prevalent among this company and many others.

Nevertheless, the esoteric aspects of asafo culture need to be scrutinized, not least because the spiritual element is in many ways a driving force behind the longevity of the

¹ Amanful elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 March 2018.

company system. This chapter has two core intentions: to demonstrate the critical position which cosmology has held throughout asafo history, and to argue that the frequent inter-company battles of the nineteenth to early twentieth centuries routinely interacted with and were shaped by the spiritual world. It will be structured along broadly thematic lines rather than as a chronological narrative, which it is hoped will allow for a greater understanding of the constituent parts of asafo spirituality before delving into the role that these cultural phenomena played in instigating inter-company conflict and facilitating continuity in identity. After initially considering a broad framework for thinking about religious beliefs among the Akan-speaking peoples, the chapter will then seek to apply this framework to the Fante asafo companies. Spiritual actors such as gods and ancestral spirits will be examined before locating these agents in the contexts within which they appeared in the mundane world, with a focus on the spiritually fraught occasions of funerals and annual festivals. The relationship between these events, on the one hand, and outbreaks of asafo violence, on the other, will be expanded upon in relation to a particularly grievous *amanko* which took place in 1930. Finally, the ritual power of the ocean in Fante fishing towns will be investigated, demonstrating the extent to which the Akan eco-social order percolated throughout asafo worldviews.

A Note on Christianity

The proliferation of Christianity in southern Ghana since the nineteenth century has profoundly influenced the belief systems of Fante communities. Yet since its introduction on the Gold Coast, Christianity has often had a syncretic relationship with indigenous cosmologies.² Given the high degree of adherence to Christianity amongst the Fante today and the impact this has on oral histories and local intellectual work, it is worth briefly

² See, for example, Birgit Meyer, *Translating the Devil: Religion and Modernity among the Ewe in Ghana* (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1999).

outlining its historical development in the region. Although it was not until formal colonisation of the region that Christianity really took hold, the first Anglican missions to the coast began in the mid-eighteenth century. In the 1752, Thomas Thompson of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts arrived in Cape Coast with the intention to establish a mission in the town. He was followed in 1766 by Phillip Quaque, said to be the son of Birempong Kojo and who as a young boy had been sent by Thompson to be educated in England, where he studied theology at the University of Oxford and was ordained as the first African minister by the Church of England.³ Both pastors held positions of some influence at Cape Coast but were unsuccessful in spreading the gospel amongst local people.⁴

A stronger basis for evangelization emerged from 1835, when a Wesleyan Methodist Mission was established at Cape Coast, from where it spread throughout much of the Fante region in subsequent decades under the leadership of the Anglo-African missionary Rev. Thomas Birch Freeman.⁵ The arrival of the Basel Mission at Christiansborg or Danish Accra in 1829 also led to conversion among the peoples of the eastern Gold Coast and its forest hinterland.⁶ By the late nineteenth century, mission activity was producing dramatic results in the Fante region and beyond. For example, it was reported that in 1919 the Synod of the Ghana District of the Methodist Church 'listened to reports of successful open-air meetings at Accra and Apam, each of which had led to over two-hundred conversions'.⁷ Methodism had a widespread impact on the towns of the Fante coast, where it contributed

³ Vincent Caretta & Ty. M. Reese, *The Life and Letters of Philip Quaque: The First African Anglican Missionary* (University of Georgia Press: Athens GA, 2010), pp 1 – 25; F. L. Bartels, 'Philip Quaque, 1741 – 1816', *Transactions of the Gold Coast and Togoland Historical Society* 1: 5 (1955);

⁴ Ty M. Reese, "Sheep in the Jaws of So Many Ravenous Wolves": The Slave Trade and Anglican Missionary Activity at Cape Coast Castle, 1752-1816', *Journal of Religion in Africa* 34: 3 (2004).

⁵ F. Bartels, *The Roots of Ghana Methodism* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1965).

⁶ Seth Quartey, *Missionary Practices on the Gold Coast, 1832-1895: Discourse, Gaze and Gender in the Basel Mission in Pre-Colonial West Africa* (Cambria Press: Youngstown, NY, 2007).

⁷ Bartels, *Roots of Ghana Methodism*, p 186.

to the emergence of ‘an evangelized, trading, property owner, Victorian middle class’.⁸ Given that it demanded its members withdraw from ‘every kind of customary ritual’, it had the potential to undermine the ritual connection between asafo companies and the Akan cosmologies which they were born out of.⁹ Yet the spiritual underpinnings of the asafo remained a crucial feature of company activity, and indeed do so until the present day. Although Christianity is increasingly overlaid onto oral traditions and local cosmologies – a more syncretic relationship between the two being common in the present day – the position of Akan spiritual actors has remained unwavering in the worldview of the Fante asafo.¹⁰

Akan Spiritual Beliefs

Much of the historical literature concerned with the significance of spirituality and religion among Akan draws upon the work of anthropologist and colonial officer R. S. Rattray. Rattray presents a limited system of classification through which to understand spiritual actors within Akan beliefs. In paramount position is the creator God, Nyame, who despite existing as the ultimate spiritual power, is ‘too remote to be concerned very directly in person with the affairs of man’.¹¹ Power is therefore delegated, according to Rattray, from Nyame to the *abosom*. The *abosom* (sing. *obosom*), understood by Rattray as ‘lesser gods’ or ‘lieutenants’, do not possess corporeal form and rather reside in certain objects such as ‘a brass pan, or bowl, which contains various ingredients’.¹² Rattray terms these residencies of the *abosom* as shrines. Below the *abosom* in his typology, Rattray identifies the existence of spiritual or ritual objects, *asuman*, consisting of ‘charms, amulets, talismans’.¹³ These

⁸ T. C. McCaskie, ‘Cultural Encounters: Britain and Africa’, in A. Porter (ed), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Vol. III* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1997), p 677.

⁹ Adrian Hastings, *The Church in Africa, 1450-1950* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1994), p 459.

¹⁰ Brigid M. Sackey, ‘Asafo and Christianity: Conflicts and Prospects’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 2 (1998).

¹¹ R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1923), p 141.

¹² *Ibid*, p 145.

¹³ *Ibid*, p 90.

conclusions, reached from both Rattray's personal interactions with Asante religion and from historical texts such as Willem Bosman and A. B. Ellis, do indeed provide a useful framework through which to introduce the nature of Akan religious beliefs. However, some of the deeper nuances and detail are lost, if only due to the fact that Rattray's books span such a large range of themes. McCaskie's investigation into Asante society and culture injects greater detail into the cosmological spectrum provided by Rattray. In McCaskie's typology, below the *asuman* sit herbs and medicines (*aduro*). But this apparent hierarchy could be blurred, with various spiritual types dovetailing into each other, so that the *aduro* could become *asuman*, and *asuman* could become *abosom*. He also notes the existence of other minor spiritual actors, such as the hostile, forest dwelling gnomes (*sasabonsam*) and the trickster goblins (*mmoatia*), who diverged from the *abosom* in their spiritual character but could be directed by the auxiliary deities.¹⁴ Nevertheless, it is the *abosom* which the asafo of the Fante littoral were most concerned with, and which were incorporated into the culture of companies themselves.

The bond between Nyame and the *abosom* is further complicated in the work of Anthony Ephirim-Donkor. For Ephirim-Donkor, *abosom* are best understood as 'the administrators of the known and unknown worlds at the behest of God', not too dissimilar from Rattray's classification.¹⁵ Yet he goes further, arguing that the relationship between the *abosom* and Nyame is one of a shared existence: 'the *abosom* are of the same essence as God, although God is the ultimate combined spirit of all the Abosom, and so to speak of the Abosom is to speak of God.'¹⁶ Nyame, therefore, is less an entity distinct from the *abosom* than the sum of all of them. It is of note that Ephirim-Donkor is himself a United Methodist pastor, and therefore his analysis reflects the religious context within which he lives and writes. It is

¹⁴ McCaskie, *State and Society*, pp 118-119.

¹⁵ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Personality and Spirituality: The Role of Abosom and Human Essence* (Lexington Books: Lanham MD, 2016), p 52.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p 56.

possible that the doctrine of the holy trinity, whereby God is simultaneously one being and also constitutive of three distinct aspects, may have influenced his interpretation of the Nyame-*abosom* relationship. As with J. B. Danquah's work, the attempt to reinterpret Akan cosmologies in line with monotheistic theology is reflective of the positionality of Fante intellectuals who draw on indigenous authority as well as Christian teachings.¹⁷

Nevertheless, Ephirim-Donkor, like Rattray, notes that *abosom* can reside in certain objects.¹⁸ These material objects therefore act as temporary homes for the *abosom*, who 'reside in them during moments of high rituals.' As will be seen below, the specificity of these objects go some way to reflect not only the nature of the *obosom* itself, but also the earthly audience who encounters it. Yet regardless of the *abosom*'s materiality, the origins of these titular gods were always within the natural world. As McCaskie puts it, 'by definition, the *abosom* were powers in and of that nature that had proceeded culture'.¹⁹

Asafo Abosom

Abosom often revealed themselves to particular asafo companies. Although there were also *abosom* worshipped by towns as a whole, such deities tended to be accompanied by particularly martial gods who were affiliated with one company or another. The manifestations of these *abosom* as protective deities in warfare often reflects the historical experience of individual asafo and the company system as a whole. In Moree, for example, No. 2 Company (Kyirim) worship an *obosom* known as Nfa. Nfa, who manifests as a white woman, is drawn from the river sharing her name and uses this source as a defensive force against incursion. When an enemy attempts to breach the town, Nfa 'floods the road and

¹⁷ Kwesi A. Dickson, 'Introduction', in J. B. Danquah, *The Akan Doctrine of God 2nd Edition* (Routledge: London, 1968).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 57.

¹⁹ McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 108.

blocks them'.²⁰ In Anomabo, an *obosom* named Kokobi is credited with having protecting No. 6 Company (Kyirim) in the midst of a large-scale conflict.²¹ To protect the townspeople, Kokobi 'turned itself into a big snake and blocked the way so the enemies were not able to go capture the people'. Narratives such as this are common among the Fante asafo, for whom the *abosom* are frequently seen to have actively engaged with war and violence. Many *abosom* have specific techniques which helps their company in war, such as shielding asafo members from the bullets of a rival company. These war gods were spread along the Gold Coast through historic waves of Fante migration. Field's anthropological work on Ga communities notes this borrowing of spiritual actors from Fante settlers. In Christiansborg and Osu, she wrote, 'there are other later-acquired war gods, Ogbame and Dade, purchased from the Fanti'.²² Fante cosmologies also borrowed from other communities. Ritual practices which emerged in the savanna lands far to the north travelled through the forest belt and down to the coast.²³ The witch-finding deity Sakrabundi, for example, grew in popularity in northern Asante at the end of the nineteenth century before evolving into Aberewa and spreading throughout the Gold Coast.²⁴ Although worship of Aberewa declined in the face of opposition from both colonial and indigenous authorities, Sakrabundi eventually found her way into the pantheon of Cape Coast *abosom*. Today, No. 2 Company (Anafu) bring Sakrabundi out for ritual occasions, one of the few Fante *abosom* represented in the form of a mask. (See fig. 4, p 124).

Some *abosom* also manifest in material forms which reflect more specific contexts of warfare. In Cape Coast, No. 7 Company (Amanful) lay claim to an *obosom* named Nana Adangba. The residence of Nana Adangba consists of a bronze figurine – 'a human form

²⁰ Kyirim Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Moree, 11 April 2018.

²¹ Kyirim Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Anomabo, 25 May 2018.

²² M. J. Field, *Religion and Medicine of the Ga People* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1937), p 65.

²³ Jean Allman and John Parker, *Tongnaab: The History of a West African God* (University of Indiana Press: Bloomington, 2005).

²⁴ John Parker, 'Witchcraft, Anti-Witchcraft and Trans-Regional Ritual Innovation in Early Colonial Ghana: Sakrabundi and Aberewa, 1889-1910', *Journal of African History* 45: 3 (2004).

with the dress and the military baggage' of a soldier.²⁵ The company history states that in the late 1940s, one of the elders of Amanful returned from fighting in the Second World War. After the elder returned to his hometown, 'Nana Adangba came on to him [possessing his body] so he led their elders to a place that they started digging and in the earth they saw Nana Adangba'.

Although asafo companies did not sign up to fight in European wars as a collective, it is clear from both oral histories and documentary sources that men from the Fante towns did indeed participate in the two world wars of the twentieth century. Recruitment durbars were held on the Fante coast in the early 1940s to encourage young men to volunteer for the Gold Coast Regiment of the British Army.²⁶ Indeed, there were some direct appeals to members of asafo companies in 1917, although these do not seem to have resulted in great numbers of conscripts.²⁷ It is possible, therefore, that members of Amanful were among those who did join up, most of whom spent the Second World War fighting in what is now Myanmar. The timing of the discovery of Nana Adangba then, seems to be more than just a coincidence. Taking the form of a soldier figurine, found by a probable veteran of the Second World War, it seems more likely that the manifestation of Nana Adangba reflected the historical experience of certain members of Amanful. This phenomenon in and of itself is not necessarily extraordinary. Much of asafo culture reflects the social contexts within which the company system was born and raised, as has been discussed previously in this thesis. Yet the earthly manifestation of the Nana Adangba *obosom* speaks to the capacity of religious beliefs among the asafo to respond to the changing historical environs within which they found themselves. Far from being primeval scheme rooted in the distant past,

²⁵ Amanful elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 March 2018.

²⁶ David Killingray, 'Military and Labour Recruitment in the Gold Coast During the Second World War', *Journal of African History* 23: 1 (1982), p 91.

²⁷ Roger Thomas, 'Military Recruitment in the Gold Coast During the First World War', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* 15: 57 (1975), p 69.

asafo cosmologies were subject to evolution and elaboration in line with the experiences of company members themselves.

The relationship between military success and the *obosom* is also evident in the ways in which asafo religious beliefs are applied to the nationalist imagery of the former colonial power of Great Britain. Several asafo representatives have made mention that Britain lays claim to a particularly powerful *obosom*, a female god known as Britannia. In a locally produced pamphlet from the 1970s, Cape Coast intellectual William Mensah describes Britannia in line with local understandings of gods and worship. He writes; ‘Britannia is a goddess of the sea’, who receives libation ‘poured into the sea with one full bottle of Champagne [sic] . . . when ‘a newly built ship is set afloat’.²⁸ This amalgamation of British ritual practices – the smashing of a bottle of wine on to a new ship to ensure safe passage – and Fante conceptions of the divine, is also used to explain British military success. One *safohen* from No. 3 Company of Moree (Nkum), told me that Britannia, ‘the spirit in the sea’, was the driving force behind the defeat of Germany in the Second World War. The *safohen*, who was incredulous that I, a British woman and a doctoral researcher in history to boot, had never heard of the power of the *obosom* Britannia, claimed that Churchill had drawn upon its power. He argued that ‘Britain was named after that powerful spirit in the sea called Britannia’, and that ‘Churchill he go and declare the war and yes he sing “rule Britannia rule” then all the British people wake up.’ The supposed power of the Britannia *obosom* goes some way to demonstrate the interconnection between Fante gods and warfare. Given the apparent capacity for military success shown by the British - including in their interactions with Asante, the Fante’s historic enemy - it is in line with local cosmological notions of power that battlefield victories could only be achieved with assistance from an affiliated *obosom*.

²⁸ William Mensah, *The Seventy Seven Gods of Oguua* (Cape Coast, 1976).



Fig. 5: The obosom 'Sakri Budu' belonging to No. 2 Company Cape Coast (Anafu), 2018. Photograph taken by author.



Fig. 6: An obosom belonging to No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Anafu), 2018. Photograph taken by author.

Nananom Nsamanfo

Within the umbrella of Akan cosmology, engagement with the dead is fundamental, a process sometimes understood as ‘ancestral worship’. The spirits of the ancestors (*nananom nsamanfo*) are believed to influence the daily life of the living long after their corporeal form has left the mundane world, in ways which could favour or frustrate their descendants. Pleasing the *nananom nsamanfo*, through libation and offerings, is therefore critical to

ensuring that they do not adversely interfere with the living. Ephirim-Donkor provides a useful tripartite framework with which to understand this relationship. The first two phases are funeral rites concerned with the preparation and burial of the corpse, but it is the third phase which has the most relevance here: ‘remembering the dead, not as deceased individuals gone forever but as those who survived death as spirits, ancestral spirits’.²⁹ These processes of remembering, particularly those of ‘societal remembrances’ during annual festivals focused on the honouring of the ancestors, sit at the heart of asafo engagement with the spiritual realm. After all, it is the asafo companies which usually lead these festivals and undertake the ritual activities which both speak to and memorialise the company ancestors. Traditionally, *nananom nsamanfo*, as with the *abosom*, would have spoken through the company priest or priestess, *asafokomfo* (from *komfo*: priest or mouthpiece of the spirits) although this position is patchily reported and seems to be less common in modern society. According to Brigid Sackey, an *asafokomfo* would have joined the company’s vanguard in battle in order to ‘survey the path and counteract any magical medicine planted on the route by an enemy/opponent’.³⁰ Yet despite the duties of the *asafokomfo* to act as a mediator between the spirit world and the living, *nananom nsamanfo* could, and did, make themselves known to other company members.

Spirits of asafo past appear to have been frequent visitors to the realm of the living during circumstances of celebration and in the midst of the woes of war. As one *safohen* explained to me, ‘as long as the drums are sounded, they will be there’.³¹ Ancestral spirit possession, wherein a ghost-like imprint of the dead inhabited the body of the living, can be seen as the performative peak of asafo engagement with the *nananom nsamanfo*. As explained by elders of No. 2 Company Cape Coast (Anafu), ‘sometimes it may be an asafo member who

²⁹ Anthony Ephirim-Donkor, *African Religion Defined: A Systematic Study of Ancestor Worship among the Akan* (Hamilton Books: Lanham ML, 2013), p 78.

³⁰ Sackey, ‘Asafo and Christianity’, p 75.

³¹ Tuafo *Safohen*, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Abeku Adams, Gomoa Dago, 19 May 2018.

really loves the asafo company who has died a long time ago'.³² In some towns, it is the founding ancestors who are the frequent ethereal visitors to the resident asafo companies. In others, the spirits of the deceased are bequeathed to a particular mortal body, inherited through families or through the position within the company that both dead and alive have at some point occupied.

Despite the prevalence of spirit possession in asafo ritual, it has received little attention from scholars beyond a passing mention in Fritz Kramer's *The Red Fez*.³³ Yet recent historical and anthropological scholarship on spirit possession cults in other contexts has furthered an understanding of this widespread ritual practice. Spirit possession has been identified as a way to harness colonial power, to negotiate crises in identity and to provide explanations for social disruption caused by imperial rule.³⁴ There are also African communities where spirit possession was deployed in preparation for, and during, war. One recent example is the role of spirit mediums in northern Uganda, where the deployment of spirits through various incarnations of the Holy Spirit Mobile Forces in 1985-88 came to encompass those prestigious military actors who had been killed in the region's civil conflict.³⁵ Possession among the Fante asafo should also be understood as an activity which reinforces military identities and draws upon the ritual power of the deceased in order to succeed in war.

Kramer contends that spirit possession among the asafo stems from the amalgamation of two distinct cultural phenomena: 'a women's cult of spirit possession' and

³² Anafu Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 7 February 2018.

³³ Fritz Kramer, *The Red Fez: Art and Spirit Possession in Africa*, (Verso Books: London, 1993), p 205-8.

³⁴ J. Cinnamon, 'Spirits, Power and the Political Imagination in Late-Colonial Gabon,' *Africa*, 82: 2, (2002); A. Masquelier, *Prayer Has Spoilt Everything: Possession, Power and Identity in an Islamic Town of Nigeria* (Duke University Press: Durham, NC, 2001); Paul Stoller, *Embodying Colonial Memories: Spirit Possession, Power and the Hauka in West Africa* (Routledge: New York, 1995).

³⁵ Heike Behrend, 'Power to Heal, Power to Kill: Spirit Possession & War in Northern Ugandan (1986-1994)', in Behrend and Ute Luig (eds), *Spirit Possession, Modernity and Power in Africa* (University of Wisconsin Press: Madison, 1999), p 28.

‘a men’s martial organization’.³⁶ He cites no sources to support this contention of a ‘dual descent’ for the practice, although it is certainly possible that the perception of spirit possession as a predominantly female activity may have been drawn from the prevalence of women in positions of spiritual mediation, working as priestesses or *asafokomfo*.³⁷ It is notable that within my own research the experience of spirit possession is not an area specifically dominated by women. Instead, ancestral spirits are often described as being inherited by active members of an asafo company which inevitably were more likely to be men than women.

A number of key tenets can be identified across all Fante asafo companies when it comes to the influence of spirit possession. *Nananom nsamanfo* acted as a form of oracle, heralding the approach of enemies and predicting the magnitude of loss of life during battle. When an encroaching threat manifested on the horizon, ancestral spirits would leap into the body of the company priest (*asafokomfo*). This phenomenon was used to explain the readiness of the Saltpond asafo companies for battle: ‘any time there were attackers coming, the *akomfo* would get possessed spiritually. When that happened they would quickly arm themselves and fight the attackers’.³⁸ In Cape Coast, ancestral spirits are said to have foretold individual outcomes in battle. No. 1 Company (Bentil) report the practice of preparing ‘a special concoction’ before heading for war, in which would be placed a small ritual object.³⁹ The company would then call upon the *nananom nsamanfo*, and ask ‘when this *safohen* goes, whether they will return or not.’ If the *safohen* in question would return from war alive, the ritual object would float when placed within the prepared potion. If the

³⁶ Kramer, *The Red Fez*, p 205.

³⁷ Brigid M. Sackey, ‘Power and Protest: Priesthood among the Fante Akan’, *Institute of African Studies Research Review* 9 (2009).

³⁸ AHP, Saltpond Elder, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, 4 August 1997.

³⁹ Bentil Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 March 2018.

safohen would die in war, according to the predictions of their ancestors, then the object would sink.

The activities of the deceased also extended into the political sphere. Ancestral spirits could play a role in appointing the living to positions of authority within a company. In conversation with the historian Irene Odotei, a *safohemma* (female captain) from Apam described her appointment along such lines. Rather than going through the usual process of being outdoored, captured by the company and paraded around the town, the *safohemma's* position was announced by 'the spirit of [her] departed father'.⁴⁰ She explained that 'a lady was possessed at Edina [i.e. Elmina], and she came and held my hand and announced me as the choice of my departed father'. It should be noted that there is less explicit evidence for the participation of ancestral spirits in political life throughout the historical record. This conversation between Odotei and the *safohemma* of Apam took place in the late 1990s. What is clear, and is resoundingly supported by all asafo companies, is that *nananom nsamanfo* acted as key agitators, provoking violent energy both when companies engaged in large-scale warfare and when two rival companies came face to face during annual festivals or funerals. Due to the warrior nature of these spirits, the possession of asafo members meant that 'something small will generate into war'.⁴¹

Funerals

Abosom and *nananom nsamanfo* were frequent visitors to the realm of the living. In times of crisis and war, these spiritual forces attended to their fleshly kin and protected the asafo in battle. Yet the ethereal and the mundane world have also come into close contact

⁴⁰ AHP, Apam Safohemma, interview with Irene Odotei, Apam, undated but probably 1997.

⁴¹ Tuafo Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

throughout asafo history during times of relative peace. Through ritual acts, music and language, *abosom* and ancestral spirits periodically entered into the presence of asafo members when celebrating festivals (often referred to as ‘customs’ in colonial parlance) and during mourning at the funerals of warriors.

Akan funeral rites are as a rule presided over by members of the deceased’s matrilineal family, or *abusua*. Dominant actors in mourning rites and burial have therefore traditionally been drawn from the matrilineage, usually the maternal uncle or the sons of the deceased’s sister if the deceased is male. As outlined in Kwame Arhin’s interrogation of a funeral process in Asante recorded by R. S. Rattray in the early twentieth century, pre-burial rites included only ‘members of the lineage, family elders, the other children and close friends’.⁴² There was space for the wider community to join in processes of mourning before the burial, with a wake taking place over a number of days involving music, performance and gift-giving. Yet the burial itself, in a cemetery belonging to the relevant *abusua* and with pallbearers drawn from the young men of the family, was an activity for the deceased’s matrilineal family.

Among the Fante, the role of the *abusua* in the rituals of life and death operates in tangent with the position of the asafo. For men active in their respective companies, and for those women who achieved the position of *safohemma*, the asafo would therefore have had a significant part to play in their transition from the land of the living to that of the dead. In most cases, when an asafo member dies, their respective company would ensure that ‘the burial and funeral rites will be performed for the person’.⁴³ According to a *safohen* from Abura, ‘once you know that our family belongs to the asafo company, then you just hand over responsibilities,’ although certain duties still fall upon the *abusua*.⁴⁴ There has

⁴² Kwame Arhin, ‘The Economic Implications of Transformations in Akan Funeral Rites’, *Africa* 64: 3 (1994), p 311.

⁴³ AHP, Saltpond Elders, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, undated but likely August 1997.

⁴⁴ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. by Okyere Ramzy, Abura, 13 June 2018.

inevitably been some change in the ways in which asafo funerals are conducted between the nineteenth century and the present day. Nevertheless, given that there is some degree of continuity in the rituals enacted during local festivals, it seems fair to conclude that contemporary descriptions of asafo funerals at least give some insight into the processes utilised in the past – particularly those which incorporate ancestral spirits and the presence of *abosom*.

Writing in the 1980s, Chukwukere provides a useful framework for considering the role of the asafo in Fante funerary practices.⁴⁵ After the news of death has been spread through the head of the *abusua* to the relevant *supi*, and then to the rest of the company, the asafo would gather at the company post. While there, Chukwukere explains, the deceased's 'achievements within the company and the society at large are reviewed', in order to determine how many, and which images should be contained on, the company flags to be exhibited while the corpse lies in state and during the funeral procession. While the *abusua* would be responsible for bathing the corpse, it is the asafo who guard the room within which the deceased lies while 'friends, relatives, and other sympathizers call at the house and extol to the skies the dead man's social achievements'. Once the day of the burial arrives, further agnatic rituals would be performed, the coffin brought to the company post, libation poured while an elder wishes the deceased 'plain sailing to the land of ancestral spirits, from which he will look after the interests of the living.' It is from here that the funeral procession begins, with the 'coffin borne round the post three times', and then carried to the location of the burial.

The funerary procession in full company display is perhaps the most prominent ceremony following the death of an asafo members. This was in part due to its visibility, but

⁴⁵ I. Chukwukere, 'A Coffin for "The Loved One": The Structure of Fante Death Rituals' *Current Anthropology* 22: 1 (1981). For a brief description of a contemporary *asafo* funeral see Michael Coronel, 'An Asafo Fante Funeral: The Final Procession of Life', in Herman du Toit (ed), *Pageants and Processions: Images and Idiom as Spectacle* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Newcastle: 2009).

also due to the eruptions of unrest which often occurred during such a parade, accordingly recorded in both oral histories and in colonial correspondence. The coffin would be carried from the deceased's house to the burial site, predominantly through company quarters but often taking an indirect route and impinging onto the territory of a rival company. This procession would incorporate features often seen during local festivals: the exhibition of flags, full company dress, music, dancing, all the usual accoutrements marking the distinct identity of the company in question, and in some cases sacrificial animals. In a court case born out of a disturbance at the funeral in 1871 for a *safohen* from No. 2 Company Cape Coast (Anafu), a witness reported that 'there were two cows with the procession, with ropes tied to their necks.'⁴⁶ It is likely that such an addition to the procession was a phenomenon limited to those with positions of power in the company and was reflective of their status and prestige. Different rituals may also have been included in funeral processes, with variation between time and place. Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Cape Coast District Commissioner Arthur Ffoulkes remarked upon an additional custom, 'dancing on the coffin while it is being carried through the street.'⁴⁷ Ffoulkes contended that this ritual originated from 'the Kru coast' in what is now Liberia and had been appropriated by Cape Coast asafo companies with the intent to provoke their rivals.

Music also plays a significant role during funeral parades of the Fante asafo.⁴⁸ In some towns, particular music or instruments are played. In Saltpond:

The drum that the okyerema plays at that period [during the festival Ayerye – celebrated in August] is a special one. It is not taken out and played at will. It is only taken out and played during the festival and the funeral rites of a safohen. It is believed that the numerous battles that the asafo [fought]. It therefore contains the

⁴⁶ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/4/94, Testimony from Andrew Prah, J.B.C. Orleans for the Colonial Government v Quamina Attopee, 10 February 1871.

⁴⁷ Arthur Ffoulkes, 'Funeral Customs of the Gold Coast Colony', *Journal of the Royal African Society* 8: 30 (1909), p 158.

⁴⁸ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *Funeral Diriges of the Akan* (Achimota, 1955).

spirits and the power of the gods as well as that of the ancestors.⁴⁹

Such is the power of the drum in question, that when played in the wrong circumstances it is believed ‘the people who will die in that year cannot be counted’.

It should be noted that the actual burial sites of asafo members vary. As explained by a *safohen* from Abura, ‘if you are a Christian then they take you to where you belong’.⁵⁰ Religious affiliation inevitably determines which cemetery an asafo member is buried in. This was clearly the practice in the twentieth century also. Applications to perform asafo funeral displays frequently reference Christian cemeteries as the endpoint for company processions. For example, No. 1 Company (Bentil) were granted permission in 1946 to parade the coffin of one of their members from their company post to their final resting place at the Catholic cemetery in Cape Coast.⁵¹ Yet in at least one case, private cemeteries were owned specifically for company use. Colonial correspondence concerning land inspections in Anomabo noted that in 1909, No. 1 and No. 2 companies shared joint ownership of a burial ground.⁵² As there is no evidence of this practice anywhere else on the Fante coast, however, it seems likely that this cemetery was a private endeavour, perhaps responding to overcrowding in the usual burial grounds.

⁴⁹ AHP, Saltpond Elders, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, undated but likely August 1997.

⁵⁰ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Okyere Ramzy, Abura, 13 June 2018.

⁵¹ PRAAD Cape Coast, 23/1/1503, Application for Funeral Procession, 19 April 1946.

⁵² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/128, DC Saltpond to CCP, 21 April 1908.

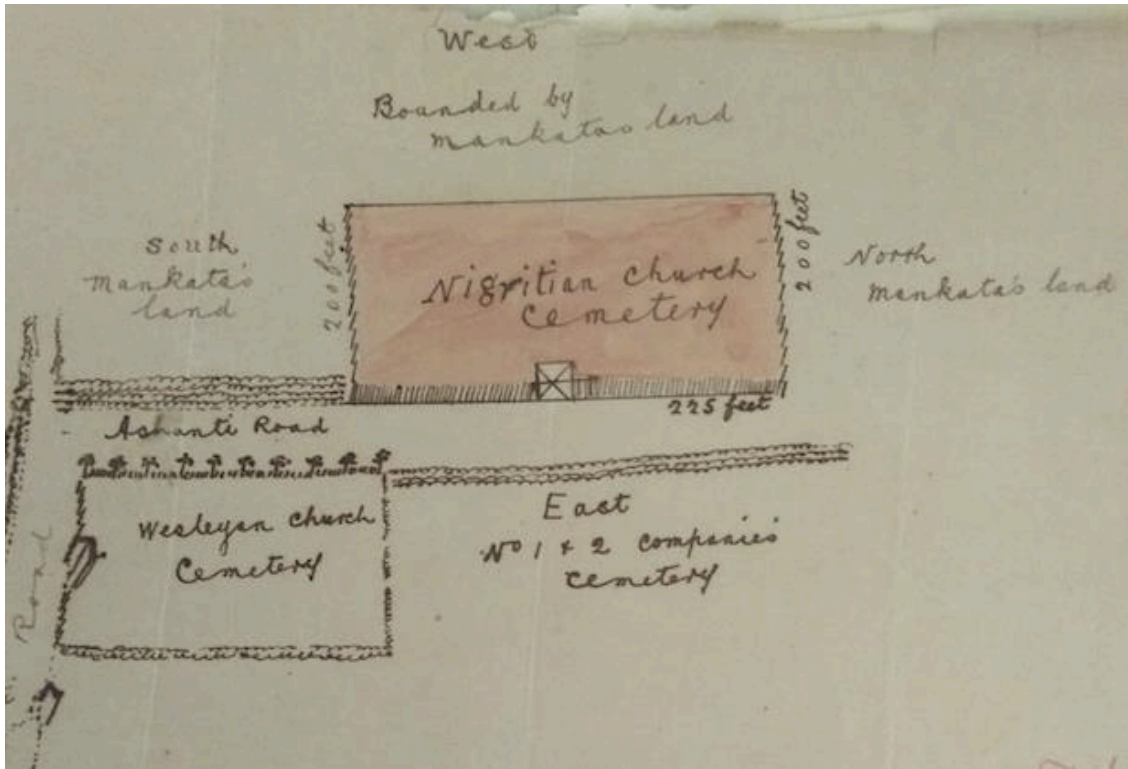


Fig. 7: *Map of Anomabo Cemeteries*. PRAAD Cape Coast ADM 23/1/448.

From the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth, there are many recorded outbursts of inter-asafo violence which erupted during, or on route to, funerals. Often, these funerals involved companies from other areas visiting the hometown of the deceased, with tensions rising between two unified town asafo. In 1895, a funeral custom at Birwa, a small seaside village to the east of Moree, attracted attendants from neighbouring Anomabo. These visitors were alleged to have ‘played company play’ after the funeral custom had ended and most of the people had left.⁵³ Given the fractious relationship between the various companies of Anomabo it seems likely that the those attending Birwa funeral were members of one particular company rather than a united force from the town as a whole, although it is not recorded which company this may have been. Nevertheless, such was the tension

⁵³ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/3, Reg vs Tasimbio & ten others, Evidence of Ekuia Enoah, 10 June 1895.

which arose during the funeral custom and the subsequent demonstration of company identity that the members of the Anomabo asafo appear to have engaged in arson. A petty trader named Adjuah Atooah reported that ‘I saw some of the Anomaboes with firebrands which they applied to the thatched roof of a large house’ which was inhabited by one Ekya Awoosabba who was cooking at the time.⁵⁴ After the house in question was set on fire, the Anomaboes ‘began fighting with stones’.⁵⁵

There were also cases where tensions bubbling away under the surface came to the fore during funeral processes. In Birwa in 1918, violence broke out between an asafo company and a contractor working in the town with a group of labourers. According to the Superintendent of Police, ‘the contractor Mr Quinto Dalberto was leaving the village and on checking his tools found a shovel missing’.⁵⁶ The shovel was found in the possession of a local by one of Dalberto’s labourers and a quarrel ensued. As explained by the DC, ‘a funeral custom was being held at the time and those celebrating and attacked the labourers using stones’. Dalberto managed to escape to the relative safety of his own residence, although it was reported that ‘the contractor was besieged in his house, inside which a quantity of stones were found’. The labourers themselves were driven out of the village as a result of the onslaught.

It is likely that this attack was orchestrated by the Birwa asafo. In the subsequent trial which took place the day after the *amanko*, the DC ‘fined the Captain of the Company who took part £8, or two months’ hard labour’.⁵⁷ The other nineteen men and two women from Birwa who took part in the ruckus were fined only £5 or six weeks hard labour. The funeral context within which violence broke out appears to have been a critical factor in raising tensions. The DC remarked that ‘if there had not been the usual funeral custom on I

⁵⁴ Ibid, Evidence of Adjuah Atooah.

⁵⁵ Ibid, Evidence of Amba Acqua.

⁵⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/688, Acting DC Saltpond (George B Freeman) to CCP, 23 January 1918.

⁵⁷ Ibid, Acting DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 January 1918.

doubt if any serious trouble would have arisen'. It is also of note that previous ill feeling towards Dalberto and his band of labourers had also been reported in Anomabo in September 1917. In a foreshadowing of the disturbance at Birwa, an 'assault on Dalberto by some of the Anamaboes' had occurred at an earlier funeral.⁵⁸ This is significant. It would otherwise be possible to explain the clash between the people of Birwa and the contractor and labourers as a result of hostility towards outsiders or a dislike for the work being done. Although these motivations are likely to still have played a part for the people of Anomabo and of Birwa, the fact that both fights occurred during funerals suggests that the spiritual context born out of burial processes facilitated the transition from underlying tensions to open violence.

It is this transition from underlying tensions to open violence which is evident during festivals celebrated by asafo companies along the Fante coast throughout their history. A high number of those inter-company *amanko* emerged in the context of local celebrations, within which the presence of *abosom* and ancestral spirits was key. In order to provide a more detailed picture of how such a festival operated, and indeed, what led to violence within this context, we will turn now to a particular example, that of the 1930 Apam *amanko*.

Festivals: Akomase in the 1930 Apam Amanko

On 26 September 1930, at least 45 men, women and children were killed during an outburst of violence in the small fishing town of Apam. This traumatic event was instigated by the two companies of the town, No. 1 (Tuafo) and No. 2 (Dentsefo). The fire which raged during the disturbance destroyed 64 houses, trapping many of the inhabitants inside and disrupting the borders marking asafo territory. In one sense, the outbreak of violence which overwhelmed

⁵⁸ Ibid, Acting DC Saltpond to CCP, 23 January 1918.

the town of Apam in 1930 was extraordinary. More than any other *amanko* of its kind, the events in Apam attracted extensive attention from the colonial administration, provoking attempts to disband and prohibit the asafo company system as a whole. For our purposes however, the 1930 Apam *amanko* encapsulates the relationship between violence and spiritual tension among the Fante asafo companies.

The violent escalation of inter-company tension occurred during the ritual practices of the festival Akomase. Translated as hooting at hunger (lit. *ekɔm*: hunger - *ose*: loud burst of voices), Akomase is celebrated to ensure a bountiful harvest and as such seeks to honour and placate the *nananom nsamanfo* and *abosom*. In the midst of the week-long Akomase festivities in 1930, a gathering of both companies outside Fort Patience led to the throwing of stones and then the shooting of guns between the men of both companies. A number of houses were deliberately set on fire, leading to the death of many women and children, presumably sheltering inside away from the gunfire.⁵⁹ Given the close proximity of houses in this area it is likely that the fire spread even beyond the intention of the original arsonist. As a result, the tragic loss of life was drawn from both asafo companies and those affiliated with them.

In the wake of this traumatic episode, various punishments were distributed to the inhabitants of Apam by the colonial administration. 18 members of Tuafo and 22 members of Dentsefo were charged with ‘taking part in a riot’ or the ‘exhibition of company flag without permission’ and sentenced with fines ranging between £10 and £40, prison sentences ranging between two and five months, and in the case of two members of Dentsefo, twelve strokes of the whip.⁶⁰ Fifteen women related to the men of No. 1 Company were also given minor prison sentences for the ‘provocation of riot’.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 13 April 2016.

⁶⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast ADM 23/1/791, ‘List of Persons Charged and Sentenced in Connection with Apam Riot’.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Much of the colonial discourse surrounding the Apam *amanko* reflected standard reactions to asafo violence by members of the British administration. The Commissioner of the Eastern Province wrote that ‘conflicts between companies such as recently occurred in Apam are inevitable consequences of idleness and youthful hot blood’.⁶² Particularly graphic language was used in minutes exchanged between colonial officials. Details such as ‘men were tied to stakes and burnt and many more were flung into the river and drowned’, paint a lurid picture of local brutality.⁶³ The nature of brutality is likely to have been exaggerated. Indeed, officials acknowledged that much of their ‘club gossip’ rather than reliable eyewitness accounts.⁶⁴ Although the death toll of the *amanko* was certainly high, there is no evidence that men were purposefully drowned, and the fire which killed so many people could well have been caused incidentally by the firing of a musket catching on a thatch roof. Yet such nuances did not occur to some in the colonial administration. In his own reflection on the Apam *amanko*, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Lord Passfield, described the people inhabiting the towns and villages on the littoral of the Central Province as ‘completely oblivious of the sanctity of human life’.⁶⁵ A member of the Labour Cabinet who had never set foot in on the Gold Coast, Passfield’s claim was likely to be grounded in the opinions of those British officers serving in the colony. However, as this statement was given in response to a request from the League against Imperialism for more information regarding the *amanko*, it may have also been a way to distance the colonial state from the episode. The dismissal of violence as relatively unimportant coupled with its visibility in the historical record can be understood as part of wider colonial anxieties about local unrest.⁶⁶

⁶² PRAAD Accra ADM 11/1/1439 Enquiry into the Company System, Commissioner of the Eastern Province to Colonial Secretary, 10/03/1931.

⁶³ TNA CO 96/696/1 Riots at Appam, L. Russbridge Minute Paper, 26 February 1931.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, E.B. Boyd, Secretary to the Governor, to R. Bridgeman, Secretary for the League Against Imperialism, 19 June 1931.

⁶⁶ Robert Peckham, *Empires of Panic: Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties* (Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 2015).

Apam itself seems to have been a focal point for derogatory sentiments. The poverty of the town was often remarked upon by colonial officers; one reported it having ‘the unenviable reputation of being a squalid dirty slum’.⁶⁷ Such preconceptions clearly influenced reactions to the extraordinary damage to property as a consequence of the dispute in May 1917.⁶⁸ The Secretary of Native Affairs wrote that ‘a number of the hovels’ which burned down ‘could be condemned as dangerous structures and destroyed and the present would seem to be a favourable opportunity for this action’.⁶⁹ It is possible to infer that violence was often put down to the inherent qualities of coastal societies, and emphasis was instead placed on capitalizing on the unrest. It may come as no surprise, then, that the 1930 *amanko* was described as ‘a local scrap between two companies with no political significance’.⁷⁰ This approach to understanding the violence enacted by asafo companies may have contributed to a distortion of local anecdotes.

In terms of the events at Apam, correspondence between colonial officers predominantly draws upon narratives which were most likely reinterpretations of discussions with the local asafo. Such documentation locates the trigger for the *amanko* in the celebration of what the Winneba DC dubbed ‘Black Christmas’.⁷¹ A term largely replaced by ‘Yam Custom’ in twentieth-century European parlance, ‘Black Christmas’ referred to the annual festivals of Akan and neighbouring communities which fell shortly after the first harvest.⁷² Yet these affairs went beyond the celebration of the new harvest. As is evident in the etymology of the Odwira festival among the Asante, which stems from the verb *ɔwira*: ‘to cleanse’ or ‘to purify’, such customs focused on the ritual cleansing of the towns within which

⁶⁷ TNA CO 96/696/1 Governor of the Gold Coast to Lord Passfield, 16 December 1930.

⁶⁸ PRAAD Accra ADM 11/11/1104, telegram, CCP, to CS, 21 May 1917.

⁶⁹ PRAAD ADM 11/11/1104, SNA Crowther Minute Paper, 2 June 1917.

⁷⁰ TNA CO 96/696/1, L. Russbridge Minute Paper, 10 January 1931

⁷¹ PRAAD Cape Coast ADM 23/1/791 DC Winneba to CCP, 29 October 1930.

⁷² Irene Odotei, ‘Festivals in Ghana: Continuity, Transformation and Politicisation of Tradition’, *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* New Series: 6 (2002).

they were performed.⁷³ The complex sequence of ritual practices performed over a number of days served to commemorate the dead and highlight the significance of the spiritual realm.

The DC of Winneba reported that violence first broke out during drumming and the exhibition of flags. He noted that a particular flag carried by the women of No. 1 Company, rumoured to be either 'a plain white flag' or 'a white flag with padlock and key', exacerbated tensions between the two companies.⁷⁴ Further correspondence by Governor Slater pins the transition from ceremony to *amanko* on the women related to No. 1 Company, who 'proceeded to the open space in front of the Fort singing songs'.⁷⁵ Despite the fact that content of these songs in Fante were unlikely to have been explicitly clear to colonial officers, the Governor contended that although the women involved 'deny that the songs were of an abusive character, the probability is that they were definitely directed against the members of No. 2 Company'.⁷⁶ Such actions are likely to have extended beyond being frivolous taunts. As was common in small Akan societies, orality carried significant weight, evident through the ritual power embodied in the swearing of oaths.⁷⁷ Verbal insults and challenges would have often been deliberately inflammatory, and the abusive songs of the company women should be seen as serious threats to the status and reputation of their audience.

A series of precautions were taken by colonial officers in the months preceding the 1930 *amanko* to avoid clashes between companies. These attempts to avoid opportunities for insult were likely due to the season of festivals along the coast beginning in May. On 17 July, the DC of nearby Winneba, Mr Bewes, held a meeting 'for the purpose of inspecting the flags and eliminating anything that was objectionable'.⁷⁸ A total of 34 flags were examined 'in the presence of both Companies', before a permit was granted for No. 1 Company to display their

⁷³ McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 144 and ch. 4 *passim*.

⁷⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast ADM 23/1/791, DC Winneba to CCP, 29 October 1930.

⁷⁵ TNA CO 96/696/1, Slater to Passfield, 16 December 1930.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*.

⁷⁷ On the power of orality in Akan communities, see Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 1995).

⁷⁸ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, DC Winneba to CCP, 29 October 1930.

emblems in mid-August.⁷⁹ Such practices were routine in the Central Province. Bewes reported that from May 1930, ‘the police were warned to be careful that no Company Flag Exhibition took place without permission’.⁸⁰ Such constraints on asafo religious celebrations demonstrates the continued attempts made by the British colonial government to reduce company violence. Alongside preventative restrictions on those events which often led to violence and disputes, judicial punishments – including capital punishment – were leveled against those involved in asafo disturbances within the coastal towns from at least the 1880s.⁸¹

Yet the window of opportunity for the two asafo companies of Apam to engage in unrestrained festivities was presented in September 1930. It was reported that the police officer in charge of the area, Sergeant Richardson, was accountable for ‘grave dereliction of duty in not reporting to the District Commissioner of Winneba that a Company Custom was in progress on the day in question’.⁸² Likely an African policeman, Richardson ‘had married an Apam woman in No. 1 Company’, and had therefore ‘acquired a certain interest in one of the Companies’.⁸³ Richardson’s neglect to mention the company performances to his seniors, probably grounded in his allegiance to his wife’s contemporaries, allowed for the free celebration of asafo rituals without the limitations usually implemented by the colonial authorities. Moreover, this affiliation through marriage with No. 1 Company (Tuafo), may also have given their members a feeling of protection, and point towards a possible blurring of the lines between the asafo and agents of the colonial state.

Flashes of asafo voices from Apam are also present, although tantalizingly brief, within the archive. It appears that correspondence between the colonial authorities and the town’s asafo was fairly common, perhaps due to the distrust by the two companies of the *omanhene* of the wider Gomoa Assin region who, at that time, was ‘labouring under the charge

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1753, Register of Riots.

⁸² PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/11/1104, CS to the Acting Inspector General of Police 15 November 1930.

⁸³ Ibid, Minute by Acting SNA, 12 November 1930.

of embezzling £400 of their money'.⁸⁴ Whatever the case, attempts by elders of both companies to appeal to the various officers of Central Province has left a paper trail in the colonial archive. These letters and petitions, usually written by local scribes, suggest that company elders were prepared to engage with the methods of colonial rule for their own ends. Indeed, the narrative of colonial authority over the asafo is complicated by the fact that companies themselves apparently took advantage of the restrictions imposed upon them in order to undermine their rivals. The actions of the DC may well have been triggered by a petition from the elders of No. 2 Company (Dentsefo). Warning of potential conflict between the two companies, headmen Kojo Mbrewa, Kweku Fuah and Kojo Andoh claimed that No. 1 Company (Tuafo), 'intend to celebrate their flag', as a result of which 'some disturbance will ensue'.⁸⁵ To illustrate their point further, the Dentsefo elders drew upon a previous instance when conflict was narrowly avoided at the funeral customs of the late mother of one Mr Sackeyfio, when Tuafo were reported to have been inciting 'trouble'.⁸⁶ The senior captain (*supi*) of Dentsefo, Kojo Mbrewa, also submitted an affidavit to the Supreme Court of the Central Province, asking DC Bewes to retract a pass which allowed Tuafo to exhibit flags which contained emblems apparently belonging to Dentsefo. The *supi* warned that members of both companies would 'fight one against the other should the flags referred to be exhibited at Apam'.⁸⁷ These predictions of a disturbance, drawing on past tensions while pinning blame firmly onto the rival company, suggest that where possible asafo members attempted to capitalize upon colonial anxieties regarding company conflict.

Apam company elders today talk about the 1930 *amanko* with great detail and interest. Yet discussions of the event tend to align with personal rivalries between No. 1 and No. 2 companies. These narratives relied upon throughout colonial documentation are also evident

⁸⁴ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/30, CCP to CS, 29 January 1932.

⁸⁵ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, J. Emil Eminsang on behalf of No. 2 Company Apam to DC Winneba, 10 May 1930.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, Affidavit of Kojo Mbrewa, 5 August 1930.

in local representations of the social unrest today, and it is likely that such explanations were initially offered up by the asafo. Present-day accounts are also located in the context of colonial control over asafo festivals. It seems most likely that the *amanko* fell within the celebration known as *akomase*, which the British saw as falling under the umbrella of ‘Black Christmas’ or ‘Yam Custom’. A week-long celebration, *akomase* began with a practice known as *akrwambɔ*, the weeding of paths and cemeteries. In the following days, libation was poured for asafo deities and for the ancestors, with specific times set apart for honouring those who had died while in battle. Company processions with flags and full regalia would accompany these rituals.

Accounts from Dentsefo elders suggest that in preparation for Akomase in 1930 the two companies were required to assemble the colours of their dress and ‘go and show it to the white man in order for him to approve their choice’.⁸⁸ The elders of No. 1 Company (Tuafo), also supported this version of events, adding that their spokesperson (*okyeame*) Kwesi Enyimaye was required to report to the DC in Winneba, in order to obtain a permit for a new flag.⁸⁹ Permits were indeed acquired, although with the stipulation that companies should ‘move within their boundary’.⁹⁰ This regulation of the space in which the asafo were able to perform processions and other rituals is best understood in line with colonial efforts to control and shape the urban landscape. Whereas urban centres were supposed to reflect the ideals of modernity, those practices which were deemed unsanitary – including excessive noise, public intoxication and ‘traditional’ customs such as funeral ceremonies and asafo performances – were seen as fit only for ‘the bush’.⁹¹ Although Apam was by this time a small fishing town,

⁸⁸ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

⁸⁹ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

⁹⁰ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 7 April 2016.

⁹¹ See John Parker, *Making the Town: Ga State and Society in Early Colonial Accra*, (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH, 2000), especially p 99-102.

It was not only the colonial authorities who made claims on the space inhabited by asafo companies. As in most Fante towns, each company had its own area of Apam, within which shrines, gods and company houses were contained. The power of borders demarcating these asafo quarters is evident in a threat leveled by *supi* Kojo Mbreye of No. 2 Company (Dentsefo), in the weeks preceding the 1930 violence. Current Dentsefo elders explained that Kojo Mbreye made it clear that if their colours were found in the new Tuafo flag, ‘then he would act’, and that ‘he also warned them they shouldn’t go near the boundary’ between the asafo quarters.⁹² The possibility of ‘the flag landing on the border’, was also cited as a motive for violence. Elders from No. 1 Company (Tuafo) corroborated this story, although there continues to be some disagreement over the specific colours in question and which company had ownership over them.⁹³ Dentsefo go further in order to blame Tuafo for the increased tensions that followed. They claimed that following the senior *supi*’s warning, the Tuafo procession complete with an insulting flag, ‘intentionally passed the boundary to see what would happen’.⁹⁴ The consequence was explained simply; ‘so when it happened like that, there was a war between two companies. There was fire’.⁹⁵

Unsurprisingly, the trigger for the *amanko* was presented differently by Tuafo elders. Their version goes deeper into the festival celebrations, during which the woman associated with the company through their relationships with male members were enacting the ritual *apetefo*, giving ‘the ancestors and the gods food to eat’.⁹⁶ It is said that at this point members of No. 2 Company, began ‘throwing stones on the Number One ladies’.⁹⁷ When the Tuafo women reported the incident to their male contemporaries, ‘the fire began’.⁹⁸ On the other

⁹² Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 7 April 2016.

⁹³ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 7 April 2016.

⁹⁴ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. trans by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016; From *pete*: to scatter or to strew, often used in relation to the offering of mashed yam to a fetish: J.G. Christaller, *Dictionary of the Asante and Fante Language called Tshi (Twi)* (Basel, 1933), p 391.

⁹⁷ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

hand, Dentsefo elders have insisted that the real instigation for conflict was the use of the Tuafo flag. Blue in background, with an image of a mouth bearing teeth, the use of red was seen as an incursion, 'because the red colour belongs to Dentsefo'.⁹⁹

It is evident from the narratives presented above that a deeper and more rigorous engagement is required with the ritual context of the Apam amanko. This is in spite of the fact that members of the colonial administration wholeheartedly dismissed the connection between the festivities of so-called 'Black Christmas' and the violence. The Acting Secretary for Native Affairs went so far as to say that 'the riot had, I think no connection whatever with this ceremony'.¹⁰⁰ However, he did go on to concede that 'the Black Xmas with its various names is certainly the most dangerous custom', although this was simply attributed to the 'usual tots of gin'.¹⁰¹ It would be foolish to dismiss the role of alcohol as an important feature of asafo customs. The *supi* of Tuafo explained that drinking would often begin at dawn, and many active members would 'consume one bottle' of *akpeteshie*, the local moonshine.¹⁰² Alcohol had an important spiritual element in ritual celebrations. Akyeampong has demonstrated that it acted as a form of communication between the supernatural and the mundane within Akan societies.¹⁰³ It is possible to conclude that although intoxication may have exacerbated the potential for aggression in and of itself, it also speaks to the heightened spiritual tension within which the *amanko* took place. Moreover, as will be touched on in relation to masculinity later, alcohol had connotations of strength and manliness which intersected with company identities. As Kwaku Nti has outlined, the role of alcohol among the asafo is encapsulated in the phrase '*asafo wodze nsa bo*; that is, it takes alcohol to play or

⁹⁹ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 7 April 2016.

¹⁰⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/609, Acting SNA to CS, 12 November 1930.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 13 April.

¹⁰³ Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Drink, Power and Cultural Change: A Social History of Alcohol in Ghana, c. 1800 to Recent Times* (Heinemann: Portsmouth, NH, 1996). For an analysis of alcohol elsewhere in the continent, see Justin Willis, *Potent Brews: A Social History of Alcohol in East Africa 1850-1999* (James Currey: London, 2002).

beat Asafo'.¹⁰⁴ Alcohol had a strong association with war not just due to the impact of inevitable intoxication, but because it held status in Fante society as a substance of ritual and military significance. In short, alcohol was drunk explicitly to facilitate warfare.

The recorded actions of the asafo companies 'clearing their fetish places and giving food to their fetishes', alongside the displaying of flags, are in line with usual programme of the finale of the Akomase celebrations.¹⁰⁵ The use of the white flag displaying the image of the padlock also points towards the context of Akomase. Elders of No. 1 Company explained that 'the flag signifies that Akomase is completed'.¹⁰⁶ Known also as 'hooting at hunger', Akomase serves to scare away the prospect of famine which afflicted the region in the past, but also as a key point in the year to 'remember the ancestors'.¹⁰⁷ The cemetery, sacred groves and the paths leading to these sites are cleared by the asafo companies, and it is this element of the festival which is known as Akwambɔ. Both Akomase and Akwambɔ embodied elements of the asafo past which were drawn upon to maintain the relevance of the institution in the twentieth century.

During Akomase, company deities were carried through the town and libation was poured in their honour. Within No. 2 Company, *abosom* such as Efferim, who catches the bullets of the opposition and throws them back in retaliation, and Omeano, who ensures accuracy of company fire, hark back to the origins of the asafo as the defenders of the town.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, Otsia Mfama and Eku, the oldest *abosom* of No. 2 Company, exist to protect company members and to assist during war.¹⁰⁹ The presence of these *abosom* during Akomase was increased by the role of those women affiliated with their father's company. In Apam, these women were known as *apetefo*, after the ritual *apete* which is enacted during the festival. A mixture of

¹⁰⁴ Kwaku Nti, 'The Role of Alcohol in the 1905 Conflict between the Anafo and Ntsin Asafo Companies of Cape Coast', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* New Series No. 2 (1998), p 52.

¹⁰⁵ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, DC Winneba to CCP, 29 October 1930.

¹⁰⁶ Tuafɔ elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

¹⁰⁷ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Tuafɔ elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

mashed yam, plantain and egg known as *tɔ* was given, by women in this case, to the *abosom* and the ancestors, a practice which features across Akan societies.¹¹⁰ The proximity of these martial *abosom* can therefore be seen to have increased during Akomase, emphasizing the militaristic nature of the asafo past. It was the practice of *apete* which was regarded by officials as having triggered the *amanko*. The Commissioner of Police described the custom thus: ‘I believe it is called “APETE” which consists of women of the company frying flour balls in oil, and when ready distributing their gift to the fetish gods, at the same time singing their fetish songs’.¹¹¹ The worship of the *abosom* immediately preceding the Apam *amanko* therefore suggests that there may be some connection between the ritual engagement with deities which represent military violence and the actual manifestation of violence through the inter-company dispute.

The spiritual tension of Akomase may have been further heightened by the presence of the *nananom nsamanfo* ‘who come to celebrate with them’.¹¹² Libation would have been poured liberally, explained by a Tuafo *safohen* as mark of appreciation for ‘what the ancestors have done - that they fought for us, for our nation’. It is this possession which is used by asafo elders to explain the propensity for company violence during religious festivals in general, and that in 1930 in Apam specifically. It is said that during Akomase, ‘when an asafo company comes, they come with their spirits.’ The inter-company fight fell on a Friday, in the middle of the Akomase custom. Although there may have been small changes in the structure of the festival, asafo elders contend that Friday has long been the time for pouring libation for a certain sub-section of the ancestors. Friday afternoon, at least for Dentsefo, is the point during

¹¹⁰ Rattray’s anthology of proverbs from Asante includes the idiom *oteasefo na oma osaman kom do otɔ*, ‘It is the living man who causes the denizen of the spirit world to long for mashed yam’: R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1916).

¹¹¹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, Report by Central Province Commissioner of Police, 29 September 1930.

¹¹² Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 6 April 2016.

Akomase where ‘they remember those who passed away during war’.¹¹³ In this case, the combative element of asafo may have been further reinforced.

The context for the 1930 Apam *amanko* was therefore a social imaginary focused on the honour of the militaristic past and those asafo members who exemplified it. The Acting Secretary for Native Affairs’ assertion that there was no link between Akomase and the *amanko* seem to be quite incorrect. His claim is further refuted by the possession of asafo members by the spirits of their ancestors, which would have coincided with the outbreak of violence. Ancestral representation during Akomase too can be interpreted as memorialization of the asafo as the defenders of the town. In doing so, the asafo can be understood as drawing on the past to maintain their relevance in contemporary society.

Combat between the two companies in this context may have arisen from the presentation of the key attributes of those spirits with which asafo members were possessed. A historical figurehead who looms large in the collective memory of Tuafo elders is *supi* Kofi Mensah, whose name is still used today to encourage younger asafo members to ‘emulate the braveness in him’.¹¹⁴ The prowess of *supi* Kofi Mensah has been passed down through generations, his strength in part attributed to the *batakari* he wore. A smock from the savanna hinterland to the north of the Akan region, the *batakari* is covered with protective charms including scrolls of the Qu’ran.¹¹⁵ *Supi* Kofi Mensah also drew on power from indigenous spirituality. Due to the protective medicine imbibed within him, when ‘a gun was fired, he could catch the bullet, and give it to his company to shoot back’.¹¹⁶ His physical endurance and virility – he fathered at least eighteen children – further contributed to his embodiment of the values at the heart of asafo. The almost fabled escapades of this leader are known to

¹¹³ Dentsefo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

¹¹⁴ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

¹¹⁵ See T. C. McCaskie ‘The Consuming Passions of Kwame Boakye: An Essay on Agency and Identity in History’, *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 13, 1 (2000) p 46.

¹¹⁶ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzie, Apam, 11 April 2016.

most members of Apam town, regardless of their active participation in asafo. Yet the manifestation of Kofi Mensah goes beyond the allegorical. As an ancestral spirit his dynamism is evident in the potency of his possession, sometimes lasting as long as two full weeks. Even before his *batakari* is donned by the individual who has inherited his spirit, 'his smock will stand without anybody wearing it, and you can see that it is breathing'. The perceived potency of his strength and bravery is key to understanding the climate created by spirit possession during Akomase. The reincarnation of asafo heroes from a glorified past may have served to emphasise those elements of the institution which marked the potency of asafo power.

The complex of ritual activities which took place during the celebration of Akomase in Apam in 1930 can be seen to have contributed in important ways towards the outbreak of violence. This spiritual tension overlaid the trappings of company identity which were paraded around the town, just as in Mumford in 1887 and 1921 and in Ekumfi Otuam in 1920. Indeed, the display of company emblems alongside the memorialisation of ancestors and *abosom* are consistent trends which can be found in the background of the large majority of inter-company *amanko* in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The Ritual Power of the Sea

Akan cosmologies also provided avenues through which the Fante asafo, the majority of whose members were fisherfolk, to navigate the trials and treachery of the ocean. Company relationships with the sea were often reflected in their fiercely protected emblems and paraphernalia. Many of the coastal *posuban* shrines, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, were decorated by sculptures of animals and objects indicative of the strength of the sea. Monumental shrines in the form of whales, ships and even submarines drew on the abilities of the coastal asafo to preside over the ocean, while also borrowing from its ritual power. No. 6 Company Anomabo (Kyirim) lay claim to the use of a line 'for measuring the

depth of the sea' as one of their sacred objects.¹¹⁷ Oral traditions of Cape Coast's No. 5 Company (Brofomba) contend their the company were awarded a medal made from a large shell 'that was a symbol for them', for their support to the British in battle.¹¹⁸ The aesthetics of a coastal community were fully embedded in the material culture of the asafo.

Yet the sea, and indeed the seashore, also acted as a zone of ritual encounter for Fante peoples and the asafo within them. This esoteric interaction with the ocean is not a unique phenomenon. Cosmological engagement with the sea existed right along the Gold Coast and beyond. Amongst the Anlo people, for example, the Yewe cult emerged in response to the need for sacred approaches towards the sea and oceanic activities in the context of precarity brought about by coastal erosion.¹¹⁹ Further to the east on the Slave Coast, the sea deity Hu, worshipped by the Hula people of present-day Benin, spread in influence through Grand Popo, Ouidah and Allada in the seventeenth century. Rituals concerned with Hu explicitly mirrored the traffic in humans through the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, such as 'the offering of sacrifices (including sometimes a human victim) to calm the sea in order to facilitate dealings with the European traders'.¹²⁰ These oceanic cosmologies sought to make sense of the profound social changes brought about by environmental change or human disruption. The widespread worship of the mermaid-like deity Mami Wata in Atlantic Africa and beyond in the Americas is said to be characterised by an attempt to grapple with a foreign otherness. Mami Wata's presence therefore provides an avenue to negotiate African encounters with European power on both sides of the Atlantic.¹²¹ Although it is possible to see cosmological notions of the sea as a

¹¹⁷ AHP, Anomabo Opanyin, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997.

¹¹⁸ Brofomba Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

¹¹⁹ Emmanuel Akyeampong, *Between the Sea and the Lagoon: An Eco-social History of the Anlo of Southeastern Ghana c.1850 to Recent Times* (Ohio University Press: Athens, OH, 2001), p 107.

¹²⁰ Robin Law, *The Slave Coast of West Africa 1550-1750: The Impact of the Atlantic Slave Trade on an African Society* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1991), p 110-11.

¹²¹ Henry John Drewal, 'Performing the Other: Mami Wata Worship in Africa', *TDR* 32: 3 (1988); Henry John Drewal (ed), *Sacred Waters: Arts for Mami Wata and Other Divinities in Africa and the Diaspora* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2009).

consequence of the reorientation of African societies towards the Atlantic with the arrival of Europeans on the West African coast from the fifteenth century, Law suggests that maritime commerce slotted into a 'pre-existing conceptual system' by which Africans made sense of the antagonistic nature of the ocean.¹²²

In Cape Coast, manifestations of Afro-Atlantic commerce and the horrors of the slave trade were evident in the form of the spiritual agent Nana Tabir. The location of this *obosom* in the liminal space between the rocky outcrop next to Cape Coast Castle and the sea is indicative of this Atlantic context. Moreover, although oral traditions claims that the *obosom* opposed the slave trade, Nana Tabir's embodiment as a white man has been argued by Andrew Apter to be 'mimetic, channelling the power of Europeans through their embodied dispositions, consumptibles, and colorations'.¹²³ It is perhaps unsurprising then, that Nana Tabir was incorporated into the cult of deities of No. 5 Company (Brofomba), whose legacies lie in the castle and accordingly in the world of Atlantic trade.

Among the Fante asafo, the need to navigate the dangers of the ocean was therefore underpinned by the occupational hazards of fishing and the engagement with European commerce, as well as wider Akan notions of human-nature interaction. Just as Akan communities in the forest belt carved out civilization from the trees, so too did the coastal settlements build a symbiotic relationship with the ocean. Botchway and Sarpong have identified how this eco-social order impacted upon cultures of work. They argue that 'in order for the workers of the terrestrial and oceanic spaces to fully reap the bounties in them, they fashion certain work conventions to guide them in maintaining an ideal cordial relationship with the land and sea spaces and the powers therein'.¹²⁴ For the fishing

¹²² Robin Law, 'West African's Discovery of the Atlantic', *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 44: 1 (2011), p 25.

¹²³ Andrew Apter, 'History in the Dungeon: Atlantic Slavery and the Spirit of Capitalism in Cape Coast Castle, Ghana', *American Historical Review*, 122: 1 (2017), p 53.

¹²⁴ De Valera N. Y. M. Botchway and Awo Abena Amoia Sarpong, 'Indigenous Work Ethics Among Akan of Ghana', *Religions* 1 (2015), p 45.

communities of the Fante region and the coast to the west, rituals which sought to maintain the eco-social order revolved around the sea deity Nana Bosompo.¹²⁵ Bosompo, often represented as a whale, embodies the ultimate power of the ocean and needed to be treated accordingly. For example:

It is demanded by tradition that fishermen must ‘sacrifice’ some of their catch to Bosompo, the Gold of the sea, after each fishing expedition before returning home. The fish that are sacrificed must be live fish, not dead ones, and an Akan maxim which supports this ritual says ‘Bosompo ankame wo nam a, wo nsa wonkame no abia’ – if the Gold of the sea does not begrudge you of his fish, you do not begrudge him of your catch’. The fish which fishermen ‘sacrifice’ to Bosompo will continue to breed and there will continue to be fish in the ocean if this ritual is observed. It is therefore taboo for a fisherman not to make a ‘sacrifice’.¹²⁶

Opoku’s analysis of sacrifice is accompanied by a discussion of fishing taboos. Like sacrifice, ‘the concept of taboo [acts] as a ritual prohibition designed to protect nature’ and can be understood as ‘giving the sea a day of rest to replenish itself’.¹²⁷ The avoidance of fishing on Tuesdays, for example, is explained by Ephirim-Donkor as motivated by ‘the fact that the ocean came into being on a Tuesday’.¹²⁸ Although Ephirim-Donkor’s Christian beliefs are evident in this Genesis creation narrative, Opoku’s emphasis on appeasing Nana Bosompo better accounts for the ways in which the eco-social order refracted through ritual engagement with the sea prior to, and then alongside, the proliferation of Christianity.

¹²⁵ Joseph Kingsley Adjei and Solomon Sika-Bright, ‘Traditional Beliefs and Sea Fishing in Selected Communities in the Western Region of Ghana’, *Ghana Journal of Geography* 11: 1 (2019); Barbara Louise Endemaño Walker, ‘Engendering Ghana’s Seascapes: Fanti Fishtraders and Marine Property in Colonial History’, *Society & Natural Resources* 15: 5 (2002).

¹²⁶ Kofi Asare Opoku, ‘African Traditional Religion: An Enduring Heritage’, in Jacob K. Olupona and Sulayman S. Nyang (eds), *Religious Plurality in Africa: Essays in Honour of John. S. Mbiti* (De Gruyter: Berlin, 1994), p 78.

¹²⁷ Ibid, p 77. See also Daniel Asante Boamah, ‘Akan Indigenous Religio-Cultural Beliefs and Environmental Preservation: The Role of Taboos’, Masters Dissertation, Queens University Canada (2015).

¹²⁸ Ephirim-Donkor, *African Religion Defined*, p 33.

The observance of the weekly fishing ban by the Fante asafo - usually on Tuesday but occasionally on different days - ties the company system to the sacred respect accorded to the natural world. In return, the ocean not only provides the fundamental lifeblood of the community, but also is said to respond to the specific needs of the asafo. It is even said that the drum languages of the asafo also have the capacity to communicate with the ocean. According to the Kyirim company of Ekumfi Ekumpoano, 'in the event where somebody goes missing or drowns in the ocean, what they do is the play the Kyirim kind of ritual evocative music on the drum, so that the sea will bring the body ashore for you to bury'.¹²⁹ By ritually appeasing the Atlantic, the asafo of Ekumpoano were able to harness the ocean's power for their own endeavours.

As a space for ritual cleansing, the sea also occupied a critical position in asafo festivals. During the Cape Coast celebration of Fetu Afahye, members of the seven companies include the ocean in their activities to the present day. Before passing by the traditional bonfire on the shore, asafo members enter into the sea to be cleansed:

All items taken to the shore are taken away from you. Your towel, sponge, the worn dress to the shore and everything that was taken along to the shore are all taken away from you. However, after the ritual bath you will be dressed up, putting on face powder, combing your hair, and a new dress.¹³⁰

Field's anthropological work on Ga communities also records the use of sea water as a cleansing fluid. In *Osu* she writes, 'those parts of the community which are of Fanti origin often have a ceremony involving washing in the sea'.¹³¹ In such rituals, the sea acts as a site of renewal. Fetu Afahye is after all a harvest festival, albeit with other historic and esoteric connotations. By cleansing themselves the ocean, asafo members are afforded a spiritual

¹²⁹ Ekumpoano Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Abeku Adams, Ekumfi Ekumpoano, 28 April 2018.

¹³⁰ AHP, Amanful Safohen, interview with Irene Odotei, Cape Coast, undated but probably 1997.

¹³¹ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, p 198.

rebirth akin to that of the season as a whole. That so many other spiritual practices took place on the beach, such as the traditional bonfire of Fetu Afahye or the finale of the *abosom* procession of Akwambo, is reflective of the importance of the boundary between the human and the natural realms. Inland, the ambiguous zone between the village and the bush, known as *kurotia* among the Asante, existed as a space of spiritual interaction.¹³² The same symbolic positioning manifested on the seashore for coastal peoples, with the beach acting as a liminal space between the untamed ocean and the human culture of the town – a boundary crossed by fishermen up to six days a week. The impact this had on asafo identities will be discussed further in the next chapter.

For the asafo companies of Moree, the sea acts as an explicit site of ancestral origin. As addressed briefly in Chapter One, before following their founders Kwagya and Amanfi, the first settlers in Moree are said to have emerged from the sea itself. According to Reindorf, ‘the ancestors of Mowure are also said to have risen from the sea in great numbers, so that someone having seen such a host of people coming out of the water, gave a great cry, which caused those who had not landed to remain in the water and become rocks’.¹³³ This origin story remains prevalent in Moree oral histories and influences the ritual activity in the town. Once a year, the townspeople of Moree, led by the asafo, pour libation into the sea ‘to commemorate their ancestors who were turned to stone’.¹³⁴

Deities associated with the sea or seafaring activities had the capacity to use their spiritual power in other spheres. Oceanic *abosom* were sometimes deployed in war: the ritual power of the sea god Nai was said to have been harnessed by the Ga when fighting against Asante forces in 1826.¹³⁵ In the battle of Katamanso, the Ga asafo are said to have ‘attributed the victory not only to their fetishes, but also to all the creatures that live in the

¹³² McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 295.

¹³³ Reindorf, *History*, p 20.

¹³⁴ Kyirim Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, Moree, 11 April 2018.

¹³⁵ Parker, *Making the Town*, p 56-7.

sea', which were considered to be 'warriors of their fetish Nai' and who had 'taken part in the combat, and to have been wounded in it'.¹³⁶ Field also notes the dual character of Fante deities transplanted to the Ga region who belonged both to the world of war and to the sea. One of many examples she presents includes a 'yam-eating, Fanti-singing war-god, Aflim', who resided at Labadi to the east of Accra.¹³⁷ Aflim's ritual ceremonies included 'a war-like procession into the bush and back, with much gun-firing and noise', but 'another secondary office of Aflim which bids to become his main one, is that of fishing-god'. The Fante interpretation of the Britannia *obosom* also speaks to the belief that the strength of the ocean could be harnessed for military activity. Not only was the sea a force to be carefully navigated, it provided a source of strength for the coastal fisherfolk that constituted the Fante asafo companies.

Conclusion

Excavating and interpreting the cosmological aspects of asafo history is challenging. Yet when broader Akan belief systems are considered in conjunction with the history of company activity, their importance is clear. The Fante asafo had to navigate a complex ritual landscape refracted through the broader Akan eco-social order, with particular attention paid to the company *abosom* and *nananom nsamanfo*. The power of the sea, its deities and the warrior spirits of the ancestors all necessitated a level of cautious respect born out through taboos, offerings and worship. Such veneration allowed for this power to be harnessed; to be weaponised by asafo companies in times of crisis.

Spiritual actors were brought into sharp relief at moments of ritual tension in funerals and festivals, when the boundary between the ethereal and the mundane worlds was especially permeable. A significant number of violent episodes in asafo history occurred

¹³⁶ Reindorf, *History*, p 210.

¹³⁷ Field, *Religion and Medicine*, p 63.

during such circumstances. As with the 1930 Apam *amanko*, proximity to *abosom* and *nananom nsamanfo* should be understood as a constitutive part of these inter-company fights. With militaristic *abosom* and warrior ancestors looming large in the historical imagination of asafo members conducting funeral or festival rituals, the capacity for the living to mirror the martial behaviour of the dead is hardly surprising. These tensions were exacerbated by the cartographies of Fante towns, negotiated through historic company rivalry and marked by sites of ritual engagement. As will be explored in more detail in the final chapter, the asafo navigated the spaces in which they lived according to these cosmological notions, especially at times of company display during funerals and festivals.

Such is the power of the *abosom* and the *nananom nsamanfo* that for some it explains the persistence of the company system as a whole. Despite the numerous social and cultural changes which the coast of what is now Southern Ghana has experienced, the asafo system persists. To paraphrase the words of an elderly *safohen* from Abura, it is the power of the *abosom* which propel the asafo forwards through time; ‘the power is there, so irrespective of the changes, the asafo company will still exist.’¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Okyere Ramzy, Abura, 13 June 2018.

Chapter Four

Gender and the Body

There are legitimate critiques to be levelled against historical writing which limits discussions of gender to a discrete chapter rather than to a more rigorous weaving of the theme throughout. Yet it is hoped that the focus in this chapter on women's roles in the asafo and on gender dynamics more broadly is justified by the conclusions which can be drawn from this approach. Women are often noticeable only by their absence from literature on asafo companies. Working class women in particular are often silenced in the historical record and it is certainly the case that there is only fragmentary source material for female interactions with the asafo company system. So great was the power of women to enforce aspects of company identity, however, that their role in asafo history, particularly in the dynamics of violence, deserves proper scrutiny. This chapter seeks to redress the lack of attention to women in the existing literature, as well as to consider the importance of masculinity within asafo history.

Over the last generation, there have been great efforts to reconstruct in all its complexity the role of women in African history. With this historiography came a need to debunk certain tropes surrounding female agency, women having been conventionally characterised as marginal actors and 'reduced to trans-historical creatures outside the dynamics of historical development'.¹ Much of the historiography of African gender history has sought to reframe these narratives by demonstrating that 'African women, as historical subjects, were active agents in the making of the colonial world'.² Following the example of

¹ Paul Tiyambe Zeleza, 'Gender Biases in African Historiography', in Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmi (ed), *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (Palgrave Macmillan: New York, 2005), p 208.

² Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musisi, 'Women in African Colonial Histories: An Introduction', in Allman, Geiger and Musisi (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2002), p 1.

such scholarly work, this chapter seeks to present women associated with the asafo as dynamic actors, who were deeply implicated in company activities and in conflict.

Oral histories have been identified as a critical source for excavating female historical experience in the African context. As noted by Francesca Declich, oral histories recounted by women take on their own specific narratives, 'because their own experiences varied by gender, and this was compounded because in retelling their stories male and female audiences heard and remembered information differently'.³ This trend is evident in the narratives examined in this chapter, particularly in histories presented by female asafo captains (*safohemma*) which provide detail on areas specific to the female experience and critical in shaping the identities of women involved in asafo activity.

There has been some important work on women and on gender among the communities of the Gold Coast and the Akan forest. This literature, much of it focused on Asante, has sought to unpack the role of gender in Akan societies and to demonstrate the ways in which it shifted as a result of encroaching British colonial rule. There are important general conclusions to be drawn about the historical position of women in Akan political and military hierarchies. Akan societies are, of course, matrilineal, and the extent through which matrilineal structures afforded African women 'possibilities of authority and power' has been subject to much debate.⁴ Certainly, for some Akan women matrilineal descent did present positions of influence, most evident in office of queen mother, or *ohemma*.⁵ Female heads of matrilineages also occupied seats in village or town councils, as *obaapanyin* or

³ Kathleen Sheldon, 'Writing about Women: Approaches to a Gendered Perspective in African History', in John Edward Phillips (ed.), *Writing African History* (University of Rochester Press: Rochester NY, 2005), p 472.

⁴ Ife Amadiume, 'Theorizing Matriarchy in Africa: Kinship Ideologies and Systems in Africa and Europe', in Oyèwùmi, *African Gender Studies*, p 90. See also Wendy James, 'Matrifocus on African Women', in Shirley Ardener (ed.), *Defining Females: The Nature of Women in Society* (Bloomsbury Academic: London, 1978).

⁵ Agnes Akosua Aidoo, 'Asante Queen Mothers in Government and Politics in the Nineteenth Century', *Journal of The Historical Society of Nigeria* 9: 1 (1977).

ohemma. Arhin's analysis of the political positionality of Akan women suggests that they were seen as 'an educator, a moral guardian, and a conciliator in the political process'.⁶

The European presence on the Fante coast impacted upon gendered experiences. Female members of local elites were afforded access to resources by this proximity. Ty M. Reese has argued that for the female elite of Cape Coast, 'Atlantic trade provided them with access to commodities that reinforced their status'.⁷ Women were also included in processes of gift giving which underpinned Atlantic commerce, with Cape Coast women in 1775 being gifted 'brandy, tobacco, and pipes' from the African Company. For those Oguaa women of lower social status, the company still provided opportunity for employment. Women could work as labourers or gardeners, paid in a combination of cash money and material goods, usually cloth. Marriage between Fante women and European men was also common in the coastal towns, a practice often referred to as *cassare*. As explained by Carina Ray, European men were 'incorporated into pre-existing social frameworks' of landlord-stranger relationships.⁸ These marriages accorded the male participants access to commercial and political alliances, medicine, linguistic and cultural knowledge and food, as well as sexual intimacy. *Cassare* also provided the families of married women with advantageous connections to European power. The extent to which the women themselves had agency in these partnerships is debated and is likely to have varied considerably. As Ray argues, 'women who acquired wealth and power through their relationships with European men typically did so because they were willing to treat others, just as they had once been treated, as tradable commodities'.⁹ With the transition from company rule to colonialism such

⁶ Kwame Arhin, 'The Political and Military Roles of Akan Women', in Christine Oppong (ed.), *Female and Male in West Africa* (George Allen & Unwin Ltd: London, 1983), p 93.

⁷ Ty M. Reese, 'Wives, Brokers and Labourers: Women at Cape Coast 1750 – 1807', in Douglas Catterall and Jodie Campbell (eds), *Women in Port: Gendering Communities, Economies, and Social Networks in Atlantic Port Cities, 1500-1800* (Brill: Leiden, 2012), p 294.

⁸ Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*, p 82; see also Pernille Ipsen, *Daughters of the Trade: Atlantic Slavers and Interracial Marriage on the Gold Coast* (University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, 2015).

⁹ Ray, *Crossing the Color Line*, p 88.

marriages were officially forbidden, a step change made explicit in Governor Rodgers 'undesirable relations' circular in 1907. Cross-racial relationships continued nonetheless, but usually without cohabitation and the formal protections brought about by marriage.

Despite the focus on women in this chapter, in terms of gendered identity it is the notion of masculinity which emerges as the dominant theme. This is not to say that women's identities are irrelevant. Rather, those women who achieved influence within Fante *asafo* companies were often perceived to have some of those aspects of *asafo* 'masculinity' which were considered particularly desirable: bravery, authority and strength of spirit. This focus on martial processes was, after all, the underlying force behind the development of the company system. As Fante intellectual J. E. Casely Hayford noted at the turn of the twentieth century, 'the military spirit is not dead in the people. It deserves to be encouraged as an element of strength in Gold Coast manhood'.¹⁰ Casely-Hayford is trying to depict the *asafo* as a productive cultural force, speaking back to colonial distrust of the company system. In doing so he concretely locates militarism as a fundamental aspect of masculinity for Fante men, expressed through the medium of *asafo* activity. The interaction between the *asafo* and a fundamental essence of manhood was further underpinned by the ritual aspect of inherited company membership. *Asafo* affiliation among the matrilineal Akan was passed down through the 'subordinate' male line and entangled with the spiritual inheritance of patrilineage through the father's deity (*egyabosom*). As with the Asante *ntɔrɔ*, which McCaskie defines as 'an essential element of a human being that defined consanguinity in patrilineal terms', the *egyabosom* embodies the spiritual connection between the forefather and his descendants.¹¹ Patrilineal inheritance of the *egyabosom* and *asafo* company membership was character defining, which Christensen explains as 'due to the fact that a son is believed to inherit his military prowess and bravery from his father'.¹² Indeed, so

¹⁰ J. E. Casely-Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions* (Frank Cass Ltd: London, 1970), p 92.

¹¹ McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 314.

¹² Christensen, *Double Descent*, p 108.

tightly interwoven were patrilineal inheritance and martial character that Christensen's asafo interlocutors rejected wholesale the suggestion that such capabilities could be transmitted from the mother's side. The proverb put to him in response, 'a crab cannot give birth to a bird', reiterates this belief.¹³ Asafo masculinities, therefore, rested on the foundational notion of spiritual character and aptitude in war as inherited qualities which connected active asafo members with the long male lineage of warrior ancestors who had come before them. These masculinities could be enhanced with the use of ritual substances such as alcohol. As Nti has demonstrated: 'Alcohol was seen as the king of all drinks. It stirred manliness and produced that aggressive disposition which was necessary for war'.¹⁴

The nineteenth-century transition to legitimate commerce and the expansion of British colonial rule saw new masculinities enter the fray of male identity. Ideals of Christianity and modernity are argued to have become paramount in the lives and identities of male converts.¹⁵ Such trends are evident too within certain asafo companies. For No. 6 Company (Akrampa) of Cape Coast, intellectualism and 'progress' had long been at the heart of how company members perceived themselves. Connell's framework of 'hegemonic masculinity' is useful here in order to unpack the shifting and variable masculinities subscribed to by various asafo members.¹⁶ Among the company system of the Fante littoral, some men ascribed to new modes of masculinity shaped by literate education and Christianity. However, for many asafo members, military prowess remained the crucial marker of male identity, despite the shift towards a Christianised masculinity. Nowhere was this more evident than in the actions of women whose allegiances lay with their father's company, many of whom sought to sustain and provoke this hegemonic militarised masculinity by any means necessary.

¹³ Ibid, p 109.

¹⁴ Nti, 'The Role of Alcohol', p 52.

¹⁵ Stephan Miescher, *Making Men in Ghana* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington, 2005).

¹⁶ R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Polity Press: Cambridge, 1995); Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender & Society* 19: 6 (2005).

This chapter therefore argues that far from being subjugated victims of asafo violence, women were implicated and actively involved in processes of fighting, from the organized violence of the deeper past to the recurrent inter-company battles which outlived formal warfare. In doing so, women will be shown to have acted as the gatekeepers of masculinity, the fire which lit the kindling, and in some cases as soldiers on physical and spiritual battlefields. Militarised masculinities, a prominent driver of inter-company violence, were kept alive by women. Gendered notions of spiritual strength were also refracted through the body. Issues of corporeality and reproduction offered avenues through which companies could renew the intimate relationship between the ritual life of the asafo and the physical embodiment of war.

Women Caught in the Crossfire

A superficial reading of gender relations for those living among asafo companies during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries might lend itself to the view that women fell victim to the regular outbreaks of violence which sprung up along the Fante coast. This would not be a completely inaccurate conclusion. There certainly are examples of women through the years who experienced injury as a result of inter-company tensions. Accoah Mootowah, a resident of Mumford, was injured during a dispute over the erection of a flagpole in 1857. Acooah attempted to intervene in the struggle and break up the fight; the result was that the crowd 'fell on her and beat her'.¹⁷ Before the outbreak of the battle between Otuum and Dago in 1920, women from Dago were said to have been attacked when 'out for water'.¹⁸ In the affray that followed, a woman named Essie Menyinnah was shot and killed.¹⁹ Although

¹⁷ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/4/6, Yao Cornelius v Cheychey Co, 25 March 1857.

¹⁸ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, Kweku Mensah Deposition, 15 December 1920

¹⁹ Ibid, Statement given by Kojo Aryee, 14 December 1920; Ohene Eduafo II Deposition, 12 January 1921.

in most instances of large-scale inter-company *amanko* women were reported to have fled once guns began to be used, many were caught in the crossfire over the years .

The implications of inter-company rivalries also may have played out in less grievous forms in some cases. In Anomabo in 1946, women were identified as being caught in the middle of ‘lawlessness and terrorism’ enacted by members of No. 6 and 7 companies. The *omanhene* wrote to the Commissioner of Central Province complaining about the establishment of ‘an unauthorised market’ in the quarters of these two companies, ‘which, amid threats, the women folk are compelled by them to attend’.²⁰ It appears that the *omanhene*’s relationship with No. 6 and 7 companies was stretched extremely thin at the time, so it is possible that this accusation was exaggerated. Frequent complaints from the *omanhene* regarding the actions of the two provocative companies, which were at that time subject to the restrictions of the Peace Proclamation Order, do invite some level of scepticism as to the validity of the above claim. Nevertheless, it is more than possible that *asafo* companies would be able to control the movements of their townspeople if they so desired.

Oral histories suggest that periods of heightened company hostility had significant consequences for intimate relations between men and women. Reflecting on the field research for the Asafo History Project, Alex Wilson noted that ‘in the olden days there was no cross marriage between the two companies’ of Gomoa Dago.²¹ Men would therefore marry the daughters of their fellow company members. This practice of marrying solely within an *asafo* company seems to have declined substantially once inter-company tensions had dissipated throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, but there is some evidence that it continued in some corners. Writing in 1968, George Hagan suggested that in Cape

²⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/629, Omanhene Amonu Ababio of Anomabo to CCP, 15 July 1946.

²¹ AHP, Alex Wilson, Fante Asafo Edited Fieldnotes 1998.

Coast 'there is a tacit understanding that men should try, as much as possible to marry women from their own Asafos'.²²

Relationships between townswomen and outsiders also caused friction among asafo communities. In the mid-1930s, asafo members from Queen Anne's Point, a bush branch of Cape Coast also known as Ekon, came close to instigating mass civil disorder out of fears that their women were being stolen from the town. According to a petition written by representatives of Ekon, events began when 'a man by name Opongo, a native of Keta, brought drag nets 'twiyi' to our town for fishing purposes'.²³ Yet drag nets were not the only alien phenomenon carried by Opongo and his work men. It was claimed that the Keta men 'practiced charms', the use of which made 'certain women belonging to our community get married to these strangers after they have been made by the influence of the charms to desert their husbands who were natives of Queen Anne's Point'. This grave insult to the men of Ekon was compounded by the 'new life' resulting from the unions, described by Ekon Oman as 'revolting in its nature'. The Anlo-Ewe ethnic identity of the Keta men may have underpinned this abhorrence, rendering the drag net pedlars unwanted strangers. Tensions between the men of the Ekon asafo and the Keta dragnet peddlers grew until 'a fracas which resulted in a melee took place'. Although the elders of Ekon stepped in and 'ordered these strangers to leave our town' before serious violence ensued, rumours of the episode pervaded Fante littoral society. Attempts to resettle the Keta drag net bearers in Moree six years later was also met with resistance from the local asafo.²⁴

The introduction of drag nets *and* their alluring Keta owners represented a dual affront to asafo masculinities. Not only did the unwanted visitors undermine the virility of local men by having affairs with their wives, they also threatened to erode the sacred role of

²² George P. Hagan, 'An Analytical Study of Fanti Kinship', *Research Review* 5: 1 (1968), p 67.

²³ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/71, Petition from Kwa Mensah et al, 4 December 1936.

²⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/130, DC Cape Coast to CCP, 3 December 1942; PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/306, Acting CCP to SNA, 7 December 1942.

Fante fishermen. Pioneers in the field, the Fante were some of the earliest communities to develop their skills which were spread along the coast through migration.²⁵ Although not all asafo members undertook fishing as their primary economic activity, it was by far the most dominant occupation and therefore a significant part of asafo identity. The organisation of the local fishing industry was extremely gendered. Women, often referred to as fishwives, would smoke the fish and sell them at markets, but it was men who went out onto the water to haul up the catch. Masculinity was therefore economically determined to some extent, a feature reflected in Ghanaian literature. In her feminist analysis of Ama Ata Aidoo's novel *Anowa*, Theresa Ennin associates productive fishing with hegemonic masculinity. She argues that the representation of Kofi Ako, husband of the eponymous Anowa, in the first scene – 'in work clothes holding a fish trap and a bundle of bait, not no fish' – serves to underscore his inability to achieve masculinity whereby 'the lack of fish is symbolic of his failure'.²⁶

Yet, as Irene Odotei illustrates, 'fishing was not merely an economic activity but of religious and political concern'.²⁷ The prevalence of ritual practices among fishermen in a multitude of contexts has long been argued by anthropologists to be a consequence of the risks taken when working on the 'different realm' of water.²⁸ As has been discussed, fishing was an activity underpinned by a sensitive awareness of the relationship between cosmological notions and the natural world. Navigation through this ritually fraught realm was usually undertaken along company lines. Fishing parties would take to the sea with their fellow asafo members, often with company aesthetics at hand. Their wooden canoes

²⁵ Emmanuel Akyeampong, 'Indigenous Knowledge and Maritime Fishing in West Africa: The Case of Ghana', *Tribes and Trials* 1 (2007); Irene Odotei, 'Migrations of Fante Fishermen', in Jan M. Jaakonsen and M. Chimère Diaw (eds), *Fishermen's Migrations in West Africa* (IDAF: Benin, 1991); Ragnhild Overå, 'Institutions, Mobility and Resilience in the Fante Migratory Fisheries in West Africa', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana* 9 (2005).

²⁶ Theresa Ennin, 'The Making of Akan Men: Confronting Hegemonic Masculinities in Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Healers* and Ama Ata Aidoo's *Anowa*', *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men* 2: 2 (2014), p 48.

²⁷ Irene Odotei, 'Gender and Traditional Authority in the Artisanal Fishing Industry in Ghana', *Institute of African Studies Research Review* (1995), p 15.

²⁸ James M. Acheson, 'Anthropology of Fishing', *Annual Review of Anthropology* 10 (1981), p 288.

were often decorated with those motifs which represented the strength of their owner's asafo company.²⁹ Correspondingly, asafo material culture on land sometimes depicted the fishing prowess of individual companies. One of the largest flags still in use by Mumford's No. 2 Company (Tuafo) features a train motif, representative of the railway at Takoradi. As a company totem, Takoradi railway is used to remind their rivals that Tuafo were the first to go to Takoradi to fish, in 1915, therefore pronouncing their capacities as superior fishermen.³⁰ Among the Akomfoadze Company of Saltpond, women 'will be seen in suit and having on her shoulders tilapia nets' during festivals.³¹ Not only does this amount to an inversion of gender norms, but also seeks to undermine fishing masculinities of their rivals by indicating 'that the Bakado (Tuafo) people do not know how to fish tilapia'. The ritual and economic character of fishing was therefore folded into asafo identities for many of the coastal companies, reinforcing localised understandings of working class manhood.

Competition for female affection was also credited for the outbreak of violence between the 4th Battalion of the West India Regiment and the Oguaa asafo, led by No. 1 Company (Bentil), in 1865. The conflict was argued by W. S. Kwesi-Johnston to have been caused by

the way the local women-folk had attached themselves to the soldiers, who were a great attraction, because of their good and regular pay and the abundant army rations (including the celebrated army corned beef) with which they were supplied. Jealousy was the motive, for the soldiers were able to maintain the women better than the women's own husbands, sweethearts, and masters could.³²

²⁹ Alison W. Gray, 'Canoe Decoration and Meaning Among the Fante of Cape Coast', *African Diaspora ISPs: Paper 25* (1996).

³⁰ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Isaac Ansah, Mumford, 22 May 2018.

³¹ AHP, Saltpond Opanyin, interview with Amoako Anthony, Saltpond, 4-6 August 1997.

³² Kwesi Johnston, 'The Asafo in Cape Coast History', p 11.

Kwesi-Johnston reported that the *amanko*, which notably took place on the evening of Fetu Afahye, killed one Oguaa local, and wounded 58 men and 5 women. However, he does not unfortunately provide any detail as to whether the extent of womanly attention was at all swayed as a result of the fight.

It is possible to see women as being caught in the crossfire of asafo conflicts. Some women were killed and injured, subjected to supernatural forces and had their movements restricted by asafo companies. Yet to present women as simply victims of the presence of the asafo in Fante communities marginalises both their capacity to attain the position of *safohemma*, and the complex extra-company connections which underpinned female identity. Reluctance to marry between asafo companies, for example, was likely a trend encouraged by asafo men *and* women, who were both affiliated to a company through their father. A more nuanced evaluation of the role of gender, and the positions of women more particularly, requires investigation into the varied forms of power which pervaded the asafo company system.

Women in Power

Although the asafo hierarchy has been predominantly occupied by men, all the way down to the general membership, women had access to formalised power in the structure of asafo companies themselves. Oral histories tell us that women did not *usually* participate in active fighting in the Fante wars of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As such, there was no pragmatic reason for their involvement in the rank and file of the asafo. However, this gendered division of labour did not prohibit women from ascending to positions of importance within a company. Despite the fact that ‘women are not admitted into the

military services, the leadership has a female counterpart'.³³ Women have long been able to attain the position of captain in asafo companies, awarded the title of *safohemma*, *asafoakyere*, or in areas such as Ekumfi, *safohimba*, and were afforded with the same degree of authority as *safohen*, even using whips on 'unruly male members' when required.³⁴

Safohemma were sometimes chosen in lieu of an appropriate male candidate for *safohen*. If an asafo captain died leaving behind no male progeny, it was possible for his daughter to inherit the position. But *safohemma* were also awarded their title in recognition of services provided to the company itself, such as 'fetching water', and delivering it to the battlefield for thirsty soldiers.³⁵ Both commitment to the company and the garnering of a prestigious reputation were identified by elders from Amanful Company of Cape Coast as underpinning an appointment to *safohemma*; '[For] women in the asafo, if your achievements are well spoken of you can become a *safohemma*.'³⁶ Safohen Parker from the No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin) also spoke to the physical and psychological strength that women could bring to the position of *safohemma*: 'there are certain women that are stronger than men, such folks are accepted into the asafo company to assist in any way they possibly can'.³⁷ It is possible that that this remark may reflect a more contemporary approach to female involvement in the company system. Yet respected elders in Anomabo testified to a few 'extraordinary' women actually joining the asafo in war during 'traditional times'.³⁸ They explained that 'those women [who] accompanied the men to wars were the ones made *asafoakyere*.' Christensen, writing in 1954, also reported that women were enstooled within asafo companies as a result of their being 'recognised as brave and aggressive (with "heavy" sunsum)'.³⁹ This mention of sunsum – the spirit – further

³³ Narkwa Oman, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Adams Abeku, Ekumfi Narkwa 20 April 2018.

³⁴ Christensen, *Double Descent*, p 111.

³⁵ Nkum elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 February 2018.

³⁶ Amanful elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 March 2018.

³⁷ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys trans. William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 February 2018.

³⁸ AHP, Anomabo Okyeame and Obaatan, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997.

³⁹ Christensen, *Double Descent*, p 111.

reinforces the idea that women were selected for the position of *safohemma* due to their inherent capabilities at least in the first half of the twentieth century.



Fig. 8: Brofomba outside Cape Coast Castle, c. 1903. Photograph taken by Arthur Ffoulkes. PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473. Four female safohemma are in this picture: fifth and seventh and eighth from the left standing top row, fourth from the left seated middle row. The two men seated in the middle of the lower row holding knives in their mouths were the company's abrafo, or executioners.

There are some limitations in female access to authority that have remained unchanged. Women cannot and could not attain the ultimate position of *supi*. As articulated by one *safohen*, 'a lady can only become *supi* when there are no men at all, if all men are dead. When

everyone is dying, and there's no man, then women can stand yes, and fight.'⁴⁰ As the paramount leader of an *asafo* company, the *supi* is required to engage ritually with supernatural actors in ways which, according to Akan cosmological thought, would be barred to women. 'There are certain qualities that men have and some rituals that women cannot do because of their menstruation. . . there are certain gods only men are allowed to carry, because if care is not taken that god can throw you into the sea.'⁴¹ As discussed in greater detail below, the contamination of ritual objects and locales by menstrual blood could have had grave implications for the wellbeing of *asafo* spiritual power.

This recognition that there are some aspects of *asafo* life that women are unable to participate in does not conflict with their ability to become *safohemma*. Whereas women may fulfil their position in non-combative ways, offering guidance, organising the company, contributing financially, their leadership during war can easily be replaced if necessary. After all, most *asafo* companies have a fairly high number of *safohen*. As described by an elder from Dago, 'a woman can be a *Safohen* but a man must stand in for her. When a woman urinates like a man her hands will get wet.'⁴²

Despite the apparent agency attributed to women who achieved the position of *safohemma* or *safohimba*, the historical record suggests that at least in some cases such women had to obtain permission from their husbands in order to be initiated into power. How often this permission was required and how easy it was to obtain is difficult to know. It is reasonable to assume that when husband and wife were a part of the same *asafo* company, the appointment to *safohemma* would have been relatively frictionless, and perhaps even a welcome level of status for the couple, albeit one with quite substantial financial strings attached.

⁴⁰ Nkum elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 February 2018. Coast

⁴¹ Amanful elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 March 2018.

⁴² AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998.

In September 1850, a dispute surrounding the appointment of a *safohemma* was brought to the Judicial Assessor's court at Cape Coast with her husband as the plaintiff. Recorded as one Mr Menyan (his wife the prospective *safohemma* was not named during the trial), the plaintiff brought a case against the whole of No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin) for the process of 'outdooring' his wife without his express permission. Although Menyan's allegiance to an asafo company was not referenced throughout the course of the trial, his antagonistic relationship with Ntin - and the fact that the case was not dealt with within the company - suggests that he was not a member of that company. According to Mr Menyan, a representative of Ntin known as Mr Acquah captured his wife from their home while Mr Menyan was absent and proceeded to make 'her a Captain in the name of her father'.⁴³ Mrs Menyan had clearly inherited the position of *safohemma* from her father through patrilineal succession. To add insult to injury, Mr Acquah returned to the plaintiff's house and 'mocked him'. Aggrieved, Mr Menyan replied that 'if he was at home and that they took his wife without asking his leave, he would resist them'. With tensions rising, Acquah swore by the Oguaa Wukuda oath that Mr Menyan 'would not be able to fight the Company'. Not to be outdone, Mr Menyan swore by the 'Common Oaths' that he would indeed be able to fight the company and resist the capture of his wife. With the gravity of these sworn oaths lingering in the air, many of those from Ntin Company returned to Mr Menyan's house that evening 'with cutlasses'.

As no actual physical violence was reported by the plaintiff or by witnesses, it seems that the interaction between Mr Menyan and Ntin that evening was one of posturing and threats. The court records further show that both the Governor and Oguuahene Aggery attempted to settle the palaver in the days that followed. According to Acquah, speaking on behalf of the whole of Ntin Company, the Governor leveed a fine of eight shillings for all involved, 'but the next day he forgave them'. However, Menyan testified that Ntin did not

⁴³ PRAAD Accra, SCT 4/4/20 Judicial Assessor's Notebook, Menyan v Intin Company, 24 September 1850.

allow the matter to rest, explaining that ‘the town people sent him for his £2 because he broke his oath’ – suggesting that he was unable to fulfil his sworn promise to resist Ntin. He also argued that ‘the Company stopped his woman [from] bringing water’ and ‘sent rum to some villages’, including the Ntin branch in Abura, ‘with the order that if they saw Menyan going to his room to cut off his head and bring it to them’.

The Judicial Assessor upheld Menyan’s complaint, ruling that as Acquah had captured the wife of Menyan and ‘committed the further aggravation of insulting and laughing at him in his own house at what was done in his absence’, Acquah was ‘the aggressor and totally wrong’. Both No. 3 Company and Mr Menyan were ordered to pay a bond of £20 to demonstrate their commitment to keep the peace for one year.

Although much of the discussion in court revolved around the gravity of swearing an oath over a threat that was unfulfilled, the heart of the matter was revisited by various advisors to the court. King Aggergy explained that ‘as to the asking leave of the former [the husband] before making a woman a captain, there is no absolute law on the matter’, but he did suggest that ‘they ought to send word’. One Sam Wood, whose credentials were not outlined in the court notes, said that ‘his wife was made Captain and he sent word and gave his consent personally’ but that the company in question ‘endeavoured to catch her before that’. These two statements taken together suggest that although there was no official obligation within Cape Coast traditional law for an asafu company to notify the husband of a prospective *safohemma* before she was selected and outdoored, it was, in a sense, good manners to do so.

It is difficult to track how this need for spousal permission declined over time. It is possible that the position that Mr Menyan was put in was unusual, with the husbands of incoming *safohemma* probably being involved in the asafu themselves and therefore privy to conversations regarding enstoolment. Court records yielded no similar cases. Nevertheless,

as much as can be extrapolated from one historical example, it does seem that the power of *asafohemma* did not quite extend into their own households.

Women as spies, across space

Even those women who were not *safohemma* still provided crucial services to their father's *asafo* company during war. The most widely acknowledged of these actions include the carrying of provisions, food and water to men fighting in battle. But women were also able to move across space with stealth. The everyday passage accorded to women allowed them to gather information which could then be passed on to the company of their father.

During a fight between the Nkums, the Bentils and the Ntins in Cape Coast in 1886, it was the wives of the members of Ntin company who forewarned the company that a war was imminent. As explained by captains of Ntin in a petition to Governor Griffith, while tensions between the various companies was rising, 'the wives of our bush people who had come to town to market, returning home informed their male relatives that the Econs and the Bentill people were going to fight us'.⁴⁴ These male relatives, most likely from the Abura village which has always been closely affiliated with Ntin, took it upon themselves to arm themselves in order to assist the company, who were fully apprised of the impending threat as a consequence. A similar process was apparent in the battle between the *asafo* of Ekumfi Otuum and Gomoa Dago discussed in Chapter 2. It was the women of Dago town who reported to the Ohene Eduafo II that an encroaching army of Otuum *asafo* was on the horizon and heading towards them.⁴⁵

Women were also able to move across spiritual borders. In a large battle in Anomabo, where the snake *obosom, kokobi* blocked the road to protect the town, *kokobi*

⁴⁴ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1108, No. 3 Company Captains, Cape Coast to Governor, 8 November 1886.

⁴⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence of Eduafo II, 27 January 1921

allowed the women of the town to come past: ‘when it’s time for the women to go and feed their people then the snake would give them away so that the women would go and feed the men’.⁴⁶ This anecdote reflects a broader trend whereby women were able to move across the invisible boundaries demarcating *asafo* territories with much more ease than their male counterparts. It is of note, however, that this did not always hold true. During a period of unrest between the two companies of Apam in 1917, it was reported that when women ‘had any property which she intends passing through their [the rival company’s] boundary, they gave them gun shots, knives, and other ill treatments’.⁴⁷ The tumultuous nature of Apam may have made this an exception which proves the rule. Women’s capacity to move through towns and their surrounding countryside in the midst of simmering company rivalry afforded them substantial opportunities to gather information about their rival’s intentions.

Women as Provocateurs: *mmobomme* and *adzewa*

The wars which plagued the Gold Coast throughout the era of Atlantic commerce regularly divided communities, with young men leaving their families behind to fight for the honour of their people. Yet women left behind consistently interacted with the battlefield on a spiritual plane. Their communication with esoteric forces kept women closely interlinked with victory, or defeat, in war itself. The ritual activities undertaken to ensure connection between the women at home and the men on the battlefield were prevalent across the Gold Coast, forming a set of practices known as *mmobomme* (variously *abomome*, *mmomme*, *agya* etc). *Mmobomme* was by no means a ritual undertaking unique to the Fante, or indeed to those women who married, loved and lived with men of the *asafo*. Known as *asayere* in the Ga language, these practices have also been extensively recorded on the eastern Gold

⁴⁶ Kyirim elder, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Anomabo, 25 May 2018.

⁴⁷ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/30, No. 2 Company Apam to SNA, 30 November 1931/11/1931.

Coast.⁴⁸ Yet *mmobomme* rituals appear to have proliferated among women associated with the Fante asafo companies long after the end of interstate warfare. As will be discussed below, women involved in *adzewa* groups – an organisation structure which stood in parallel to the asafo – often participated in activities evident in *mmobomme* rituals. Women were deeply implicated in battle and intimately connected to those enacting physical violence. Although Arhin argues that ‘the essential female military role was to give encouragement for men’, deeper analysis of female activity suggests a more profound interaction with war.⁴⁹ Women were instrumental in determining the strength and morale of their armies, and were themselves embroiled in a ritual conflict which subsumed the physicality of war in the mundane world. Women were provocative, urging men to fight not simply as cheerleaders from the side lines, but as equal participants in wars which protected their homes and lifted up their communities.

Mmobomme, that ‘distinctly female form of spiritual warfare’, is said to have its roots in the location of women’s reproductive power in Akan cosmology, wherein women’s role as the creators of life ‘made them the best defenders of life’.⁵⁰ A ritual practice seeking to protect communities against looming existential threats, be that war, epidemics or political instability, *mmobomme* took root in a variety of forms across the Akan world and beyond.⁵¹ Adam Jones nevertheless identifies certain common aspects of the practice: praise and execration, prayer, symbolism, obscene behaviour, inversion of gender roles and the abuse of male cowards.⁵² Such cultural markers provide scope for identification of *mmobomme* even when observers were not themselves acquainted with the practice.

⁴⁸ Parker, *Making the Town*, p 52.

⁴⁹ Arhin, ‘Political and Military Roles of Akan Women’, p 96.

⁵⁰ Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, ‘Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History’, *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 28: 3 (1995), p 492.

⁵¹ On epidemics, see McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 295.

⁵² Adam Jones, “My Arse for Akou”: A Wartime Ritual of Women on the Nineteenth-Century Gold Coast’, *Cahiers d’Études Africaines* 33: 123 (1993)

Written accounts of practices which can be associated with *mmobomme* can be found from the early seventeenth century. A German surgeon visiting Moree from 1617 to 1620 noted the dances, dress and communication with spiritual actors deployed by local women while their men were away at war.⁵³ It is critical to explore those components of *mmobomme* which centre around song and an instrumental wielding of gender power, not least because these aspects continued to inform female interactions with warring *asafo* companies into the twentieth century. Ghanaian musicologist J. H. Kwabena Nketia understood *mmobomme* songs as part of a broader subset of musical type ‘named after the function it performs’.⁵⁴ Nketia defines *mmobomme* as ‘songs of prayer for wishing a person well’, which overlap with *asayere* (‘visiting the wives’) music, ‘a category of songs performed by women in times of war, when the men are away’. Lyrics to *mmobomme*, and *asayere* songs could vary, from praising heroic fighters to urging men to fight and mocking those who would not take up arms. This latter aspect was particularly prominent, and so powerful that according to Arhin, such lyrics composed by *mmobomme* women could ‘drive confirmed war-dodgers to suicide’.⁵⁵ According to Casely Hayford, ‘to hear them chant their beautiful war-songs is to nerve one for the severest struggle’.⁵⁶ That these lyrical themes are evident in songs already explored in this thesis, such as those sung by women in Ekumfi district, is evidence of the continued influence of *mmobomme* into the twentieth century.⁵⁷

Ritual activities undertaken as part of *mmobomme* sometimes took on a distinctively militaristic character. As preserved in Asante oral histories recounted to Emmanuel Akyeampong, rituals ‘sometimes involved women pounding empty mortars with pestles as a

⁵³ Ibid, p 554.

⁵⁴ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, *The Music of Africa* (W.W. Norton: New York, 1974), pp 24–5.

⁵⁵ Arhin, ‘Political and Military Roles of Akan Women’, p 96.

⁵⁶ Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions*, p 91.

⁵⁷ Aspects of *mmobomme* which centre around shaming men through song and parade bear striking similarities with performance customs throughout the world, such as rough music in the United Kingdom and charivari in Western Europe and North America. Elsewhere in Africa, examples include *al-hakkamat* in Darfur: see Saud M. E. Musa, *Hawks and Doves in Sudan’s Armed Conflict: Al-Hakkamat Baggara Women in Darfur* (James Currey: London, 2018); and in Guinea, see Elizabeth Schmidt. “‘Emancipate Your Husbands!’: Women and Nationalism in Guinea, 1953–1958”, in Allman et al, *Women in Colonial African Histories*.

form of spiritual torture of Asante's enemies'.⁵⁸ Stefano Boni's study of accounts by French colonial ethnographer Maurice Delafosse also describes women who 'proceeded armed with sticks' as if they were themselves walking out on to the battlefield'.⁵⁹ In 1784, Accra women 'fought each other with wooden sabres while their men were at war' and accounts from the late nineteenth century describe women who 'run to and fro with guns, or sticks roughly carved to represent guns, and pierce green paw-paws with knives, in imitation of the foemen's heads'.⁶⁰ Many sources describe also such women as daubed with white clay (*hyire*) indicating a state of liminality or heightened spirituality.⁶¹ Such ritual aspects, alongside the protective tone of *mmobomme*, gave rise to European perceptions that women involved 'appear to be regarded in some aspects as female warriors who guard the town during the absence of men'.⁶²

Mmobomme essentially turned on the weaponisation of gender. European visitors to the Gold Coast remarked on blatant female nudity, 'at least at the time when a battle was anticipated'.⁶³ British colonial official and doctor C. A. Gordon recorded one such performance as told to him by a merchant staying in Cape Coast in 1848. Gordon, along with Brodie Cruickshank and much of the Oguaa asafo, was away from the town as part of the expedition to Nzema to capture the warlord Aka. On their triumphant return, Gordon was told that 'from the day of our departure till our return they [the women of Cape Coast] eschewed absolutely all artificial clothing'.⁶⁴ When asked by the merchant why they had decided to doth their attire, the women reportedly explained 'What does it matter . . . we were all women at Cape Coast. The men have gone to war'. In essence, those male residents

⁵⁸ Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', p 492.

⁵⁹ Stefano Boni, 'Female Cleansing of the Community: The Momome Ritual of the Akan World', *Cahiers d'Etudes Africaines* 192: 4 (2008), p 777

⁶⁰ Jones, 'My Arse for Akou', p 552; A. B. Ellis, *The Tshi Speaking Peoples of the Gold Coast of West Africa* (Chapman and Hall Ltd: London, 1887), p 226.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p 227.

⁶² *Ibid*.

⁶³ Jones, 'My Arse for Akou', p 552.

⁶⁴ C. A. Gordon, *Life on the Gold Coast*, (Tindal & Cox Bailliére: London, 1874), p 18.

of Cape Coast who had remained in the town were considered as having lost their claim to masculinity. In his broader description of *mmobomme* ceremonies, A. B. Ellis confirms the use of female nudity to undermine men who did not participate in war: ‘the ceremony is generally performed in a state of nudity, and frequently some of the principal women appear with two hen’s eggs fastened above the *pudenda*’.⁶⁵ The use of hen’s eggs to represent testicles provides a striking depiction of gender inversion. The prevailing theme of undermined masculinity is further evident in Ellis’s account: ‘any man, except the aged and infirm, who may be discovered in the town or village is at once assailed with torrents of abuse, charged with cowardice, taunted with a want of manliness, assaulted with sticks, and driven out the town.’

In some areas, *mmobomme* women moved into the masculine realm more explicitly. According to Adam Jones’ analysis of European sources, ‘women might be seen wearing men’s clothing or carrying an implement associated with men’, such as ‘paddles, fly-switches, machettes’.⁶⁶ The actions of Ga *asayere* women while their menfolk fought against Asante in 1826 is noted by Reindorf in a description likely to have been based on his own observations during the wars of the 1860s-70s: ‘The women in camp and those at home had since the marching of the warriors each assumed the dress and tools of her husband and imitated his work, dancing and singing in company to keep the spirits of the husbands in camp’.⁶⁷ Indeed, according to the interlocutors of anthropologist M. J. Field, *asayere* dance groups were ‘the women’s asafo’.⁶⁸ There is no available mention of literal *cross-dressing*, women wearing the outfits of their warrior men, within the Fante littoral. Yet evidence of gender inversion can be found in those women who armed themselves with makeshift or

⁶⁵ Ellis, *Tshi Speaking Peoples*, p 226-7.

⁶⁶ Jones, ‘My Arse for Akou’, p 553.

⁶⁷ Parker, *Making the Town*, p 52.

⁶⁸ M. J. Field, *Social Organisation of the Ga People* (Crown Agents: London, 1940), p 103.

imitation weapons. As a form of play which utilised gender, inversion sits alongside nudity as a tool with which women asserted themselves as the guardians of masculinity.

Although *mmobomme* is argued to have either died out or transmuted into a form of protection from ‘immaterial, imaginary, metaphorical and supernatural disasters’, there are still relatively contemporary accounts of the practice being used by *asafo* women.⁶⁹ An elder from Gomoa Dago in the late 1990s described women practicing *mmobomme* as ‘[singing] “*akosa bra fiee oo*”, meaning those who have gone to the battle field return in peace’, a significantly less provocative lyrical content.⁷⁰ In *asafo* narratives from Saltpond, too, there are references to gender inversion which could be seen as a continuation of *mmobomme*. As we have seen, women connected to No. 2 Company, Dentsefo, ‘will be seen in suit and having on her shoulders tilapia nets’, during festivals.⁷¹ Yet in relation to women associated with the Fante *asafo*, the ritual organisation which is most commonly used to describe their positions is that of the *adzewa* system. A frequent feature of Fante culture in the coastal towns, *adzewa* is a musical performance group with a predominantly female membership. De Graft Johnson described *adzewa* as ‘a dancing and social band, which is the female equivalent of the *Asafu*, attached to certain *Asafu*’.⁷²

The term *adzewa* itself can refer to the groups themselves, the dance that is often performed by them, or the gourd rattle that is used in their performances. These gourd rattles have been identified as having certain spiritual properties, such as in Anomabo where ‘the women believed these gourds to contain supernatural power, for they were kept in a room with the [o]bosom of the company and were said to be the “children” of the bosom’.⁷³

Adzewa structural organisation usually runs in parallel, and closely aligned to the *asafo*

⁶⁹ Boni, ‘Female Cleansing of the Community’, p 771.

⁷⁰ AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998.

⁷¹ AHP, Saltpond Elder, interview with Amoako Anthony, Saltpond, 4-6 August 1997.

⁷² De Graft Johnson, ‘The Fanti Asafu’, p 314.

⁷³ Christensen, *Double Descent*, p 111.

company system, with each *adzewa* group affiliated to an *asafo* company, and laying claim to the same name and similar identities. It is this close relationship between the two social organisations that has led many to perceive *adzewa* as the woman's wing of the *asafo*.

Adzewa is predominantly a Fante practice, although it has been incorporated into Effutu culture through the processes of intercultural exchange prevalent in these spaces, such as Winneba, due to the migration of Fante communities into Effutu areas. As with male *asafo* membership, women are born into an *adzewa* group.

Scholarship on *adzewa* has mostly come from the field of ethnomusicology. *Adzewa* displays consist of singing, instrumental accompaniment, dance performances and drum languages. Dances are noted to be vigorous and symbolic, the body of the dancer forming shapes in order to communicate with both the drum and the audience at large.⁷⁴ Singing is accompanied by a single drum, is predominantly diatonic and contains lyrics which are usually concerned with victories or defeats in battle.⁷⁵ Instruments include a single bell, or *dawur*, and the preeminent gourd rattle, also referred to as *mfoba* or *akor*.⁷⁶ The style of music performed by *adzewa* also bears similarities with *asafo-ei*, a style often used in display by *asafo* proper which includes 'recitative warrior music and praise singing'.⁷⁷ The content of *adzewa* lyrics were much in keeping with that of *mmobomme* songs; 'keeping vigil by reciting and singing songs in anticipation of their husbands, brothers, lovers and sons returning victoriously from the battle field'.⁷⁸

⁷⁴ Kingsley Ampomah, 'An Investigation into *Adowa* and *Adzewa* Music and Dance of the Akan People of Ghana' *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 4: 10 (2014), p 119

⁷⁵ J. H. Kwabena Nketia, 'The Role of the Drummer in Akan Society', *African Music* 1: 1 (1954), p 36; Isaac D. Riverson, 'The Growth of Music in the Gold Coast', *Transactions of the Gold Coast & Togoland Historical Society* 1: 4 (1955), p 130.

⁷⁶ Esi Sutherland-Addy, 'Women and Verbal Arts in the Oguaa-Edina Area', *Research Review* 14: 2 (1998), p 9-10; See also A. Turkson, 'Effutu Asafo: Its Organisation and Music', *Journal of International Library of African Music* 6: 2 (1982), p 10-13.

⁷⁷ Kingsley Ampomah, 'Pre-Performance and other Contexts within Which *Adzewa* and *Adzeba* Music and Dance are Performed along the Fanti Coastline of Ghana', *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* 4: 20 (2014), p 51.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p 52.

It is tricky to trace the origins of *adzewa*. It is of course possible that the practice existed for as long as the asafu company system has played its part in Fante society. Perhaps the most thoughtful framework comes from Esi Sutherland Addy's work on *adzewa*, in which she explores a number of chronological narratives before proposing that *adzewa* exists as the formalised evolution of the *mmobomme* rituals.⁷⁹ Moreover, Sutherland Addy analyses lyrics of songs sung by *adzewa* alongside oral histories conducted in the late 1990s which suggest that the organisation was clearly established in Cape Coast at least by the 1820s. One such song details the suffering of 'their female ancestor Kwaadua', who is attributed with the origins of *adzewa* by the women related to No. 1 Company (Bentil). Kwaadua was said to have been brought from Asebu to marry a *Safohen* Enudadze, a captain of Bentil. With the repeated refrain '*edom asee madze a Ohiam aye!*', 'The warring hosts have destroyed the precious things I own, aye!', Kwaadua's song remembers the lives lost in the 1824 British defeat by the Asante. *Safohene* Enudadze, Kwaadu's husband, 'took a number of warriors in a company to support Governor MacCarthy', and such was the devastation that 'none of Enudadze's men survived'. Sutherland Addy contends that these lyrics, still sung by Cape Coast women over one hundred and fifty years later, are evidence of *adzewa's* existence at the time of battle.

Sutherland Addy's contention that *adzewa* is a residual form of *mmobomme* appears to have some support from oral histories conducted in other areas of the Fante coast. Alex Wilson explored the relationship between the *adzewa* and *mmobomme* during a conversation with an elder from Gomoa Dago. According to the *opanyin*, 'abobombe is performed during war times while adzeba is performed when there is no war'.⁸⁰ As interstate wars became less frequent, replaced by local rivalries and company conflicts, it is likely that *mmobomme*

⁷⁹ Sutherland-Addy, 'Women and Verbal Arts', p 5.

⁸⁰ AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998; *Abobombe* is used here as a singular of *mmobomme*

declined in Fante societies. *Adzewa*, which could be performed during annual festivals and other ritual celebrations during peace time, would therefore have had a more significant part to play from the later nineteenth century. Nevertheless, *adzewa* frequently fulfilled the same role as *mmobomme*: urging men to fight and shaming those who didn't, while women remained plugged into war through their engagement with the spiritual plane while battle was waged.

It is clear that *adzewa* was subsumed into the phenomenon of internecine violence along the Fante coast. Indeed, the provocative capacities of *adzewa* sparked many a quarrel between asafo companies. In 1929, No.1 Company of Cape Coast, Benti, took their frequent rivals, No. 2 Company, Anafu to tribunal for the use of an *adzewa* rattle during the funeral of the Oguahene Mbra II. Their complaint was focused on 'the part which some elderly women took in the proceedings. . . No. 1 Company complained that the privilege of using a certain rattle was exclusively theirs'.⁸¹ According to the *supi* of Benti, Kofi Amowah, 'No. 2 Company for the first time appeared in public with the Adziwa on company formation', an action which 'nearly ended in bloodshed'.⁸²

There are other instances where the features of *adzewa* or *mmobomme* are recognizable in historical sources without specific mention of either term. In the lead-up to an inter-company fight in Apam in 1930, women associated with No. 1 Company were recorded as having singing songs which offended No. 2 Company, causing them to throw stones in response.⁸³ The women then proceeded to 'throw chop [food] down in front of No. 2 Company and called them as one would call fowls'.⁸⁴ This action is reported to have provoked an aggressive response from No. 2 Company as throwing maize on the ground in

⁸¹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/493, Acting DC. to Omanhene Mbra III, 6 September 1929.

⁸² Ibid, Supi Kofi Amowah to DC Cape Coast, 11 September 1929.

⁸³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 23/1/791, Report by Commissioner of Police, Central Province, 29 November 1930.

⁸⁴ Ibid, DC Winneba, to CCP, *Riot at Apam*, 2 October 1930

front of a rival, as if they were fowl, was said to be ‘an insult to their cognitive abilities’.⁸⁵ Yet maize is also used for provocation of violence: ‘if you want a person to fight, you take the maize and then you say that it is burning’.⁸⁶ The actions of the women were therefore likely to have been ‘an attempt to promote a fight’.⁸⁷ There are also a number of references to corn and fowl in Twi proverbs reflecting on gender relations. The contemporary proverb *ɔbaa te sɛ akokɔ; yɛde aburoo na ɛsɔne no*, ‘a woman is like a chicken; we use corn to lure her’, speaks to the idiomatic link between fowl and the female sex.⁸⁸ The comparison between the chicken, ‘a weak and timid domestic animal’ and the women who can be ‘easily lured or deceived,’ is pertinent here.⁸⁹ Although proverbs are likely to have mutated over the years, the transliteration may well have been entrenched in the collective consciousness of 1930 Apam. The Ashanti Social Survey conducted in 1945 reveals an Akan idiom, *wo wo akɔkɔ a wo wo aburoo*, literally translated as ‘if you have corn you own a fowl – i.e. a fowl will always have corn.’⁹⁰ The underlying message that ‘wealthy men would be flocked by women seeking riches’ suggests that the association of women and fowl resonated during the period.⁹¹

Passing references to women provoking and encouraging asafu violence are ten a penny in all sources concerning the asafu, written or spoken. In a three-day battle between No. 1 and 2 Companies of Cape Coast in September 1879, to cite one example, men were said to have been ‘goaded on by their woman folk’.⁹² Women from Ekumfi Ekumpono forced their men to fight with the asafu from Ekumfi Akra in 1907, with threats that if they did not rise to the challenge, ‘then Ekumpono women would never again marry

⁸⁵ Tuafu elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzi, Apam, 11 April, 2016.

⁸⁶ Dentsefoe, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Joseph Dadzi, Apam, 13 April 2016.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ G. Diabah and N. Aba Appiah Amfo, ‘Caring Supporters or Daring Usurpers? Representation of Women in Akan Proverbs,’ *Discourse and Society*, 26: 1, (2014), p 15.

⁸⁹ Ibid, p 16.

⁹⁰ Ella Jeffreys, ‘Images of Masculinity and Femininity: What Can Be Learned from the Ashanti Social Survey 1945-46?’ (BA dissertation, SOAS, 2013).

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Kwesi Johnston, ‘The Asafu in Cape Coast History’, p 11

Ekumpoano men.⁹³ This broader sentiment was articulated in some detail by an elder from Gomoa Dago: 'In the olden days if there is a battle and you tell your wife you are going to the battlefield you will die. It is rather the women who urge us on to fight. They at times use their husbands to cause insinuation on other women whose husbands have failed to go to war'.⁹⁴ Perhaps out of all discussions on the topic, the potential for women to provoke conflict has been best summed up by an asafo representative from Saltpond who explained simply, 'whether conflict or war would come, it all depended on the women'.⁹⁵

Women in Battle

The extent to which asafo women were actively involved in past battles is somewhat disputed in company traditions. According to Casely Hayford, when women were in close physical proximity to the battlefield they usually acted as porters, 'carrying refreshments to their brothers, fathers, or uncles'.⁹⁶ Yet some companies have explained the installation of women as *asafoakyere* or *safohemma* as arising from their willingness to fight alongside men. Anomabo oral histories suggest that "during the Asante-Fante wars, some women were very brave and went to war with their men".⁹⁷ In Ekumfi, it is said that 'there are women who have once gone to the battle field'.⁹⁸ One 'woman from Ekumpoano also fought bravely in a battle' and is compared to Yaa Asantewaa, who inspired the resistance against British rule in Asante in 1900-1901.⁹⁹ Yet other asafo representatives deny that women took part in active fighting in wars gone by. As one *safohemma* remarked, 'they were not involved'.¹⁰⁰ A lack of written sources on the subject makes these various claims difficult to corroborate. De

⁹³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond CCP, 25 May 1907.

⁹⁴ AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998.

⁹⁵ AHP, Saltpond elder, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, undated.

⁹⁶ Casely Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions*, p 91.

⁹⁷ AHP, Anomabo Okyeame and Obaatan, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Anomabo, 18 August 1997, Anomabo.

⁹⁸ AHP, Otuam Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Ekumfi Otuam, 7 February 1998.

⁹⁹ T.C. McCaskie, 'The Life and Afterlife of Yaa Asantewaa', *Africa* 72: 2 (2007).

¹⁰⁰ AHP, Apam Safohemma, interview with Irene Odotei, Apam, undated but late 1990s.

Graft Johnson notes that ‘in time of war they [women] sometimes obtained ammunition for their *Asafu* by either placing themselves in pawn or going surety’, but makes no mention of them actually fighting.¹⁰¹ However, as oral histories which *do* place women in the centre of war describe such individuals as ‘extraordinary’, it does seem possible that such figures may not have risen to prominence every generation, therefore explaining the disconnect between *asafo* accounts.

As early as 1764, records depict violence between Fante women which seems to have been delineated along company lines. Adam Jones writes that ‘fighting broke out in Moure as a result of the aspersions cast by women of one quarter on those of another’.¹⁰² This pattern would resonate with the ways in which women were involved with violence during the inter-company fights which followed the earlier Fante wars. When company rivalries were prolonged and intense, it is also possible to catch glimpses of physical violence from women in the archives. Women played a key role in the perpetual distrust between the *asafo* of Gomoa Dago and Ekumfi Otuum. In January 1894, the linguist of the *ohene* of Tantum was sent to the DC to report on a rumour regarding a confrontation between the women of the two towns. He reported that ‘the Lagu women were throwing stones on the Tantum women when the latter women were on their way to the bush market’.¹⁰³ This attack met with equal levels of hostility from the women of Otuum. The linguist continued, ‘the Tantum women were obliged to throw stones as well on the Lagu when they all fought with stones together’. It took the combined forces of the Saltpond police and messengers from the *ohene* of Otuum to put a stop to the stone throwing, but not before women on both sides were wounded. A headman from Ekumfi Otuum noted that as many as 70 women from Gomoa Dago were at the scene.¹⁰⁴ Neither was it an isolated incident. In light of the

¹⁰¹ De Graft Johnson, ‘The Fanti *Asafu*’, p 314.

¹⁰² Jones, ‘My Arse for Akou’, p 547.

¹⁰³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, Statement given by Okyeame Kwaku Wrampa to L.W. Peregrine, DC Saltpond, 3 January 1894.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, Statement given by Qua Esson.

frequent disputes between the asafo of the town towns, it is possible to see the actions of the women in January of 1894 as a key component of this tension.

Indeed, it appears that women in Ekumfi were particularly prone to engaging in asafo violence. In the *amanko* between the asafo of Ekumfi Ekumpoano and Ekumfi Akra in March 1907, women were identified both as provocateurs and as active participants. The DC of Saltpond wrote that ‘women . . . on both sides are known to have encouraged and egged the men on to fight’.¹⁰⁵ He elaborated further, ‘it is shown on the depositions that the Akra and Ekumpoano women first fought together by throwing sand at each other; and the Ekumpoano women told their men that “if the Ekumpoano men allowed the Akra Company to pass then the Ekumpoano women would never again marry Ekumpoano men”’. Ekumfi women were again recorded as appearing on the battle front in the 1940s. A local police inspector reported that ‘on the dead night of the 2th October, 1942, a great number of Akupuanus [Ekumpoanos], both men and women, especially the men, armed with cutlasses and laid ambush’.¹⁰⁶ These persistent archival references to female violence in the Ekumfi region may simply be a product of the attention paid to the area by the colonial administration. However, we could also speculate that the practice of female warfare was just more common in Ekumfi. If this was the case, then the actions of the alleged Ekumpoano female warrior would imply that this trend had deeper historical roots.

There are examples of female asafo violence elsewhere on the Fante coast. Women played a key part in unleashing violence in Moree, when company rivalry over the building of a flag post spiralled out of control. In the midst of an outburst of fighting between two companies, ‘who number two of three hundred a piece’, armed with muskets and the usual stone throwing, ‘the town was set on fire by the women’.¹⁰⁷ Women were also in the fray

¹⁰⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, DC Saltpond to CCP, 25 May 1907.

¹⁰⁶ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/502, Inspector Amoah to Gold Coast Police Headquarters, 31 October 1942.

¹⁰⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, Letter from DC Cape Coast, 8 February 1889.

during an outbreak of violence between Benti and Nkum companies in Great Kormantine. According to Quah Cheah, a member of Nkum, 'the women did not run away when the fight commenced, the women stood by the side when stones were being used. . . .when the fight commenced the women of each side supplied stones'.¹⁰⁸ It was, perhaps, not the norm for women actively to engage in inter-company clashes. What these few examples do tell us, though, is that on occasion female investment in company identity served to draw them into the fray.

Menstruation

The gendered dynamics of the Fante *asafo* were profoundly shaped by embodied reproductive identities. Menstrual blood, and those who carry it, was seemingly bestowed with an extraordinary power of negation. It has been posited by Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng that 'menstrual taboos probably originated because of this male ambivalence towards the reproductive powers of women'.¹⁰⁹ Matrilineal inheritance of wealth and status was embodied in a woman's blood (*mogya*), a fluid which held enormous weight in Akan societies. As a substance, and as a metaphor for kinship, *mogya* was highly potent and accordingly regarded with profound ambivalence. Menstrual taboos among the Akan should be understood as part of this approach towards reproduction and therefore towards women.

Anthropologists have long noted the varying restrictions placed on menstruating women in Akan societies.¹¹⁰ During menstruation, women were prohibited from many

¹⁰⁸ PRAAD Accra, SCT 5/5/1, Reg v Assunyumah and Quacoe Bontoo, 4 February 1891.

¹⁰⁹ Akyeampong and Obeng, 'Spirituality', p 496.

¹¹⁰ For anthropological work on menstruation and menstrual taboos more broadly see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (Routledge: New York, 1966), chapter 9 *passim*; Thomas Buckley and Alma Gottlieb, *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation* (University of California Press: London, 1988).

activities, including cooking food for men, entering a man's house, swearing oaths or having an oath sworn against them, and in some cases even speaking to a man.¹¹¹ Menstruating women of high rank were particularly secluded, often confined to huts in the liminal zone on the edge of towns.¹¹² Even in language, menstruation was a verbal taboo and to this day is usually spoken about euphemistically.¹¹³ Such restrictions are intensely linked to the power of menstrual blood to contaminate sacred objects and spaces. The interaction between menstruating women and spiritual locales was often expressly forbidden. As Rattray explains,

The reasons underlying the abhorrence of the unclean woman in Ashanti I believe to be based on the supposition that contact with her, directly or indirectly, is held to negative and render useless all supernatural or magico-protective powers possessed by either persons or spirits or objects. . . . Even by indirect contact, therefore, an unclean woman is capable of breaking down all barriers which stand between defenceless man and those evil unseen powers which beset him on every side.¹¹⁴

Field's later ethnography of psychiatry among the Akan also noted that menstruating women 'were not allowed near shrines, near good *suman* or near any medicinal object.'¹¹⁵ In her work on Akuapem cosmology, Minkus also argues that interaction with polluting substances such as menstrual blood 'effectively lowers a person's spiritual resistance and makes him vulnerable to a variety of evil spiritual influences'.¹¹⁶ As the present-day *Nsumankwaahene*, chief of the Asantehene's medicine, put it, 'shrines and deities actively

¹¹¹ Christine Oppong, 'Notes on Cultural Aspects of Menstruation in Ghana', World Health Organisation (1974); Rattray, *Religion and Art*, p 75.

¹¹² McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 295.

¹¹³ Kofi Agyekum, 'Menstruation as Verbal Taboo among the Akan of Ghana', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 58: 3 (2002).

¹¹⁴ R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1927), p 75.

¹¹⁵ M. J. Field, *Search for Security: An Ethno-Psychiatric Study of Rural Ghana* (Faber and Faber: London, 1960), p 41

¹¹⁶ Helaine K. Minkus, 'The Concept of Spirit in Akwapim Akan Philosophy', *Africa* 50: 2 (1980), p 189.

‘dislike menstrual blood’.¹¹⁷ Menstruating women are in some instances even restricted from involvement with ritual acts which are specifically delineated as being a part of the female sphere. Indeed, Boni indicates that in Sefwi women in their menstrual period were expected not to participate in *mmobomme* rituals, although this obligation is less commonly abided by in the present day.¹¹⁸

Yet when handled correctly, menstrual fluid could be a productive substance. Menstrual blood was used to renew the ritual dynamism of the Asante Golden stool, an act argued by Akyeampong and Obeng to be underpinned by the power of the substance as ‘fertility fluid’.¹¹⁹ In this sense the esoteric nature of menstrual blood lies in its embodiment of potential, or unfulfilled, life. Agyekum also notes the restorative powers of menstrual blood for women themselves, explaining that Akan women are only able to reinitiate intercourse after childbirth once they have menstruated because ‘it is believed that she is purified after the blood flow’.¹²⁰

Menstrual blood as a danger to the life of spiritual beings and places is just as prevalent among asafo culture. Women’s inability to attain the position of *supi* is explained through the risk of menstrual blood coming into contact with areas where the connection between the spiritual realm and the mundane is especially strong, such as the posuban shrine. Indeed, the gravity of this risk is hard to overstate. ‘A woman in her menstrual period should not enter or even go near [the posuban]’, explained a *safohen* from Saltpond. ‘Doing that will mean that the posuban is defiled. This may bring calamity to the person and the asafo as well.’¹²¹ Asafo members from Amanful elaborated further: ‘there are some rituals that women cannot do because of their menstruation’, therefore rendering them

¹¹⁷ Emma Cleveland, ‘Patriarchy, Spirituality, and Power: An Examination of Gender Division in Asante History in the Former Gold Coast during the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Era’, *Africa and Asian Studies* 14 (2015), p 219.

¹¹⁸ Boni, ‘Female Cleansing of the Community’, p 779.

¹¹⁹ Akyeampong and Obeng, ‘Spirituality’, p 496.

¹²⁰ Agyekum, ‘Menstruation as a Verbal Taboo’, p 379.

¹²¹ AHP, Bakado Safohen, interview with Ebenezer Monney, Saltpond, 6 August 1997.

unable to adequately fulfil the duties of a *supi*. Menstruation is also cited as the reason behind women's lack of access to flag bearing positions and as the dominance of men as drummers.¹²² Of the Egobi well in Otuum, the use of which sparked conflict between Otuum and Dago women in 1894, Ohene Eduafo II explained, 'people are not allowed to go there on a Friday with a brass pan, also no women on menstruation, no one married can carry a red cloth, women not allowed to wear gold jewellery, potentially no widows'.¹²³ Water played a key role in Akan spirituality, and the Egobi well was considered a shrine.

In Fante asafo cultures, menstrual blood is occasionally recognised to possess an energy which goes beyond the power of negation. However, it does not necessarily appear that the ritual use of menstrual blood in this context has the same implications for fertility and childbirth as the examples explored above. Although references to the positive functions of menstrual blood are few, it appears that for the asafo menstrual blood contained powers which could be wielded in war. In particular, it is said to have been used in *preparation* for battle: as one elder of Dago explained, 'men used their [women's] blood to bath', before going to war.¹²⁴ A *safohemma* from No. 1 Company Cape Coast, Bentil, also located the use of menstrual blood in preparations for the expedition into Appollonia and the capture of Nzema warlord Kweku Aka in 1848:

'When they were going for the Aka war the fetish priests were asking for the blood of a virgin lady, so they took that lady to the fetish priest and they used her flow to bath the warriors, they used it to bath and the soldiers drank some to make them strong.'¹²⁵

¹²² Emmanuel Kofi Aidoo, 'Documentation of the Fante Asafo Flags since the Year 2000 and their Socio-cultural Significance', M.A. Thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (2011), p liv. [Interview with Kofi Mbir member of Brofomba]; Emmanuel Obed Acquah, 'New Trends in Asafo Music Performance: Modernity Contrasting Positions', *Journal of African Arts and Culture* 1 (2013), p 26.

¹²³ PRAAD Cape Coast, 23/1/372, Minutes of Arbitration re: Tantum-Legu Boundary Dispute, Evidence from Ohene of Dago, Eduafo II, 14 February 1922.

¹²⁴ AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998.

¹²⁵ Bentil Safohemma, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 8 March 2018.

Moreover, the Bentil *safohemma* was able to recount the aftereffects of using menstrual blood in this way. It is said that the ritual gravity of this act had unintended consequences for the young woman whose menstrual blood was used by the Bentil soldiers: 'because of that, she never gave birth'. So grave was this sacrifice that the young woman was held in high esteem by the Bentil company, and was accordingly appointed *safohemma*. As opposed to a familial inheritance of authority, this appointment to *safohemma* effectively amounted to the creation of a new stool. It is no coincidence that this narrative was recounted to us by the current occupant of the stool. In her emotionally charged reflection on this history, it was clear that the origin of her position had been passed down to her from her predecessors - a profound example of female identity and strength within the male dominated institution of the asafo. The blood which bound the *safohemma* to the stool also accounts for the intense anger felt when it was recently suggested that the Aka stool be returned to the people of Nzema.

Gendered underpinnings of reproduction have also been used by asafo companies as a source of idiomatic humour. No. 4 Company Cape Coast (Nkum) lay claim to a stylised flag called *ɔwo nta*, decorated with an abstract depiction of a human figure with two blocks between their legs. As explained to me amidst great peals of laughter by representatives from Nkum, *ɔwo nta* represents that 'the person who has given birth to twins is not afraid of a big penis'.¹²⁶ Although the Nkum members I spoke to were somewhat vague about deeper meaning of this image, it is likely that the courage of a woman who has endured a dizygotic

¹²⁶ Nkum Elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 5 February 2018.

labour represents the strength of Nkum company themselves. In effect, the company which has fought multiple fierce enemies is not afraid of conflict with a rival.



Fig. 9: Dwo Nta flag, Cape Coast, 2018. Photograph taken by author.

It would be remiss to ignore the violent treatment of male reproductive organs within asafo history. Despite the relatively limited source material which would be needed to construct a more distinct pattern, there is nevertheless clear evidence of castration used as a tool in battle within inter-company asafo fights. In a particularly gruesome episode in the village of Agilfa in the Cape Coast district during a funeral custom in 1899, a boy was kidnapped and ‘cut by one of his capturers on the breast and testicles with a knife’.¹²⁷ According to oral histories recounted within No. 3 Company (Ntin) of Cape Coast, castration was used in a

¹²⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/11/1129, DC to Acting CS, 3 February 1899.

fight between them and No. 1 Company (Bentil) in 1932. As relayed by an Ntin *safohen*, members of No. 3 Company advanced on Bentil and when meeting them in battle, ‘cut off his [their rival’s] manhood and put it in his mouth’.¹²⁸ Evidence from both Albert Akinwande, Superintendent of Police at Winnebah, and William Arthur Ryan, Medical Officer at Winnebah, also points towards acts of castration during the 1920 fight between the asafo of Ekumfi Otum and Gomoa Dago. In Ryan’s case notes recording the condition of a corpse born out of the violence, ‘there was complete amputation of the penis and scrotum’.¹²⁹ Against the backdrop of gendered identities, castration could be seen as another method through which to desecrate asafo masculinities. Yet it is also crucial to consider the broader propensity for mutilation within asafo violence. Evidence of decapitation and other gratuitous injuries is abundant within the history of military culture on the Gold Coast and the Akan forest more broadly, and this is reflected among the asafo as well.

Decapitation

Preoccupations with bodily dismemberment are made visible through the depiction of decapitation in asafo aesthetics. Headless bodies, or bodiless heads, were often used as emblems on company flags and in some cases on posuban shrines. As a motif, severed heads could convey multiple messages. In Gomoa Dago, both company posubans include sculpted or painted heads in their decorative frescos. At the highest point of the posuban of No. 1 Company (Tuafo) stands a singular head facing in the direction of Dago’s historic rivals, the asafo of Ekumfi Otum. The perpetual gaze of this disembodied simulacrum is said to recall war between the old enemies in which the other half of the Dago asafo, No. 2 Company (Dentsefo), ran away. It was only No. 1 Company ‘who were able to face Otum’.¹³⁰ Yet

¹²⁸ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast. 8 February 2017. I was told that these actions have been recorded on a flag, but it could not be shown lest the images spark further conflict.

¹²⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, Records from the Supreme Court, 11 January 1921.

¹³⁰ AHP, Dago Opanyin, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 20 February 1998.

many heads also adorn the posuban of Dago's No. 2 Company, in which case 'the heads represent those who were beheaded during the wars' guarded by painted lions so that the owners of the heads 'do not come for them'.¹³¹ Kwame Labi also describes a similar posuban display 'of a battle scene in which the asafo have decapitated their enemies'.¹³² Although no longer standing, the demolished posuban of Anomabo's No. 6 Company (Kyirim) is said to have included sculpture which 'told stories of the defeat and beheading of the Anomabo warriors' from rival asafo factions.¹³³

On asafo flags, too, the portrayal of decapitation usually symbolised the extent of asafo military brutality. In one particularly poignant example, thought to date from the first half of the twentieth century and likely to have been one of those confiscated by the colonial state, a beheaded body lies at the feet of a hydra-like beast. Now property of the Brooklyn Museum, the use of the head motif in this flag has a dual meaning. Not only does the headless corpse pay homage to the damage which could be unleashed on foolhardy foes who threatened the company in question, but the many-headed monster itself amounts to a visceral embodiment of asafo force. With its many leering eyes and gaping mouths, the message is clear. The asafo can be in many places at once, equipped with watching spies and vicious weapons to defeat even the most fearless of enemies. As with the anthropomorphic representation of company prowess, the ancients of local folklore such as the legendary Asebu Amanfi are 'often depicted with multiple heads'.¹³⁴ Asebu Amanfi, a significant figure in Moree due to his position as founder of the Asebu kingdom, is said to have been a giant, a voracious eater, and to have held acute ritual powers. Amanfi's polycephalic portrayal on asafo flags, sometimes shown alongside many reaching arms, should be understood as a symbolic representation of his potent strength.

¹³¹ AHP, Dago Tufuhin and Asafo Elders, interview with Alex Wilson, Gomoa Dago, 7 February 1998.

¹³² Kwame Labi, 'The Evolution and Innovations in Fante Asafo Posuban', *Anthropos* 113 (2018).

¹³³ Samuel Adentwi Bentum, 'Cultural Significance of Edina Asafo Company Posts', Doctoral Thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (2006), p 194.

¹³⁴ Adler and Barnard, *Asafo!*, p 28.

There is considerable evidence for the prominent role of decapitation in Akan warfare in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. During the 1618 war between Asebu and Fante, for example, Asebu forces are reported to have invaded Fante villages and taken ‘over 300 heads of trophies’, with the Fante forces counterattacking in Moree and ‘killing and decapitating about 20 African slaves and employees of the Dutch’.¹³⁵ A later conflict between Fante and Asebu in 1708 resulted in the Fante attacking again and ‘beheaded the king’.¹³⁶ Europeans on the coast also engaged in the use of severed heads as trophies of war. In the 1620s, the Portuguese governor at Elmina promised ‘Elmina men a considerable amount of trade goods for each Dutch head that they could deliver to him’.¹³⁷ It is clear that decapitation was present during the expansionist wars which dominated the likely emergence of the asafo company system. Fante military forces won the severed heads of rivals and were also subject to the threat of being beheaded themselves. Given the emphasis placed on a glorious past of martial prowess in the centuries to follow, the inclusion of decapitation as a motif on company flags can be seen as an aesthetic manifestation of this historical memory.

Positions of office known as the *abrafo*, or company executioners, also remained in place long after Fante expansionist war had ceased. Arthur Ffoulkes, DC of Cape Coast at the turn of the twentieth century, wrote in some detail about the *abrafo* of No. 5 Company (Brofomba), with whom he had a particularly strong relationship. He claimed that in times of war the *abrafo*’s ‘duty in battle is to behead those of the enemy killed on the field, who are not removed by their comrades’.¹³⁸ After decapitation, the *abrafo* would also have been responsible for the cleaning of the severed head in order that the skull be used as a company

¹³⁵ Law, ‘Fante Expansion Reconsidered’, p 64.

¹³⁶ James Saunders, ‘The Expansion of the Fante and the Emergence of Asante in the Eighteenth Century’, *Journal of African History* 20: 3 (1979), pp 352.

¹³⁷ Mark Meuwese, *Brothers in Arms, Partners in Trade: Dutch-Indigenous Alliances in the Atlantic World, 1595-1674*, (Brill: Leiden, 2012), p 292.

¹³⁸ Ffoulkes, ‘Company System’, p 267.

trophy. Although Ffoulkes conceded that the gory requirements of the *abrafo* had declined somewhat at the time of writing, the position remained. In a photograph taken by the DC of Brofomba's captains and headmen (see fig. 7, p 158), the company's two *abrafo* are pictured with their customary knives held in the mouth.

In his 1932 report on the Fante asafu, De Graft Johnson sought to play down the idea that decapitation occurred during company warfare. He contended that 'everyone knows that human sacrifice forms no part of *Asafu* customs', and that 'even during a battle no *Asafu* could decapitate a war captive, unless fatally wounded or killed in action'.¹³⁹ Yet cases of decapitation during outbreaks of violence between rival asafu companies have been clearly recorded into the twentieth century. A 1903 conflict between two villages near Cape Coast, Ankromah and Brebia, is reported to have resulted in four persons being killed, two of whom 'were afterwards decapitated'.¹⁴⁰ The fierce battle between Ekumfi Otuum and Gomoa Dago in 1921 also saw such acts of dismemberment. On attending the scene, the *ohene* of Dago reported that 'two of the bodies were headless'.¹⁴¹ Decapitation in this context was just one in a list of mutilations, including castration and a corpse whose 'right ear was cut off at the head'.¹⁴² According to Kwame Labi, 'decapitated heads of members of the rival asafu from Dago' were actually buried beneath the posuban of the Otuum Tuafo.¹⁴³

Why decapitation? There are, after all, many ways to kill a person, and the use of beheadings does invite interrogation. In their historical survey of decapitation and the head motif in Europe, Gardela and Kajkowski argue that in many cases, 'the severing of the head of a suspicious person (either living or dead) was intended to prevent them from harmful

¹³⁹ De Graft Johnson, 'The Fanti Asafu', p 320.

¹⁴⁰ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473, Telegraph from Chief of Police Cape Coast to Chief of Police Accra, 29 September 1903.

¹⁴¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/796, Evidence of Dago Ohene, 3 January 1921.

¹⁴² Ibid, Evidence of Medical Officer William Ryan, 5 January 1921.

¹⁴³ Kwame Labi, 'The Posuban Is Our Pride: Maintaining and Modernizing a Tradition and Its Visual Language', *Ghana Studies* 22 (2019), p 79.

post-mortem activity'.¹⁴⁴ Rita Dolce, in her exploration of beheadings in the Ancient Near East, suggests that decapitation meant that enemies were 'deprived of their heads, and thus of their recognizable identity', therefore enforcing anonymity onto the victim.¹⁴⁵

Decapitation as a symbolic moment of rupture, particularly when used against those with power and prestige, has been a spectre throughout much of human history. From the many iterations of the story of Salome, to the political association between the guillotine and revolution born out of the French Reign of Terror, the severing of heads has held a poignant reputation throughout human history.

Although conceptions of corporeality varied across time and space, decapitation held substantial ritual connotations in many areas of Africa.¹⁴⁶ The act of removing a head from its body was relatively common across the kingdoms of West Africa. Execution by decapitation, employed against captured enemies and on the battlefield, was used in Dahomey and in Ouidah, where the severed heads would be preserved 'for ceremonial display'.¹⁴⁷ Among the Akan, decapitation was also the standard form of punishment for all capital offences, a grievous act which was seen to require proportional punishment.¹⁴⁸ In his analysis of *atopere*, a process of mutilation reserved for the most grievous offences, McCaskie argues that, 'in Asante thinking the body, albeit a secondary item in belief, served as a paradigm for key instrumentations in cognitive mapping – notably references to appropriate wholeness, and to rituals of enclosure/disclosure in death'.¹⁴⁹ In other words, the integrity (or not) of the body had ramifications for the victim's position after death. For McCaskie,

¹⁴⁴ Leszek Gardela and Kamil Kajkowski, 'Introduction', in Gardela and Kajkowski (eds), *The Head Motif in Past Societies in a Comparative Perspective* (Museum Zachodniokaszubskie: Bytow Poland, 2003), p 13.

¹⁴⁵ Rita Dolce, "Losing One's Head" in *the Ancient Near East: Interpretation and Meaning of Decapitation* (Routledge: Oxford, 2018), p 7.

¹⁴⁶ See Stacey Hynd, 'Dismembering and Remembering the Body: Execution and Post Execution Display in Africa, c. 1870 – 2000', in Richard Ward (ed), *A Global History of Execution and the Criminal Corpse* (Palgrave Macmillan: London, 2015).

¹⁴⁷ Robin Law, "My Head Belongs to the King": On the Political and Ritual Significance of Decapitation in Pre-Colonial Dahomey', *Journal of African History* 30: 3 (1989), p 405.

¹⁴⁸ Mensah Adinkrah, 'Suicide and Mortuary Beliefs and Practices of the Akan of Ghana', *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying* 74: 2 (2016), p 152.

¹⁴⁹ McCaskie, *State and Society*, p 254.

executions predicated on mutilation allowed for an appropriation of the deceased's selfhood by the state, a process of 'a vanishing from history in the shattering of the body'.

Yet this anonymity by dismemberment stands in contrast to the exhibition and ritual usage of severed heads won in battle. The skulls of defeated enemies, including that of Charles MacCarthy, were carefully preserved by the Asante and featured in the annual *Odwira* festival. For Pietz, this meant that 'the power and authority exercised by MacCarthy was being absorbed into that of the Asante sovereign'.¹⁵⁰ This interpretation could be applied to the context of the Fante asrafo. Acts of decapitation could have allowed for the victorious asrafo to subsume the power inherent to those that they had beheaded. In the case of the No. 1 Company (Tuafo) of Otum, who buried the severed heads of their Dago rivals beneath their posuban, decapitation could be seen to have afforded a bounty of ritual power that was relocated into their spiritual hub. Such *ritual* practices should be considered alongside the pragmatic implications of decapitation. Obtaining the severed heads of enemies provided proof of military success, reproducing the status of asrafo members with their community. It also had the added benefit of being terrifying. A reputation of ruthless warfare further underscored the threat posed by asrafo companies to their enemies. Decapitation not only brought an end to life, but also inhibited appropriate funerary processes required for death. Into the present day, 'any type of death where the deceased's corporeal remains were mangled or could not be retrieved is considered a bad death'.¹⁵¹ Depictions of severed heads on flags or shrines underscored the capacity for asrafo violence not only to bring about death, but to disrupt the deceased's passage onwards into the afterlife.

¹⁵⁰ William Pietz, 'The Fetish of Civilization: Sacrificial Blood and Monetary Debt', in Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink (eds), *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor MI, 1999), p 72.

¹⁵¹ Mensah Adinkrah, 'If You Die a Bad Death, We Give You a Bad Burial': Mortuary Practices and "Bad Death" among the Akan in Ghana', *Death Studies* (2020), p 5.

Conclusion

Akan notions of gender embodiment had deep implications for asafo culture in the Fante region. It is clear that women have long been perceived as powerful in their own right within asafo history and discourse. Such approaches are even evident in oral histories. The Saltpond asafo *en masse* boast of a victorious battle against a singular, ‘very fat’, woman who lived in the nearby town of Kuntu. This woman ‘was said to be very powerful, and she defeated any person or group of persons that went there’.¹⁵² Indeed, the descriptor ‘very fat’ used to depict the Kuntu woman should be understood as an indication of her great power. At last, the Saltpond army defeated her, decapitated her and deposited her head into a straw basket, or *brefi*, as a symbol of their achievements. So significant was this event that the woman’s likeness is carved into the *posuban* of No. 3 Company, Nkum. That this victory was significant enough to merit the decoration of an asafo shrine, and an accompanying proverb, *brefi amoa*, illustrates just how powerful women had the capacity to be. The physical embodiment of female reproduction through menstrual blood allowed for asafo members to harness that power and incorporate into their own military activities.

Female strength of spirit also allowed women to be deeply involved with asafo activity, either within or adjacent to company hierarchies. As *safohemma*, women were able to exert authority over men. Through *mmobomme* and *adzerwa*, women became deeply implicated in war: the lyrics of their songs preserved company histories as well the pasts which they experienced themselves. Although men were the central force of the asafo, it was women who ensured that the militarised masculinity required to perpetuate company strength was maintained even in the most fearsome of battles. Women’s actions can

¹⁵² AHP, Saltpond Elder, interview with Amoako Anthony, Saltpond, 4–6 August 1997.

therefore be seen as a key component of the recurrent asafo violence on the Fante coast from the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century.

Warrior identity remains an integral part of the self-perception of asafo members. Although large-scale wars and inter-company fights have now become a thing of the past, every asafo man I spoke to through the course of this research was adamant that they too were soldiers; ‘they are ever ready, if it comes to fight they are ready, whenever there’s a fight they will go’.¹⁵³ Militarised masculinity continues to pervade company culture, even if through memories and words alone. As encapsulated in a Cape Coast asafo song still performed in the twenty-first century:

‘If you are a man

If you are born a man

Come forward when you hear the sound of war!’¹⁵⁴

¹⁵³ Anafu Asafohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by William Kobina Otoo, Cape Coast, 7 February 2018.

¹⁵⁴ Leonard J. Accquah, ‘A Repertoire of Tropes: A study of Fante-Akan Asafo song texts from the Cape Coast area of the Central Region of Ghana’, MPhil Thesis, University of Cape Coast, Ghana, 2002.

Chapter Five

Space, Place, and Colonial Control

As the military guardians of their communities, the Fante asafo were intimately tied to the land upon which they lived. Their position as defenders of the town reflects a long and complex relationship between the company system and their home communities, spaces which were made into embodied places by corporeal passage of movement and by personal and collective experience. In effect, asafo activity and perceptions transformed abstract space into perpetual sites of memory, which sat heavy upon company culture for centuries after their origin. Asafo perceptions of space divided their communities into geographical territories, each company with its own place of residence or 'quarter'. Pragmatically, this impacted upon the place of residence for those affiliated with the asafo, but also determined where daily and seasonal activity occurred. The division of towns into company quarters was delineated by cosmological affects such as the location of ritual power, creating 'invisible landscapes' which would be manifested in the physical realm as shrines.¹ Such cartographies served not only to demarcate the identity of companies in the present, but also to render the historic life of the asafo a tangible and provocative experience for those living there.

Yet the Fante asafo companies were not the only occupants of these coastal realms to interpret and occupy such spaces with regard to institutional priorities and allegiances. Not only were colonial officials resident in some of the settlements inhabited by the asafo, but colonial power itself was explicitly concerned with the ways in which space was used

¹ Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing and the Sense of Place* (University of Iowa Press: Iowa City, 1993).

and, accordingly, regulated. Asafo borders were refracted through colonial bureaucracies to create a layered, overlapping and often contested understanding of space. Over the course of British rule and the ever-present threat of inter-company violence which ran throughout, the question of how space was occupied by the asafo became increasingly fraught. As the colonial state considered how best to control the company system, the regulation of spatial aesthetics and performance became the preferred mode of operation. Attempts to limit animosities and altercations were frequently, and increasingly, focused on aspects of the company system explicitly linked to the way space was used: the building of *posuban* or company posts; the exhibition of emblems; the gathering of company members; and the parades, processions and performances which constituted asafo festivals. All were considered by colonial officials to carry the potential provocation of violence, and all were inextricably embedded in asafo place making.

This chapter presents two arguments. First, that asafo identity and culture was concretely tied to the spaces which companies inhabited. Second, that colonial attempts to regulate this space did in some cases pose a threat to the very existence of the company system. The extent to which this threat was realised is limited, for reasons that will be explored in what follows, yet it would be remiss to pretend that colonial regulation did not impact upon the asafo both in the short and the long term. Asafo cartographies and their potential for evocation and violence are explored first, before deeper investigation into colonial attempts to change the character of the company system. Finally, two aspects of asafo spatial dynamics threatened by colonial intervention are explored: the prohibition of the Cape Coast festival of Fetu Afahye, and a man-of-war shrine built in Ekumfi Narkwa. That these two areas of contention, and indeed many of the events explored in the latter half of these chapter, fall into the last thirty or so years of colonial rule is reflective of the escalating desire to restrict the asafo towards the end of the period of British dominance.

Asafo Cartographies I: Rural/Urban Dynamics

Landscapes of power, influence and alliance extended from the asafo company headquarters in the heart of the coastal towns into their surrounding rural hinterlands. Codified into a distinct network of alliances from the mid-nineteenth century, the ambiguous relationship between the coastal towns and their rural hinterlands had deeper roots in the evolution of Gold Coast settlements. The expansion of trade on the coast in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries reconfigured the region's topography. Commercial development, population growth, and new divisions of labour led to the emergence of coastal port towns, 'places where social wealth, power and authority were focused'.² Spaces such as Cape Coast went from small coastal outposts of indigenous polities, Fetu in this instance, to vibrant urban centres. In his study of Cape Coast, Gocking argues that 'it was deep involvement in the capitalist system which contributed to the importation of class distinctions associated with the metropole'.³ Rural settlements surrounding these new towns were reoriented as the hinterland. As outlined in Kea's work, these villages became 'the residence of slaves and other personal dependants of the ruling classes and of revenue-paying peasants, craftsmen, goldminers, salt makers, fishermen, and other free producers'.⁴ This dependant hierarchy was also evident in the linguistic patterns of the novel territorial organisation, whereby 'people in rural settlements tended to speak the language of their particular town'.⁵ The rural hinterlands became largely subordinate hubs of food production, linked to the economic, political and social institutions of the port towns.

Yet the historic implications of old inland capitals, combined with the eco-social order underpinning Akan relationships with nature, left rural areas imbued with a sense of tradition into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even after the port towns became the

² Kea, *Settlements*, p 13.

³ Roger Gocking, *Facing Two Ways: Ghana's Coastal Communities under Colonial Rule* (University Press of America: Lanham MD, 1999), p 58.

⁴ Kea, *Settlements*, p 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*

dominant fixture of political hierarchy for Fante peoples, Mankessim retained a position of ritual status. Home of Nananom Mpow and the buried remnants of the three pioneering warlords who led the migrant *borbor* Fante south, Mankessim represented the ancestral heartland of what had become a large and disparate community. The inland countryside, although diminished in status, continued to hold weight due to its connection with ritual power and the past. Those that lived in rural areas were also seen to have intimate traditional knowledge tied to the bush. When coastal dwellers fell sick and needed access to herbal medicines, they would often repair to the bush in order to recover. In the case of Otuam *safohen* Kweku Yedu, discussed in Chapter Two, help was sought from the small village of healers, Amoanda, because the people there were ‘predominantly farmers, so the closeness with nature and herbs led to the evolution of their knowledge of the use of herbs’.⁶ Tension between rural and urban realms was born out of this relationship. Although the towns along the coast held superior status, with all the trappings of commercial opportunity and social mobility, the interior retained relevance through its association with tradition.

This tension between rural and urban identity was also present among the Ga communities of Accra on the eastern Gold Coast. Here too, commercial and political change created a territorial organisation grounded in an ambiguous relationship between towns and their immediate hinterlands. The celebration of local festivals provided an outlet for the expression of rural-urban social topographies. As Parker notes, ‘the divide between *man* and *kose* was dramatically bridged each year at *Homowo*, public festivities opening with the ceremonious entry of the rural population into the town’.⁷ Like the Ga, Fante societies also had their own methods of maintaining and expressing connections between the residents of coastal towns and their hinterland neighbours. Amongst the *asafo*, these connections were embodied in the complex network of allegiances known as ‘bush branches’.

⁶ Tuafu Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Adams Abeku, Gomoa Dago, 19 May 2018.

⁷ Parker, *Making the Town*, p 7.

Asafo Cartographies II: Bush Branches

For the bigger companies, relationships with the small villages of the coastal hinterland led to strong spatial ties along asafo identity lines. This network was particularly prominent in Cape Coast, where the size of the company system and the number of peri-urban and rural settlements afforded such close relationships, a legacy of the town's position on the Gold Coast during the era of Atlantic trade. Affiliated villages would cloak themselves in the trappings of company identity and be incorporated into company infrastructure. Often known as 'bush branches', the asafo of these villages developed their own conceptions of company life and their own histories, sometimes seeing themselves as the offspring of the primary company in the town – as one *supi* described it, the 'Mother Asafo'.⁸ The relationship between bush branches and their 'mother company' was complex. While these village asafo would often have their own spiritual obligations, *posuban*, flags and hierarchies, bush branches would join their mother company at key moments in community life, ritual celebrations and, of course, in war. While bush branches had their own *supi*, he would report to the *supi* of the main urban company, 'because the *supi* over there cannot supervise what is happening here, so they should have *supi* here to also supervise and inform'.⁹ Bush branches were also often involved in stool elections, such as that of the Oguuahene, and at times differed in opinion from other constituencies of their company.¹⁰ Yet anxieties held by parent companies often trickled down to their 'children': the tensions and animosity which emerged between asafo factions in the town often had implications for bush branches in the villages. Rivalries in the town rippled out into conflicts between communities in parochial

⁸ PRAAD CC, ADM 23/1/503, Application from Supi Ntsin No 3 Cape Coast, Kodwo Abokyi, 25 August 1956.

⁹ Abura Safohen and Okomfo, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by Okyere Ramzy, 30 May 2018.

¹⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/883, Notes of Meeting with DC Cape Coast, 26 July 1937.

bush branches – although at times these battles were fought alone, without assistance from the town asafo.

Perhaps the most intense rivalry between bush branches which echoed the ill-feeling between their parent companies was that between Abura and Kwapro. Both were, and remain today, small settlements on the outskirts of Cape Coast: Abura is due north, just over an hour's walk from Cape Coast Castle, and Kwapro is to the northwest, an hour from the Cape Coast-Elmina Road. Abura fell under the umbrella of No. 3 Company (Ntin) and Kwapro under No. 4 Company (Nkum), having split from No. 2 Company (Anafu), in the early years of the twentieth century over 'a misunderstanding'.¹¹ In 1915, fighting erupted between Abura and Kwapro which resulted in injuries requiring surgical treatment for five Kwapro men and the death of one.¹² The cause of the violence was Abura's attire of white caps worn on procession while returning from a funeral custom in Elmina, which 'were similar to those worn by No. 4 Company Cape Coast and should not have been worn by No. 3 Company Cape Coast, whose company caps are black'.¹³ Although there was no support from either No. 3 Company or No. 4 Company of Cape Coast proper, the all too familiar provocation was born out of identities and insignia of the mother asafo. In later threats of violence between the two bush branches, interventions were made by headmen of their mother companies in an attempt to avert conflict. A dispute regarding Abura's intended exhibition of a company flag with the emblem 'of an animal trap at cross-roads' – apparently an image belonging to Kwapro – led Supi Josiah of No. 3 Company Cape Coast to attempt to convince Abura elders to 'produce the said flag at an arbitration'.¹⁴ It seems that although bush branches fiercely protected the identity and aesthetics of the town asafo, they could also be subject to calls for restraint from their mother companies.

¹¹ Anafu elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. by W.K.O., 7 February 2018, Cape Coast.

¹² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/134, Letter from Acting Senior Medical Officer, Dr Wade, to DC Cape Coast, 7 May 1917; PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/586, Letter from Ag. CCP Taplin to CS, 12 March 1915.

¹³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/586 Letter from Acting CCP, Mr Taplin, to CS, 1 June 1915.

¹⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/883, Kwamina Lumfa, Regent of Oguaa, to CCP, 16 April 1935.

Yet bush branches could also provoke rivalries between the town *asafo*. In 1886, the *safohen* from No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin) wrote to Governor Griffith complaining about the 'Econ' company from a small hamlet known as Queen Anne's Point (about six kilometres east from Cape Coast Castle), described as 'a member of the Bentil company'.¹⁵ Ekon, the Fante name for Queen Anne's Point, refers to the settlement from which these people came rather than a formal company name. The residents of Ekon fell under the umbrella of the No. 1 Company Cape Coast (Bentil), probably as a result of their proximity to Bentil quarters. According to the Ntins, the Ekon people visited the Bentil quarter of No. 1 Company for the purpose of 'holding a custom' and brought with them a whistle which was seen to belong to the Ntins, therefore setting the stage for direct provocation 'in a manner which was likely to irritate the young members of our Company and thus lead to the breach of the peace'.¹⁶ After complaints were made in person to the DC, ill-feeling rumbled on for the rest of the day until Ntin heard rumours from *their* bush branches that direct physical confrontation was on the horizon. As described by the Ntin *asafohinfo*, 'the wives of our bush people who had come to town to market returning home informed their male relatives that the Econs and the Bentil people were going to fight us'. Unfortunately, the No. 3 Company (Ntin) petitioners did not reference exactly which of their bush branches these informative wives hailed from, Ntin having had a disproportionate number of bush branches, including Abura, Siwdo, Kakumdo and Mpeasem. Nevertheless, this intelligence prompted the Ntin elders to advise 'our young men to go and meet them and prevent them from coming to town'. The elders then went back to the DC accompanied by 'the principal educated natives' of Akrampa to warn him about 'the danger there was of a collision taking place'. Violence was averted, although summons were issued against No. 3 Company (Ntin) captains 'for endeavouring to bring about a breach of the peace', which caused no end of

¹⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1108, Captains of No. 3 Company Cape Coast to the Governor, 8 November 1886.

¹⁶ Ibid.

dissatisfaction among the company and formed the central complaint of the Ntin's petition to the Governor. Yet bush branches here played a critical role in laying the ground in which inter-company violence *could* have erupted.

The interconnections between the Moree and the Cape Coast companies also paved the way for physical support in battle. Although present-day testimony by elders of the Moree asrafo challenges the idea of their companies acting as bush branches, claiming instead that the Moree companies predate those of Cape Coast, strong affiliations between the two have been sustained over the years. During an outbreak of violence between No. 2 and No. 3 companies of Cape Coast resulting from provocative acts during a funeral custom in December 1905, the DC Arthur Ffoulkes – notable for his considerable understanding of company culture – reported on this relationship. 'I understand No. 2 sent to Moree (No. 1) for assistance which was promised and Moree would have brought in the rest of No. 1 Co of Cape Coast who owe No. 3 an old grudge', he wrote.¹⁷ Strong ties between certain asrafo factions, reinforced by the close physical proximity of Moree and Cape Coast, allowed for Moree companies to act as a reserve battalion to be called upon in times of crisis. Indeed, the Moree asrafo continued to engage in inter-company tension in Cape Coast for much of the first half of the twentieth century. In 1932, Moree was also placed under the Peace Proclamation Ordinance - not as a result of unrest within the town itself, but because 'some of the inhabitants of that town took part in the Cape Coast riot' of that year.¹⁸ Whereas asrafo companies were created with the specific intention of protecting their own community, it is clear that the interconnections between companies allowed for inter-town alliances.

Looser alliances between companies and between neighbouring communities further complicated the cartography of the Fante coast - including for colonial officials attempting

¹⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473, Report by DC Cape Coast, 11 December 1908.

¹⁸ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/130, DC Judd to Nana Amanfi III, Omanhene of Asebu, 9 July 1936.

to curtail the actions of the asafo. After a period of unrest in Moree in 1947, attempts to enforce the Peace Proclamation Ordinance and accordingly confiscate all weapons and ammunition were complicated by the hiding of such items with neighbouring allies. Upon searching the nearby village of Brafo Yaw, police found '8 cap guns, 5 gun barrels, a large number of cutlasses and knives', which were believed to have been removed from Moree and which suggested to the Commissioner of Central Province that 'there is no doubt that a number of firearms are hidden in other outlying villages'.¹⁹ Not only did asafo relationships across space provide ample support in battle with other companies, they also enabled companies to resist encroaching restrictions by the colonial state.

Asafo bush branch networks perpetuated the historic relationship between coastal urban centres and their rural hinterlands. Many of the inland villages affiliated with mother companies, especially in Oguaa, were a product of population growth and the need to expand to new farming areas. Incorporating these communities into the established urban infrastructure of the asafo represented a significant growth of the company system, extending its landscape of power and influence beyond the town borders. Urban centres and the smaller settlements which lay inland were subject to interwoven mappings of allegiance and identity, which afforded asafo members with expansive relationships to the spaces within which they resided.

¹⁹ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/306, CCP to CS, 12 April 1947.

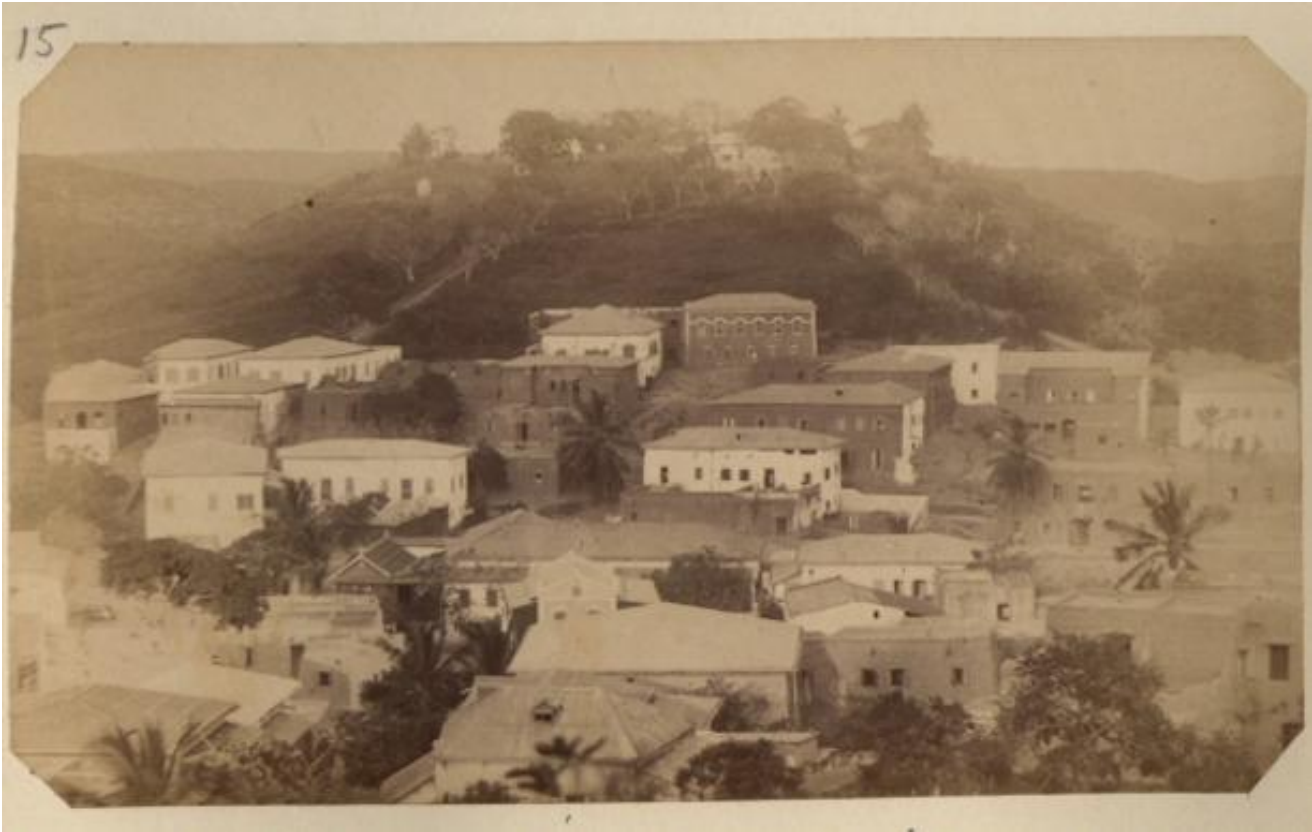


Fig. 10: Cape Coast c. 1942.

TNA CO 1069/34/37



Fig 11: Cape Coast, Ntin Quarter, 2018.

Photograph taken by author.

Asafo Cartographies III: Violence at the Border

Asafo conflicts often revolved around subtle engagement with company cartography. Violence or tension born out of company contestation of space and territory was sometimes underpinned by pragmatic protection of resources. Given the coastal livelihoods of most Fante asafo company members, such goings-on often revolved around the sea and other littoral water features, rivers and lagoons. Anomabo saw one such episode in October 1933, when a *safohen* of No. 1 Company, Mr Ogoe, himself not a fisherman but a ‘government pensioner of the Public Works Department’, cast a drag or seine net into Anomabo waters. This act was met with hostility by local fishermen, ‘who constitute Nos 2, 6 and 7 Companies of Anamabu State’, of which Number 6 Company apparently laid claim to ‘over 300 able-bodied fishermen’.²⁰ The introduction of new drag nets was controversial right along the Fante coast in the early twentieth century, including in Anomabo, where the *safohen*’s operations represented a threat to the daily catch of the town’s regular fishermen. As reported by the *adontsihene* of Anomabo,

the main objection of the fishing community lies in the fact that Mr. Ogoe would throw in his seine net where the fishing folks have already thrown in theirs and would drag these nets to the shore when he draws his Seine net, thereby robbing the unfortunate fishermen of their catch.²¹

The community certainly made their objections known. Safohen Ogoe reported that while while working on the beach on 11 October with his men – presumably members of his No. 1 Company – ‘suddenly a large number of men over 400 with whips and sticks . . . came down upon me and challenged me to pull out the Net from the water’.²² Ogoe ordered his men to stop working and lodged a complaint with the DC at Saltpond. Neither the DC, the

²⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/448, Adontsihene Kweku Amonu III to CCP, 17 February 1933.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid, statement given by K. Kobia Ogoe, sworn before DC Pendergast, 22 October 1933.

omanhene nor the *adontsihene* seem to have had much sympathy for the No. 1 Company Captain, although they were concerned by the potential for ‘trouble again between Nos. 1 and 6 Companies’ particularly given the grievous battle fought between these rivals in 1919.²³ The DC accordingly recommended that ‘in this instance the use of seine nets would be contrary to the public peace, and should therefore be discontinued’, which seems to have put an end to the matter - albeit with some lingering animosity between the various factions.²⁴

In other cases, however, controversies over fishing rights did inflame company tensions. ‘Fishing disputes’ between Gomoa Dago and Ekumfi Otum were frequently referred to in twentieth-century court cases and in oral histories.²⁵ A present-day *safohen* from No. 1 Company Otum (Tuafo) explained that one such quarrel emerged when rival *safohens* from Otum and Dago were at sea fishing and ‘it happened that one fish happened to find itself in both nets of the two’.²⁶ Conflict between Narkwa and Ekumpono in 1932 was also said by elders of the latter to have resulted from disputed fishing rights in the Narkwa lagoon, a phenomenon neatly dubbed by my translator as ‘tilapia war’.²⁷

Yet issues around place more frequently arose out of fierce and often sacred understandings of *asafo* relationships with the land which they inhabited. Within towns, the *asafo* carefully mapped out the urban landscape according to the locales belonging to each company. Traditionally, these territories were the permanent home of the company. *Asafo* territories held ritual spaces and personalities, the *posuban* and the *abosom*, but also were areas most members – and in some cases all members – of the company resided. The extent to which company quarters were rigidly inhabited by their members is difficult to trace, but

²³ Ibid, Adontsihene Kweku Amonu III, to CCP, 17 February 1933.

²⁴ Ibid, DC Saltpond to Adontsihene, 17 November 1933.

²⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1472, Evidence given by Eduafo II at Winneba Criminal Assizes, 27 January 1921.

²⁶ Tuafo Safohen, interview by Ella Jeffreys trans. Abeku Adams, Ekumfi Otum, 28 April 2018.

²⁷ Narkwa elders, interview by Ella Jeffreys trans. Abeku Adams, Ekumfi Narkwa, 20 April 2018.

it is certainly the case that in some towns these territories were fiercely protected, especially at times of intense hostility such as in Apam in the 1920s and 30s. Urban cartography reflected these patterns, which have left a strong residue in the present-day configuration of the coastal towns. The territory of No. 1 Company Cape Coast (Bentil), for example, is still known as Bentil, despite company members and elders now living across Oguaa and beyond. Invisible borders, demarcated only in the asafo worldview, separated company from company and determined the ways in which asafo bodies inhabited and inscribed the spaces they called home. Boundaries which marked asafo territory were fiercely protected and demanded respect from the inhabitants of Fante towns. Crossing asafo borders *en company*, without appropriate measures taken to ensure permission and provide conciliatory offerings, amounted to an explicit provocation. As we have seen, the frequent ritual parades during festivals, funerals and other moments of spiritual tension often provoked outbreaks of violence within contexts of simmering unease between rival companies.

The intricate customs surrounding asafo territory and the costs paid when these customs were ignored were investigated at length by Cape Coast DC Arthur Ffoulkes in 1905, following an outbreak of violence in December of the previous year. As Ffoulkes reported, the controversy arose upon the death of one of No. 2 Company's (Anafu) drummers, a man who 'did several acts hostile to No. 3 Company (Ntin) and became a marked man'.²⁸ In accordance with asafo practice, 'No 2 Company wished to give him a company funeral, which involved passing through Intin Street, No 3's land', with the added provocation of 'using an imported custom of one man dancing like a circus rider on the coffin of the deceased'. In order to carry out this action, No. 2 Company would have had to seek *carte blanche* from No. 3 Company, as 'when one Company passes, as such, over the land of another company, it has always been a Fantee custom, if not generally throughout the Colony, for the other company to be notified with drinkables'. In this case, Ffoulkes

²⁸ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473, Confidential Report by Arthur Ffoulkes, 11 December 1905.

records that ‘No 3 Company then prohibited No 2 from passing along Intin Street without paying the usual tribute’. Apparently, the required offering was not accounted for, as rather than No. 2 Company (Anafu) burying their drummer, the funeral was performed by the deceased’s matrilineage (*abusua*). Yet so grave were the discussions surrounding the boundary crossing that No. 2 Company (Anafu) launched a full-scale attack on its rival, marching up Intin Street and ‘thereby trespassing on No 3’s land’, and – in an act of absolute sacrilege – desecrated their company shrine, ‘a small swish mound . . . stuck [with] an emblematic iron pin about a foot long, threaded with bamboo fibre, and covered by a tortoise shell’.

No. 2 Company’s actions represented two incursions upon the sacred ley lines on which asafo identity and ritual geography was constructed. Crossing the boundary into No. 3 Company’s territory was a forbidden passage. Although individual members would have been able to move freely around the town, as long as hostilities weren’t particularly inflamed, moving across borders as an explicitly asafo grouping was considered to be an act of transgression and attempted intimidation. Yet the attack on the shrine itself also brought to the fore the perpetual intimacy between space and violence in asafo history. As Ffoulkes wrote, ‘about the year 1869, there was a serious riot between Companies No 1 and No 3 in which No 3 buried one of the members of No 1 who were killed, in Intin Street’. It was on this exact spot that No. 3 Company’s shrine was built. To desecrate this ritual memorialisation of company victory constituted a cognisant engagement with the relationship between space and time, place and history. The destruction of any shrine amounted to a gross attack upon the spiritual life of a company, but to destroy a shrine built upon the buried bones of a rival undermined the military prowess *embodied* in that particular location. The outrage which followed No. 2 Company’s act of destruction demonstrates the sacrosanct relationship between asafo identity and place. Asafo cartographies dictated the

rules of company engagement and had such inordinate power that they could be weaponised at times of dispute.

Violence between asafo companies did at times allow for the spaces within which companies resided to be erased and reconstructed. The frequent acts of arson committed during the most intense inter-company fights inevitably had implications for the architecture of towns. Structures were destroyed, rebuilt and sometimes destroyed again, often without leaving lasting scars on the landscape. Yet there were cases where the destruction resulting from large-scale asafo violence had severe cartographic consequences. Fire unleashed during the fight in Apam in September 1930 had grave significance for the demarcation of asafo borders themselves. Prior to the events of 1930, both companies of Apam lived on the beachfront, their respective territories lying side by side along the shore. Yet as recorded by the DC of Winneba, ‘a large slum area quarter in No. 2 Company’s quarter was destroyed by the fire’, rendering much of the company territory uninhabitable and damaging the boundary between asafo land.²⁹ This, combined with the smouldering tensions between the two Apam companies, seems to have pushed No. 2 Company (Dentsefo) to relocate entirely, and as such redraw the invisible landscape of company culture.

The area north of Apam known as Mamfam to where the No. 2 Company (Dentsefo) moved was uninhabited before the events of 1930. Initial settlement in the wake of the *amanko* may have occurred as a result of members from both companies fleeing Apam to avoid colonial law and order. Motivations for escaping the limits of the town are also referred to in oral histories. The present-day *supi* of No. 2 Company recounted that some members of his own company ‘ran away because there [were] a lot of police in the town wanting to arrest them’, but other still went to seek indigenous cures for their injuries.³⁰

²⁹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/609, DC Winneba to CCP 21 June 1943.

³⁰ Dentsefo Supi, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Joseph Dadzi, Apam, 13 April 2016.

Narratives recounted by the rival No. 1 Company (Tuafo) are unsurprisingly tinted with victor's triumph, arguing that No. 2 Company 'realized that most of their people were dying, so they decided to run away'.³¹ It is likely that the reasons for resettlement were in fact multifaceted. The grievous loss of life suffered by No. 2 Company may well have contributed to the decision to move to a more distant location, yet the pragmatic implications of destroyed property is likely to have also played a significant contributing factor.

Initial attempts to formalise the resettlement of No. 2 Company to Mamfam was met by resounding opposition from No. 1 Company. Tuafo efforts to block this resettlement may have been an attempt further to assert the dominance of their company by taking the upper hand in determining the new borders. As a result, both companies became submerged in a lengthy court proceeding over land tenure. As late as 1943, an exasperated DC of Winneba declared that contestation over Mamfam was simply a new manifestation of inter-company rivalry, that 'continued in the guise of a land claim'.³² Yet the dispute over land ownership appears to have become complicated by the involvement of colonial bureaucracy. Records of lengthy meetings and frequent correspondence indicate a concerted effort by various officials to settle the matter. Tensions were high on both sides, however. A letter from Tuafo elders argued 'that the members of No. 2 Company have been given allotments of land while no members of No 1 have any which shows barefaced en-bloc impartiality'.³³ Provincial Commissioner Skene also spoke of the disgruntled nature of Tuafo members, who complained to him 'that they had equal rights in the Mamfam land, and that as they also had lost some houses in the recent riot it was only fair that they should be allowed to share Mamfam in order to erect new houses'.³⁴

³¹ Tuafo elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Joseph Dadzi, Apam, 11 April 2016.

³² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/609, Letter from DC Winneba to CCP, 21 June 1943.

³³ Ibid, Headmen of No. 1 Company to CCP, 27 April 1932.

³⁴ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/30, CCP to SNA, 29 January 1932.

Although No. 2 Company (Dentisfo) did eventually achieve their goal and re-established their company territory on Mamfam, away from the ominous threat of their rivals, the evolution from physical fight to court proceedings represented an attempt to assert control by redrawing asafo borders. The continued contestation over the new settlement by No 1. Company (Tuafo), albeit somewhat galvanised by the intense ill-feeling between the two companies, reflected a desire to control the land. Interestingly, in the case of Mamfam, companies were willing to engage with colonial methods of authority in order to gain the upper hand.

Today, and for the last seventy years or so, Mamfam is widely understood to be land belonging to No. 2 Company. Although company tensions have to a great degree subsided and asafo members are no longer expected to make their homes within the defined borders of company territory, Mamfam remains a geographical marker of the violence which once ripped Apam into two. Borders redefined in the wake of fierce conflict inscribe asafo history onto the land and continue to bring the past into the present for residents of the town. So intimate is the relationship between asafo pasts and local mappings of the community in Apam, that the events of September 1930 are evident to even to the casual visitor. A wide street running through the middle of the town stands as a sort of war memorial, with signposts marking the way to 'Nineteenth Thirty Road'.



Fig. 12: Nineteen Thirty Road, Apam, 2016. Photograph taken by author.

Colonial Control I: Abolition

If the essence of asafó culture was so fundamentally linked to the places which members were born to defend, then the ways in which space was inhabited and regulated by others inevitably had implications for the company system. As a visible and kinetic presence, asafó companies had a profound impact on the geography of the Fante littoral, from the cyclical ritual events of the company calendar to the outbreaks of violence which shaped colonial perceptions of how space should be used. It is therefore unsurprising that much of the colonial state's efforts to control asafó companies was concerned with how asafó members inhabited the coastal towns and villages. Explicitly motivated by a desire to end violence,

but also underpinned by the perception of many colonial officers that the company system amounted to little more than a time-consuming nuisance, restrictions on the asafo grew as colonial rule became more entrenched.

Following the formalization of British colonial rule on the Gold Coast in 1874, various attempts were made to regulate or even completely to abolish the asafo company system. Such efforts typically emerged in the aftermath of asafo conflicts which resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of property and subsequent prosecutions in the colonial courts. In 1889, in the wake of a fight between Bentil and Nkum companies in Moree, the DC, Mr Hindle, recommended 'the prohibition of the exhibition of Company flags, tribal emblems etc, and the abolition of the Company system', a suggestion which the Colonial Secretary acknowledged as 'very desirable but I should say impracticable at present'.³⁵ In 1906, the Commissioner of Central Province revisited the question of 'abolishing all the company posts in Cape Coast', a topic which he noted had been raised before, 'but it was then decided that [because] these posts were erected before the [Native Customs] Ordinance came into force it could not legally be done'.³⁶ Drawing on the work of Mensah Sarbah, the commissioner noted the political complications which could ensue if abolition was enacted: 'it would be the commencement of the overthrow of the whole of the Native Constitution'. Yet it appears that the commissioner was seriously considering the proposition nevertheless. He concluded his letter to the Secretary of Native Affairs with the suggestion that, 'to abolish the Companies and their posts, if it could be accomplished, would very effectually stop these frequent and serious faction fights at Cape Coast'.

The most concerted effort to abolish the company system came in the wake of the battle in Apam in 1930, when the question of whether to disband the asafo company system was once again discussed by the colonial administration. Assistant Secretary of Native

³⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, Minute Paper: Report on Moree Riot, 4 May 1889.

³⁶ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473, CCP to SNA, 8 January 1906.

Affairs De Graft Johnson was tasked with writing a report which took into account the company system more broadly, while also considering the specific situation in Apam and bubbling tensions in Anomabo. Provincial commissioners were instructed by the Colonial Secretary to reflect on the report, as well as their views on the asafo and the role it should play in twentieth-century colonial society.

Responses differed according to the particular manifestations of the company system from region to region. The Chief Commissioner for Ashanti, for example, wrote that 'it is well-known and well-understood that you can no more "abolish" the Asafu than you can "abolish" the citizens of the United Kingdom', although he did concede that among the Fante people 'the Asafu have been allowed to get out of hand to a far greater extent than in any other part of the Gold Coast'.³⁷ The Commissioner for the Eastern Province also acknowledged the constitutional element of the asafo. In his letter to the Colonial Secretary he argued that 'the asafo system as practiced in the Eastern province and Ashanti is a practical demonstration of the growth of democracy in this country, and is emphatically not intended to be a vehicle for the drunken brawls that occur in the Central Province'.³⁸ The obvious irony of a colonial official lauding the growth of democracy notwithstanding, this correspondence speaks to the divergence between the company system as it manifested on the Fante coast, and their cousins in the East. A select number of *omanhene* were also contacted for their opinions on the asafo, and the information given by those from this region echoed the unique political position of the company system in the East. In a letter forwarded to the Colonial Secretary, the *omanhene* of Kwahu described his local asafo as 'something entirely different', and an institution which was 'in all but name a Bolschevic [sic] or Communist society seeking to pull down the native administration'.³⁹ It could be argued that the *omanhene* was invoking the spectre of communism simply to underscore his

³⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1439, CCA to CS, 30 March 1932.

³⁸ Ibid, CEP to CS, 10 March 1931.

³⁹ Ibid, Kwahu Omanhene to Akyem Abuakwa Omanhene, 30 December 1927.

dislike of the company system. Yet in his analysis of the Kwahu asafo, Asiamah emphatically argues that this revolutionary depiction was accurate.⁴⁰ All in all, the information gathered by the colonial administration in the wake of the 1930 Apam *amanko* served to emphasise the inherent difficulty in generalising across the asafo. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, the perception of the asafo as a vehicle for rising commoner dissent, especially in the inter-war period, was mostly applicable to companies from Kwahu or neighbouring Akyem Abuakwa.

Considering the attention given to the Apam *amanko*, if the asafo were ever to have been abolished, it is likely to have been in its aftermath. Yet in light of the opinions of district commissioners across the colony, the matter was dropped. Abolition was also discussed alongside potential plans to utilize those aspects of the company system which could be beneficial to the colonial state. As noted by the Acting Commissioner of Central Province in 1931, 'it has been suggested that being of military origin and still fostering the military spirit they might be incorporated into the Territorial movement but personally I am not in favour of this' – apparently an idea that the asafo might be reconfigured as some sort of reserve colonial force.⁴¹ Yet most of these suggestions were eventually disregarded too. De Graft Johnson's report, which will be returned to shortly, was revised and eventually published as a sessional paper and then as an academic article. For a short period at least, the question of abolition was put aside.

That is not to say that the discussions about disbanding the asafo evaporated entirely. As officials came and went through the revolving doors of the colonial bureaucracy, new commissioners mulled over the question of abolition. In 1942, the DC of Cape Coast wrote that 'I consider the abolition of the Company (Asafu) system is on the whole desirable. The original aim of the system has disappeared and there is little possibility

⁴⁰ Asiamah, *Mass Factor*, ch. 5 *passim*.

⁴¹ Ibid, Acting CCP to CS, 2 April 1931.

of the system being adapted to worth-while activities in peace time. The company system in Oguaa state has produced for years nothing but bloodshed, quarrelling and dissatisfaction.⁴² Yet he warned that if the company system were disbanded, there would be 'considerable' and possibly 'violent' opposition. Instead, he suggested 'that the abolition of the Company system should be carried out state by state and only when the behaviour of the Asafu in a state has offered a definitive reason for the disbandment of the Asafu Companies in that state'. He did concede however, to a point raised by the assistant DC that abolition of the asafu company system could have implications for constitutional matters, with potential to 'impair the fabric of the state'. Again, the problem of opposition and constitutional disruption stood in the way of an overhaul of the company system.

Within the higher echelons of government, the discourse about proposed disbanding of the asafu appears to have lingered. The Commissioner of Central Province reported in 1942 that 'His Excellency [the Governor] is therefore considering seriously the question of disbanding these Companies throughout the colony and Ashanti In the meantime, and until further notice, all Company meetings or celebrations of customs connected with the organisation should be prohibited forthwith under the provisions of Cap. 77'.⁴³ Nevertheless, by the late 1940s there seems to have been a grudging acceptance that in one form or another the asafu company was here to stay. As expressed by the Secretary of Native Affairs in 1947, 'though we do not propose to abolish the Asafos it is our policy to eliminate all the disruptive elements of the Asafu system'.⁴⁴

These last two remarks, made on the eve of the era of anti-colonial nationalism and the process of decolonization, indicate the extent and nature of control which the administration endeavoured to exert over the asafu. Although the company system was

⁴² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/932, DC Cape Coast to CCP, 26 March 1942.

⁴³ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/1503, CCP to DCs, 6 March 1942.

⁴⁴ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298, Acting SNA to CS, 22 October 1942.

never abolished, their activities and culture were steadily restricted by the laws of the Gold Coast Colony. The prohibition of company meetings and celebrations, the attempted surveillance and control over asafó space, the endeavour to 'eliminate the disruptive elements of the Asafó system', had the potential to slowly chip away at company culture until the asafó mutated into a different beast entirely or disappeared altogether.

Colonial Control II: Legislation

Although colonial surveillance was unevenly applied in towns of the Fante coast, attempts to restrict the ways in which public space was utilised began to take legislative form from the end of the nineteenth century. As discussed in Chapter One, in 1868, six years before the declaration of a formal Crown Colony, the Native Customs Regulation Ordinance sought 'to make better provision for securing the peace of the town of Cape Coast and to regularize the celebration of the annual and other Native Customs in the Settlements on the Gold Coast'.⁴⁵ Provoked by asafó unrest within the boundaries of Oguaa and pressure from the Colonial Office in London, the 1868 Ordinance became the model from which broader and wider-reaching efforts to curtail company activity through controls over public space would be developed.

In 1892, twenty-four years after the first attempts to legislate asafó life, the Native Customs Ordinance was given an upgrade. The new legislation made greater stipulations on complex aspects of company culture throughout the Gold Coast.⁴⁶ Indeed, the details of the 1892 revisions can be seen to reflect a deeper understanding of the company system and ways in which companies navigated the multifaceted landscape of colonial rule. Some aspects of the ordinance simply sought to extend the reach of the earlier proscriptions,

⁴⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 4/1/596, Native Customs Ordinance 1868, p 303.

⁴⁶ Gold Coast Laws, Vol. 2, p 1185.

stating that the celebration without permission of yearly festivals including 'Yam Custom, Black Christmas, or *Kuntum*' was prohibited in Accra, Ada, Axim, Cape Coast, Dixcove, Elmina, Keta, Prampram, Saltpond, Sekondi, Shama and Winneba in the first instance, and then Anomabo, Apam, Christiansborg, Kormantin, Labadi, Moree, and Mumford from September 1892, and Beracoe from January 1893. Penalties for participation were also higher, with a maximum sentence of three months with hard labour and a fine of twenty-five pounds.

Part 3 of the ordinance gave colonial officials greater powers to disrupt other aspects of asafo activity. Company meetings which were considered by a DC to 'be dangerous to the public peace' could be prohibited, with members who ignored this prohibition at risk of arrest without a warrant and thereafter 'liable to imprisonment with or without hard labour for a term not exceeding six months or to a fine not exceeding fifty pounds'. Punishment was significantly more intense for captains or *supis*, who could be imprisoned for a maximum of one year and fined up to one hundred pounds. Companies were not allowed to exhibit new flags or emblems without permission in writing, with penalties in line with those given for taking part in illegal company meetings and the potential for flags to be seized and confiscated. Company posts – defined as 'any post, earth-work, or other erection set apart of used in any public place by a native company for the display of emblems or flags, or to mark a place of meeting of such company', could not be erected, and commissioners could order new company posts to be torn down. Such restrictions posed the potential for significant incursions into company activity. Company gatherings, annual celebrations, flags and emblems, posts and shrines were all integral facets of asafo identity and structure. It is perhaps unsurprising then, that many of these prohibitions went unacknowledged or, at least, cautiously avoided.

Further attempts to ensure that the measures outlined in the 1892 Native Customs Ordinance were adhered to came in the form of financial bonds or deposits. For a District

Commissioner to grant permission for the exhibition of a new flag or emblem, the organisation of a meeting, or for the celebration of local festivals, companies would be required to sign a bond or deposit a financial guarantee to ensure that such activities would not result in conflict or violence. If violence did occur and companies defaulted on their bond payment, they could be subject to imprisonment for up to one year.

Later critiques of the Native Customs Ordinance and its subsequent amendments were wholly rejected by many within the colonial government. Responding to criticisms by the Provincial Council of Chiefs in 1938, the DC of Cape Coast argued that ‘it is only where the performance is likely to cause trouble that a native custom will be forbidden. It is incorrect to interpret this as an attempt to destroy native customs’.⁴⁷ This was an interesting assertion. Although there was clearly a range of official approaches towards the asafo and their regulation, this DC presents an instrumentalist interpretation of legislative power. Yet even for well-meaning wielders of the proscriptions and permissions embedded in the Native Customs Ordinance, the ability to regulate the intricacies of asafo culture would have the potential to impact on dimensions of company identity in a real and sometimes profound manner.

Although the Native Customs Ordinance posed the potential for restrictions to daily asafo life, further legislation was developed in order to respond to the immediate threat or occurrence of violence through the Peace Proclamation Ordinance of 1897, ‘an Ordinance to amend the law relating to the carrying and possession of arms and for the preservation of the public peace’.⁴⁸ The influence of asafo companies on the Peace Proclamation Ordinance was made abundantly clear in its prologue:

Whereas the peace of the Colony has on various occasions been broken by the assembling together of bodies of armed men for unlawful purposes leading in many

⁴⁷ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/197, DC Cape Coast to CCP, 16 August 1938.

⁴⁸ Gold Coast Laws, Volume 2, p 446, Cap 33.

instances to the destruction of forcible seizure of property, the plundering and burning of houses and the commission of murder and other crimes, and it is expedient to make better provision for the prevention of such offences.

Whereas the Native Customs Ordinance was perpetual and once applied to a town could be drawn on to restrict company activity, the Peace Proclamation Ordinance was only declared at times of perceived crisis by the Governor in Council – just as the government might read the Riot Act in the metropole. This proclamation would be published in the Government Gazette and would make it ‘unlawful to have or carry arms or ammunition within any specified part of the Colony’, a restriction which could only be revoked by the Governor or lifted once the prescribed time period had lapsed. The ordinance gave DCs the authority to ‘enter and search any house, buildings or places situate in a proclaimed district for any arms or ammunition suspected to be therein’. It also made provision specifically for the action of rioting. Riots which resulted in ‘harm to any person or loss of life or loss of property’, while it was operative could be subject to fines of up to five hundred pounds for chiefs who had been seen to have taken part in a riot, instigated a riot, or ‘been negligent in preventing or suppressing’ a riot, or ‘neglected to bring to justice or deliver up persons taking part in or accused or suspected of taking part in such riot.’ The inhabitants of the areas proclaimed under ordinance could also be liable for the costs for ‘additional constabulary or police’ deployed by the colonial government.

The focus in the Peace Proclamation Ordinance on inter-company violence is best understood by the rising tide of asafo conflict in coastal towns in 1890s. In 1893, there was an *amanko* in Moree, in 1894 in Apam and the Ekumfi District, and in 1895 in Birwa and Anomabo. The occurrence of such conflict even after the Native Customs Ordinance had been applied to these locations must have called into question the efficacy of the pre-existing laws. The Peace Proclamation Ordinance, albeit often utilized *after* outbreaks of violence

had occurred, allowed for a focus specifically upon the act of aggression itself, as opposed to the wider cultural context within which unrest could emerge.

Despite the specific focus on methods of violence central to the Peace Proclamation Ordinance, much of the colonial control over how asafo companies inhabited and inscribed space relied on the stipulations and formulas provided in the Native Customs Ordinance. Financial bonds to secure peace were deployed with increasing frequency over the course of British colonial rule in an attempt to dissuade companies from engaging in provocative behaviour. As a rule, such bonds took two forms: preventative and reactive. In the aftermath of violence, companies would be bound over to keep the peace in an effort to prevent the animosity bubbling away under the surface from again boiling over. Preventative bonds were drawn up with specific focus on forthcoming events: company funerals, meetings, rituals and so forth.

By the late 1930s, securing permission for company activities and paying bonds in order to guarantee peaceful interactions had become an increasingly detailed and formalised process. Applications made to perform funeral customs, for example, required specifics about the character of company activity such as 'exhibiting company flags and emblems', the playing of company drums, the routes of processions and the start and end times of performances.⁴⁹ When seeking permission, asafo petitioners would frequently provide their own justifications for why such activity should take place, such as the belief that if funeral customs were not performed appropriately 'a plague will set in among them'.⁵⁰ Detailed programmes of asafo festivals providing daily itineraries would find their way to the desks of DCs for their approval.⁵¹ Conditions could then be applied by colonial officials under the terms of preserving the peace, which companies would have to consent to before conducting

⁴⁹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/932, Permission from Assistant DC Cape Coast, 29 October 1937.

⁵⁰ Ibid, Anomabo *Asafohen* to DC Cape Coast, 16 September 1943.

⁵¹ PRAAD Cape Coast, 23/1/833, Supi Kofi Amuah, No. 1 Company Cape Coast to DC, 3 August 1937.

their ceremonies. Such conditions would often further regulate the ways in which asafos could move around their own towns, often expressly prohibiting companies from ‘enter[ing] another’s quarter’, determining if and where guns could be fired, which emblems could be displayed and prescribing passes for visiting companies.⁵² If it was feared that regulations would be ignored, which was seen to be more likely in smaller and fragmented communities such as Ekumfi than in large urban centres like Cape Coast where the colonial presence was stronger, then DCs would frequently remind their local asafos of the stipulations of the Native Customs Ordinance.⁵³ In some cases, permission had to be conveyed through the conduit of the town chief or *ohene*. In 1917, for example, the *ohene* of Gomoa Dago, Eduafu II, refused to give *his* permission for the two companies of his town to celebrate their annual festival and, moreover, would not ‘go to Winneba to obtain a pass for them from the District Commissioner’.⁵⁴ This was ultimately disregarded by the Dago asafos, who started to perform their celebratory customs anyway but were arrested, fined and made to sign a bond with a surety of £380.

The cost of sureties could be extortionate. In 1920, the DC of Winneba reported that the *omanhenes* of Ekumfi and Gomoa Assin both signed bonds for ‘one thousand pounds each against disturbance’ in the wake of a recent conflict. At the turn of the century, Ffoulkes reported that captains and elders of No. 5 Company Cape Coast (Brofomba) ‘were made to sign a bond in £500’, swearing that no disturbance would occur during the celebration of their custom.⁵⁵ Refusal to sign bonds could have grave implications. In 1931, the *tufuhene* of Anomabo and two of his men were sentenced to two months imprisonment with hard labour for refusing to sign a bond to keep the peace.⁵⁶ Asafos members who were confronted with

⁵² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/193, Programme of Ceremonial Events and Conditions Imposed; Libation for Nana Amonu V.

⁵³ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 21/1/760, DC Saltpond to Omanhene of Ekumfi, 12 December 1944.

⁵⁴ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/168, Ohene Eduafu II to CCP 4 July 1918

⁵⁵ Ffoulkes, ‘Company System’, p 276.

⁵⁶ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/116, SNA Minute Paper, 11 December 1931.

the demands of the colonial state were at risk of being pincered, running the risk of paying large sums if inter-company violence broke out – an eventuality which at times those in local authority had little control over – or facing jail time.

Asafo members were to some extent able to evade encroaching colonial purview through their deeper understanding of territorial space. On countless occasions, companies faced with the threat of colonial control simply left the area, much to the annoyance of the police and officials. Capture could be avoided by repairing to the bush or taking to the sea. In 1889, for example, police marched into Moree to make arrests after a company fight but ‘found Moree burnt and deserted’.⁵⁷ The next day, the DC reported that ‘I hear some delinquents are in [the] bush near here’.⁵⁸ A similar situation met the Chief of Police when he visited Anomabo to investigate an episode of violence in August 1919, whereupon he was ‘only able to take one statement down as I was told all the people concerned in the riot of No. 1 and No. 6 Companies had fled to the bush’.⁵⁹ Hiding out in the bush usually lasted only a week or so, yet after the 1930 Apam *amanko* fear of colonial punishment seems to have driven many of the inhabitants to flee for some months. On 26 November, months after the *amanko* had taken place, Winneba’s acting DC reported that ‘the population who took to the bush after this riot, are still hiding in various places’.⁶⁰ Whether those elusive members of the Apam asafo had taken up permanent residence in the forest or simply slipped out of town whenever rumours of approaching colonial officials reached their ears is not clear. It was not only individuals who remained elusive to the state. Precautions were taken to hide both company members and their ammunition while the imposition of the Peace Proclamation Ordinance was in place. In 1947, the Commissioner of Central Province reported that in Moree ‘a number of wanted persons, possibly taking their firearms with

⁵⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, Telegram from D.L. Wall to CS, 13 February 1889.

⁵⁸ Ibid, Telegram from D.L. Wall to CS, 14 February 1889.

⁵⁹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/762 Chief of Police to Acting Inspector General of Police, 3 August 1919.

⁶⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/791, DC Winneba to CCP, 29 November 1930.

them, had put out to sea in fishing boats before the arrival of the Police'.⁶¹ The practicalities of everyday life and work presumably put limitations on how often – and for how long – these tactics of evasion could be deployed, especially for those companies residing in locales which had a DC in residence such as Saltpond or Cape Coast. Nevertheless, in some instances at least, asafo companies could put their local knowledge of peripheral spaces to good use in order to circumnavigate the reach of the colonial state.

Intellectuals and Peace Processes

Endeavours to limit the extent to which asafo companies could disrupt the supposed peace of civil society were not limited to the colonial state. In Cape Coast, No. 6 Company (Akrampa), the asafo descended from the Euro-Africans of the town, often acted as peace-makers by working as intermediaries between the townspeople and the colonial state. Akrampa, often referred to as the Cape Coast Volunteers, occupied a unique position due to its members' mixed ancestry, literate education and consequential status as local intellectuals – an identity which was channelled into the Gold Coast Aborigines' Rights Protection Society (ARPS), founded at Cape Coast in 1897. Although it retained the features of a traditional asafo company: a military identity, an *obosom* (the serpent god Aboananka) and a strong sense of history, Akrampa was to some extent set apart from the other six companies of Oguaa. Its attire and equipment were recorded as having been entirely 'borrowed from the European' and its members considered exempt from the town oaths Mankata Wukuda and Oguaa Wukudua, as according to an enquiry into the Cape Coast constitution in 1924, 'in all ancient wars this Company showed great promptitude, activity and bravery'.⁶² That this enquiry was undertaken at a tribunal with the approval of the Oguaaahene, his council and representatives from all seven companies speaks to the status

⁶¹ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/306, CCP to CS, 12 April 1947.

⁶² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 11/1/1759, Cape Coast Constitution Enquiry, 13 February 1924.

which Akrampa held in the town. Its position as mediator was, and remains to this day, illustrated by the imagery and slogans displayed on its flags: a cup of water to demonstrate its cooling presence ('when there was fire it was water that we will put on it') and the declaration 'defence not defiance'.⁶³

Akrampa certainly positioned themselves as the defenders of joint British-Fante interests, and at times used this to their own advantage. In a petition to the administrator of the colony in 1873, its leaders contended that the company 'has always acted in times of war as the Governor's body guard'.⁶⁴ The examples they gave, the 1848 expedition to Appollonia and earlier campaigns against Asante, were cited in order to demand a replenishment of Akrampa ammunition stores as war with Asante again loomed. W. S. Kwesi Johnston also notes the position of Akrampa as 'the Governor's or President's bodyguard' and identifies their involvement in Cape Coast battles against Elmina in 1774, Asebu in 1792, Efutu in 1824 and others.⁶⁵ By the early nineteenth century, Akrampa's identity extended to the Christianity of increasing numbers of its members. According to Augustus Casely-Hayford, in 1823 the Cape Coast Volunteers went to 'bring Moree's Chief back to Cape Coast to answer accusations that he had been involved in human sacrifice'.⁶⁶

A component of Akrampa activity focused on efforts to quell asafo unrest. The Cape Coast Volunteers again marched to nearby Moree to tackle inter-company violence there in 1889, albeit without the approval of the DC, who 'distinctly told them that I in no way countenanced their action and they went at their own wish'.⁶⁷ Their presence may have had some impact, however, as on their return they 'reported that firing had ceased on their arrival and the people had promised not to resume it'. In 1914, Akrampa worked alongside

⁶³ Akrampa Supi, interview with Ella Jeffreys, Cape Coast, 9 March 2018.

⁶⁴ Crooks, *Records*, De Graft et al to Colonel Harley, 3 February 1873, p. 484.

⁶⁵ PRAAD Cape Coast, ACC 90/64, W.S. Kwesi Johnston, 'The Asafu in Cape Coast History', Paper given at University of Cape Coast (1963).

⁶⁶ Casely-Hayford, 'Genealogical History', p 113.

⁶⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1120, DC Cape Coast to CCP, 8 February 1889.

the police in disrupting a fight consisting of stone throwing between No. 1 and No. 2 companies of Cape Coast and then conducted 'night patrols' alongside the official forces in order to prevent further violent outbursts.⁶⁸ Such was the contribution of the Akrampa that the attending police superintendent wrote to the Police Commissioner to 'beg strongly to state that the Volunteers have rendered a very excellent service both in checking the riot and assisted in making arrests'.⁶⁹

Local intellectuals, some of whom were active members of Akrampa, were also critical in producing knowledge which informed colonial interactions with the asafo. Prominent Fante scholars such as J. E. Casely Hayford and John Mensah Sarbah – from Cape Coast and Anomabo respectively - included analysis of the company system in their treatises on Gold Coast society and culture. All too aware of the poor reputation which the company system had garnered, such writings frequently attempted to counter colonial perceptions of the asafo as a wholesale nuisance. Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Casely Hayford acknowledged that conflicts between companies were 'deplorable' and supported the regulation of asafo displays, but saw the martial character of the asafo as an invaluable aspect of Gold Coast society.⁷⁰ He wrote, 'the military spirit is not dead in the people. It deserves to be encouraged on scientific lines as an element of strength in Gold Coast manhood. It is absurd to practically destroy martial spirit in a people, and then turn around and call them cowards'.⁷¹ Mensah Sarbah, who – as will be shown shortly – had a hand in mediating between asafo factions, also described active participation in a man's company as the 'most indispensable duty of the citizen'.⁷² Both men emphasised the political and cultural importance of the company system for Gold Coast communities.

⁶⁸ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/594, Superintendent E. A. James to Commissioner of Police, 18 December 1914.

⁶⁹ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/134, Superintendent E. A. James to DC Cape Coast, 17 February 1914.

⁷⁰ Casely-Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions*, p 89.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p 91.

⁷² Mensah Sarbah, *Fanti National Constitution*, p 27.

By the 1930s, the published work on the asafo most commonly consulted, at least by colonial bureaucrats, was J. C. de Graft Johnson's 1932 'The Fanti Asafu'. De Graft Johnson, himself an Akrapma member, was born in Cape Coast in 1884 into a family known for scholarship and political engagement. He was the son of Joseph Welheim de Graft Johnson, a co-founder of the ARPS, and was educated at Cape Coast's Wesleyan Boys' School and Mfantshipim College before reading social anthropology at the London School of Economics. Working his way up through the ranks of the Gold Coast civil service, in 1920 De Graft Johnson became the Assistant Secretary of Native Affairs in 1920.

'The Fanti Asafu' was a revised version of De Graft Johnson's report commissioned in the wake of the events at Apam in 1930. The original, longer, report attempted a wider analysis of the asafo extending to the eastern of Gold Coast Colony and in Asante. The complete report appears to have been lost in the archives. Even in the bound copies of sessional reports available in the National Archives of the UK, all that is evident of De Graft Johnson's paper is a printed title alongside a handwritten note, 'not printed or bound up to date'.⁷³ Nevertheless, it is possible to work backwards from responses to De Graft Johnson's paper, which often quoted him directly, in order to gain more insight into the totality of his longer report. It included recommendations specifically concerned with the local contexts of Apam and Anomabo, such as the implementation of Boy Scout training into Apam schools, and the need for proper intelligence gathering when mediating disputes.⁷⁴ Circulated among relevant provincial commissioners, along with a letter from the Colonial Secretary asking for their opinions on the company system, the report elicited an ambivalent response. As discussed above, part of this conversation pivoted on the question of prohibition. De Graft Johnson's report was subject to rather harsh critique from some corners, not least due to his explicit contention that former Commissioner of Central Province Mr Saxton had not

⁷³ TNA, CO 98/59, Legislative Council Minutes and Sessional Papers 1931-32.

⁷⁴ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/16, Anomabo Report, J. C. de Graft Johnson, 1 October 1931.

sufficiently communicated with the various companies of Anomabo had and therefore failed to avert hostilities.⁷⁵ Yet the sentiment of some of his suggestions were incorporated into the administration's approach to the asafo, namely the focus on legislative restrictions on company activity. It should also be noted that De Graft Johnson's article had a life far beyond that of the British colonial administration. The detail contained in his analysis of the Cape Coast company system was drawn on upon in early asafo historiography, such as the work of Datta and Porter, and indeed, in much of what has been written since.⁷⁶

There were occasional efforts from officials who attempted to put an end to asafo violence through considered engagement with companies *and* support from local intellectual elites, many of whom were part of Akrampa. The fact that these efforts tended to happen in Cape Coast is most likely a result of the close contact between the asafo and the District Commissioner and Commissioner of Central Province who both resided in the town. Arthur Ffoulkes, a District Commissioner in Cape Coast at the beginning of the twentieth century, employed a cook who was himself a *safohen* in No. 5 Company (Brofomba). Such intimate proximity may well have paved the way to a deeper cultural sensitivity surrounding asafo life, and consequentially, interactions which extended beyond efforts at control and restriction.

⁷⁵ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1439, Minute by CS, 13 November 1931.

⁷⁶ Datta and Porter, 'The Asafo System', p 280 – 281.



Fig. 13: Brofomba Asafohinfo. Centre is Albert Mboro, cook for Arthur Ffoulkes. Photograph taken by Arthur Ffoulkes. PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473.

This approach seems to have governed a number of ‘peace processes’ undertaken at Cape Coast which sought to put an end to inter-company violence within the town. In late 1908 and early 1909, concerted engagement with the Oguaa asafo, led by the colonial state but with a significant contribution from intellectuals of the ARPS and Akrampa, focused on the exhibition of emblems and flags by companies. Despite a limited understanding of the historical memory embedded in these objects, officials were certainly aware of the provocative capacities they carried. Indeed, despite the softer approach to the company system, this peace process sought to regulate and restrict the images which the Oguaa companies could display. Mr Eliot, Commissioner of Central Province, held ‘a series of meetings with a view to obtaining possession of such flags and emblems of the seven Cape Coast Companies, which for so many years have formed a menace to the internal peace and good feeling of the Cape Coast community’.⁷⁷ According to Eliot, flags were subject to ‘voluntary surrender’, and a list was compiled of all permitted emblems which companies could display.⁷⁸ Given that the meetings were arbitrated by ‘chiefs’ – presumably the Oguaaahene as well as the Tufuhene and various company elders – it is possible that the confiscation of provocative flags may have had some support from the community at large. The fact that companies were rewarded with gifts, liquor and new presentation flags sewed by Eliot’s wife presumably helped to aid the ‘bond of good feeling’ which the Provincial Commissioner identified over the course of his work. Nevertheless, it is likely that many of the provocative flags confiscated by the colonial administration during this peace process were those that ended up in the hands of Western collectors.

The culmination of the Cape Coast peace process was a large-scale public gathering on 6 March 1909 during which ‘practically the whole population of Cape Coast were collected on the Victoria Park’.⁷⁹ New company ‘peace flags’ *assumɔwi frankaa* were

⁷⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1473, CCP to SNA, 22 October 1908.

⁷⁸ Ibid, CCP to SNA, 22 January 1909.

⁷⁹ Ibid, CCP to SNA, 6 March 1909.

presented to the *asafo* and *assumdwinsa*, the ritual sharing of drink to signify unity, was shared between companies. Addresses were made by Cape Coast Tufuhene W. Z. Coker, and leading members of the ARPS, John Mensah Sarbah and E.J.P. Brown, both of whom spoke of the public support for the peace process. It is notable, however, that the tone of these speeches differed. The Tufuhene spoke of his utmost gratitude towards the Provincial Commissioner, declaring 'it is certainly with unmingled pleasure that I rise to thank you on behalf of myself, the *supis*, *asafuhinfu*, and members of the seven companies'.⁸⁰ Coker assured Eliot and the gathered crowd 'that the ill-feeling which had existed between the companies for the past fifty years might be buried in the deep blue sea' and that 'we shall do our utmost best to bring about a lasting peace'. In contrast, Mensah Sarbah, the Colony's leading barrister, veered towards an admonishment. He was 'sure that the representative captains who had listened to the address of Mr Eliot the Commissioner of the province will consider thoughtfully what they have just heard' but argued that if pre-existing regulations of company activity had been followed 'there would have been no regrettable riots'.⁸¹ Brown continued in this vein, calling upon the *asafo* 'in return for the trouble he [Mr Eliot] has taken' to 'live together henceforth so as to make him feel satisfied so that he has not laboured in vein'.⁸² No matter how ephemeral it may have turned out to be, a projection of unity at least from the higher echelons of Cape Coast society appears to have generated hope for a decrease in inter-company animosity.

Yet ephemeral it was. Fights between companies reappeared in Oguaa, albeit a decade or so after the peace process was completed. Despite the regulation of *asafo* flags and emblems continuing for the remainder of colonial rule, the military spirit inherent to company culture was never effectively suppressed. There were no further attempts to carry out peace processes, and methods of control offered through the Native Customs Ordinance

⁸⁰ Ibid, Reply by Tufuhene of Cape Coast, 6 March 1909.

⁸¹ Ibid, Address by John Mensah Sarbah.

⁸² Ibid, Address by W. J. P. Brown.

became increasingly attractive for many in the colonial state. Commissioners lobbied that 'there should be stricter control of 'Annual Customs' and more insistence on the signing of bonds and making of deposits.⁸³ The extent to which such efforts were successful, or simply placed the asafos and the state in a game of cat and mouse, differed across space and time as well as across the various dimensions of company culture which fell under the remit of the ordinance.

Oguaa Fetu Afahye

The ability for district and provincial commissioners to withhold their permission to celebrate local festivals, effectively dictating how asafos inhabited their own towns, had the capacity to force fundamental ruptures in company life. Perhaps the most infamous example of colonial restriction is that of the Cape Coast annual festival Oguaa Fetu Afahye, which is remembered as having been re-established by Kwame Nkrumah in 1964 after having been banned by the colonial state. Yet the precise circumstances of the disappearance of the Cape Coast festival are difficult to define. It is clear that asafos-led customs were subject to periods of prohibition, and in the case of Cape Coast the provocation for such proscription to be applied came in the form of a significant outbreak of violence in 1932. The 1932 unrest has been identified by the aforementioned Stanley Shaloff as being distinct from the 'traditional violence between rival military formations' of Cape Coast, a phenomenon which for Shaloff 'would not merit extended scholarly concern'.⁸⁴ Although this thesis hopes to have proved Shaloff's interpretation of asafos conflict incorrect, it is true that the outbreak of violence in 1932 had an explicitly political bent, and was to some extent determined by political differences amongst proto-nationalist intellectuals of the ARPS. As widely acknowledged by colonial officials, Fante intellectuals and the asafos themselves, the violence were born out of a fierce controversy over who should rightfully be

⁸³ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1439, Acting CCP to CS, 2 April 1931.

⁸⁴ Shaloff, 'The Cape Coast Asafos Company Riot of 1932', p 591.

made *tufuhene* of the Cape Coast companies, George Edward Moore or W. Z. Coker. The position of *tufuhene*, supreme commander of the town's companies, had important military and political dimensions. Not only did the *tufuhene* lead the joint asafo into battle, he was also required to support the Oguaahene in the administration of the region. As Casely-Hayford explained, 'the tufuhin is, *ex officio*, also the principal civil councillor of the King', effectively the second-ranking office-holder in the state.⁸⁵ The question of who was appointed to be *tufuhene*, Coker or Moore, therefore had significant ramifications for both the asafo companies but also for the Oguaahene himself. William Zacchaeus Coker, supported by No. 1 Company (Bentil) and part of the Agona *abusua* who laid claim to the stool, was effectively the incumbent *tufuhene* and had held the stool since 1888.⁸⁶ A charismatic kingmaker, he had enjoyed extraordinary influence over swathes of Cape Coast and indeed, over certain sections of the colonial administration. In 1928, after divisions among the town's intellectual elite pit Coker against the sitting Oguaahene Mbra III and the influential Kobina Sekyi - Coker had been unwilling to support an election boycott championed by Sekyi - the old *tufuhene* was deposed. George Edward Moore, linguist of the ARPS and ally to Sekyi and was proposed as his successor. Although he had the support of the other six companies of Cape Coast, No. 1 Company (Bentil) refused to accept Moore on the basis that he was not from the Agona *abusua*. Their loyalty to Coker, who had originally hailed from Bentil, was unwavering.

The enstoolment of George Moore as *tufuhene* in July 1928 was contested from the outset by No. 1 Company (Bentil). Tensions simmered for four years until they finally boiled over when the ceremonial 'outdooring' of George Moore was attempted in 1932. These hostilities erupted despite the fact that Moore's rival Coker had died the previous year. On 1 October 1932, 'while the ceremony was being observed the members of No. 1

⁸⁵ Casely-Hayford, *Gold Coast Native Institutions*, p 66.

⁸⁶ Casely-Hayford, 'Genealogical History', p 216 - 218.

Asafu Company (Bentisfu) to the surprise and astonishment of all in Cape Coast, came out with guns from their quarters and lined along the streets through which the members of No. 3 Asafu Company had to pass, obviously with the intent to attack'.⁸⁷ In the ensuing fight, several people lost their lives. Nevertheless, the involvement of the asafu in this moment of political tension has been argued to have drawn more members into the Cape Coast companies.⁸⁸

Four days after the 1932 *amanko*, Cape Coast was placed under the Peace Proclamation Ordinance. Although the ceremonial performance of the attempted outdoorings of the new *tufuhene* was distinct from the annual Oguaa festival, both were prohibited under the terms of the ordinance. According to Samuel Blankson, 'the celebration of Fetu Afahye went on year after year in varying degrees until the Government banned it in 1932 by passing the Peace Proclamation Ordinance'.⁸⁹ As Blankson acknowledges, however, 'the ban was substantially relaxed in 1939', and there is no doubt that the Oguaa asafu were celebrating their local festivals in the closing decades of colonial rule. Applications for permits and permissions to perform the 'annual festival' as early as 1947 and 'the yearly abangyi festival' from 1956 onwards are preserved in the Cape Coast archives, and it is likely that permissions were given throughout the intervening years.⁹⁰ Fetu Afahye differed from smaller festivals in Oguaa like Abusum-huro, a ritual process whereby a period of silence followed by extreme noise 'created by the firing of guns, the ringing of bells, the beating of drums, and striking of tin plates and other metallic utensils, as well as hooting and boisterous singing', was undertaken in order to banish evil spirits from the town, which was said to have 'fallen into disuse' by the early twentieth century.⁹¹

⁸⁷ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/63, Petition from *Ohene* Kweku Arhin to Governor Shenton Thomas, 24 July 1933.

⁸⁸ Gocking, 'The Historic Akoto', p 308.

⁸⁹ Samuel Blankson, *Fetu Afahye* (Cape Coast University Press 1973), p 16.

⁹⁰ PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/884, Supi Kofi Amuah to DC Cape Coast, 3 August 1947; ADM 23/1/1503, A. G. Cross to Senior Superintendent of Police and Oguuahene, 8 August 1955.

⁹¹ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1759, Cape Coast Constitution Enquiry.

The prohibition of Fetu Afahye reflects wider colonial restrictions on local festivals and on the ways in which asafo companies moved around the town. Although the annual Cape Coast *did* occur between the imposition of the Peace Proclamation Ordinance in 1932 and Nkrumah's declaration of renewal in 1964, it would have been subject to the limitations of the relevant government officials. Even the process of application to carry out Fetu Afahye appears to have been met by a desire to restrict the intimacy of the Cape Coast companies, who were unable to gain approval for an 'omnibus application' as a combined force and instead were required to submit individual applications, company by company.⁹² High levels of police were deployed throughout the periods of celebration, and the extent of colonial surveillance was apparent. Fetu Afahye in independent Ghana, however, afforded the asafo the ability to perform their local custom without having to appease the anxieties of colonial bureaucracy.

Physical Demarcations of Asafo Space: Posuban Shines

Although the cartography of asafo landscapes was often visible only in the knowledge of the inhabitants of the Fante towns, physical renderings of company territory were at times concrete. Most notable among these markers were, and continue to be, the *posuban* shrines sprinkled across the Fante coast. Often built in a miniature imitation of the European forts or naval ships, with grand architectural features of arches and columns, or in the shape of wild and fearsome beasts, the materiality of the posuban is reflective of the strength and warrior spirit of the companies themselves. Now a frequent feature of tourist guides and a subject of analysis by art historians, these striking ornamental sculptures have roots in

⁹² PRAAD Cape Coast, ADM 23/1/1503, A. G. Cross to Senior Superintendent of Police and Oguahene, 8 August 1955.

simpler shrines. As well as providing a physical rendering of company character, *posuban* represented the embodiment of ritual and historic aspects of asafo life.

Although it is unclear when *posuban* first emerged, it appears that elaborately decorated company shrines were not common until the end of the nineteenth century. The first recorded 'monumental *posuban*', Doran Ross argues, was built in Abandze in 1883: 'a monument with thick walls, decorated with arches, central tower, columns, geometric designs, and a painting'.⁹³ Ross suggests that these design characteristics may be rooted in 'the elaborate grave sculpture of the Fante', detailed by European visitors to the coast in the seventeenth century. A process of intercultural exchange which brought Fante funerary aesthetics into contact with symbols of European dominance and strength may therefore have been in play in the evolution of monumental *posuban*. Pragmatic implications of new resources are significant here too, with the introduction of Portland cement at the turn of the century creating 'the necessary momentum for the sudden proliferation of figurative cement statuary that occurred after the Second World War'.⁹⁴

The growth in the popularity of monumental *posuban* in the second half of the twentieth century can be seen as part of a wider chronology of asafo shrines. Both Labi and Ross identify this process of evolution as beginning with aesthetically simpler yet ritually significant shrines constituted of fenced trees, *dua ase*, and sacred mounds or rocks, *esiw*. Constructions made up of these two elements are, Ross argues, 'a conventional means of defining sacred space among the Akan', and therefore suggests that such shrines were integral to company life from the genesis of the asafo system.⁹⁵ *Dua ase* were often built over the physical remains of asafo ancestors, or, as noted above, those of their rivals. Evidence of *dua ase* and *esiw* along the Fante coast was recorded by early European visitors.

⁹³ Ross, 'Come and Try', p 13; Labi, 'Transformation of European Forts, Castles and Flags', p 86.

⁹⁴ Nancy Toothman, 'Cement Funerary Sculpture: Historic Continuities in Central Guinea Coast Commemorative Art', *Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies* 17: 1 (1988), p 15.

⁹⁵ Ross, 'Come and Try', p 16.

Writing about his experience residing at Fort Fredericksborg in the 1660s, Wilhelm Müller noted that ‘the whole country is full of trees which the Fetu people hold sacred’ and that so prevalent were ‘*fitisio*-rocks and stones’ that he inadvertently sat on one in Cape Coast, only to be chased off by a crowd of local women.⁹⁶ Shrines in this style were incorporated into asafo culture and are still used by some companies today.



Fig. 14: Dua ase posuban of No. 4 Company (Ntin), Abura bush branch, 2018. Photograph taken by author.

⁹⁶ Jones, *German Sources*, p 160.

Significant within Labi's analysis is the undercurrent of company rivalry driving the development of ever larger, grandiose and decorative posuban. Like asafo flags, distinctive posuban were designed in part to display company strength and pay homage to historical victories. The size and complexity of construction also allowed for a display of company wealth – usually arising from particularly affluent *asafohinfo*. Commitment to this aesthetic mode of competitive chauvinism could therefore be located as a fundamental tenet of posuban development.

Yet even the construction of *dua ase* appears in some cases to have been representative of the asafo experience. In a letter to the *omanhene* of Saltpond Nana Essandoh III, the *ohin* of Saltpond's Upper Town, Brom Enki Ababis II, describes the ritual processes surrounding the re-fencing of a *dua ase* shrine as should have been conducted in 1922:

the ceremony of the fetish tree should be done when the Ohin beats gong gong so that the company should meet and sound their bugle and all marched to a field to cut sticks each one according to the number of the company men to see how many had died during the year, this done from the ancient times, when the sticks are put down the elder Captain by name Bronoo cuts the old fence into two; this had been done in olden times. After it is cut the Ohin brings in his rum to perform the ceremony before the fence is renewed.⁹⁷

It appears that the *dua ase* of Saltpond Upper Town's company (Nkusukum) had been inappropriately re-fenced under the cover of night without these ritual acts. Tensions between various factions of Nkusukum and Upper Town elders had created an atmosphere of mistrust, and the supposed power which the *ohin* should have exerted in organising the *dua ase* ceremony was hotly contested. It is therefore necessary to approach the *ohin's*

⁹⁷ PRAAD Accra, ADM 11/1/1129, Brom Enki Ababis II to Nana Essandoh III, 22 September 1922.

statement with some caution, yet his reaction to the illegitimate re-fencing still indicates the gravity attributed to the ceremony. He argued that ‘as the fence had been made at night surely the fetish is spoiled’ and that if the new fence was not removed and the ceremony repeated properly, ‘the result will be very fatal’. Although the covert fencers may have disagreed – there is nothing in the archive to represent their position – it is reasonable to accept the description of the ritual processes and its significance. Just as monumental posuban would later display the bravery of asafo companies using sculptures of fearless beasts, the gathering of sticks for re-fencing *dua ase* was representative of company sacrifice.

The desire to move away from bamboo fences appears to have begun slightly earlier in Cape Coast, where the proximity to colonial officials may have played a part in utilizing more resilient materials. An 1885 petition from captains of No. 3 Company (Ntin) contended that ‘sometime around 1882 or 1883, His Excellency the Governor Griffith on his visit to Cape Coast took a walk to Intin, saw the post, and recommended the bamboo fence be removed and a brick one put in its place’.⁹⁸ However, the construction of a wall was opposed by the Foreman of Public Works, who believed that it would become ‘an obstruction to the public thorough fare’ and, moreover, allow Ntin to decorate the wall with provocative company insignia. He argued that ‘should permission be granted to this Company to carry out their designs, it would also be the means of a riot taking place’.⁹⁹ If we accept the account of the No. 3 Company *safohen*, it seems as if there was some difference in how colonial officers understood their role as supporting or opposing the transition from simpler *dua ase* to monumental posuban.

What is critical about the timeline of posuban development presented by Labi and Ross is that it demonstrates the lack of success by the Native Customs Ordinance in restricting their construction. For the entirety of Labi’s first stage and much of his second,

⁹⁸ Ibid, ADM 11/1/1108, Petition from No. 3 Company Captains to the Governor, 19 January 1885.

⁹⁹ Ibid, Ellis to Surveyor, 19 February 1885.

when posuban construction became more intricate, decorative and large-scale, it was theoretically illegal to 'erect or make any company post in any public place'.¹⁰⁰ That so many of these monumental posuban emerged despite colonial legislation may have been the result of a technicality. The large structures were often built on the sites of prior *dua ase* shrines and therefore represented an addition rather than entirely new 'company post'.

It is difficult to overstate the significance of posuban for company identity. The extent to which they captured and signified the meaning of the asafo is evident in the words of a present-day *safohen* of No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin):

When you go to a town and there is no posuban then that place is not a town.

Everywhere you see a posuban then in the olden times a war happened there and different towns fought there. Each time you see a posuban it shows that the town was fought for before it was maintained.¹⁰¹

A visible representation of asafo guardianship, shrines, whether *dua ase* or monumental posuban, would not have been eradicated without significant opposition from local communities.

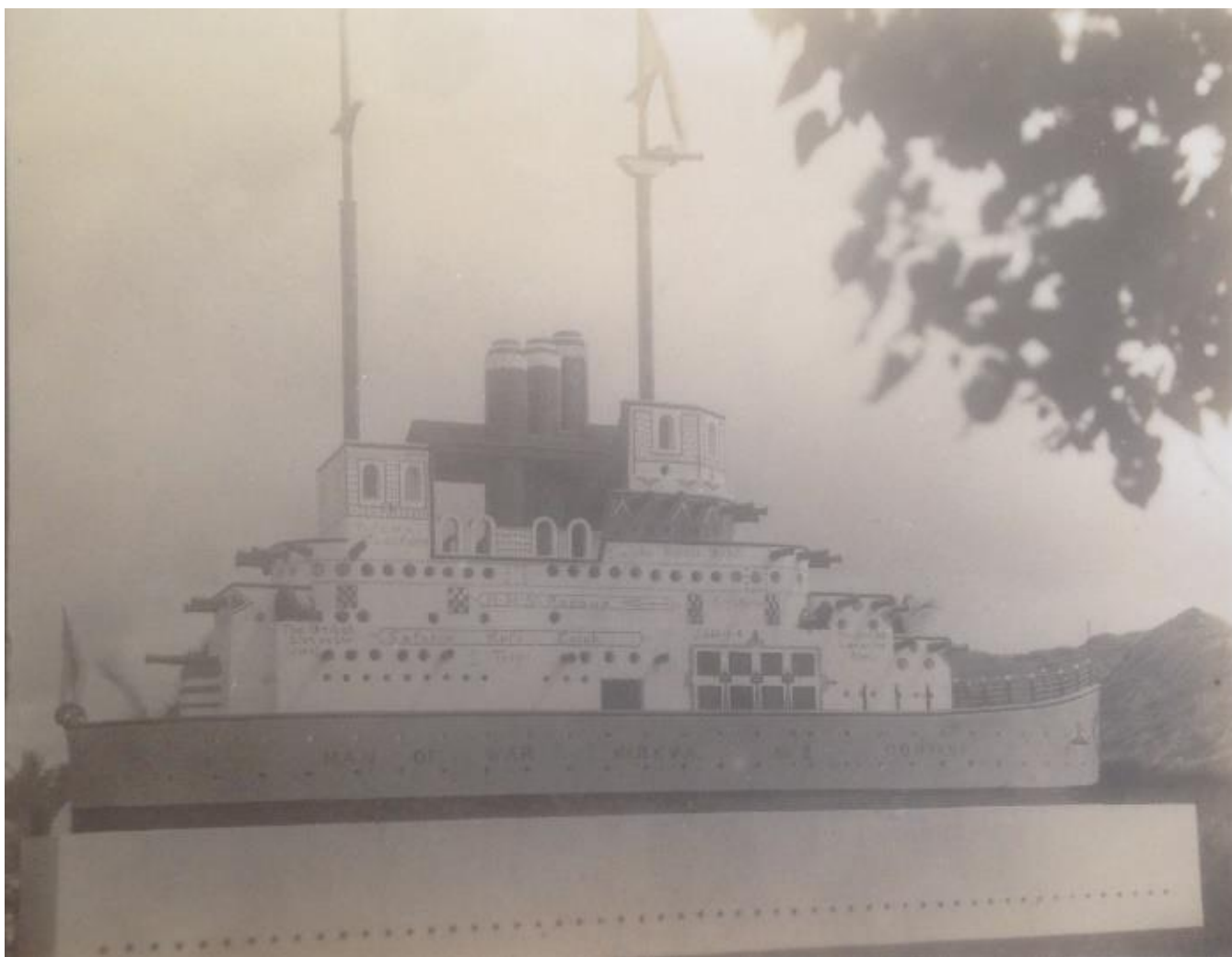
The Lost Shrine of Ekumfi Narkwa

Perhaps the most poignant example of the way in which historical memory was fixed in place by the Asafo posuban shrines is that of No. 2 Company in Ekumfi Narkwa. Due to concerns regarding the provocative nature of the posuban, descriptions and photographs of this shrine are available in colonial correspondence shortly after it was built in the early 1940s. Despite some deterioration, these images provide striking insight into the character of the posuban when it was first constructed.

¹⁰⁰ Gold Coast Laws, Vol II, p 812.

¹⁰¹ Ntin Safohen, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. William Kobina Otoo, 8 February 2018, Cape Coast.





Figs 15, 16, and 17. Ekumfi Narkwa shrine 1942. PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298.

Arguably the most striking element of the Narkwa posuban was its sheer size. According to the DC of Saltpond in 1942, the shrine was ‘approximately 30 feet high (it is three storey) and 60 foot long’.¹⁰² This size was reflected in the cost and time taken to build the posuban, amounting to three years of labour and £600. Nestled among the houses of Ekumfi Narkwa, the posuban certainly cast a striking representation of company power.

The power embodied in the No. 2 Company post also reflected the asafo tendency to incorporate aspects of British military strength into their own symbols and identities. The

¹⁰² PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298, CCP to SNA, 20 October 1942.

posuban was a detailed replica of the warship HMS Renown, commissioned in 1916 and active throughout the Second World War. It is likely that Renown was introduced to No. 2 Company of Narkwa through the propaganda films shown widely throughout the Gold Coast during the war. Indeed, Renown was the star of a number of short films by British Pathé News, which may have made their way to the Gold Coast Information Department via the Colonial Office in London.¹⁰³ The use of her likeness in a physical embodiment of asafo spiritual identity is meaningful. The attention to detail in the posuban, in order to depict the British military ship accurately, was substantial. The DC of Saltpond described the ‘piece de resistance’ of the posuban as ‘one of the three “funnels” belching forth smoke from a fire specially lighted down below’.¹⁰⁴ As with the borrowing of Atlantic-era architecture to build posuban in the shape of slave forts, British military might was clearly a quality which companies attempted to emulate.

Posuban that took the form of battleships existed elsewhere on the coast. Ross identifies the first three of these as built at Abrem Berasi (in 1921), neighbouring Ekumfi Akra (in 1929) and in Saraafa Aboano (in 1931).¹⁰⁵ More followed, including the often-photographed battleship *posuban* belonging to No. 6 Company Anomabo (Kyirim) built in 1954. According to a local publication on the Anomabo asafo shrines, Kyirim’s *posuban* acts as an explicit provocation: ‘they challenge people to fight at sea if they are strong’.¹⁰⁶ This is said to reference a conflict between Kyirem and No. 2 Company (Etsiwa) which happened at sea. The Ekumfi Narkwa *posuban* was therefore one of a cluster of warship shrines built between the 1920s and 1950s - in line with Labi’s typology of *posuban* evolution but also speaking to imprint of European military activity on asafo culture.

¹⁰³ British Pathé Archive, *HMS Renown Comes Home*, 23 March 1942; *HMS Renown Arrives at Portsmouth: News in a Nutshell*, 25 February 1935; *HMS Victory and HMS Renown*, 1920-1929.

¹⁰⁴ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298, CCP to SNA, 20 October 1942.

¹⁰⁵ Ross, ‘Come and Try’, p 21.

¹⁰⁶ Nyanfueku Akwa, *Anomabo Asafo Companies and Their Shrines Alive* (Luna Marketing: Accra, 2005), p 16.

This rhetoric of British military power is also evident in the slogan carved onto the hull of the posuban warship, twice on each side, ‘the British Lion on the alert’, accompanied by four small lion figurines. An image frequently deployed to represent British imperial power, the slogan can be seen as part of the broader co-option of that power by the companies of the Fante coast, as with the use of the union jack on asafo flags. Indeed, the use of the lion in Akan arts has been argued by Ross to have its origins in inter-cultural exchange: ‘the lion was a relatively late introduction to Akan iconography and largely a twentieth-century phenomenon . . . the quintessential visual metaphor for European (especially British) power on the Gold Coast’.¹⁰⁷



Fig. 18: Monumental posuban of No. 6 Company Anomabo (Kyirim), 2018. Photograph taken by author.

¹⁰⁷ Doran H. Ross, ‘The Heraldic Lion in Akan Art: A Study of Motif Assimilation in Southern Ghana’, *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 16 (1982), p 171–173.

Despite the homage paid to British military power at the time of the global struggle against the Axis powers, colonial officers were not sympathetic to the Narkwa posuban. The construction of the shrine was, of course, illegal, the 1892 ordinance stating that ‘it shall not be lawful to erect or make any company post in any public place’ and giving DCs the authority to ‘cause any company post in his district to be pulled down and destroyed’. The question of whether or not to order the destruction of the Narkwa posuban was therefore considered by administration – a discussion complicated by the fact that the shrine had been under construction for three years before local commissioners noticed its existence. As the Governor asked, ‘how is it that the Government knew nothing about it, and took no steps to stop the building at an earlier stage?’¹⁰⁸ Indeed, the successful completion of the posuban without government interference points to the limitations of the colonial administration when it came to asafo activity. It transpired that due to staff shortages and turnover, no representative of the government had visited Narkwa since the former Saltpond DC had walked along the beach in 1940.

Once the existence of the posuban became known, just a few days before the planned unveiling of the shrine, a flurry of communication ensued. The Commissioner of Central Province believed that it should be torn down, arguing that ‘the time has arrived when the disruptive elements of the asafo system should be brought under control, and one way of doing this is to show the asafo that they cannot break the law and get away with it’.¹⁰⁹ The DC of Saltpond and the acting Secretary for Native Affairs, in contrast, took a more sympathetic view. The former noted the prolonged rivalry between the asafo companies of Ekumfi Narkwa and nearby Ekumfi Ekumpoano but argued that if the posuban were to be destroyed ‘the peace would be considerably more likely to be disturbed than to leave it as it is’.¹¹⁰ His concerns that the unveiling of the posuban may provoke conflict between the two

¹⁰⁸ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298, Governor to CS, 17 October 1942.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ PRAAD Accra, CSO 21/21/298, DC Saltpond to CCP, 11 October 1942.

communities were curtailed by efforts to limit the festivities: company formations, guns, drumming, flags, emblems and uniforms were all prohibited and a heavy police presence was ensured. It appears that these measures may have inhibited the potential for violence, with the DC reporting that ‘the gathering was perfectly orderly and not hostile’. The serenity of the unveiling, alongside the DC’s broader recommendations, seems to have convinced the SNA, who wrote that ‘if I were a native of Narkwa and it was destroyed, I think that I should feel like a child whose most treasured toy had been sent to a jumble sale by its parents’.¹¹¹ At the subsequent Executive Council meeting on 23 November, the decision that ‘the Company Post at Narkwa should *not* be demolished’, was supported by a majority, including the Governor.¹¹²

The posuban in all its martial glory escaped destruction. Asafo members of Narkwa were left to their own devices, and for more than two decades the company post served as the heart of asafo life. But in 1967, tragedy struck. A precarious community residing on a narrow spit of land between the Narkwa lagoon and the Atlantic, Ekumfi Narkwa was faced with the existential threat of natural disaster. Heavy rainfall that year caused high volumes of water to cascade down the Okyi-Nakwa river which feeds into the Narkwa lagoon. As the lagoon burst its banks, the architecture of Ekumfi Narkwa was gradually eroded. Over a period of around three or four months, the entire community was washed away. The man-of-war shrine was one of the last buildings to be lost, its size and the strength of its foundations propping up the posuban for weeks, until it too slipped away into the ocean.¹¹³

The loss of the Narkwa posuban and the resettlement of the community had profound implications for local asafo culture. So devastating was this experience that I was told that the elders of Narkwa ‘kept crying whenever they thought of this national

¹¹¹ Ibid, Letter from Ag SNA to CS, 22 October 1942.

¹¹² Ibid, Executive Council Paper for Discussion: Agenda for Monday 23 November 1942.

¹¹³ Narkwa elders, interview with Ella Jeffreys, trans. Abeku Adams, Ekumfi Narkwa, 20 April 2018.

disaster'.¹¹⁴ It was during my own trip to Ekumfi Narkwa in 2018 that I was confronted by memories of the 1967 flood which continue to shake the Narkwa asafo. Whereas most asafo representatives I had spoken to throughout the course of this project were able to speak with relative fluency about the culture and history of their companies, many of my questions to the Narkwa asafo went unanswered. This is not to say that my interlocutors were uninterested in or disengaged from company life: the asafo still has a significant part to play in the life of the community. Yet in the words of Narkwa elders themselves, 'so much about our history and customs was lost to the ocean'. The names of the *abosom*, the calendar which dictated the ebb and flow of asafo ritual activity and the knowledge of those rituals: all were acknowledge as having been eroded by the same water which tore down the physical architecture of old Narkwa.

Fig. 19: Ekumfi Narkwa, 2018. Photograph taken by Author.



¹¹⁴ Ibid.

The Ekumfi Narkwa flood can be seen as a metaphor for the ebb and flow of colonial control over the asafo in the first half of the twentieth century. Although the great posuban escaped the clutches of the Native Customs Ordinance, its loss through a natural disaster underscores the intimate relationship between the asafo and place. While the warship boldly projected the character of the company to all and sundry, it also had esoteric meaning for those who lived around it. By physically tying the asafo to the town, the posuban embodied the connection between the land, the ancestors and the ritual life of the company. Without it, much of what makes an asafo company an asafo company has been lost.

Conclusion

Many of the bustling seaside towns which defined the Gold Coast as a zone of dynamic cross-cultural encounter in the era of Atlantic commerce have entered a period of relative decline in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The move of the colonial capital from Cape Coast to Accra in 1877, the construction of Takoradi to the west as the colony's principal harbour in the 1920s and the subsequent construction of Tema harbour under Nkrumah have all contributed to the removal of commercial activity from the Fante coast. Once hubs of trade, towns such as Anomabo and Ekumfi Otua have become relatively impoverished communities. Yet the coastal settlements inhabited by the Fante asafo were profoundly shaped by the cosmopolitan dynamics born out of Atlantic trade. Historical legacies were etched into the topography of littoral towns, born out through the physical landscape and the ways in which this space was inhabited. That asafo violence often broke out on the borders between rival company territories or at times when public space was utilized for ritual ceremonies is indicative of the profound position which land held in Fante culture. As a link with ancestral lineages, land afforded a connection with the past.

Colonial attempts to regulate the asafo company system frequently involved the control of public space. Although this was often ineffective, it did reflect some

understanding of the topographical contexts within which asafo violence thrived. Colonial discourse often presented violence as a result of the deliberately provocative nature of asafo material culture and the drunkenness and hooliganism which was seen to occur during festivals and ceremonies. While these analyses were sometimes superficial, there was nevertheless an acknowledgement that conflict frequently coincided with visible uses of public space. Among those officials who invested substantial time and energy into understanding the company system, such as De Graft Johnson and Arthur Ffoulkes, this analysis was of course more sophisticated. In any case, the proscriptions outlined in legislation such as the Native Customs Ordinance enshrined the connection between violence and uses of space for all involved in the government and judiciary of the Gold Coast Colony.

Yet colonial officials sometimes knew little about the spaces they were trying to control. Despite detailed enquiries and reports submitted by district commissioners and local intellectuals, asafo companies often held the upper hand when it came to the navigation of the communities that they served. Their unique relationship with the town provided them with maps of allegiance and support that rippled beyond dedicated company territories. Evasion and secrecy, as well as intelligence gathering, were products of this cartography. Land also provided a connection with asafo ancestors and their historic link to the past. Asafo place-making, acts of renewal and remembering which reinforced company obligations to time and space had provocative capacities because of this undercurrent of ritual power. Steps taken to stop or to limit such place-making processes, therefore, had the capacity to weaken the asafo's intimate connection to its martial origins. While attempts to limit asafo use of public space were patchy, the encroachment of colonial red tape into the fundamental acts of company culture – public displays, construction of shrines, festive rituals – does go some way to explain the decline of asafo activity from the 1940s.

Conclusion

We end as we began, with the questions born out of De Graft Johnson's article on the Cape Coast asafo. Was the position of the asafo in Gold Coast society one of deep cultural importance, or were the companies simply a rabble of young men provoking erratic riots? By this point, the cultural importance of the Fante asafo should be evident. The asafo were present for the birth of modern Fante society and the companies were intertwined with early power structures in towns such as Cape Coast and Anomabo. Much of their early activity took place on a coastal stage characterised by competition and conflict. The asafo fought against, and alongside, the British, the Dutch, the Danes, the Nzema and Asante, as well as within the shifting alliances between various coastal polities. Shaped by this environment, the asafo grew to be a critical element of political and social infrastructure on the Gold Coast. They drew from European and Akan mores in the development of their unique company cultures, and therefore retained a distinctly coastal flavour even as the era of Atlantic commerce gave way to formal British colonial rule. Companies had strong cosmological roots, complex material culture, and intricate psycho-geographies, all of which grounded them in the towns and communities which they called home. Asafo activities shaped the annual calendar of Fante lives, the nature of their labour, and the substance of their – often gendered – identities. To say that the position of the asafo in Gold Coast society was one of deep cultural importance is somewhat of an understatement. Indeed, it is this depth which sets the Fante asafo apart from their cousins to the east and inland.

But was there frequent asafo instigated violence? Undoubtedly. Although the colonial depiction of the Fante companies as erratic hooligans was fundamentally misinformed, it is abundantly clear that asafo *amanko* were not infrequent and were not exaggerated. The loss of life, the injury and the trauma of company fights has been

extensively detailed in the pages above. Nor were *amanko* on the Fante coast predominantly motivated by overtly political disagreement. Although there are significant cases of asafo fights born out of political factions – especially in Cape Coast – these histories have been prioritised in academia over the many *amanko* which were underpinned by more nebulous cultural factors. As was noted in the introduction of this thesis, scholarly focus on asafo violence which explicitly interacted with the politics of colonial indirect rule is understandable. The asafo did have political power, and this was – at times – wielded through the mode of physical violence. Yet to dismiss the majority of Fante company disputes as irrelevant is to undermine the capacity for analysis of asafo culture. It also fails to account for the intersection between military identity and outbreaks of episodic *amanko*. Violence *was* endemic to the Fante asafo precisely because this identity was perpetuated through the vast reach of company culture beyond simply the political arena.

Military Identities: Formation and Continuities

The asafo company system emerged as a military response to the threats posed by the political turmoil of the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade: the turbulence on the coast, the expansionist empires inland, and the need to defend the integrity of the Fante towns. Asafo proximity to both precarity and to dynamic intercultural exchange profoundly shaped the structure of companies and the identities of their members. In some cases, the legacy of this period is stark. The character of No. 6 Company Cape Coast (Akrampa) as the mixed-race mediators between British power and Fante communities persisted in well into the twentieth century. Over two hundred years after Tom Ewusi gathered together a band of Euro-African men to form his own company, the Akrampa were marching into Moree to quell asafo unrest, and negotiating peace agreements between companies in Cape Coast. At times, these legacies were even wielded as insults, the use of the slur *brofonkwa* (white men's slaves) against No. 5 Company Cape Coast (Brofomba), for example. The political evolution

Conclusion

of the coastal towns in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – when expansions in trade transformed previously rural backwaters into bustling port cities – had ramifications for asafo allegiances far into the twentieth century. Asafo unrest in 1932 Cape Coast over who should rightfully occupy the seat of *oguaahene* was informed by earlier power structures initiated by Birempong Kojo as Cape Coast transitioned from Fetu to Oguaa under his reign. Yet the experiences of the early asafo were also encapsulated in subtler forms. Asafo structures and naming practices reflected their role as a united army, designed to rebuff unwanted military advances, even when company violence only took the form of *amanko*. Posuban designs which mirrored the architecture of slave forts were built centuries after the original castles first peppered the landscape of the Fante coast. Even as the locations of power moved to Accra in the East and Takoradi in the East, the remnants of the great Fante outposts echoed through asafo culture.

Once the trade in slaves transitioned into legitimate commerce and early colonial rule, British campaigns into the interior further shaped asafo identities. The British expedition to capture Nzema chief Kweku Aka in 1848 with accompanying troops of the Cape Coast asafo permeated through the town for generations. So profound was this military endeavor that it shaped the gendered experiences of a lineage of *safohemma* from No. 1 Company Cape Coast (Bentil) for over a century. The continued influence of men such as Charles MacCarthy and Brodie Cruickshank, in Cape Coast and Anomabo respectively, also resonated through asafo culture, in oaths, in flags, and in status. Battles against Asante were memorialized within company identities from Cape Coast to the Ekumfi region. The extent to which this era underpinned foundational asafo sense of self cannot be understated.

This is not to say that asafo culture and identities were static. Although there was a great deal of continuity, there was also evolution as asafo cultures adapted to reflect their new historical contexts. International conflict in the twentieth century left its mark on even the most esoteric aspects of company culture. The revelation of the *obosom* Nana Adangba to

No. 7 Company Cape Coast (Amanful) shortly after veterans of the Gold Coast Regiment returned home from war speaks to the malleable nature of asafo cosmologies, responding to the new forms of warfare which company members participated in. The same can be said of the lost Ekumfi Narkwa posuban, a representation of the British battlecruiser HMS Renown. As military aesthetics evolved in line with the technological developments of the modern world, company culture adapted to reflect these new forms of warfare. Military identities predicated on the experience of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries still prevailed, but they were influenced by the experiences of international global conflict.

The Acceleration of Intercompany Violence

Where we see a greater degree of change is in the targets of asafo violence itself. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, we can identify a second phase of asafo history within which inter-company conflict increased. The prohibition of the asafo's formal military role under British colonialism cut off a critical avenue through which to express military identities. Violence was therefore reoriented away from external foes which threatened the stability of Fante towns, and towards rival companies who had – at times – been brothers in arms. This transition was gradual. It is not the case that a united army suddenly disintegrated into warring factions. Intercompany fights predated the advent of formal British colonial rule. Nevertheless, the considerable increase in *amanko* between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth coincided with the removal of other forms of military activity. This evolution should be understood as the adaptation of military identities – and the need to express these identities – under the parameters of colonial rule. Acts of violence which proved military prowess remained an integral part of asafo life, even if violence was internecine during this period.

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The potential for violence was exacerbated by a series of cultural modes which perpetuated military company identities. Flags, emblems, oaths, and lyrics – deployed by the *asafo* at moments of ritual festivities and during significant events – all worked in tandem to keep the company identities of centuries past ever present in the minds of members. From the contested emblems of 1880s Mumford, to the use of memorial *ntam* in Ekumfi, company culture perpetually reinforced the need to prove that contemporary Fante men could live up to the warrior status of their ancestors. Military identities, and the violence through which they were expressed, were also reflected in the cosmologies of *asafo* companies. *Nananom nsamanfo*, such as *supi* Kofi Mensah in Apam, walked among company members ready to inhabit the body of the living when intercompany rivalry boiled over. The appearance of these ancestral spirits in the mundane world further increased the likelihood that rivalry would erupt into violence. Martial deities were also venerated and honoured with libation throughout the year. An integral part of *asafo* spiritual life, *abosom* acted as cosmological counterparts to the military identities of the *asafo*. The presence of both of these spiritual actors at funerals and festivals explains the frequent explosions of violence in these contexts, and reveals the relationship between *amanko* and *asafo* culture. In short, the increase of intercompany violence was underpinned by both the maintenance of other forms of *asafo* activity, and the need to reenact the histories which these activities drew upon.

The interplay between violence and gender during this second phase of *asafo* history was critical. Militarised masculinities which required men to prove their worth through acts of war did not evaporate with the establishment of the Gold Coast Colony. Despite the introduction of Christianised conceptions of manhood centered around literacy and abstinence, for most inhabitants of the Fante towns the *asafo* constituted a core aspect of male identity. These masculinities were brought to bear in the violence instigated between companies. Women reinforced this trend by threatening the removal of sex and marriage

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for those who wouldn't engage in violence. Accusations of cowardice were leveraged by female relations of asafo members with the effect that an outbreak of *amanko* became more likely. Such provocations overlaid the tension introduced by material culture, language, and cosmology especially during ritual events. During these episodes, the atmosphere of Fante towns became a tinderbox which women could set alight.

Successive *amanko* carved scars onto the landscape of Fante towns which would not fade for generations. These communities were already mapped out in line with asafo territories, marked by street names and *posuban* alike. Bush branches, a feature of the rural surroundings of former port cities such as Cape Coast, recalled the rural/urban tensions of the era of the Atlantic Slave Trade and this also refracted through asafo conceptions of place. Yet intercompany violence further inscribed the military identities of asafo members into the earth. These markers had the capacity to cause more violence, such as the building of the shrine belonging to No. 3 Company Cape Coast (Ntin) at a burial site which held the bodies of members killed in an intercompany fight. In other cases, the impact of company violence refracted through the geography of the town itself, of which the reconfiguration of Apam in the wake of the 1930 *amanko* is a prime example. These cartographies became another reminder of the military identities which asafo companies held on to so tightly.

The combination of all these cultural, spiritual, and geographical markers of company pride allowed for the proliferation of violence as an expression of asafo identity. It may seem somewhat artificial to disaggregate these interlocking aspects of company life. Yet once they are examined on their own terms the implications that each had for violence becomes clear. The expansion of the asafo into various aspects of Fante society meant that the company system could not simply disappear once their original purpose had been removed. Instead, the companies maintained their position as the defenders of their communities by violently proving that they could still be depended on to act as a military force.

'Riots' and Restrictions

Although the British drew on asafuo military capabilities in their endeavours to expand their power, this relationship ended once Asante and other inland empires were subjugated.

During the subsequent years of the Gold Coast Colony, the asafuo were treated as a nuisance to be managed. This approach reached its peak in the last fifty years of British colonial rule.

Attempts to stop company 'riots' led to serious restrictions on asafuo culture and expression.

Laws such as the Native Customs Ordinances and the Peace Proclamation Ordinances

essentially outlawed the building of asafuo shrines, the celebration of asafuo rituals, and the

gathering of asafuo members. Although the company system escaped the prospect of

complete abolition, their ability to perform their identities in various cultural spheres had

the potential to be seriously curtailed. Yet the enforcement of colonial legislation was, at

times, inconsistent. In some cases company life continued as usual, especially in smaller

towns further away from the prying eyes of District Commissioners. Despite anxieties

regarding civil unrest, the colonial state did not always have the infrastructure through

which to stop asafuo activity. The fact that colonial officials were not aware of the building of

the Narkwa shrine in the 1940s, an act expressly prohibited by the Native Customs

Ordinance, speaks to the limitations of colonial control.

Nevertheless, there were flashpoints of violence which triggered a clamp down on company culture. Where the Public Proclamation Ordinance was implemented following

notable *amanko*, the asafuo faced the threat of serious fines or incarceration. The banning of

the Cape Coast festival Fetu Afahye in the wake of asafuo tension in the 1930s also illustrates

the extent to which the colonial state *could* restrict opportunities for the expression of

military identities. This period also saw an increase in bond signing and permission slips

required before companies could exhibit new flags or perform certain rituals. Such

bureaucracy blunted the sharper edges of asafuo activity, a process which could have

damaged the company system irreparably. Had the colonial desire to restrict the asafo had been carried out systematically, and the bond between companies and their towns not been so strong, it is possible that the institution would have faded away altogether.

Colonial Peace?

By the early 1950s, asafo instigated violence was a far less frequent feature of the Fante coast. The reasons behind this decline are likely three-fold. In the first instance, as the years passed and new generations took over the asafo, the thread which tied companies to their military past stretched a little thin. In the second, the fall in violence should be understood as part of a longer trend which continued throughout the twentieth century, wherein asafo membership itself was in decline. Thirdly, it is probable that colonial attempts to restrict company activity did have at least some impact on the contexts within which *amanko* typically erupted. As has been shown, the heightened spiritual environments of funerals and festivals – so conducive to violence – were often flattened by the regulations of colonial rule in the twentieth century. These endeavours were purportedly designed to bring about a so-called ‘colonial peace’. It is to this question which we now return, in order to avoid any misconceptions about the nature of British imperialism on the Gold Coast.

The tension between physical violence and structural violence, between war and enforced peace, has long been discussed by scholars of Peace Studies. As Galtung outlined in his 1969 analysis of the nature of peace and violence, ‘absence of one kind of violence is bought at the expense of another’.¹ Attempts to prohibit physical, interpersonal violence have typically been underpinned by a monopoly of state violence, whether that be through incarceration, or enforced poverty. In the case of colonial treatment of the asafo, attempts to prohibit company *amanko* in the name of colonial peace was also underpinned by the threat of state violence. For all those asafo members sentenced to hard labour in prison, for the

¹ Galtung, ‘Violence, Peace, and Peace Research’, p 181.

poor fishing communities who were forced to pay raise substantial fines, violence was undoubtedly inflicted upon them by the colonial state.

Moreover, the colonial treatment of the asafo itself was frequently driven by a desire to curtail company life. It is critical to understand such attacks on such a poignant cultural institution as violent. Just as scholars of genocide have widened their conception of this most egregious act include the systemic violence of settler colonies such as Algeria, so too should we expand our conception of colonial violence to include the destruction – or attempted destruction – of culture.² This is not to conflate the brutality of settler colonialism with the more indirect style of imperialism enforced on the Gold Coast. Nevertheless, the destructive approach towards the Fante asafo by the British administration should be understood as inherently violent. The ever-present threat of abolition, the restrictions on asafo performance and festivities, the attempts to physically erase the asafo landscape by pulling down *posuban* shrines; all threatened the cultural fabric of Fante society. Codified through laws such as the Native Customs Regulation Ordinances, these restrictions amounted to a low-level war against the asafo – especially in the last forty years or so of British colonial rule. As Achille Mbembe wrote, in the colonial imaginary, ‘peace is more likely to assume the face of endless war’.³

It is also critical to remember that the emergence of the asafo company system itself was due in part to the political turmoil brought about by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Any discursive universe which posited the asafo as criminal hooligans, while the British perceived themselves as bringers of peace once the enslavement and trafficking of Africans gave way to encroaching colonisation was, at the very least, hypocritical. This tension is further compounded by the fact that for the early years of formal colonisation, the British drew on asafo support in the wars they waged with Asante, Nzema, and the Dutch. Once the

² See William Gallois, ‘Genocide in Nineteenth Century Algeria’, *Journal of Genocide Research* 15: 1 (2013).

³ Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (Duke University Press: Durham NC, 2019), p 76.

need for military backing on the coast had decreased, and that aspect of company life was formally prohibited, the warrior identity of the asafo was left with nowhere to go but inward. The violence that followed was as much a product of British colonialism as it was a phenomenon of Fante society. Subsequent endeavours for ‘colonial peace’ – a peace concerned entirely with the ability to control colonised subjects – were predicated on the ignorance and racism inherent to the entire British Empire. The fact that asafo violence did not reignite once Ghana became independent, even after festivals such as Oguaa Fetu Afahye had been re-established, speaks to the fallacy at the heart of the colonial project.

A Cultural History of Asafo Violence

By exploring the cultural context within which the asafo proliferated, this thesis has hoped to offer an alternative analysis to that provided in the pre-existing historiography. While other scholars have focused their attention on the Eastern asafo, and the political mobilisation of companies in these regions, a comprehensive examination of asafo culture has been passed over. The geographical focus of this research project has provided greater opportunity for such an examination. The Fante were, after all, the originators of the company system, and the extent to which the asafo influenced many aspects of society has always been particularly poignant in these areas. Studies of the asafo which prioritise places such as Kwahu and Akim Abuakwa were never going to centre company culture in their research because features such as emblems and rituals – so integral to the Fante asafo – were simply not as important within the Eastern companies. Scholarship which *has* evaluated the coastal asafo has often prioritized moments of political turbulence. This literature has illustrated the political influence of the asafo well, but has not always revealed the intricate cultural details which underpinned the complex identities of the Fante companies. Equally, the disproportionate attention paid to the potential for working class expression in the historiography has occluded an analysis of gender, and of the cultural

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influences that reinforced asafo identities. In doing so, a key explanation for why violence was so prevalent has been missed.

Focusing on a cultural history of asafo violence has also provided an insight into the continuities within company identities. Despite the marked change in the scale of violence which companies were involved in, many of the rituals, oaths, deities, uniforms, regalia, spirits, and art remained just as poignant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as they had done in previous years. The extent to which the cultural reach of the Fante asafo perpetuated even during the later years of colonial rule was significant, and this has been neglected to the detriment of historical scholarship.

Overall, including culture in an analysis of asafo violence enriches our understanding of both. Violent episodes have served as cultural texts, illuminating the nuances of asafo material culture, of cosmology, of gendered identities, and of the geographies of Fante towns themselves. Without using violence as our way in to these topics we risk ignoring the very foundations on which this culture rests. Understanding the events which companies have been involved in explains how military identities were created, and why the culture which venerated these identities was able to flourish for such an extended period of time. On the other hand, a proper appreciation of the nuances of asafo culture, and the ways in which this culture has both adapted and been maintained, goes a long way to explain what was at stake for the company members who enacted violence. Without the expansion of the Fante asafo into the cultural sphere it is unlikely that *amanko* would have been so frequently instigated along the central coast. Intercompany violence was predicated on a rich and complex history of military action, kept alive through regenerative company culture. So intense was this connection to the past, that military identities continue to have resonance in the Fante towns today.

My lasting impression of the Fante asafo is that they have long been the true guardians of their own histories. As encapsulated on many company flags, they are the

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keepers of the keys to the town. Through their art, their veneration of the ancestors, their linguistic memorial forms and the cultural cartographies they inscribe onto the coastal landscape, the Fante asafo companies hold onto their pasts tightly. So integral has the asafo been to the fabric of Fante society that company history has invariably been the history of the towns within which they reside. By keeping these histories alive, passing them down from one generation to the next, asafo companies have preserved a military culture which harks back to a different age. Although it has been centuries since large-scale conflict erupted on the Fante coast, the asafo remain people of war.

Epilogue

On 6 March 1957, the Gold Coast Colony became the independent nation of Ghana. Under the leadership of Kwame Nkrumah and his Convention People's Party (CPP), Ghana emerged onto the world stage. The months and years leading up to independence were filled with mobilization, negotiations, and eventually ceremonies of great grandeur. There is little detail regarding formal company involvement in independence processes, neither in oral histories nor archival sources. In short, asafo members supported the endeavour to free Ghana from the chains of British imperialism but were really on the outskirts of the formal transition to independence. This is not to say that individual asafo members were not party to independence negotiations, nor that such individuals were not significant in the new Ghana. Yet for the most part, asafo companies in and of themselves were in the periphery.

In the new political structures of Ghana, the asafo remained on the outside of state governance. As Ghana became a one-party republic in 1960, the CPP incorporated a great deal of civil society organisations such as trade unions into their body politic. Yet the diffuse and conflict-prone nature of the company system could not easily be manipulated into the arena of national politics. After all, the asafo was an organisation marked by hyper-regionalism. This did not stop political leaders from calling upon the asafo when it was convenient. There are numerous examples of Nkrumah drawing on asafo culture, including his assumption of the title *Tufuhene*. Twenty-five years later and four coups later, then President Jerry John Rawlings visited Cape Coast to call on the asafo to work with newly created organisations for local politics known as People's Defence Committees (PDCs). For the most part, however, asafo political activity remained focused on that of their own towns and villages, just as it had for the preceding centuries.

Epilogue

Company identities continued to proliferate throughout new and evolving cultural modes in the second half of the twentieth century. Although the combative aspect of inter-company relations was on the decline, the martial spirit of the asafo appears to have filtered through leisure activities in the Fante towns. In June of 1970, one of Cape Coast's football teams, the Mysterious Dwarves, applied for permission to 'sing war songs, through the principal streets' of the town before a match against their rivals, the Venomous Vipers.¹ Considering that these war songs were said to follow 'age-long tradition', it seems more than likely that they had their roots in asafo lyrics.

Nevertheless, perhaps the most dominant trend among the modern asafo, and undoubtedly the saddest, is that of decline. The drop in active membership, especially among younger inhabitants of the Fante towns has been explained as due in part to environmental degradation, the spread of strict Christian ideals and the high economic cost of being an active member of the asafo. The costs of those who hold the position of *safohen* or even *supi* can be exorbitant, with expectations to contribute cash and expensive liquor adding up quickly. Moreover, many young people today move away from their hometowns in search of greater job prospects in Accra or Takoradi. In doing so, they break the chain which linked father to son, passing down the inheritance of *egyabosom* and company membership.

Although many words have been written on the potential for the asafo to reconfigure themselves as a channel for local development, or political organisation, these ideas have yet to be realised. In the present day, the asafo consist predominantly of elderly men and women who keep the old ways alive, and a smattering of younger people who take an active interest. Asafo presence in the Fante towns remains strong at the funerals of certain preeminent individuals, or when large festivals are being celebrated. During Cape

¹ PRAAD Cape Coast, RG 1/3/33, J. Ben Mensah, Club Secretary, to Assistant Commissioner of Ghana Police Service, 9 June 1970.

Coast's Fetu Afahye, companies still wear their colours, albeit on branded t-shirts from companies such as MTN (a mobile network provider) who sponsor the event. Yet the daily work of security requires a larger active membership than most companies currently lay claim to.

Despite the decline in company membership, asafo culture continues to have influence throughout the globe. The complex spiritual histories and identities embodied within asafo flags have in recent years been reimagined through poignant art works. Elisabeth Efua Sutherland's work in a collaborative exhibition with fantasy coffin maker Paa Joe in 2018 drew on performance art using abstract, asafo-style banners to interrogate Ga and Fante cosmologies and to explore coastal relationships between death, life, and the sea. In the UK, recent winner of the Arts Foundation Futures Award Tonoa Sasraku constructs her own asafo-style flags by using appliqué on newsprint, which she then displays in haunting short films. Sasraku, whose art expresses her own identity as a mixed-race woman growing up in the United Kingdom, uses flag making as a method to delineate 'the physical legacy of postcolonial grief'.² Perhaps the most exciting artist working with asafo flags today is Barbara Eyeson, a member of the Ghanaian diaspora living in London. Eyeson collects, commissions, and records asafo flags, seeking to decipher the meanings inherent in the appliqué images, and display them both physically and online. Her recent documentary *Rich Past: Baba Issaka the Flag Maker*, follows its eponymous master flag maker Baba Issaka, who followed in his father's footsteps as tailor to the asafo. In her work with these sacred historical objects, Eyeson surely continues in the tradition of the asafo: as guardians of the history of the Fante towns.

² Caroline Roux, 'Artist Tonoa Sasraku: I didn't realise I was white until I was nine', *Financial Times*, 23 January 2021.

Appendix 1 – List of Referenced Fante Asafo Companies

Cape Coast Town

- No. 1 Company (Bentil)
- No. 2 Company (Anafu)
- No. 3 Company (Ntin)
- No. 4 Company (Nkum)
- No. 5 Company (Brofomba)
- No. 6 Company (Akrampa)
- No. 7 Company (Amanful)

Cape Coast Bush Branches

- Ekon – *affiliated with No. 1 Company (Bentil)*
- Siwdo – *affiliated with No. 3 Company (Ntin)*
- Kakumdo – *affiliated with No. 3 Company (Ntin)*
- Abura – *affiliated with No. 3 Company (Ntin)*
- Kwapro – *affiliated with No. 4 Company (Nkum)*

Moree

- No. 1 Company (Bentil)
- No. 2 Company (Kyirim)
- No. 3 Company (Nkum)

Anomabo

- No. 1 Company (Tuafo)
- No. 2 Company (Etsiwa)
- No. 3 Company (Dontsin)
- No. 4 Company (Ebirem Wassa)
- No. 5 Company (Ebron)
- No. 6 Company (Kyirim)
- No. 7 Company (Akomdoadze)

Saltpond

- No. 1 Company (Tuafo/Bakado)
- No. 2 Company (Dentsefo)
- No. 3 Company (Nkum)

Ekumfi

- Akra Company
- Narkwa Company
- Ekumpoano Company

Gomoa Dago

No. 1 Company (Tuafo)

No. 2 Company (Dentsefo)

For much of the twentieth century, the Dago asafo joined together as a united force.

Mumford

No. 1 Company (Dentsefo)

No. 2 Company (Tuafo)

Apan

No. 1 Company (Tuafo)

No. 2 Company (Dentsefo)

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ADM 14/1 Legislative Council Minutes

CSO 21/21 Colonial Secretary Papers

SCT 4/4 Judicial Assessors Notebook

SCT 5/4 Divisional Court, Cape Coast

SCT 5/5 Divisional Court, Accra

Public Records and Archives Administration Department, Cape Coast

ADM 23/1 Secretary for Native Affairs Papers

ACC Ascension to Archives

The National Archives UK (London)

CO 96 Gold Coast Original Correspondence

T70 Royal African Company Records

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Kyirim Elder, Anomabo, 15 August 1997

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