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TELLING THE TALE OF OSEI BONSU: AN ESSAY ON THE MAKING OF ASANTE ORAL HISTORY

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PART I

It is often said that the West African forest kingdom of Asante has the richest historical source materials in sub-Saharan Africa, and a contemporary culture with a vibrant interest in its own past. One result is that Asante has been 'much scrutinized' by historians (Reid 2011). However, basic work still remains to be done, and nowhere more so than in the area of oral and written historical texts in Twi produced by the Asante about and for themselves. In Barber's review of textual production of this sort throughout Africa, she ends by saying that such material 'cries out for a more integrated historical-anthropological account' (Barber 2007: 201). This is an essay in response to Barber's plea. It deals with Asante *apae*, which Barber herself discusses (Barber 2007: 92–7).

Asante *apae* are praise or referential poems about the lives of Asante kings. Their core subject is achievement and its celebration, but the genre also permits the interweaving of criticism with exaltation, and notably in the matter of behavioural foibles. It is also the case that recitation by experts allows for adjustments of meaning through oral intonation. The narrative spine of *apae* is substantively constant, but tonal or 'bent' articulation (*koa mu*) of particular words (*nsemfua*) can suggest multiple interpretations to the listener. Punning is common, and complicated by its promiscuous and prolonged extension through long passages of metaphor. The genre is not transparent, nor is it meant to be.

Here I am concerned with the person and reign of the seventh Asantehene (King of the Asante) Osei Tutu Kwame (1804–23). For reasons outlined below, he is known in the *apae* as Osei Bonsu, and that is the name I will use for him throughout. My focus is dictated by circumstance. In the forty-five years I have worked in Asante I have had the privilege of witnessing performances of the *apae* several times. By chance, I have listened to the *apae* of Osei Bonsu three times, and I have been present at lengthy discursive exegeses and interpretations of them by an Asantehene and his closest royal functionaries and intimates at the prolonged drinking parties (*saadwa*) held after such events.

By chance, too, Osei Bonsu was the first Asante ruler to be witnessed in the act of listening to his own *apae* by someone who described the event. On 26 September 1817, he ritually drank palm wine in his capital of Kumase while

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'the whole of the music' of his *kwakrannya* horn ensemble played. As the music went on, 'the executioners, holding their swords with their right hands, covered their noses with their left, whilst they sung his victories and titles' (Hutchison[1] in Bowdich 1819: 382). This account is immediately recognizable, for in the performance of *apae* today, 'the reciter half covers his mouth with his left hand, while he points a sword in his right hand at the chief' (Yankah 1983: 386).

Much has been written on the performative aspects of *apae* in Asante and other Akan kingdoms today. Speech, music, dance, dress, display, audience, impact, response and related concerns are subjects of an insightful scholarship that pays attention to a broader comparative literature in ethnography and in cultural theory (for example, Barber 2007; Boadi 1989; Carter 1984; Kaminski 2003; 2012; Nketia 1955; 1966; 1973; Purvis 2009; Sarpong 1990; Smith 1975; Yankah 1983; 1998). That said, the sole analysis known to me that attempts to investigate Asante *apae* for their specific historical, political and ideological content is a paper that limits itself to providing short footnotes to a text collected twenty years earlier by another author (Nketia 1966, for text; Arhin 1986, for investigation). This analysis is suggestive, but it is restricted and constrained. It is also ambitious, for reasons outlined below.

At normal conversational speed, the Asante dialect of Akan Twi is spoken almost twice as fast as its analogues among the Akuapem and Fante. The result is that 'words roll into each other' all of the time, and intermediate sounds are elided or omitted to maintain a rapid flow of talk. At times this is complicated by the poetic virtues attributed to the invention of compound words. All kings, Osei Bonsu included, are lauded as *pesemakoanya*; that is, *pe* + *sem* + *ako* + *anya* ('he who looks for a pretext for war and finds it'). It is obviously difficult to hear and interpret this in rapid oral performance, and more especially so when the given stanzas of verse offer an avalanche of such compounds.

In Asante utterance, public performance demands clear speech (*kasa duru*) that is spoken in a low, nasalized tone to indicate supplicatory seriousness. Formal linguistic analysis of the speech rhythms in Asante *apae* show that the variable tempo and line length of the verse are shaped by an isochronous beat. Expert recitation is attained in a style that exploits changes in tempo and ellipsis so as to maintain oscillatory rhythmic beats at harmonic intervals. This rhythm remains constant throughout, even during silent rest phases and between individual poems. It need hardly be said that this adds another level of difficulty for the listener (Purvis 2009; Kasahorow 2012: 32–3).

Asante *apae* are chanted poems replete with esoteric archaisms, obscure metaphors and abrupt topical and emphatic shifts. Combined with the mode of delivery just described, these features render hearing and understanding what is being intoned difficult and often impossible, even for native speakers of Asante Twi. Many invited to attend *apae* performances today surrender to the emotions produced in them by the delivery of the verses, rather than struggling with what the words actually mean. In the 1920s, Rattray described the intonation of *apae* as being like the 'humming of bees' (Rattray 1923: 103). This 'humming' is part of

[1]William Hutchison was a member of the Bowdich mission to Kumase in 1817. After the departure of the mission, he was left behind as British Resident (to 1818), before returning to the coast.

a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, of sound, sight and occasion, intended to inspire feelings appropriate to the recitation. Thus, I have been present when listeners to *apae*, in spite of their difficulties with comprehension, were brought to a heightened emotional state and even to tears by the occasion itself. 'It is our history', I was told, 'and we feel it in us.'

In trying to tease out and understand the telling of the tale of Osei Bonsu in *apae*, I have relied massively on Asante friends. I recorded all performances I have attended on tape and in writing, as far as the latter was within my powers. I then discussed my two versions at length and over years with Bare Kese Nifahene Arhin Brempong, and with the late Asantehene Opoku Ware II, the late royal spokesmen (*akyeame*) Busiako Antwi and Baffuor Osei Akoto, the late Yaw Andoh, Secretary to the Asantehene, the late Professor A. Adu Boahen and others. I have also relied on the 'History of Ashanti', an unpublished manuscript assembled from various oral sources and set down in the 1930s and 1940s by a committee headed by Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II.[2]

This manuscript reproduces passages of the *apae*, enlarges on them in narrative commentary, and discusses these further in the king's correspondence with other committee members. Since passages of the *apae* speak in the continuous present tense, in which the deeds of all rulers are collapsed together into a single monarchical archetype ('Osei', the name of the first Asante king), this text and the allied correspondence about it have helped hugely in disentangling and assigning verses to individual Asantehenes. Most importantly, this text is in many ways an elaboration on the *apae*. The compressed mnemonics of the poems are keys to the long and detailed narratives that gave rise to them. In one sense, the *apae* may be understood as both summary and index of the oral (hi)stories told by the Asante about their past.

Let me add one final note here. Speaking and hearing are the alpha and omega of Asante oral history making. Thus, *tete ka asom* – 'ancient things remain in the ears' (Rattray 1916: 190). In *apae*, Asante history is not recounted in a linear way. So, in telling the tale of Osei Bonsu, I have imposed an order – a connectivity, a sequence, a chronology – that does not exist in the original. In doing so I have made use of a range of other Asante oral histories, together with non-Asante sources in a supporting role. This paper takes its cues from the *apae* in attempting to report a genuinely indigenous Asante history, albeit from the ruling dynasty's viewpoint. It is a portrait of Osei Bonsu as he and his contemporaries chose to see him, and a (re)construction of his person and actions in accordance with the canons of Asante historical understanding and the ideologies of Asante power.

PART II

Asienkyemu was (and is) a tiny village 100 miles north-west of Kumase in the drainage basin of the river Tano in Ahafo. Indeed, the river provides the village's only claim to fame. Tano is the oldest and most important of the supernatural

[2]New Manhyia Palace, Kumase: Papers of Otumfuo the Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II (NMP/OAP), 'History of Ashanti'. I am preparing an annotated edition of this text for publication by Oxford University Press for the British Academy.

powers (*abosom*) inhering in nature, as far as the Asante and many other Akan are concerned. Asienkyemu was home to Taa Kwadwo, one of the numerous 'children' (*taa*) of the river Tano, and had a shrine with celebrated powers of divination (Rattray 1923: 172–202; McCaskie 1995: 313–14; 2000: 81–94, 179–87).[3]

In the early 1810s, the Kumase Bosommuruhene arrived in Asienkyemu. He was custodian of the Bosommuru sword (*afena*), the emblem of the patrilineal group to which Osei Bonsu belonged. He had been sent to ask Taa Kwadwo why the sword had withdrawn its cooperation from the king. The shrine told him through its priestess that the sword was offended because Osei Bonsu had shown partiality to another sword. This was Mponponsuo, the sword employed by the king to receive oaths of fealty from his subordinates, to swear his purposes to his people in public, and to proclaim victory over his and his people's foes. The king was now advised by Asienkyemu Taa Kwadwo to satisfy the 'caprices' of the Bosommuru sword, and 'to adjust' his attitude to it in relation to the Mponponsuo sword.[4]

In the *apae* of Osei Bonsu, a repeated refrain is 'I am not sleeping' (*merennda*). This is linked to the story just recounted. In 1940, Osei Agyeman Prempeh II noted that after the Fante war of 1807, Osei Bonsu was unable to sleep because in the state sword room (*akrafieso*) next to his bedchamber Bosommuru and Mponponsuo kept him awake all night with their impassioned arguments. Bosommuru felt that, in the Fante war, Osei Bonsu had shown undue favour towards Mponponsuo. This was 'a great matter', because Osei Bonsu's preference elevated the sword of individual power (ego) over the sword of group descent (kinship). In his pride he had forgotten that the Fante victory was not his alone but rather it also belonged to 'Osei', the collectivity of his predecessors of which he was only the latest incarnation. Osei Agyeman Prempeh II stressed the importance of this episode because 'the war in Fantiland with Mponsuo [sic] is a reason why Osei Bonsu is a great king and [it] says so to that effect in his praises (*apae*)'. Osei Bonsu made a mistake that caused him sleepless nights, but took steps to rectify the problem as an Asante ruler should.[5]

More than 300 Asante stool or office histories were collected between the 1960s and 1980s (the IASAS series). Some were published; others exist only in draft. Most follow cues set out in the *apae* and enlarge on these with specific details about individual stools and office holders. It is clear from the *apae*, and from detailed amplifications in the stool histories, that the matter of the Mponponsuo sword during the Fante war is central to Asante historical constructions and understandings of Osei Bonsu.

In the eighteenth century, the Fante mediated Asante trade with the European forts along the littoral of the central Gold Coast. From the 1760s, Asante was increasingly frustrated by Fante involvement in and influence over the gun–slave cycle crucial to the Kumase government (see, most recently, Shumway 2011). In the late 1790s, three Asen rulers rebelled against Asante and fled south into Fante, where they were given refuge. In 1805, the recently enstooled Osei Bonsu sent a

[3]See also the Institute of African Studies' *Ashanti Stool Histories*, University of Ghana at Legon, henceforth referred to as IASAS: IASAS/262: Asienkyemu, 1983.
[4]IASAS/262: Asienkyemu, 1983.
[5]NMP/OAP, Asantehene to I. K. Agyeman, 12 March 1940.

series of envoys south to Abora in Fante to try to secure the return of these subjects. The last of these missions was put to death by the Fante. Osei Bonsu now took up the Mponponsuo sword and swore the Great Oath (*ntam kese*) that he would invade and destroy Fante and its people. In May 1806, Abora was sacked. Then, in June 1807, the Dutch fort at Kormantin was surrendered to the Asante. In the same month, Osei Bonsu laid siege to the English fort at Anomabo. Both European powers were accused of giving succour to Asante's foes (see, most fully, Wilks 1975).

Meredith, inside Anomabo fort, and Torrane, the British governor at nearby Cape Coast, both left detailed accounts of events in June 1807 (Meredith 1812).[6] On 15 June, the Asante attacked the Fante town of Anomabo. It was sacked, and those hundreds who fled to the beach were slaughtered. With 'insatiable' fury the Asante then attacked the fort, oblivious to their own mounting losses (Meredith 1812: 140–1). By 16 June, 8,000 of the estimated 15,000 Fante who had crowded into Anomabo town for safety lay dead in its ruins, on the beach, or in the surf. On Torrane's urgent orders, a flag of truce was sent from Anomabo fort to Osei Bonsu. This was well received at the Asantehene's headquarters, where 'the air resounded in acclamations' by the Asante soldiery 'in praise of their king' (Meredith 1812: 147–8). Osei Bonsu declared that he had no quarrel with the Europeans, but had attacked Anomabo fort only because it sheltered his enemies and his rebel subjects.[7]

Diplomacy now took its winding course. Osei Bonsu refused to come to Cape Coast but removed to Anomabo to await the arrival of Torrane. On 25 June, Torrane met with Osei Bonsu 'in an open place' behind Anomabo town. Formal greetings were exchanged. The Asantehene much impressed his British interlocutors, and a spirit of reconciliation was obtained on both sides. Torrane stayed in Anomabo for two weeks and returned to Cape Coast certain of Asante goodwill. Then, on 1 July, Osei Bonsu broke camp at Anomabo to pursue his remaining enemies elsewhere on the Gold Coast (Meredith 1812: 155–9).[8]

In the *apae* of Osei Bonsu, the foregoing is epitomized in the passage '*anomabo buroni se opono wo kye, kankan buroni se wo ahuri a pe wo sibore, na mfa die wode ye Fanti no mmeye no*' ('The Anomabo governor says he removes his hat for you. The Dutch governor says if you jump up in the air, find a good place to land and do not treat him as you have treated the Fante'). However, the nub of the 1807 war in the *apae* is not mentioned anywhere in the European sources. At some point on the evening of 25 June, after Torrane had returned to Anomabo fort, Osei Bonsu was borne aloft in his palanquin to that town. On the outskirts he got down and walked, accompanied by his ensemble of *mpintin* drummers and followed by his army.

The surviving Fante chiefs were assembled together to swear allegiance to the Asantehene and acknowledge him as their overlord. Osei Bonsu drew the Mponponsuo state sword, ritually appropriate to the occasion, and exchanged solemn oaths with the Fante. The king's entry into Anomabo town is

[6]See also The National Archives, Kew, T.70/35.

[7]The National Archives, Kew, T.70/35, Meredith to Torrane, 17 June 1817; Torrane to Meredith, 18 June 1817.

[8]The National Archives, Kew, T.70/35, Torrane to London Committee, 20 July 1807.

commemorated in the *apae*. He walked in time to the beat of the *mpintin* drums, and so it is said '*kwame a okyoa dom anim ni*' ('This is [Osei Tutu] Kwame who walks majestically and uncaringly before his foes'). As a result, the *apae* have the refrain '*kwame donkyoa, kwame donkyoa, ye*' ('Kwame Donkyoa, it is he who walks in front of his enemies'). To this day, Kwame Donkyoa is a byname of Osei Bonsu, chanted in performance as acclamation and mnemonic.

After the oath swearing, Osei Bonsu led both the Asante and Fante down to the beach. There, in front of this retinue he again drew Mponponsuo. He dipped it into the Atlantic and declared '*me dommum no wo*' ('you are my prisoner'). In the *apae*, Osei Bonsu is hailed as *odummumfafo* ('he who is the taker of captives') in passages that make much dazzling verbal play with the tonalities of the near homologous *dom* ('a military host') and *odomfo* ('a bringer of mercy or peace'). In this crescendo, Osei Bonsu is conjured up in a virtuoso recitative that is so fast that it does indeed sound like the hum of a swarm of angry bees. At this point in the *apae*, the Mponponsuo sword is itself apostrophized as *dommoafo* ('a helper in war', implying indispensability).

Osei Bonsu turned from the ocean to face his Fante subjects. He asked: '*aboa ben na ono kyen mmoa a wowo po mu nyinaa*?' ('What is the biggest beast in the sea?'). The Fante replied, '*bonsu, ono ma obobo hyen*' ('The whale, for it can sink ships'). The Asantehene faced his own troops and declared, '*mfi nno yobofro me Osei Bonsu*' ('From today, I am to be called Osei Bonsu [Osei the whale]'). And from that day on, Osei Tutu Kwame has been known in the *apae* and in oral histories as Osei Bonsu. For example, the Kumase Anantahene was present when 'the king won the appellation Bonsu by placing the sword into the sea for the first time in the annals of Asante history'.[9] Together with generic names accorded to the first Asantehene Osei Tutu (d. 1717) and conferred on all his successors (Arhin 1986: 187), Bonsu is perhaps the most salient praise name (*abodin*) repeated in the *apae*. And it is an individual, person-specific appellation. When the executioners chant, '*bonsu, wo na abodin nyinaa ye wo dea*' ('Bonsu, you are worthy of all praise'), the reference is to one, and only one, Asantehene.

Let us try to tease out a little more about the (hi)story just told. Recitative intonation can turn *bonsu* into a joking insult at the expense of the Fante. If the word is attenuated in speech to *abonsuo*, it references the wooden bowl used to wash for gold dust, the implication being that Osei Bonsu 'washed' the Fante at Anomabo until he had all their wealth. In some renditions the word *bonsu* (*bo*, 'destroy[er]' + *nsu*, 'water') is suffixed with *pekye* (with a sense of 'pulverizing'), but this can be elided to *mpekua* (with a sense of 'disparaging'). Complexities of this sort are woven through all the chanted verses. At some performances excited members of the audience will forget themselves and shout '*tie, tie*' ('listen, listen'), to draw attention to the complexities of intonation, metaphor or pun that they have noted in the recitation.

It has been argued that the Asante conceived of their world as a circle centred on Kumase, and that their 'mental map' of greater Asante encompassed an area that could be walked across in the fundamental calendrical unit of forty-two days

[9]IASAS/3: Ananta, 1963; and see also, for example, IASAS/36: Mpaboa, 1963; 44: Kokofu, 1963; 100: Kronko, 1963; 160: Aboaso, 1966; 161: Sanakoroa Wono, 1966.

(*adaduanan*). That meant that the 'frontier' of Asante in any direction from Kumase lay at a distance of twenty-one days' walk (*adaduonu*) (Wilks 1992; McCaskie 1980). This presented a problem, for in perceptual terms the southern frontier lay in the Atlantic. We have already noted the metaphysical salience of rivers in Asante thought, and this extended to bodies of water (*nsu*) more generally. In oral tradition, it is widely reported that early Asantehenes were forbidden (*akyiwadee*) to travel to the sea coast, for how was this seemingly limitless body of water, notionally a part of greater Asante, to be incorporated into it? It could not be subdued or conquered in any straightforward military way.

Osei Bonsu was the first Asante ruler to see the Atlantic. It is tempting to think that he planned its symbolic subjugation in Kumase prior to his invasion of Fante. Or, perhaps, he was simply carried away by an acute awareness of the historic singularity of his presence on the Anomabo shoreline. Whatever the case, he took up the Mponponsuo sword (mistakenly, in the view of some) to thrust into the sea. It was the sword to hand, for he had only just used it to extract and accept the fealty of the Fante chiefs assembled to receive him. And since he was now claiming the Atlantic too as a symbolic subject, Mponponsuo may have seemed the logical sword to use.

There can be little doubt that other matters were in Osei Bonsu's mind on Anomabo beach. His two immediate predecessors were his elder brother Opoku Fofie, who had died after a short reign in suspicious circumstances, and before that Osei Kwame, who was deposed from office and forced to commit suicide, or did so voluntarily. By contrast, Osei Bonsu had shown himself to be a successful warlord in the hallowed tradition of his predecessors Osei Tutu, Opoku Ware and Osei Kwadwo. And so he may have fallen prey to a momentary hubris, for had he not exceeded his predecessors by defeating the Fante and (re)claiming the ocean?

Osei Bonsu's *apae* celebrates this stunning achievement, and virtually all Asante stool histories and other oral historical traditions memorialize his unprecedented triumph. Some imitated Osei Bonsu. Akyawkromhene earned the appellation *baayim bia twa* (implying 'he is brave and puts a sword in the sea') from his king for dipping his own sword into the ocean at Anomabo.[10] Some memorialized other events in the campaign. Otikromhene took the head of the Fante Aburahene and placed the skull in his stool room.[11] Osei Bonsu's Fante war is a high point of Asante oral history and it is recalled as such in dense and telling detail.

Osei Bonsu worked hard to cement his triumph. Politically, he failed. The Fante remained restive and recalcitrant. Ironically, his attempt to monopolize Asante control over the gun–slave cycle took place in 1807, the very year in which the British transatlantic slave trade was abolished. As Osei Bonsu lay dying in 1823, Asante was on the verge of the first of its nineteenth-century wars with a more imperially minded Britain (McCaskie 2011a). Nevertheless, in Asante tradition, Osei Bonsu is associated with and celebrated for all sorts of consequences that flowed from his Fante war. This is a (hi)story severally told

[10]IASAS/8: Akyawkurom, 1962.
[11]IASAS/163: Otikurom, 1966.

elsewhere and it can be reviewed quickly. The 1807 war led over time to the James–Bowdich (1817) and Dupuis (1820) missions to Kumase, as the British sought full diplomatic connection with the most powerful polity on the Gold Coast. Osei Bonsu became an eclectic consumer of European goods and ideas, going so far as to build a two-storey stone house (*aban*) in Kumase in emulation of the European forts he had seen with his own eyes on the coast.

Most importantly, Osei Bonsu refashioned very old Asante mythic traditions about the differences between black and white peoples into a political ideology in which Asante and Britain ruled over their respective halves of humanity (McCaskie 1972). In the *apae* of Osei Bonsu, these matters are acknowledged in an allusive passage that turns on word play. The king is celebrated for his advancing of Asante power from *mponoa* ('the water's edge', a district of Asante abutting lake Bosomtwe) to another *mponoa* (meaning the seashore of the Gold Coast). In doing so, Osei Bonsu closed the circle of greater Asante, and conjoined the two worlds of blacks and whites.

PART III

In the *apae*, Osei Bonsu figures and is represented as a great ruler who defeated Fante, opened direct communications with the British, and earned a name (literally) by incorporating the sea into greater Asante. However, this is only half the story told in the *apae* and in other Asante oral historical traditions, and it is the less complex half. The other half concerns Osei Bonsu's war on the Abron people of Gyaman, fellow Twi-speaking Akan who lived on the north-western frontier (*ohye*) of greater Asante. Here, an Abron elite ruled over non-Akan Nafana, Juula and other subjects. This goes some way towards explaining why Abron culture was Janus-faced. It shared in the Akan norms of Asante, but also interacted with non-Akan peoples to its west and north beyond greater Asante. To take one salient instance of commonality and difference, Asante and Abron had strong ties of shared belief (most notably in the river Tano, a rule-of-thumb topographical boundary between the two), but whereas the Abron practised their belief with masks derived from the Senufo to their west, the Asante had no masking tradition at all (McCaskie 1981; 2004).

Osei Bonsu's war with Gyaman is massively documented in Asante and Abron oral histories and in rich materials from other peripherally involved polities, such as the Watara state of Kong (Kodjo 2006). Moreover, this conflict was of intense political and commercial interest to Europeans on the Gold Coast, and it was commented on extensively by the British and Dutch. All of this means that the extended prologue to the war, from about 1810, and the campaign itself in 1818–19 are amenable to detailed reconstruction on both sides. The result has been two modern narrative accounts of great quality. The historian Wilks has dealt with the Asante side of the conflict, and the anthropologist Terray with its Abron counterpart (Wilks 1975; Terray 1995). Wilks' historical narrative is a deeply informed empirical study of the politics of the Asante war, of the office holders who planned it, and of the commanders who executed it. Terray's ethnographic account from the Gyaman side takes much more account than Wilks does of cultural issues of supernatural belief. Indeed, Terray argues that the wartime priority for both sides was to ensure 'le concours de forces spirituelles'

superior to that of their enemy, and argues further that this was seen by both protagonists as being the necessary or primary condition for victory, whereas force of arms was viewed as the sufficient or secondary condition (Terray 1995: 609). The *apae* and other historical sources support and amplify Terray's viewpoint.

Consider first an external source, the journal kept by William Hutchison, who was left behind as the resident in Kumase after the departure of the British embassy in 1817. From October 1817 until January 1818, during the final Asante preparations for the war, he recorded the following intensive activities in the sphere of supernatural belief: for twelve days prior to 11 November, Osei Bonsu was 'busy making fetish, etc. for the success of the war', with Muslims attending at the palace every morning 'for prayer and sacrifice'; on 8 November, Osei Bonsu made 'human sacrifices' at Bantama, Asafo and Adum in Kumase 'for the success of the war'; on 23 November, Osei Bonsu formally told Hutchison, as British resident, of 'his intention of going in person' to make war on Gyaman; on 30 November, Osei Bonsu paid a visit to Hutchison and apologized for not coming to see him more frequently, as he had 'so much fetish to make'; on 21 December, Gyaasewahene Opoku Frefre said he was about to go with the king 'to make fetish' for the war at the army's assembly point near Breman; on 7 January 1818, a Sunday *adae* (the Asante forty-day festival), Osei Bonsu presided over the largest human sacrifice Hutchison had seen, so as to 'propitiate the fetish, and make the war successful'; and over the seventeen days following 7 January 'the sacrifice was continued', while 'the songs of death and victory proved their wish to begin the war' (Hutchison in Bowdich 1819: 393–4, 399, 402, 406–7, 412, 419–21).

All of the foregoing is contextualized in Asante, and also in Abron, oral histories. Sites of hostile supernatural power influenced the routes taken by the Asante invasion force. Crossroads where four or more paths intersected (*nkwantanan*), notoriously sites of otherworldly power, were all believed to have been 'mined with fetishes and charms by the Gaman'.[12] To counter this and like forces, and particularly Abron shrines that derived their own powers from the river Tano, Osei Bonsu was accompanied by the most potent of his own shrines: the Tano (*taa*) shrines of Bekoe and its 'supporters' – Gyabuor, Ampem, Fofie, Pemekuma (from Bekyem), Tikosa (from Takyiman), Ankankan (from Gyenyaase), Yawaa (from Duase), Dwemo (from Koraase), Banie and Agyabema (from Tepa), Kotoko Twenpaduo (from Tuobodom), and Kwadwo of Asienkyemu, arbiter between Bosommuru and Mponponsuo – as well as other renowned shrines, such as Domfe (in the charge of Kumase Nsumankwaahene), Meyam (from Kyirapatre) and Dente (from distant Krakye).[13] The Abron likewise assembled their shrines, to do supernatural battle with their counterparts from Asante (Terray 1995: 609–11).

[12]NMP/OAP, Asantehene to I. K. Agyeman, 9 July 1940.

[13]IASAS/22: Nsumankwaa, 1962; 101: Gyenyaase, 1964; 117: Duase, 1964; 159: Koraase, 1966; 167: Paakoso, 1966; 182: Kyirapatre, 1966; 194: Asuboa, 1967; 203: Twumaduase, 1967; 208: Tuobodom, 1967; 256: unpublished, 1982; 262: Asienkyemu, 1983; 274: unpublished, 1967; 289: unpublished, 1974; 293: unpublished, 1966.

What caused the Asante–Gyaman war? In simple political terms, Gyaman was defeated in 1740 by the Asante. Thereafter, it fell into Kumase's orbit, but by the close of the eighteenth century its tributary kings had re-established a high level of autonomy. So, Osei Bonsu's invasion of 1818–19 was undertaken to reaffirm the status quo ante, and to restore Gyaman to the role of an Akan buffer state against the non-Akan world on the north-western frontier of greater Asante. It is also the case that Gyaman was very rich in gold. Indeed, it was gold and its use that proved to be the immediate *casus belli*. All sources are agreed that Gyaman king Kwadwo Adinkra made a Golden Stool in rivalrous emulation of, and challenge to, its Asante counterpart, *sika dwa kofi*, and compounded this by acquiring gold sandals and gold finials for his umbrellas. It was this act that translated the confrontation to a different and deadly serious plane. Kwadwo Adinkra was denying the unique status of *sika dwa kofi*, the prime embodiment of the Asantehene's power and authority, and the repository of the collective 'soul' (*sunsum*) that defined belonging and unity in being Asante.

Osei Bonsu's response to this insultingly deadly threat was framed around normative cultural beliefs. Preliminary insight is furnished by a detailed Asante oral history, gathered in the early 1900s by a well connected Akuapem Twi-speaking researcher in Kumase (Asare 1915, see Chapter 7; for context, McCaskie 2011b). Sampanne (in due course Kumase Adumhene Kwadwo Sanpanin), the son of an Asante father and an Abron mother, was a royal servant (*ahenkwaa*) to Osei Bonsu. He was hated in Gyaman for using his Kumase connection to extort gold. Sampanne knew about the Gyaman Golden Stool, but chose a different tack with Osei Bonsu to argue for war. The king resisted these blandishments, while admitting he was 'warlike'. Kwadwo Adinkra, he added, was his consort or wife (*oyere*), a translation of gendered norms of subordination and service from the domestic to the political realm. Sampanne seized on this opening, urging that a man could always choose to find fault with his wife's services and beat her. This allusion to disobedient wives, and to fractious women generally, resonated in the king's mind, for it was reported that Kwadwo Adinkra had made and publicized his Golden Stool at the instigation of his domineering sister (some sources say wife) Ama Tamia.

In the event, it seems that Kwadwo Adinkra surrendered his Golden Stool to the Asante envoy Kwame Butuakwa, sent by Osei Bonsu to Gyaman for that purpose. This was done while Ama Tamia was absent from her brother's court. When she returned she was enraged. She turned on her brother, railing against his cowardice and forcing him to make a second Golden Stool. She was the source of provocations that called forth a second deputation from Kumase. This time Ama Tamia took the lead. She gravely insulted Osei Bonsu by offering to vomit up or shit out gold if that was what he wanted. She called the Asante head of mission a tortoise (*okyekyere*), an Akan symbol of impotence. The deputation was rebuffed and attacked. It is reported that Ama Tamia then swore by all her shrines that she and her brother had each other's sex organs – she was, in fact, the man of the two. Incandescent, she raged that she would cut off her brother's genitals, put them on top of her own umbrella, and lead a war with Asante while her brother skulked in a corner and remained silent with fear (Bowdich 1821: 30–1, fn. 54 gives the longest version of Ama Tamia's speech, but in discreet Latin because of its nature).

Gender confusions and ambiguities are threaded through Osei Bonsu's *apae*. Kwadwo Adinkra is called a ram (*odwennini*). This references the Abron oral history in which it is said that Kwadwo Adinkra commissioned a fight between two rams, one named for himself and the other for Osei Bonsu (see also Reindorf 1895: 173 for an account derived from an Asante source; for context, McCaskie 1998). The latter prevailed, meaning that the Gyamanhene was the lesser male, and so could not hope to win in the masculine struggle of war with the Asantehene.

The *apae* make great play of role reversal of gender stereotypes. Kwadwo Adinkra is cast as a woman, or as a wife whose persistent derelictions of duty have at last led to punishment from an exasperated husband (Osei Bonsu). Likewise, Ama Tamia is never named but she is apostrophized, either as a woman whose masculine attributes outstrip those of her cowardly overlord, whether brother or husband, or as a hermaphrodite, and so a living offence against the natural order of the world. Tellingly, she conspires to bring about a war with Asante by bullying Kwadwo Adinkra in an ambiguous confusion of gendered roles. He is woman and she is man, at least in her exercise of initiative. But she also insults his masculinity by treating him as if he were the inertly malleable substance of a woman's daily chores: *o nyam aburow, o siw fufu* ('she grinds corn, she pounds fufu'), the corn and fufu being the Gyamanhene. In a notably difficult passage to read with any great confidence, it is said that Kwadwo Adinkra fell pregnant and gave birth to Ama Tamia. This is yet another reference to matter out of place, an unnatural birth that must lead on to evil and disaster.

The war itself is readily described. In early February 1818, the Asante army set out for Gyaman. It followed the Banda road, thence to Nsawkaw, and west to Bonduku in Gyaman. A shorter road through Berekum was ruled out because of Abron charms buried at the crossroads along it. Osei Bonsu then concentrated his invasion forces at Nkoransa. There is uncertainty as to the date of the crucial battle on a *fodwo* (Monday), whether 23 March or 4 May 1818. Abron sources keep a pained and shamed silence to this day about their utter defeat, so much so that Terray never asked them to show him the battlefield (Terray 1995: 614). Asante oral histories, by contrast, are almost overwhelming in the details of their victory and its aftermath. They pillaged Gyaman towns and villages for months, and, laden with loot and prisoners of war, they returned home in 1819. In early August of that year, Osei Bonsu's headquarters were at Boaman, then at Breman, in Asante.[14] The Asantehene prepared himself for his ceremonial re-entry to Kumase in, most probably, September 1819.[15]

Kwadwo Adinkra died at the decisive battle along the banks of the river Tain, between Soko and Sampa. Abron tradition has it that he committed suicide from despair. Unsurprisingly, Asante oral histories allege that he hid himself, but was captured and killed.[16] A much more complicated (hi)story is alluded to by the

[14]IASAS/37: Kodua Tepa, 1963; Manhyia Records Office, Kumase, Miscellaneous Files, Apagya vs. Tafo, 1944.

[15]For external accounts, see NBKG General State Archives, The Hague, 351, Governor Oldenburg's Elmina Journal, 1817–19; The National Archives, Kew, T.70, 1819; Dupuis 1824; *The Royal Gold Coast Gazette and Commercial Intelligencer*, Cape Coast, 1822–23.

[16]See, for instance, IASAS/53: Breman, 1963.

mnemonic phrasing of the *apae*. The relevant passage has been translated as follows: 'Behold the Great One!/Osei Tutu, you bent low/and they lifted a big man onto a platform/You bent low/and they hid Adinkra in a sack of hide' (Arhin 1986: 190, 192). There are marvellously subtle linguistic implications in this passage. Strictly, animal hide is *aboa nwoma* (animal + hide, skin), often abbreviated to *nwoma*, the term also used for leather. However, *nwoma* can also, impolitely, stand for human skin, although strictly human skin is *honam*, which, to complicate things further, can be used to mean the flesh as well as the skin. In performances of this passage, so my notes and interlocutors both tell me, *nwoma* is used sometimes, and *honam* at other times. The word *honam*, in its meaning of both flesh and skin together, also references in compound words the unmanly addiction to carnal desire that hints at sensual overindulgence and a lack of control. Again there is a gender dimension, for these vices are associated with women, in this case the 'womanly' Kwadwo Adinkra.

What does it mean that Kwadwo Adinkra was hidden in a bag (or sack?) made from hide, or that he was somehow concealed in human skin and/or flesh? Taking their cue from the *apae*, many Asante traditions tell fuller versions of this (hi)story. The version given here is taken from the history of Asante authorized by Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, an elaboration and exegesis by one Asante ruler on the *apae* of another.[17] This is the longest account known to me, but other substantial Asante and Abron oral (hi)stories are in agreement with it (for instance, Asare 1915; Terray 1995: 616–19).

It is said that Kwadwo Adinkra was killed in battle. To prevent his head being taken and displayed in the Asante *odwira* (the Asante annual festival) (McCaskie 1995: 214), his son Apaw cut it off. He hid it in the belly of a pregnant woman, who lay dead on the battlefield, after removing the foetus. Apaw sewed up the belly and heaped corpses over the woman. The Asante captured Apaw, but even on pain of death he refused to reveal the whereabouts of his father. Gyaasewahene Opoku Frefre told Osei Bonsu that he had heard the Gyamanhene's war horns blowing, and would go to look in that direction. On the way, he captured the mother of the woman in whose abdomen Apaw had concealed his father's head. Under threat of death, she told him about Apaw's ruse. The Asante found the pregnant woman's corpse with her bulging stomach stitched up. Near her lay 'a headless trunk with gold trinkets worn on the calves of the legs and on the left wrist'. The woman was opened up, and Kwadwo Adinkra's head and trunk were taken before Osei Bonsu. Amidst 'thunderous rejoicings', the grief-stricken Apaw confirmed that these were his father's remains.

Osei Bonsu ordered that Kwadwo Adinkra's head be sewn back onto his trunk. The corpse was then seated on a state chair ('they lifted a big man onto a platform'). His surviving office holders were ordered to form a semicircle around him by rank, as they had done when he was alive. Osei Bonsu also sat on a state chair, and also arranged his officials by rank in a semicircle. The two parties faced each other as in a hearing in a law case. Osei Bonsu told the Fabem *okyeame*, a senior spokesman, to indict Kwadwo Adinkra for treason. The charges were addressed to the corpse. It was recalled that Gyaman had been subject to Asante since 1740, and that all of its kings were 'male consorts' (*maninyere*) of the

[17]NMP/OAP, 'History of Ashanti', Chapter 9.

Kumase ruler. As wives, it was their duty to show unswerving obedience to their husbands. Kwadwo Adinkra's transgressions were listed, ending with the unforgiveable: 'you have made a Golden Stool for yourself, and you knew full well that whosoever has done so is surely liable to the penalty of DEATH' (capital letters in the original). The Fabem *okyeame* continued that the Gyamanhene 'wisely' surrendered this stool to Osei Bonsu, for he knew that only an Asantehene 'is eligible to occupy a Golden Stool'.

The second Golden Stool is not mentioned, but it is strongly implied. Kwadwo Adinkra was now 'puffed up' because of 'the wrong advice of a tattling woman' (Ama Tamia), and so did all he 'ought not to have done' and said all he 'ought not to have said'. Osei Bonsu was patient, and again asked Kwadwo Adinkra to desist. This was unavailing, and the Asantehene put the 'affront' of aggravated insult and open revolt before his councillors. These 'unanimously agreed to declare war'. The Fabem *okyeame* ended by declaring that this was why the Gyamanhene was dead, and now faced trial. This was only what should have happened in the first place, for proper procedure was that a rebellious subject pleaded his case before the Asantehene, relying on 'attentive hearing and determination' in arriving at a just outcome from his overlord. Formulaic justice was followed to its logical conclusion. All the Asante present gave a 'thunderous assent' to Kwadwo Adinkra's guilt. As was customary, Osei Bonsu was asked to pay a 'thank offering' (*aseda*) to the officials in attendance. This was a stiff ten *mperedwan* (£80) of gold dust, but, to show his gratification at the verdict, the king waived his customary right to ask for the *aseda* to be reduced. The executioners stepped forward, beheaded the corpse, and said to Osei Bonsu that the prescribed 'satisfactory work has taken place' (*mopiaw*). The king ordered the head to be put in a brass pan covered with a white cloth and given over to the Akwamuhene for conveyance to Kumase. Goldsmiths were told to stand by to mould the head's likeness in gold so that it might be placed in the *odwira*.

When the Asante army re-crossed the river Tain on its march home, the Gyamanhene's head fell into the water. It could not be found. Osei Bonsu refused to move on until this trophy was recovered. He poured a libation to the Tain to secure its aid in his search. The river duly gave up the head to the searchers, confirming that Osei Bonsu had won his battle with Kwadwo Adinkra in their struggle to gain the support of supernatural powers. Apaw was brought back to Kumase as a captive, as was Ama Tamia; she was given as a wife to Sampanne (Kwadwo Sanpanin), the same royal *ahenkwaa* who had urged Osei Bonsu to invade Gyaman. When the Asantehene duly re-entered Kumase, he was dressed in the great 'war dress' (*batakari kese*) and danced before his people to the beat of the *fontomfrom* drums.

What follows is the climax of the oral (hi)story of Osei Bonsu. At this point key phrases from the *apae* are quoted directly in Osei Agyeman Prempeh II's text. The historical methodology used is to ventriloquize Osei Bonsu by putting words into his mouth. This technique is designed to close the circle between the compressed memorialization of the *apae* and the elaborated narrative of events. It is also a vital way of imparting the meaning of the (hi)story recounted to its listeners (or, now, readers). Two crucial passages construct a narrative on the foundation of the *apae*. I give both of these here in Asante Twi and in English translation, in the versions furnished by Osei Agyeman Prempeh II.

Osei Bonsu speaks: 1

At the state gathering to welcome Osei Bonsu back into Kumase from his war in Gyaman, he spoke as follows to those Asante people and non-Asante subjects assembled to receive him.

> *Me Osei Kese, Moahunu so Gyamanhene Adinkra kaa mo ka-bone no, me ne no akoko, aku no, atwa no ti, na mosoa ne nkoa no fa nnommum mabe. Mo ahene a mo gu ha yi, ne mo ahene a mohye m'ase no mu biara, so moantra ho komu ansom me sompa, na mobo dwao biara a, me ne mo beko, aku mo se makum Adinkra yi. Se mobo dwae, na me ne mo anko, anku mo saa a, Ntankesie!*
>
> 'I, Osei the Great, I tell you the chiefs and people here assembled that when Adinkra, the king of Gyaman, struggled against me, I fought with him, killed him and cut off his head, and have brought many of his subjects as captives to Kumase. You chiefs here assembled, and every other chief under my sway, I sincerely assure you that if you do not remain loyal, and serve me quietly, and render good and loyal service to me, I will fight with you, and kill you, even as I have killed Adinkra. If you misbehave and I fail to fight with you and kill you as I have told you, (then) I swear the Great Oath.'

Osei Bonsu speaks: 2

After this oration, Osei Bonsu 'turned round and spoke thus to his children, grandchildren and other relatives'.

> *Me Osei Kese, Maso m'akofena mu makum Kwaefuo. Mmtwe Mponponsuo manu po mu, mafa no dommum. Mahwehwe meho ahyia, obiara nni baabi. Enti muhyia obiara a okuta biribi a mope bi a, monni no Adufudie.*
>
> 'I, Osei the Great, I have taken hold of my war sword and have conquered the people on the desert as well as those in the forest. I have dipped my sword Mponponsuo into the sea and have taken it as captive. I have looked around myself and find nobody anywhere. Therefore if you meet with anybody who is holding anything which you desire to have, you can take some without any payment.'

These speeches portray Osei Bonsu as an invincible warlord. The second one summarizes the key points made in this essay. The savannah or 'desert' and the forest are the world known to the Asante, and Osei Bonsu has firmly secured these limits. He has taken the Atlantic 'captive' and prevailed too where greater Asante ends in the savannah lands west and north of Gyaman. The text, like all histories, is also politicized. '*Adufudie*' makes reference to *bosommuru adufude*, the patrilineal (and patrifilial) *ntoro* descent group that supplied a number of Asantehenes. This group used the names Osei and Owusu in alternate generations. Osei Bonsu and Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, as their names signify, both belonged to *bosommuru adufude*. Here, the thirteenth Asantehene is drawing deliberate attention to the exalted status of the seventh Asantehene in an act of identification with him that unites both of them in common descent in the line of *bosommuru adufude* (McCaskie 1995: 276–7). It may be the case, too, that Osei Agyeman Prempeh II is here making amends on behalf of Osei Bonsu, who slighted the Bosommuru sword, as we have seen, by using Mponponsuo to signal his conquest of the sea. It will be plain by now that imbrications of this subtle type are a commonplace of Asante oral history making.

PART IV

This essay had a lengthy gestation for, as the reader will now know, it encompasses complicated matters of language and understanding. It is short by my customary standards, but deliberately so, in order to provide a narrative clarity unencumbered by all but necessary details. My conclusion is similarly brief and to the point, and for the same reason.

I have argued elsewhere that communicating by speaking and listening structures Asante reality and is at the heart of Asante cultural practice, and that this remains the case despite the advent of a widespread literacy. I have argued too that the archival historian can order only the surface of events, for the most part externally described, and not the wellsprings of motivated selfhood that reside within an orally constructed past rendered in the language(s) of its makers. It seems to me that most Africanist historians have too readily embraced the first option, and have abandoned the second as being – what? – too difficult, too time-consuming, too unyielding in the laborious pursuit of historical meaning(s) embedded in indigenous languages (McCaskie 2000: 238–40).

Plainly and surely, historical work and other forms of scholarship about Africa should be about the recuperation and explication of African views of African pasts and presents. As noted at the beginning of this essay, Asante is often said to hold an especially privileged place as a subject for historical research. But I have come to wonder if that is indeed the case. Perhaps it is repeated more and more frequently, as the appetite for deep fieldwork over decades in any single African culture has fallen away towards a vanishing point.

In a recent and impassioned book, the distinguished Africanist Patrick Chabal castigated the ways in which the study of the African present is constructed and implemented (Chabal 2012). If I read him correctly, his principal complaint was similar to mine. He deplored the 'objective' and 'scientistic' workings of imported social science theories in Africa. These contrive to disfigure or misrepresent African realities, but simultaneously work to reinforce the academic (and other) investments made in them by their practitioners. Combined with a near universal short-termism in research, such work never really steps beyond the discursive enclave of the western academy and those few Africans recruited to it.

Chabal urged the bedrock importance in all Africanist work of history and context (Chabal 2012: 303). In the purposes and methods of some historical ethnographers of Africa, he discerned and applauded a capacity for self-critical understanding absent from the social sciences. This he associated with awareness of, and care about, the key issues of subjective standpoint and the use of languages of enunciation in reporting findings (Chabal 2012: 162, 182, 298). This is well put and incontrovertible. That said, I think that Chabal did not quite go far enough. If history and context are indispensable, as indeed they must be, then the languages in which Africans understand these fundamentals must take their rightful place at the centre of Africanist research, historical or otherwise.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about the Asante perception and understanding of Asante history as expressed in the *apae* or 'praise songs' of Asantehene (King of the Asante) Osei Tutu Kwame, known as Osei Bonsu (1804–23). As such, it offers an indigenous portrait of kingship and the expectations and behaviours attaching to it in Asante thought. The core of the paper is centred on the role of Osei Tutu Kwame as a leader in war, against the Fante of the southern Gold Coast in 1806–07 and against the Abron of Gyaman (today in the eastern Côte d'Ivoire) in 1818–19. Both campaigns are interpreted from the point of view of Asante thinking about their own historical goals and understandings, and of the fit and proper role of an Asantehene in such matters. Throughout, extensive oral historical materials are used in conjunction with the *apae*, and a rich range of European sources are deployed as a counterpoint. The paper's claim to originality is that it offers an Asante view, at once intellectual and ideological, of their own constructions of their past and of the nature of their history as they themselves chose to understand it.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la perception ashanti et de la compréhension de l'histoire ashanti, telles qu'exprimées dans les *apae,* ou chants de prières, du roi ashanti Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame, également connu sous le nom d'Osei Bonsu (1804–1823). Il offre à cet égard un portrait indigène de la royauté et des attentes et comportements qui s'y rattachent dans la pensée ashanti. L'élément central de l'article s'intéresse au rôle d'Osei Tutu Kwame en tant que dirigeant en guerre contre les Fante dans le sud de la Gold Coast en 1806–1807 et contre les Abron de Gyaman (aujourd'hui dans l'est de la Côte d'Ivoire) en 1818–1819. Ces deux campagnes son interprétées du point de vue de la réflexion des Ashanti sur leurs propres objectifs et compréhensions historiques, et de la compétence et honorabilité d'un Asantehene à ces égards. Toute au long de l'article, l'auteur s'appuie sur de nombreux textes historiques oraux en conjonction avec les *apae*, et développe en contrepoint une riche palette de sources européennes. L'article revendique comme originalité d'offrir une perspective des Ashanti, tout à la fois intellectuelle et idéologique, de leurs propres constructions du passé et de la nature de leur histoire telle qu'ils choisissent eux-mêmes de la comprendre.