

# PAWNS ON THE GOLD COAST: THE RISE OF ASANTE AND SHIFTS IN SECURITY FOR DEBT, 1680–1750

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## Abstract

In the seventeenth century, Europeans on the Gold Coast took gold pawns as security for debt, but from the early eighteenth century, they turned increasingly toward the use of human pawns. This shift was the result of a transformation in levels of demand for gold amongst African sellers, most notably the Asante, who began to secure control over local gold sources from c. 1700. The change in demand for gold was accompanied by a rise in slave prices on the West African coast, but it was the indigenous system of debt recovery that proved crucial to the success of European trade.

## Key Words

Ghana, credit, currencies, economic, mining, slavery, trade.

*ɔdehyee nhyehye na sika na ehyehye* [Gold not nobility makes a person famous]<sup>1</sup>

We trafficked in slaves so that we could get gold and with gold we could get anything.<sup>2</sup>

Employing the human body as a form of security was common in preindustrial societies.<sup>3</sup> In western Europe, as in Africa, people historically had provided security for debt, but by the seventeenth century, if not before, it was unusual for people in Europe to be given as security for loans, although as pledges, people were used as a guarantee of performance. Indeed, the legal premise of security had itself undergone change. The rising demand for credit facilities in medieval Europe had, according to John H. Wigmore, increased the variety of obligations and forms of action linked to non-payment of debt, so that by the early modern period, the older idea of a pledge – essentially a forfeit – had been largely replaced

1 Proverb cited in T. C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge, 1995), 78. I have chosen to translate *sika* as 'gold'.

2 O. Sam, quoted by George Preston in his review of R. Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY, 2011) for H-AfrArts, Jan. 2012 <<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-Africa&month=1201&week=c&msg=uB2B7YZNMhze%2B/%2B7sxfK/g>>, accessed 18 July 2012.

3 This practice has been identified in Africa and parts of Latin America, as well as southern and south-eastern Asia. T. Falola and P. E. Lovejoy, 'Pawnship in historical perspective', in P. E. Lovejoy and T. Falola (eds.), *Pawnship, Slavery, and Colonialism in Africa* (Trenton, NJ, 2003), 3. Protection for creditors, often in the form of a pledge of a productive asset, appears in some of the earliest surviving legal records. R. Westbrook, 'Conclusions', in R. Westbrook and R. Jasnow (eds.), *Security for Debt in Ancient Near Eastern Law* (Leiden, 2001), 328–9.

by that of collateral security, in an attempt to guarantee the payment of a specific amount of debt.<sup>4</sup>

However, this transition does not appear to have occurred simultaneously in Africa, where it remained customary for debts to be secured with human pawns, and may have been for some time.<sup>5</sup> In their 1999 article, David Richardson and Paul Lovejoy revealed in detail the use of human pawns as a form of debt security in the Atlantic slave trade at Old Calabar in the later eighteenth century.<sup>6</sup> They argued, moreover, that use of the body as a form of debt security was a key element in the success of that business – ‘the adaptation by British and Old Calabar merchants of the local institution of debt bondage, or “pawnship”, proved crucial as a way of securing credit until Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807’.<sup>7</sup> The use of the body to secure commercial loans did not appear as a generalised feature of Afro-European relations. At Ouidah in the same period, security appears in general to have been unnecessary; overdue debts could be recovered through sale of the debtor and/or his family into slavery after successful prosecution in the king’s courts. The situation was similar at Bonny, where traders relied on the authority of the king to enforce credit arrangements.<sup>8</sup>

On the Gold Coast, the securitisation of debt was a constant concern. Human pawns were occasionally in evidence from at least the seventeenth century, but records of the European trading companies suggest that gold, jewellery, and highly valued beads were more common as items of security, along with ceremonial items and other more mundane pieces.<sup>9</sup> Such objects appear, at least in the second half of the seventeenth century – and even at the beginning of the eighteenth – to have been preferred.<sup>10</sup> After that point, however, the relative importance of gold objects appears to have waned, and references to human pawns begin to dominate. This shift towards accepting people as security for debt is best evidenced in the records of the Danish West India and Guinea Company (WIGC), but additional materials from the Dutch West India and Guinea Company (WIC) and the

4 J. H. Wigmore, ‘I. The pledge-idea: a study in comparative legal ideas’, *Harvard Law Review*, 10:6 (1897), 326–41. See also Westbrook’s critique of Wigmore in ‘Conclusions’, 331–2.

5 Some writers claim pawnship cannot be identified prior to the Atlantic slave trade; others suggest it was a much older institution. See the range of essays in Lovejoy and Falola (eds.), *Pawnship*.

6 P. E. Lovejoy and D. Richardson, ‘Trust, pawnship, and Atlantic history: the institutional foundations of the Old Calabar slave trade’, *American Historical Review*, 104:2 (1999), 332–55; P. E. Lovejoy and D. Richardson, “‘Pawns will live when slaves is apt to dye’: credit, risk and trust at Old Calabar in the era of the slave trade’ in Lovejoy and Falola (eds.), *Pawnship*, 71–96; P. E. Lovejoy and D. Richardson, ‘The business of slaving: pawnship in Western Africa, c. 1600–1810’, in Lovejoy and Falola (eds.), *Pawnship*, 27–54.

7 Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust’, 335.

8 R. Law, *Ouidah: The Social History of a West African Slaving ‘Port’, 1727–1892* (Athens, OH, 2004), 133–5; P. E. Lovejoy and D. Richardson, “‘This horrid hole’”: royal authority, commerce, and credit at Bonny, 1690–1840’, *The Journal of African History*, 45:3 (2004), 364. See also, W. Bosman, *A New and Accurate Description of the Coast of Guinea Divided into The Gold, The Slave, and The Ivory Coasts*, ed. J. R. Willis (1704; first English edn, 1705; 4th English edn., London, 1967), 352 and 363a.

9 Pieter de Marees informed readers of his travelogue ‘that a Boy had been left on the Ship as a pawn on account of a debt’. P. de Marees, *Description and Historical Account of the Gold Kingdom of Guinea* (1602), trans. A. van Dantzig and A. Jones (Oxford, 1987), 41.

10 A. Jones, *Brandenburg Sources for West African History, 1680–1700* (Stuttgart, 1985), 66–72; for Danish, Dutch, and English examples, see below.

Royal African Company (RAC) are utilised here to help explore the generality and complexity of the shift. On the Gold Coast, as at Old Calabar, there was no local political or legal agency active in the protection of credit, creating a situation in which traders had little option but to forge their own security arrangements. Why then did they choose to move away from the use of pawned objects and adopt the native institution of human pawn? The answer appears to lie in the parallel presence of two connected developments in Afro-European commercial relations: the declining availability of gold as an export commodity; and the rise to power of the Asante nation.

## THE SHIFT TOWARD THE USE OF HUMAN PAWNS

The provision of credit was a difficult issue for all the European companies trading off the west coast of Africa. Advice from company directors to European factors on the Gold Coast regularly cautioned against the extension of any form of credit to African traders, even though accounts offer ample evidence its use.<sup>11</sup> Given the high level of European competition, company employees always ran the risk of upsetting the delicate trade balance, and recognised that failing to extend credit would risk loss of business to rivals.<sup>12</sup> Offering credit was not always perceived as problematic. In order to function as permanent trading settlements, European forts had been required to develop a series of ongoing financial relationships with local peoples. Credit extended to Africans in coastal towns was therefore at some level redeemable by withholding the payment of rental agreements, customs duties, customary dues, and other perquisites from local allies, employees, and agents.<sup>13</sup> And where debtors and their followers were living in the vicinity, the perception of risk was greatly reduced.<sup>14</sup> Caution nevertheless remained the watchword, especially where personal wealth was at stake. According to William Bosman, chief factor for the WIC at the end of the seventeenth century,

The *Negroes* come daily to our Castle, or Fort, with their Gold; for which, after it is weighed, essayed and purified, they receive our Commodities; none of which ever go out of our

11 Credit could be used to serve political as well as economic ends. See K. Y. Daaku, *Trade and Politics on the Gold Coast, 1600–1720: A Study of the African Reaction to European Trade* (Oxford, 1970), 42–3.

12 By the beginning of the eighteenth century, Europeans occupied as many as 23 forts and factories along the Gold Coast from the Dutch-held Axim in the west to Christiansborg, held by the Danish at Accra, around 300 miles away to the east. Such forts had been built to secure gold supplies from pirates and other European merchants, as well as Africans. D. Eltis, *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* (Cambridge, 2000), 174–5. Companies offering credit could expect better access to trade. The National Archives, Kew (TNA) C113/261, Copies of Letters to and from Commenda (Komenda), Succondee (Sekondi) & Dixcove (1716?), Sekondi, 15 Sept. 1716.

13 In 1687, Ralph Hassell was asked ‘to be trusted with four barrells of powder and one ounce in lead barrs’; the Fante offered to pay ‘out of their monthly customes, and if they are conquer[er]s in slaves’. R. Law (ed.), *The English in West Africa, 1685–1688: The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681–1699, Part 2 (RAC 2)* (Oxford, 2001), 192.

14 Governor Boris reported in 1738 that he had been ‘obliged to lend 520 rdl. to the Dutch Caboceer Okanie . . . This sum we will always guarantee, since he has come here to be with all his slaves and relatives, who exceed 200 men with guns, as well as women and children.’ O. Justesen (ed.), *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana, 1657–1754, Volume 2: 1735–1754*, transl. J. Manley (*Danish 2*) (Copenhagen, 2005), 539.

Ware-houses before they are paid for; and if the Factor will give any Credit, it is on his own account, and he is consequently liable for the value to the Company.<sup>15</sup>

Although Bosman gives no details of any security he might have required, the records of the European trading companies make it clear that gold pawn was a familiar and frequent form of security for commercial debt in the seventeenth century. An inventory of the Swedish African Company from 1658, for example, lists the pledges that had been left with the Company since the early 1650s, the bulk of which were in gold jewellery or highly valued agori beads; we find similar entries in the Dutch and Danish records.<sup>16</sup> Nor was this purely a fort-based practice. Thomas Phillips, employed by the RAC as commander of the *Hannibal*, claimed he was often asked for credit to the value of two or three marks in gold:

promising payment in a certain number of days, when their servants or boys . . . return from the inland countries . . . Commonly they will leave some pledge in our hands till payment, as great collars of gold, and other large fatishes of exquisite workmanship, which their great men wear, and which they will be sure to redeem.<sup>17</sup>

A review for the RAC of the 'great causes of decay of [its] trade to Africa' in 1705 not only echoed Dutch thinking on the responsibility for credit extension but reinforced the need for security in gold:

whosoever should trust a blackman should be liable for the summ, which would render the chiefs at Cape Coast Castle allwayes so cautious as never to trust but on gold pawns, which would have no consequence in the world on your trade.<sup>18</sup>

If we turn now to the records of the WIGC, the first reference to pawned goods appears in 1674 as part of the inventoried effects of the late Governor Bartholomaeus von Groenenstein at Frederiksborg.<sup>19</sup> This includes a long list of his pawns, many of them

15 Bosman, *Description*, 92.

16 R. A. Kea, *Settlements, Trade, and Politics in the Seventeenth-Century Gold Coast* (Baltimore, MD, 1982), 237–9. Agori (acori; cori) beads had been important trade goods on the Gold Coast since the arrival of the Portuguese in the fifteenth century. Daaku, *Trade*, 25; J. W. Blake (ed.), *Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560: Documents to Illustrate the Nature and Scope of Portuguese Enterprise in West Africa, the Abortive Attempt of Castilians to Create an Empire there, and the Early English Voyages to Barbary and Guinea, Volume I*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 86 (London, 1942), 50. For the Dutch, see A. van Dantzig (ed.), *The Dutch and the Guinea Coast, 1674–1742: A Collection of Documents from the General State Archive at the Hague* (Accra, 1978), 119 and 122.

17 Failure to redeem, however, would result in the *panyarring* of 'as many of the negroes of that town where our debtor lives, as we can, or as will come to the value of the debt, which we secure aboard, and threaten to carry away with us if they be not redeem'd . . . but this is seldom done, we being very cautious in trusting them for any considerable value': T. Phillips, 'A journal of a voyage made in the *Hannibal* of London, Ann. 1693, 1694', in A. and J. Churchill (eds.), *A Collection of Voyages and Travels: Some Now First Printed from Original Manuscripts, Others Now First Published in English, Volume 6* (London, 1732), 206. Fetish gold according to Atkins was gold cast into various decorative shapes for body ornamentation. J. Atkins, *A Voyage to Guinea, Brasil, and the West-Indies; in His Majesty's Ships the Swallow and Weymouth* (2nd edn, London, 1737), 183–4. Bosman noted two types of fetish gold: one was 'Artificial Gold composed of several ingredients'; the other 'unalloyed Mountain gold' used for adornment. Bosman, *Description*, 73–4.

18 John Snow's letter to the Royal African Company, 31 July 1705, cited in K. G. Davies, *The Royal African Company* (London, 1957), 369.

19 The King of Fetu sold the land for Frederiksborg in 1659 to the Danish African Company, the forerunner of the Danish West India and Guinea Company. The latter, established in 1673 and surviving until 1754,

in gold, with their monetary value recorded in marks, ounces, and engels as determined by their weight. Items in von Groenenstein's possession ranged from large neck rings, bracelets, and gilded chains to lumps of gold and 'false gold', gilded snail shells and fetishes, and a gold-trimmed sword. Other items in pawn included various beads – some of them 'aggrey' (agori) beads – basins and old clothes, and one reference to a slave.<sup>20</sup> Seven years later in 1681, the list of pawns being held at Frederiksborg – if considerably shorter – was not significantly different; again it reflected a preponderance of gold items, listed by weight and according to value.<sup>21</sup> Where it does differ, however, is in the amount of additional information it provides on the nature of the debt: included in the list of pawns are details of the length of time for which the pawns had been held. It has been noted elsewhere that credit in African society was rarely time-limited, often being recalled on the basis of need.<sup>22</sup> This is certainly supported by the Danish evidence. Debts had often been live for eight or nine years, and on one occasion for no less than thirteen. To each loan had been added interest at a rate of 25 per cent *per annum*, which though unlikely to be paid, nevertheless signalled to the Company directors at least that the governor was serious about the problem.<sup>23</sup>

There are no further significant listings of pawns in the document collection for another forty years, although loans were still being issued and pledges taken.<sup>24</sup> The next major piece of evidence appears in January 1722, when an itemisation was made of pawns and goods found in the writing desk and chest of Peder Østrup, who had assumed the office of interim governor at Christiansborg on the death of Knud Rost in 1720. The listing suggests that he, like von Groenenstein, was in the habit of securing credit on gold, gold jewellery, and other precious items.<sup>25</sup> But an additional debit ledger drawn up in February 1722 reveals that he had also lent out some monies without security and others

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transferred its headquarters to the more easterly fort of Christiansborg at Accra in 1685 as a result of a dispute with the English. O. Justesen (ed.), *Danish Sources for the History of Ghana, 1657–1754, Volume 1: 1657–1735*, transl. J. Manley, (*Danish 1*) (Copenhagen, 2005), viii, xviii, 1, and 8–9; Law (ed.), *RAC 2*, 141 and 427–9.

20 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, 25–31. Slaves were presumably acceptable as pawns to Europeans because they were considered property. For the use of slaves as pawns, *Ibid.* [1700] 141, [1704] 181–2, and [1722] 289. For a sword held by the RAC, see R. Law (ed.), *The English in West Africa 1681–1683: The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681–1699, Part 1 (RAC 1)* (Oxford, 1997), 176.

21 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, 64–5.

22 Pawnship agreements did not usually have deadlines as debt was collected on the basis of need. While this gave the debtor time to pay off when convenient, it also meant the debtor could enforce the debt at any time, usually through *panyarring*. O. Ojo, 'Child slaves in pre-colonial Nigeria, c. 1725–1860', *Slavery & Abolition: A Journal of Slave and Post-Slave Studies*, 33:3 (2012), 422. For comparable English practice, see J.M. Spicksley, "'Fly with a duck in thy mouth": single women as sources of credit in seventeenth-century England', *Social History*, 32:2 (2007), 193.

23 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, 64–5. In 1745, Governor Billsen had apparently 'wanted to do what no European has yet found practicable, that is to make the Negroes pay interest when they wished to borrow something against an adequate gold pawn'. Justesen (ed.), *Danish 2*, 645.

24 As part of his preparations to leave Christiansborg, Governor Lygaard advised the WIGC directors that he had advanced guns to the value of around 24 bendas to a number of local groups, but 'since the Negroes are not yet in a position to pay this because of the war they have been waging with the *Aquambues*, one has to give them some credit'. His successor, Frans Boye, noted in 1711 that pledges had been received for 736 rdl. of African debt, but did not reveal their nature. Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1* [1710], 226 and 236.

25 *Ibid.* xv and 281–3.

against human pawn. His lending policy was to come under considerable criticism from his successor. As David Herrn reported to the *Sekret* Council on his arrival in 1722, Østrup, ‘through his diverse, great and illegal extravagance . . . has brought everything into shameful confusion’.<sup>26</sup> His list of 73 debts included one clear example of the use of human security and three other possible cases.<sup>27</sup>

Writing to the directors in Copenhagen in February 1722, Herrn promised to try and remedy the situation. But problems were evident as Herrn tried in vain to account for all the pawns being held on behalf of the Company.

The goods pawned against the Company’s receivables can be seen in the enclosed itemization, Letter J. There are however several which have no note, and we do not know to whom they belong, and how much has been borrowed on them. Of other pawns, half have been taken away and others again, which the owners wanted to redeem, are quite gone. I fear that this will cause some discord and inconvenience.<sup>28</sup>

By July 1722, it was clear to Herrn that some of the difficulties he was encountering in attempting to recover the Company’s debts were a result of the fraudulent behaviour of Østrup.

The pawned goods have also been treated knavishly by P. Østrup, since many Negroes have come and asked for their pawns, which I swear to God I have never seen, and yet debt is claimed to be in pawn.<sup>29</sup>

Østrup, it seems, had helped himself to a number of pawned items before being dismissed from his post. The passage of time did little to aid Herrn in his pursuit of the Company’s debts. Those listed on the Company’s books in March 1724 after his death as being owed ‘in the time of the late Knud Rost, Peder Østrup and the late David Herrn’ numbered 68, only five fewer than had been on the books two years earlier. Moreover, the bulk of the debtors that can be identified on both lists had significantly increased the amount of their borrowing.<sup>30</sup> The ledgers provide continuing evidence of the use of pawned property, and a small number of examples of the use of human pawns. 18 rdl. had been lent against ‘2 *Qvambus* in pawn’, for example and 54 rdl. 24 sk against ‘*Cophij Zay*, pawn *Remidor* [oarsman]’.<sup>31</sup> Christian Syndermann, appointed

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 281.

<sup>27</sup> The debt ledger reveals that 64 rdl. was owed on ‘4 Negroes whom *Tette* pledges’. Three further entries may be human pawn: 8 rdl. on ‘one *Aqvambuesch* Negro in pawn’; 14 marks on ‘*Cacun*, fisherman, in pawn’; and 139 rdl. on ‘*Aj*, borrowed on *Anombe* and a woman by name *Dede*’. Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 291–2. However, examples where individuals are described as ‘in pawn’ may simply refer to those who have provided some form of security. This is suggested by a later entry in 1724 in which the record of a debt of 16 rdl. to ‘*Qvampa* in *Aqvambue* in pawn’ has the corresponding ledger entry ‘1724 19th June paid in cowries and redeemed his pawn’. If he were in pawn himself, the entry would surely have noted his freedom, as in a case earlier in the ledger entry. *Ibid.* 350 and 348.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.* 286.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 295.

<sup>30</sup> Forty debtors can be clearly identified on both lists. Of those 19, (47.5 per cent) had increased their debt; 5 (12.5 per cent) had decreased it; and 16 (40 per cent) had the same level of debt. *Ibid.* 290–1 and 319–20.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* 319–20.

governor in 1723, promised – as his predecessor had – to try and recover the Company's outstanding receivables.

It therefore appears to us that the above-mentioned three governors [Rost, Peder Østrup and Herrn] have acted very badly, since they have lent out such a large and substantial capital to the Negroes, since these people are not minded or by nature like Whites, such that they will themselves voluntarily pay their debts. But a number of them think, when they are dunned, fair though it may be, that they are being done a great injustice. It will therefore create great trouble and difficulty for us, but we must not neglect, to the best of our ability and in accordance with our sworn duty, to remind them to pay their debts. If this should fail to bear fruit among them, then we will use such incentives as may be strong enough to make them pay their debts.<sup>32</sup>

The veracity of Syndermann's intention with regard to lending and his more proactive approach gains some confirmation from the list of his debtors drawn up in June 1725, which recorded only 42 names (including one Nune, 'pawn[ed] fisherman').<sup>33</sup> Henrik von Suhm, his successor was even more determined. Though he retained Syndermann's services 'because he is thoroughly familiar with the trade', a commission was established to recover Syndermann's outstanding debts. Von Suhm reported that as a result, 'Negroes were pawned, then clapped in irons against payment of the debt, by which means some of it has even been collected.' However, this tactic backfired spectacularly, as African traders avoided the fort in fear or being *panyarred* for debt. Von Suhm was forced to admit the mistake:

I acquired such a bad reputation throughout the country that even the king sent a message to me asking if it was true, as people were claiming, that I had all trading Negroes who came here clapped in irons and then sold them, both for their own and for others' debts.<sup>34</sup>

Yet this was only part of what appears to have been a broader, more rationalised approach by von Suhm to the recovery and protection of debt. Sixty-one debtors appear on the Company debt books in both 1724 and 1726, but of those only 7 had increased their debt, and, in each case, the amount was relatively small (between around 3 and 5 marks).<sup>35</sup> Moreover, as the debt book ledger in September 1726 reveals, a number of debts had been partly or fully redeemed through the forfeiture of gold pawns, and some others had been paid for in cowries. Other security, where recorded, appears to have been human, with *remidors* (oarsmen) frequently standing themselves in pawn for relatively small amounts of debt, usually less than 100 rdl.<sup>36</sup> How much this is a function of recording practice is difficult to determine. Some of the *remidors* that appear as self-pawning in the 1726 debtors' list also appear in the 1724 list with similar levels of debt

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 314.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.* 338.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* 323 and 339.

<sup>35</sup> Fifty-two debtors had the same debt while two had made a partial repayment. This stability continued until the end of the decade. Of the 44 debtors that can be identified in the 1726 and 1729 lists, 36 debtors owed the same amount, 7 had decreased their debts, and only 1 owed more. *Ibid.* 319–20, 347–51, and 384–5.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, 36 rdl. on 'Adjarij and Adjiribi Remidors {Osu} Stand themselves in pawn'; 64 rdl. on 'Annombe Remidor {Osu} Himself and his whore stood in pawn'. *Ibid.* 348–9. Some *remidors* had borrowed against the later delivery of a slave. For canoemen in pawn to the RAC with amounts, see Law (ed.), *RAC 1* [1681], 175.



but no accompanying reference to their pawned status. Was this information simply omitted earlier, or had they been asked to provide pawn subsequently as evidence of their intent to pay under von Suhm's more pro-active debt recovery programme? Certainly new debt that can be identified after 1726 was predominantly secured on human pawn. *Quacum*, a *remidor* in Orsu, had increased his debt from 166 rdl. in 1726 to 202 rdl. in 1729. While in 1726 he had offered himself in pawn, by 1729 it was clear that additional security was required: his son was also listed as a pawn for the debt.<sup>37</sup> Likewise Old *Cophi*, who had repaid his outstanding debt in 1726, had by 1729 asked for further credit of 130 rdl.; the Danish insisted on holding two *remidors*, *Afadu* and *Ando*, for the bulk of the debt (114 rdl.).<sup>38</sup>

Debtor lists in September 1727 and January 1729 reveal that the policy of accepting human pawns as collateral had continued under later Governors Frederik Pahl and Anders Wærøe, although a number of pawned objects were discovered in the Company's gold chest in 1729. Agori beads were most in evidence, but the chest did contain two small gold fetishes and a gold bracelet.<sup>39</sup> Later debt books say nothing about gold pawn, but do provide examples of human pawn; it is at this point that the shift towards the greater relative use of the body as security is apparent. In addition, increasing levels of indebtedness – or at the very least, demands for more security – are suggested by entries in Governor Christian Glob Dorph's debit ledger of February 1744, in which, on at least two occasions, debtors had been required to offer their whole families in pawn as security for their debt.<sup>40</sup>

The incomplete nature of the source material makes any attempt at a detailed calculation of the number of references to human pawns in the text unhelpful, but there is a rise in the number of incidental references to such pawns after the 1720s that becomes more insistent towards the middle of the century. Von Suhm had recognised that credit authorised by Company officers with African traders down at the coast, where the Company had lodges, was unlikely to be recovered, and that he needed to make use of existing indigenous debt recovery systems. In 1725, he informed the directors of his change of course – 'all private [outstanding] debt will be allocated to the Company, so that no one must deal with the Negroes on his own account'; it would be left to the king or local caboceers 'to collect it for us against reasonable payment'.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps there was, in addition, a move to recognise the value of local forms of security, and adapt their practice accordingly. Certainly there were problems for Europeans in relation to the use of gold. As already noted, it was relatively easy to embezzle and without it, African debtors could not be dunned for their debt.<sup>42</sup> Sometimes items appear to have been misplaced or lost. In 1686,

37 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 348 and 384.

38 *Ibid.* 348 and 385. Presumably, his payment history meant he could be trusted for the remaining 16 rdl. without security.

39 *Ibid.* 366–9 and 384–6.

40 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 517–21 and 584–5.

41 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 339.

42 In addition to Østrup's theft, other Company officers were accused of fraud. Peter Valck, who found significant amounts of gold and gold pawn when he seized command in 1681, was accused of squandering it all, and Wærøe claimed that in 1729, 'Governor Suhm took with him all the pawns that were in gold, as itemized in the Company's books, and exchanged them for cowries, inasmuch as Governor Suhm took



Ando Bonishee – a leading trader of Anomabu – had attempted to redeem his gold pawn, which he claimed consisted of both a neck ring and an arm ring, for which he had made satisfaction. Ralph Hassell, then RAC factor at Anomabu, who could only lay his hands on the arm ring, was advised by Bonishee that he would take fetish (swear on oath) before witnesses to prove his debt, and if his pawn was not returned in full, he would desire ‘the slave and five angles againe’ at its full value.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately for Europeans, the use of human pawns did not provide a satisfactory solution to the problem of debt security either.<sup>44</sup> Although creditors advised borrowers that unredeemed pawns would be sold upon expiry of their credit agreement, in reality, few European governors on the Gold Coast were willing to follow through on such threats. While WIGC directors were keen to recover outstanding debts, they had given express instruction ‘in the standing orders, Item 14, and in the governor’s special instructions, Item 11 . . . to treat the Negroes with leniency and kindness’. Reporting as interim governor in 1752, Carl Engman echoed the thoughts of many of his predecessors – the only way to recover Company debt was by force, ‘such that the Negroes’ children or family are taken by the head and sent as payment to the West Indies’.<sup>45</sup> In adopting such a strategy, however, they risked losing trade to other forts, as disgruntled debtors moved their allegiances elsewhere. Moreover, African authorities on the coast were increasingly careful to regulate against the unlawful removal of their security. In 1747, Ludwig Rømer attempted to recover an overdue debt through the pretended sale of a pawn to an interloper. The debtor paid up, but the interloper refused to free the pawn unless he received a female as well as a male slave. Rømer had little option but to comply, since ‘according to the custom of the country’, the debtor could demand four slaves for his pawn, if the pawn was not returned.<sup>46</sup> By the 1750s, the penalty appears to have increased significantly. According to Marcus Svane, bookkeeper during Engman’s governorship, the latter had sold a number of pawned children belonging to the *Ada* Negroes to a Portuguese vessel for gold. As Svane informed the directors in July 1753, the cost of that premature sale could have been considerable.

For if the *Ada* Negroes got slaves to give and pay back what they had borrowed, and then demanded their children, and they were not to be had, they could according to their own

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them as salary’. *Ibid.* 69–70 and 394. William de la Palma, the Dutch director-general, may also have removed gold pawn illegally, taking it on board the *Africaensche Galey* in a box in 1705. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 122.

- 43 Law (ed.), RAC 2, 180–1. Early complaints about difficulties in selling some pawned objects may have encouraged a preference for gold. Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1 [1683], 77. For pawned objects that were not sufficient to cover the value of the debt, see R. Law (ed.), *The English in West Africa, 1691–1699: The Local Correspondence of the Royal African Company of England, 1681–1699, Part 3 (RAC 3)* (Oxford, 2006), 331. This problem may have intensified as the price of gold rose on the Gold Coast (see below).
- 44 For disappearing pawns, see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 822. For the problem of runaway pawns, see TNA T70/1470, Journal at Appollonia (1780) including a description Of the Castles Forts and Settlements belonging to the Royal African Company (1737), 24.
- 45 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 874. In July 1746, it was claimed that it was ‘almost an impossible matter’ to send a number of pawns, one of whom was heir to a local stool, to be sold off the coast; instead they became Company slaves. *Ibid.* 675 and 684. See also Governor Platfues’s comments in May 1748 and the further purchase of two boys as *remidor* slaves instead of accepting them as pawns in 1754. *Ibid.* 721 and 948.
- 46 *Ibid.* 803.

and the country's custom demand whatever they wanted for them, so that nothing else could settle this than whatever agreement could be reached. And then it would not have been cheaper than ten men slaves apiece, which was 30 men slaves for three *impias* and according to a simple calculation 3,000 rdl.<sup>47</sup>

Yet keeping the pawns over significant periods of time was also costly for the Company. As Rømer was keen to explain,

when they [Africans] borrow from the Europeans, they do not pay even a low interest on the principal, but we have to feed the security they give, which usually means their own or slave children, sometimes feeding them for several years. Should we wish to sell the security, the debtor's friends and any caboceers and fetish priests with whom they are acquainted come and plague us, begging us to have patience for yet a few more months – so [sometimes] we have fed their children until they became fully grown.<sup>48</sup>

The French made similar complaints about the cost of maintaining Fante pawns in 1752, and the British were keeping pawns at their own expense in the latter part of the eighteenth century.<sup>49</sup> It was also the responsibility of European companies to care for injured pawns.<sup>50</sup>

There is evidence that on some occasions European traders on the Gold Coast refused to take human pawns. In July 1713, the WIC was looking for 'as many securities as possible' to guarantee a loan to Caboceer Caffo, chief of the 'tJufferse, who had requested funds for the payment of allies in his war against the Akan. He already had some debt outstanding, but the precarious political situation made it necessary, in the view of the Dutch, that his request be granted, if with some care:

we know that if he had golden *impias* he would give them as a pawn or even as full payment for his needs, but that we cannot let the Company's money go out of our hands without any proper surities; yet, he should try to produce sufficient *impias*, either golden ones or Conte de Terra, to the greatest value he can find, even if it were up to 100 bendas, but we cannot take Negroes as pawns or *impias*; firstly because we do not consider them sufficient, and secondly because that would cause too many rumours, and the Fantyns might hear of it, whilst we want to do this business in secrecy.<sup>51</sup>

47 *Ibid.* 901. Svane was defending himself against a number of accusations made by the former Governor Hachsen, but did not hide the fact that he and Engman were not on good terms. For his testimony, see *Ibid.* 858–68 and 893–912.

48 L. F. Rømer, *A Reliable Account of the Coast of Guinea* (1760), S. A. Winsnes (ed.) (Oxford, 2000), 164. For the problem of unredeemed pawns, see TNA T70/1470, Journal at Appollonia, 24. For a male slave who had been pawned for one year for 'a fine Portuguese slave', see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 869.

49 Centre des archives d'outre-mer, Aix-en-Provence (CAOM), C<sup>6</sup> 13, 27 Feb. 1752, *Memoire d'observations sur le traité fait avec les Fantines*, Article 14; TNA T70/32, Inward Letter Book 1773–81, 51. In Old Calabar, the costs of maintaining pawns apparently fell on the debtor. This may have been related to the strength of the British near monopsony – 85.8 per cent of slaves between 1701 and 1810 left on British ships. See Lovejoy and Richardson, 'Trust', 338 and 351. In medieval European practice, creditors normally maintained pledges. E. Tomlinson, 'Comparative historical perspectives', in Westbrook and Jasnow (eds.), *Security*, 27.

50 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 691.

51 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch* [1713], 171. Given the variety of uses for pawns, their value may often have failed to correspond exactly to the debt they secured. For references to an 'adequate' pawn and an 'exact pawn', both in 1745, see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 645 and 662.

Nevertheless, human pawns were being offered as security for commercial debt in the 1710s by the state that had taken control of the bulk of the gold producing areas – Asante.<sup>52</sup> And by the 1740s, this practice was also a feature of the other significant polity in charge of Afro-European commerce on the Gold Coast littoral – the Fante Coastal Coalition – who, in addition, had an interest in gold.<sup>53</sup>

We should also re-examine the multiple forms, meanings, and terminologies used in discussions of security in the early modern period before trying to evidence change. Words used to describe security in the European trading companies' records include (or have been translated as) 'pawn', 'pledge', 'surety', and 'hostage'. In modern discussion, we generally understand security to refer to specific items of property deposited or handed over in order to guarantee the payment of a debt, because the concept of a surety – a pledge (either an object or a person) for the fulfilment of a promise or the performance of an agreement – is less common. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Europeans may rarely have thought of human pledges as securities for debt, but it remained common practice for people as pledges to be offered as security for the completion of contracts, the performance of a promise or agreement, or the safety of individual actors, especially in relation to trade. Nor was this practice unique to Europe.<sup>54</sup> In the highly contested commercial context of the Gold Coast such pledges were vital, as Rømer noted in his advice to newly arrived personnel as late as April 1749:

Here at the fort eight caboceers' sons have been and are still supported, namely three from *Fante*, two from the hills and two from the *Rio Volta*. These are all pawns from the most prominent caboceers. Those from *Fante* we have so that we can safely send goods ashore at these places to get provisions; those from the hills and the river we have here so that our factors at *Ningo*, *Ada* and *Quitta* [=Keta] can safely send goods to the most necessary places that belong under theses caboceers, to procure trade ...<sup>55</sup>

52 John Stevenson had been entertaining Asante traders at Dixcove for six days in 1716, buying ivory, gold, and slaves. He had been obliged to sell his *perpets* (*perpetuanas*: wool fabrics), guns, and powder at high prices, and as the Asante were 'very uneasie & ill to please I have likeways trusted the head of them 14 oz goods on five good men pawns ... on their promise of paying me in 2 Months at the Longest in good Slaves & Teeth & likeway's to engage others to come to this place to Trade'. TNA C113/261, Copies of Letters, John Stevenson, Dixcove, 11 Aug. 1716, 123v–124.

53 The Fante had offered human pawns to the Dutch in 1740 in return for gunpowder, gold dust, and lead. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 351.

54 See, for example, 'July 2. Mount Howard, at the mouth of Wyapoco, Guiana', *Domestic Corresp. Jac. I., Vol. VIII., No. 87, Cal. p. 127*, in W. N. Salisbury (ed.), 'America and West Indies: July 1604', *Calendar of State Papers Colonial, America and West Indies, Volume 1: 1574–1660*, British History Online, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=68913>>, accessed 3 Sept. 2012; 'The voyages of William Hawkins the elder to Guinea and Brazil during the years 1530–2', in J. W. Blake (ed.), *Europeans in West Africa, 1450–1560: Documents to Illustrate the Nature and Scope of Portuguese Enterprise in West Africa, the Abortive Attempt of Castilians to Create an Empire there, and the Early English Voyages to Barbary and Guinea, Volume II*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 87 (London, 1942), 299; 2 April; Add. MS. 32,650, f. 115. B. M. Sadler State Papers, I. 113, in J. Gairdner and R. H. Brodie (eds.) 'Henry VIII: April 1543, 1–5', *Letters and Papers, Foreign and Domestic, Henry VIII, Volume 18 Part 1: January–July 1543*, British History Online, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=76734&strquery=pledge>>, accessed 3 Sept. 2012; R. C. Temple (ed.), *The Travels of Peter Mundy, in Europe and Asia, 1608–1667, Volume II, Travels in Asia, 1628–1634*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 35 (London, 1914), 264. See also the three essays by Wigmore on 'The pledge-idea' in the *Harvard Law Review*, 10:6–7 and 11:1 (1897).

55 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 761.

A brief outline of the various uses of human security in the records of the English, Dutch, and Danish trading companies will reveal the considerable flexibility of the practice.<sup>56</sup> First, in the RAC records, pawned bodies served a variety of purposes: to secure the safety of factories and their goods; to act as hostages to ensure the safe return of negotiators and intermediaries; to secure the future payment of a court fine or compensation (rather than the payment itself), and as proof of an intention to comply with legal agreements; and to bind individuals to good behaviour.<sup>57</sup> The Danish and Dutch records provide comparable instances and reveal in addition that the use of human pawns – as pledges for the performance of some current or future action – remained part of African and European practice throughout the period under investigation.<sup>58</sup>

Some of the complexity of meaning is recovered by the comparison of two references to the same ‘pawn’. In 1729, interim Governor Andreas Wellemsen, in handing over the books, factory, and warehouse, along with the son of the caboecer of *Orsue* town, to his successor, informed him that the boy was ‘in pawn for the town’s debt’. A more expansive explanation at the end of the same letter, however, stated that the caboecer had ‘left his son in pawn in the fort as surety that the Negroes would not run away from the town, and that they would, as reported, pay off their debt as soon as possible.’<sup>59</sup> A decade or so earlier, an entry in the RAC document collection suggests a similar duality of purpose. In 1717, John Tau’s pawns – which appear to have been horns – were being held as ‘Security for his good behaviour to the Company & the payment of his debt amounting at first to ninety two Bendys which he has not at all complied with in either case’ (he had recently ‘deserted the Companys interest’). If security could have a dual purpose, it could also take on a mixed format. Pawns received as a result of agreements with the Fetu for their good behaviour ‘and for Securing & reimbursements of the Company Charges in bringing them to Obedience’ included gold fetishes and a number of children, including ‘5 Boys 2 Girles Pawned by the Queen & COUNTRY of Fetue for a debt’.<sup>60</sup>

The use of free bodies as collateral for debt may not have been a desirable part of European practice in the late seventeenth century. In 1687, for example, the RAC bought slaves on a temporary basis to avoid the use of human pawn, expecting them to be redeemed later.<sup>61</sup> That there was an early recognition of the commercial value of human pledges nevertheless is clear. *En route* for Copenhagen, Governor Busch recounted

56 The multiplicity of their uses sometimes made identifying their purpose problematic. William Cross of the RAC, concerned about the activities of a French vessel at Komenda in 1686, wrote that ‘the king has given them a pawn on board, and what for I can [not] learne’. Law (ed.), *RAC* 2, 79.

57 Law (ed.), *RAC* 1 [1681], 68; [1683], 12; [1683], 61; [1681], 302; [1681], 145; [1682], 193; Law (ed.), *RAC* 3 [1695], 343; Law (ed.), *RAC* 2 [1687], 53 and 49; [1687], 215; Law (ed.), *RAC* 3 [1693], 304; TNA T70/30, Inward Letter Book 1753–62, 19 Oct. 1753, 19.

58 For bodies as security for the performance of a promise in 1681, see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 73. For the recovery of slaves in 1698, *Ibid.* 141. As guarantee of intention to trade in 1747, Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 703–4. For bodies as hostages for a peace treaty in 1704, van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 98. For future payment of a debt in 1717, *Ibid.* 195. For guarantee of safety in 1727, *Ibid.* 223.

59 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 422–4.

60 TNA C113/270, Letter Book, Cape Coast Castle, 1717, 9–11. For other examples of human and gold pawn, see TNA C113/286, Accounts, invoices, bank statements etc relating to William Johnson, 1717–19, 23v, 52.

61 Law (ed.), *RAC* 2, 100. See also TNA C113/261, Copies of Letters, Edward Patrick, 13 July 1716, Komenda, 73v.

the offer that the King of Accra had made to assist in the retaking of Christiansborg, at the time being held by the Portuguese. The promised sureties – which include an agreement to forfeit in case of failure – extended to:

his mother, sons and wives with all his gold, which he had taken with him to Friedriksberg. He would also quickly procure the slaves we wanted, and if this did not happen, then we had all his relatives as sureties and could then do with them as we liked. Mr Prand and I considered this, and we believed then that it could not go ill, for even if the King of *Accra* lost the battle, there would still be slaves in it for us. So we tried to maintain good friendly relations with him. He also asked us if, when the ship was at *Lampe* and he needed more powder or more muskets, we would help him with this – in return, however, for gold pawn.<sup>62</sup>

The final comment, nevertheless, reveals the contemporary preference for gold. Busch had asked for gold pawn for the weaponry, and the English too appear to have been able to demand gold pawn in some instances, especially when credit was petitioned for guns and gunpowder.<sup>63</sup> While Europeans seem to have preferred property – including slaves – as security, African traders may well have been pushing for the use of human security. There are further complications, however, in attempting to understand the nature and choice of security in the early eighteenth century.

Translators of the late seventeenth-century Danish records chose to refer to human security where it operated to provide a guarantee of performance rather than collateral for a loan as ‘pledges’, ‘hostages’, or ‘sureties’. From the 1720s, however, there is a clear shift to use instead the more generic term ‘pawn’ for any form of security. The fact that this was indicative of shifts in contemporary usage is suggested by a parallel shift in the records of the Dutch company, although the RAC were already describing all forms of security – whether object or person, and regardless of their function – as ‘pawn’ in the 1680s.<sup>64</sup> Certainly until the early eighteenth century, the human security that was offered by African traders in exchange for goods looks more like pledge than collateral. Although Ahenesa (Ansa), King of Akwami, was allowed to pawn his wife at James Fort, Accra, for 100 muskets in 1681, her sale would have been unlikely to provide sufficient collateral for the loan: the following February, Ralph Hassell paid 9 muskets each for 2 female and 1 male slave, which he believed was ‘extravagant rates for my Masters proffit’.<sup>65</sup> Yet nine years later, the English refused to provide the King of Eguafu with the ten barrels of gunpowder he had requested because his gold pawn was insufficient: ‘it not being all good gold’, he received only four.<sup>66</sup> Instances in which there was disagreement over loan redemption also suggest that the indigenous premise of security on the Gold Coast was more akin to the concept of pledge than collateral. In 1722, the Danish were holding

62 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 73–4.

63 Law (ed.), *RAC* 2, 139; Law (ed.), *RAC* 3, 309 and 334.

64 In the Dutch records, of the three examples of the use of human security as a guarantee of performance in the early eighteenth century, the first two in 1704 and 1717 are translated as ‘hostage’ and the final example in 1727 as ‘pawn’. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 98, 195, and 223.

65 Law (ed.), *RAC* 1, 175 and 183. For the value of guns in slaves at Whydah – the price early in the 1700s was 12 guns for one slave, see M. Johnson, ‘The ounce in eighteenth-century West African trade’, *The Journal of African History*, 7:2 (1966), 206–7.

66 Law (ed.), *RAC* 2, 139.

a number of gold items belonging to the King of Akwamu, weighing in at over 15 marks, upon which he had borrowed 30 *benda* of gold as well as some goods in c. 1718–19. In the 1722 ledger, he is listed as owing 640 rdl. at which point the security held by the Company exceeded the value of his debt. But sometime between 1722 and 1725, the king increased his loan to 3,974 rdl.<sup>67</sup> He managed to pay back 57 rdl. on 31 July 1725 in cowries, but the Danish – keen to recoup as much as possible – decided to cash in their pawn, receiving 912 rdl. for part of the pawned gold on 30 September of the same year and a further 848 rdl. for the remaining gold on 8 October; this reduced the king's liability to 2,157 rdl. Unfortunately for the Danish, the problem of the outstanding debt had to be taken up with the king's successor. He was not averse to making good on his predecessor's debt, but equated the total liquidation of the security with the cancellation of the loan. In 1727, he refused to pay the outstanding balance demanding the return of the gold or the annulment of the debt as well as compensation for the dishonour he perceived he had suffered.<sup>68</sup>

For Africans, gold pawn does not appear to have been the norm.<sup>69</sup> Instead, the provision of human pawns was what characterised indigenous practice, even though it was used to secure the performance of a wide range of obligations, including the payment of specific debts.<sup>70</sup> In the Danish material, the 1720s marks the decade in which the instances of human pawn begin to supplant those of gold. But if factors and governors appear to have been adapting to African terminology as well as African practice, they were not prepared to risk capital on the legal premise of security as pledge or forfeit. In a parallel shift, therefore, human pawns appeared more frequently as guarantees of specific amounts of debt from the 1720s as debts and their security were calculated in relation to slave

67 There is no record of which of the various units of weight present on the Gold Coast were used by the Danish. If the equivalencies listed in documents under the dates of 1680 and 1698 still applied, one *benda* was worth 32 rdl., and one mark (gold weight) was equal to four *benda*. The king had offered security worth 60 *benda* that covered his debt of 20 *benda* (640 rdl.), but not the later debt of 124 *benda* (3974 rdl.). Justesen (ed.), *Danish I*, xxi–v, 41, and 101.

68 *Ibid.* 282, 290, 349, and 360–2. The king asked 'if it was the custom in our home country to forfeit pawns without informing the owner. To this the answer was that he knew well that *Aquando* had first borrowed 30 *bender* of gold as well as goods, and since the pawn was gold, it balanced out against gold. Secondly, there was no time, when the ship that was given the gold for goods came here in the roads, to let him know, since the captain of the ship would not put off his departure for such a long time, perhaps a fortnight, until one could get a messenger back again.' In addition, the promise from *Aquando* had been to repay in 2 months' time, but the debt had been active for eight and nine years without interest. *Ibid.* 361.

69 In one instance, Edward Barter of the RAC reported that the Akwamu had promised 'either their sons or two hundred bendys' to the King of Allampo to secure Company trading in the area. Law (ed.), *RAC* 3, 566.

70 For inter-African pawning in 1744, see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 656–7; TNA T70/1463, 'Cape Coast Memorandum book 1703–4', 13 Jan. 13 1703–2 Jan. 1704; and van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 312. European literature was critical of the practice of African pawning by the mid-eighteenth century. For example, J. S. G., the last commandant of Commenda, wrote: 'If a Negro wants Money – be he Old or Young – Decrepit or Robust – he can pawn himself – or his Son – his Sister or his Sister's Child – to his Neighbour, for a Sum payable at a Day certain . . .': J. S. G., *Detector Detected: or, State of Affairs on the Gold Coast, and Conduct of the Present Managers Considered* (London, 1753), 39. Clarkson's essay was more sympathetic to what he saw as exploitation, noting that poorer African traders were 'obliged to leave a pledge or security for their return. This pledge consists of their own relations. T. Clarkson, *An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species* (2nd edn, London, 1788 [orig. pub. 1785]), 27–8.



value. In 1744, for example, *Jancon* and *Qvacu* both owed 96 rdl. – the cost of a male slave at 100 per cent markup – for which they stood themselves in pawn.<sup>71</sup> There were still negotiations to be made, as creditworthiness was related to status and bargaining power: where the relatives of caboceers and free Negroes were offered as security, the Danish seem to have accepted a balance of one pawn to the value of two slaves.<sup>72</sup> Like the gold they replaced, Europeans wanted their human pawns to provide collateral security, but what had happened to switch the balance of preferences, and who was driving this change?

## THE EUROPEAN DEMAND FOR GOLD

The extension of Portuguese medieval exploration to the Gold Coast of Africa in the late fifteenth century heralded the beginning of what could be described as the earliest documented gold rush, as European nations competed for access to the rich gold deposits of the area. Though significant in terms of its contribution to the early modern European economy, this gold rush has been rightly overshadowed by the broader and more devastating commercial endeavour of which it was part – the transatlantic slave trade. This too was European in its origins, but had global consequences that went immeasurably beyond its initial formulations.

‘Ghāna, the land of gold’ is referenced in the writings of the early Arab geographer al-Fazārī, and Arabic sources confirm the existence of a substantial trans-Saharan trade in gold from at least the tenth century.<sup>73</sup> One major goal of Portuguese exploration then appears to have been to locate and secure sources of African gold in order to bypass Arabian merchants, and allow the Portuguese crown direct access to the precious metal. Only with the discovery of the Gold Coast in the 1470s did this begin to look feasible.<sup>74</sup>

71 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 584–5. For the cost of slaves, see Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, xxxvi. Some security appears excessive, such as the fisherman who had pawned his sister for 12 rdl. in 1735, but he may have made partial repayment. Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 504.

72 See, for example, the debt of *Domine* in 1735 who owed one man and one woman slave, and whose daughter was in pawn, or that of the *Ada* Negroes in 1750 for 192 rdl. (two men slaves), who had offered one pawn from the caboceer’s family. Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2, 503 and 791. On the Slave Coast, a ratio of two pawns to three slaves seems to have been the norm for British slave traders. Lovejoy and Richardson, ‘Trust’, 351.

73 Abū-l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī provides the first Arab description of the ‘silent’ gold trade. N. Levtzion and J.F.P. Hopkins (eds.), *Corpus of Early Arabic Sources for West African History* (Cambridge, 1981), 32, 379 fn. 8, and 380 fn. 11; P. Spufford, *Money and Its Use in Medieval Europe* (Cambridge, 1988), 163–4.

74 Pereira claimed Henry had religious and political motives for his voyages of exploration believing he would find there ‘so much gold and other rich merchandise ... as would maintain the King and people of these realms of Portugal in plenty and would enable them to wage war on the enemies of our holy Catholic faith’. D.P. Pereira, *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*, trans. and ed. G.H.T. Kimble, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 79 (London, 1937), 62. When the Portuguese took Ceuta in 1415, it was famed for its gold doubloons, minted from gold brought across the Sahara; capture of the port allowed the royal mint to produce gold coins for the first time in fifty years. The gold bought from Saharan caravans at the trading post of Arguim, established in 1449–50, was sufficient to allow the Portuguese mint to issue its new gold *cruzado* in 1457. The discovery of gold on the Gold Coast from the 1470s ensured that the *cruzado* could maintain its exceptional level of purity for eighty years. A.R. Disney, *A History of Portugal and the Portuguese Empire, Volume 2: The Portuguese Empire* (Cambridge, 2009), 3–4, 13–14, 46, and 56–60.



As the gold trade was increasingly reoriented away from its northern focus towards the southern coast, there were opportunities for political change as traditional authorities in coastal kingdoms were undermined.<sup>75</sup> The most relevant of these for the discussion at hand was the rise of the Asante nation in the early eighteenth century – whose identity and power was intricately intertwined with gold – and the parallel emergence of the Fante Coastal Coalition. Their control over a broad swathe of the coastal littoral allowed them to monitor and direct commercial operations between the Asante traders inland and the Europeans on the coast.<sup>76</sup> The emergence of these new polities in the early eighteenth century coincided with the period in which supplies of gold as an item of commerce were dwindling.

Initially, the Portuguese had *imported* slaves into the Gold Coast as an exchange good but by the seventeenth this trade had been reversed, although until the eighteenth century slaving remained relatively small scale.<sup>77</sup> Richard Bean's 1974 note in the *The Journal of African History* sparked what has become a long-running debate on the timing of the relative preference of Europeans for gold and slaves, as indicated by their commercial value. For Bean, gold remained the most coveted good until the later seventeenth century. After that point higher export prices for slaves, and the depletion of the most accessible gold deposits, in his view, appear to have driven up labour costs in mining.<sup>78</sup> Ernst van den Boogaart's challenge almost twenty years later, incorporating evidence from a revision of the number of slave imports into Spanish America before 1650, argued for a much earlier swing: 'from 1600 onwards the value of slave exports surpassed that of gold exports. This has been demonstrated ... for 1623–32 and it is also valid for 1600–22.'<sup>79</sup> The more recent work of David Eltis has sought to reclaim the turn of the eighteenth century as the fulcrum of change. Only then did slaves become more important than gold 'as gold deposits were mined out and, more important, as both slave prices and numbers of slaves carried increased sharply'.<sup>80</sup>

75 J. D. Fage, *A History of West Africa: An Introductory Survey* (4th edn, Cambridge, 1969), 97. For evidence that this shift was already underway by the early sixteenth century, see Pereira, *Esmeraldo*, 75.

76 The Fante were an amalgam of several cultural groups that included Akan, Asebu, Etsi, Fetu, Agona, and Eguafu. They did not appear as a unified group until after 1700, but by 1726 were coordinating to counter the aggression of the Asante. R. Shumway, *The Fante and the Transatlantic Slave Trade* (Rochester, NY, 2011), 15 and 99. The Asante nation emerged at the end of the seventeenth century in the forest lands of the Akan peoples, with its capital at Kumase. I. Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens, OH, 1993), 41. Fynn claims the Asante were a military union of various Akan-speaking peoples, 'aiming at political and economic expansion'. By 1720, they had control of the economic resources in the western Gold Coast hinterland and were the major political players in that area. J. K. Fynn, *Asante and Its Neighbours, 1700–1807* (Evanston, IL, 1971), 1 and 55.

77 At the Portuguese factory established in 1487 to the east at Benin, animal skins, 'coris' [agori] beads, cotton cloths, and slaves were bought to exchange further west for gold; the Portuguese also imported slaves into the Gold Coast from Arguim. Cited in Daaku, *Trade*, 24. See also Blake (ed.), *Europeans in West Africa*, 1, 50 and 126–7; and Disney, *History* 2, 62.

78 R. Bean, 'A note on the relative importance of slaves and gold in West African exports', *The Journal of African History*, 15:3 (1974), 353–5.

79 E. van den Boogaart, 'The trade between western Africa and the Atlantic World, 1600–90: estimates of trends in composition and value', *The Journal of African History*, 33:3 (1992), 380.

80 D. Eltis, 'The relative importance of slaves and commodities in the Atlantic slave trade of seventeenth-century Africa', *The Journal of African History*, 35:2 (1994), 249.

Price increases are often the most visible signal of shifts in the demand/supply equilibrium, and as such form a substantial part of existing historical analyses. John Fynn, for example, has argued that a rise in prices encouraged ‘the Africans to abandon the tedious job of working in the gold pits for the comparatively easy task of raiding for slaves’.<sup>81</sup> Eltis too claims that ‘the slave-gold mix shifted sharply at the end of the century in response to a change in the relative price of gold to slaves’.<sup>82</sup> The documents of the monopoly trading companies offer some qualitative support for this increase. In 1704, Willem de la Palma, director general for the WIC, claimed that since 1700–1 the price of slaves had risen ‘by more than a half’.<sup>83</sup> Johannes Postma’s more definitive Dutch figures support his claim, indicating a rise from 30 guilders in 1680 to 45 in 1703; by 1721, the price demanded had risen to 80 guilders.<sup>84</sup> The price of slaves at the Danish forts had risen too. Starting from 10 rdl. in 1680, the prime cost of a slave rose to 16 rdl in 1700, reaching 32–38 rdl. in the period 1700–24.<sup>85</sup> Price data for the British also reveal a rise in the cost of slaves toward the end of the seventeenth century, with Bean’s figures, for example, suggested a near doubling of prices from £5.43 in the four years between 1698 and 1702 to £10.24 in the following four.<sup>86</sup>

Explanations for the causes of price rises at the end of the seventeenth century have focused on increasing demand for African labourers in the Americas, both as plantation slaves and as miners. Certainly the cost of slaves in the Caribbean appears to have risen, and with the discovery of gold in the region of Minas Gerais in Brazil at the end of the century, the Portuguese were looking for labourers who were fitter and better suited to work in the mines than those from Angola or Kongo.<sup>87</sup> The entry of English interlopers into the trade as a result of the end of the RAC’s monopoly in 1698 has also been cited as a causal factor in the sudden racking up of competition.<sup>88</sup> As Johan Thrane, governor at the Danish fort, reported in 1700, ‘there are so many ships here at the Coast that

81 Fynn, *Asante*, 15.

82 Eltis, *Rise*, 177.

83 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 104.

84 J. M. Postma, *The Dutch in the Atlantic Slave Trade, 1600–1815* (Cambridge, 1990), Appendix 24, 406. The price had been forty guilders in 1676.

85 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, xxxv–xxxvi.

86 R. N. Bean, *The British Transatlantic Slave Trade, 1650–1775* (New York, 1975), 72.

87 See estimations of cash prices for slaves in Jamaica in the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database (TASTD), Emory University Digital Library, <<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/database/search.faces>>, accessed 24 April 2013; for prices in the British Caribbean, see H. A. Gemery and J. S. Hogendorn, ‘Elasticity of slave labor supply and the development of slave economies in the British Caribbean: the seventeenth century experience’, in V. D. Rubin and A. Tuden (eds.), *Comparative Perspectives on Slavery in New World Plantation Societies* (New York, 1977), Table 2, 73. The Portuguese had concentrated much of their slave trading activity in West Central Africa after the founding of Luanda in 1575. But political developments and a smallpox epidemic among the Bantu tribes of Angola in the period 1685–7 encouraged ‘the revival of the Portuguese slave trade in the Gulf of Guinea’, which gained additional momentum from the demand for labour in the gold mines after 1695. C. R. Boxer, *The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825* (London, 1969), 103 and 169–70.

88 At Cape Coast Castle, it appeared that the relaxation of the monopoly had ‘outdone’ the trade because independent traders gave such high prices for slaves. TNA C113/273, ‘Letters from James Phipps and others at Cape Coast castle to the Court of the Royal African Company and others in London’, 1709–21, 35v. From the 1680s, the RAC proved increasingly incapable of enforcing its monopoly, and began to license a small number of private traders after 1686. However, the final withdrawal of its protected status

they might have rained down from the clouds'.<sup>89</sup> There was certainly a significant racking up of slave exports. The estimated number of slaves leaving the Gold Coast rose from 75,377 in the period 1676–1700 to reach 229,239 in the following 25 years, with the biggest single yearly increase occurring between 1699 and 1700 (4,817 to 11,203). The annual total then fell back, and apart from odd years when slave numbers were high, did not reach and maintain similar levels until the late 1760s.<sup>90</sup> Given the fact that the number of slaves leaving the Gold Coast appears to have trebled between the later decades of the seventeenth century and the early decades of the eighteenth, the supply of slaves must have had considerable elasticity.<sup>91</sup> Moreover, African sellers appear to have been pushing the terms of trade. Despite the fact that men were in greater demand than women, male slaves as a proportion of all slaves fell from a figure of 52 per cent in 1662–97 to 47 per cent in the period 1698–1713.<sup>92</sup>

The change in commercial practice could not have failed to have an impact on contemporary discussion. In August 1704, de la Palma reported to his directors in Amsterdam that increased competition was causing the inhabitants 'to concentrate on the whole much more on the slave than on the gold trade, finding the former more profitable'; he now regarded commerce in slaves – rather than gold – 'as the unique cornerstone of Y.H's interest'.<sup>93</sup> This appears to have affected his procurement strategy, and did not go unnoticed elsewhere. In March 1706, the Danish Governor Erich Lygaard, reporting to his superiors in Copenhagen, argued for a similar change of direction:

Even if capital in gold cannot be traded to be sent home with every ship (which would require that the trade got better than it is now) one can regularly get slaves, with which the Company (in my view) must first and foremost be maintained. Not a year goes by but the Dutch send out four, five or more slave ships, and if they did not keep up this trade, they would long since have been ruined.<sup>94</sup>

Yet the policies of the Dutch, Danish, and English trading companies show considerable vacillation, driven largely by the level of returns from the slave trade.<sup>95</sup> In the last quarter of the seventeenth century, the Dutch, according to Postma, had 'exported nearly half of

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occurred at the same time as a general bidding up of prices by a flood of European competition. Bean, *British*, 92.

89 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 118.

90 TASTD, <<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>>, accessed 24 April 2013. An estimated 1,209,321 slaves were exported from the Gold Coast from 1601 to 1866. This constitutes around 10 per cent of the estimated total of 12,521,336 slaves transported during the period of the transatlantic trade (1501–1866).

91 Henry Gemery and Jan Hogendorn suggested a highly elastic supply for the later seventeenth century, and David Richardson has made similar claims for the early eighteenth. Gemery and Hogendorn, 'Elasticity', 80; D. Richardson, 'Prices of slaves in West and West-Central Africa: toward and annual series, 1698–1807', *Bulletin of Economic Research*, 43:1 (1991), 46.

92 Eltis, *Rise*, 175–6.

93 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 103–4.

94 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 201.

95 Thrane, for example, had suggested that he be allowed to buy stocks of slaves, but changed his mind in light of price movements for both slaves and their food, and the unpredictable arrivals of Danish ships. However, he advised the directors in 1701 that he would begin again to buy slaves when any were available. *Ibid.* 118 and 121–2.

all the gold mined in West Africa'.<sup>96</sup> Their much poorer performance in the first decade of the eighteenth century may have encouraged a broadening of trade, but interest in gold did not wane. The high cost of Gold Coast slaves in 1710, for example, occasioned a reversal of existing practice with the recommendation that instead of buying slaves, traders should 'rather barter the cargoes which arrive for gold and other current trade goods'.<sup>97</sup> Similar sentiments appear in the RAC material. In 1711, bemoaning the consequences of the trade 'being laid open' to interlopers and attempting to regain its monopoly status, the Company proposed a scheme 'by which, not only a sufficient Number of Negroes will be bought for supply of all the Plantations, but very large Returns will be made Annually in Gold, and other Merchandize, to the great encrease of Bullion, and the Wealth of this Kingdom'.<sup>98</sup>

For the Danish, complying with conflicting Company directives was often tricky. In July 1720, a disappointed Governor Rost reported that trade at Accra was worsening:

Now neither gold nor cowries comes here to the fort, but always slaves. We are obliged to buy some of the best to cover the current costs of the fort. Although your Lordships the Directors tell us in your orders that we must not take goods for goods, we still think that it is better (since the trade is now so inordinately poor) to engage in some trade in slaves rather than refrain altogether.<sup>99</sup>

Governor von Suhm offered a suitable compromise. In requesting more coastal transport and 'kill-devil' – young rum or brandy from St Thomas – to improve his trading prospects, he explained his motives and his strategy:

To shed further light on the above, I postulate that the true advantage of the Company in the trade lies in purchasing slaves for the goods, and then attempting to get them out at a profit, either with our own ships or to interlopers. For what I reported in my humble letter of 20th September 1725 – that the slaves could be sold to the Portuguese for gold at *Fida* [=Ouidah] – was, as Your Lordships can see from the same letter, on the condition that the fort was always so abundantly supplied with goods that we would have no need to seek them from the interlopers.<sup>100</sup>

The Danish had made earlier attempts to trade for gold with the Portuguese, allowing one captain in 1702 'to anchor his ship for a few days under the protection of the fort to sell tobacco and rum'; he, in return, had promised to 'purchase from the Company's cargo as much as he had sold for gold'.<sup>101</sup> By 1730, if not before, it was Portuguese

96 Postma, *Dutch*, 85.

97 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 156.

98 Royal African Company, *A True Account of Eight Years Exports of the Royal African Company, and Eight Years Exports of the Separate Traders* (London, 1711), 2. For the importance of large-scale imports of bullion into England in the first half of the eighteenth century, see H. E. S. Fisher, *The Portugal Trade: A Study of Anglo-Portuguese Commerce, 1700–1770* (London, 1971), 92–106; Boxer, *Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, 164–6; and D. Richardson and E. W. Evans, 'Empire and accumulation in eighteenth-century Britain', in T. Brotherstone and G. Pilling (eds.), *History, Economic History and the Future of Marxism: Essays in Memory of Tom Kemp (1921–93)* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1996), 79–102.

99 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 279.

100 *Ibid.* 354–5. Boxer notes that Brazilian gold was smuggled by Bahian slave-traders into Ouidah, despite official prohibitions on export to anywhere but Portugal. Boxer, *Portuguese Seaborne Empire*, 171.

101 Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, 151.

demand that was informing procurement strategy. As Wærøe reported in December of that year:

Finally in this item, Your Lordships the Directors are pleased to recommend us not to purchase other than young Portuguese slaves. We can assure you that the poorest man slave we purchase, and at the lowest price, we can sell again to English and French ships here at the coast for at least 112 rdl., and the poorest woman slave for 80 rdl., and this for good wares, so that for the goods we can get the same money back in gold, and sometimes even a profit on it. Your Lordships can thus see for yourselves that if the gold trade with the *Akenists* would come in here, we could use all the slaves we purchase: selling them for goods and the goods for gold, which we believe gives us a better profit; and sending the gold home with our ships. And no slaves will die on the voyage to the West Indies.<sup>102</sup>

This policy had also been adopted by the Dutch, who the English claimed had been trading for gold as coastal middle men since at least the 1680s.<sup>103</sup> The WIC directors eventually called a halt to the practice, believing it reduced the supply of slaves for the Dutch West Indies.<sup>104</sup>

Other policies confirm the continuing importance of gold for the European trading companies. Throughout the first half of the eighteenth century, for example, the Danish and Dutch companies discussed the building of new lodges and the acquisition of new forts, and continued to entertain the possibility of finding and working their own mines, despite a number of unsuccessful attempts.<sup>105</sup> The Dutch finally decided to open up slave trading to anyone willing to pay them a ‘recognition’ fee in ‘liquid gold, or otherwise the same value in ivory’.<sup>106</sup> The British too, were still dreaming of gold. The RAC shifted its focus towards the export of gold and ivory after 1731, and its successor company in 1750 was encouraged to do the same.<sup>107</sup> James Hippisley, who was employed at a number of forts on the Gold Coast in the 1750s, pleaded for the erection of a fort at Cape Appolonia in 1764, at least in part on account of that place having ‘always been remarkable for its plenty of gold’. Indeed it was the only place in Hippisley’s opinion, where the

102 *Ibid.* 435 and fn. 107. The ‘young Portuguese slaves’ were high quality slaves who could be sold for gold to Portuguese and Brazilian ships.

103 Law (ed.), *RAC I*, 211.

104 J. Postma, ‘A monopoly relinquished: the West India Company and the Atlantic slave trade’, in E. Paling Funk and M.D. Shattuck (eds.), *A Beautiful and Fruitful Place: Selected Rensselaerswijck Papers, Volume 2* (Albany, NY, 2011), 221. In 1730, the WIC slave trade monopoly had been restricted to the Gold Coast, and it was lost four years later. In 1738, the company decided to end its role as a trader in slaves. *Ibid.*

105 The Danish planned to build a lodge at Great Ningo as it was a good place for gold, slaves, and tusks, and in addition was ‘very convenient for engaging in trade with the Portuguese’. Justesen (ed.), *Danish 2*, 512. In 1720, the WIC wanted to push forward with the search for gold mines, believing gold to have been ‘abundant’ in areas around the Ancober River. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 214; Daaku, *Trade* [1670s, 1718], 26–7. The Dutch were still considering mining in the 1740s, despite earlier failures both by themselves and the Portuguese as a result of local hostility. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch* [1738], 337; [1740], 348; [1742], 354.

106 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch* [1740], 351.

107 P.S. Foner, ‘The international slave trade’, in C. Conrad (ed.), *African Americans in the U.S. Economy* (2005), 12. The Company of Merchants Trading to Africa took over the role of maintaining and running the forts along the west coast from the Royal African Company in 1750. D. Richardson, ‘The British Empire and the Atlantic slave trade, 1660–1807’, in P.J. Marshall (ed.), *The Oxford History of the British Empire, Volume Two: The Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1998), 445.

English could ‘depend on getting gold, on (what is now so improperly called) the *Gold Coast*’.<sup>108</sup>

## THE AFRICAN DEMAND FOR GOLD

Hippisley was one of the few commentators to explain the decline in gold availability in Lower Guinea in the eighteenth century in relation to changes in African demand. Gold, he revealed, had now ‘become as precious among them as with us, for this plain reason, that every necessary and indulgence are as readily purchased with it in Guinea, as in our parts of the world’.<sup>109</sup> This view contrasts with the existing historiography, which sets declining availability within the context of rising levels of hostility and the impact of this on production and exchange. The understanding that wars ‘made gold scarce but negroes plenty’ was well known among European factors.<sup>110</sup> This trade-off had significant implications for business at the very end of the seventeenth century with the onset of what seemed to Willem Bosman at least to be a situation of perpetual warfare.<sup>111</sup> It not only meant that trade routes from the areas of gold production were closed, but that sources of the metal itself were left unexploited as miners were called up to fight.<sup>112</sup> In addition, wars required large amounts of funding, all which had to be paid for in gold, the local currency. Much of this was obtained through the imposition of a war tax – *apeatoo* – and other special levies, but gold was also a key element in the negotiation of alliances.<sup>113</sup> Some groups resorted to bribery – the Akyem reputedly offered the Agona a large brass pan full of pure gold if they would assist them in defeating their enemies;<sup>114</sup> others were ‘oblig’d to buy a Peace at the price of a large Sum of Gold’.<sup>115</sup> For the victors, however, war could also be a *source* of gold; defeated peoples had to pay indemnities in gold as well as slaves, and the amounts could be substantial.<sup>116</sup> Since gold functioned both as local currency and an item of commerce, any fall in production could have significant implications for the money supply, as well as the export market. Certainly the value of gold appears to have risen. From as early as 1727, Danish factors reported that African

108 J. Hippisley, *Essays* (London, 1764), 39–40.

109 *Ibid.* 40.

110 Cited in Daaku, *Trade*, 30. As R. Hassell and W. Pley noted in their letter of Jan. 1682, ‘Ahenesa is now in battalia with his army marching towards the Achims [Akyems]. If hee overcomes we may expect slaves, if [he is] over com a better trade for gold then hath been many years’. Law (ed.), *RAC* 1, 182.

111 Bosman, *Description*, 70.

112 Fynn, *Asante*, 32. Asante males at least were on permanent military standby. Bosman noted that ‘Negroes in general are Soldiers as long as the War continues ... and the War ended each Man applies himself to the Exercise of his particular Calling’. Bosman, *Description*, 70.

113 K. Arhin, ‘Asante military institutions’, *Journal of African Studies*, 7:1 (1980), 28. European trading companies provided gold for the payment of war taxes and the prosecution of wars. See Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1 [1733], 466; Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 2 [1748], 706; and van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 88.

114 Cited in Fynn, *Asante*, 46. The Agona refused the offer, preferring the ‘bad’ gold of Fante, with whom they already had an agreement.

115 Bosman, *Description*, 23. Bosman also commented that kings were prepared to hire themselves out to support a neighbour at war for a sufficient sum of gold, or offer mediation services to both parties for a fee. *Ibid.* 191.

116 K. Arhin, ‘The financing of the Ashanti expansion (1700–1820)’, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, 37:3 (1967), 286.



sellers were demanding 20 per cent more European goods for gold than for slaves, a situation that appears to have continued until at least the 1750s.<sup>117</sup> The impact on Danish stocks was significant – the small amounts of gold being obtained were barely enough to cover fort costs, and from 1728, Company directors ordered that traded gold was not to be used for local purchases or the payment of expenses.<sup>118</sup>

There was no complete withdrawal of African sellers from the gold market. While demonstrating an increased preference for payment in gold, merchants were nevertheless prepared to expend gold if the deal was sufficiently tempting. According to John Snow's letter to the RAC of 31 July 1705, access to high quality goods allowed the Dutch to 'catch the gold, & slaves being little of their trade they then dismiss them to us'.<sup>119</sup> That gold was available is also clear from Dutch sources in 1705 – guns and powder could elicit the elusive precious metal, as could other quality items.<sup>120</sup> And around ten years later, James Phipps recorded that he had had to barter 'with Capt Maulthus an Interloper from London for some goods to Dispatch a gang of Ashantees that brought about one thousand weight of Elephants Teeth besides some gold'.<sup>121</sup> Danish governors too made repeated requests to Copenhagen for regular deliveries of good quality commodities, but were frequently disappointed; they turned to sourcing 'the proper gold goods', after 1739 at least, from George Fryer, a London merchant.<sup>122</sup>

Gold had a number of functions in Gold Coast societies that can help to account for changes in export preferences. Clearly, since it was 'the principal medium of exchange in the process of buying and selling', we would expect demand for gold to rise alongside the expanding volume of both internal and external trade.<sup>123</sup> As well as money

117 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, xxxi. Prices in Europe remained stable. The London market price for gold stood at £4.31 per fine ounce in 1718; it rose to its highest price of £4.38 in 1769 before falling back to end the century at £4.26 (in 1800). The official price stood at £4.35 in 1700; it fell back to £4.25 in 1717, where it remained in 1800. L.H. Officer and S.H. Williamson, 'The price of Gold, 1257–2011', *Measuring Worth*, 2011, <<http://www.measuringworth.com/gold/>>, accessed 20 May 2013. In the Netherlands too, the base price of gold remained constant at 44 fl. per ounce between 1663 and 1823. Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, xxxv, fn. 158. Interestingly, James Hippisley claimed it had been proved beyond doubt that the failure of the RAC was one of commercial incompetence: 'they bought their gold too dear'. Hippisley, *Essays*, vii. By 1777, the use of gold to purchase slaves on the Gold Coast was being encouraged by a premium on the value of any gold brought to the exchange. K.H. Ledward (ed.), 'Minutes of enquiry into administration of the West African trade: volume 84', *Journals of the Board of Trade and Plantations, Volume 14: Jan. 1776–May 1782*, folios 260–63, 279–85, British History Online, <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=77776>>, accessed 19 July 2012; Johnson, 'Ounce', 202–4.

118 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 1*, xvii. Nevertheless, in 1738, the Danish reported selling some gold to an Englishman for 'Vispel' brandy. It was 'much in demand among the *Akenists* and can be sold at 100 per cent profit'. This they considered better than having 'the dead capital lying here without bearing fruit'. Justesen (ed.), *Danish 2*, 536. For similar Dutch difficulties, see van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch* [1718], 209.

119 Cited in Davies, *Royal African*, 369.

120 Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 108.

121 TNA C113/273, Letters from James Phipps, 12 Mar. 1714/15, 78.

122 Justesen (ed.), *Danish 2*, 559 and 567. The 'gold' goods purchased included brawls, powder, Wispel (or Vispel) brandy, knives, and 'bajutapeaux with red stripes'. *Ibid.*

123 Kea, *Settlements*, 173. Willem Bosman discussed the two most common types of gold – dust and lump – and added a reference to 'Kakeraas', which he claimed was gold mixed with silver or copper and cast into small pieces worth a few farthings. Although it could not be sold in Europe for more than forty shillings an ounce, it was 'currant all over the Coast'. Bosman, *Description*, 81–2; Kea, *Settlements*, 189–90. Hayes's early eighteenth-century manual for merchants is reminiscent of Bosman: money in Guinea consisted of gold



for exchange, customs duties had to be paid in gold, for example, and the rising levels of criminal and civil offences that tend to accompany population growth and urbanisation would have led to a greater number of judicial fines.<sup>124</sup> Gold in addition served to grease the wheels of the justice system.<sup>125</sup> But there were other social factors at play. That the peoples of the Gold Coast, as Pieter de Marees recorded in his early travelogue, were ‘very keen on their Gold’, was a function of the fact that status, wealth, and the ownership of gold were closely entwined in Gold Coast culture and practice.<sup>126</sup> Nobility could be achieved through birth, the performance of meritable action on behalf of the state, or the accumulation of money, which allowed the individual in question to undergo a public ceremony of ennoblement.<sup>127</sup> The lure of aristocratic status therefore provides part of the context for Bosman’s critique of the Gold Coast peoples, who ‘very greedily heap up Money and Goods; to which their Minds are strongly enclined’.<sup>128</sup> But he also recognised that gold was equated with the control of people: ‘Kings are obliged in this Country to preserve their Power by dint of force; wherefore the richer they are in Gold and Slaves, the more they are honoured and esteemed; and without those they have not the least command over their Subjects.’<sup>129</sup>

For one group of people in particular, however, gold appears to have wielded an extraordinary significance, and it may not be accidental that their rise to power coincided with the large-scale retraction of gold as a commodity from the export market. That group is the Asante. Gold was not the only source of wealth in precolonial Asante – other sources included people, food, goods, and land. Yamao Ponko, whose name in Asante became ‘a byword for the accumulation of wealth’ in the eighteenth century, appears to have made his fortune through trade and the buying up of land and people in debt. But gold was the ultimate performative symbol of wealth – when approached by others claiming to be his financial equal, Ponko demanded they ‘show him their assets in gold’.<sup>130</sup> Gold had been used as a demonstration of wealth on the Gold Coast from the sixteenth century at least, but in Asante, the metal appears to have been gaining considerable additional

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dust and small gold pieces, along with ‘Kacorawns, which is Gold drawn out into a small Wire, and cut afterwards into very small Pieces.’ See R. Hayes, *The Negociator’s Magazine: Or, The Most Authentick Account Yet Published of the Monies, Weights, and Measures of the Principal Places of Trade in the World* (4th edn, London, 1739), 425. The use of small pieces of ‘Kacraws’ gold at the market had also featured in the earlier account of Pieter de Marees, who believed it had been introduced by the Portuguese at Elmina. De Marees, *Historical*, 65.

124 Forty years ago, Walter Rodney argued that the judicial systems on the West African coast had been systematically corrupted for the benefit of the slave trade. W. Rodney, *A History of the Upper Guinea Coast, 1545–1800* (Oxford, 1970).

125 Bosman claimed that at Axim presents of gold and brandy were vital in securing the favour of the caboceers and local councils in cases of dispute – the largest bribe won out. Bosman, *Description*, 165.

126 De Marees, *Historical*, 60.

127 Kea, *Settlements*, 101–2. Amongst other privileges, ennoblement conferred exemption from enslavement for nobles and their children. *Ibid.*

128 Bosman, *Description*, 118. Thomas McCaskie explains this principle of accumulation as having emerged organically from efforts to establish a sustainable – if fragile – subsistence agriculture in the forest, in the face of an ‘anarchically irruptive nature’; values such as fruitfulness, abundance, and increase then became important cultural norms. McCaskie, *State and Society*, 75. See also Wilks, *Forests*, ch. 2.

129 Bosman, *Description*, 188.

130 McCaskie, *State and Society*, 38, 44–6, and 58–61.

value. Much of this has been attributed to its symbolic relationship with power through the concept of the Golden Stool. Drawn down from the heavens at the founding moment of Asante at the end of the seventeenth century, the Stool was thought to contain, in the words of John Fage, ‘the spirit of the whole Ashanti nation’, of which the king was to be the eternal guardian.<sup>131</sup> Gold was thus linked symbolically to national power, identity, strength, and continuity, ensuring it a singular place in Asante culture and practice.

The manifestations of this link are not difficult to see. From its central part in the retelling of the creation story, to its role in the defeat of national enemies, gold was bound to the life and beliefs of the Gold Coast peoples.<sup>132</sup> If the Golden Stool marked the foundation of the Asante nation, it was the potential loss of large quantities of gold that inspired the need for it.<sup>133</sup> Gold makes a regular appearance in folk tales and proverbs, for example, and was called upon to mark important lifecycle events.<sup>134</sup> ‘A Negro of Fortune’, according to James Wyatt, had pieces of gold laid in his coffin, and gold was a significant element in traditional wedding celebrations.<sup>135</sup> As a source of mystical power, gold could be offered up by priests in advance of major events such as war, trade, and travel, and for the resolution of existing problems, often related to illness.<sup>136</sup> Finally, gold

131 Fage, *History*, 108. Also see, Daaku, *Trade*, 162–3.

132 McCaskie gives the version offered by the Kumase *Adumbene* Adum Ata in 1817, in which at the beginning of the world black men, having first choice over two items – a box and a sealed piece of paper – chose the former. It contained gold, iron, and other items, while white men discovered that the letter that remained revealed everything to them. McCaskie, *State and Society*, 107. A similar story was related by Bosman, in which at the beginning of the world it was said that God created both black and white men and offered two sorts of gifts ‘viz. Gold, and the Knowledge or Arts of Reading and Writing, giving the Blacks the first Election, who chose Gold, and left Knowledge of Letters to the White’. Bosman, *Description*, 146–7. The defeat by the Borbor Fante warlord Kwegya Akwa of the Asebu in 1706 was attributed to knowledge he had gained as a boy about the secret location of their gold ornaments, precious beads, and items of regalia, which he subsequently plundered. Shumway, *Fante*, 97.

133 One strand of oral tradition locates the onset of war between Denkyira and Asante in the threat to stocks of gold – it is claimed that Ntim Gyakari, the Denkyiran king, sent a large brass pan to Osei Tutu at Kumase, with the order that it be returned full of gold. A rival strand suggests that sexual exploitation of one of Tutu’s wives was the cause. Daaku, *Trade*, 163, and fn. 2.

134 See R. S. Rattray (transl. and ed.), *Ashanti Proverbs: The Primitive Ethics of a Savage People* (Oxford, 1969 [orig. pub. 1916]), 152, 154, and 162–4. These are generally concerned with the importance of wealth accumulation and careful housekeeping. See also R. S. Rattray, *Akan-Ashanti Folk Tales* (Oxford, 1969 [orig. pub. 1930]), in which a reference to gold in some form appears in at least 13 of the 75 examples.

135 J. Wyatt, *The Life and Surprising Adventures of James Wyatt* (London, 1748), 171. See also van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 209. Bosman noted that funeral gifts included offerings of gold, ‘which ’tis pretended is given to be carried to the Grave with the Corps; and the larger Present of this Nature any Person makes, the more it redounds to his Honour and Reputation’. Funerals of the rich he noted became ‘very chargeable’. Bosman, *Description*, 230. For the presumed unlawful activities of a man at Sekondi factory who claimed to have been digging for the gold buried with a caboceer, see Law (ed.), *RAC* 2 [1686], 19. De Marees noted it functioned as a dowry. De Marees, *Historical*, 19. Bosman and Barbot noted its use in dressing the bride. Bosman, *Description*, 198; P. E. H. Hair, A. Jones, and R. Law (eds.), *Barbot on Guinea, Volume II: The Writings of Jean Barbot on West Africa, 1678–1712*, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series, 176, (1992), 503.

136 Bosman, *Description*, 151 and 222. Rattray revealed that the Golden Stool was believed to contain the *sunsum* or soul/spirit of the Asante nation; as such power, health, welfare, and bravery were embodied in it. This led to offerings of gold dust being made: for access to the rock of god Tano; at the shrine on the River Tano by Asanti armies going to war; to the *abusua* by a son whose father wished to leave him land; to priests for a return to health; and to makers of sacred talking drums, which only chiefs could

ornaments, as a demonstration of military prowess, were worn by the Asante in battle, soldiers being ‘frequently so loaded with Gold and *Conte de Terra*, that they can scarce march’.<sup>137</sup> In addition, the source of Asante power was protected through the concept of the sacred. Asante military activity secured control over all the major auriferous areas in the early eighteenth century, and while there were sound economic reasons for preventing European access to gold, Bosman claimed that the Asante held the gold mines to be sacred, ‘and consequently take all possible care to keep us from them’.<sup>138</sup>

What may be most significant for the discussion at hand, however, is Thomas McCaskie’s claim that after 1700, the Asante state sought to control not only the sources of gold, but access to them. Such action had a number of facets. Fines in gold for adultery paid to the king had already been part of the judicial system on the Gold Coast in the early seventeenth century.<sup>139</sup> But McCaskie claims that the Asante state extended this principle to the payment of all fines, tributes, taxes, and other levies, all of which had to be paid in gold.<sup>140</sup> In the case of the introduction of death duties, attributed to the reign of Opuku Ware in the second quarter of the eighteenth century (and without specific limit), the state ‘customarily took the overwhelming bulk of the gold dust in any estate’.<sup>141</sup> Moreover, as Ivor Wilks has noted, the payment of death duties was cleverly linked to the notion of the good citizen – the *okaniba*:

the individual who by the exercise of his, or her, own skills and industry made money and therefore at death became, through the system of death duties, a benefactor of the nation. It is implicit in this view of society that wealthy citizens will take every opportunity conspicuously to display their riches and to acquire formal recognition of their achievements.

Since the state also determined who should be awarded noble status for the accumulation of wealth, from the very early eighteenth century, the introduction of measures to maintain control of entry saw the death penalty decreed for both the circulation of counterfeit gold and the making of regalia from it.<sup>142</sup> If, by 1750, the Asante state had secured, in Fynn’s words, ‘complete control of the gold, ivory and slave resources

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possess, before they set out to find a suitable tree from which the drums would be made. Gold dust was also used in preparing the burial quarters of royalty. R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford, 1923), 134, 189, 202, 238, 258, and 289–90.

137 Bosman, *Description*, 182.

138 *Ibid.* 80. In a passage inserted in the 1732 English version of *Barbot* produced after his death, there is a description of the magical qualities attributed to some gold objects. Hair, Jones, and Law (eds.), *Barbot II*, 609. The Dutch noted the aggressive behaviour of Africans towards those surveying for gold, and their desire to keep the location of gold secret. Van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 214–5. Individuals also strove to conceal their gold supplies. Venture Smith revealed that despite the torture that eventually killed him, his father refused to inform his enemies about the location of his money. V. Smith, *A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Venture, a Native of Africa but Resident Above Sixty Years in the United States of America, Related By Himself* (New-London, CT, 1798), 10–11.

139 De Marees, *Historical*, 20, 102.

140 The Asante state also agreed to commute capital punishment in the mid-eighteenth century, although the motivations behind this are unclear. This innovation has traditionally been attributed to the humanity of *Asantehene* Kusi Obodom, who reigned from 1750 to 1764; interestingly, the amount of the financial penalty was not fixed. McCaskie, *State and society*, 39–41.

141 *Ibid.* 64.

142 *Ibid.* 42; Wilks, *Forests*, 148 and 129; van Dantzig (ed.), *Dutch*, 311.

in the interior of the Gold Coast', it had also become the main repository for, and redistributor of, gold.<sup>143</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The European gold rush that was precipitated by the discovery of substantial quantities of the precious metal on the Gold Coast in the fifteenth century led to the export of huge amounts of gold in the two centuries that followed. European demand does not appear to have been curtailed in the eighteenth century, but there was a clear reduction in the amount of gold available for exchange, which in the historiography has been linked to falling levels of production as a result of political unrest among emergent African states vying for commercial supremacy. Consequently, from around 1700, the European trading companies turned increasingly to slave trading as demand for slaves in the Americas expanded. Moreover, it has been suggested that slave trading on the Gold Coast emerged as 'a second-best alternative for both sides', as Africans attempted to 'maintain the flow of Atlantic imports threatened by diminishing gold production'.<sup>144</sup> From a European perspective this is not difficult to evidence. Gold as a commodity item continued to preoccupy the minds of company directors throughout the period under discussion, even if supply was limited. Evidence is not so clear from an African perspective, however. The value attributed to gold on the Gold Coast – both materially and symbolically – suggests that gold rather than slaves may have been the 'second-best alternative' for African traders during the early eighteenth century.<sup>145</sup> Given the dual function of gold on the Gold Coast – as both currency and commodity – extracting the nature of preferences from export levels is problematic. Certainly war reduced the amount of gold available for export as production fell and demand for money to fund the prosecution of war increased. But for the Asante especially, gold became more than a material possession and a route to personal glory. As a symbol of national power, unity, and strength, its level had to be monitored carefully by the fledgling state, and losses kept to a minimum. War also meant that slaves became more plentiful in the eighteenth century, in direct opposition to supplies of gold, and were more easily accumulated. In addition, they needed to be disposed of fairly rapidly; they were costly to keep and a threat to security.<sup>146</sup> How fortunate for traders then, that the very end of the seventeenth century brought an expanding number of Europeans who were willing to buy them, as commercial endeavours multiplied substantially in response to rising prices. Gold was still available for exchange in the early eighteenth century, but at a higher price and only for those 'gold goods' that were in high demand among African traders.

This renegotiation of commercial preferences appears to have spilled over into the related area of credit preferences in the early eighteenth century. During the seventeenth century, Europeans – quite familiar with the use of pawned objects as security

<sup>143</sup> Fynn, *Asante*, 81; Wilks, *Forests*, 147–50; McCaskie, *State and Society*, 42–9.

<sup>144</sup> Eltis, *Rise*, 178.

<sup>145</sup> Shumway notes that the export of gold rose again after abolition. Shumway, *Fante*, 178, fn. 136.

<sup>146</sup> Justesen (ed.), *Danish I* [1724], 324–5.

for lending – had asked their African debtors for gold, jewellery, ceremonial items, and slaves when making advances. Not until the early eighteenth century did human pawns as security for commercial loans appear to become part of customary practice. At this point, Europeans were experiencing problems with the use of gold pawn, and the opportunity to gain additional cargo in the case of default may well have worked initially to make the use of human pawns seem attractive. Yet it was soon evident that such pawns could be as much if not more problematic – they required food and support and were difficult to sell off the coast without losing local goodwill. The Danish, at least, appear to have remained reluctant to accept human pawns as security, preferring to provide funds instead through the purchase of young boys as slaves. Gold pawn was still in evidence, but like its counterpart in trade, appears increasingly to have been obtained only for the ‘right’ sort of goods.

Problems of interpretation remain. The shift to human pawns may be a function of the source selection, and the WIGC was a relatively small concern.<sup>147</sup> Secondly, the printed records of the WIGC, which serve as the primary source for this investigation, are not comprehensive, taking the form of an edited selection chosen for interest and relevance after a process of consultation. The Dutch records too were originally collected as research notes for a thesis.<sup>148</sup> In addition, neither of these collections were consulted in their original language, raising frustrating problems of interpretation and translation; meanings can change across cultural and linguistic boundaries, as well as between periods of time. Europeans were familiar with the use of pawned objects to secure debts, and with pledges and hostages as surety for the performance of a contract or an agreement. Africans, on the other hand, used the concept of security in relation to a broad range of obligations, but do not appear to have recognised any difference between the idea of a pledge or forfeit, and that of collateral for debt. Mixed portfolios of security suggest there may have been a process of transition in which African debtors offered human pawns that Europeans accepted as what we might call sureties while Europeans demanded pawned objects as collateral for any monetary debt. Gradually, however, and in response to a withdrawal of gold pawn, Europeans moulded the broader African concept of human ‘surety’ to include a more specific idea of collateral security that they could utilise. For African debtors, the end result was often the same – the forfeit of their pledge – but the supra-local nature of that forfeit demanded institutional protections. By the mid-eighteenth century, customary fines for the unauthorised removal of pawns had been introduced in an attempt to restrain impatient European traders.

<sup>147</sup> The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database suggests the total number of slaves transported under Danish and Baltic flags to have been 111,041, in comparison to 554,336 under the Dutch flag and 3,259,440 under that of Great Britain. See TASTD, <<http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/assessment/estimates.faces>>, accessed 12 Mar. 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Selection of the Danish material rested on four criteria, including ‘information on the commercial and social relationship between the Ghanaians and the Danish and other European Companies’. Justesen (ed.), *Danish* 1, vii. In addition, there are no sources for the period between 1690 and 1698, when the forts and their commerce were farmed out to Nicolaj Jansen Arf, a private merchant. For the selection of Dutch material, see van Dantzig, (ed.), *Dutch*, 1.

The lower preference amongst African debtors for gold pawn was likely to have been a consequence of its dual function as commodity and currency. Given the importance of gold in social mobility, growing levels of demand alongside a declining supply would have tended to encourage hoarding. Moreover, during a period of considerable political and social dislocation, the material and symbolic value of gold as a source of wealth and power, and as visible evidence of status, would surely have discouraged even its temporary loss. The need to maintain currency levels would also have cautioned against removing large amounts of gold from the monetary system to function as pawn. Indeed, the increased use of human pawning appears most marked in the Danish material in the later 1720s, after an aggressive period of debt recovery involving the liquidation of much of the gold pawn that had been held at Christiansborg. Other European trading companies may have taken a less parsimonious approach, but in any case the decision to shift away from the use of gold pawn may not have been in European hands.

Since the Asante were in control of the main auriferous regions by the early eighteenth century, understanding their behaviour is crucial to explanations of change. According to McCaskie, we have to consider that fact that 'the accumulation of wealth as imperative and as a yardstick, and the deeply resonant meaning of wealth as symbol and as mnemonic, were abiding and central features of Asante life, history and self-knowledge'.<sup>149</sup> Their rise to power would no doubt have been costly, but from the creation of the nation with the calling down of the Golden Stool in 1698, gold had constituted the primary determinant of power, status, identity, and wealth; as early as 1702, Asante traders were offering human pawns for commercial credit. The Fante Coastal Coalition too emerged in the wake of high levels of inter-state conflict, and though we know less about their relationship with gold, by the 1740s at least, they were also offering human pawns in commercial credit dealings. Extracting the idea of an expansion in the use of humans as a form of debt security in the early eighteenth century from the available documents has required a measure of informed interpretation. Yet historicised within the particular context of early eighteenth century change, it does not seem unreasonable to argue that it reflected a genuine shift in practice that was instigated by a rising preference for, and control of, gold in Asante, and an increased demand for slaves in the Americas. Such developments were greatly aided by the high levels of European competition that existed on the Gold Coast, allowing African kings, chiefs, and merchants more opportunities to influence the terms of trade. The absence of a single political authority prepared to safeguard credit also played a part, but political strength in this instance appears to have been less significant than strategy. The sociocultural, economic, and symbolic value attached to gold by the Asante people was audaciously attached to an ambitious programme of nationalist expansion that also drew on gold for its success. But that was not all. Slavery exists wherever repayment of debt can be attached directly to the sale of the body, ensuring that the level of enslavement is determined ultimately by the form and nature of debt recovery. The culture of 'rights-in-persons', so clearly outlined by

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149 McCaskie, *State and Society*, 37.

Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff in the 1970s, offered new opportunities to enterprising people with bodies at their command.<sup>150</sup> That the prevailing indigenous system of debt recovery allowed those bodies to be used in both the securitisation and liquidation of debt was of crucial importance to European traders, who largely adopted the institutional practices of their trading partners in order to support and extend their commercial ambitions.

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150 I. Kopytoff and S. Miers, 'African "slavery" as an institution of marginality', in S. Miers and I. Kopytoff (eds.), *Slavery in Africa: Historical and Anthropological Perspectives* (Madison, WI, 1977), 7–11.