

THE ASANTE OF GHANA

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ABSTRACT: *Etymological attempts to explain who the Asante really are could not fully explain the concept. The research finding has, however, shown that the understanding of the concept is fluid over time. Observation on the social life of the Asante has demonstrated that an Asante may be someone capable of speaking the Twi language; whose parents, especially the mother, is an Asante and more significantly, owes allegiance to the golden stool. In addition, one must also be part of an extended family whose origin comes from an ancestress. This jural corporateness of the extended family seems to form the foundational premise of the social and cultural order of the Asante. The purpose of the study is to highlight who the Asante of Ghana are; and to clear probable misconceptions and miscommunication about this socio-cultural group. This knowledge about the Asante may create peaceful co-existence for foreigners who may want to have business interactions with them. The significance of the study is that it has contributed both nationally and internationally to anthropological theory about people of other cultures like the Asante of Ghana.*

KEYWORDS: Etymology, Asante, Asanteness, Akan, Twi language, Jural corporateness.

INTRODUCTION

In the postmodern time exponential technological advancement in transport and communication appears to collapse space and time into one; squeezing the world into what we call the global village. The phenomenon of ‘the global village’ initiated by e-commerce and the Internet seem to aggravate an increase in national and international interactions among different peoples, and cooperation in commerce or business. But this opening up of world markets with diversities and differences has its concomitant. This situation creates miscommunications and misunderstandings that ferment complex disputes (Gedzi 2009:25; Prathamesh 2003). There is the need to know more of people of other cultures like the Asante of Ghana to curtail some of the misconceptions. Thus the question, addressed in this article is: Who are the Asante of Ghana and what makes them different from other socio-cultural groups in Ghana? This study tries to find answer to the question, discuss the findings and conclude.

METHODOLOGY

The approach of the study is anthropological qualitative study. The material used came from an anthropological research conducted among the Asante in 2006, 2007 and updated in 2014. It

formed part of my published PhD thesis by Shaker in 2009, yet to be published into a book. The materials were obtained through individual and group interviews and discussions with key informants such as chiefs, family heads and ordinary people in the Menhyia palace, Sepe Timpo, Bantama, Asakore-Mampong, New Kyekyere in Kumasi and peri-urban locations such as Ejisu and Kokofu. These materials together with field observation and extensive relevant literature complemented in providing a holistic picture about the research object. The limitation of the study is that it was difficult to access an interview with *Asantehene*, the king of the Asante, a renowned key informant on the traditions and values of the Asante.

RESULT/DISCUSSION

This section deals with who the Asante really are. It begins by explaining the origin of this socio-cultural group in Ghana.

Who the Asante Are

The Asante are located in the Ashanti region of Ghana. The 2010 population census estimated the population in the region at 4,780,380; and Kumasi, the traditional capital of the Asante, at 2,035,064 (Statistical Service Ghana 2012: 1, 8). Even though there is migrant population, it is arguable that the Asante form greater proportion of the population in this region. The Asante are part of a socio-cultural group known as the Akan. This group consists of the Akwamu, Guan, Fante, Denkyra, Brong, Akyem, Kwahu, Sefwi, Wassa, Akwapim, Assin and Asante. Geographically, the Akan occupy the western, central and Ashanti regions and parts of the Brong-Ahafo, eastern regions of Ghana and the eastern part of the Ivory Coast. There is consensus that, together with the rest of these Akan groups, the Asante have migrated from ancient Mesopotamia to sub-Saharan Africa (Gedzi 2009; Osei 2004). Each of the Akan ethnic groups is autonomous but linked by similar culture and the Twi language.

A discussion with Asokore-Mamponghene (paramount chief of Asokore-Mampong) and other traditional elders during fieldwork in Kumasi¹ has revealed that the Asante migrated from the north to Techiman and then drifted to the southern coast in places like Mankesim. Most of the Asante people were hunters and since the coast was not conducive to this kind of life, they decided to move back to the north and settled in Adanse where they learned to build houses. Thus, the name of this settlement *Adanse* etymologically refers to the art of building houses (i.e., *Adansie*). From Adanse, the various groups moved further north again toward Bekwai, Asantemanso and Kokofu. Other places people went to were Dwaben, Mampong, Nsuta, Kumawu, Offinso, and Nkoranza, while others also went to Kwaman, which was the original name for Kumasi.

The obvious question one may ask is: Who are the Asante? It is therefore appropriate that in this initial stage we define the name *Asante* (*Asanteni* – an Asante; *Asantefo* – Asante). One may have to start with *Asantefo* as a word and as a linguistic problem. What did the word Asantefo originally

¹ A great extent of the material used in the article forms part of my anthropological study among the Anlo and the Asante of Ghana, which was published in 2009 as PhD thesis by Shaker and yet to be published into a book.

mean? What is its etymology? Historians and anthropologists continue to debate this issue and have offered various answers (see Allman 2000; McCaskie 1995; Osei 2001; Wilks 1993). This paper addresses three main attempts made to arrive at a *Twi*² etymology for Asante. These are namely, *Asan-te-fuo* (clay producing group), *Esa-nti-fuo* (because of war group) and *Asanteni-ba* (a child of Asante). All this reflects the kind of reasoning involved.

The Curator of the Kumasi Manhyia Palace, Osei Kwadwo (2001), for example, proposed that:

The Asante got the name from the special commodity they served Denkyira with. All the states were sending commodities like plantain fibre, firewood and gold dust to Denhyira [hene] every Akwasidae. But in addition to these commodities, the Asantes were sending red clay as a special commodity to Denkyira. The Akan call the red clay “Asan”, therefore the Asante were differentiated from others with the name Asan-tefo i.e. those who dig for clay (Osei 2001: 1).

The second theory, which the Curator has come out with and looks somewhat plausible, is that the name Asante is said to emerge as a result of the people’s activity as they prepared for war. This was at the time of Osei Tutu in the 16th century when the famous traditional priest, Okomfo Anokye purportedly gathered all the Asante chiefs from the various ‘micro states’ and advised them to form a single, larger confederacy against their warring enemies such as the Denkyra. To cement the union, Okomfo Anokye was said to have commanded a golden stool, which he made to rest on the lap of his friend Osei Tutu, who at the time was the chief of Kwaman (old name for Kumasi). Okomfo Anokye managed to convince the other chiefs to accept the Kwaman chief, Osei Tutu as their king. The golden stool, therefore, is believed to be a symbol of the unity of all the Asante microstates represented by their chiefs. According to an Asante legend, the golden stool contains the soul of the Asante nation and thus, belongs to the Asante nation. Every chief in the union pays allegiance to it. As indicated, the union was formed to fight the Denkyera king, Ntim Gyakari. In other words, it was ‘because of war’ (*esa nti*) that the union formed. Thus, the people came to be the *Esa-nti* or *Asante*—meaning those who formed a union because of war (Osei 2001). While the Curator’s theories seem to have its basis on the etymology of *Asantefo*, the derivation does not seem to prove much because it does not give any clue to the meaning of the word.

The third theory that appears more ingenious but less convincing is *Asanteni-ba*. This is taken from the Asante observation that an *Asanteni* (sing.) is a child born of an Asante mother and an Asante father. This explanation concerns the biological origin of a person. However, it seems that this alone also may not be enough to make someone an *Asanteni*.

Jean Allman (2000) argues the fluidity of history of the concept, Asante. Ivor Wilks (1993) indicates that the Akan in the 15th century were distinguished and defined by their sedentary agriculture, matrilineal and matrilineages, ‘states’ (*aman*) and bonds of ‘language, religion and a common sense of shared identity’ (94). As the Asante emerged at the end of the 17th century however, various dynamics of the developing Asante state shaped their identity (Allman 2000: 101). This fluid process continued in the 18th and 19th centuries. Arhin (1983), in his study of ‘Peasants in Nineteenth Century Asante’, indicated that ‘be(com)ing Asante’ was associated with

² The language spoken by the Asante is Twi.

being or becoming urban and worldly or being pulled towards the urban life of Kumasi, the traditional capital (Arhin 1983: 475). Thus 'being' Asante was something you 'did over time and across space. It was not something you flatly were or were not' (Allman 2000: 103). 'Asanteness' as a process of 'be(com)ing', according to Allman, historically became evidenced in the annual *odwira* festival where the 'unity of the *Asanteman* was re-enacted; allegiance to the golden stool was affirmed; the centrality of Kumasi was reinforced; and the seamless unity of dead, living and unborn was remembered. Power, moreover, was reconstituted and reaffirmed' (Allman 2000: 103). This symbolic re-enactment of 'Asanteness' through the celebration of the *odwira* lapsed between 1896 and 1985 (McCaskie 1995: 151). Although later reintroduced, its significance was lost. Thus, being an Asante had become an ascribable attribute. Allman concluded that 'Asanteness' was no longer something that had to be performed; it only had to be believed. But the social base, in women's roles as mothers of the lineage, in the values and symbols and rhythms that marked Akan communities, there remained for Asante a 'seamless unity' between an Akan past and an Akan present (Allman 2000: 110).

It seems therefore, that the various etymological attempts are social constructs, which the Asante themselves have made over the years in trying to understand their own identity. This understanding is fluid and continues to change according to the passage of time. Therefore, it is important not to be restricted to one etymological explanation. Observation on the social life of the Asante; their actions and interactions with themselves and others demonstrate that an *Asanteni* or an Asante (Plural, Asantefo) may be someone capable of speaking the *Twi* language, whose parents, especially the mother, is an Asante and more significantly, must be one who owes allegiance to the *Sika Dwa Kofi* or the Golden Stool. This assessment corroborates T.C. McCaskie's explanation that the right of full citizenship in Asante society seems exclusively vested and defined by membership in an *abusua kesse* or the extended family (McCaskie 1995: 88) whose origin in any case comes from an ancestress. This, according to McCaskie, lays the foundational premise of social and cultural order of the Asante. To alter this definition and construction of the jural corporateness in any way, may be tantamount to tearing up the charter of Asante society. Anthropologists identified the social convergence of this for the ordinary Asante citizen in the sense that the severance of lineage ties may be comparable to passing a death sentence over him or her (McCaskie 1995: 89).

Enid Schildkrout also argues that this phenomenon of identifying oneself with a particular ethnic group and seeing others outside that group as strangers or outsiders was a legacy of, and complicated by, British colonial rule. This is because during the colonial period, people whose traditional homelands or states were not known or defined were tagged by the British as 'non-natives'. In moments of political crisis, the 'non-natives' were susceptible to deportation to their places of origin. By this definition, the concept of nationality links with the concept of ethnic origin, since the place of birth alone did not confer the status of native (Schildkrout 1970: 254). Thus, it could be said that it was only by pragmatic considerations that the Asante society gave rights of 'Asanteness' to anyone whom they perceived could bring economic prosperity to their state.

For the Asante, Kumasi was a structure in which the economic, social, and political systems merged intricately, where everyone received his or her due. Within this pattern, the king provided the protection within which trade could flow with limited official interruption. Even though this structure has changed over time, there are traces left behind since the present Asantehene still controls stool lands and benefits that accrue from their resources. The rationale behind such policy is simple. The king's wealth, and indirectly that of the state, is potential rather than real. It relies on the capacity and the readiness of the people to pay all the extraordinary taxes and tributes needed to sustain the state.

There were some other changes. During fieldwork in Kumasi, I observed how powerful traders integrated with the traditional order to obtain political offices in addition to their trading activities. In addition, some of these immigrants to Kumasi remain socially and culturally aloof from Asante society. They retain their status as strangers (Schildkrout 1970: 256). Admittedly, in the presence of foreigners in large numbers and the fact that some powerful traders seem supported by foreigners against some of the traditional rulers, makes the process of integration difficult and leads to what is described here as diffused authority.

The Asante, like the Anlo society, is lineal and thus, divided into clans. There are eight clans in Asante. A person belongs to the clan of his or her mother. This means all extended family members in this society, as earlier indicated, trace their descent from a common ancestress. In other words, the matrilineal family consists of all persons, whether male or female, who have descended from a common ancestress. The basis of the genealogy is the common blood that feeds and nurtures the child in the mother's womb. The peculiarity involved here is that the matrilineal blood passes only through females. This naturally leads to a system of diagonal succession where the matrilineal blood dies with every male member (Josiah-Aryeh 2005: 116). This means males are only regarded as members of the matri-family during their lifetime. This implies children belong to their mother's family and not to their father's.

According to Peter K. Sarpong (2002: 64-76), the matrilineal society is governed by certain norms, namely:

1. The clans or lineal groups are exogamous (i.e., people marry from outside it.)
2. Women are more important than men are. Women continue the lineage while the latter ends with men.
3. Ideally, there is a collective ownership of property or wealth by the clan. The property does not belong to individuals. Individuals receive and use it but cannot dispose of it.
4. Succession, inheritance and rank are all determined lineally. This means one succeeds in his or her clan and inherits in his or her clan.
5. The kinship terminology deals with sociological as well as biological factors. That is, one's father's brothers are one's fathers while one's mother's sisters are one's mothers. This means these people must treat one as if they are one's biological father or mother.

In the matrilineal kinship and family system, maternal siblings take precedence over the spouse in many spheres of life. This includes investment decisions and the joint acquisition of property (Oppong 1981). Many Akan proverbs encapsulate the importance of this maternal relationship over the paternal. For example, *Enii yento* or ‘One can easily get oneself a partner but not a mother’; and *Dabre me mmame awo* or ‘provided my mother gives birth and I have a sibling’, it does not matter whether there is a father or not (Awusabo-Asare 1990: 15). Further, a wife and a husband in theory have no right to inherit each other’s property. Additionally, children do not inherit from their father. This is because, as indicated, the clan owns the property. In other words, one cannot succeed his or her husband or father because one’s clan determines all these things. One succeeds and inherits in his or her own clan. This is why, when there is a dispute over succession or inheritance, a chief tries to find out the clan of the disputing parties. The matrilineal family members enjoy common ownership of property. Moreover, they are liable to contribute to pay family debts and possess the rights of representation at family meetings. Further, the head of the family holds all property in trust and also manages and controls it on behalf of members (Awusabo-Asare 1990: 117). The purpose of the study is to highlight who the Asante of Ghana are; and to clear probable misconceptions and miscommunication about this socio-cultural group. This knowledge about the Asante may create peaceful co-existence for foreigners who may want to have business interactions with them. The significance of the study is that it has contributed both nationally and internationally to anthropological theory about people of other cultures like the Asante of Ghana.

CONCLUSION

The paper has tried to explain who the Asante really are. None of the etymological theories used has fully explained the concept of being an Asante. The research finding has, however, shown that understanding of the concept is fluid in the sense that it continues to change over time. Observation on the social life of the Asante has demonstrated that an Asante may be someone capable of speaking the *Twi* language, whose parents, especially the mother, is an Asante and more significantly, owes allegiance to the golden stool. In addition, one must also be part of an extended family whose origin is traceable to an ancestress. This jural corporateness of the extended family appears to form the foundational premise of social and cultural order of the Asante. Thus it would only be by pragmatic considerations that the Asante society might give rights of ‘Asanteness’ to anyone whom they perceived could bring economic prosperity to their ‘state’.

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