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Asante Stools and the Matrilineage

A dissertation presented by

Catherine Meredith Hale

to

The Department of History of Art and Architecture

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in the subject of

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Cambridge, Massachusetts

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Professor Suzanne P. Blier Catherine Meredith Hale

Asante Stools and the Matrilineage

Abstract

Discussions of Asante stools in Western literature and museum records have focused exclusively on their association with male chiefs. My research, which combines archival and oral histories, and sets the existing literature and documentation on stools in comparative perspective, reframes existing thinking by asserting that *asese dwa* (sing. *sese dwa*), or conventional Asante stools, are intimately connected with women, and especially, queen mothers. Although the stool today is known widely as a symbol of male chieftaincy, chiefs do not sit on them in public. They use them only in very specific private spheres. It is queen mothers who sit on stools publically as seats of authority. The physical form of the stool, especially the *mmaa dwa* or "woman's stool" is a powerful symbol of female fecundity and the propagation of the Asante peoples.

By exploring queen mother's archives of stools and their dynamic uses of them, I present a more expansive history of these important cultural objects that challenges the taxonomies established by R. S. Rattray (1927) and others during the twentieth century. Contrary to the clearly defined hierarchies of symbolism, materials and structure that have informed assessments of historical stools in the West, Asante queen mothers have commissioned and used stools in an ongoing and context-dependent process of negotiation for at least a century. In this dissertation I explore the history of Asante stools since the late-nineteenth century through the lens of queen mothers' perspectives.

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Glossary of Key Terms

Abusua (pl. *mmusua*) – clan or lineage; all members of society belong to one of eight *mmusua*: Agona, Aduana, Asenie, Asakyiri, Asona, Bretuo, Ekuona, and Oyoko

Abusuapanin – male head of clan or lineage (*abusua*)

Asantehemaa – paramount queen mother/leader of the Asante peoples (female)

Asantehene –paramount chief/leader of the Asante peoples (male)

Asipim – chairs of European style that are composed of a wood frame with hide stretched across the seat; also, generic term used to refer to all elaborately decorated men's chairs

Mmaa dwa – "woman's" stool; design integrates a central support column surrounded by four supports at each corner; also, general term used by queen mothers in Asante to refer to all *asese dwa* (less frequently, the term *ahenanan* is used interchangeable with *mmaa dwa*)

Nkonnwafieso – stool house where blackened stools of ancestors are kept

Obaapanin – female head of a clan or lineage (*abusua*)

Obosom (pl. *Abosom*) – tutelary gods

Obremponhemaa (pl. *Abremponhemaa*) – queen mother, subordinate to the Omanhemaa

Obremponhene (pl. *Abremponhene*) – chief, subordinate to the Omanhene

Odikrohemaa (pl. *Adikrohemaa*) – queen mother, subordinate to the Ohemaa

Odikrohene (pl. *Adikrohene*) – chief, subordinate to the Ohene

Ohemaa (pl. *Ahemaa*) – queen mother, subordinate to the Obremponhemaa; also, term used to refer generically to all queen mothers

Ohene (pl. *Ahene*) – chief, subordinate to the Obremponhene; also, term used to refer generically to all chiefs

Okyeame (pl. *akyeame*) – linguist/orator to the chief or queen mother; wide range of responsibilities including layer and diplomat (usually male but can be female)

Omanhemaa (pl. *Amanhemaa*) – paramount queen mother

Omanhene (pl. *Amanhene*) – paramount chief

Sese dwa (pl. *asese dwa*) – conventional stool made from *sese* wood

Sika Dwa Kofi – "Golden Stool born on Friday," the paramount political symbol of the Asante peoples

Introduction

Discussions of Asante stools in Western literature and museum records have focused exclusively on their association with male chiefs. My research, which combines archival and oral histories, and sets the existing literature and documentation on stools in comparative perspective, reframes existing thinking by asserting that *asese dwa* (sing. *sese dwa*), or conventional Asante stools, are intimately connected with women, and especially, queen mothers. Although the stool today is known widely as a symbol of male chieftaincy, chiefs do not sit on them in public. They use them only in very specific private spheres. It is queen mothers who sit on stools publically as seats of authority. Many of the contemporary male and female leaders in Asante with whom I spoke assert that the stool symbolizes a chief specifically because it makes reference to the queen mother who appointed him. The physical form of the stool, especially the *mmaa dwa* or "woman's stool" is a powerful symbol of female fecundity and the propagation of the Asante peoples.

By exploring queen mother's archives of stools and their dynamic uses of them, I present a more expansive history of these important cultural objects that challenges the taxonomies established by R. S. Rattray (1927) and others during the twentieth century. Contrary to the clearly defined hierarchies of symbolism, materials and structure that have informed assessments of historical stools in the West, Asante queen mothers have commissioned and used stools in an ongoing and context-dependent process of negotiation for at least a century. While chiefs' relationships with stools are an important aspect of their histories, it is critical that women's dominant association with them not be overlooked. In this dissertation I explore the history of Asante stools since the late-nineteenth century through the lens of queen mothers' perspectives.



Figure 1 The Golden Stool or *Sika Dwa Kofi* (Image credit: McLeod, *Asante*, 1981, bet. 96-97)

For the Asante of Ghana, stools are integral components of social and political life. They are vital identity markers and sacred mediums for honoring and communicating with ancestors. Like the paramount political symbol of the Asante peoples, the Golden Stool or *Sika Dwa Kofi* ("Golden Stool born on Friday"), stools are frequently mobilized to symbolize Asante identity more broadly (see Figure 1). Every chief and queen mother has a stool or set of stools, which both mark status and serve as vehicles for political messages about the nature of his or her leadership. These objects are so central to the positions of local leaders that when a chief or queen mother takes office, he or she is said to have been "enstooled." Many lineages also have a *sese dwa* that is identified with their lineage or Stool (here, in the sense of a political division[1]), such as

[1] Throughout the text, I capitalize "Stool" to indicate when I am referring to a political office as opposed to a material object.

the Silver Stool of Mampong. In some cases, this is the stool used for all enstoolment rites performed in that group, both male and female. For example, the current Mpobihene and Mpobihemaa[2] were both publically enstooled on the same *sese dwa* that they use for everyone in their lineage. It features their Aduana *abusua* symbol, which is a dog with fire in its mouth.[3]

Conventional Stools or *Asese dwa*



Figure 2 Conventional stool or *sese dwa* in the *mmaa dwa* design. "Smoked" color and metal plating indicate high status. Collection of the British Museum, Af 1954,23.3215.
(Image credit: Catherine Hale)

In these key socio-political settings stools, referenced here interchangeably as *asese dwa* (sing. *sese dwa*), share a conventional form (see Figure 2). They have a rectangular base with incised "steps" on either side of the central support structure (which

[2] Asante leaders' titles begin with the name of their "Stool"(in most cases this is the name of the city or region they oversee) followed by "hene" to indicate a chief or "hemaa" to indicate a queen mother. In this case, the Mpobihene and Mpobihemaa are the Chief and Queen mother of the Mpobi Stool, respectively.

[3] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

is usually abstract but may incorporate figural representations), a curved seat with geometric "cut outs" running linearly at the base of each curve, and a shape (usually square, sometimes carved in concentric repetition) carved into the underside of the base around the central opening (see Figure 3). Almost always, these stools are used in a "raw" state (no varnishes or lacquers are added) and their custodians maintain them by mixing sand and water that they rub onto the stool using a rough leaf (from the *nyankyerene*, which is a common tree). Lime juice may be used in the cleaning and on some occasions white clay is added to make the stool even "brighter."[4]



Figure 3 Underside of *sese dwa* showing concentric squares carved around opening of hollow central core. Collection of the British Museum, Af 1954,23.3215. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Historically, very extravagant stools made for high-ranking individuals were "smoked." These stools have a richer brown hue and, as the smoking was a form of pest protection, they rarely show signs of infestation. Because the same smoking process, which traditionally involves placing the stool on the roof of a dwelling over top of the

[4] Nana Afia Serwaa, Aputuogyahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

area where the stove or fire is located, can take months to complete, it is much more rare in contemporary practice. Nowadays, only stools made for the *Asantehene* or *Asantehemaa* (king and queen mother of Asante, respectively) are likely to get this kind of treatment.[5] Depending on the owner's status and other factors that I discuss in chapter three, the complexity of the design of each stool may be more or less elaborate and could include such things as metal plating.

This common stool type certainly predates the confederation of the Asante kingdom at the end of the seventeenth century and, according to most royals with whom I spoke, is understood to have existed from the very beginnings of the lineages that now compose the Asante peoples.[6] The conventional stool type is differentiated from other kinds of stools by the term *sese dwa*, which refers to the high-quality *sese* wood used to make them. Raw *asese dwa* are frequently termed "white" stools to distinguish them from the "black" stools of ancestors. Regular household stools made from inexpensive wood and available at most shops are called *nyame dwa*.

Blackened Stools

When an extraordinary leader passes away, his or her *sese dwa* (traditionally, the one used for bathing) is "blackened" and placed in the ancestral stool house or *nkonnwafieso*. Most often, this process is reserved for chiefs and queen mothers but some heads of lineages (*abusuapanin* and *obaapanin,* male and female head, respectively) and priests and priestesses have their stools blackened, too.[7] The blackening process involves coating the stool in a mixture of soot, spider web, and egg yolk, which is then layered

[5] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuonkonnwasenefuohene (Otumfuo Chief Carver), in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

[6] This information was gathered during fieldwork between 2007 and 2012.

[7] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

over time with sacrificial offerings such as sheep's blood. Peter Sarpong (1971) suggests three key reasons that ancestral stools are blackened: to keep them from becoming ugly or visually distressing when they receive sacrifices, to represent the relationship between the living and the deceased ancestors through color symbolism (in certain contexts, black is a sign of mourning, in others, it is frightening, which calls for respect and veneration, both of which are appropriate for ancestral stools), and, finally, for durability – the blackening process acts as a kind of preservation agent that helps keep the stools in good form for successive generations.[8]

However, the ingredients used to blacken stools are the same as those used to "consecrate" the underside of "white" stools destined for the court of the Asantehene. After he was enstooled in 1995, Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II, told his Chief Carver, Nana Frempong Boadu, to restrict use of this consecration process because "it is one of our most serious oaths."[9] The parallel use of materials in blackening and consecrating suggests that they have significance beyond the reasons outlined by Sarpong. What the specific meaning of the use of soot, spider web and egg yolk may be was not something I was able to determine but it is interesting to note that at least two *asese dwa* I observed (one in the collection of the British Museum and one in the possession of Nana Akosua Abrafi II, the Sewuahemaa) had "cut-outs" on the underside of their bases in the shape of a spider web (see Figure 4). One possibility is that the spider web as ingredient and decorative motif in some way references Ananse, the trickster spider, who is a symbol of wisdom, creativity, and the complexities of life – all that pertains to leadership in both the earthly and ancestral realms. Eggs are used frequently in Asante ceremonies that involve

[8] Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971): 37-38.

[9] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

safeguarding and fertility, such as the female puberty rite, *bragoro*. Since protection and propagation of the lineage are two of the key concerns of ancestors, the inclusion of egg yolk may have some relationship with these capacities.



Figure 4 *Kotoko dwa* stool belonging to the Sewuahemaa, Nana Akosua Abrafi II, with concentric spider-web shapes carved into its underside. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

As A. Kyerematen has explained, "the black stool is believed to be inhabited by the spirit or *sunsum* of the head of the lineage for whom it was consecrated, and therefore to possess the magical quality of being able to protect the living members of the lineage."[10] Duties that must be performed in relation to ancestral stools include making offerings of sheep, chickens and liquor to them on a regular basis. Because ancestors are understood to be capable of participating actively in the affairs of the living, they must be kept happy and satiated. The *Akwasidae* and *Awukudae* festivals, which are held at six-week intervals on Sundays and Wednesdays, respectively, are designated specifically for

[10] A. Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 39, no. 1 (Jan 1969): 1.

celebrating the ancestors, though leaders may engage with them on less official occasions as well.

Each lineage has a special area for housing the blackened stools of ancestors and the individuals permitted to enter it are few, even on festival days. In my experience, for some lineages, the queen mothers' stools are kept separate from the chiefs' stools while in others they are housed in the same room. It is a taboo for a menstruating woman to enter the *nkonnwafieso* and some queen mothers who are pre-menopausal have *akyeame* (linguists) perform their duties in the stool house, in addition to their own, on their behalf. Generally, it is the linguist who is responsible for pouring libations to honor the ancestors, though these responsibilities may be shared with the Kontihene or others. When I attended the *Akwasidae* celebrations at Amanfrom (Mantia Stool) the *okyeame* poured libations publically for the ancestors, after which only the chief, queen mother and *okyeame* entered the *nkonnwafieso* at the palace to pay homage to the ancestral stools. As the activities that take place inside the stool house are private, I did not ask for details of the process. Similarly, because it is taboo for anyone beyond a restricted list of individuals to enter the *nkonnwafieso*, my discussions of blackened stools, which are addressed elsewhere in the literature, are limited in scope. My research into *asese dwa* has focused primarily on the "white" stools used by royals in public spheres.

Chiefs and *Asipim* chairs

While queen mothers sit on *asese dwa* in public, generally, when a chief appears in an official capacity, he sits on an *asipim* chair. It is the *asipim* that indicates to the public that he has the right to rule and should be approached according to specific protocols. *Asipim* is the term used to describe chairs of European style that are composed

of a wood frame with hide stretched across the seat. Like the *sese dwa*, the *asipim* chairs belonging to higher-ranking chiefs tend to be larger and more elaborately decorated than those of lower-ranking individuals. Brass tacks and studs placed along the legs and back support are among the most common forms of decoration on these seats, along with metallic finials.

Malcolm McLeod lists two other types of chairs used by high-ranking chiefs, the *akonkromfi* and the *hwedom*. Both chairs are generally larger than *asipim*. The *akonkromfi* features crisscrossing legs and an openwork support that resemble imported folding chairs and *hwedom* are upright chairs with "flat backs and seats with legs and stretchers copied from turned prototypes."[11] In addition to their uses by chiefs, *asipim*, *akonkromfi*, and *hwedom* chairs are now employed to seat top-tier religious officials in churches in the Kumase area. For example, I observed these chair types at St. Peter's Basilica in Kumase, on which bishops and other leaders of varying ranks were seated before the congregation (see Figure 5).[12] Although McLeod lists the specific types of chairs used by chiefs by name, most individuals I encountered in the Ashanti Region used the term *asipim* to refer generically to all official chairs used by men, regardless of their particular shape or decoration.

[11] M. D. MacLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd, 1981): 120.

[12] The clergy in all of the Anglican and Catholic churches I visited in the Ashanti Region during my research were male. Whether a female leader would sit on an *asipim*, *akonkromfi*, or *hwedom* chair if she were in the position of being a religious leader is a question that warrants further study. As the subsequent chapters explore in more depth, traditional Asante views hold that women who are pre-menopausal are not permitted to sit on *asipim*. It is possible that this taboo has not been addressed since I am not aware of any women who currently hold leadership positions in Anglican and Catholic churches in Kumase.



Figure 5 *Asipim* and *Akonkromfi* chairs for church officials at St. Peter's Basilica, Kumase.
(Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Many of the queen mothers with whom I met keep *asipim* and other special chairs at their homes and in their palaces to seat chiefs (as chiefs keep *asese dwa* in their custody to seat queen mothers). Nana Gyama Pensan II, the Aboasohemaa, showed me the four *asipim* she has at her palace. The largest and most elaborate is for the Aboasohene (see Figure 6). It features a light-colored hide seat and chair back that are both framed by metal plating that is studded along all its edges with tacks. Its top rail is crested on the left and right sides by a metal finial. The support structure of the chair is carved in a spiraling motif that is painted black with additional areas of metal plating at its joints. The second largest chair is for the Kontihene, who is second in command to the chief and responsible for such things as pouring libations and settling disputes. His chair

includes small squares of metal plating at its joints and along the supports running between the seat and back support. The upper rail of the chair is lined with a row of tacks and just below the rail's center is a diamond motif composed of tacks. The hide covering the back and seat of the chair is dark brown and its wood supports are painted black. The two other *asipim* at Nana Gyama Pensan II's palace are smaller than the aforementioned chairs and include no metal plating. Their seats and backs are both covered with a light colored hide and their wooden supports are painted black. Lower-ranking chiefs or men who have come to visit the palace use these *asipim*.



Figure 6 Nana Gyama Pensan II sits on her *sese dwa* next to the Aboasohene's *asipim* chair. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)



Figure 7 Chair for the Offinsohene commissioned by the Offinsohemaa to keep in her home. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Powerful queen mothers are also commissioning new seating forms for chiefs. Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, the Offinsohemaa, has a chair she designed specifically for her chief that she keeps in her living room (see Figure 7). It features a gold frame that boasts the *adinkra* symbols *akofena* (two crossed swords), which alludes to courage and valor, and *bese saka* ("sack of cola nuts"), which suggests affluence, abundance and unity. The arms of the chair culminate in what appear to be the heads of voracious leopards and the plush seat and back of the chair are upholstered in a bold purple and white patterned cloth. In addition to the luxurious chair the Offinsohemaa keeps in her living room, she keeps several basic *asipim* on hand to seat chiefs and male visitors (I have been told that while only queen mothers may sit on *asese dwa* in public, *asipim* of basic design can be used by non-royal men). The idea that *asipim* chairs are reserved for men was reinforced for me when I attended a rehearsal of the *bragoro* puberty rite at the Offinsohemaa's home. Although the compound was overflowing with queen mothers,

some of whom did not have a seat, no one sat on the available *asipim* chair. It remained unoccupied for the duration of the events.

A Brief History of Royal Asante

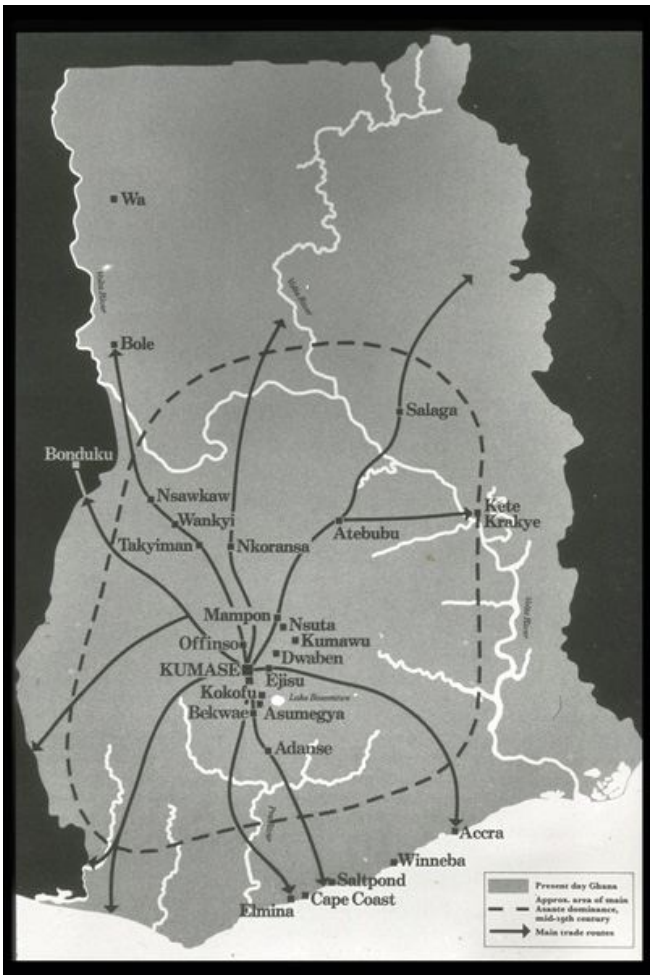


Figure 8 Map of Ghana showing trade routes and Asante dominance in the mid-19th century. (Credit: McLeod, *The Asante*, 1981, p. 8)

At its peak in the nineteenth century, the Asante kingdom extended more than 550 km from the coast into the interior forest region of what is present day Ghana (see Figure 8).[13] The Asante Confederacy's military strength was unparalleled in the area and they

[13] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 10.

were able to defeat states such as Denkyira (1701), Wankyi (1711-12), Takyiman (1722-3) and Ankyem (1742) to become one of the most powerful empires in West Africa.[14] Beginning in the late-eighteenth century, Asante's administration was centralized in Kumase, where high-ranking leaders were responsible for overseeing various activities across the region. A network of roads maintained by the government linked the kingdom with important centers of trade to the north and south and the court of the *Asantehene* (or king of the Asante) was a bustling center of activity. [15] As M.D. McLeod notes, T.E. Bowdich, the first Englishman to document a description of the king's palace in 1817, remarked on its exceptional luxury and splendor.[16]

In the second half of the nineteenth century Asante suffered from civil conflicts as well as invasion by the British; first, during their brief occupation of Kumase in 1874, and subsequently in a series of colonial campaigns that culminated in the Ashanti War of 1900. The area formerly controlled by the Asante, then referred to as the "Gold Coast," was increasingly the site of British interventions and attacks.[17] In 1896, British Troops invaded Kumase and Asantehene Agyeman Prempeh was captured and exiled, eventually ending up in Seychelles, where he remained until he was repatriated in 1924.

Despite repeated petitions from Prempeh and his retinue, the British refused to return them to Asante in the first decades of the twentieth century. A. Adu Boahen cites two key reasons for the British reluctance: first, they insisted that to show devotion to the

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[14] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 17.

[15] Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975): 1-2.

[16] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 9.

[17] T.C. McCaskie, "Agyeman Prempeh Before Exile," '*The History of Ashanti Kings and the Whole Country Itself' and Other Writings*, A. Adu Boahen, et al, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 15-16.

Crown, the Asante had to be willing to give up the Golden Stool, which they were not prepared to do. Second, decisions regarding repatriation were stalled from 1914-1918 because of the First World War.[18] However, the Asante's active support and participation in the War on Britain's behalf, evidenced, from the administration's perspective, their loyalty and acceptance of colonial rule. This, in combination with the Asante's increased trust of the British after R.S. Rattray recommended against their pursuit of the Golden Stool, were factors that contributed to the eventual resolution of Prempeh's repatriation.[19]

Once the British were satisfied by Asante's "progress," measured by the erection on European-style brick buildings, missionary and government schools, motorways and rail links, and a thriving cocoa trade, among other things, they felt that Agyeman Prempeh's return no longer presented a significant threat.[20] Prempeh's conversion to Anglicanism, which occurred during his time in Seychelles, as well as the formal education of his family members, further assured the British that he would prove to be a leader capable of promoting their aims in Asante. National and international pressure, as well as the total consensus among paramount chiefs calling for the return of Prempeh, eventually pushed the British to order for his return, which the Secretary of the State for the Colonies did via telegram on 8 April 1924.[21]

Although Prempeh was returned from exile, the British stipulated that he must do so as a private citizen, not as the Asantehene, though the Asante viewed him as such

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[18] A. Adu Boahen, "Agyeman Prempeh in the Seychelles, 1900-1924." '*The History of Ashanti Kings and the Whole Country Itself' and Other Writings*, A. Adu Boahen, et al, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 31-32.

[19] Ibid. 35-36.

[20] Ibid. 36.

[21] Ibid. 37-40.

according to custom.[22] The competing agendas of Prempeh, the Asante and the British worked to reconceive the idea of "kingship" and eventually, Prempeh was recognized as "Kumasihene" in 1926. Four years after his death in 1931, the British reinstated the office of the Asantehene. Although colonial rule was still in place, the Asante Confederacy was thereby constituted in "territory and political structure," which was in line with the indirect rule structure desired by the British.[23] As Emmanuel Akyeampong notes, the return of Prempeh represented a moment of significant change for Asante. British colonialism was accepted as a fact of existence and Prempeh promoted western education as an opportunity to learn and strengthen their kingdom for the future. He exemplified the dynamism and adaptability that characterized Asante kingship, and "could thus rightly be described as the last 'traditional' king of Asante and its first 'modern' one."[24]

The mid-twentieth century brought an entirely new set of challenges for Asante leadership. Following the Second World War, The Commission of Enquiry was established to look into rioting that had occurred in the Gold Coast. Its leaders met with disgruntled individuals who had been marginalized by chiefly offices in the preceding years and, subsequently, recommended the end of Indirect Rule.[25] They suggested organizing local government structures based on the British forms and, in 1951, the first general elections were held in the Gold Coast and Kwame Nkrumah's Convention Peoples' Party (CPP) was installed. In addition to opposing colonial rule, the CPP wanted

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[22] Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Agyeman Prempeh's Return from Exile, 1924-1931," *The History of Ashanti Kings and the Whole Country Itself' and Other Writings*, A. Adu Boahen, et al, eds. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003): 43.

[23] Ibid. 44-48.

[24] Ibid. 55.

[25] Richard Rathbone, "Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs: The Fate of 'Natural Rulers' Under Nationalist Governments," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 10 (December 2000): 51.

to see the end of chiefly power in Ghana and set about circumscribing the power and authority of chieftaincy.[26] In the mid-1950s, the National Liberation Movement (NLM), a predominantly Asante party with ambitions to restore their sovereignty, emerged. They presented a threat to the ruling party, who responded by aligning themselves with chieftaincies in outlying areas. This eventually resulted in the creation of a new administrative region, Brong-Ahafo, which effectively cut Asante's power in half (see Figure 9).[27]

Leading up to Independence in 1957 and afterwards, the CPP revised their position on chieftaincy, now claiming that it was a critical component of modern government. In so doing, they also assigned themselves the power to appoint and dismiss chiefs in the various regions of the new Ghana.[28] As Richard Rathbone reports, "the lists of 'destooled' and then de-recognised chiefs, and government-preferred and thus recognised substitutes for the latter part of 1957 and 1958, quite literally involve hundreds of people."[29] After a coup ousted Nkrumah's CPP in 1966, the new military government rejected all CPP-appointed chiefs and reinstated those who had formerly been deposed. However, chiefs' access to resources such as they had in the earlier part of the century are somewhat restricted because these continue to be maintained at a national level.[30]

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[26] Richard Rathbone, "Kwame Nkrumah and the Chiefs: The Fate of 'Natural Rulers' Under Nationalist Governments," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 10 (December 2000): 54-56.

[27] Ibid. 61.

[28] Ibid. 61-62.

[29] Ibid. 62.

[30] Ibid. 62-63.



Figure 9 Map of Ghana showing contemporary administrative regions
(Credit: U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, 2007)

Despite this tumultuous history, the institution of chieftainship has remained an important part of Asante, and more broadly, Akan culture. Although the power of chiefs was severely restricted in matters relating to finance, trade, and politics during the colonial era, their participation in cultural and social issues meant that chieftainship "continued to thrive on its basic structure."[31] Even with the granting of Ghana's independence in 1957, and the CPP's efforts to dismantle it, chieftainship has endured. It continues to be a highly valued political structure as well as an extended family system that ensures the well being of members of its lineage in contemporary Asante.

[31] Oseadeeyo Addo Dankwa III, *The Institution of Chieftaincy in Ghana: The Future* (Accra, Ghana: Konrad Adenauer Foundation, 2004): 6.

Asante (and Akan) Cultural Forms

The Asante (also known by the colonial spelling, "Ashanti") are part of the larger Akan ethnolinguistic grouping that includes the Fante and Brong, among others. They speak tonal languages from the Kwa branch of the Niger-Congo family (often called Twi or Akan).[32] The Akan peoples make up the largest percentage (47.5%) of present-day Ghana's population and extend into eastern Côte d'Ivoire and parts of Togo.[33] These interrelated groups share common cultural and socio-political traditions, including the use of stools as symbols of leadership. As M.D. McLeod notes, among the Akan peoples "there are traces of the great matrilineal clans…the practice of naming children according to the day of birth…and many closely similar religious ideas and rituals."[34]

With the Golden Stool at its apex, Asante society is arranged hierarchically. The king and queen mother of Asante, or *Asantehene* and *Asantehemaa*, respectively, preside over the *amanhene* and *amanhemaa* (sing. *omanhene, omanhemaa*), who are the paramount chiefs and queen mothers of their divisions, towns and villages. Under these principal leaders are the *ahene* and *ahemaa* (sing. *ohene, ohemaa*), who are responsible for different aspects of administration. Below them are the lowest-ranking chiefs and queen mothers, the *adikrohene* and *adikrohemaa* (sing. *odikrohene*, *odikrohemaa*).[35]

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[32] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 14.

[33] Central Intelligence Agency. The World Factbook. /library/publications/the-world-factbook (1 February 2013)

[34] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 14.

[35] The terms *ohene and ohemaa* (pl. *ahene* and *ahemaa*) are also the generic terms used to refer to chiefs and queen mothers at all levels of the socio-political hierarchy.

Historically, members of society whose family was not in some way associated with a chiefly office were generally servants to these elite, powerful and wealthy groups.[36]

The Asante are a matrilineal culture and most Asante leadership offices pass through the female line; however, there are some positions that are appointed patrilineally (such as in the Kronti/Konti political division). All members of society belong to one of eight *abusua* or clans: Agona, Aduana, Asenie, Asakyiri, Asona, Bretuo, Ekuona, and Oyoko. Each *abusua* traces its origin to a common ancestress and members believe themselves to share the same blood (*mogya*) inherited through their mothers. From their fathers, Asante peoples receive *ntoro*, which is a kind of spiritual component. At one time, *ntoro* groups may have had a part in military organization but their history is not well understood.[37]

Like its society, Asante gods are hierarchically structured. At the highest level is Nyame, the supreme god who was responsible for creation. Below him are his "sons" or "children," often represented by rivers or lakes, and *Asaase*, goddess of the earth.[38] Underneath these deities are a multitude of tutelary gods called *abosom*, who, despite being "lesser gods," are very important because they can be petitioned directly through specialist priests. The priests, who also provide a body that the god can possess in order to communicate and offer advice, attend to shrines that house the gods while on earth. [39] Regular sacrifices and offerings to the *abosom* are necessary because they are believed to actively influence the life and events of the community and their favor needs to be

[36] Kwame Arhin, "Rank and Class Among the Asante and Fante in the Nineteenth Century," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 53, no. 1 (1983): 9.

[37] Malcolm D. McLeod, *Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 19.

[38] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 10.

[39] Ibid. 11.

gained.[40] Although colonialist programs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in a great number of Asante converting to Christianity, many individuals still practice traditional rituals and consult with indigenous divinities in tandem with their new faiths.[41]

Divine kingship, ancestral worship and belief in an afterlife were central features of Asante worldviews prior to colonization by the British. The Asantehene was considered the highest mediator between the people and the gods. His sacredness was not existent at birth, but instead, was recognized once he took up his royal office. For the Asantehene, divine status was obtained after first being lowered three times over the stool of his most famous predecessor, and then being lowered three times over the Golden Stool.[42] Through this ritual act he was believed to harness the power and divinity of the royal office and his predecessors. After it occurred, the Asantehene was considered so powerful that no part of his body was allowed to touch the ground.[43]

Today, scholars generally agree that something akin to divine kingship existed in Asante prior to colonization, however, whether or not it exists presently is the subject of debate. T.C. McCaskie argues that divine kingship ended with the mass conversion to Christianity that occurred with colonialism, while Ivor Wilks suggests that although the political "kingdom" persisted through colonialism, it underwent secularization that did away with the "divine" aspect of kingship. Another scholar, Louise Muller, maintains that contemporary Asante is still a divine kingship because the Asantehene still behaves

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[40] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 12.

[41] For example, see Pino Schirripa, "Dealing with Gods: Notes about Social and Family Continuity of Spirit Possession Among the Akan of Ghana," Chap. 7, *Akan Worlds: Identity and Power in West Africa*, edited by Pierluigi Valsecchi and Fabio Vitti (Montreal, L'Harmattan Inc., 1999): 120.

[42] E.G. Parrinder, "Divine Kingship in West Africa," *Numen* 3, no. 2 (Apr., 1956): 112.

[43] Ibid. 112.

as the highest mediator between people and the gods for indigenous, Christian and Moslem believers.[44]

Scope of Thesis and Literature Review

My discussion of Asante stools focuses primarily on the period from the late-nineteenth century through to the early twenty-first century. To support my arguments, I also make references to historical events such as the founding of the Asante Confederacy in the eighteenth century and oral histories of cultural origins conceived centuries before. Because of the shared traditions that exist among the larger Akan ethnolinguistic group mentioned above, many of my conclusions regarding the relationship between *asese dwa* and queen mothers may have broader applicability. However, I am reticent to present my research as a micro-study that represents a larger phenomenon as the testimonies of queen mothers with whom I spoke highlighted for me the important ways in which each scenario is negotiated and adapted with specificity. An examination of queen mothers in areas beyond Asante and a juxtaposition of "stool cultures" in Ghana that are matrilineal and patrilineal would prove fruitful areas for future research.

Although Asante and/or Akan stools are well known, in-depth studies of them are rare. R.S. Rattray's early twentieth-century works, *Ashanti* (1923) and *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (1927), which include sections on stools, remain staples in contemporary discussions of Asante material culture. A. Kyerematen's 1969 essay, "The Royal Stools of the Ashanti," recounts the story of the Golden Stool and examines the blackened stools of the Asantehene's lineage. Peter Sarpong's later text, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*

[44] See: T.C. McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Ivor Wilks, "The Golden Stool and the Elephant Tail: An Essay on Wealth in Asante," *Research in Economic Anthropology*, vol. 2 (1979): 1-36; and Louise F. Muller, "Religious Peacekeeping and the Persistence of 'Divine Kingship' in Ghana," AEGIS European Conference on African Studies, African Studies Centre, Leiden, The Netherlands, 11-14 July 2007.

(1971), provides a basic introduction to stools and their various roles in Asante culture but draws heavily on Rattray's taxonomies. In 1980, Sharon Patton at Northwestern University wrote a doctoral dissertation titled "The Asante Stool." This unpublished study focuses on chiefs' stools in the *kronti* political division. It includes valuable information about terminology, decorative motifs, and carving techniques, but does not delve into topics such as the *kronti* chiefs' uses of the stools in their possession. Patton's 1979 essay, "The Stool and Asante Chieftaincy," is an excerpt from her dissertation research. Throughout the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, a number of sources have been published that deal with the Asante art and culture more broadly.[45] Authors of these texts often mention stools and their importance in Ghana; however, many rely heavily on early colonial literature in their accounts, and discussions of stools are relatively brief.

Although it focuses on the political office of the stool rather than the material object, the *Ashanti Stool Histories* (vols. I and II) recorded by Joseph Agyeman-Duah, Ivor Wilks, and others between October 1962 and December 1968 documents oral testimonies relating to several of the key Asante lineages and their origins. In particular, the stories reference the widely held beliefs that female ancestresses played critical roles in the foundation of the Asante peoples.

Eva Meyerowitz (1950, 1951) conducted research in the Brong-Ahafo region among the Bron, who are a northern Akan people. In *The Sacred State of the Akan* Meyerowitz offers a discussion of the stool form and its symbolism with special reference to queen mothers. However, her research has suffered extensive scholarly

[45] For example, see A. Kyerematen, *Panoply of Ghana* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964); Herbert Cole and Doran Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1977); M.D. McLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981).

criticism due to inaccuracies in language and chronologies as well as her failure to cite sources for her information, among other issues.[46] When I raised some of her claims regarding symbolism (ex. The connection between moon motifs and queen mothers) during my fieldwork in the Ashanti Region, all were summarily dismissed. Kofi Antubam (1963), Meyerowitz's research assistant, makes similar claims to Meyerowitz in *Ghana's Heritage of Culture* but does not offer sources here, either. For these reasons (in addition to the broad rejection of these ideas by the queen mothers and their affiliates with whom I spoke) I make very few references to these sources in my discussion.

Beverly Stoeltje (1995, 1997, 2000, 2003, 2009) has published extensively on the subject of Asante queen mothers. Her research, which includes numerous articles and book chapters, explores the role of queen mothers in Asante culture primarily in historical and legal terms. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng (1995) evaluate the ideas underpinning power in Asante with particular attention to queen mothers and the shift of power from female-centric origins to contemporary male-dominated political configurations. Michelle Gilbert (1993) examines the function of Akan queen mothers as well as issues of Christianity through the lens of a stool dispute from the eastern Akuapem kingdom. Tariku Farrar (1997) considers queen mothers in West African cultures more broadly, using Akan queen mothers as a case study for considering the possibility of matriarchal authority in Africa. Marijke Steegstra (2009) focuses on the role of patrilineal Krobo queen mothers of Ghana in contemporary contexts, highlighting their activities in NGOs in combination with traditional offices.

[46] For examples of the criticisms of Meyerowitz's work, see Dennis M. Warren, "The Use and Misuse of Ethnohistorical Data in the Reconstruction of Techiman-Bono (Ghana) History," *Ethnohistory*, vol. 23, no. 4 (Autumn 1976): 365-385 and "A Re-appraisal of Mrs. Eva Meyerowitz's Work on the Brong," Research Review (Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana) 7:53-76.

Suzanne Gott (1994, 2003, 2007) has addressed the topic of women and gender in Asante in relation to material culture in three key sources. Her doctoral thesis (1994) looked at women's use of cloth in displays of identity, status and wealth. Gott's 2003 article, "Golden Emblems of Maternal Benevolence: Transformations of Form and Meaning in Akan Regalia," delves into the use, in Akan leadership displays, of a pectoral consisting of paired gold disks that appear to be stylized representations of breasts. In her discussion, Gott pays particular attention to the importance of maternal nurturance in Akan worldviews. Finally, her 2007 essay describes the status-related performances of women in conjunction with funeral rites in Asante.

Art historical sources that address issues of gender in different African cultures include Monni Adams' (1986, 1988, 1991, 1993) discussions of We women's masking traditions, Anita Glaze's (1981, 1986) consideration of gender in Senufo visual culture, Ruth B. Phillip's (1978, 1980, 1995) work with the Mende of Sierra Leone, Polly Nooter-Robert and Allen F. Robert's (1996) explorations of Luba art and memory and Cynthia Becker's (2006) investigation of Amazigh women's arts and identity, among others.[47]

Methodology

My study of Asante stools took place throughout the five years between 2007 and 2012. Fieldwork, archival research and first-hand examination of museum collections were vital components of my investigation. My fieldwork in Asante occurred over the course of three separate visits in 2007, 2009 and 2012, each of which lasted an average of three months. In 2007 I undertook formal training in Twi (Asante) at the University of Ghana, Legon, engaged in archival research at the University of Ghana Institute of

[47] For an overview of key sources that address gender in African art see Lisa Aronson, "Gender and South African Art," *African Arts*, vol. 45, no. 4 (Winter 2012): 1+4-5.

African Studies and National Museum, Accra. I then traveled around the Ashanti Region, learning about Asante arts and the techniques of their creation. In particular, I spent time studying the process of carving *asese dwa* with carvers at Ahwiaa and the Centre for National Culture – Kumase.

In 2009, I traveled through northern Ghana, Burkina Faso and Mali, examining the intersections of Asante/Akan traditions and the wider circulation of stools in marketplaces. Following that, I based myself in Kumase, where I commenced archival research at Manhyia Palace and the Centre for National Culture – Kumase. During this trip, I lived with the Rt. Rev. Edmund Kojoe Yeboah, who was the Bishop of the Anglican Church from 1985-1998. With his assistance, I delved into the question of Anglican and Catholic adaptations of indigenous ideas and symbolisms.

My work with queen mothers, which includes interviews with 14 women at differing levels of the political hierarchy as well as their affiliates, consumed my final research trip of 2012. I worked with Nana Sarfo Kantanka, Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture, and ministers of the different administrative areas of the Ashanti Region, to identify a representative selection of queen mothers of different ages, statuses and locations in order to gain the widest breadth of perspectives on stools. I engaged in conversations sometimes in English but primarily in Twi, with the assistance of Nana Sarfo Kantanka, who acted as translator when my language skills reached their limits.

The queen mothers with whom I spoke included Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko (Offinsohemaa, Omanhemaa), Nana Braku Yaa (Asokorehemaa, Omanhemaa), Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo (Senfi Adumasahemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Ama Konadu II (Esresohemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Ama Agyeman (Kodiehemaa, Abremponhemaa),

Nana Afia Serwaa (Aputuogyahemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Akosua Abrafi II (Sewuahemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Birago Ababio (Mpobihemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Gyama Pensan II (Aboasohemaa, Abremponhemaa), Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio (Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, Ohemaa/Obaapanin), Nana Sika Brayie (Sasaamopaninbenkumhemaa, Ohemaa/Obaapanin), Nana Abena Gyamfua (Adwafohemaa, Ohemaa/Obaapanin), Nana Adwoa Agyeiwa II (New Bomfahemaa, Dikrohemaa), Nana Darkowaa Ababio II (Dikrohemaa under the Mantia Stool). In addition to the queen mothers and their affiliates, I spoke with a number of other individuals, such as Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, whose knowledge I cite throughout the text.

My research for this project also included visiting key collections of Asante stools at the British Museum (London), the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, The Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology and the National Museum of Ireland (Dublin), which I completed over a period of six weeks in the autumn of 2010. During my time at Harvard, I carried out an in-depth investigation of a stool in the collections of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which was the catalyst for my research program (the case study of this stool is outlined in chapter three).

Because most museum documentation and scholarly literature have focused largely on Asante stools' association with male chieftaincy, the stool archives belonging to queen mothers and their associated oral histories were critical aspects of my research. Similarly, historical photographs from sources such as the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Basel Mission Image Archive offered crucial insight into the ways in which women used stools in the early twentieth century and before. Taken together, these alternative forms

of data offer a rich picture of the important links between women, specifically queen mothers, and *asese dwa* in Asante culture.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1, "Re-Engendering Asante Stools," foregrounds the historical relationship between women and stools and considers the ways that variations on the story of the Golden Stool have gendered implications. I describe the primary role of queen mothers in the acquisition of *asese dwa* at Ahwiaa and set this information in comparative perspective with Euro-American literature and documentation, which makes almost exclusive reference to male chieftaincy in relationship to Asante stools. Lastly, I use photographs from the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to illustrate that women's relationships with stools have endured for more than a century.

Chapter 2, "Bodies and Stools: Ritual, Structure and Symbols," outlines the dynamic permission system associated with queen mothers' use of stool designs and considers broader structural and symbolic analogies between the stool form, architecture and the (female) body. I examine the critical connections between *asese dwa* and menstruation, as evidenced in taboos associated with different forms of seating and the female puberty rite, *bragoro*. I also explore the gendered character of stools in broader contexts, including *akyeame*, gods, and Anglican and Catholic traditions in Asante.

Chapter 3, "The Primacy of Archives," addresses Euro-American collecting histories as well as the archives of stools maintained by queen mothers in Asante. Drawing on the case study of a stool in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University, I demonstrate the ways that museum records have privileged male chieftaincy and obscure or erase the histories of queen

mothers. An overview of key stools in the collections of Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Nana Braku Yaa I, Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, Nana Birago Ababio, and Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, offers a counterpoint to Euro-American museum documentation and narratives and reveals the dynamic and complex system of negotiation associated with queen mothers' stool customs. Finally, I explore the invention of new stool types in the latter half of the twentieth century and their relationships with conventional practices.

Obaa na owoo ohene. It is the woman who gave birth to the King. (Asante proverb)[48]

"The stool is the symbol of a chief only insofar as it makes reference to the queen mother who appointed him."

---S. F. Adjei, Director of the Centre for National Culture - Kumase

Chapter 1

Re-Engendering Asante Stools

[48] Quoted in Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1995): 481.

For the matrilineal Asante peoples, since their earliest histories, stools have been intimately connected with women, and queen mothers in particular. Many of the origin stories outlined in the *Ashanti Stool Histories* highlight the important roles of ancestresses (the first queen mothers) and their relationships with stools, many of which predate the birth of the famous Golden Stool (discussed below). For example, the ancestress, Ankyewa Nyame, known as "the true angel of God," is said to have come down from the sky at a place called Asiakwa in the Akim district at some point before the eighteenth century founding of the Asante confederacy. She brought her ancestral stool with her and her retinue followed. Nana Ankyewa Nyame is held to be the ancestress of both the Oyoko and Aduana *mmusua* (sing. *abusua*) lineage. The Golden Stool today is identified with the former group.[49] Another female ancestress, Asiam Nyankopon Guahyia, foundress of the Bretuo lineage (*abusua*), accompanied by her relatives and subjects, is believed to have descended from the sky on a silver chain carrying her silver stool.[50] She is remembered as having landed either at Adanse-Ahensan right away or having arrived here following a migration from Adanse-Ayaase. She, too, is said to have appeared prior to the confederation of Asante. In yet a third example, the Mampong stool, second in power only to the Golden Stool, traces its lineage to another ancestress, Asiam Nyankopon Guahyia.[51] After her arrival, Asiam Nyankopon Guahyia announced that her sister, Nyinampong, the queen mother of Denkyira and the Agona *abusua*, was making

[49] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Kokofu* stool history, p. 1.

[50] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 2, *Adubinsukese* stool history, p. 1, *Atasomanso* stool history, p.1.

[51] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 2, *Adubinsukese* stool history, p. 1.

her way to the same location. A short time later, Nyinampong descended from the sky with her "bead-stool" in hand.[52]

These are just a few of the *abusua* origin stories that foreground women and their stools. Many more individual stool histories feature key female ancestresses and their arrival on earth with stools, a number of which date to the era prior to the Golden Stools' descent, or somewhat later, under the reign of Asantehene Opoku Ware I (1700-1750). Thus, Nana Yaa Asase, ancestress of the Akyawkrom stool, is said to have come up from the ground at a hole called Ayano Bong (alt. Ayano Tokoromu) at Akyawkrom. With her she brought her brother and the Ankyawkrom stool.[53] Ampoma Tim, ancestress of the Dadiesoaba stool, for her part, is said to have migrated from Denkyria to Kumase carrying a miniature stool after the Asante defeated Denkyira in 1701.[54] The Dadiesoaba stool itself is said to have been created by Opoku Ware I during the first half of the eighteenth century.

Oral histories outlined in the *Ashanti Stool Histories* offer other evidence of the relationship between female ancestors and stools. Here we read explanations of the transmission of authority from women to men, a phenomenon said to have occurred in the decades and centuries that followed initial matriarchal foundations. Nana Kyerew Akenten, ancestress of the Mamponten stool, is identified as both the queen mother of Mamponten and the female chief. According to related oral traditions, she "reigned for a long time, but because of the intermittent wars that faced the nation it became necessary

[52] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 2, *Atasomanso* stool history, p.1.

[53] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Akyawkrom* stool history, p. 1.

[54] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Dadiesoaba* stool history, p. 1.

to appoint a male substitute."[55] It was Nana Kyerew Akenten's brother, Nana Saasi Ayeboafo, who was selected as the first male occupant of the Mamponten stool. Similarly, Nana Dufie, ancestress of the Fehyiase stool, "handed over the administration of this village, as well as the ancestral stool, to her son, Toku Kumanin, who was then a minor" because of the ongoing wars in the area.[56] Apparently, once her son came of age, Nana Dufie decided to divide their responsibilities by ruling over the women while Toku Kumanin dealt with the administration of the men.[57] These oral histories are in line with Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng's (1995) observation about the prominence of war (male activities) in the new Asante nation, as key factors impacting a shift from female to male authority in the period after the confederation's founding.[58] The other crucial reason for the change cited by Akyeampong and Obeng is that of taboos around menstruation that restricted female participation in certain spheres.[59] We can see in these various examples the strikingly important role that gender is seen to have played in Asante stool history and ongoing signification.

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[55] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Mamponten* stool history, p. 3.

[56] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Feyhiase* stool history, p. 1.

[57] Ashanti Stool Histories, vol. 1, *Feyhiase* stool history, p. 1; No doubt, oral histories pertaining to other stools that are not recorded in the *Ashanti Stool Histories* offer comparable explanations to reconcile the change of power that took place between the origin stories and later realities. When considered in the context of these early legends that feature ancestresses and their stools, the queen mothers' broad dismissal of the Golden Stool story that included ancestral stools being buried in the River Bantama in my interviews in 2012 takes on new significance. Contemporary queen mothers may have been offended by a story that effectively erased the material evidence of the crucial roles their ancestresses played in the creation of the Asante nation. Interestingly, while there is a disconnect between women's ancestral authority as told in the *Ashanti Stool Histories* and their twentieth-century circumstances, their relationships with stools (in the sense of the physical object) seems to have been sustained and even strengthened over time.

[58] Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender, and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1995): 492.

[59] Ibid. 492.

The Golden Stool and the Issues of Gender

The Golden Stool or *Sika Dwa Kofi* ("Golden Stool born on Friday") is the foremost political symbol of the Asante peoples and the rudiments of its origin story are well known: in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Osei Tutu, leader of Kumase, overtook numerous towns and states in the area of the Gold Coast and unified them as the Asante Confederacy. He called upon his chief priest and advisor, Okomfo Anokye, to conjure an object from the heavens that would symbolize the unity of this new nation. Then, on a certain Friday, a glorious stool descended from the heavens to the accompaniment of thunder and lightening and came to rest on the lap of Osei Tutu. Chiefs of the different divisions of Asante gave nail and hair clippings, which were made into an ointment that was rubbed onto the stool to show that it belonged to the entire nation and contained its soul or spirit. Anokye delineated a code of moral behavior that all Asante people had to follow in order to ensure the health and survival of the Golden Stool, and accordingly, the nation itself. This code and the importance of the Golden Stool to the Asante peoples have continued throughout their history.

Another facet of the Golden Stool story that seems to appear mostly from the 1960s onwards includes an addition with vital details on gender. This version is exemplified in Alex Kyerematen's 1969 article, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti.[60] in which he takes up what he calls the "Golden Stool from the heavens":

> A condition of its arrival, Anokye insisted, was that all the chiefs in the kingdom, including the king, should surrender all their regalia – their stools, swords, and spears – and thereby avoid reminder of their earlier history and sentiments. A huge cavity was dug in the bed of the River Bantama, and in this all the regalia was buried. Because of this the river became known as *Aworo afena*, 'running

[60] Alex Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39, no. 1 (Jan., 1969): 1-10.

> over swords'. To mark the spot where the regalia was buried, Anokye is said to have planted a sword on the bank, predicting that no one would be able ever to remove it but that if he did, this would presage the end of the kingdom. This is said to be the sword still to be seen in the grounds of the Kumasi Central Hospital at Bantama, apparently immoveable by unaided human effort. Only one piece of regalia was exempted from Komfo Anokye's decree: the stool of Ankyaw Nyame, founding ancestress of the royal Oyoko lineage who, it is said, descended from the heavens by a gold chain, the Sika Atweaban, having been preceded by her court-crier, Esen, and by Aya Kesee who carried her stool.[61]

The *Ashanti Stool Histories* (vols. I and II) recorded by Joseph Agyeman-Duah, Ivor Wilks, and others between October 1962 and December 1968 includes this variation of the Golden Stool story associated oral accounts (ex. the Hia stool history, the Kyidom stool history, and the Agona stool history[62]) but with the exception that none make a point of excluding the Oyoko ancestral stool from being buried along with the rest of the earlier regalia.[63]

Rattray's 1923 account of the Golden Stool story in *Ashanti* does not mention the surrender of stools as a condition of the Golden Stool's arrival. His version, which he credits to an "old Ashanti of the ruling class, deeply versed in the lore and traditions of his race, whose ancestor was one of the Ashanti kings,"[64] is generally consistent with the details outlined in the first paragraph above. However, in his 1929 *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, Rattray offers an alternate story to explain the renaming of the River

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[61] Alex Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39, no. 1 (Jan., 1969): 3

[62] The Oyoko stool history included in *The Stool Histories* does not address the Golden Stool so it is difficult to ascertain whether the informants were aware of the story outlined by Kyerematen with regard to the exemption of the stool of their ancestress, "Nana Ankyewa Nyame" (as spelled in *Ashanti Stool Histories*).

[63] Kyerematen credits Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II for providing him with information for the article, which focuses exclusively on the blackened stools of the Oyoko royals. It is possible that the exemption he mentions may be a consequence of his informant's desire to emphasize the Oyoko royals' right to rule and privileged position within Asante.

[64] R. S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 288.

Bantama to "*aworo afena"* ("*awomfana"*) which points out that when going to war, army leaders demanded a sign that they would be victorious.

Here the story becomes not only more complex but also important in terms of historical nuance. Among other things, Anokye ("Anotche") gave one of Osei Tutu's ("Osai Tutu") sons a shield that "so long as the front of it was presented towards the enemy, they would retreat."[65] According to Anokye, who explains that the shield taboo relates to the drinking of palm wine, Osei Tutu after creating new swords and handing them out to his commanders, the latter accepted them, taking the oath decreed by Anokye. When the son broke the taboo by drinking palm wine, the enemy overtook the Asante, forcing them to retreat. Anokye then ordered all the swords thrown into the river and new ones made in turn.[66] Rattray reports that, "of the 'medicine' which had been used in the making of the Stool, [Anokye] took what remained, and mixing it with copper, distributed pieces to all Chiefs who possessed blackened Stools, thus sharing with all some of the power which lay in the Stool."[67] This account not only offers an alternative explanation for the renaming of the River Bantama, but also points to the fact that the chiefs did not surrender their blackened stools. In short, the stools identified with key female ancestresses of these lines still are considered to retain political primacy.

During my fieldwork in the Ashanti Region in 2012, when I inquired about the story that all leaders had given up their regalia to bring about the birth of the Golden Stool, I was met with resounding denial. None of the queen mothers I interviewed or their affiliates (chiefs, linguists, family elders, etc.) admitted even the slightest familiarity with

[65] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929): 273.

[66] Ibid. 274.

[67] Ibid. 277.

that aspect of the story. In their explanations, I found myself privy to yet another version of the Stool's origins. Nana Sarfo Kantanka, Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture and Ankobia ("chief who does not travel") of Asotwe, first communicated the story to me but a number of queen mothers later corroborated it. I understand that this version may be recorded in some capacity by an Asante playwright (in Twi); however, I haven't yet been able to verify this elsewhere.

The version of events discussed above is framed in part around a modern view that the present day Asante peoples are descendants of the original Empire of Ghana (which flourished in the western Sudan between the fourth and twelfth centuries). These individuals migrated over time to their present location in the forest region of southern Ghana. According to Nana Sarfo Kantanka, the stool belonging to the ancestress of the ancient royal lineage was lost in the migration from the Empire of Ghana to the forest region. When Okomfo Anokye called upon the gods to deliver a symbol of the unified Asante nation in the early seventeenth century, the Golden Stool that appeared before them was the one that had been lost centuries before. Another aspect of the story points out that prior to the Golden Stool's descent, the *Asantehene* or king of the Asante was not yet identified. In brief, although Osei Tutu had victoriously led his armies to take over the other previously independent groups, he was not automatically considered the paramount leader. Instead, the stool came to rest on the lap of "the *Asantehene*" as an "identifying" act. In other words, it could have landed on the lap of any of the chiefs present at the event, but instead it selected Osei Tutu as the official King of Asante.

This legend of the Golden Stool, as told to me by Nana Sarfo Kantanka, seems to be a version of the framing by the 'Very Reverend Apostle Mr. Ofori,' leader of the

Assembly of Christ Redeemer, a Pentecostal denomination in Kumase, presented to T.C. McCaskie in the mid-1990s.[68] McCaskie reports that Mr. Ofori outlined a story that claims the Asante people, then called the "Koa," migrated in the fifth millennium BC to 'a valley in modern day Israel' from the Sudan via Egypt. They lived peacefully alongside the Jews until the Babylonians took Jerusalem and enslaved them. When the Persian King Cyrus later captured Babylon, the Jews returned to Israel but the Lord God revealed to the Koa that they were, in fact, his chosen people and he had a special plan for them. Their leader, also named Cyrus, was instructed to eat a scroll of lamentation and they were told that they would wander the earth until they found their final resting place. Initially, they settled in the area now known to have been the Western Sudanic Kingdom of Ghana. This kind of historical repositioning to bring a polity into engagement with other well known historical centers in Africa is well known elsewhere on the continent.

What is new here is the important place in the narrative of ancient Ghana. The name "Ghana," according to Ofori, is a transformation of the name Koa to Koana to Gwana and, finally, to Ghana. When Islam dominated the area, according to this account, the Koa moved on and arrived at their final home, Asante. Here "the appearance of the Golden Stool (*sika dwa*), in essence, was a reappearance, the manifestation of the scroll ingested by the first Cyrus. It descended from Heaven upon the knees of Cyrus' lineal successor the first *Asantehene* Osei (ie. Cyrus) Tutu."[69] As Asante thrived, the population fell into idolatry and God punished them by bringing colonialism upon them. However,

[68] T.C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000): 231-235.

[69] Ibid. 234.

in this process, they also were introduced to the Bible. The British unknowingly provided the Asante with the tool with which they would "wrest the Christian message back from European ignorance and Jewish dismissal…at last, the Lord God would restore the true order of his creation. Black African peoples instructed and led by the Asante (Koa) would exercise benevolent dominion over Europeans, Jews and the other peoples of the earth."[70]

Taken together, the nuances of these different versions of the Golden Stool story, of which there are surely more, illustrate the dynamic character of history and its narration. Kyerematen's account (although it exempts the Oyoko clan's ancestral stool) and the stories in the *Ashanti Stool Histories* focuses on the erasure of previously distinct identities and assumes that Osei Tutu is the rightful leader of the Asante nation. The story relayed by Kantanka, however, links the ancient lineage with the new kingdom and foregrounds the active selection of Osei Tutu as *Asantehene*, therein echoing the process by which queen mothers choose chiefs for Stools (leadership offices) in their communities. In effect, the Golden Stool in Kantanka's version defines the queen mother as ancestress who selects the king. The story relayed to T.C. McCaskie adds another layer to the ancient origin story, establishing a clear link with Christianity and reconciling potential conflicts with indigenous traditions. In this case, the will of the ancestor/ancestress becomes synonymous with the Word and Osei Tutu who is positioned as Cyrus' proper successor in the eyes of God. Each told from a distinct vantage point over the course of a century, these legends, in their diverse privileging of nationhood, matriarchy and Christianity, reflect the complex backdrop that was twentieth-century Asante.

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[70] T. C. McCaskie, *Asante Identities: History and Modernity in an African Village* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2000): 234.

Queen Mothers and the Stool Market

Adom Gyamfi Richard, secretary of the Ahwiaa Wood Carver Association, informed me that, next to foreign visitors, queen mothers have been the stool carvers' most frequent customers throughout the twentieth century.[71] Depending on their rank and financial resources, queen mothers purchase ready-made conventional stools of a standard design or they commission more elaborately embellished ones (at greater expense) to use in their official capacities, which include such events as judging disputes, attending durbars, and presiding over female puberty rites. When they are enstooled, queen mothers inherit all of the stools belonging to the previous queen mothers from that line. They also may choose to have a new stool made to suit their tastes or they may select one of the inherited ones for regular use. All these objects fall under the heading of "Stool property" (a term that is comparable to "Crown" property in its reference to an official political division) and when a queen mother chooses to have a new stool made, it becomes part of this archive. If she chooses to leave her post or passes away, each stool, including any newly made ones, is transferred to the next queen mother.

These stools, which might be called "archival" stools, differ from the blackened stools of ancestors that have been a frequent subject of discussion in the literature on Asante culture. While blackened stools are sacred objects that are not practical items for seating, "archival" stools are often presented to queen mothers to sit on during their visits with one another or with chiefs.[72] Chiefs also maintain archival stools that are part of

[71] Adom Gyamfi Richard, Secretary of the Ahwiaa Wood Carver's Association, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[72] For a discussion of Blackened stools see Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971); A. Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39, no. 1 (Jan., 1969): 1-10.

their stool property but their own uses of them differ from those of queen mothers.[73] The bulk of the stools in European and North American museum collections are "archival" stools of this type.

Euro-American Stool Collections and the Question of Gender

As we have seen, queen mothers, rather than chiefs, have been the largest local consumers of Asante stools since at least the early twentieth century. Yet for the most part, existing discussions of stools have centered on their roles in (male) chieftaincy traditions and ancestral veneration; queen mothers' roles in turn largely are presented as a female equivalent to male chieftaincy.[74] Both are problematic since the positions of Asante queen mothers and related engagement with stools are distinct from those of men. Museum records in Europe and North America, when they exist, generally reinforce false assumptions of male identity with stools by making exclusive mention of chiefs, even though this reference is frequently inaccurate or misleading.

The origins of these ideas are traceable to the period of active collecting of Asante stools, which took place in the late-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prevailing Euro-American ideas about stools in the early twentieth century are perhaps best evidenced in the newspapers from that period, and especially, the Editorials section. The content of articles from the *London Times* reveals the pervasiveness of Euro-American peoples' understanding of Asante stools through equations with the British Throne and male chieftaincy or kingship, as well as their general confusion regarding the

[73] The preceding information about Asante queen mothers' uses of stools is based on interviews I undertook with 14 queen mothers in the Ashanti Region of Ghana in May and June of 2012.

[74] See R. S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927); A. Kyerematen, "The Royal Stools of Ashanti." *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 39, no. 1 (Jan., 1969): 1-10.; Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971); Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980.

role of the Golden Stool and *asese dwa* more broadly. An article from 21 September 1921, provided by the newspaper's Dunkwa correspondent, explained that "the Golden Stool of Ashanti is the symbol of sovereignty corresponding to the Throne and a Monarch in Ashanti was not enthroned but enstooled."[75]

Not only was the Golden Stool equated with the Throne, stools in general were often conflated with the Golden Stool. For example, in the follow-up to his initial article concerning the Golden Stool, the Dunkwa correspondent offered further details about the Golden stool and then launched into a discussion of "true Ashanti stools," explaining that

> They are rectangular and oblong in plan with a flat solid base carrying a column at each corner and a larger central upright, which may be circular or square but is, in the best kinds, hollowed out and pierced with rectangular holes. The columns are also embellished by scalloping, etc, cut out of the stolid. The top or seat is curved downwards from the ends to the centre, the design as whole being simply severe and pleasing, and the proportions always good.[76]

Shortly after the article was published, a woman by the name of Lucy C. F. Cavendish wrote in to announce that she was aware of "three copies of the Golden Stool" that were in the possession of her family. She explained that two of the stools, both covered in "Native Silver," were brought home by Sir Owen Lanyon after the Kumase campaign and one was given to her with her initials carved into it. According to Cavendish, the stools "tall[ied] exactly, except as to size, with the description given lately by your Ashanti correspondent."[77] Cavendish recalled "Sir Owen telling [her] that no one was allowed to sit on the stool except the King and that it was always kept lying on its side to prevent any devil sitting on it."[78]

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[75] *London Times*, "The Golden Stool Found: Ashanti Symbol of Sovereignty," 21 September 1921.

[76] *London Times*, "Golden Stool of Ashanti: Mystery of Its Fate," 14 October 1921.

[77] *London Times*, "The Golden Stool of Ashanti," 11 November 1921.

[78] Ibid.

These Western articles reveal confusion about Asante stools on a number of levels. First, the Golden Stool is not the same shape as that described by the Dunkwa correspondent and it is covered in gold, not silver. Thus, Cavendish's stools clearly were not copies of it. Second, the Golden Stool does not belong to the "King" or *Asantehene*, nor is it a throne. Considered a living being, the Golden Stool is enthroned on an *asipim* (a high-backed European-style chair) with its own set of royal regalia. Finally, even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was primarily queen mothers, not chiefs, who used stools as a type of "throne," in the sense of a "seat" that expresses power.

Asante Stools in the News

Articles from the American popular press during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries similarly reveal a tendency to conceive of Asante stools, and the Golden Stool specifically, in terms of British Coronation symbolism. Male chieftaincy narratives reached well beyond England's borders. An article from the Dallas Morning News in April 1900 refers to "the Gold Stool of the Ashanti, the royal throne."[79] Around the same time, a news brief about the Asante from the Philadelphia Inquirer mentions the "ancestral golden throne."[80] An 1899 story from the San Jose Mercury News talks about "Ashanti kings…and treasures attached to the royal stool, or throne."[81]

The degree to which the Golden Stool was conceived as a male coronation seat or throne, and the problematic nature of this belief, is best evidenced by the story of Sir Frederick Hodgson. In late March of 1900, Hodgson, the Governor of the new Gold Coast Colony, met with Asante leaders in Kumase to discuss their petition for changes in

[79] *Dallas Morning News*, "Golden Stool War," 10 April 1900.

[80] *Philadelphia Inquirer*, "Is Ashanti's throne found? Discovery of the Golden Stool May be the Cause of Trouble," 8 April 1900.

[81] *San Jose Mercury News*, "The Coast of Blood and Gold," 24 June 1899.

the British occupation. After demanding that the Asante pay interest on an old war indemnity, Hodgson concluded his speech by proclaiming:

> …once and for all that Prempeh will never again rule over this country of Ashanti… The paramount authority of Ashanti is now the great Queen of England whose representative I am at the moment… Where is the golden stool? Why am I not sitting on the golden stool at this moment? I am the representative of the paramount power, why have you relegated me to this chair? Why did you not take the opportunity of my coming to Kumase to bring the golden stool and give it to me to sit upon?[82]

In fact, this was not the first time the Governor had attempted to seize the Golden Stool. Major Frederick Myatt, M.C., author of *The Golden Stool: An Account of the Ashanti War of 1900*, reports that a year prior, Hodgson had organized "a secret expedition into Ashanti in search of it" but the Asante were well aware of his aims.[83] When Sir Frederick Hodgson demanded to sit on the Golden Stool, the Asante peoples were so offended that they resolved to defend the Golden Stool, the soul of their nation, by waging war against the British.

On 30 March of that year, Sir Cecil Armitage, the individual responsible for acquiring one of the largest holdings of Asante stools now in the collections of the British Museum, led an expedition to the town of Nkwanta under the guise of looking for arms and ammunition. The real purpose was to travel to nearby Bali, where a young informant had told them the Golden Stool was buried beneath a building in a forest grove. After an unsuccessful search that involved extensive digging, the party returned from Bali, where they were met with a group of angry Asante who opened fire on them after the British started clearing their plantain crops to establish a defensive position. The constabulary

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[82] Quoted in Pamela McClusky, *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum in association with Princeton University Press, 2002): 91.

[83] Major Frederick Myatt, M.C., *The Golden Stool: An Account of the Ashanti War of 1900* (London: William Kimber, 1966): 33.

left for Kumase the next morning at dawn but this was just the first in a series of clashes that constituted the Ashanti War of 1900. [84]

The campaign that ensued, which Nana Yaa Asantewaa, the queen mother of Ejisu, is credited with instigating, is acknowledged as one of the "most determined resistance movements of the colonial era."[85] The British eventually overcame the Asante when reinforcements arrived with new weaponry, but not before lives were lost on both sides as a result of Hodgson's demands. In his arrogance, the Governor failed to understand that no one sits on the Golden Stool. Not even the *Asantehene* or *Asantehemaa*. In short, Hodgson assumed that the Golden Stool was the Asante equivalent of the British Throne, and in doing so, made a grievous error.

Even after the nine months of war that followed the British Governor's politically motivated assertion, calls for the Golden Stool did not cease. Authorities continued to search for it throughout the Asante region during the next two decades. As Pamela McClusky has explained, the British mistook the Golden Stool for a coronation seat and saw it as a prize that they should capture and own.[86] When King Prempeh was exiled in 1896, the stool was buried in the forest for safekeeping. It was not until thieves uncovered it accidentally in 1921 that its true significance came to be understood. The discovery of the stool led the Asante people to fear that the British would be able to take possession of it and they went into national mourning. Dreading another war, R.S. Rattray, the Government Anthropologist, wrote a memorandum to the British authorities

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[84] Major Frederick Myatt, M.C., *The Golden Stool: An Account of the Ashanti War of 1900* (London: William Kimber, 1966): 33.

[85] Pamela McClusky, *Art from Africa: Long Steps Never Broke a Back* (Seattle: Seattle Art Museum in association with Princeton University Press, 2002): 91.

[86] Ibid. 92.

to clear up the misconceptions concerning the stool. Here Rattray explained that "this stool was never sat upon" and it was "the shrine of the *sunsum* or soul of this people."[87] In response to the memorandum, the British agreed to discontinue their attempts to take the Golden Stool into their custody.

Despite the clarification issued by Rattray with regard to the Golden Stool, museum records indicate that conventional Asante stools continued to be understood in terms of coronation symbolism throughout the twentieth century. While some aspects of this comparison are accurate, such as referring to the political office of a chief as a "Stool" in the same way that one refers to the "British Throne" or "The Crown" to indicate such things as property ownership, the equation contributed to many misconceptions about stools, about the Asante political system more generally and about the gendered history of both. What is particularly remarkable in this discussion is that stools were envisaged as "seats" of power used by male chiefs, with little or no mention of their principal users, and specifically the place of queen mothers (*ahemaa*, e.g. the important female rulers who appoint chiefs) within this process.

Queen mothers and *Asese Dwa*

One of the most striking features of Asante stools is that queen mothers are the most important leaders in society permitted to sit on them in public and when they do so, their use expresses the official power and importance of these women (see Figure 10). In my interviews with chiefs, queen mothers and other members of Asante royal lineages, the resounding consensus is that a chief only sits on a *sese dwa* very briefly (lowering himself upon it three times) during the enstoolment process, when he is bathing (this is a

[87] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 292.

traditional practice that has become somewhat less common over time as domestic washroom facilities have changed) and in some instances, before approaching the ancestral stools in the *nkonnwafieso* (stool house). Additionally, certain male office holders may sit on very small stools while serving the *Asantehene* in a specific capacity, as is the case of the *okyeame* (orator or linguist). In these roles, the men are generally perceived as attendants to the ruler, not as chiefs in their own right.[88]



Figure 10 Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, sitting on her *mmaa dwa* stool next to her *nyansapo* stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

[88] I discuss the responsibilities of the *okyeame* and his use of a stool as a seat of authority in more depth in Chapter Two.

Although my interviews on this topic took place in 2012, I believe it is not likely that the differences I witnessed between women and men's uses of stools changed much over time and with respect to status. In other words, it seems highly unlikely that (male) chiefs in the late-nineteenth century or early twentieth century sat on stools in public, or that chiefs of higher rank sat on stools while those of lower rank sat on *asipim* (or *vice versa*). Interviews with queen mothers and chiefs of all ages and at all levels of the political hierarchy, including Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, the Adumasahemaa or queen mother of Adumasa, who has been on the stool since 1928, made it clear that (male) chiefs appear not to have used stools other than in the very limited contexts I outlined above for at least a century.[89] Stools here remained largely the privileged object of female historical agency and political power.

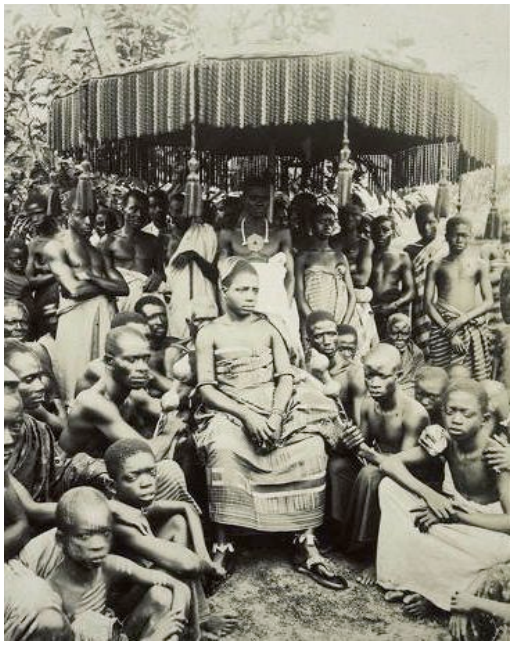


Figure 11 "Yaw Sapong, Asante Chief," photographed by Frederick A. L. Ramseyer c. 1888-1895. (Image credit: Basel Mission Image Archive, University of Southern California Libraries, Record ID: impa-m38378)

[89] Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, Adumasahemaa, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

Historical photographs in the Basel Mission Archives that date as far back as the 1880s as well as R.S. Rattray's early twentieth-century photos of Asante corroborate this information. For example, an image titled "Yaw Sapong, Asante Chief" taken by Frederick A. L. Ramseyer sometime between 1888 and 1895 shows the young leader sitting in state on a European style *asipim* chair not a stool (see Figure 11).[90] The metal-plated front rung of the chair is visible between his feet, just below the edge of the *kente* cloth he wears. Another image taken by Ramseyer during the same period, titled "The indigenous chief of Obomeng," shows the chief sitting in state with his entourage. He wears a top hat and the finial of an *asipim* is visible above his left shoulder.[91] Similarly, in a photograph taken by a Mr. Berger between 1903 and 1912 of the "Chief of Kokofu," the armrests of an *asipim*, as well as its upper rail, are visible behind the seated leader.[92]

In Rattray's images, too, it is clear that chiefs sit on *asipim* chairs and queen mothers sit on *asese dwa* (stools). This is perhaps best exemplified in the image of the model court scene Rattray asked carvers to create for him. Significantly, the figure of the chief or Asantehene is seated on an *asipim* while the queen mother and *okyeame* are both seated on *asese dwa*.[93] Another image taken by Rattray showing the Juabenhene and Juabenhemaa sometime before 1929 includes the Juabenhene sitting on an elaborate *asipim* beside an *akonkromfi* chair that supports the Juaben Stool (see Figure 12).[94] On the other side of the Stool, the female leader here, the Juabenhemaa, is seated on what

[90] Basel Mission Image Archive, University of Southern California Libraries, "Yaw Sapong, Asante Chief." Record I.D.: impa-m38378.

[91] Basel Mission Image Archive, University of Southern California Libraries, "The indigenous chief of Obomeng." Record I.D.: impa-m38338.

[92] Basel Mission Image Archive, University of Southern California Libraries, "Chief of Kokofu." Record I.D.: impa-m25845.

[93] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): Figure 188.

[94] R.S. Rattray, *Law and Constitution in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1929): Figure 29.

appears to be the *mmaa dwa* ("woman's stool") style of *sese dwa*, which is decorated with metallic strips. I am unaware of any historical images or documents that present a chief sitting in state on a *sese dwa*. As is the case today, it appears that for at least the time since the late nineteenth century, chiefs sit on *asipim* chairs and queen mothers sit on traditional stools when acting in official capacities publically.



Figure 12 "Juaben Hene and Ohema with stool," photgraphed by R.S. Rattray c. 1921-1929. (Image credit: Pitt Rivers Museum, Acc. Number: 1998.312.529.1)

Another account provided by Rattray reinforces the important relationship between queen mothers and *asese dwa*, in particular, those showing the *mmaa dwa* design. In Chapter XXIV of *Ashanti* the author describes the process involved in creating a replica of the Silver Stool of the Mamponghemaa (queen mother of Mampong), which the queen mothers and women of Asante sent to H.R.H. Princess Mary, Viscountess

Lascelles, on the occasion of her marriage in 1922. The stool was made in the *mmaa dwa* design associated with women and queen mothers and incorporated silver plating on its columns, base and seat. Its underside was "consecrated" (a process I will discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters) and it included metal fetters around its core to bind the owner's soul to the stool. The crucial relationship between queen mothers, women and *asese dwa* is delineated in the letter the Mamponghemaa wrote to accompany the gift:

> Lady Guggisberg, wife of His Excellency,
>
> I place this stool in your hands. It is a gift on her wedding for the King's child, Princess Mary.
>
> Ashanti stool-makers have carved it, and Ashanti silversmiths have embossed it.
>
> All the Queen Mothers who dwell here in Ashanti have contributed towards it, and as I am the senior Queen Mother in Ashanti, I stand as representative of all the Queen Mothers and place it in your hands to send to the King's child (Princess Mary).
>
> It may be that the King's child has heard of the-Golden Stool of Ashanti. That is the stool which contains the soul of the Ashanti nation. All we women of Ashanti thank the Governor exceedingly because he has declared to us that the English will never again ask us to hand over that stool.
>
> This stool we give gladly. It does not contain our soul as our Golden Stool does, but it contains all the love of us Queen Mothers and of our women. The spirit of this love we have bound to the stool with silver fetters just as we are accustomed to bind our own spirits to the base of our stools.
>
> We in Ashanti here have a law which decrees that it is the daughters of a Queen who alone can transmit royal blood, and that the children of a king cannot be heirs to that stool. *This law has given us women a power in this land so that we have a saying which runs:*
>
> *'It is the woman who bears the man.'* [emphasis mine]
>
> (i.e., the king). We hear that her law is not so, nevertheless we have great joy in sending her our congratulations, and we pray the great God Nyankopon, on whom men lean and do not fall, whose day of worship is a Saturday, and whom the Ashanti serve just as she serves Him, that He may give the King's child and her husband long life and happiness, and finally, when she sits upon this silver stool, which the women of Ashanti have made for their white Queen Mother, may she call us to mind.
>
> (Signed) AMMA SEWA AKOTO.
> X her mark.[95]

[95] Quoted in R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 294-295.

The Colonial Legacy and the Complication of Categories

As the various oral testimonies and documentary evidence outlined above reveal, *asese dwa* have been associated with queen mothers since at least the late nineteenth century. Legends identified with the era around the time of the early eighteenth century foundation of the Asante confederacy reveal much the same thing. What, then, accounts for the fact that early twentieth-century collectors did not mention queen mothers in their documentation of Asante stools, despite the fact that these women were their primary users? There are many possibilities. Writing in 1923, after finally learning about the vital roles of queen mothers in the matrilineal society of the Asante, anthropologist R. S. Rattray explained,

> [he] asked the old men and women why [he] did not know all this – [he] had spent very many years in Ashanti. The answer is always the same: 'The white man never asked us this; you have dealings with and recognize only the men; we supposed the European considered women of no account, and we know you do not recognize them as we have always done.'[96]

That an early twentieth-century African trader might mislead a Western collector into thinking that a stool belonged to a (male) chief rather than a female ruler because he thought it would be more highly valued is a distinct possibility. Christopher Steiner's research into the African art market reveals that it was, and still is, a common tendency for African traders to alter the histories and forms of objects to suit the perceived tastes of Western collectors. For example, Steiner quotes the experience of the American scientist, Frederick Starr, who travelled through the Belgian Congo to collect specimens and artifacts for the American Museum of Natural History in the early twentieth century. In December 1905, Starr reported that

[96] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 84

> Yesterday a well-carved wooden figure was offered. I refused it because it was rather new and empty [of medicine] in its stomach hole. Today it appeared again, this time with a fat round belly neatly sewed up and well smeared with cam and oil. I agreed to the price, getting it down to 1.50 francs.[97]

Steiner explains that Starr's sources eventually became so familiar with his tastes that they only offered him objects they knew would meet his criteria. As previously discussed, the pervasiveness of this kind of scenario, particularly in West Africa, means that the objects that have come to represent "Africa" in European and North American museums tend to be selected and framed by specifically Western perspectives.

This problem imposed by the colonial reconstruction of knowledge is exacerbated by the ways in which later scholars have used early sources, and inaccurate taxonomies perpetuated by them. In 1927 R.S. Rattray published photographs of thirty-one conventional Asante stools.[98] He explained that the list was not necessarily exhaustive of all the possibilities but felt that it was "sufficient to show their graceful lines and the technique and beauty of their design."[99] For each stool, he listed information such as its title and the member or members of society who had permission to possess it. For example, he described the *Esono 'gwa* or "The elephant stool," that could only be used by the "King of Ashanti," and the *Sakyi dua koro 'gwa* or "The stool with the single centre support," which was used "only by the priesthood."[100] Among the stools he mentioned were three that he claimed were exclusive to women: the *Ahema 'gwa* or "The Queen's stool," that is the stool of "Nyako Kusi Amoa, one of the early Queen Mothers

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[97] Christopher B. Steiner, "The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art," *Art History and Its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2002): 142.

[98] Throughout this chapter I use the term "stool" to make reference to "conventional" Asante stools or "*sese dwa*" and I use all three terms interchangeably.

[99] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 273.

[100] Ibid. 272-273.

of Ashanti," the *Mma 'gwa*, or "the woman's stool," that "a man, when he marries, generally presents his wife with this stool," and *Me fa asa 'gwa* or "my half is finished," that he explained meant "half my clan is dead."[101] Rattray's outline, with its tidy descriptions of users and meanings, promoted a picture of Asante stool designs and functions as being static, clearly defined and rigidly hierarchical.

This idea has been replicated in the majority of the literature on Asante stools produced in the twentieth century. For example, Peter Sarpong, in *The Sacred Stools of the Akan*, appears to draw the bulk of his examples of stool owners and their designs and symbolism from Rattray's early account.[102] M.D. McLeod, in *The Asante*, devotes most of his discussion of Asante stool types and uses to a reiteration of the content of Rattray's compilation.[103] Sharon Patton's unpublished 1980 dissertation, "The Asante Stool," strives to categorize stools and hierarchies in an approach that draws on Rattray's framework, too. As not many substantial studies of stools were published during the twentieth century, most other publications and catalogues replicate the espousal of Rattray's framework in their brief discussions.

Yet, Rattray's language suggests that even as he was writing in the late 1920s, the cogent categories he described were not so exclusively demarcated as his own catalogue may have implied. Specifically, he opens his discussion of stools by saying that "a generation or so ago, every stool in use had its own particular significance and its own special name which denoted the sex, or social status, or clan of the owner."[104] Such an

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[101] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272.

[102] The examples cited by Sarpong are the same stools listed in Rattray's account. See Peter Sarpong, *The Sacred Stools of the Akan* (Accra-Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1971): 19-25.

[103] M.D. McLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1984): 114-115.

[104] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 271.

observation suggests that, although he believed stringent rules regarding ownership existed previously, they may not have been employed so rigorously at the time of his observations.

When Sharon Patton undertook a study of the stools of the chiefs of the Kronti political division in the late 1970s, she also noted that individuals in possession of stools did not necessarily follow the policies outlined by Rattray or the carvers with whom she spoke. For example, contrary to Rattray's assertion that only women could own the *mmaa dwa*, and that a husband gave it to his wife, Patton documented multiple chiefs who possessed this design.[105] She also observed that despite the carvers' insistence that chiefs' stools should have black designs painted on the bottom, most of the stools of the chiefs she viewed did not incorporate this feature.[106] Although Patton noted the disconnect between the "rules" and practice, her study did not penetrate more deeply into the ways in which stools were used in different contexts: she commented only that certain chiefs possessed the *mmaa dwa*, not how or why these chiefs were using these specific stools.[107]

For the most part, Patton attributed the discrepancies she observed to "rule breaking" or changes to stool uses that occurred over time. Similarly, Rattray did not indulge in any lengthy investigation of how the stools he listed functioned in specific scenarios. In the other chapters of *Religion and Art in Ashanti* and in his additional publications he mentions various individuals sitting on stools in the course of ceremonies

[105] Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 66.

[106] Ibid. 108.

[107] As I discuss in Chapter Three, a number of people I interviewed provided reasons that the "woman's stool" may have been in these chiefs' possession. Among other things, they speculated that the chiefs might have had them to provide to queen mothers to sit on when they came to visit.

and other events (for example, when he describes the rites associated with the Adae festival in *Ashanti*[108]) but he does not go into detail about which type of stool one was sitting on.

My own research among queen mothers in Asante reveals that hierarchical prescriptions are exceptionally relative and context is a crucial component of how a leader chooses which stool to employ at particular moments. While some discrepancies can indeed be attributed to "rule breaking" and/or changes that have occurred over time, at least in the case of queen mothers, there is also an important sense in which some Asante stools and their uses are fluid and dynamic and have been since at least the early part of the twentieth century.[109] In other words, the rules that apply to an individual's use of stools in one situation may not be equally relevant under a different set of circumstances.[110]

As I have emphasized in this chapter, Asante stools historically have had important links to women. Consistent with this, men (chiefs) sit on stools on very limited occasions and generally in quite intimate contexts (bathing, for example). It is queen mothers who use these stools actively as seats of authority in an array of public and private spheres. This may be one of the key reasons that studies of Asante stools from the twentieth century, that focused almost exclusively on stools with regard to male chieftaincy, are framed in predominantly static terms. Because the stools that chiefs use

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[108] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 94-95.

[109] I suspect that the fluid and dynamic character of stool rules and hierarchies is applicable to chiefs' and other users' engagement with them but I cannot comment in more depth as my investigation focused on queen mothers. This is an area that would be fruitful for future study.

[110] The most elderly queen mother I interviewed was Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, who was enstooled in 1928, the year after Rattray published *Religion and Art in Ashanti*. Her experience with stools has been as dynamic as more recently appointed queen mothers, which suggests that this kind of fluidity was operational even at the time that Rattray was writing.

do not circulate in the same ways as queen mothers' stools, scholars who have interpreted them may not have been as concerned with the need to understand the hierarchical rules around them as context-dependent. This is another critical argument for distinguishing the history of queen mothers' stools from that of chiefs and developing a discussion of them that considers their unique circumstances.

Chapter 2

Bodies and Stools: Ritual, Structure and Symbols

Stools: Ritual and Rank

The most important lesson I learned from queen mothers about Asante stools is that, while there are important rules about who can use which types of stools and forms of decoration (as Rattray, Patton and others have described), these policies shift and change depending on the person's use of the stool, location and present company. For example, Nana Birago Ababio, the Mpobihemaa, told me that anyone at any level of the socio-political hierarchy, male or female, could own a stool that represents his or her *abusua*, and many people do. For the Agona *abusua* the symbol on such a stool would be a parrot, for the Bretuo, a leopard, the Oyoko, a falcon or hawk, the Ekuona, a buffalo, the Aduana, a dog, the Asenie, a bat, and the Asakyiri, a vulture.

However, men would likely not sit on these stools and owners would use them only in the privacy of their bedrooms or compounds.[111] If someone other than a queen mother (or member of the royal retinue assigned to sit on a stool, such as an *okyeame*) sat on a stool at a public event, they could be reprimanded and even charged for misrepresenting themselves. Nana Gyama Pensan II, the Aboasohemaa concurs that individuals, usually women, can only own and sit on stools in private realms, such as their bedroom. She explains, "you can buy it. Maybe in your privacy in your bedroom you can sit on it because there is nobody there but immediately if you would bring it out and sit on it [in public] you will have problems."[112] According to Nana Gyama Pensan II,

[111] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

[112] Nana Gyama Pensan II, Aboasohemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

sitting on a stool in public without the proper authority to do so would be a great offense that is punishable by lawmakers.[113]

Even in someone's own household, the ability to sit on a stool is dependent on who is in her company. In most cases, merely owning a *sese dwa* of any design does not appear to be an issue. It is the act of sitting on it that is loaded with implications. For example, if an individual lives with the queen mother, she usually cannot sit on a stool in her presence (or anyone else who lives there as they would likely see it as subversive behavior). Ebenezer Aikins-Opoku, the District Cultural Officer for the Bosomtwe District Assembly, when we were in conversation with Nana Afia Serwaa, the Aputuogyahemaa, described the following scenario to me to explain this idea:

> (Gesturing to the daughter of the queen mother) This lady is sitting by her mother who is the queen mother. The queen mother is sitting on the stool. She can't sit on the stool, though there may be more in the house. But traditionally she is not permitted to sit on it because she is not a queen mother. It is only the queen mother who is permitted to sit on the *sese dwa*. So you can buy one and put it in your room for decoration's sake but not to sit on it as traditional authority permits.[114]

The overarching idea, it would seem, is that how one uses conventional stools privately is her own affair but if she sits on one in the presence of someone who has the right to use it as a seat of authority she is considered to be acting with great disrespect.

Earlier, I outlined the hierarchical political structure of Asante queen mothers. The kind of relational permission system for stool use that applies to non-queen mothers also applies, in slightly more complicated ways, to differently ranking queen mothers. Put

[113] Nana Gyama Pensan II, Aboasohemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012. Another part of queen mothers' royal regalia is a specific type of sandals. These sandals identify her important position, along with the *dansinkran* hairstyle mentioned in Chapter Three. If any woman who was not a queen mother presented herself in public with any one or combination of these identifying features, she would likely be subject to criminal prosecution for impersonation.

[114] Ebenezer Aikins-Opoku, District Cultural Officer for the Bosomtwe District Assembly, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

simply: in any given situation, the queen mother with the highest status (out of whoever is present) establishes the "rules" about appropriate dress and accoutrements for the women under her. In some cases, this may be communicated through an official announcement. For example, when the Asantehene Otumfuo Opoku Ware II celebrated his Silver Jubilee in 1995, each rank of queen mother from *omanhemaa* down to *odikrohemaa* was provided with guidelines about the cloth they should buy and wear for the event. For the Jubilee, the paramount queen mothers exhibited their rank by wearing white lace, which no one else was permitted to integrate into their dress.[115] For a few specific positions or lineages, there are clear prescriptions about what may be integrated into stools and regalia. The spiritual chief of the Asantehene and the queen mother of that Stool, for instance, always use a white umbrella.[116] However, on most occasions, queen mothers are expected to anticipate what an appropriate level of elaboration for their own regalia will be relative to the other attendees. This leads to accusations of insubordination when a superior queen mother perceives someone below her to have integrated some component into her regalia that is fancier than her own.

Nana Sika Brayie, the Sasaamopaninbenkumhemaa, who is at the level of *ohemaa* or *obaapanin*, told me that her senior queen mother accused her of wearing a cloth that was finer than her own and the accusation was so serious that they had to go to the Asantehene's court to resolve the issue.[117] Nana Adwoa Agyeiwa II, the New Bomfahemaa, who is an *odikrohemaa*, relayed a similar type of story about a festival held at Mampong where some of the queen mothers wore gold-plated sandals, only to find that

[115] Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa, in conversation with the author, 9 June 2012.

[116] Nana Sarfo Kantanka, Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture – Kumase, in conversation with the author, 2 June 2012.

[117] Nana Sika Brayie, Sasaamopaninbenkumhemaa, in conversation with the author, 31 May 2012.

the Mamponghemaa, who is second in authority only to the Asantehemaa, was wearing the same ones. They had to leave quickly and purchase new sandals (without gold) to wear for the occasion.[118] According to all of the queen mothers with whom I spoke, if you arrived at an event and discovered that one of your superiors was sitting on a stool that was the same as yours, you would have to dispose of it immediately and find something more appropriate to sit on.

The pressure to select the correct stool for a festival, ceremony or other event is sometimes alleviated if it is hosted by a paramount queen mother because she often provides enough stools from her own holdings to seat the visiting queen mothers in attendance. In such a scenario, the paramount queen mother will distribute stools to the variously ranking female leaders in a way that is in line with their hierarchical political structure (usually the taller and more elaborately carved/plated stools will go to the highest ranking women; however, it depends on the perspective of the queen mother issuing the stools. Some queen mothers may be inclined to use other criteria, such as giving taller stools to taller women).

Nana Braku Yaa I, the Asokoremanhemaa, informed me that queen mothers at the level of *odikrohemaa* are not allowed to sit on stools at all when large numbers of queen mothers gather. They can do as they wish in their own communities, where they have authority, but when they are in the presence of *amanhemaa*, *abremponhemaa* and *ahemaa*, they have no right to sit on a stool. She added that when a gathering takes place in the presence of the Asantehene, only paramount queen mothers may use stools. According to the Asokoremanhemaa tensions have arisen amongst the queen mother

[118] Nana Adwoa Agyeiwa II, New Bomfahemaa, in conversation with the author, 8 June 2012.

ranks in recent years because *adikrohemmas* who possess wealth have become notorious for flouting the traditional laws around employing regalia appropriate to their station.[119]

For smaller local gatherings, queen mothers may be expected to bring their own stools, in which case, they must be cognizant of the proper level of decoration relative to the other guests and their statuses. As I mentioned above, the most important consideration is to fit within the structure established by the dominant queen mother. This means that much variation can occur from town to town and queen mother to queen mother. If the highest ranking queen mother chooses to use a stool that is not particularly elaborate, in most cases the queen mothers below her must ensure that they do not exceed (or even match) the stool she has chosen to employ. However, the rules around exactly what this means shift and change depending on the prescriptions of the ruling queen mother (for example, some queen mothers are concerned about the relative height of stools, whereas others are not). When a queen mother holds court, attends a family member's funeral or presides over an event in her immediate community, she is generally the only one who sits on a stool and can use any design, size and level of decoration she chooses.

Nana Birago Ababio, the Mpobihemaa, who is at the level of Abrempon, has a stool plated with imitation silver, which she uses in her village but not elsewhere. As she explained to me, "I cannot bring that stool to Otumfuo's house or Ohemaa's house. I cannot take the stool to Mampong, but I sit on it at my own house."[120] The distinction between stools and local use is very important, Nana Birago Ababio continued,

[119] Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa, in conversation with the author, 9 July 2012.

[120] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

> …when you are in your town it is different from when you travel somewhere. Most especially when you are in Manhyia palace or when you are going to see the Offinsohemaa. If you go there, she has to provide you with a stool – you don't have to carry your own stool there, you see. You don't have to carry your stool to Mamponghemaa's house or to Offinsohemaa's house. You go there and she will provide a stool for you.[121]

Although most queen mothers have multiple stools, some of which they use for different events, most have one "special" stool that is the one they use most often, particularly in their own communities.

Bodies and Stools

Writing in 1927, Rattray listed numerous taboos applied to a woman of childbearing age, which I will quote in full to illustrate the scope of their implications:

> She may not cook her husband's or any adult male's food, but may cook for her own sex or for children of either sex, but may not herself eat food cooked in the dwelling-house for any man.
>
> In olden days if a woman entered the ancestral stool house (where the blackened stools are kept) during her monthly periods she would have been killed instantly. 'If this were not done the ghosts of his ancestors would kill the reigning chief.' She may not cross the threshold of any man's house. Even to-day in Ashanti every 'bush' village has its *bara dan* or *bara fieso* (*bara* hut) where women go and live during the menstrual period. She may not 'swear an oath', nor may an oath be sworn against her. She may not cross certain sacred rivers like the Tano; even should she become unwell when away from her home for the day, she may not return home across the river till six days have elapsed. She is not allowed to reside in certain sacred villages, e.g. *Santemanso*, near the sacred grove.
>
> The wives of certain craftsmen, e.g. weavers, may not even address their husbands directly when in this condition, but must do so through the medium of a spokesman, generally a young child. They must not touch the talking drums. For most *suman* (amulets), contact with them is the deadliest taboo. Women who die in this state may not even be removed from the *bara* hut and buried until that day when in the normal course they would have come forward from their seclusion. They may not sit in court as an arbitrator in any case.[122]

The Asante consider menstrual blood "unclean" and dangerous to anyone with whom it might come into contact. Not surprisingly, women subject to such extensive restraints

[121] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

[122] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 74-75.

could not engage actively in the affairs of the state. As Ivor Wilks notes, "there is no doubt that between menarche and menopause a woman's life in Asante tended to be restricted to the concerns of household and family."[123] Although there seems to be somewhat more flexibility in applying these rules in contemporary contexts, taboos around menstruation are still in active practice, particularly among high-ranking leaders of the royal lineages.

Interestingly, queen mothers and other members of Asante courts with whom I spoke named the taboos around menstruation as the key reason why queen mothers sit on stools while chiefs or kings sit on *asipim* chairs. In other words, women's broader authority in Stool offices may have been circumscribed by menstrual taboos, but their relationship with the physical objects themselves was maintained and, even strengthened, for the very same reasons. As the Offinsohemaa explained to me, "[stools] were made for women – purposely for women and *asipim*, for men. Someone who menstruates should not sit on the *asipim*. If you sit on it, you won't have a baby."[124] Similarly, the Mpobihemaa told me, "they've made a rule or a taboo for a woman to sit on *asipim*. If you are a woman and you haven't started giving birth to children and you sit on an *asipim* they say you cannot give birth because you've made yourself a man already and a man cannot give birth to children. So women don't sit on *asipim*."[125]

Nana Brefo-Boateng, the Gyasehene of Gyamase, adds, "with all due respect, we think that when women are in their menstrual period they are not that pure…so because

[123] Ivor Wilks, *Forests of Gold: Essays on the Akan and the Kingdom of Asante* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1993): 335.

[124] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

[125] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

of that, you don't allow them to sit on *asipim*."[126] Accordingly, post-menopausal queen mothers may sit on *asipim* chairs on some occasions if they so choose; however, most with whom I spoke indicated that they rarely do so and that the appropriate seat to use in any official capacity as a queen mother is the stool. Although women who are menstruating can sit on the "white" *asese dwa*, they cannot come into contact with blackened stools, as Rattray's description outlines. This regulation suggests that there is a significant difference in the ways "white" and "black" stools are conceptualized.

Although the taboos regarding menstruation limit the activities of queen mothers and may account at least partially for the transition of authority from women to men in the early years of the Asante nation, it would be an oversimplification to assume that this means menses is perceived from a singularly negative perspective. In fact, part of what seems to necessitate the restrictions imposed on women is the belief that menstrual blood is extremely powerful. As I discussed previously, the matrilineal Asante hold that *abusua* members are connected through shared female blood. As such, women are highly valued in Asante society, particularly for their fecundity, of which menstruation is a vital symbol. As Nana Brefo Boateng explains,

> We are a matrilineal society and the women are very, very, important because the lineage or the family…the growth of the family depends upon the women. So, normally, if a child is born the first question the women will ask is, "is it a female"? If it is a female then everybody is happy because they know that the line is going to be continued. So, because of that we always give reverence to women. So that is why women are always important in our chieftaincy matters.[127]

[126] Nana Brefo-Boateng, Gyasehene of Gyamase, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[127] Ibid.

In addition to celebrating women more generally, Asante peoples value queen mothers especially for their participation in selecting Stool occupants. Nana Brefo-Boateng continues,

> Women are supposed to be our mothers so it is the mother who knows which of its children will be fit for the stool. So our queen mother, that is who is the head of all the women in the town or the area, is responsible for electing a chief when a chief dies or when he is destooled. The queen mother or the head woman of the family who should select the chief – the reason is that she knows all her children and she knows which of them can be a proper chief. So the responsibility is purely hers to select somebody. And after the selection it is up to the kin-makers to accept or reject that person.[128]

In these ways, queen mothers are highly esteemed in the configuration of Asante socio-political life. In many contexts, they are thought to balance men through their complementary qualities. According to Michelle Gilbert, the queen mother's "main attribute is the moral quality of wisdom, knowledge, emotion, compassion, all that pertains to her as a woman and is not bestowed by male officials."[129] The female puberty rite, *bragoro* ("life-dance") exemplifies these ideas in its celebration of Asante women and their fertility, which is performed through the ritual enstoolment of initiates as "six-day queen mothers."

Bragoro: Female Puberty Rites and the 'Six Day Queen Mother'[130]

In Asante there is no puberty rite for boys and there is no evidence that there ever was one. Traditionally, when Asante girls reach their menses, they engage in a week-long

[128] Nana Brefo-Boateng, Gyasehene of Gyamase, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[129] Michelle Gilbert, "The Cimmerian Darkness of Intrigue, Queen Mothers, Christianity and Truth in Akuapem History," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 23, iss. 1 (1993): 9.

[130] I had the opportunity to observe a rehearsal for a female puberty rite in Offinso in June 2012. The rehearsal was undertaken in preparation for a massive ceremony (for multiple initiates) that was planned to take place during the 25th anniversary celebration of the Offinsohemaa in July 2012. Because I viewed a rehearsal, not all the ritual components were treated in their entirety. Therefore, I have relied heavily on Sarpong's detailing of the rites from 1977 and have noted where my observations add to or diverge from his account.

series of ceremonies that mark their entry into womanhood called *bragoro*.[131] The queen mother of a community begins the ritual by declaring her permission for the adolescents to participate (in some cases, this may require her to inspect the potential initiates for evidence of menstruation and confirm that they are not pregnant). According to Sarpong, families often consult a diviner to determine whether or not the deities think it is a good idea for their daughter to participate in the puberty rituals. If they advise someone not to join in, only the most essential aspects of the rite are performed on her: the dedication and the 'enstoolment.'[132] Material goods are crucial to the implementation of different aspects of the ceremonies and come in large quantities. Families with less access to financial resources may borrow items from friends and relatives to use in the duration of the events and return later. Some of the materials used in the course of the rituals include such things as mats, pillows, umbrellas and stools; others items are presented as gifts to the young woman for her future life (beads, *kente* cloths, sewing machines, etc.).[133] Once all the materials are acquired, a date is set and the ceremonies take place.

The first day of the rites is the busiest for the initiates as well as their community. It begins when the mother wakes her child and sends her for a cold bath while she goes out to the village to assemble the other women and officially announce the beginning of the celebrations. After bathing, the girl is ritually enthroned on a stool in the public space outside her house. The stool used for this ceremony is the same one used by queen mothers when sitting in state, the "white" stool. Here, "white" refers to the fact that the

[131] In recent years, communities have adapted the length and components of these ceremonies to accommodate such commitments as attendance at school.

[132] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 18. The fact that the enstoolment is considered essential to the puberty rite reinforces the vital relationship between womanhood, queen mothers and stools.

[133] Ibid. 19.

stool, which is made from *sese* wood, is a raw stool, not a blackened ancestral stool.[134] If multiple initiates are going through the rites together, they will use a communal space for the 'enstoolment' and other public activities (see Figure 13).



Figure 13 Young initiates 'enstooled' publically as part of *bragoro*. Nana Darkowaa Ababio II (far left) and other queen mothers who officiated the event stand behind the girls. The gifts they received are pictured in front. (Image credit: Nana Sarfo Kantanka, 2006).

As is the case in the enstoolment of chiefs and queen mothers, the initiate is raised and lowered over the stool three times. Sarpong reports that the 'enstoolment' is usually performed with the assistance of an old woman who ensures that the girl's "buttocks make contact with its surface."[135] The girl is dressed in cloths that reveal nothing but her

[134] In fact, in the rehearsal ceremony I witnessed in June 2012, the initiates used archival stools belonging to the Offinsohemaa. It is my understanding that for the major ceremony slotted to take place in July, the young women planned to borrow stools from the Offinsohemaa as well as her subordinate queen mothers, if necessary (due to large numbers of participants).

[135] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 22.

face and she sits on the stool with a brass basin that contains water, *adwira* plant leaves, an egg and dry okro fruit at her side. When revelers approach the young woman, they throw coins into the basin and the woman sitting with her dips her hand into the basin and then sprinkles her with water. Sarpong notes that in Kumase, one egg is placed in front of the girl and one behind. Each time a gift is presented to her, the woman aiding her switches the position of the eggs. The idea is that the egg at the front absorbs any malevolent forces that might be contained in the incoming gift. By reversing the positions of the eggs, they are cleansed and the process can begin again.[136]

The crowd of onlookers, mostly comprised of women and girls, plays musical instruments, sings and admires the initiate. Later on, more musical and dance performances take place that center around celebrating the enstooled adolescent and sometimes teasing local men who happen upon the scene. During the dancing or at the same time, the head of the girl's matrilineage pours a libation to thank the gods and ancestors for ensuring that their child reached the age of puberty and requests that they continue to safeguard her through adulthood. Following this important event, visitors lavish the young woman with gifts she can use in her new life as a woman and/or wife. Depending on her family's wealth, the presents may range anywhere from pots and pans to agricultural land.[137]

In the course of the events, the young woman's father plays an important role during the hair-cutting ceremony.[138] He is responsible for shaving her head so that only a braid remains at the crown. He then offers an amount of money to his daughter to "buy"

[136] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 22.

[137] Ibid. 26-27.

[138] As the puberty rite that I witnessed at the Offinsohemaa's residence in 2012 was only a rehearsal, this event did not take place. Accordingly, I rely entirely on Sarpong's account here.

the braid so that it can be removed. The braid is then kept in a crack in the wall of their home, where it can be retrieved if the young woman has the misfortune to pass away when she is travelling a great distance. The braid then becomes a stand-in for her physical body during mortuary rites.[139] An old woman then clips the finger and toe-nails of the girl before preparing her hair in the closely cropped *dansinkran*[140] style worn by queen mothers, which includes a thick band of shea-butter mixed with soot that runs along her hair-line.[141] Afterwards, she rubs the initiate's body with shea butter and replaces her clothing with a fresh white cloth that leaves her breasts bare as a symbol of impending motherhood. She is also shrouded with beads and jewelry to amplify her feminine beauty. Her maternal benevolence is broadcast throughout the rituals by dishes of food that circulate among the onlookers on her behalf.[142]

A ritual bath, which usually takes place in a nearby river, follows next in the sequence of events. The girl is carried to the spot with her retinue following her, complete with a younger girl who acts as her "royal" stool carrier. As the women parade toward the water they sing songs (in Twi) with lyrics that translate as

Queen-mother, you are going!

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[139] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 27.

[140] Nana Sarfo Kantanka, in conversation with the author, May 2012. Nana Sarfo Kantanka reports that the term "dansinkran" comes from the English words "dancing crown." He told me a story in which the British arrived in Kumase and were captivated by the beautiful dancing women (who they did not realize were queen mothers) and referred to their characteristic hairstyle as a "dancing crown." This was adopted into Twi to become "dansinkran."

[141] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 28. Sarpong refers to this hairstyle as "the traditional one of Ashanti adult women" but the queen mothers I interviewed in 2012 maintain that it is only appropriate for queen mothers to wear it and, in the case of puberty rites, initiates (temporarily). They claim that wearing the *dansinkran* hairstyle in public without the preceding justifications would be tantamount to impersonating a queen mother and would be considered criminal. It should be noted that merely having a cropped hairstyle is very much a traditional style for all adult women – it is the highlighting of the hairline with shea butter and soot that is reserved exclusively for queen mothers.

[142] Ibid. 28.

You have (a good) parent.
You are going!
Mother! Queen-mother!
You are going![143]

Once they reach the river, an old woman submerges the initiate three times. Following this, in Offinso, she is seated again upon the stool and a fresh lime is squeezed over her head. Food offerings are then made to the river and the stool-carrier washes the stool in exchange for an egg before taking it back home. A full bath then takes place, which involves carefully washing each part of the young woman's body with a combination of lime juice and soap in a manner that is similar to the bathing rituals performed on deceased leaders transitioning to the realm of the ancestors. While she bathes, women shout out from the bank, suggesting which part to wash next and praising her female body. After the bath, she is once again rubbed with shea butter, hair-styled and clothed, this time in *kente* cloth and a fresh white head covering. The women carry the 'queen mother' back to her house under an umbrella, where she is seated again on the stool and surrounded by friends and relatives who observe soberly as she is dedicated to the Supreme Being, gods and ancestors.[144] In the dedication the officiant[145] pours palm-wine on the ground at the end of each line of prayer as she entreats the gods and ancestors to care for the young woman.

[143] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 29.

[144] Ibid. 31. Note: the initiate does not actually eat the food at this juncture; rather than swallowing it she spits it into a pot.

[145] At the rehearsal of the puberty rites I witnessed at Offinso the Offinsohemaa, Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, acted as the officiant.



Figure 14 Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, feeds one of the initiates an egg during the rehearsal of *bragoro* I attended at her home on 29 May 2012. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Next, she feeds the girl a series of foodstuffs while reciting an explanation of their symbolism (ex. as she feeds the girl a pepper the officiant says, "May you never taste misfortune.") (see Figure 14).[146] This portion of the ritual culminates when she covers the girl's head and her own with a white cloth and feeds her an egg, followed by mashed plantains and palm oil, which the initiate must consume without using her teeth (because she must not "bite her seed"). Finally, the remaining food is placed in a basin on the ground and the young woman leads two children (a girl and a boy), who are symbolic of her future family as well as the forthcoming generations of her lineage, toward it and

[146] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 33.

releases them. As they run for the food the other children race to grab their share. The girl then officially breaks her day long fast by eating a feast of exquisitely prepared foods. Once everyone has consumed an ample amount they resume dancing and singing until the night finishes with a dance by the initiate, who shakes everyone's hand and exits the scene.[147]

Traditionally, initiates spend the six days following the first day of festivities confined to their homes where they are cared for like queen mothers.[148] This means that they do not engage in anything involving physical exertion and maid-servants (younger local girls) look after all of their daily needs. The 'six-day queen mothers' bathe three times a day, after which they are oiled with shea butter and draped in gleaming new cloths. They eat often and only the best foods so that they might become "plump and attractive" prospective brides and mothers.[149] Like queen mothers, the initiates in this phase may be called on to settle disputes arising among the young girls who attend to them; in some cases, they will go so far as to dismiss ill-behaving servants. Their other activities during this time involve telling tales to one another and playing games, both of which usually revolve around themes of men, husbands and love. Sometimes, boys from the village will join in games such as *ahenahene*, wherein male and female participants select each other as partners and elect themselves to various positions within a traditional Asante court (king, queen mother, etc).[150] These activities continue for five days, after

[147] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 26.

[148] More recently, this long period of confinement is shortened or modified in various ways to ensure that initiates do not miss school. This may involve participating in the activities associated with the confinement during consecutive weekends or abbreviating the rituals to suit a shorter timeframe such as one or two days.

[149] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 39.

[150] Ibid. 41.

which the initiate is 'destooled'. Her attendants warn her of the impending destoolment by dancing and singing a song with the refrain

> Six-day queen-mother
> Tomorrow we are destooling you.[151]

On the following day, for the first time since the beginning of the festivities, the young woman appears in public with bare feet (symbolic of her 'destoolment') and assists the young girls with cleanup.[152] The day after that she dresses richly again and, accompanied by her family, travels around the village and surrounding areas expressing her thanks to all who joined in the merriment.

The celebration of young girls entering womanhood through the enactment of being a "six-day queen mother" illustrates the crucial links between women, queen mothers and fertility, as symbolized by the onset of menstruation. The important role of the *sese dwa* in these events, particularly in the initiate's official transition from girl to woman and presentation to the public, both resonates with and reinforces the fundamental relationship between women, particularly queen mothers, and stools. The use of the stool in *bragoro* rituals, in combination with other factors, suggests that the "white" *sese dwa* may even be conceived in some ways as a female body. I will return to this point later on.

Rituals and Stools

The important link between women and stools may encompass even more complex definitions of the female gender in Asante thought. During the fieldwork I undertook between 2007 and 2012, queen mothers, chiefs and numerous other members of royal courts repeatedly told me "men do not sit on stools." At first, this assertion

[151] Peter Sarpong, *Girls Nubility Rites in Ashanti* (Tema: Ghana Publishing Corporation, 1977): 45.

[152] Ibid. Queen mothers and chiefs are not allowed to touch their feet or buttocks to the bare ground. If this occurs, it is synonymous with their destoolment.

seemingly contradicted the written and photographic "evidence" I had seen that depicted male office holders sitting on stools in both historical and contemporary contexts. Admittedly, none of the material with which I was familiar described a chief or king sitting on a stool; but, in many cases, male members of his retinue sat on stools while in his service.[153] When I pressed the matter further by showing photographs of these men to various leaders in the Ashanti Region in May and June of 2012, a number of them responded, "Oh! That is because they are like women!"

On one level, the remarks made by the interviewees may be interpreted as dismissive: by saying men who sit on stools are "like women" they seemed to imply that they were "mere servants" to a powerful leader. In the context of this discussion, I was told that if a young boy were to sit on a stool of the kind used by a queen mother, he would be admonished and removed from it immediately lest he be deemed a "sissy." People would say something like, "What? Are you a woman? Get off!"[154] This attitude seems in line with the sentiments of Nana Birago Ababio, the Mpobihemaa, who, when I asked why women sit on stools and men sit on *asipim*, said, "God made man and God made woman, so, to differentiate men from women, and always, men are on top of women, so, they designed this *asipim* for men and this stool for women."[155] To explain why linguists and other attendants in the service of the Asantehene sit on stools, the

[153] Someone can be a chief in his village but not interpreted as such when serving a higher-ranking official such as the Asantehene. In such a case he might sit on a stool while serving the king but in his own village (where he performs a different range of functions and sits differently within the overall hierarchy) he would sit on an *asipim* chair.

[154] Nana Sarfo Kantanka, in conversation with the author, 25 May 2012.

[155] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

Mpobihemaa added, "they have to come down before the chief. Even their stools are not as big as [queen mothers' stools]. They are very, very small ones."[156]

But such an interpretation is not the only lens through which Asante society frames women and was by no means shared by the majority of queen mothers with whom I spoke. In fact, Asante peoples continue to uphold and celebrate women for their roles as progenitors and nurturers in society, as the female puberty rite described above illustrates. Discussions from the literature addressing *akyeame* (sing. *okyeame*), gods, and priests or priestesses may provide further insight into the relationship between stools and the female gender, broadly construed.

Frequently translated into English as "linguist," the *okyeame* appears in his most public role as the chief's (or queen mother's) orator. Nevertheless, he is responsible for a very wide range of functions such as advocating judicially, advising the chief, performing ancestral rites, and maintaining expertise on lineage and local history.[157] The *okyeame* is one of the most important positions in an Asante court and he leads the chief's hierarchically organized retinue. [158] In Rattray's *Religion and Art in Ashanti*, written in 1927, he reports that he asked carvers to create a model Asante court for him and describes the results. In his account he points out that the *Asantehene* is seated on an *asipim* chair and the queen mother and the *okyeame* are both seated on stools. While discussing the *okyeame* figure, he remarks that the chief refers to the *okyeame* as "*eno*,"

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[156] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.

[157] For a discussion of the *okyeame's* responsibilities see Ivor Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century: The Structure and Evolution of a Political Order* (Athens: University of Ohio Press, 1995): 471-474.

[158] Each chief or queen mother generally has at least one *okyeame* but higher-ranking individuals may have multiple *akyeame*. In such a case, there will usually be a primary *okyeame* who is highest in rank. When Rattray was writing in 1927 he reported that the Asantehene had twelve linguists. Female *akyeame* exist (predominantly in queen mothers' courts) but they are rare.

which he translates as "mother" (the same term he reports that the community uses to refer to young women after their puberty rites)[159] and the *okyeame* calls the chief "*me kunu,*" which he translates as "my husband" (but does not go into the topic in more depth).[160]

Writing in 1995, Kwesi Yankah addressed the topic of *akyeame* in *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory*. He explains that, when he is appointed, the head *okyeame* to the chief undergoes rituals that are comparable to wedding formalities.[161] According to Yankah, "an okyeame is traditionally referred to as the *ohene yere*, the chief's wife."[162] The ideas underpinning this designation are "mutual accessibility between the two functionaries, enjoining mutual loyalty and unanimity in word and deed."[163] As this description suggests, in many ways, the *okyeame* is conceived as the chief's complement, similar to a queen mother. While the official rites for installing an *okyeame* differ slightly depending on the particular group, the process follows the same cultural guidelines as a marital engagement. Okyeame Kofi Amoakwa of Agona Nsaba described his selection procedure to Yankah as follows:

> It's just as if the chief has seen a woman he is interested in. He first seeks your consent, and informs his council of elders of his attention to "marry" you, then sends a drink through an envoy to your father. The latter in turn presents the drink to your maternal lineage and informs them about the chief's intentions. If they also agree to the proposal, the father sends a positive reply to the chief. After this, the chief makes final preparations for the marriage. If he is a paramount chief, he presents Schnapps (gin) drinks and a token cash amount to your father. In the olden days, items presented included an *amoase* [undergarment worn by women

[159] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 74.

[160] Ibid. 277. "*Eno*" also refers more generically to women, elderly women and grandmothers.

[161] Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 89.

[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

> between the thighs]. Part of the drink, plus the *amoase*, are given to the okyeame-to-be, and the cash is distributed to key members of the lineage. A day or so after this, you are presented to the chief as his "wife," and in the presence of his elders, you pay a drink fee to the state drummers and hornblowers, after which it is announced, "This person, So-and-so, is henceforth the chief's wife; if you slander or verbally assault him, the law will deal with you accordingly.[164]

When a chief passes away, his *okyeame* participates in bereavement rituals similar to his royal wives. Although Yankah notes that these practices have been relaxed in some groups in more recent years (for example, the confinement period may be lessened), at least among the Agona, the process concludes with the presentation to the *okyeame* of a "new cloth, a cock, and a drink, the normal rites in widowhood."[165]

Aside from the queen mother, the *okyeame* is the only member of a chief's court who can address him directly while sitting in state. He has unparalleled access to his private affairs and, like a wife, can receive guests, enter his rooms without special permissions and exercise discretion about which visitors are suitable for presentation to the chief.[166] One of his most important duties is to perform rituals on the chief's (or queen mother's) behalf in the *nkonnwafieso* or stool room. These activities underscore the important link between *akyeame* and ancestors. As I witnessed when I attended the *Akwasidae* ceremonies of the Mantia Stool at Amanfrom, it is often the *okyeame* who is responsible for pouring libations to honor the ancestors. This kind of direct relationship with the ancestors and complementarity to the role of the chief suggests important links between *akyeame* and queen mothers. Yankah notes that in rare cases of female

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[164] Okyeame Kofi Amoakwa of Agona Abusua, quoted in Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 90.

[165] Kwesi Yankah, *Speaking for the Chief: Okyeame and the Politics of Akan Royal Oratory* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995): 90.

[166] Ibid. 90-91.

chieftaincy, the *okyeame* is still referred to as a "wife" but he does not specify how the role of the *okyeame* is conceived when he or she is serving a queen mother.

It is my understanding that female chiefs (as opposed to queen mothers) are perceived as being masculine in gender and they use the regalia appropriate to this (male) station. For example, Nana Brefo-Boateng, the Gyasehene of Gyamase, relayed a story to me about a woman who, because she was appointed both queen mother and chief at the same time, wore a chief's sandal on one foot and a queen mother's sandal on the other. When she was sitting in state as chief, she used an *asipim*, but when acting as a queen mother, she sat on a *sese dwa*.[167] This kind of gendered association with roles rather than specific individual's sex reinforces the idea of male-female balance that seems to play out in the relationship between the chief and *okyeame*.

During my interviews with Asante queen mothers I did not encounter any female *okyeame* so I cannot comment on their seating prescriptions but it is worth noting that the male *akyeame* I met in queen mothers' courts sit on *asipim*. For example, Nana Gyama Pensan II, the Aboasohemaa, explained to me that in her palace, men, including *akyeame*, never sit on *asese dwa*. She keeps *asipim* there specifically for seating male visitors. Even men who are not officials in her court or elsewhere sit on *asipim* in her presence, although they are basic in design (non-royal men are invited to sit on a standard wooden *asipim* with a hide covered seat but no additional decorative elements).[168] This raises questions about whether the role of the *okyeame* is constituted differently in the service of a queen mother. Because a queen mother is conceived on many levels as the ultimate symbol of feminine capacities and powers, is her *okyeame* thereby considered from a

[167] Nana Brefo-Boateng, Gyasehene of Gyamase, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[168] Nana Gyama Pensann II, Aboasohemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

masculine vantage point? These questions, which, unfortunately, I was unable to pursue in more depth during the course of my fieldwork, warrant further investigation.

The relationship between the female gender, stools and performance may also play out in the realm of Asante gods. As I discuss in more detail in the Introduction, the Asante pantheon is a complex and multi-tiered hierarchy with Nyame, the Supreme Being, at the top. Pashington Obeng explains, "certain aspects of the hierarchical structure of the Asante society seem to provide a prototype for the framework of their religion."[169] In other words, things like complementary gender roles and signaling status levels through regalia, which are crucial to the socio-political hierarchy, have parallels in the spiritual realm. For the purposes of this discussion I am most interested in parallels that relate to gender and seating: since some gods are perceived as female and others as male, it makes sense that directions regarding seats of authority are applied here as well. Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko (Offinsohemaa) first introduced me to this idea with regard to the female god of the Ofe River.

According to the Offinsohemaa, when a male priest is taken over by a female god he dons a woman's cloth and sits on a stool. She maintains that if a god who is male inhabits him or her, his priest or priestess will sit on an *asipim* chair. In the course of our discussion, she relayed the following story to me to establish her point,

> There was a day that I went to Ofe [River] and…I told ɔfe, "I am going to see your husband. I want you to meet me there!" So then I got to the skirt of the town and [the priest] went in the shrine and when he came back he dressed like Ofe. So I told him, when did he dress like this? He said, "as soon as he saw you," so I told him I had gone to see Ofe. I told the river that I am going to see your husband. There's another river, which is a man. So I told her, "I'm going to see your

[169] Pashington Obeng, "Asante Catholicism: Ritual Communication of the Catholic Faith among the Akan of Ghana," PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1991. 45.

> husband so I want you to meet me there." As soon as I got there, the priest [at that river] changed into Ofe.[170]

She further explained to me that in addition to wearing a woman's cloth, the priest as Ofe [a female river god] sat on a stool. After the Offinsohemaa visited with the priest, to express her thanks, she sent him a cloth similar to the one that she wears. He now puts on this cloth each time he embodies Ofe.[171] The Offinsohemaa's claim that a priest or priestess personifying a male god would dress and behave in a masculine manner is supported by Pashington Obeng's observations about Asuo Abena, a male river deity at Juaben. According to Obeng, although the custodian of the shrine is a seventy-year-old woman, she keeps her hair trimmed in the male style and wears her cloth loosely around the shoulder as men do.[172]

Similarly, a description included in T.C. McCaskie's discussion of the present-day Medoma shrine in Kumase emphasizes the importance of dressing to suit the spirits. McCaskie reports, "when a spirit 'mounted' (*akom*) him, [the priest] sniffed at it to make sure which one it was before putting on the garb appropriate to it. Each spirit had its own special dress."[173] Although these additional sources do not pay special attention to seating, the Offinsohemaa's assertions regarding stools and *asipim* are consistent with their emphasis on the crucial relationship between gods, gender and clothing.

Two photographs taken by R.S. Rattray at the palace of the Asantehene in the 1920s suggest that, at least as early as that period, *abosom* were required to sit on

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[170] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Pashington Obeng, "Asante Catholicism: Ritual Communication of the Catholic Faith among the Akan of Ghana," PhD Dissertation, Boston University, 1991. 109.

[173] T.C. McCaskie, "*Akwantemfi* – 'In Mid-Journey': An Asante Shrine Today and Its Clients," *Journal of Religion in Africa*, vol. 38 (2008): 60.

particular types of seats (see Figure 15). In the images, the shrines of deities rest on various *asese dwa* and *asipim*. The caption for both photos reads, "All the *abosom* and their priests assembled in the *Gyase Kesie*, when the gods took this oath to the chief through the mouths of their priests…[after which] the shrines of the gods were each set upon his stool and the chief passed among them."[174] Without further information it is difficult to confirm that gender was the primary reason for the specific seating arrangements pictured but, based on the preceding discussion, it seems very likely. At the very least, the photographs suggest that particular types of chairs/stools were required for distinct *abosom*.



Figure 15 "All the *abosom* and their priests assembled in the *Gyase Kesie*, when the gods took this oath to the chief through the mouths of their priests…[after which] the shrines of the gods were each set upon his stool and the chief passed among them," photograph by R.S. Rattray, c. 1921-32. (Pitt Rivers Museum, 1998.312.524.1)

[174] Pitt Rivers Museum, photograph numbers 1998.312.524.1 and 1998.312.525.1.

There also seems to be a sense in which the gendered nature of stools has been translated into contemporary Anglican and Catholic religious practices in the Ashanti Region. As I discuss in Chapter Three, many of these churches adopted stool-shaped altars in the latter half of the twentieth century. On one level, the integration of the stool as altar was explained to me by various individuals, including Rt. Rev. Edmund Kojoe Yeboah (Bishop of St. Cyprian's Cathedral, Kumase, 1985-1998), as symbolic of Christ being the "King of kings."[175] As the ultimate chief, Christ should have a stool as his symbol. However, my discussions with other members of Asante royal lineages, especially, Nana Brefo-Boateng, the Gyasehene of Gyamase, suggest that there are multiple levels on which the link between Christ and the stool can be understood.

When I asked Nana Brefo-Boateng about the significance of the integration of stools as altars into the Anglican and Catholic churches, he agreed that, "it is because we know that God is the supreme king or chief…so since the stool is our symbol of authority, a supreme being who is more powerful, it should also represent his authority."[176] But at the same time, when I subsequently framed my question in terms of asking about whether the altars in these churches are a representation of God's body, he concurred and added that, "that's why you see that most of the altars are also shaped in the stool form. Yes, yes. You see, with us it's very interesting - sometimes we call God a man and sometimes we call God a woman."[177] In making the connection between the idea of the stool as the body of God, and in that context, God being a woman, he further explained, "well, it's the woman who knows how to take care of her children, how to

[175] Rt. Rev. Edmund K. Yeboah, Bishop of Kumase 1985-1998, in conversation with the author, November 2009.

[176] Nana Brefo-Boateng, Gyasehene of Gyamase, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[177] Ibid.

feed the children, so that when you want something from God you say, 'the good mother, I want this…'."[178] Here, again, appears the idea that stools may be symbolic of chiefs in some ways but, simultaneously, the act of sitting on a stool, and the idea of the stool as a body, are intimately linked with notions of women and queen motherhood.

Structure: The Stool as (female) Body

In her PhD dissertation on Asante stools, Sharon Patton documented the anthropomorphic terminology carvers use to refer to *asese dwa*. As she explains, the names assigned to different parts of stools "denote structural analogies between the stool and the human body."[179] Specifically, carvers call the top of the seat *anim* (face), the bottom is the *etikuro* (back of the head), the rounded knobs on the underside of the seat are *etiko puaa* (braids of hair), the middle section of the stool is called *mfinimfini* (the trunk of the body), and the top of the base is referred to as *ahweaabo* (testicles or stone). Stools that do not have *tokuro* (holes cut into the surface of the seat) are called *akonnwa mum*, "dumb stool."[180] In addition to these anthropomorphic titles, Patton listed other language used by the carvers that made reference to architectural forms, such as the word denoting the "plaques resting on the base of the stool or upon the stool supports," *aban*.[181] *Aban* means "fortress or enclosure" and describes the fences built up around Asante traditional structures for protection. When I spoke with carvers at Ahwiaa (the village in the Ashanti Region where they are centralized) in 2012, they offered the same

[178] Nana Brefo-Boateng, Gyasehene of Gyamase, in conversation with the author, 26 May 2012.

[179] Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 71.

[180] Ibid. 65.

[181] Ibid. 66.

range of expressions to name the various parts of a conventional stool that Patton documented in the 1970s.

While the carvers at Ahwiaa have an extensive and complicated vocabulary with which they refer to stools and their components, the majority of queen mothers and their affiliates with whom I spoke were not familiar with and/or did not make regular use of these same terms. However, my discussions with them regarding stools and their various meanings and uses gave me the impression that the carvers' terminology, in its diversity and complexity, makes reference (simultaneously) to multiple levels on which stools can be conceived. For example, perhaps the most obvious reason for the use of anthropomorphic terminology to describe various stool components is the ritual blackening of stools after an important leader's death.

As discussed in the Introduction, the stool that had the most intimate contact with its owner (traditionally the bathing stool) is blackened and placed in the stool room of the lineage upon his or her death. It then becomes the repository for the leader's ancestral spirit, who has the ability to intervene in the daily lives of his or her family members. The stool itself is not the ancestor; rather, it is a temporary dwelling place that allows individuals to continue to communicate with him or her. In this sense, it is a kind of "body" that the ancestor and family members can use to connect with one another. In this context the use of the differently gendered terms "*ahweaabo"* (testicles) and "*etiko puaa*," ("*atiko pua*") which Rattray reports was used to describe the hairstyle of queen mothers during the early twentieth century, can be understood as a layered description of the stool as representing male ancestors in some cases and female ancestors in others.[182]

[182] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 275.

The relationship between a leader and his or her stool as body is evidenced in the common saying "a great stool has fallen" to refer to the passing of a chief or queen mother.

Although the link between blackened stools and anthropomorphic terminology is certainly an important one, I believe that it is just one of the ways that the association between *asese dwa* and the human body is conceived by the Asante peoples. In particular, the *sese dwa* seems to be conceptualized in certain contexts as the queen mother's body. Here, the use of the term *"etiko puaa*" as a reference to the hairstyle worn by historic queen mothers may take on additional significance. When I met with Nana Birago Kokodurfo (Adumasahemaa, on the stool since 1928) and her family and court members, together they explained to me that the ritual enstoolment of chiefs and queen mothers is, on some level, a rebirth. According to the group, there is a sense in which the stool used during enstoolment is the (queen) mother, who gives birth to the leader in his or her new role.

With reference to enstoolment of chiefs, they drew parallels with the puberty rites for young women, saying "it's like you are born… a woman bore you therefore you sit three times and after you sit three times the third time you become yourself as a man. It's like the women - they do the same thing when the young girl is ready to become a woman. They sit you on the stool like this, too, in public."[183] The role of the *sese dwa* in the moment of transition from man to chief and from young girl to woman is presented as pivotal because of its association with the queen mother. Elizabeth Paul Hutchison, the

[183] Nana Birago Kokodurfo, Adumasahemaa, and family/court members, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012. Members of the discussion included: Okyeame Attakyei, Okyeame Ekoba Gyase, Osei Tutu (son), Akosua Achiba (witness), Mrs. Margaret Adu-Poku, (daughter), Mrs. Rita Paintsil (grandchild), Elizabeth Paul Hutchison (niece), Gordon Amoah (grandchild), Mrs. Gladys Opokuware (daughter), Nana Kyei Benkum (sub-chief), Alex Bekoe (sibling to the chief).

niece of the Adumasahemaa, added another layer to the discussion by explaining that some chiefs sit three times on a "white" *sese dwa* before approaching the ancestors in the stool house as a way of identifying themselves with the queen mother. By sitting on the stool, they show their relationship with the woman (and related women of the lineage) who gave them the right to rule and accordingly, the privilege to approach the ancestors. As she explains, "the queen mother is the mother of the chief; therefore, you will sit on your mother's lap."[184]

The idea of the stool as a symbol of the queen mother and links with procreation was communicated to me by a number of the Asante leaders with whom I spoke. Many individuals framed the relationship with particular attention to the close connection between queen mothers and ancestors. Nana Afia Serwaa, the Aputuogyahemaa, commented that although it is always the men's role to pour libations for ancestors,

> …it is the women who make sure that the ancestors are fed. They prepare food for the chiefs to feed the ancestors, they make sure that there is water, everything that is needed at the stools room, at the very end of it, they gave birth to the ancestors, it is not the men. The men's children are out so once they give birth to the ancestors of the lineage that will become the next chief and the next queen mothers. They have the direct line.[185]

This emphasis on the matrilineage was also expressed when I enquired about the form of the *sese dwa* and, specifically, the *mmaa dwa* or *ahenanan* stool design, which Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, told me is the oldest stool design, along with the *kotoko dwa* (both of which I discuss in more length in Chapter Three).[186] Nana Gyama Pensan II and Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, who have been on the stool for 15

[184] Elizabeth Paul Hutchison, niece of Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurfo, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[185] Nana Afia Serwaa, Aputuogyahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[186] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

and 84 years, respectively, both told me that the central pillar of the *mmaa dwa* design symbolizes the queen mother, who is surrounded by her community (symbolized by the four corner columns). As Nana Yaa Birago Kokoduro's niece, Elizabeth Hutchison, explained in more detail, "the four legs make the stool firm. And so she's the mother, she has to be firm. With the Akans, everything is about your mother. Not our father. So we cherish our mothers more than our fathers. Therefore the queen mother has to be protected. She has to be surrounded by the family."[187]

The Architecture of Stools

The same kinds of arguments put forward to explain the shape of the *mmaa dwa* as a body came into play when I asked about traditional Asante architecture. I found that the ways that architecture, stools and queen mothers were portrayed intersected and echoed one another in fascinating ways. Nana Adwoa Agyeiwa II, the New Bomfahemaa described the four-part plan of conventional Asante homes and palaces by explaining that they were based around the idea of a woman (or, in the case of a palace, a queen mother) being surrounded by her family. Similarly, Elizabeth Hutchison told me, "if you are a man you can get married to another woman from a different family. So what you do, you go there. But if you come to one of the queen mothers or the woman of the house, her children stay in the house…so she's like a pillar!"[188] In other words, the matrilineal character of Asante means that the woman is the center of the home and her family members surround her, both literally and figuratively. The queen mother is the center of

[187] Elizabeth Paul Hutchison, niece of Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurfo, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[188] Ibid.

her palace and her community. According to Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurfo and others, both stools and traditional architecture demonstrate this relationship.



Figure 16 Interior of newly built palace for the Mantia Stool that draws on the traditional form of an open courtyard surrounded by open and closed front rooms. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Although many Asante peoples now live in private residences that, especially among the wealthy, resemble the multi-storied homes popular in North America and elsewhere, the majority of palaces I visited still conform on some level to the four-part plan of traditional Asante architecture (see Figure 16). They are not exact replicas of traditional architecture but they continue to make use of the central courtyard surrounded by both open and closed rooms that is a distinguishing feature of historical forms. Several of the queen mothers I visited, particularly those in more rural areas, also make their homes in dwellings that draw on this conventional design. However, most are now made from cement bricks and plaster rather than wattle and daub.

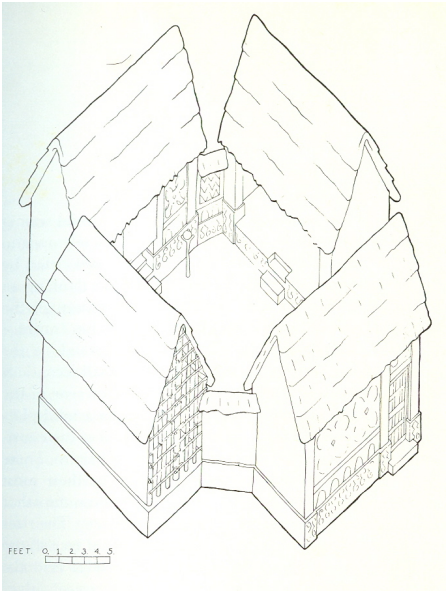


Figure 17 Basic four-part plan of traditional Asante architecture.
(Credit: Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses*, 1969, p. 3)

The traditional architecture of the Asante was based on a common underlying structure for individuals at all levels of society. The same four-part plan was used to build shrine houses for gods, official meeting places, family homes, and the residence of the Asantehene (see Figure 17). The design involved four rectangular, single-room buildings that were set around an open courtyard.[189] The corners of the buildings were joined with the assistance of a splayed screen wall that could be manipulated for size and angle as necessary. In most cases, three of the buildings had open fronts that were exposed to the central courtyard. These buildings were called *adampan*.[190] The fourth building was at least partially closed off by a door and windows, or an openwork screen that allowed for better ventilation. On the external walls there were no other openings, except in a few cases where a small exit was located at the rear of the building. Each unit sat on a red

[189] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 4.

[190] M.D. McLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, Ltd., 1981): 32.

clay platform that was raised about 3 feet from the ground. To enter, one had to ascend a set of steps that usually numbered around 3, but could vary.[191] The upper register of the structure was always painted white, and its base was always red. This color scheme has been maintained in many contemporary cement buildings.

To construct the basic Asante architectural unit, craftsmen would set out a framework of timber posts around the perimeter of the clay platform. Bamboo or cane was then woven horizontally through these posts to link them and provide stability. A mixture of muddled clay was plastered onto the framework and the result was a sturdy wall of about ten inches in thickness.[192] Smoothing liquid clay over it several times finished the surface. Roofs were designed for the buildings by sewing palm leaves in an overlapping pattern and attaching them to a bamboo grid. With the support of beams, these frameworks were secured into place, often creating very steeply pitched roofs. The openwork screens that covered the fronts of some rooms were of two main types: straight and curved. Straight designs were created using timber cores that were covered with clay, while curved shapes, also covered with clay, were made by bending flexible *babadua* cane.[193] The designs added to the faces of buildings also came in two forms. The lower section of the building was decorated by building up layers of red clay, most commonly into a variety of spiraling motifs. The upper register generally included a range of geometric designs that were created by manipulating narrow strips of cane. After the cane was bended into place and attached to the building front, a layer of clay was smoothed

[191] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 4.

[192] Ibid.

[193] Ibid. 4-6.

over its edges. Once completed, the entire upper section of the building was covered in a wash of white clay known as *hyire*.[194]

T.E. Bowdich compiled the most extensive record of this style of construction in his description of the palace complex at Kumase in 1817. Unfortunately, the British subsequently destroyed these structures in 1874 but Bowdich's illustrations and discussion offer an opportunity to explore the character of traditional Asante architecture in some depth. By the early nineteenth century, Kumase was established as a major trading and government center. The layout of the city, which was located on a hill that overlooked the Subin River, reflected its increasing urbanity. In 1817, it had at least 27 major streets and covered an area that was nearly 4 miles in circumference.[195] The city was organized into quarters, or *abrono*, and the court servants responsible for certain tasks took up residence according to their occupation. For example, Blacksmiths lived and worked in the northeast section of the capital.[196]

Every street was named and had a superior captain who was in charge of its maintenance and security; some of these streets were as wide as 100 meters. The palace complex was located at the center of the city's two main avenues and was reported to cover an area of nearly 2 hectares in 1840.[197] According to Bowdich, the front of the palace was surrounded by a wall, which acted as a kind of entranceway. It was around 200 meters long and was lined with *adampan* used by the king's servants. As one came closer to the palace, the fronts of buildings became more and more elaborately decorated

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[194] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 7.

[195] T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1819): 323.

[196] Ibid.

[197] M.D. McLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, 1981): 46.

and the individuals occupying the rooms increased in importance. At the end of the passageway, visitors arrived in the Great Court or *Pramakeseso*, where officials met with the Asantehene to decide on important matters related to state business. When Bowdich observed the court in 1817, it measured around 35 x 15 meters.

After leaving the court, one was confronted by a series of courtyards, around which the traditional 4-part building plans took shape. The residences of the highest-ranking officials were located in the most interior part of the complex, along with the bedroom of the Asantehene, and these were the most extensively decorated. Living quarters for the King's wives were located at the back of the palace, close to the bathing facilities, menstruation houses, and latrines. Bowdich reported that the women's residences were among the most highly ornamented in the palace complex.[198] Not only were the royal residences more decorative than those of the lower-ranking members of society, the buildings used to form the basic 4-part plan were significantly larger in size. In 1848, W. Winniet observed that, "the apartments of the Royal premises are of the same order and style as those of the native dwellings… but the Royal apartments are of much larger dimensions than those of the people."[199] The settlement plan and architecture of Kumase were replicated in nearly every other town and village in the Asante Kingdom. Tarikhu Farrar reports that the plan on which Kumase was based "is virtually universal for the Asante and Bono peoples, who together constitute about three-fifths of the Akan population."[200]

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[198] T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1819): 304-309.

[199] Quoted in M.D. McLeod, *The Asante* (London: British Museum Publications, 1981): 46.

[200] Tarikhu Farrar, *Building Technology and Settlement Planning in a West African Town: Precolonial Akan Cities and Towns* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen University Press, 1996): 63.

Many of the contemporary queen mothers and their affiliates with whom I spoke told me that traditional Asante architecture is subject to the same hierarchical design rules as stools (although architecture's permanency and public character means that their application is less relativistic and dynamic than stool rules, which I discuss in more depth in Chapter Three). When I asked about the decoration of traditional architecture, Nana Akosua Abrafi explained to me that, like stools, the designs on buildings are a means of identification and communication of status. She further compared the adornment of homes and palaces to the symbols found on regalia, saying, "you are in the durbar. You've come late and you want to see where your chief is – you don't ask, you look up! At the top of the umbrellas you see the design that belongs to your chief and you go there."[201] Ebenezer Aikins-Opoku, the District Cultural Officer of the Bosomtwe District Assembly, added, "I am from a different place, madam is from a different place, Nana is from a different place and we are all getting together at Manhyia palace. There is a big durbar, *Akwasidae* festival… When I go, the minute I see the symbol of my chief's umbrella. I don't ask anybody, I meander my way through and I go and stand behind my chief and that will identify through the symbol of my chief's umbrella. Architecture is the same."[202] In other words, the decorative features of traditional buildings made the identity of their occupants clear.

[201] Nana Akosua Abrafi II, Sewuahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[202] Ebenezer Aikins-Opoku, District Cultural Officer for the Bosomtwe District Assembly, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

Case Study: King's Bedroom illustrated by Bowdich in 1817

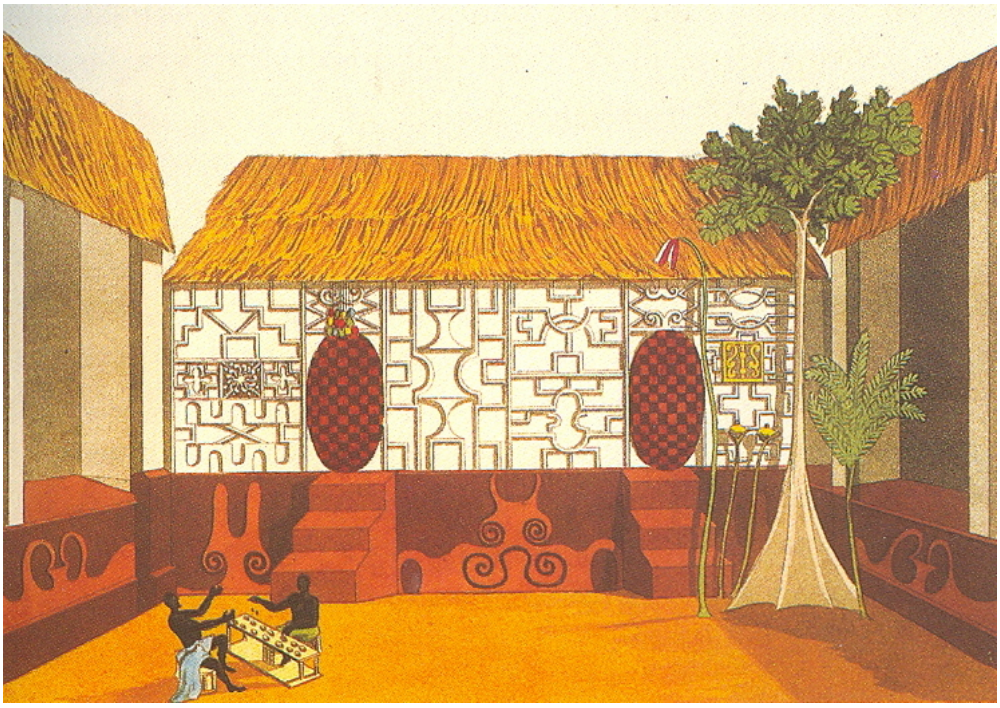


Figure 18 "The King's Sleeping Room," illustrated by T.E. Bowdich.
(Credit: T.E. Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee,* no. 10, bet. 308-309)

The parallels between the hierarchical designs used on Asante stools (and other regalia, such as umbrellas) and conventional buildings in historic contexts are best evidenced by Bowdich's illustrations of the Asantehene's "Sleeping Room" (see Figure 18). The comments that accompanied Bowdich's sketch were as follows:

> No. 10, is the exterior of the King's bed room, being one side of an inner area, about 30 feet square. The stunted silk-cotton and the manchineal tree are fetish or sacred, as are the white and red rags at the top of the pole, and the small brass cups supported by the forked sticks. The colored bags hanging over the round doors (the chequering of which is in relief,) contain Moorish charms. The carving of the left hand window is cased in silver, of the right hand, in gold. The two men are playing at Worra.[203]

[203] T. Edward Bowdich, *Mission from Cape Coast Castle to Ashantee, with a Statistical Account of that Kingdom, and Geographical Notices of Other Parts of the Interior of Africa* (London: J. Murray, 1819): 308.

Although Bowdich provided a few useful pieces of information, the account is primarily descriptive and lacks a comprehensive discussion of how the structure and forms functioned within broader Asante.

The integration of symbolism found on stools and other regalia is evident in the designs featured on the walls of the king's bedroom. For example, in the bottom left-hand section of the upper register there is a single "X" figure located between two undulating lines. The only other place that a single "X" is depicted in Bowdich's drawings of the Asantehene's palace is in one of the most elaborately decorated piazzas. The highly decorative nature of this piazza suggests that it was probably part of the inner palace complex that was reserved primarily for the use of the Asantehene. Thus, it seems that a single "X" motif on buildings may have been solely the prerogative of the King. This proposition is supported by the rules regarding stool ownership outlined by Rattray. In 1927, he listed two stools, both with a single straight-lined "X" design that he said could only be owned by the Asantehene and his personal stool carrier. (Note: another stool that he claimed was available to both men and women had a slightly more stylized version of an "X" motif, but this design was curved and the name of the stool, the "Moon Stool", indicates that it referenced two half-moon shapes placed back to back, and was not an "X" in the strict sense. This paired half-moon shape is also found on many stools as a smaller incised design, but in no other examples is a single straight-lined "X" found).

Another example from Bowdich's illustrations reinforces the suggestion that status symbols on stools were also found in architectural spaces. In the bottom right-hand panel between the two entrances to the Asantehene's bedroom there is an additional motif that may also have been reserved for use by the King. The design is similar to the shape

of a violin, with rounded ends and a semi-circular indent on either side of its middle. This design is also included in the elaborately decorated piazza mentioned above, but not in any of the other sections of the palace depicted by Bowdich. The same motif is etched into the metalwork of a stool purported to have belonged to the Asantehene Kofi Karikari (see Figure 19).



Figure 19 Asante stool in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art bearing the "violin" motif in its metalwork. (Image credit: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Object ID 65-5)

The stool, which is now in the collection of the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City, Missouri, bears a plaque that reads: "King Koffee's State Chair from his Palace at Comassie brought home by Arthur Paget Feb 1873."[204] The elaborate décor of the stool, with its metal plating and intricately carved designs, indicates that the stool could very well have belonged to an Asantehene. Furthermore, the motif does not appear on stools belonging to lower-ranking individuals I viewed in Ghana, in European and

[204] Herbert M. Cole and Doran H. Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (Los Angeles, CA: Museum of Cultural History, University of California, 1977): 138.

North American museum collections, or in any of the existing literature. Based on this information, it seems reasonable to suggest that the "violin" motif may have been reserved for use by the Asantehene in both stools and architecture. Unfortunately, no documentation exists on the "X" and the "violin" symbols that may offer more information on their significance.

The curvilinear design situated between the two sets of stairs on the bottom register of the King's bedroom is also worthy of comment within this discussion of hierarchical motifs. While there are fluid or curving designs on the lower section of several of the palace buildings depicted by Bowdich, this particular motif only appears in the Asantehene's room. Remarkably, it is found on one other example of traditional Asante architecture that was located outside the royal complex (that is illustrated and/or discussed in the available literature). In 1969, Swithenbank undertook a comprehensive study of nine shrine houses that escaped demolition by the British in the late nineteenth century.[205] Among these buildings was the temple at Bawjwiasi that housed the shrine of Tano Odomankoma, one of the sons of the River God Tano (see Figure 20). On the bottom right-hand register of the kitchen section of the shrine house the same curvilinear motif is included. It is possible that this design could be some kind of stylized depiction of Odomankoma.

[205] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969).

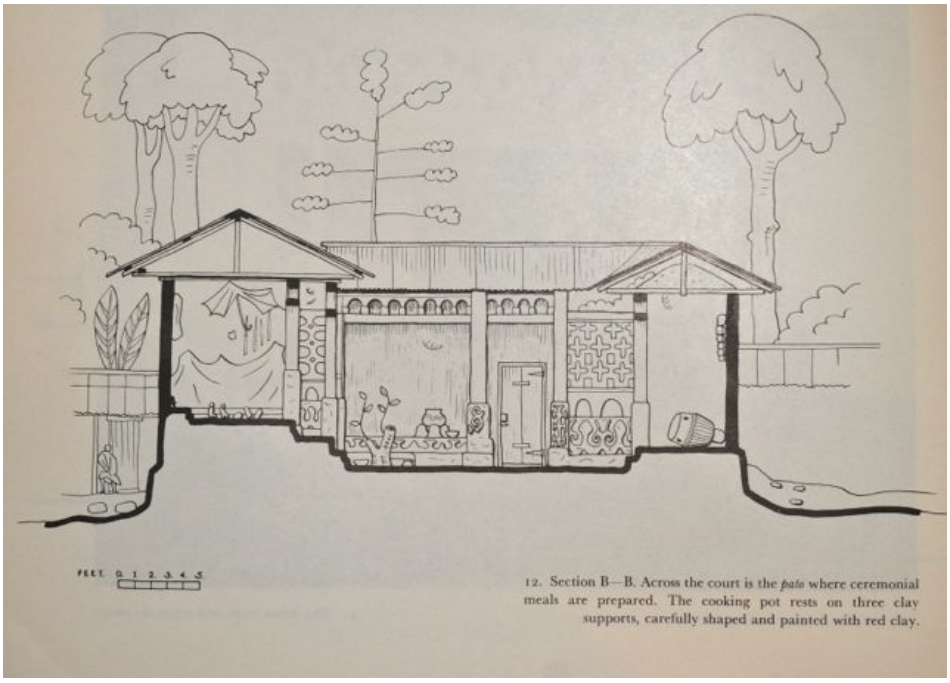


Figure 20 Ceremonial cooking area at the Bawjwiasi shrine that shares a design similar to the one found in the sleeping room of the Asantehene.
(Credit: Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses*, 1969, p. 18)

Swithenbank does not make any mention of the meaning of the specific motif in the context of the shrinehouse; however, it is interesting to note that Tano Odomankoma was a God with national, rather than only local, significance.[206] According to Swithenbank, the spirit was often carried into battles to provide protection and military strength. The presence of the curvilinear design in the Asantehene's bedroom could have served a similar purpose. Nana Akosua Abrafi II, the Sewuahemaa mentioned to me that militaristic considerations play into the composition of the Asantehene's palace. As she explained, "when he sits in state with his elders almost everyday the chamber that faces the main entrance is where they sit so that if anybody is coming from outside they can

[206] Michael Swithenbank, *Ashanti Fetish Houses* (Accra: Ghana Universities Press, 1969): 15.

just notice and see quickly – they can take defensive action."[207] It may be that the curvilinear motif found at Bawjwiasi and in the King's bedroom is a depiction of Odomankoma, which provides protection and reflects the Asantehene's military prowess.

While the specific curvilinear motif in the king's bedroom may have a relationship with Odomankoma, it is interesting to note that Bowdich's illustrations also imply that the fluid designs visible on the bottom section of the Asantehene's Sleeping Room may also be indicators of status more generally as they do not appear in the dwellings of the lower-ranking individuals. In Chapter Three, I address the addition of prestigious "consecration marks" to the underside of stools that are destined for the court of the Asantehene and Asantehemaa. While the immediately visible parts of nearly all conventional Asante stools are symmetrical along a vertical axis and are carved using static geometric design motifs, "consecration marks," in contrast to rest of the stool form, are fluid or curvilinear. It is possible that the apposition of fluid and static motifs in Asante architecture functions in a similar way to those on stools.

In addition to the hierarchical symbolism found on various Asante regalia that relates to identification, the structure of the stool itself is very architectural; particularly the *mmaa dwa* (or "woman's stool") which Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, described as one of the oldest designs in existence.[208] Its cylindrical central support with a "checkerboard" pattern and four support pillars on each corner have striking parallels with conventional buildings; especially, the sleeping quarters of the Asantehene sketched by Bowdich (see Figure 21). Firstly, the same "checkerboard" motif carved into the columnar *mmaa dwa* support appears on the ovular entranceway to the

[207] Nana Akosua Abrafi II, Sewuahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[208] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

king's chamber and images of other parts of the palace complex, taken at different points during the nineteenth century, reveal that the same design was used on almost all doors that led into private spaces.



Figure 21 Visual parallels between traditional architecture and *mmaa dwa* design of Asante stools. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Secondly, every conventional Asante stool includes a series of "steps," called *etuo abo*, on the left and right-hand sides of the base that ascend toward the raised platform where the central support is located. These steps have no functional value, yet appear in the same place and in the same style on all *asese dwa*. The consistency of their appearance suggests that they may have some kind of larger significance that goes beyond mere decoration. Notably, when viewed end-on, the steps leading to the "checkerboard" support of the *mmaa dwa* are a visual equivalent to the entrance of the Asantehene's bedroom depicted by Bowdich. The circular shape of the doorways further reinforces the comparison between the two structures because it implies the cylindrical form of the stool support.



Figure 22 Visual parallels between the *fihankra* symbol and an elaborately carved stool seat. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The *adinkra* symbol *fihankra* adds another dimension to this connection between stools and traditional architecture. The symbol, which is intended as an abstract birds-eye view of the 4-part Asante structural unit, means "security" and, as Adolph Hilary Agbo explains, "*fie* refers to the 'home or house,' *hankra* also refers to a 'compound or courtyard.' *Fihankra* therefore means a 'compound or courtyard house…[which] is typical of Akan architecture."[209] The shape of the *fihankra* symbol has remarkable formal similarities with the shape of seats on the most elaborately carved stools. While most conventional stools have a basic rectangular shaped seat that curves upward at its outside edges, Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, reports that when carvers are in a position to create a very carefully rendered stool, they will often shape it so that there are extended areas of wood on the front and back of the seat. These added details visually replicate the *fihankra* symbol as Figure 22 illustrates. The formal parallels just discussed suggest that the configuration of the stool may have been intended to simulate traditional Asante architecture or *vice versa*. Such an association would provide an explanation for

[209] Adolph Hilary Agbo, *Values of Adinkra and Agama Symbols* (Kumase: Bigshy Designs and Publications, 2006): 29.

the carvers at Ahwiaa's use of architectural terminology to refer to certain stool components, such as *aban*.

This link between *sese dwa* and traditional Asante architecture implies that conventional building structures are also conceived in some ways as "bodies" among the Asante peoples. To begin with, the juxtaposition of static and dynamic elements in both architecture and stools may communicate some of the core concepts of Asante cosmology and personhood. George Preston explains that, "perhaps the most charged element in the traditional Akan political system is *kra*, an intangible spiritual continuity comprised of the souls and moral presence of the heroic royal ancestors, and the moral fibre of the living rulers which are melded into the collective spirit of the body politic and the generations to be born."[210] The *kra* is a kind of "lifeforce" that originated with Nyame (the Supreme Being) and is passed by women through succeeding generations of a given lineage.[211] The *ntoro*, on the other hand, is the more fixed aspect of an individual that comes from the father.

In this context, it is worth noting that the bottom or dynamic register is red while the upper or static register is white. Philip F. W. Bartle has explained that for the Akan, "colour symbolism consists of white and red for the respective male-female, corpus-spiritual, blood-semen categories."[212] While personhood is a balance of male and female qualities, so is governance. Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng argue that "good leadership combined 'hot' and 'cold' qualities: reason balanced bravery,

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[210] George Preston, "Dynamic/Static," *African Art as Philosophy*, ed. Douglas Fraser (New York: Interbook, 1974): 54.

[211] Sam K. Akesson, "The Akan Concept of the Soul," *African Affairs* 64, no. 257 (Oct 1965): 281; Taylor, 19.

[212] Philip F. W. Bartle, "Forty Days: The Akan Calendar," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1978): 81.

compassion balanced inflexibility."[213] From this perspective, it is possible that the fluid and dynamic designs depicted in red clay on the building's bases, paired with the static, rectilinear motifs presented in white on the upper registers, were intended to reflect the balance of female-male power that pervades Asante social and spiritual thought and reflects the composition of personhood (*kra* and *ntoro*) that I outlined previously.

[213] Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng, "Spirituality, Gender and Power in Asante History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, vol. 28, no. 3 (1995): 490.

Chapter 3

The Primacy of Archives

Collecting Histories

In the last three decades, curators and scholars have begun to emphasize the importance of studying the history of collections as an essential step toward identifying the nature of the assumptions and values that they embody.[214] This impulse is part of a wider recognition that Western museum collections are more representative of the tastes of particular individuals than they are comprehensive pictures of the cultures whose objects they contain. This is especially true of African collections. Christopher Steiner has argued that "perhaps more so than in any other field in the world of art, collectors have dominated the formation of taste and construction of aesthetic value in the study and exhibition of African art."[215] He suggests that where scholarship has directed the development of other art genres, and in turn sparked public desire, collectors have led institutions dealing with African art to their subject.[216] The result of this system is that the aesthetic discriminations of a particular collector or set of collectors determine the scope of objects available to represent "African art" at a given institution. Susan Vogel has added to this assessment, explaining that what has come to be understood as "African art" in the West is only a small segment of the range of artistic objects created by the different peoples of the African continent.[217]

Not only are collections of African material culture limited in scope, but their composition, documentation, and display often reveals more about the predilections of

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[214] Susan M. Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, (London; New York: Routledge, 1994): 194.

[215] Christopher B. Steiner, "The Taste of Angels in the Art of Darkness: Fashioning the Canon of African Art," in *Art History and its Institutions: Foundations of a Discipline*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield, 132-145. (London; New York: Routledge, 2002): 133.

[216] Ibid. 132-145.

[217] Susan Mullin Vogel, ed., *The Art of Collecting African Art* (New York: The Center for African Art, 1988): 4.

collectors than it does about the cultures in question. A number of European and North American museums have significant quantities of Asante stools. Regardless, most of the studies I encountered of these objects went into significant detail about the position of the stool in its "original" cultural context, but did not acknowledge or address its presence in Western institutions. The studies' descriptions and explanations of Asante stools focus primarily on men and draw heavily on equations with symbols and ideas from the British monarchical system; yet, discussion of Europeans and their role as collectors of these items is limited to quotations from observers that support evidence about the described role of stools in Asante society.[218]

In the introduction to his essay on "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," Craig Clunas addresses this situation in terms of Chinese art. After revealing a personal story about his own engagement with the "Throne of Emperor Ch'ien-lung" at London's Victoria and Albert Museum when he was 14, he states that:

> These are not the tales curators tell. Their role in maintaining objects (in both senses of the word) demands that they suppress such embarrassing personal engagements and secret fetishisms, which threaten to reopen the space between the viewer and the artifact. The throne was there, and the Emperor of China sat on it. Now it is here, and you the visitor view it. Do not ask how it got here, or where it was from 1770 to now; that does not matter. You are here to engage with "China," not with "Britain," so do not ask what the presence of the throne of the emperor of China might tell you about Britain and its narratives about China over the two centuries since the thing was made.[219]

Clunas further explains that despite the fact that Qing political discourse did not acknowledge any type of "Throne of China," and there was no seat that attributed the right of rule, the British collected and exhibited this chair belonging to Emperor Ch'ien-

[218] For example see Herbert Cole and Doran Ross, *The Arts of Ghana* (UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1977): 134-140.

[219] Craig Clunas "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," *The Anthropology of Art*, eds. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 186.

Lung in the early twentieth century under the title "The throne of Emperor Chi'en-Lung." Clunas maintains that the failure to admit the important role of the British in the history of this object and the tendency to understand its presence in the museum as a natural occurrence will only "reproduce a stifling identity of self-regard."[220] This perspective is further supported by James Clifford who has argued that, "it is important to analyze how powerful discriminations made at particular moments constitute the general system of objects within which valued artifacts circulate and make sense."[221] For that reason, a comprehensive discussion of Asante stools requires attention to their roles in multiple markets and any consideration must be addressed in terms of intercultural exchanges that have implications for the ways stools are understood in local and global contexts.

Asante Stools in European and North American Collections

The majority of stools in North American and European museum collections are *asese dwa* were acquired in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[222] The British Museum houses the largest collection of Asante stools by far, with seventy-eight "full stools" and seventy-five "model stools" (the "model stools" group includes goldweights, ivory carvings and small stools carved out of inexpensive wood to illustrate the different designs in existence at various moments in history). The National Museum of Ireland, the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, and the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University all have significant numbers of Asante

[220] Craig Clunas "Oriental Antiquities/Far Eastern Art," *The Anthropology of Art*, eds. Howard Morphy and Morgan Perkins (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 186.

[221] James Clifford, "On Collecting Art and Culture," *The Predicament of Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988): 221.

[222] Some institutional collections contain historic blackened ancestral stools that are not intended for public viewing. They are rare in number and museums such as the British Museum have policies in place that prohibit display and/or viewing of these sacred objects. I will not be discussing blackened stools at length in this dissertation, as my focus will be on stools intended for public presentation.

stools and/or model stools in their collections (more than ten but generally less than twenty in each case). Most other institutions in North America and Europe that are in possession of stools have them in much smaller quantities and their quality varies dramatically.

While the more sizeable collections of Asante stools generally include a few collected at later points in history (which are generally of lower quality than those collected earlier and may have been created for an external market), many of them, particularly those in the British Museum, were acquired as a result of British activities in what was known as the Gold Coast area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Gold Coast Commercial Intelligence Bureau, a body concerned with recording and promoting British activities in the colony, made the second largest donation of stools (fifteen) to the British Museum (the largest donation to the British Museum was a group of eighteen stools, which came from the dispersion of the collections of Sir Henry Wellcome in 1954). The Bureau donated the stools in 1927 when they were divesting their collections of "specimens," which were previously put on display at the "Gold Coast Court" to illustrate "Empire geography and development" in special exhibitions in London.[223]

Celia Barclay donated another substantial group of stools (thirteen) to the British Museum in 1978, which she inherited from her father, Sir Cecil Armitage (1868-1933). Armitage, along with Wilfred Davidson-Houston (1870-1960), was one of the first two District Commissioners in Asante and participated actively in the Anglo-Ashanti Wars, particularly, the Ashanti War of 1900. Sir William Maxwell, Governor of the Gold Coast

[223] Gold Coast Commercial Intelligence Bureau, *Annual General Report 1926-1927* (London: Anckonicus Publishing Company, Inc.).

from 1895-1897, donated seven blackened stools to the British Museum during a summer visit to England in 1896 to speak about the future of the Gold Coast and the Asante Kingdom. Likely, he obtained the blackened stools in the course of the expedition of January 1896, led by Sir Francis Scott, in which the British took Asantehene Prempeh I prisoner. Other Asante stool collectors whose acquisitions ended up in the British Museum include individuals such as Thomas Edward Bowdich (who travelled on a diplomatic mission organized by the African Company of Merchants and donated a stool in 1818), F. R. Morton (who acquired the stool he sold to the museum in 1896 during one of the Ashanti Expeditions), Captain Robert P. Wild (a military officer who belonged to the Mines Department of the Gold Coast in the early twentieth century), and R. Austin Freeman (a member of a medical expedition to Ashanti and Bontuku in 1889 during which he served as a physician, navigator and naturalist).



Figure 23 Asante Stool collected by Garnet Joseph Wolseley, c. 1874, purported to be the "travelling war stool of the King of Ashanti King Koffee."
(Pitt Rivers Museum, 1978.7.1. Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Stools in the collections of the National Museum of Ireland, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University have provenances similar to those in the British Museum. For example, the National Museum of Ireland holds eight Asante stools that were originally loaned by Wilfred Davidson-Houston, previously mentioned to be one of the two first District Commissioners of Asante, in 1899. The Pitt Rivers Museum has a stool collected by Garnet Joseph Wolseley, apparently while he commanded the British assault on the Asante in 1874, which he claimed is the "travelling war stool of the King of Ashanti King Koffee" (see Figure 23).[224] According to Colonel W. T. Dooner, a member of Lord Wolseley's 1873-74 Kumasi Expedition, "many of those officers and men who were in the expedition…brought [an Asante stool] home with them as a memento."[225] The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge houses three stools that originated with A. C. Haddon, British Anthropologist and Ethnologist, who collected them around 1900.

British military, missionary, and anthropological/ethnological activities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries account for the presence of stools in these more substantial collections. Because most of the major collections of Asante stools were composed during this very particular moment in history, the ideas and attitudes of their collectors as well as the broader public had an important impact on how these objects came to be understood in Europe and North America. In most cases, the records museums have about the objects are scarce – mentioning only the donor's name and, in some cases, his or her description of what the stool was perceived to be; however, other sources can

[224] Pitt Rivers Museum Object Catalogue, 1978.7.1

[225] *London Times*, "The Golden Stool of Ashanti," 21 November 1921.

help build a more comprehensive picture of how Asante stools came to be understood in wider European and American consciousness.

Case Study: The Peabody Stool

A stool in the collection of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University illustrates how pervasive Euro-American ideas about stools and their relationships with male chieftaincy impacted wider understandings of *asese dwa* (see Figure 24). As in many other cases, the possibility that this stool was associated with women, and queen mothers in particular, was entirely ignored. The Peabody stool (object number 22-17-50/B2909) measures 32.5 x 53.5 x 30 cm (H x W x D) and is carved from a single block of what appears to be *sese* wood. It has a rectangular base, on which a second, slightly raised rectangular platform appears. The sides of this second platform are carved into small steps (called *nsayee*).[226] A third platform is centered on the second platform. This rectangular platform is about a centimeter deep and stretches almost to the edges of the second platform. Four semi-rectangular, solid-wood supports with saw-toothed carvings (*nkyɛkyaa*) along their outside edges extend from the corners of the third platform to support a curved rectangular seat (*anim*).

Underneath the seat, on the left and right sides, there are rounded triangular forms protruding from the base (*etiko puaa*). A fifth support is located at the center of the four solid supports (*sekyedua*). It is hollow, cylindrical, and carved into a small checkerboard motif. The surface of the stool appears to be covered in some kind of unidentifiable brown wash. At the center of the underside of the base there is a cavity where the carver dug out the central core of the cylindrical support. A small rectangular space of wood

[226] All of the terms for the anatomy of the stool are from Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 65-71.

(*ɛtuo abo*, "to strike the bottom")[227] has been carved out of the area surrounding the cavity (1 cm deep).



Figure 24 *Mmaa dwa* or "woman's stool" in the collection of the Peabody Museum at Harvard University. (Object number 22-17-50/B2909. Image credit: Peabody Museum)

The only documentation that accompanies the Peabody Stool can be found on two original ledger pages that were used to record information about this object at the time of its accession. According to these pages, Alice L. Boardman donated the stool to the museum in 1922, after receiving it from "William Gage Putnam." The stool is described as a "Carved wooden seat" from the "Ashanti Tribe, West Coast, Africa." Under "Remarks," the ledger page reads, "Brought from the West Coast of Africa by William Gage Putnam and given by him to the donor. The seat of an African Chief." When Putnam collected the stool and under what circumstances he did so are not mentioned. Other than their names, the Peabody Museum does not possess further background on

[227] Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 71.

Boardman or Putnam. Although the information contained in the ledger pages is limited, at the very least it offers a starting point for further investigation.

The *Historical Register of Harvard University 1626-1936* indicates that in 1924 the *William Dorr Boardman Professorship of Fine Arts* was established by the President and Fellows from "the bequest of Alice L. Boardman (Mrs. William Dorr Boardman) in memory of her son."[228] It seems likely that this was the same Alice L. Boardman responsible for donating the Asante stool to the Peabody Museum. The bequest suggests an engagement with the arts and a relationship with the University, and it occurred within the same general timeframe as the stool donation. Knowing the name of Mrs. Boardman's husband (and son) facilitates tracing her genealogy and helps determine her relationship to William Gage Putnam. In the second volume of Sidney Perley's *A History of Salem Massachusetts*, there is an entry for a Captain Edward Putnam that reads:

> Captain Edward Putnam, master mariner and merchant; married Margaret Sage June 13, 1839; died November 21, 1852; she died in Roxbury Jan 3, 1892; child: 1. Alice Louise, born April 3, 1840; married William Dorr Boardman of Boston April 3, 1863.[229]

The fact that Alice L. Boardman's maiden name was Putnam suggests that, in all likelihood, she was related to William Gage Putnam. Although State and Federal Census records from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries make no mention of a William Gage Putnam, they do record the existence of a William "Sage" Putnam who was the cousin of Alice L. Boardman.[230] William Sage Putnam was born in 1833, worked as a mariner, remained unmarried, and resided in Salem Massachusetts for most of his life.

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[228] President and Fellows of Harvard College, *Historical Register of Harvard University 1636-1936* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1937): 43-65.

[229] Sidney Perley, *A History of Salem Massachusetts*, vol. II (Sidney Perley: Salem, MA, 1926): 118.

[230] 1880 U.S. Census, Salem, Essex, Massachusetts; Roll: T9_532; Family History Film: 1254532; Page: 636.3000; Enumeration District: 232; Image 0412.

Alice Louise Boardman grew up in Salem and, upon her husband's death in the 1870s, she returned to her hometown where she lived until she passed away in 1924. Cousins living in the same town likely had a sociable relationship and William Putnam's job as a mariner would explain how he was able to bring the stool from West Africa and give it to Alice Boardman. This seems to be the most plausible explanation for the stool's provenance. The William "Gage" Putnam reported in the Peabody ledger records was probably a clerical error.

This argument for the Peabody stool's provenance helps refine the stool's dates of collection and creation. After 1900, there is no record of William Sage Putnam in the Federal or State Census. This suggests that Putnam passed away sometime between 1900 and 1910 (when the next Census was completed). If Putnam was born in 1833 and died before 1910, he must have collected the stool sometime between these dates. While some mariners began sailing early in their childhoods, William Sage Putnam came from a wealthy and well-educated family and probably did not begin work before the age of eighteen. Based on this information, the collection date of the stool was likely between 1851 and 1910. Although these dates offer a more refined collection period, they cannot provide any insight into the earliest date of the stool's creation because the stool could have existed for any length of time prior to its collection by Putnam. It is only possible to confirm that the stool was created before 1910.

The small piece of paper adhered to the underside of the base of the stool reads:

> …the best thing he has brought away from West Africa, is an "Ashanti Stool." In the Kingdom of Ashanti they do not "crown" their kings, they "stool" them. This stool by its appearance suggests an African background. It is a little lower than a piano stool and the sides of the seat turn upwards so that the seat resembles a cross-section of a canoe. It is carved out of the cottonwood or "canoe wood" of

> the country. When an Ashanti chieftain is travelling, the stool, the emblem of his kingship, is carried with him.

The text appears to be from a newspaper or magazine but I could not determine its specific origin. Whether or not the description is a direct discussion of the Peabody stool is also unclear. Its very general content means that it could refer to any number of Asante stools. Regardless, these fragments of documentation echo the monarchical and male-centric references espoused in the newspaper coverage and historical accounts from the same period.

The claim that the Peabody stool was the "seat of an African chief" is problematic on two levels: first, the design of the stool, which includes a central column flanked by four supports that have small triangular projections, is called the *mmaa dwa* or "woman's stool" and, theoretically, is not intended for male use. In her unpublished dissertation on Asante stools from 1980, Sharon Patton noted that although rules regarding who can own which stool designs are rigorously delineated, they are not necessarily followed with the same attention.[231] She identified more than one chief in the Kronti political division who had a *mmaa dwa* or woman's stool in his possession.

When I inquired about this scenario in my interviews with chiefs and queen mothers in the Ashanti region in 2012, numerous interviewees suggested that perhaps the chiefs in possession of the *mmaa dwa* did not have a queen mother counterpart at the time and, accordingly, were the custodians of the archival stools of both genders for their lineage. Another explanation offered to me was that the chiefs in question kept the *mmaa dwa* stools on hand for queen mothers to sit on when they came to visit. Both of these situations are plausible and point to a second issue, applicable to all conventional stools,

[231] Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool." PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 82.

which I mentioned earlier: with a few rare exceptions, chiefs do not actually sit on *asese dwa*. Although they may own stools as symbols of their authority or to provide to queen mothers for their use, they do not often use them as a "seat," except briefly during enstoolment, bathing, and in some cases, prior to visiting the stool house.

According to the queen mothers and chiefs with whom I spoke, bathing stools and the stools used by male attendants to the Asantehene are very small (not usually measuring more than twenty-five centimeters high). As in the case of the Peabody stool, the majority of stools in European and North American collections do not show signs of wear that would be associated with using the stool for bathing and are generally taller than 25 centimeters. Consequently, it is very unlikely that these objects fit the definition of "the seat of a West African chief" or some similar designation. In some cases, the "archival" stools in Western collections such as the Peabody stool may have belonged to queen mothers and were erroneously identified as chiefs' stools. In other cases, they may have been in the possession of a chief who used them symbolically but not practically, or for seating visiting queen mothers; or, they could have belonged to a male who was in the service of the king. In any event, their uses certainly differed significantly from that claimed in the records.

An exploration of contemporary queen mothers' stool archives reveals many different stool forms, including the *mmaa dwa*, and their uses over the course of the twentieth century. Set in comparative perspective with the history outlined in the Peabody records, these case studies suggest that, among other things, the Peabody stool could have belonged to a queen mother who used it as her seat of authority.

Queen Mothers' Stool Archives

The dynamic character of queen mothers' stool uses in combination with changes occurring over time, and cases of "rule breaking" makes it difficult to establish a clear set of parameters like those outlined by Rattray in the early twentieth century. Instead, what follows is a series of case studies of queen mothers' stools gathered in 2012. Taken together they exemplify the complexity and fluidity of *asese dwa* as they have functioned in twentieth and early twenty-first century Asante. My intention is not to offer a catalogue raisonne of Asante stools. Rather, I use these case studies and related examples to explore the intricacies of queen mothers' uses of stools in different contexts.

Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa (Omanhemaa)

Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, the Offinsohemaa, is the highest-ranking queen mother with whom I spoke. Offinso is one of the paramount Asante towns and Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, accordingly, is an *omanhemaa*. This means she ranks just below the Asantehemaa in terms of status and authority. The stool the Offinsohemaa uses most often to hold court and attend durbars and other events is the one Rattray described as the *'Pantu 'gwa'* or 'The Big Spirit (Gin or Rum) Stool' (see Figure 25).[232] She commissioned carvers to create it for her when she was enstooled in 1987 because she liked the design. The central column is shaped like a liquor bottle and the four supporting columns positioned at each corner have rounded projections running along their exterior edge that have triangular cutouts inside of them.

[232] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 273.



Figure 25 Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko's *Pantu* stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, told me that this specific type of projection indicates a design intended for men[233] and the Offinsohemaa does not deny this. Instead, she explains that there are certain designs made for women that chiefs cannot use but queen mothers have the prerogative to own any type of stool design made, whether intended for men or for women. To illustrate her point she equated the rules around stool use to accepted norms regarding men's and women's clothing. Gesturing to her woman's cloth, she stated, "no men can wear this but the men's t-shirt, I can wear it."[234]

The seat of Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko's *Pantu* stool incorporates a number of metal tacks that form a circle that is about twelve and a half centimeters in diameter and has rectangles extending from its top and bottom to the edges of the seat on both sides. The Offinsohemaa explained that after she received the stool from the carvers she brought it home and asked the priest of the Offinso Stool to create a special medicine that

[233] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

[234] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

would offer protection to her and the stool. The priest drilled the holes in the seat in the formation she asked for (which she says has no special significance) and filled them with a "black potion" after which he "locked it up with the nail."[235] According to Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, this spiritual substance makes it so that if someone sits on the stool other than her, "maybe you can't wake up, you can't stand up again."[236]

Many Asante peoples believe that one's *sunsum* or spiritual essence transfers into a stool with repeated use and it is therefore very important that no one other than its rightful owner make use of such a personal stool. However, not all queen mothers deem it is necessary to integrate protective features into their stools like those undertaken by the Offinsohemaa. Nana Gyama Pensan II, the Aboasohemaa, told me that she has no need for protection because she "doesn't have any problems with anybody."[237] She explained that if a Stool is under dispute or the process leading to the current queen mother's enstoolment was contested, she might be more inclined to add apotropaic substances to ensure that she is the only one to sit on her stool (both literally and figuratively).[238]

The Offinsohemaa's *Pantu* stool, which is about forty centimeters high, is one of the tallest stools I saw in the course of my interviews with queen mothers. For Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, it is important that her stool be identifiably taller than her subordinate queen mothers. Pointing to another stool in her holdings (with a liquor bottle-shaped central column and rounded side supports), which was shorter, she explained, "I won't use this one because it is short. I am a paramount queen mother so I have to sit on a

[235] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

[236] Ibid.

[237] Nana Gyama Pensan II, Aboasohemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

[238] Ibid.

bigger one. I have some sub-queen mothers and they can use this one in public. Because I am bigger than them, I am superior, I have to use this one [referring to the *Pantu* stool] so that there will be some difference."[239] What is particularly notable in the Offinsohemaa's discussion is that she explains the height of her stool in relation to the women who are under her direct administration. She lists no prescribed height that is specific to her rank within the larger socio-political Asante framework; rather, it is she who determined the height necessary for her stool to distinguish her within a specific group of queen mothers.

Another stool, which is from the Offinsohemaa's archive and stands only about twenty-five centimeters tall, reveals the changes to height that have taken place in more recent years (see Figure 26). Many of the queen mothers with whom I spoke mentioned that stools became increasingly larger in the second half of the twentieth century because most women find that sitting on shorter stools results in back aches and other discomforts. Despite its small stature, the older stool from the Offinsohemaa's collection includes a number of features that express status in other ways. Like the Peabody stool, it is made in the *mmaa dwa* design listed by Rattray[240] (a vertical support on each of four corners with small triangular projections running along their outside edges and a single cylindrical central support with a "checkerboard" pattern) and features metal plating that was applied in the same configuration as the tacks on the *Pantu* stool. However, its materials are more intricately worked. In particular, the circular shape at center boasts delicate repoussé ornamentation. It is possible that the tack formation on the Offinsohemaa's *Pantu* stool was intended to evoke this design; however, she did not mention it.

[239] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

[240] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272-273.



Figure 26 Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko's historical *mmaa dwa*. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Several queen mothers as well as the carvers at Ahwia told me that it is much less common to incorporate metal plating in a stool today than it was in the early twentieth century because the materials are harder to acquire and much more expensive. When I spoke with her, Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, the Wadie Adwumakasehemaa mentioned that the "very old" black stools in her care have metal on them but is very uncommon to find similar decoration in her lineage nowadays.[241] It is possible that the metal tacks on Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko's stool may be a contemporary adaptation of the metal plating.

Where the circular metalwork has deteriorated in places along the stool's edge, the frayed fibers of a cloth package are visible. Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko told me that, similar to the protective substances integrated into her personal stool, the material under the metalwork is the casing of an amulet.[242] Although the queen mother was unable to

[241] Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, in conversation with the author 7 June 2012.

[242] Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko, Offinsohemaa, in conversation with the author, 29 May 2012.

provide me with a date of origin for the stool, she reported that it had passed through multiple previous queen mothers' hands. Based on comparisons with stools from European and North American collections, I would estimate that it was created sometime in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. It is my understanding that the Offinsohemaa keeps this stool as part of a material history of her lineage and does not offer it to visiting queen mothers as a seat the way she might with other stools from her archive. Such an approach makes sense in view of the fact that the stool has an amulet integrated into its seat – the presence of this protective feature suggests that it was the "special" stool of a previous queen mother and not part of the general stool property that can be used by visitors.



Figure 27 Underside of Nana Ama Serwha Nyarko's historical *mmaa dwa* showing remnants of curvilinear consecration marks. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

A notable aspect of this historical *mmaa dwa* that adds to its unsuitability for seating anyone other than its original owner is the existence of consecration marks on the underside of its base (see Figure 27). Much of the design has worn away over time but traces of a curvilinear motif executed in three parallel lines on the stool's bottom are still

visible. In his description of the creation of a replica of the Queen of Mampon's Silver Stool for Princess Mary on the occasion of her marriage, Rattray described the consecration process as it was executed in the early twentieth century:

> The Silver Stool was turned upside down and placed on top of a silk-covered cushion upon a low table. An old copy of the Observer was carefully wrapped round it. The Queen Mother's first-born daughter and the Queen Mother seated themselves on their stools. An egg upon a plate, some soot, a knife, and some short sticks were placed on a corner of the table in readiness. The Queen Mother then broke the egg, allowing the white to fall on the ground, the yolk into the plate. She then spoke as follows: …'Osese tree, receive this egg and eat; concerning the child of the King of England who is getting married, if she sits upon you let her have long life.' The daughter frayed out the ends of the sticks and mixed the yolk and the soot. When all was ready, she and her mother, looking up to the sky with hands uplifted, spoke the following prayer: …'Supreme Being on whom men lean and do not fall, concerning Mary, the child of my Lord the King of England who is getting married, I pray of you to give her long life and grace. I seat her upon this stool.' These religious rites being completed, the Queen Mother produced out of a handkerchief 14s. in silver coins, and these she grouped all around the hollow in the centre of the stool. This was the 'artist's' fee, and if not paid the woman who was about to draw the design… 'would run the risk of becoming blind '. Amma Agyiman (the daughter) now began to paint on the mixture with one of the little sticks, beginning with the steps round the hollow centre of the stool. When this was done the design upon the bottom of the stool was next laboriously drawn, the Queen Mother from time to time suggesting or showing her daughter what to do. The stool was now complete and ready for the 'daughter of Kings ' to sit upon.[243]

As Rattray's description indicates, the purpose of applying these marks was to prepare the stool for a specific individual to use and, in turn, provide them with a form of protection. Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, explained to me that if a stool bears these designs no one other than its intended user may sit on it because the specific purpose of the markings is secret (and if you are not aware of their purpose they could harm you).[244] In addition to the egg yolk and soot that Rattray mentioned, Nana Frempong Boadu included spider webs on the list of ingredients used to perform the

[243] R.S. Rattray, *Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923): 297-298.

[244] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

consecration of a stool.[245] It is possible that Rattray did not notice the web being used by the queen mothers when he was writing in the early twentieth century or that it was not included on that occasion. Perhaps the components of the mixture have changed over time and in different circumstances.

In her doctoral study of the stools of the chiefs of the Kronti political division in 1980, Sharon Patton reported that, although they did not explain the reasons behind it, the carvers at Ahwia told her "it is the custom that all chiefs' stools be painted on the undersurface of the stool base."[246] However, she noted that none of the Kronti chiefs' stools she observed were painted in this manner. When I asked Nana Frempong Boadu about this in 2012, he explained that during the period that coincided with Asantehene Opoku Ware II's reign (roughly 1970-1999) the carvers at Ahwia applied the black marks to every stool they made for chiefs and queen mothers.[247] When Otumfuo Nana Osei Tutu II became the Asantehene in 1999, he discovered this practice was taking place and asked the carvers to stop. According to the Otumfuo Chief Carver, the Asantehene told him to discontinue applying the marks to all stools because "it is one of our most serious oaths."[248]

This may explain the discrepancy between the carvers' comments to Patton and her own observations. It may be that the chiefs in the Kronti political division acquired their stools before the carvers began adding the designs to all stools indiscriminately and Patton's interviews took place afterward (in the late 1970s). In the decade or so since

[245] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[246] Sharon Patton, "The Asante Stool," PhD Dissertation, Northwestern University, 1980. 108.

[247] Whether Opoku Ware II specifically instructed the carvers to apply the marks to all stools or whether it was something that began to occur but escaped his notice is not known.

[248] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

Otumfuo's request, the carvers at Ahwia only add the black designs to the bottoms of stools destined for the courts of the Asantehene and Asantehemaa. The Asantehene and Asantehemaa can then distribute the stools as they please. This means that it is still entirely possible for chiefs and queen mothers to obtain stools with these markings, though extremely rare. Nana Frempong Boadu told me that the Asantehene might choose to give a stool with the markings to a specific leader to show his appreciation for an achievement or show of excellence.[249] As a result, in contemporary contexts the consecration marks on stools function as status symbols in addition to their other, more discreet, purposes. This scenario is yet another example of how a specific leader, in this case, the Asantehene, determines the rules for stool creation and use rather than everyone following an entrenched set of prescriptions.



Figure 28 Nana Darkowaa Ababio II's *sese dwa* with consecration marks on its underside. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

[249] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

I encountered only one other stool that had black markings on its base during my interviews with queen mothers. It belonged to an *odikrohemaa*, Nana Darkowaa Ababio II, who inherited it from her grandmother, the preceding queen mother (see Figure 28). Like the markings on the Offinsohemaa's stool, the designs were composed of three parallel lines. In this case, the curvilinear motif formed half of a figure eight on either side of the "step" surrounding the hollowed-out core. The "step," too, was covered in a thick line of soot. Nana Darkowaa Ababio II explained to me that her grandmother had added these marks to the stool but she was unclear on the reasons why. At the level of *odikrohemaa*, it is unlikely that a superior leader sanctioned the addition of these marks. Even during the time in which carvers were adding the marks liberally to stools, their actions did not extend to *adikrohemas*. Accordingly, it is likely that this design is a case of "rule breaking."

Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko showed me two other stools from her archive that she uses to seat visiting queen mothers, both of which are about thirty-five centimeters tall. These were the stools she used to enstool the initiates in the course of the rehearsal of the puberty rites I witnessed at her residence in May 2012. One stool is the *Nyansapo* or "wisdom knot" stool, which features an *adinkra* symbol as its core support. The *nyansapo* symbol indicates wisdom, ingenuity, intelligence and patience and seems to be fairly popular among queen mothers. I interviewed at least four queen mothers who possessed this stool design, though none of them used it as their primary *sese dwa*.[250]

The other stool, which I mentioned earlier on in my discussion, is a variation of the *Pantu* stool. Rather than the four vertical supports that are included in the

[250] The four queen mothers who showed me a *nyansapo* stool in their holdings were: Nana Serwah Nyarko (Offinsohemaa), Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo (Adumasahemaa), Nana Ama Agyeman (Kodiehemaa), and Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio (Wadie Adwumakasehemaa).

Offinsohemaa's personal stool, this stool has a rounded support that encircles the central liquor bottle-shaped form and is embellished with small triangular projections that run down the center of each curving side (Nana Frempong Boadu reports that these small triangular projections indicate a stool intended for female use[251]). Neither of these stools includes any metal plating and the underside of their bases does not reveal any markings other than two large initials, "A D," on the *Nyansapo* stool. Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko did not give me any indication of the reasons for this inscription.

While the underside of the *Nyansapo* stool is completely flat, the base of the stool that is a variation of the *Pantu* stool has one square "step" cut out at its center, directly under where the solid central support is located. Both the *Pantu* stool and the older *Mmaa dwa* have multiple square "steps" carved into the underside of their bases that surround the openings of their hollow central supports. The *Pantu* stool has two "steps," while the *Mmaa dwa* has three. Adom Gyamfi Richard, the Secretary of the Ahwiaa Wood Carver's Association, claims that the "steps" are conceived as a way for the spirit of the stool's owner to enter and exit the stool's core but the Otumfuo Chief Carver dismissed this suggestion.[252] According to Nana Frempong Boadu, this feature usually indicates that a stool belongs to a chief or queen mother. In theory, the more steps that are included and the more complex the design, the higher the rank of the owner, although I am unaware of any clearly defined number to rank ratio. The Otumfuo Chief Carver explained that the steps are particularly important for expressing status when the stool is in transit as its core rests horizontally on the carrier's head and the seat and underside are exposed to

[251] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[252] Adom Gyamfi Richard, Secretary of the Ahwiaa Wood Carver's Association, in conversation with the author, 13 June 2012.

onlookers. When they see the steps carved into the base, the viewers know that "a big man is coming."[253]

Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa (Omanhemaa)

Nana Braku Yaa I is the Asokoremanhemaa or queen mother of Asokore, which is one of the paramount Asante constituencies. Like the Offinsohemaa, Nana Braku Yaa I is an *omanhemaa*. She was enstooled in 1985. Although Nana Braku Yaa I and Nana Ama Serwah Nyarko are both paramount queen mothers, they do not necessarily have identical ideas about stools or regulate the use of them by their subordinate queen mothers in the same ways. For example, while it was very important to the Offinsohemaa that her stool be distinguishably taller than her sub-queen mothers, this is not an issue that concerns the Asokoremanhemaa. She explained to me that if a queen mother under her authority were to have a stool that is taller than her own, "it doesn't really matter."[254] According to Nana Braku Yaa I, using a bigger stool is a matter of convenience, not an act of disrespect. If someone who is tall has to sit on a short stool, she might suffer discomfort. Nana Braku Yaa I maintains that she does not care about the height of individual stools because the seating arrangements required of queen mothers when they gather for official events illustrates their statuses relative to one another, anyway.[255]

When I visited with the Asokoremanhemaa at her private residence she showed me the four stools she keeps there. Like many of the other queen mothers with whom I spoke, Nana Braku Yaa I stores stools at a number of different places, including her

[253] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[254] Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa, in conversation with the author, 8 June 2012.

[255] For an example of the hierarchical types of seating arrangements that are strictly regulated within Asante, see the Seating Plan of the Asanteman Council for the enstoolment of Nana Osei Tutu II in 1999 published in the *Daily Graphic Souvenir Edition* (26 April 1999).

palace and family member's houses. This arrangement makes it easier for her to make use of appropriate seating without having to carry a stool with her every time she changes location.[256] However, the stools she keeps at home are the ones she uses most frequently. During our discussion, the Asokoremanhemaa sat on a plastic chair but she made a point of telling me that she would normally never do so. Because she was feeling unwell, the elders had granted her permission to use a chair with back support for the occasion. Under most circumstances, Nana Braku Yaa I always sits on a *sese dwa*. For her, sitting on the stool is an incredibly important act because

> …when god gave the power to rule to women…the power was vested in the *sese dwa* and it was given to the women, the queen mothers. So the power, the authority, is vested in the *sese dwa*. Immediately that you have become a queen mother you have to wear an authority, claiming authority over your people.[257]

According to Nana Braku Yaa I, historically, queen mothers were "not even allowed to sit on any ordinary chair except the *sese dwa*."[258] Nowadays, most queen mothers use many different kinds of furniture for casual seating and reserve their stools for the times when they are acting in an official capacity. Nana Braku Yaa I differs significantly from the majority of queen mothers with whom I spoke in this respect.

The Asokoremanhemaa has a specific stool she uses when she is spending leisure time in her own compound (see Figure 29). She inherited it from the previous queen mother and its dimensions are 31 x 52.5 x 23.5 cm (H x W x D). Its seat and base are conventional, but its core support structure features two Euro-American-style chair or table legs that appear to have been turned on a lathe. The two legs, located at either end of the raised platform at the center of the stool's base, frame a rectangular central column

[256] Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa, in conversation with the author, 8 June 2012.

[257] Ibid.

[258] Ibid.

that is wrapped in black and silver-patterned plastic. It looks as though the plastic covering may have been packaging or decorative material of some kind that was cut into strips and repurposed to ornament the stool. Rather than being raw wood like most *asese dwa*, the Asokoremanhemaa's leisure stool seems to have some kind of brown wash covering it, possibly a varnish. On the four corners of the raised platform and corresponding underside of the stool's seat, slightly lighter areas are visible that suggest it formerly had four supports such as the ones included in the *mmaa dwa* design. Likely, the Euro-American style supports are a repair that was made to a more conventional stool.



Figure 29 Nana Braku Yaa I's "leisure" stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The stool Nana Braku Yaa I uses for public events features the *gye nyame adinkra* symbol surrounded by four supporting columns and measures 39.5 x 53.5 x 25.5 (H x W x D). It is a very basic form that includes little embellishment. The rounded projections running the length of each of the four supports are simplified versions of the small triangular shapes seen on the Offinsohemaa's *Mmaa dwa* stool. This abbreviation of the decorative motif on the support columns is common among the pre-fabricated stools available for sale at Ahwia to buyers who are not interested in ordering a custom-carved

stool. Nana Braku Yaa I inherited her *Gye nyame* stool from the previous queen mother, so she did not have information on how it was acquired originally; however, based on its features, it was likely purchased ready-made. Neither the Asokoremanhemaa's leisure stool nor her *Gye nyame* stool have the inverted "steps" on the underside of their bases that Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, says are important features of a high-ranking leader's stool.[259]



Figure 30 Nana Braku Yaa I's Bathing Stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The most elaborately carved and decorated stool in Nana Braku Yaa I's possession is her bath stool, which measures 25 x 49 x 18 cm (H x W x D) (see Figure 30). Its central structure is composed of a liquor bottle shape bracketed on each side by a semi-circular support that is plated with silver-colored metal, which is embossed with irregularly spaced half-moon shapes. The underside of the stool's base includes a single diamond "step" cut directly below the central support. Although she was not concerned about the height of her stool relative to subordinate queen mothers, the

[259] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author 14 June 2012.

Asokoremanhemaa told me that if a lower-ranking queen mother integrated metal into her stool, especially an *odikrohemaa*, she would be destooled.[260] Nana Braku Yaa I also inherited the *sese dwa* she uses for bathing from the previous queen mother and explains that she selected it for this particular purpose since it was the smallest one in her stool archive.[261]

Traditionally, a queen mother's bath stool is the one that is blackened and placed in the stool room upon her death because it is the one with which she had the most personal contact. However, changes to bathing facilities in contemporary contexts means that not all queen mothers use a bath stool as Nana Braku Yaa I does.[262] In such cases, I found that queen mothers considered their "special" stool used for public appearances, holding court and other official events to be their most intimate stool. This presents a challenge because many of the female leaders explained to me that size is a very important consideration for selecting a stool to be blackened. Most compounds and their stool rooms have limited space and cannot accommodate the larger-sized stools that have become the norm among "special" stools in the second half of the twentieth century. In addition, the changes to size that have occurred over time mean that the ancestral stools of historical queen mothers would be significantly smaller than those of more recent leaders, thereby visually suggesting an inappropriate and inaccurate hierarchical relationship between women who held the same position.

As Nana Afia Serwaa, the Aputuogyahemaa, explained to me, "it doesn't show respect to your ancestors because they are having smaller ones like this [referring to a

[260] Nana Braku Yaa I, Asokoremanhemaa, in conversation with the author, 8 June 2012.

[261] Ibid.

[262] Only two other queen mothers with whom I spoke showed me a bath stool: Nana Afia Serwaa, Aputuogyahemaa, and Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, Adumasahemaa.

shorter stool] and it is as if you are more important than the one that created the stool."[263] A practical solution, which seems to be accepted by most lineages facing this problem, is to have the queen mothers get a small copy of their "special" stool made for blackening and placement in the stool room. The stool likely would not be an exact copy but rather, an approximation. The queen mothers who proposed this strategy seem to have somewhat non-traditional views regarding the relationship between an owner's contact with a particular stool and its suitability for blackening.

While some queen mothers, most of whom use bathing stools, believe that it is important to blacken a stool that had intimate and consistent contact with its user, others are content with having a new copy made for this process. For example, Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, the Wadie Awumakasehemaa, told me that because she "believes in God," it does not matter to her if a brand new, unused stool is purchased for blackening.[264] She explained that "in the olden days" it was more of a concern but with the spread of Christianity, practices have changed.[265] In addition, most queen mothers with whom I spoke were not particularly worried about the aesthetic appearance of their stools designated for blackening because the designs on them quickly become unrecognizable when they receive fat, sheep's blood and other offerings during regular ceremonial rites. Although Nana Braku Yaa I's bath stool is the most elaborately embellished of the group she showed me, this seems to be a product of the fact that it was small and available, rather than an intentional decision related to design.

[263] Nana Afia Serwaa, Aputuogyahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[264] Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

[265] Ibid.

Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, Senfi Adumasahemaa (Abremponhemaa)

Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo (formerly Nana Yaa Birago II) is the (Senfi) Adumasahemaa, which is at the level of Abrempon. She reports directly to Manhyia (the Asantehene) and has sixteen villages under her authority. Enstooled in 1928 at the age of six (she was 91 at the time of our interview), she is the eldest and longest reigning queen mother with whom I spoke. She was preceded on the stool (in reverse chronological order) by Nana Abrafi, Nana Boatemaa, Nana Nyanta Kromo, Nana Dwirafisem, and Nana Birago I.[266] From the age of ten to the age of fifteen, Nana Yaa Birago II lived at Hiaa (the home of the wives of the Asantehene in Manhyia Palace) with her mother's sister, Nana Ama Ampong, the first wife of Asantehene Osei Agyeman Prempeh II, who reigned from 1931 to 1970. Nana Yaa Birago II's grandfather, Opanin Osei Kwaku from Tano Adwuman, was a stool carrier for the Asantehene.[267]

"Kokodurofo" is the name added to Nana Yaa Birago II's title by Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II on the 80th anniversary of her enstoolment in 2008. It means "brave" and its inclusion in her name acknowledges her strength and endurance throughout the trials she faced over her years as Adumasahemaa. The Adumasa Stool, now occupied by Nana Amankwah Kodom Ababio, Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's son, was the subject of a decades-long chieftaincy dispute that was eventually resolved by the Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II on 15 March 2007. The stool has had twenty-three occupants in the course of its history, at least seven of whom are now deemed non-royal custodians and have since been removed from the official record of the "true royal

[266] "Special Commemorative Brochure for the 80th Anniversary Reign of Nana Birago II, Queenmother of Senfi Adumasa," published by printart, Asafo-Ksi in April 2008. Received from Nana Birago Kokodurofo 15 June 2012. 24.

[267] Ibid. 11-12.

lineage of the Adumasa Stool."[268] This complex history led to a number of competing claims to the Stool by different lineages. Nana Birago Kokodurofo's family reports that she was the target of relentless and brutal attacks and harassment during the protracted period of contestation. Individuals making claims to the Stool and their supporters refused to allow her to bury her mother at Adumasa and barred community members from traveling to her funeral. At one point they went so far as to destroy Nana Yaa Birago II's home.[269]

Despite the tumultuous events that occurred over a period of more than a decade, Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo does not regret her decision to fight for her lineage's right to the Adumasa Stool. As her niece, Elizabeth Paul Hutchison, explained to me, "she knows she is the right person for the stool…so she doesn't care what anybody says. She knows she is the right person and she is doing the right thing. She doesn't regret it though she went through all this."[270] When I asked Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo how the dispute was finally settled, she told me that each of the competing queen mothers was called before the Asantehene to recite the history of the Adumasa Stool. As the rightful heir, she was the only one in possession of extensive and detailed knowledge.[271]

Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo showed me six stools she uses regularly. Like Nana Braku Yaa I, her bathing stool is one of her most important stools and will be blackened

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[268] "Special Commemorative Brochure for the 80th Anniversary Reign of Nana Birago II, Queenmother of Senfi Adumasa," published by printart, Asafo-Ksi in April 2008. Received from Nana Birago Kokodurofo 15 June 2012. 24.

[269] Elizabeth Paul Hutchison, niece of Nana Birago Kokodurofo, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.

[270] Ibid.

[271] None of the information I have included for any of the stools anywhere in my dissertation would be sufficient to prove the right to a particular Stool. In a very few of my interviews, queen mothers felt, after they had spoken, that they provided too many details on a particular subject. In such cases, I have eliminated those details from my reports.

upon her death (see Figure 31). However, she differs from Nana Braku Yaa I in that her bathing stool is the least elaborate of those in her possession. The stool measures 18 x 42 x 17 cm (H x W x D). Similar to the Offinsohemaa's *Mmaa dwa* and *Pantu* stools, it has five supporting columns: one on each corner and one at the center. Every column is a basic three-dimensional rectangle and the central support is the same with only one narrow zig-zag pattern running down its center for decoration.

According to Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, zig-zag motifs, which are common decorative elements in different variations on many stools, are symbolic of unity.[272] Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's bathing stool does not boast the "checkerboard" core or triangular projections found in the historical *mmaa dwa* design. In fact, it probably more closely resembles the *Namma* or "two-penny" stool Rattray suggested was for poor people (except for its thin line of decoration – the *Namma* stool has no embellishment at all).[273] It does not include the *atiko puaa* (rounded projections) on the underside of the seat that are common to most conventional *sese dwa* and the base has only one small cutout in the shape of a triangle beneath the solid central support. As I mentioned above, the use of a very basic stool design for bathing and subsequent blackening seems to be a relatively common practice among the queen mothers I interviewed, regardless of their status.

[272] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

[273] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272.



Figure 31 Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's Bathing Stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The stool the Adumasahemaa uses for public events is what the contemporary carvers with whom I spoke at Ahwiaa call a *Mmaa dwa* (see Figure 32). Unlike Rattray's historical *Mmaa dwa* it has the same rounded projections (rather than triangular) seen along the edges of the outside supports on Nana Braku Yaa I's *Gye nyame* stool and a slight variation on the decoration of its central column. Rather than a checkerboard pattern across its entire surface, the hollow cylindrical column includes groups of four triangles running vertically down the center with a line of squares on each side. This is the same design seen on the column on the *Me fa asa* stool listed by Rattray. The stool is 31 x 55 x 22 (H x W x D) and is irregularly covered with a light blue powder that Nana Birago Kokodurofo said is a form of defense against termites she applies to her raw wood stools.[274] The underside of the stool features one "step" carved into the area around the opening of the hollowed-out central support column.

[274] Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, Adumasahemaa, in conversation with the author, 15 June 2012.



Figure 32 Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's contemporary *mmaa dwa*. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The remaining stools the Adumasahemaa showed to me are ones that she uses only in her own compound. One, which measures 29 x 51 x 20 cm (H x W xD), features a rectangular column with staircases extending from its center toward the top of the seat and the bottom of the stool's base. This design makes reference to the proverb *owuo atwedee baako mmforo, obiara bewu*, "everyone climbs the ladder of death," which reminds its viewers that mortality is universal. The raw stool is covered in the same blue pest protection as the previously discussed contemporary *Mmaa dwa* and the underside of its base is completely flat. Nana Birago Kokodurofo also owns a *Nyansapo* or "wisdom knot" stool that is very similar to the one owned by the Offinsohemaa. The dimensions of the Adumasahemaa's stool are 36 x 55.5 x 22 cm (H x W x D) and the underside of its base is uniform as well.

The two remaining of Nana Birago Kokodurofo's stools are entirely covered in silver paint. Nana Birago Kokodurofo did not offer an explanation for this choice but the edges of the stools under the paint seem to be worn extensively, suggesting that it may have been added as a way to refresh them for ongoing use. The paint may also serve a

similar purpose to the blue pest protection seen on previous stools by keeping termites at bay. The first measures 34 x 47 x 18 cm (H x W x D). It has a central column with two vertical lines of zig-zag motifs that run parallel to one another, which is encircled by a support structure that has small triangular projections running down the center of its outside edges. A small diamond-shaped cutout is visible on the underside of its base below the solid central support. This stool is in the design carvers at Ahwiaa refer to as *Kotoko dwa* (and call a "men's design"). I will discuss this form at more length later on this chapter.

The second stool measures 34 x 53.5 x 21 cm (H x W x D) and is of the type Rattray referred to as the *Obi-te-obi-so* or "someone-sits-on-top-of-someone-else" stool (see Figure 33).[275] The name of the stool describes the fact that it includes two stools, one placed on top of the other. Nana Frempong Boadu told me that the order of stools in such an arrangement is important as the stool on top indicates superiority.[276] Nana Birago Kokodurofo's two-tiered stool has a somewhat simplified version of a historical *Mmaa dwa* (presumably, representing queen mothers) on its bottom level. The central support does not include a checkerboard pattern but the corner supports feature the triangular projections that are a hallmark of this stool type. I would argue that the stool on the upper level is a rudimentary representation of the Golden Stool. The narrow angular supports that run from the edges of the seat of the Golden Stool on each side down to its base, which are suggested here, are not found on most stools. The only other stool with angular supports I have ever seen is the *Animinkwa* stool published in Rattray's account. However, the absence of *atiko puaa* (rounded projections on the underside of the seat) on

[275] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 273.

[276] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.

the top stool further supports the idea that it may represent the Golden Stool as it is one of the only stools that does not have them (other than the *namma* stool previously mentioned). If read based on this interpretation, the stool's message also makes sense: all leaders are subordinate to the Golden Stool.



Figure 33 Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's *Obi-te-obi-so* stool. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa (Abremponhemaa)

Nana Birago Ababio, the Mpobihemaa, who is at the level of Abrempon, was enstooled in 1974 at the age of ten. The Mpobi Stool is one of about seven Stools that comprise the Nsenia division (with the Nsenia Stool at its head). Nana Birago Ababio's lineage owns multiple stools, which they keep at various locations (including her home in Kumase, her home in her village, the chief's palace and relative's houses). If she is planning to host a gathering of queen mothers, she gathers these stools together so she has enough to seat her guests. Although she inherited several stools from the previous queen mother, she chose to acquire new ones for her most frequent use. As I mentioned previously, the Mpobihemaa has an (imitation) silver-plated stool that she uses in her own community but would never take elsewhere or use in the presence of a higher-

ranking chief or queen mother. Unfortunately, I was unable to view this stool because she keeps it at her village for use when she sits in state and our meeting took place at her house in Kumase.

During our visit, Nana Birago Ababio showed me two stools she keeps at her home in the city. The first, which she sat on during the course of our interview, measures 34 x 56 x 24.5 cm (H x W x D) (see Figure 34). It is composed in the five-support style the carvers at Ahwiaa referred to as the *Mmaa dwa* design when I spoke with them in 2012. Its column is rectangular and features a motif composed of groupings of four triangles flanked by zig-zag lines that run vertically on each side. Its four corner supports have rounded, rather than triangular, projections along their outside edges (with the exception of the rectangular column, this stool owned by Nana Birago Ababio is very similar to the one in Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo's possession). The top of Nana Birago Ababio's stool's base includes the "steps" leading up to the central platform that are characteristic of conventional stools but the underside of its base, with the exception of the opening to the hollow central core, is entirely flush. Although Nana Birago Ababio was in possession of a stool the contemporary carvers at Ahwiaa called the *Mmaa dwa* design (which, according to them was exclusively for queen mothers' use), the Mpobihemaa was not aware of any such designation. When I asked her about the carvers' name for this particular stool form she replied, "no, I don't know. Me, what I know is I can buy any stool I want… all these stools are made for women. So, I don't see why they make a specific one for women that is a *Mmaa dwa*."[277]

[277] Nana Birago Ababio, Mpobihemaa, in conversation with the author, 6 June 2012.



Figure 34 Nana Birago Ababio's contemporary *mmaa dwa*. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Many of the queen mothers I interviewed, who also owned the so-called *Mmaa dwa*, among other designs, shared similar sentiments. In fact, it was common among queen mothers to use the term "*mmaa dwa*" interchangeably to refer to any form of *sese dwa*. As the District Cultural Officer for Kwabre East, Stephen Anderson, explained to me in conversation with Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, the Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, the name for conventional stools "is *asese dwa*. The name is *asese dwa* but because you are a queen mother and you are the leader of all the women you have the name given to you…. the *sese dwa* you sit on is [called] *mmaa dwa*."[278] Conversely, men's *asipim* chairs are sometimes referred to by the encompassing term *marima dwa*, which is the same name Rattray ascribed to a specific conventional stool type that he labeled "the man's stool."[279]

[278] Stephen Anderson, District Cultural Officer for Kwabre East, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

[279] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272.

It is worth noting that the five-part design referred to by the carvers as *Mmaa dwa* was the most common *asese dwa* among the queen mothers I interviewed. In addition to the cases I have already outlined, I observed examples of the contemporary *Mmaa dwa* in the collections of Nana Ama Konadu II (Esresohemaa), Nana Ama Agyeman (Kodiehemaa), Nana Gyama Pensan II (Aboasohemaa), Nana Sika Brayie (Sasaamopaninbenkumhemaa), Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio (Wadie Adwumakasehemaa), and Nana Darkowaa (*odikrohemaa* serving under the Mantia Stool).

Nana Gyama Pensan II, the Aboasohemaa, an *abremponhemaa* who serves under the Kumase Traditional Council[280] in the Kwabre East District, is one of the few queen mothers who acknowledged the name of the five-support design as the *Mmaa dwa*. She explained that it is very popular among queen mothers but there is no specific rule that says that queen mothers must own this design. For Nana Gyama Pensan II, the design of the stool represents the queen mother (the central column) who is surrounded by the elders, attendants and women of the town (the supporting columns).[281] The Aboasohemaa uses a newly carved *mmaa dwa* with triangular projections and a central core with a vertical triangular design motif that measures 37.5 x 53 x 27 cm (H x W x D) as her "special" stool. Such a designation may explain why Rattray (1927) claimed that the stool called the *Mmaa dwa* was exclusively for women and that "a man, when he marries, generally presents his wife with this stool."[282] In such a context it would make sense for a man to give his wife a stool representing ideas of fertility, motherhood, community and

[280] Because Nana Gyama Pensan II serves under the Kumase Traditional Council she is *abrempon* but her status is more akin to an *omanhemaa*.

[281] Nana Gyama Pensan II, Aboasohemaa, in conversation with the author, 7 June 2012.

[282] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272.

stability. In many ways, it seems that the naming of the design "*Mmaa dwa*" may reference the ideas it embodies about women rather than making exclusive reference to the individuals permitted to use it.



Figure 35 Nana Birago Ababio's *Kotoko dwa*. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The second stool Nana Birago Ababio showed me during our visit featured a central column encircled by rounded supports (see Figure 35). It is called *Kotoko dwa* by the carvers at Ahwiaa and is similar to both the *Kotoko 'gwa* and the *Kontonkowori* stools listed by Rattray in his stool catalogue. Rattray actually names *Kotoko 'gwa* twice in two separate figures (159 and 177). The first, he claims can be owned only by "*amanhene* (paramount chiefs)"; the second, he says is the "porcupine stool" that is sat upon by "members of the king's council, composed of the *Ashante'Hene*, the *amanhene*, and the greater priests."[283] He attributes the ownership of the *Kontonkowori* to the Asantehene.[284]

[283] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 272-273.

[284] Ibid. 273.

The carvers at Ahwiaa told me that any variation on the design that includes a central column that is encircled by rounded supports is called *Kotoko dwa*. Particularly elaborate versions of such a design, which are very rare, are called *Kontonkowori*, which means, roughly, "the *Kotoko dwa* of all *Kotoko dwas*."[285] This explains why Rattray had two designs listed under the same title – they are all called *Kotoko dwa* but, as I have shown so far, they have varying degrees of elaboration that are relative to one another. Depending on the extravagance of a higher-ranking individual's stool, the *Kotoko dwa* designs below him must necessarily be less elaborate.

When I showed Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, images of a very ornate version of a *Kotoko dwa* in the collection of the British Museum, he said that one like this is a *Kontonkowori* and is "forbidden to carve" for anyone but the Asantehene (see Figure 36). This version from the British Museum is far more extravagant than the stool depicted by Rattray under the same title. The stool types Rattray documented were ones that he asked carvers at Ahwiaa to create to demonstrate the range of stool types in existence. Since it would be illegal to carve a sumptuous *Kontonkorowi* for anyone other than the Asantehene, it may be that the carvers made a slightly more elaborate *Kotoko dwa* and labeled it a *Kontonkorowi* for Rattray. Such an approach captures the idea of the relativity of design rules but it does not communicate the complexity of their uses when they were framed, as by Rattray, in a seemingly inflexible hierarchy of forms. This is yet another reason to assess Rattray's categorical distinctions with a critical eye.

[285] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver and Adom Gyamfi Richard, Secretary of the Ahwiaa Wood Carver's Association, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.



Figure 36 *Kontonkowori* in the collection of the British Museum that I showed to carvers at Ahwiaa. (Object ID Af 1956,10.12. Image credit: Catherine Hale)

While Rattray and the carvers at Ahwiaa, both in the 1920s and today, referred to the *Kotoko dwa* as a "men's design," several queen mothers with whom I spoke owned them and, like Nana Birago Ababio, were not aware of any gendered classifications. Nana Ama Konadu, the Esresohemaa, who is at the level of Abrempon, keeps one in her possession to seat visiting queen mothers.[286] During my interview with Nana Akosua Abrafi II, the Sewuahemaa, she sat on an exquisitely carved *Kotoko dwa* that features the same spider web-shaped "steps" carved into the underside of its base as the *Kontonkowori* in the British Museum (although its design is not as elaborate overall) (see Figures 4 and 37). Not surprisingly, this very decorative stool is not the one that Nana Akosua Abrafi II uses to travel - she keeps it at her palace. However, she expressed no knowledge of or concerns about it being designated for men.

[286] Nana Ama Konadu II, Esresohemaa, in conversation with the author, 30 May 2012.



Figure 37 Nana Akosua Abrafi II's *Kotoko dwa*. For view of underside, see Figure 4.
(Image credit: Catherine Hale)

Like Nana Birago Ababio, the Sewuahemaa told me that "the *asese dwa*, all the *asese dwa* belong to the women."[287] When I asked her about the stools that men or chiefs sit on she explained that they only use it for bathing so "it doesn't matter…be it the four legs or the one with the round checkerboard…because you don't sit on it in public, when you die and they [blacken] that one for you, fine. It's still the stools of the woman or the queen mother's stools. In public, if you see a man sitting on a *sese dwa* it will be the attendants."[288] As I noted previously, Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, who was enstooled in 1928, uses at least one *Kotoko dwa*, which, by its appearance, seems to be several decades old (it may have been inherited from the previous queen mother but she did not say). The Adumasahemaa's use of a *Kotoko dwa* suggests that queen mothers did not

[287] Nana Akosua Abrafi II, Sewuahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[288] Ibid.

subscribe to the rules outlined by Rattray and the carvers at Ahwiaa as early as the first part of the twentieth century, if ever.

Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, Wadie Adwumakasehemaa (Ohemaa/Obaapanin)

Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio was enstooled as the Wadie Adwumakasehemaa, which is at the level of *ohemaa* or *obaapanin*, in 1992. When I visited with her she showed me four stools that she uses frequently. Two she acquired new, one she inherited from the previous queen mother, Nana Afia Fofie, and one the *abusuapanin* or male head of the family keeps at his residence for her to use when she visits. Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio explained that she had to purchase the two additional stools because she needed to have enough *asese dwa* available to seat visiting queen mothers. She has a *kotoko dwa* that she acquired at the time of her enstoolment that is 25.5 x 50 x 20 cm (H x W x D). About a decade later, she began to find the *Kotoko dwa* too short for comfort and acquired a new stool that she currently uses for most events.

This "special" stool, which is now around ten years old, is carved in the contemporary *Mmaa dwa* design and measures 32 x 51 x 24 cm (H x W x D). Its underside does not include any "steps," though there is an opening to the hollow core of the central support. To describe this stool design, Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio used the term "*ahenanan*" interchangeably with "*mmaa dwa*." "*Ahen*" means "how much" and "*anan*" is the Twi word for "four." Nana Akosua Abrafi II (Sewuahemaa) and Nana Birago Ababio (Mpobihemaa) also used this same vocabulary. At least among queen mothers, "*ahenanan*" seems to describe stools with the four columnar supports that are

characteristic of the *Mmaa dwa* design. According to Nana Akosua Abrafi II, "*ahenanan*" is the "real name of the [stool] with four legs."[289]

Like the Offinsohemaa, the Adumasahemaa, and the Kodiehemaa, the Wadie Adwumakasehemaa has a *Nyansapo* or "wisdom knot" stool (see Figure 10). She inherited it from the previous queen mother, which means that it is at least fifty-five years old, if not more. It measures 39 x 49 x 28 cm (H x W x D) and has a small double zig-zag pattern carved into the bottom section of each support. Although Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio is the lowest ranking queen mother of those whom I interviewed that were in possession of a *Nyansapo* stool, at 39 centimeters, hers was the tallest and most skillfully carved of the group.

The stool the *abusuapanin* keeps at his residence for the Wadie Adwumakasehemaa's use measures 30 x 59 x 22 cm (H x W x D) (see Figure 38). It features an elephant figure as its main support – a style that Rattray called the "*Esono 'gwa*" or "Elephant Stool" and said was "only used by the King of Ashanti."[290] According to Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio, this stool is more than fifty years old. This was the only stool with a figural support I observed in all of my interviews with queen mothers. Although Rattray's stool catalogue reveals that "elephant stools" were being created at least as early as the 1920s, many of the queen mothers I interviewed still associate the design with their southern neighbors, the Fante. When I presented images of a stool from the British Museum with an elephant figural support to a number of different queen mothers, they told me that it was "Fante" and not Asante. Although such stools may be in the collection of the Asantehene and others, they appear to be far less common

[289] Nana Akosua Abrafi II, Sewuahemaa, in conversation with the author, 4 June 2012.

[290] R.S. Rattray, *Religion and Art in Ashanti* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927): 273.

among queen mothers than the stools that incorporate more abstract geometric designs or *adinkra* symbols.



Figure 38 The stool the *abusuapanin* keeps at his residence for Nana Kwartemaa Nyiano Ababio. (image credit: Catherine Hale)

As the preceding case studies and related examples demonstrate, queen mothers' possession and uses of *asese dwa* are fluid and dynamic. Contrary to the outline established by Rattray and subsequent authors, there is no clear delineation of "rules" about who can own which designs. Instead, the prescriptions shift and change according to the context and attitudes of the most superior leader. In many ways, queen mothers perform their identity through the use of stools and other regalia in an ongoing process of negotiation. Like innumerable art forms from across the African continent, such as masks or cloths, the meaning and significance of *asese dwa* must be understood within this larger framework of performance.

The New Stool Types

In the latter half of the 20th century a new form of stool emerged. It draws on the *sese dwa* shape but is less finely hewn, has a more block-like structure, and displays

significantly less curvature in its seat formation (see Figure 39). Stools of this type are frequently varnished and feature *adinkra* symbols (visual representations of concepts or proverbs) as a central design motif, rather than being left unfinished and/or boasting the more abstract geometric patterns common to conventional stools in the Ashanti Region. Instead of the incised steps on either side of the top of the base and the concentric shapes carved into the underside of the stool that are hallmarks of tradition and prestige on conventional stool types, the new stool type usually has a repetitive "X" motif carved into the top of its base and its underside is entirely flat.

According to Nana Frempong Boadu, chief carver to Asantehene Otumfuo Osei Tutu II (the current king or ruler of the Asante peoples), carvers developed this new stool type in response to a combination of factors, including reduced supplies of the traditional *sese* wood used to carve stools, increased costs of tools required for carving, and the rising demands of the foreign market.[291] These new stools require much smaller pieces of wood from which to carve and craftsmen often replace *sese* with a cheaper or more readily available wood such as mahogany. Because of the uneven and darker coloring of cheaper woods, they are sometimes referred to as "red" stools. The new stool type can be carved in a matter of days, rather than the weeks, months, or in some exceptional cases, years, necessary to create conventional stools. Unlike *sese dwa* their designs do not have gendered and hierarchical ownership prescriptions – anyone can own and use any style of the new stool but their uses of them differ dramatically from conventional stools.

[291] Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, in conversation with the author, 14 June 2012.



Figure 39 Example of the new stool type with *Gye nyame* design. Collection of the author. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The most popular new stool type features the "*gye nyame*" *adinkra* symbol, which refers to the proverb "I fear nothing except God" (Figure 39). S. F. Adjei, current director of the Centre for National Culture - Kumase, and Nana Sarfo Kantanka, the institution's deputy director, credit Dr. A. A. Kyerematen, founder and first director of the Centre, with the conception of this now ubiquitous design. Adjei and Kantanka explained that Kyerematen asked the carvers at Ahwiaa to create a stool that would represent the Asante Cultural Centre in its role in the preservation and promotion of Asante culture.[292] The selected design, with its reference to God, mediated between indigenous spirituality and the Christian belief systems that were adopted by the majority of the Asante population by the mid-twentieth century. In 1963, after a visit by Dr. Kwame Nkrumah, first

[292] S.F. Adjei, Director of the Centre for National Culture - Kumase and Nana Sarfo Kantanka, Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture – Kumase, in conversation with the author, June 2012. It is worth noting the parallels between Adjei and Kantanka's account of Kyerematen's conception of the *gye nyame* stool and the well-known story of the birth of the Golden Stool, which is said to have come into existence around the beginning of the eighteenth century when Osei Tutu asked his chief priest and advisor, Okomfo Anokye, to create a symbol that would represent the Asante nation.

president of the newly independent Ghana, the Asante Cultural Centre was renamed the Ghana National Cultural Centre, and its symbols and strategies were adapted into a larger nationalist agenda.[293] Since that time, the *Gye nyame* stool has become the most frequently produced and purchased form of the new stool type. It is readily available in markets from Accra in the south to Tamale in the north and appears at tourist shops in other West African nations. For example, I observed the *Gye nyame* stool in Burkina Faso and Mali during fieldwork in 2009.

Perhaps not surprisingly, carvers in Ahwiaa and at the Centre for National Culture - Kumase report that the market for the new stool type is primarily foreign. Promoted as the quintessential souvenir of Asante and, more broadly, Ghanaian identity, it comes in a variety of sizes and finishes that facilitate cross-border portability (smaller stools not only fit in luggage better, the varnish that is applied to most of them helps alleviate any concerns international border agents have about transmission of insect infestations). Locally, Asante buyers also may purchase these stools as decorative features for their homes, but most queen mothers and chiefs with whom I spoke declared that it would be entirely inappropriate to use them in any kind of official political or ritual capacity.[294]

Of all the queen mothers I interviewed, only one, Nana Ama Agyeman (the Kodiehemaa), had one of the new stool types in her possession. It was covered in a dark brown varnish and featured the *sankofa adinkra* symbol (a bird with its head turned back toward its tail, representing the proverb "go back and pick," which makes reference to the idea that one should learn from the past in order to move forward). Nana Ama Agyeman

[293] Nana Sarfo Kantanka, Deputy Director of the Centre for National Culture – Kumase in conversation with the author, June 2012.

[294] This information was gathered during fieldwork between 2007 and 2012.

explained that she received the stool as a gift from a friend and, although she appreciated its aesthetic appearance, she would never use it in her role as a queen mother. Instead, it was integrated into her living room as an ornament. The information that royals would never use the new stool type in ritual is, of course, rarely shared with overseas customers, who are often regaled with stories about stools' roles in chieftaincy and ancestral veneration in the process of a sale. Product descriptions on websites such as Ebay and Overstock.com include numerous references to "Asante royal stools," in their promotion of stools that conform to this new type.

Although the new stool type proliferates in the shops that line the main road running through Ahwiaa (the village in the Ashanti region where carvers are centralized) and can be found in almost every tourist outlet across Ghana, it did not replace the conventional style, but rather, emerged in parallel as a solution to the growing problem of reduced resources and increased demand from global markets. At the same time as carvers create these new stools for foreign buyers, they are still actively creating the more conventional stool type, which is popular locally with Asante queen mothers. Tourists are welcome to purchase a variety of conventional stool types that are for sale in Ahwiaa but the carvers report that most foreigners opt for the new type, which is almost always varnished. Several shops sell varnished stools of the new type that have been made to look old through the addition of dust, mud and wear marks.

The Seat of State of Ghana

While the new stool form is not used in Asante rituals, it is integrated into the design of the Seat of State of Ghana created by Kofi Antubam in the early 1960s (see Figure 40). The distinguishing feature of the new stool type in this context is the

repeating "x" motif that is visible along the edges of the stools' bases. As previously discussed, conventional stools have a series of "steps" (parallel lines) rather than the "x" motif. Although scholars have noted the integration of the *Kotoko dwa* stool design in the upper portion of the chair's base,[295] the double platform suggests that the lower part of the chair, in fact, may represent what is called an *Obi-te-obi-so* or "someone-sits-on-top-of-someone-else" stool.

This stool design features two different stools, one placed on top of the other, and, according to Nana Frempong Boadu, Otumfuo Chief Carver, the higher stool indicates the superiority of the individual or concept it represents. As I discuss in Chapter Four, Nana Yaa Birago Kokodurofo, the Adumasahemaa, keeps one of these stools in her palace. In her case, the upper stool appears to be a rudimentary representation of the Golden Stool, which surmounts the *Mmaa dwa* design frequently associated with queen mothers. The likely message communicated by such a configuration is that all leaders are subordinate to the Golden Stool. What is remarkable about the design of the Seat of State of Ghana is that it also appears to integrate a stool form similar to the Golden Stool, which has angular supports running from the narrow part of the base of the central support upward toward the seat. However, in this arrangement, the Golden Stool is below the upper stool, which is a *Kotoko dwa*.

[295] See Janet Hess, "Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary and "National" Art in the Nkrumah Era," *African Studies Review*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Apr 2001): 59-77 and Carola Lentz, "Traveling Emblems of power: The Ghanaian 'Seat of State'," Institut für Ethnologie und Afrikastudien, Department of Anthropology and African Studies, *Working Papers* 94 (2008): 1-20.



Figure 40 Seat of State of Ghana. (Image source: Vieta, *The Flag Bearers of Ghana*, 2000. p. 116)

The *Kotoko dwa* is conceived sometimes as a general reference to chieftaincy. It is possible that Antubam, who was widely celebrated as an Nkrumah Era artist,[296] intended to communicate the subversion of the Golden Stool (and therein, the Asante Confederacy) to the new composition of the Republic, which was made up of many different chieftaincies. Such a sentiment would be in line with the tensions between the powerful Asante Confederacy and the formation of the newly defined nation that emerged in the twentieth century. Antubam's father was an Asante chief but in his own politics the artist communicated simultaneously an admiration for tradition and a desire to break away from it.

According to Antumbam, "Art expresses both the tradition and aspirations of a people, what they consider desirable for the present and the future.... The force of outside influences is no source of danger to a virile artistic tradition that is too profoundly aware

[296] See Janet Hess, "Exhibiting Ghana: Display, Documentary and "National" Art in the Nkrumah Era," *African Studies Review*, vol. 44, no. 1 (Apr 2001): 59-77

of itself to lose its personal and national identity."[297] Although the *Kotoko dwa* makes reference to chieftaincy, it does so in a manner that makes it possible to encompass many different cultures that have similar political structures but do not identify themselves with the Golden Stool as the Asante do.

At the same time, the Asante are frequently symbolized by the *Kotoko* or porcupine symbol, which may suggest that the artist was intentionally asserting two distinctly Asante emblems within the national design. Why Antubam placed the *Kotoko dwa* in a superior position to the Golden Stool is an intriguing question with many possible answers. Whatever its intended meaning, the integration of the new stool type in the Seat of State of Ghana fits within the larger twentieth century trend of mobilizing stools as a ubiquitous emblem of Ghanaian national identity. Whether found in architectural features, on printed cloth or napkin holders (among a myriad of other things), the stool is synonymous with the identity of independent Ghana in a global sphere.

Catholic and Anglican Altars as Stools

Anglican and Catholic churches in the Ashanti Region developed another important variation of the *sese dwa* in the second half of the twentieth century: their altars. In post-Independence Ghana, the Catholic and Anglican churches both underwent significant changes in their approaches to Christianity. As Pashington Obeng explains, prior to the consecration of Rev. Dr. Peter Kwasi Sarpong (an Asante born in Maase-Offinso) as Bishop of the Kumase Catholic Diocese in November 1969, "the church's energy was spent on establishing a mission station, mainly to 'convert' the Asante to

[297] Quoted in Lawrence Grobel, "Ghana's Vincent Kofi," *African Arts*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1964): 68.

Christianity and consequently transform their culture."[298] Lead by European priests who labeled activities like drumming, dancing, puberty rites and festivals "pagan," Asante Catholics were expected to wholly abandon all traditional responsibilities such as ancestral veneration and take on the lifestyle (as well as the beliefs) of the missionaries. Preceding the Bishopric of Sarpong, mass was given in Latin and sermons offered in English (in some cases with a vernacular translation) and clerical vestments were purchased or copied from European prototypes.[299]

Sarpong's appointment followed shortly after Vatican II (1962 – 1965), an ecumenical council composed of the world's Roman Catholic religious leaders, who met to discuss changes to the Church's doctrine. One of the key outcomes from the process was the shift toward an openness to engage in dialogue with other world religions and practices. Although Africa was not the intended focus of the discussions, the documents produced through the council continue to provide guidance in the continent's Roman Catholic restructuring.[300] In contemporary Kumase, Catholic services now integrate a wide range of indigenous regalia and rituals. When I attended the Thanksgiving Mass of the Golden Jubilee in the Priesthood of Most Rev. Peter K. Sarpong (now Archbishop Emeritus of Kumase) at St. Peter's Basilica in December 2009, Asante cultural symbols were everywhere evident. For example, dancers and drummers preceded the entry of the religious leaders (who had come from all over West Africa and further abroad for the event) in a manner echoing the ceremonies that occur prior to the entry of an important chief. The stoles of the priests were *kente* cloths and many of the Bishop's mitres featured

[298] Pashington Obeng, *Asante Catholicism: Religious and Cultural Reproduction Among the Akan of Ghana* (New York: E.J. Brill, 1996): 121.

[299] Ibid. 121-122.

[300] Ibid. 121-123.

adinkra symbols. The key officiants took their seats on *asipim* and *akonkromfi* chairs underneath an umbrella comparable to those used by the most elite Asante chiefs and queen mothers.

When I attended Anglican services at St. Cyprien's Cathedral and St. Anne's Parish (the Seat of the Manhyia Archdeaconry) in November 2009, I witnessed similar kinds of integration of indigenous symbols, regalia and practices. Like the Catholic Cathedral, religious leaders at St. Cyprien's sit under an umbrella on chairs similar to those used by chiefs. At St. Anne's, which is the official church of the Asantehene, the service was given entirely in Twi and presenting the offering (which I was invited to participate in by the Guild of the Good Shepherd, who was responsible for providing it that week) involved carrying baskets of various foodstuffs to the altar while we and the rest of the parish danced to lively music to express our thanks.

These various adaptations mean that services differ dramatically from the types formerly offered by European missionaries. For the purposes of this discussion, one of the most interesting modifications made by Anglican and Catholic churches in Kumase in recent decades is the integration of stool-shaped altars. While the altars in Anglican and Catholic churches elsewhere in the country have a standard shape more akin to what one would find in most North American or European institutions, many of the churches in Asante have stool-shaped altars in their sanctuaries and chapels. According to Rt. Rev. Edmund K. Yeboah, who was the Bishop of Kumase from 1985 to 1998, the incorporation of the stool shape took root in the latter half of the twentieth century, when

the Anglican and Catholic churches began to expand their influence, build new structures and integrate indigenous emblems.[301]



Figure 41 Stool-shaped chapel altar at St. Paul's Anglican Church, Kumase.
(Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The altars are not exact replicas of *asese dwa*, but their configurations suggest the stool form most often by surmounting a central support structure with a top that has upturned ends. St. Cyprien's Cathedral, which was created in 1973, has a cement altar that features a curving "seat" as its surface that rests on top of three cubic supports. St. Paul's Anglican church has a stool-shaped altar in its main space that has a hexagonal support and one in a small side chapel done in tile-work that has a solid central column emblazoned with a blue cross (see Figure 41). The rear side of the chapel altar has a small cubby for keeping the host. St. Anne's church has a stool-shaped altar with a stylized

[301] Rt. Rev. Edmund K. Yeboah, Bishop of Kumase 1985-1998, in conversation with the author, November 2009.

alpha omega symbol as its core support and St. Mary's Catholic parish has two converging triangles with a cross decorating them as its stool-altar.

Most individuals with whom I spoke offered the same reason for the use of a stool as altar: it symbolizes that Christ is the "king of kings" or "top chief." These ideas parallel the integration of other motifs and regalia such as the umbrella and *asipim* chairs used by officiants. However, in the case of the Anglican Church, there is another layer to add. When Asantehene Prempeh I returned from exile in 1924 one of his first acts was to have the desecrated Golden Stool refurbished. In 1929, two years before his death, he was eager to present the Stool to the public to reassure everyone that stability had returned to Asante. While he was in Seychelles, Prempeh had converted to Anglicanism. As Emmanuel Akyeampong has explained, Prempeh seemed to have a very ambivalent relationship with his new faith and there are dissenting opinions about whether his conversion was intended as a manipulation of the British or he truly shared their beliefs.[302] Either way, when he presented the restored Golden Stool to the Asante peoples in 1929 he chose to do so at the Thanksgiving Service at St. Cyprien's Anglican Church in Kumase.

Quoting from the Duncan-Johnstone papers at Oxford, Akyeampong reveals that the Golden Stool was paraded through the streets in a manner reminiscent of the *Odwira* celebration of Asante nationhood, after which it was placed in front of the altar in the church. Prempeh and the Queen Mother then removed all of their ornaments before

[302] Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Christianity, Modernity and the Weight of Tradition in the Life of 'Asantehene' Agyeman Prempeh I, c. 1888-1931, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1999): 279-311.

kneeling to offer thanks for his safe return.[303] As Akyeampong queries, "was Prempeh supplicating the Christian altar, the Golden Stool that was strategically positioned in front of the altar, or both? Is it worth remembering that the Asantehene always removed his ornaments before entering the stool room of his ancestors."[304]

Whether or not the Asantehene was directing himself toward the altar, Golden Stool, or both, when he and the queen mother submitted, their actions were critical for a society who had long awaited the return of their superior leader and guide. It is possible that the way the Asantehene presented the Golden Stool had some kind of impact on the subsequent integration of the stool-as-altar in the Asante Anglican Church. In many ways, Prempeh's actions presupposed or even laid the groundwork for a new way of thinking about Anglicanism and, more broadly, Christianity, as something that could exist in tandem with indigenous beliefs.

[303] Emmanuel Akyeampong, "Christianity, Modernity and the Weight of Tradition in the Life of 'Asantehene' Agyeman Prempeh I, c. 1888-1931, *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute*, vol. 69, no. 2 (1999): 304-305.

[304] Ibid. 305.

Conclusion

In the summer of 2007 a billboard for SG-SSB International Business Centre, a majority European-owned financial services company based in France, dominated one of Kumase's busy roundabouts (see Figure 42). The advertisement featured an image of a freshly carved stool with the hands of the carver still applying the finishing touches. The slogan next to the image read, "Carve a Strong Niche on the International Market" and a list of services, including such things as foreign accounts and import assistance, appeared in smaller print above it. What caught my attention at the time, and what continues to resonate with me five years on, is the way the billboard so neatly encapsulates the complex issues at stake in navigating the dynamic history of Asante stools in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.



Figure 42 SG-SSB Billboard, Kumase, Ghana, June 2007. (Image credit: Catherine Hale)

The incorporation of the new stool type, rather than the *sese dwa* used most frequently by queen mothers, is significant. At first assessment, the pairing of an Asante stool with the slogan "Carve Your Niche on the International Market," appears to suggest the promotion of a uniquely Asante identity within the global sphere. Yet, as the

preceding discussion illustrated, the new stool type is more closely associated with broader notions of Ghanaian nationalism (as evidenced in the Seat of State of Ghana) and external perceptions of Asante identity (as the most popular item in tourist markets) than it is with local politics and ritual.

It is worth noting that the billboard was located in one of the most affluent areas of the city, where hotels and banking institutions abound and expats from around the world frequently stay for extended periods of time. This begs the question: who is the advertisement's intended audience? Although it is tempting to hypothesize about the intentions of the advertiser, the main point I want to focus on here is that this marketing strategy exemplifies the larger phenomenon that has impacted Asante stools and African material culture in the course of cross-cultural exchanges throughout the twentieth century. Namely, framing them in terms of vocabulary, ideas and concepts that are professed to be local or "authentic" but more often than not reflect the perceptions and/or misperceptions of external agents. Here, it is particularly salient that the *adinkra* symbol depicted on the stool on the SG-SSB billboard appears to be an abbreviation of *kintinkantan*, which is a warning against arrogance.

Late-nineteenth and early twentieth century collectors appear to have understood the Asante stools they acquired primarily through the lens of male chieftaincy and equations with British monarchical symbols. Their narratives about these objects, which established the dominant framework for thinking about Asante stools for much of the twentieth century, overlooked the critical connections between women, queen mothers and stools. Although the ways that *asese dwa* symbolize chiefs and their authority in Asante domains are important facets of their histories, this function cannot be separated

from stools' association with queen mothers. In fact, it is exactly the stool's critical link with queen mothers that makes it an effective symbol of chieftaincy. Put another way, the stool is an emblem of a chief because it makes reference to the queen mother who gave him the right to rule.

Oral histories of lineage origins and variations of the Golden Stool story indicate that women's roles in Asante have long been vital components of their larger socio-political system. The female puberty rite *bragoro* exemplifies the celebration of fecundity and motherhood that is cherished in the Asante worldview. In each of these contexts, queen mothers' engagement with stools is foregrounded, suggesting the pivotal relationship between the form of the stool and ideas of fertility and cultural propagation. Conceived on multiple levels as a (female) body, the *sese dwa* is at once mother, queen mother, and ancestress, who ensure the continuation of the lineage. Striking parallels between *asese dwa* and traditional architecture push this connection even further to highlight the centrality of women within their communities and Asante more broadly. At the same time, women's association with Asante stools appears to extend beyond a rigid definition of sex to more fluid ideas of gender. In these contexts, the complementarity of partnered roles, such as chief and *okyeame*, characterize the feminine-masculine balance of Asante leadership structures.

As the case studies and related examples of Asante stool archives demonstrate, queen mothers' possession and uses of *asese dwa* are fluid and dynamic. Contrary to the outline established by Rattray and subsequent authors, there is no clear delineation of "rules" about who can own which designs. Instead, the prescriptions shift and change according to the context and attitudes of the most superior leader. In many ways, queen

mothers perform their identity through the use of stools and other regalia in an ongoing process of negotiation. Like innumerable art forms from across the African continent, such as masks or cloths, the meaning and significance of *asese dwa* must be understood within a larger framework of performance.

As is the case with much African art housed in museums and circulating in the international market, global understandings of Asante stools have been mediated through the perspectives of outsiders with varying biases, levels of familiarity with Asante culture, and access to information. It is only in retrospect that scholars, museum professionals and other stakeholders are now able to start unraveling information and seeking out additional persepctives to develop more comprehensive understandings of these unique objects. As the preceding discussion demonstrates, investigating queen mothers' relationships with stools is a crucial element of building a more comprehensive history of these vital socio-political symbols.

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