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Tarnishing the Golden Stool

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Tarnishing the Golden Stool

by

Fenna M. Wächter

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Abstract

This thesis deals with the Asante federation (in modern-day Ghana) in the nineteenth century, within the wider context of a general crisis of authority in African states in the later part of the century. African states were fighting against the external pressures of European imperial expansion while facing internal challenges to their structures of power. Asante was one of these states and this thesis examines why, because of a particular combination of internal and external challenges, Asante was unable to maintain its independence at the end of the nineteenth century.

In the first part, the thesis looks at the emergence of Asante in the 1700s, and explains the bases of the ruler’s authority. It does so by drawing on both primary (including travellers’ accounts of Asante) and secondary literature. Parts Two and Three of the thesis contain narratives of events from the 1820s until the civil war of the 1880s and eventual British conquest of Kumasi, the Asante capital, ten years later. There are two narratives: one focusing on relations with the British, based close-by at Cape Coast, and on economic change; the other on internal events, such as the behavior of the Asante rulers. The thesis then reconciles both narratives and explains how they influenced each other. Much of the primary material for Parts Two and three in particular comes from British Colonial Office documents (mainly letters and reports from Cape Coast) held in the National Archives (Public Record Office) in London.

Asante historiography so far has been split into two dominant approaches: formalist and substantivist. The former focuses on Asante responses to external change, including the challenge posed by the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and to an increased British involvement in its affairs, consequent on the extension of British influence and control at the coast. The other approach explains Asante’s crisis through the internal contestation of authority, achievement, and wealth, and focuses particularly on the moral components of Asante’s crisis. The thesis combines both approaches, and explains how external factors led to internal repercussions, and vice versa. By combining both the formalist and the substantivist approach, the thesis also helps to close the gap between the historiographies of European imperialism and those rooted within African history. It demonstrates that both perspectives are needed to fully
grasp the processes of the collapse of African states and their conquest by European powers at the end of the nineteenth century.
Introduction

Imperial expansion on the African continent in the late nineteenth century resulted in the collapse and takeover of previously independent states. To explain this, historians such as David Fieldhouse have posited the idea of a “general crisis” caused by the increasing disparity in strategic, political, and economic power between African states and their Western trading partners. “Never had one continent possessed so immense a power advantage over the others or been in such close contact with them”.¹ This created a conflicting mixture of opportunities and constraints. Contact with European powers provided opportunities for both African individuals and their rulers to gain wealth and power outside the accepted structures, but, at the same time, by undermining their authority, contact also tended to pressure their rulers into more authoritarian behavior.

However absolute they might appear, African rulers were constrained in their exercise of power: they had to consult the interests of others. Powerful councils of advisers aided the rulers’ decisions, but also held power of their own, and in some cases were authorized to depose a ruler if he repeatedly failed to behave or act appropriately. There was also the possibility of popular uprising. As the need to deal with European economic and political demands put growing pressure on states and their rulers, it opened up new arenas of argument, sometimes violent, over questions of authority and social hierarchy just as it opened up new arenas of social and

economic contestation. In many cases rulers responded by arbitrary attempts to increase their power. As Lonsdale put it:

[The] growing inability of African rulers to bring internal disputes to a final conclusion was a factor in their increasingly anxious tyrannies; it was also an indication of creeping conquests from outside.

Arbitrary and perhaps defensive behavior by African rulers in turn contributed to general unrest and encouraged demands for accountability and reform. However, to promote reform and to agree to a moral audit of governance might be dangerous, for neither rulers nor their states had much room to maneuver as European pressures increased. They needed to be flexible to respond to the challenge, but they were forced to be inflexible to remain in control.

The kingdom of Asante in today’s Ghana is a particularly good example. Faced with both changes in trade and with a series of increasingly unaccountable rulers, Asante began to question the bases of government. During the nineteenth century the British became direct neighbors of Asante and their presence provided both the opportunity and the need to critique state power. It offered a refuge for dissidents, runaways, and criminals. It also introduced new ideas about accountability and of how government should be carried on, and, by so doing, it challenged the rulers’ overarching authority. Asante rulers adapted to the situation by becoming more autocratic, and by the time a more progressive ruler came to power, his means of legitimating his authority had been so weakened that he could not prevent the final takeover of Asante by the British.

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2 Sometimes such attempts have been seen as “modernization” as they involved steps such as the introduction of armies based on Western models, and attempts to upgrade the fiscal system, but reforms were mostly carried out not with “modernization” in mind, but with the goal of preserving power.

The rich historiography on Asante in the nineteenth century is broadly split into two different approaches. One approach is that of Ivor Wilks, who has focused on the economic challenges and external pressures facing Asante. His is primarily a formalist approach. The other, substantivist, approach is represented by Tom McCaskie, who has examined Asante notions of authority, achievement, and wealth, and how these changed and were contested internally over the course of the second half of the nineteenth century. McCaskie argues that the crisis of government in Asante had a strong moral component as what was seen as abuses of government power took place. Wilks argues that it was interactions with the British, as well as Britain’s changing interests in West African affairs, that posed the threat to the stability of the state itself. A narrative of the decline of Asante could be based solely on either one of the two factors, but this thesis strives to look at both, as it was the interplay of the internal and external challenges that caused the crisis of the 1880s which seems typical of the general crisis posited by Fieldhouse.

In addition to the wealth of secondary analysis, much was also written about the kingdom by European missionaries and travelers who entered Asante from the seventeenth century onwards. The number of foreign visitors to Asante increased through the eighteenth century and reached an apex in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, as British interactions with Asante increased over time, so did the volume of British official correspondence about it. The combination of both primary and secondary materials has allowed me to clearly establish the form of government and governing ideals that were in place in Ashanti at the beginning of the nineteenth century. They also provided valuable insight into the internal as well as the external
challenges to these forms of government, and they enabled me to draw conclusions about the interplay of internal and external factors in the decline of Asante power.  

In order to understand fully the significance of the challenges and changes of the later nineteenth century, it is necessary first to provide an outline of the bases of Asante authority and of how that authority was legitimated. This is dealt with in the first part of the thesis. The second part provides a narrative of events signaling the slow decline of Asante between the early 1820s and the early 1880s. The third part will discuss the collapse of the state in civil war, the end of Asante independence and the takeover by the British in 1896. Finally, the conclusion will discuss and evaluate formalist and substantivist approaches and strive to reconcile them.

\footnote{For a detailed discussion of the sources, see “Bibliographical Note”, p.74.}
The boundaries in this map include areas which were in some form of tributary relationship to Asante, but were not part of the federation (Gonja and Dagomba).
Part I: Foundations of Asante Authority

The Emergence of Asante

The Asante federation emerged in the early eighteenth century in the form of a military coalition against the then powerful kingdom of Denkyira. Asante was one of many tributaries to the kingdom, all of which traded extensively with European powers who had established a presence by the late fifteenth century on the coast.5 Most members of the kingdoms and chiefdoms in the area, including Denkyira, belonged to the Akan, sharing a language, a common history, and a common belief system. The small chiefdoms had emerged in the preceding centuries under the leadership of men, referred to in Asante tradition as abirempon. They engaged in trade, and accumulated wealth with which they acquired slaves and attracted followers, creating estates and villages within the forest by clearing the land. Over time some of these abirempon had been forced to give land to others, and some chiefdoms had thus grown in size by incorporating others.6

Through the European presence along the coast, Denkyira and its tributaries engaged in the transatlantic slave trade. The chance to partake to a greater degree in the profits from this trade may well have played a role in the decision of the small chiefdom of Asante and a group of other Denkyira tributaries to form a military coalition to end that kingdom’s overrule. Tired of the annual tributes owed to Denkyira, Osei Tutu of Asante called a meeting with the other tributaries – including Dwaben and Mampon, which would later form integral parts of the Asante federation. The chiefs agreed on a rebellion against Denkyira rule and war came in 1699. By 1701, the Dutch in Elmina reported that Denkyira had been defeated and that Asante had

5 These powers included originally the British, Dutch, and Portuguese.
emerged as the new head of a federation of Akan states under the *Asantehene*. This federation will at points be referred to as the *Asanteman*, a term which includes all parts of Asante and describes the nation as a whole. ⁷

In order to capitalize on the federation’s natural resources, it became advisable to centralize power. The original idea of a group of equal chiefdoms faded quickly and the chiefdom of Asante established itself as a successor to Denkyira; however, not all states were subjected to the same degree of subordination. Dwaben, for example, was initially incorporated as a semi-autonomous state. In 1817, however, the *Dwabenhen* presented himself to Dupuis, acting as British envoy, as the equal of the *Asantehene*, and when Dupuis asked the *Ashantehene* for an introduction to the *Dwabenhen*, Osei Tutu Kwame exclaimed, “Who is he? Am I not the king? Is there another king beside me?” In 1832, Kumasi forces invaded Dwaben and ended its semi-autonomy, incorporating it more fully into Asante. ⁸

**Asante Location and Resources**

Asante is located northwest of the river Pra and some distance from the coast. The location of the Asante state provided it with numerous advantages over its rivals as it lay in an area with both gold and well-watered agricultural land. Its location also enabled it to participate in the transatlantic slave trade. The combination of these factors made Asante a wealthy and populous state in the nineteenth century.

Originally Asante’s borders were marked by the Pra River in the South, and the Ofin River to the North-West. After a series of expansionary wars in the late eighteenth century,

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⁷Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, 111. Refer to glossary *Asanteman*.
Asante’s borders stretched further and included the land from Ahafo to Nzima, and from Accra to Kwawu, covering an area of approximately 250,000 square kilometers (96,525 square miles).\(^9\)

Despite its considerable expansion, Asante was still not a direct neighbor to the British, as the Fante States separated the two powers. The Fante states served as middlemen in the highly profitable slave trade between the Europeans along the coast and the inland states, including Asante. The Fante had created a federation of their own in the eighteenth century in order to counter the perceived threat of an emerging Asante.\(^10\)

Hoping to tap into the profitable trade with the Dutch and the English at Cape Coast directly, the new state attempted to establish markets along the coast in order to control the trade especially in firearms which would give them invaluable advantages over inland powers. Such goals were viewed suspiciously by the Fante, who feared that the arms acquired by the Asante would be used against them. As a result, they attempted to block the routes of Asante traders and restrict their trade in firearms. For several decades, the Asante struggled to reach the coast directly. In 1765, the Governor of Cape Coast, David Mill, reported: “A Month ago the King of Ashantee sent down Messengers here to acquaint me that he wanted to open a Market nearer the Waterside than before”. In 1780, a first success occurred when Asante traders established a route to the coast at Cape Appolonia west of Cape Coast (see map) through non-Fante territory, and it was through this route that Asante traders were able to trade directly with Europeans.\(^11\)

Asante was rich in gold – a fact that had attracted European traders to this part of the West African coast for centuries. As early as the sixteenth century, people in the area had mined

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gold and used it to trade with Muslims across the Sahara and Europeans across the Atlantic. The gold mines and the access to the coast provided resources that could be used as pillars to build and rest an empire on: gold, arms, and slaves.

Despite its advantageous geographical location, the building of a large political entity and the creation and maintenance of its culture were not easily achieved in the forests of Asante. Akan towns were built within a forest which had to be cleared before humans could settle there. The magnitude of that task becomes evident when one reads the description of the forest by J. Dupuis in 1824:

> Numerous plants and creepers of all dimensions chained tree to tree, and branch to branch, clustering the whole in entanglement ... The opacity of this forest communicated to the atmosphere and the surrounding scenery a semblance of twilight; no ray of sunshine penetrated the cheerless gloom, and we were in idea entombed in foliage.¹²

The overwhelming, omnipresent nature of the forest is also mirrored in Asante religion. Shrines to Onyame, the Supreme Being, often featured a stone axe to testify to the triumph over the forest by Asante’s predecessors.¹³ As McCaskie puts it:

> The Asante were and are acutely aware that their culture, in the most literal sense, was hacked out of nature. And this understanding ... engendered the abiding fear that, without unremitting application and effort, the fragile defensible place called culture would simply be overwhelmed or reclaimed by an irruptive and anarchic nature.¹⁴

The unremitting effort which McCaskie talks of required large numbers of working hands, more than Asante itself could provide. As a result, slaves were acquired, either through trading at the European ports, or through northward military expansion. Slaves became an important pillar to

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¹² Dupuis, *Journal*, 16. Wilks has in fact suggested that clearing a one-hectare field out of this forest would require the removal of 1,250 tons of vegetation (Wilks, *Forests of Gold*, 56).


the kingdom of Asante in two ways: they helped in the creation of culture within the ever encroaching forest, and they were the basis of wealth for many powerful men in Asante, in addition to the gold resources within the country.  

The successes achieved in the battle to hack culture out of nature are mirrored in reports by European travelers who visited Asante. They discovered a country with an elaborate infrastructure and a sophisticated bureaucratic system. Asante's capital Kumasi, which had expanded throughout the eighteenth century, was well connected with other towns within the federation by means of wide roads. Checkpoints along them allowed for the collection of taxes on trade goods that were carried throughout the kingdom and along two major trade routes: one leading north, and the other south. Eight major roads led from Kumasi into all corners of the Asanteman and to important trading centers outside its borders, along the coast as well as in the northern hinterland. This road system served as a spatial grid of federal authority. Keeping the roads clear in itself took effort and central planning and was a very visible demonstration of the power and the reach of the state.  

Trade

Asante’s Southern trade was dominated by exchanges with the Europeans, and had rested mostly on slaves up to the nineteenth century. With the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade and the gradual change to legitimate trade, its main commodity became gold. It is interesting to note the way in which the trade in people and gold shifted over time in Asante. At first, gold was exported in order to acquire slaves to build the Asante state, strengthen its matrilineages, and

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15 Slavery is discussed in more detail below.
create civilization out of wilderness. At the second stage, as Asante no longer relied on the constant influx of labor, slaves were exported in order to obtain European goods: arms and luxury items for the rich and powerful. After the transatlantic slave trade came to an end, gold was again exported, this time to continue the import of European goods.\(^\text{18}\) This shift is crucial and deserves more attention. Originally, when gold left the country it had brought in another resource crucial for the functioning of the state – people. But gold leaving the country for the acquisition of luxury goods indicates a shift in priorities. As one crucial state resource was leaving the country, it was not being replaced by another equally productive one.

Trade with the North was based on a wider variety of goods: it included kola (which was very widely used in the Sudan but hardly at all by the Asante who cultivated it) and European trade goods such as salt, rum, and iron tools which had been purchased on the coast.\(^\text{19}\) The northern areas engaged in extensive trade with Asante were those in direct proximity such as the trading towns of Gonja, but Asante trade also reached as far as the communities of the Niger bend. The capital of Dagomba was an important trading center where Asante traders encountered Hausa traders from further east.\(^\text{20}\) After abolition, more emphasis was placed on trade with the North, and it provided some alternative to the southern routes. Asante was thus able to offset the loss of income from slaves through trading with the interior.\(^\text{21}\) This “bipolar structure” (Arhin) of Asante trade is why the increasing difficulty associated with the southern trade (due to the abolition and conflicts with the British) did not have quite as devastating an effect on the Asante economy as one might expect. While the changes in the southern trade certainly had considerable

\(^\text{18}\) Abolition did not end the slave trade immediately. There was a transition period in which slaves were exported illegally.


\(^\text{21}\) Law, “The historiography of the commercial transition”, 102.
impacts on Asante which are mentioned throughout this thesis, the northern trade routes did provide an alternative for Asante traders.

There were different kinds of traders in Asante: internal as well as long-distance. Long-distance trading required a host of protective measures such as escorts of armed men. Only a select group of individuals, state functionaries, had such resources at their disposal. Every November, for example, they sent traders to acquire kola and sell it in the markets. These traders were allowed to carry bundles of produce for their own profit.\textsuperscript{22} Another group of traders were full-time merchants who travelled all year round and did their business on a much larger scale. The Asante trading economy was thus a mixed one, consisting of state traders, who also traded for themselves, and private individuals. All trade was, however, carried out ultimately for the profit of the state, since all interactions were heavily taxed. Private traders had to pay tolls that were much higher than those paid by state officials who often were completely exempt.\textsuperscript{23} Moreover, the state wished to encourage the private accumulation of wealth since it would ultimately reap the benefits through taxation.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, private traders, who could amass considerable wealth over time, were eyed suspiciously by the established elites. Bowdich explained in 1819:

\begin{quote}
Were they [chiefs] to encourage commerce, pomp the idol of which they are most jealous, would soon cease to be their prerogative ... the traders growing wealthy would soon vie with them.\textsuperscript{25}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{22} Arhin, “Aspects of the Asante Northern Trade,” 366.
\textsuperscript{23} This combination of state and private trade was common along the West Coast. It often created “temporary monopolies” for rulers who then had an advantage in selling their goods before private traders did. For a full discussion of this see: Robin Law, “Royal Monopoly and Private Enterprise in the Atlantic Trade: the case of Dahomey”, Journal of African History: 18 (1977), 555-575.
\textsuperscript{24} The benefits of accumulation for the state of Asante are discussed in detail below.
\textsuperscript{25} Thomas 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: John Murray, 1819), 336.
Considering the profits that could be made, these fears were well-founded. According to Bowdich, English cotton yielded a 400% profit in Kumasi, as did gunpowder and rum. Gunflints could be sold for a 600% profit.\textsuperscript{26}

**The Political Structure of Asante**

Asante consisted of various territorial divisions which were subject to the capital Kumasi; but while power was centralized, especially in the hands of the *Asantehene*, the other chiefdoms which had joined in the confederacy against Denkyira did not lose all power. William Tordoff quotes Bowdich as saying that the Asante government was based on “equality and obligation”. The chiefs (*Amanhene*) had to swear an oath of allegiance to the *Asantehene*, and they were required to respond to his summons and supply him with fighting men if asked to do so. They owed the king taxes and had to observe trade regulations established by the state. At the same time, however, they enjoyed considerable amounts of power in their districts and had under them varying numbers of sub-chiefs (*Birempon*) and villages which owed the *Amanhene* allegiance and taxes in the same way that the *Amanhene* owed them to Kumasi. While power was being gradually centralized in Kumasi, the *Asantehene* remained theoretically “no more than primus inter pares”.\textsuperscript{27}

The *Amanhene* were stool holders. The title of a “stool” which was conferred upon a man often referred to his area – the stool of Mampon for example.\textsuperscript{28} While it was named after an area, a stool was defined in terms of people – the amount of subjects was indicative to a stool’s wealth, not the size of the lands attached to it. Each stool controlled certain amounts of wealth,

\textsuperscript{26} Bowdich, *Mission*, 331.
\textsuperscript{28} There were also bureaucratic stool holders who were members of the advisory council of the *Asantehene*. Although they too held stools, these were not named for a particular place or region in Asante. Throughout the thesis I will refer to “territorial stoolholders” such as the *Mamponhene*, or “bureaucratic stoolholders” who were located in Kumasi.
derived from the subjects’ wealth. The title of stool holder is comparable to a title such as “lord” but it comes attached to land, wealth, villages and slaves. These goods attached to the stool existed separately from the private wealth of whoever the stool holder was at the moment. He was only allowed to utilize the stool funds for his duties as an agent of the stool: buying powder and arms, on which the federation’s power was based, paying for funeral expenses, making regalia, and providing food and drink for one’s subjects. Rattray explains that: “food and drink were always available in a Chief’s palace for any man, woman or child who cared to claim it, including strangers”.29 Stool holders strove to increase the wealth attached to their stools: if they could afford to do so they would buy villages from other stool holders and therefore increase their area of influence and power. Whatever they added to their stools remained as stool property for their successors.30 Stool holders moved in and out of office but the stool and its wealth remained constant. The stool itself was more important than the individual who occupied it at any given time, just as the titles existed independently of those who held them. Amanhene served primarily as the human agents of their stool, just as the Asantehene acted as the agent of the Golden Stool.

Asante was essentially a federation of stools. The original Amanhene had been warleaders and powerful chiefs when Asante and its allies rose up against the rule of Denkyira. Each stool holder had a court comparable to that of the Asantehene in Kumasi, albeit on a smaller scale. An Amanhene was surrounded by a group of elders, Mpanyimfo, who guided him in the administration of his stool. Some were also given a specific military title which allotted leadership of certain military units to him in war time. Others held non-military titles, such as the

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30 These successors were not necessarily sons of the former stool holders. See below.
Gyasehene, who presided over servants and minor officials surrounding the Amanhene, or the Okyeame, who served as speaker of the elders’ council and prosecutor in court cases.\(^{31}\)

The same structure applied to the court of the Asantehene in Kumasi, although members of his Mpanyimfo were considered advisers to the ruler of the federation, which increased their prestige and power in relation to the elders surrounding an ordinary Amanhene. In fact, the Amanhene of the other territorial divisions stood in a relation to the Kumasi elders comparable to that of their Birempon in relation to them. Since they were thus subjected to the authority of the Asantehene, they were required to take an oath of allegiance to the Asantehene, promising to help the Asantehene in ruling the nation, not to take up arms against him, and to follow his summons on every occasion. By acknowledging the Asantehene as ruler of the Asanteman, an Amanhene also acknowledged that he held his title and the land attached to it from the ruler, and could be removed by him as a result. In addition, he acknowledged that his subjects had the right of appeal to the Asantehene for a final judgment in court cases, for the ruling of the Asantehene outweighed any previous ruling by an Amanhene. The oath also restricted the right of Amanhene to wage war on each other.\(^{32}\)

Next in order of importance to the Amanhene was the Queen Mother (Amanhemaa) who usually came from a group of high ranking princesses, daughters and nieces of former Amanhene of the region. To fully understand the influence of this female counterpart to the Amanhene it is important to know that Asante was a matrilineal society. Descent was therefore reckoned through the mother. The children of a woman belonged to the mother’s clan, not the father’s, and a woman was ultimately usually under the authority of her mother’s brother, not her husband or

The powerful position of women within the descent group was also shown by the fact that the *Amanhemaa* was the official authority on the genealogy of the royal line; she was the “final arbiter on who was qualified by blood to be a male ruler”.  

The Queen Mother held a stool of her own and belonged to the *Mpanyimfo*. In addition she was considered a co-ruler with the *Amanhene* on almost equal footing; her feminine qualities such as emotion and compassion were supposed to balance his male governing attributes of bravery and discipline. The Queen Mother was politically influential, in fact so great was her influence that any failure of an *Amanhene* under her watch was attributed to her for lack of counsel. Just as the relationship between the *Mpanyimfo* and their *Amanhene* was replicated on a larger scale in Kumasi between the *Asantehene* and his advisers, so too was the relationship between an *Amanhemaa* and an *Amanhene*.

Kumasi was the center of the federation, and despite the similarities of the political structure, it was different from other towns. While other towns in Asante served as large trading centers or centers of production, Kumasi was a “government town” and McCaskie has suggested that it was filled with office holders and those who were hoping to become office holders themselves one day. Bonnat, who lived in Kumasi as a prisoner for a while, recalled:

*The tremendous importance of the king of Achanty draws to Coomassie a large number of young men, belonging to the best families of the kingdom ... they are drawn above all by the hope of coming to the attention of the king.*

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35 Akyeampong and Obeng: “Spirituality, Gender and Power”, 490. The last *Asantehemaa*, Yaa Kyaa, was the driving force behind the *Asantehene*’s resolution to uphold Asante independence and not rely on British support in the rebuilding of Asante after the civil wars in the 1880s.
and they neglect no opportunity of pleasing him ... one sees them continually following in his footsteps, soliciting his favours and his smiles.\textsuperscript{36}

Kumasi did not produce its own food or goods and its small marketplace was dominated by luxury goods imported from Europe. The officials residing in Kumasi sent followers to farms surrounding the capital in order to produce food, but also so that they would not have to provide for their costly upkeep within the town.\textsuperscript{37} Allman argues that the culture of Kumasi was not simply “Asante culture”, particularly because several different ethnic groups came together there to do business. Kumasi culture “differed from the purely indigenous culture but progressively influenced it”\textsuperscript{38}.

**Succession and Destoolment**

Succession to a stool was regulated through a mixture of descent and election. An Asantehene could nominate whom he wished to be his successor (Badiakyiri), but it was up to the council of elders and the chiefs of the territorial divisions, as well as the Asantehemaa, to elect a new Asantehene upon the demise of the old one. They would certainly consider the late Asantehene’s choice, but they did not necessarily have to follow it if they deemed it unwise to do so. They could then choose another candidate from the group of eligible men (belonging to a lineage of the royal clan). While the Badiakyiri often succeeded the late Asantehene, he did so “only … because he has been selected independently by the votes of the majority of the Mpanyimfo”.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in: Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 374.

\textsuperscript{37} Tom McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 34.

\textsuperscript{38} Allman, “Be(com)ing Asante, be(com)ing Akan”, 103.

\textsuperscript{39} Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 85. Recall the matrilineal nature of the Asante state. Being the son of a ruler was not in itself sufficient qualification to become a ruler in turn. However, being the son of a mother whose close relatives had been rulers in the past, did place one in the pool of eligible candidates.
Each Amanhene was seen as an intermediary between the ancestral spirits and his subjects. Thus, a ruler’s, especially the Asantehene’s, decisions were understood to be decisions of the ancestors, and it was said that “the King can do no wrong”. To understand this saying correctly, however, it is important to see that there was a conceptual separation between the person of the Amanhene and the position he occupied as agent of his stool. For example, when the Asantehene was acting in his capacity as agent of the Golden Stool, he could not err, but if he acted as an individual (using state wealth for private expenses, for instance), he was certainly doing wrong, and would be criticized for it.

Those who enstooled the Asantehene also had the power to destool him, for the Asantehene was not in fact an absolute ruler. While he may have appeared to be so to outsiders, he was in fact heavily reliant on the council of elders and the Asantehemaa. If he repeatedly ignored their judgment, they could choose to remove him from his position of power. Once destooled, any former officeholder was considered an ordinary person who could be “soundly abused for his past misdeeds” by his erstwhile subjects. This was to ensure against abuses of power, and it would be tested repeatedly later in the nineteenth century, as Asantehenes failed to live up to their duties as stool holders and were subsequently destooled.

The Asantehene thus had to prove himself worthy of being the agent of the Golden Stool. He was expected to fulfill his duties: ruling in accordance with the ancestors, keeping the Asanteman secure and prosperous, and accumulating additional wealth for it. His actions were reviewed, in a sense, on an annual basis at the Odwira festival. The term Odwira was derived from dwira which means “to purify”. The festival was important for maintaining the health of the

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40 Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution, 80.
41 Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution, 83.
Asanteman, and since it was presided over by the Asantehene it underlines his responsibility for the well-being of the state in all its aspects.\(^{42}\) Odwira carried several meanings on various levels. For one, it served as a harvest festival, which is why it is often referred to by travelers of the time as the “Yam Custom”.\(^{43}\) It also marked the passage into a new year, celebrated with actions marking a new beginning such as the refurbishing and whitewashing of all of Kumasi’s governmental offices. In addition, Odwira served as a reminder of the relationship with the ancestors and renewed the connection with them as it remembered the past. The Asantehene would perform a series of rites for the ancestors, such as sacrificing sheep and slaves as an offer to them. Thus, while celebrating the past, the festival also celebrated the present and future.\(^{44}\)

For the Odwira, Asante’s most important office holders as well as a large number of subjects travelled to Kumasi to celebrate alongside the Asantehene and to refresh their oaths of allegiance to the Golden Stool and its agent. Some travelers estimated that Kumasi held about 150,000 people during the month-long festival, instead of its usual 20,000 inhabitants. The Asantehene would receive all his major and minor chiefs and then all of them together reviewed the progress of the Asanteman since the celebration of the last Odwira. Themes discussed in this review of progress were the success of military expansions in the last year as well as the overall prosperity of the Asanteman. The festival thus served as a review of the Asantehene’s rule.\(^{45}\)

**Bases of Legitimacy**

The Asante drew on numerous sources of legitimacy to maintain cultural and political cohesion within the federation and to underpin the authority of the ruler. All members of the


\(^{43}\) “Custom” in this instance means a ceremony or a festival, not simply a tradition.

\(^{44}\) The fact that it celebrated both past and future attests to the Asante understanding of interconnectedness and fluidity of past, present, and future.

\(^{45}\) McCaskie, “Time and the Calendar in Nineteenth Century Asante,” 193.
Asanteman shared a set of beliefs which included ideas about rulership and authority. The Akan universe consisted of spirits, animals, and humans. Above all stood Onyame, which was both a concept of the essence of power, and a personification of a Supreme Being in the spirit world. Onyame was the source of the power which ran through every part of the universe and all parts of this universe derived their power from Onyame. One could tap into this power source to gain access to authority and the control of social institutions. The key to acquiring power was to know and understand the workings of the universe.\(^{46}\) The concept of a Supreme Being and the spirit world can be interpreted as a political metaphor. It could be used as a justification for Asante predominance over the other chiefdoms, and an illustration of the way in which these chiefdoms received their power through Kumasi. In addition, it can be seen as a spiritual underpinning to the Asantehene – it was from him that power and authority flowed to the other chiefs and state officials. While Onyame was the head of a federation of spirits, the Asantehene was the head of the federation of chiefs.\(^{47}\) However, the belief in Onyame was not simply a political device; it was rather an overarching Akan belief that had been in existence long before the military alliance, and was later molded to focus on the Golden Stool and its authority. It is impossible to separate sacred and secular in the Asante belief system and political structure, for they were completely intertwined.\(^{48}\)

The structure in which the power of the Amanhene was derived from the Asantehene and the power of the regional and bureaucratic stools was derived from the Golden Stool evolved over time. It was only once the federation had established itself after 1700 that the Golden Stool became the leading element in the Asanteman. Certainly by 1800 the Golden Stool had become

\(^{46}\) Akyeampong and Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender and Power”, 483.

\(^{47}\) Note that although the symbolism of Onyame was used to underline the Asantehene’s authority the ruler was not considered a “god king”.

what Wilks refers to as the *grundnorm* of the political system of Asante, the locus of authority. The Golden Stool was an actual stool, and all regional *Amanhene* also had a physical stool in their possession, but stools were not used as thrones. Rather they were both symbols and depositories of power.\(^49\) The Golden Stool “was held to embody the corporate essence or 'soul' (*sunsum*) of those beings who were, are and will be Asante, and in direct and obvious consequence it was revered as a hallowed or sacred object”. By being placed on a stool, the *Asantehene* and his chiefs received power they had not possessed previously. Rattray noted that “until a Chief had been enstooled … he had not the real *sunsum* … of his ancestors”.\(^50\) To a certain degree, *sunsum* may be compared with Freud’s idea of the Ego. *Sunsum* was the leading force behind a person’s everyday decisions, although one may not always consciously be aware of it. In fact, it tells the person “what it really wants without the person knowing or being aware of what he wants”.\(^51\) The *sunsum* conferred upon a stool holder consisted of the essence and wisdom of previous holders of that stool; their combined knowledge was therefore believed to be guiding the present stoolholder’s decisions.

The idea of *sunsum* and the resulting connectedness with the ancestors cemented office holders’ authority as it justified their elevated positions. Their connection with Asante ancestors legitimized their actions. This is summed up nicely by Kwame Arhin who explains that stool holders were always addressed as *nana*, a term also given to grandparents, thereby underscoring the notion of a connection with the ancestors. “All power and authority holders were regarded

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\(^{49}\) Rattray in fact points out that a chief was never to sit on a stool, not even during enstoolment ceremonies; “he only made pretence to sit upon it, and took great care that his private parts should not come into contact with it” (Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 145).


basically as elders, owing to their identification with the deceased occupants of their stools”.52

The positive influence of being associated with an ancestor cannot be underestimated; their experience and wisdom was valued highly. As one Asante proverb had it: “the words from the mouth of an old man are better than any amulet”.53

The custody of the Golden Stool legitimated the Asantehene’s power, and its role as a fount of legitimacy can be traced back to Onyame. According to tradition, the Golden Stool descended from heaven into the hands of Osei Tutu’s priestly adviser Komfo Anokye. By having the stool descend from heaven, it was implied that it came from the place where Onyame was residing ever since he had ceased to roam the earth and removed himself from being surrounded by human folly.54 To have the Asantehene’s symbol of power descending from the place where the traditional source of all power was believed to reside, clearly suggests that authority had been granted to the Asantehene. This parallel also becomes apparent in an appellation given both to the Asantehene and to Onyame in personified form. Both were called, among other things, otumfu, which means “the omnipotent one; the possessor of visionary insight”.55 However, this was very specifically attached to the relationship with the Golden Stool; these attributes were only ascribed to the Asantehene because he was imbued with the collected sunsum of his predecessors. Thus, the Golden Stool was, in McCaskie’s words: “the enabling instrument, the

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54 Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* 20-1. According to Rattray the tale established that Onyame was bothered by an old woman who constantly pounded her yams, and as she did so her pestle knocked up against Onyame who exclaimed: “Because of what you are doing I am going to take myself away up in the sky.”
55 McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 104.
representation, that all at once underpinned, validated and guaranteed the legal exercise of sovereign right”.

Other chiefs’ stools, though also bases for the legitimacy of their holders’ authority, were not as powerful as the Golden Stool, and the death penalty was applied to anyone who dared adorn his stool with gold. The only one comparable to the Golden Stool was the Silver Stool which the Mamponhene held. Mampon was the northernmost chiefdom in the Asante heartland and furthest away from the center of power of Kumasi. It had been a crucial actor in the war of independence from Denkyira. The Mamponhene, occupant of the Silver Stool, was also head of the Asante army and an important participant in the rituals surrounding the installment of a new Asantehene. By the early nineteenth century, Mampon had turned into an important center of local administration, its structure comparable to Kumasi, although it did not boast quite as many inhabitants.

The Importance of People

The Asante perceived their state as civilization hacked out of nature. This placed a considerable emphasis on people as pillars of the kingdom and keepers of civilization under the ruler. The control of people was a deciding factor in political influence. All men and women of Asante were referred to as *nkoa* (*sg. akoa*), a term referring to people living in a condition of dependence in relation to someone else. This could, for example, refer to family relations: a man’s nephew and niece were *nkoa* to their uncle, because they were under his control. According to Rattray, “a condition of voluntary servitude was … the heritage of every Asante; it formed indeed the basis of his social system”. All people belonged to other people, and this applied to members of all social strata, not merely to slaves. The inhabitants of a village owed

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allegiance to their respective chief, the chiefs to their paramount chiefs who owed allegiance to the Asantehene, who in turn owed allegiance to his ancestors, his advisers, and to the Asanteman as a whole.\textsuperscript{58}

However, people were not just dependent on their immediate relatives and superiors; they were also indebted to the state. One had to make personal sacrifices in order to further the welfare of the Asanteman. One’s actions defined one’s Asanteness, a quality more than a simple ascribed identity. Being Asante was something you \textit{did}, not something you \textit{were}. During the performance of Odwira, for example, the participants in the festival \textit{did} things to symbolically strengthen their Asante-ness as they re-enacted the unity of Asante and affirmed their allegiance to the Golden Stool.\textsuperscript{59}

The idea of universal indebtedness is mirrored in a number of Asante proverbs, one of which states:

\begin{quote}
\textit{if there be a debt in the village that owns no master, ... it is a debt of the head of the village; if there be a thing found in the village without an owner it belongs to the head of the village.}\textsuperscript{60}
\end{quote}

This focus on ownership and the assignment of an owner to all things and people within Asante may again stem from the deep-rooted awareness that nature continued to threaten the established culture of Asante. It seems that all people were given to an ‘owner’ to protect them from the reign of nature and its inherent threats. “If you have no master, a beast will catch you”.\textsuperscript{61}

Free people were not the only group integral to the creation and maintenance of the Asanteman. Slaves also played an essential part. They were often allowed to own property, their

\textsuperscript{58} Rattray, \textit{Ashanti Law and Constitution}, 33-4.  
\textsuperscript{59} Allman, “Be(com)ing Asante, be(com)ing Akan,” 103.  
\textsuperscript{60} Rattray, \textit{Ashanti Law and Constitution}, 34.  
\textsuperscript{61} Akyeampong and Obeng, “Spirituality, Gender and Power,” 487.
own slaves, marry, and they could become heirs to their masters. In addition, to kill a slave required official permission from a central authority, for the right to decide over life and death was reserved exclusively for the Asantehene. He alone could decide on the execution of slaves and criminals alike. This power underlined his connection with the world of the deceased. Acting on behalf of the dead he could control the administration of death within Asante. It also emphasized once again the value placed on people – they were viewed as so important to the well-being of the Asanteman that it should not be easy to diminish their number.

Asante slaves were incorporated into society, and became, in effect, nkọa. Hopkins argues that “the influx of new slaves and the presence of slaves whose ethnic origins limited their chances of integration, created a dispossessed and potentially disaffected group.” To prevent this, it was desirable to incorporate slaves seamlessly into society. The chances of an Asante slave being integrated into Asante society were quite high. According to Rattray, nine out of ten were eventually adopted into their masters’ families and their descendants intermarried so as to become full Asante citizens. Upward mobility was therefore a reality for many slaves, in particular for those who had been captured at a young age. Former slaves who had managed to become full members of society were not to be associated with their slave ancestors. An Asante principle of immense judicial importance states that “no one must disclose the origin of another.” This rule had possibly been established to ensure the truly seamless integration of

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63 Masters not having final control over their slaves’ lives was not unusual in this part of West Africa at the time. Dahomey had similar practices. For more information see J. Lombard, “The Kingdom of Dahomey,” in *West African Kingdoms in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Forde & Kaberry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 75.
64 Antony Hopkins, *An Economic History of West Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 26. This integration became increasingly difficult with the buildup of slaves as the transatlantic slave trade slowed down.
66 Rattray, *Ashanti Law and Constitution*, 40. An Akan folktale tells the story of a village of hunters who meet a group of bush-pigs one day. The pigs became men and joined the village under condition that they were regarded as people and their origins were not to be mentioned. When a fight broke out between a villager and a
former slaves and it goes back to Hopkin’s point about avoiding the formation of a disaffected group of permanent aliens.

Slaves were often employed on the farms surrounding the bigger towns and villages, but while slaves and farmers seemingly were doing the same work, slaves had to work harder and do the work their owners did not want to do. Slave labor dominated in gold mining. In addition, a slave usually did not have a plot of land to cultivate food for himself. He depended on his owner to feed him in exchange for the work that he did.

Despite the importance placed on people, a small group of slaves was viewed as consumables. These slaves were referred to as *nkere* (*sg*. *akyere*). They were destined to be sacrificed for ritual purposes. Whole villages in Asante served as homes to these *nkere* where they could live for years before being summoned to be sacrificed at an event such as *Odwira*, to provide servants in the afterlife.67

*Nkoa* and slaves alike belonged to a particular stool or stool holder, who in turn belonged to the highest stool, the Golden Stool, or the highest office holder, the *Asantehene*. The number of subjects a stool holder ruled over was indicative of his political power and importance. Stool holders would buy villages and their inhabitants from other stools, or villages could be conferred upon a stool by the *Asantehene* as a reward.68 The importance of the number of subjects for the status of a stool holder is reflected in a proverb stating “it is the feathers on a fowl that make it bush-pig, the villager called the other an animal. In response, the bush-pigs destroyed the village and only spared a few lives – see Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* 129.

67 McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 98-9. This custom was certainly a later development, caused in part by the considerable increase of the Asante slave population due to the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. This will be discussed in more detail later.

68 It is noteworthy that it was not always clear whether the inhabitants of a village put up for sale were free or slaves; it did not seem to matter.
big”. This indicates not only that the number of a stool’s subjects determines that stool holder’s importance, but also seems to suggest that the number of people he controls is what makes or breaks the political role of a stool holder.

The importance assigned to all groups of people within Asante and the obligations put on them also had implications for their freedom to leave the state. If in fact, one left Asante in order to evade taxes, for example, one was committing a crime. The high value placed on people in Asante meant that they were assets of the state. If an Asante returned from a journey outside the kingdom’s borders with tattoos on his body, indicating another identity or allegiance, he could be executed by the king. By changing his identity and choosing not to be Asante any longer, he had stolen himself from the Asante state, a deeply antisocial act.

**Gold and Accumulation of Wealth**

The importance of gold in Asante is evidenced by a great number of proverbs dealing with its role in society. One of them establishes that “gold is king”. This can be interpreted on two levels: the first and obvious one is referring to gold and its position in society; just as the king and the paramount chiefs it had a considerable amount of influence and judicial power. Gold is the king, gold is the ruler. At the same time, the proverb may well suggest that those who have gold will be elevated to the position of a ruler themselves. Other proverbs support that argument: “the rich man is the elder” is one example, suggesting in addition to the fact that wealth comes with power and it also comes with wisdom.

The accumulation of wealth was a crucial civic duty in Asante. Wealth could consist of gold, *nkoa* and slaves, and landed property. However, the only accepted currency for state

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69 Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* 80.
71 Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs* 162.
interactions was gold dust. All taxes were therefore paid in the form of gold dust, and people and land had a value attached to them, measured in gold. Gold was both the currency of state power and the standard of value. It was also in and of itself a status symbol as those who had reached a certain threshold of wealth were allowed to adorn themselves and their wives with elaborate gold ornaments. Those men who were particularly successful in accumulating wealth could choose to make a public display of all their wealth – parading through Kumasi their wives and their slaves, as well as chests filled with their gold dust, themselves being covered in gold ornaments.

Gold dust also proved vital in hacking culture out of nature. It allowed for the purchase of slaves, to provide labor for the Asante state. The importance of gold did not diminish as Asante had established itself and a labor surplus was secured, however. It continued to play a vital role, it served as the blood in the veins of the administration of the state. Wilks explains this aptly: “the traditional Asante view of wealth … was one of its natural flow upwards in society, from the producer to the … Golden Stool.” 72 By filling the state treasury, one enabled the state to pursue policies for the good of all of Asante. And the state treasury was filled through the accumulation of wealth by the individual – based on an intricate tax system.

A considerable amount of tax revenue was derived from death duties levied by stool holders. If a wealthy subject died, his movable assets (gold dust, slaves, cloths etc) were valued and a large proportion was given to the stool holder presiding over the deceased in the form of gold – this could amount to as much as half of the deceased’s assets. In addition, an inheritance tax was levied on what was handed down to the heirs. 73 Once this stool holder died, all of his

72 Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 444.
73 Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 698. If the heirs of the deceased were unable to pay the estimated taxes in the form of gold dust, they would have to convert people and land into gold by putting them on the market; in most cases the Asantehene would pay their worth into the treasury himself so that the debt was seen as settled.
accumulated wealth, including death duties received from others, fell to the stool holder above him, thus money trickled upwards Asante society.\textsuperscript{74}

The \textit{Asantehene} or whichever stool holder had gained possession of the death duties, did not always keep the whole amount, but rather redistributed it. Some of it may have been given back to the deceased’s heirs, but it was not uncommon for other portions to be given to completely different people. When the \textit{Asantehene} gave gold to an individual he did not expect that person to simply hold on to the gold, but rather wanted him to increase it.\textsuperscript{75} That was the case not only for reallocated death duties, but it was common for the \textit{Asantehene} to award his office holders with a certain sum of money; in fact he did so regularly every 40 days. The chiefs were expected to use the money for trade and increase it considerably. At the end of each year they were to report to the king how much money they added to the amount given to them and he could choose to render it there and then, which was seldom done, since it was known that each increase meant an increase in the death duties that would eventually be paid.\textsuperscript{76} Asante’s bustling trading networks provided ample opportunity for individuals to follow the \textit{Asantehene}’s wishes and accumulate more.

If a man was approved of having accumulated enough wealth to be recognized for it, he was made an \textit{abirempon}, a term traditionally applied to the earliest Akan entrepreneurs who had been essential in founding the first Akan villages and chiefdoms within the forest.\textsuperscript{77} The term \textit{abirempon} literally meant “big man”. The making of an \textit{abirempon} was richly symbolic. As part of the custom, a slave would tie a symbolic Elephant’s Tail around his waist, and the man would

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{74} Rattray, \textit{Ashanti Law and Constitution}, 107-8.
\item\textsuperscript{75} McCaskie, “Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History”, 34.
\item\textsuperscript{76} Wilks, \textit{Forests of Gold}, 133-4.
\item\textsuperscript{77} Refer to p. 6; this also establishes the importance applied to these men, their achievement for Asante society was viewed as equally important to the deeds by those who had been essential in founding the Akan chiefdoms in the first place.
\end{itemize}
have to “hunt” him. He would then be awarded the right to have an Elephant’s Tail (*mena*) carried in front of him whenever he walked in public.  

Two Asante proverbs about the elephant reveal two different aspects about the significance of the Elephant Tail. One proverb states “After the elephant there is no other animal (to compare with it in size and strength)”.  Therefore, by owning the Elephant’s Tail, a big man overshadowed all other men in size and strength in a civic sense. This goes also back to the notion discussed above according to which gold equaled power (“Gold is king”). The second proverb establishes that “it is one man who kills an elephant, but many people who eat his flesh”. By accumulating a large amount of gold, the *abirempon* had worked towards the good of Asante society as a whole, because upon his death, his wealth would flow into the royal chest to be redistributed for the good of the Asanteman. Just as one man killed the elephant to feed many, it was one man who had accumulated the gold, but many people who benefitted from it. Also, at the end of the ceremony, the new *abirempon* would plant a spear in the market place and challenge others to do what he had just done, thereby encouraging emulation of his achievement.

The *Asantehene* also had an Elephant’s Tail, but his was golden (*sika mena*), thereby establishing its superiority to the other elephant tails, just as the Golden Stool was superior to the other stools. While the Golden Stool symbolized the essence of the Asanteman, the Golden Elephant Tail symbolized its collected wealth and this symbol of wealth (in the form of gold) was conceptualized as “enfolding” or “being wrapped around” the Golden Stool, serving almost

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80 Rattray, *Ashanti Proverbs*, 60.
as a protective shield to hold Asante-ness together.\textsuperscript{81} This is a good indicator of the importance of wealth to Asante society – wealth protected Asante from danger.

The custom of vying for the honor of receiving an Elephant’s Tail provided a controlled form of competition among Asante men. It can be seen as an arena in which men could challenge each other to excel under the auspices of the state. Through this established system of the Elephant’s Tail, the state served as the fount of honor achieved through the fulfillment of civic obligations. Honor in Asante was enjoyed in the form of advancing in rank in the social hierarchy. Honorable actions such as the accumulation of wealth were not rewarded by receiving more gold but rather by a public acknowledgment of one’s achievements.\textsuperscript{82}

Means of accumulation changed over time – in the beginning the wealthy elites of Asante had made their fortune as military commanders during the wars of expansion in the early 1700s. Later, trade became an important means of gaining wealth, and in the nineteenth century, the accumulation of wealth would become dependent on being a favorite of the Asantehene\textsuperscript{83}. While the means of accumulation thus changed, gold dust remained the currency, and the blood in Asante’s veins. This would become a problem in the nineteenth century as Asante’s gold supplies diminished.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion one can say that three factors were the main causes that held the Asanteman together: gold, an intricate system of social relations and civic duty, and \textit{sunsum}. Gold was a means of rewarding civic duty and fostering accountability, and strengthening relations within

\textsuperscript{81} McCaskie, “Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History,”31.
\textsuperscript{82} Iliffe, \textit{Honour}, 83.
\textsuperscript{83} The traditional importance of military positions for the elevation in society is also indicated in the fact that members of the \textit{Mpanyimfo} often held military titles, a reminder of the past when success in battles was needed to acquire a position of an adviser to the \textit{Amanhene}. 
the federation and among the *Amanhene*. It also encouraged people to strive for working for the
good of Asante and increasing its wealth. As long as wealth continued to increase and gold
regulated civic actions, rulers were found to be ruling in accordance with *sunsum* and their power
was thus legitimized. But events in the nineteenth century would result in the decline of these
pillars, as gold became scarce and people began to feel less strongly obligated to the state than
before. As *Asantehenes* began to rule more autocratically than before, their legitimacy was
questioned as the perceived power of *sunsum* in providing legitimacy decreased considerably. By
the middle of the nineteenth century the Asante system would begin to crumble.
Timeline

- *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu (r.1800-1823)
  - 1807 Asante occupation of Fante Territories
  - 1823 Defection of various territories from Asante; First Anglo-Asante War
- *Asantehene* Osei Yaw Akoto (r.1824-1833)
  - Battle of Katamanso 1826
  - 1831 Anglo-Asante Peace Treaty
- *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua Panin (r.1834-67)
  - 1843 British Government takes over administration of Gold Coast
  - 1852 Creation of the British Protectorate
  - 1863 Second Anglo-Asante War
- *Asantehene* Kofi Kakari (r.1867-1874)
  - 1872 the Dutch cede Elmina to the British
  - 1873 Third Anglo-Asante War
  - 1874 Invasion and destruction of Kumasi; Peace Treaty
- *Asantehene* Mensa Bonsu (r.1874-1883)
  - 1879 Domankama movement
  - 1883 Interregnum
- *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua (r.1883-4)
  - 1884 – 1888 Civil War
- *Asantehene* Agyeman Prempeh (r.1888-1896)
  - 1896 Agyeman Prempeh exiled; British Resident installed in Kumasi
  - 1900 Fourth Anglo-Asante war makes Asante a British colony
Part II: The nineteenth century – a downward spiral

This part of the thesis will deal with the course of events from the 1820s until the end of the 1870s, during which time the Asante system faced pressures from both inside and out. The British presence in close proximity to the kingdom was growing, and British interests changed over time. As interactions between them and Asante intensified, the former of necessity became more aware of internal events in the state and they attempted to influence its political decisions and actions. The narrative of events will separate British-Asante relations from internal Asante issues. The first part will outline British-Asante relations and explore the dilemmas faced by the British in dealing with Asante, while the second part discusses the internal affairs of the state. An explanatory section at the end will bring both narrative threads together and explain their implications as well as the interplay between them.
Asante-British Relations

The British had established a permanent presence along the Coast by the early 1800s. Shortly thereafter, Asante reached its utmost extent with the occupation of Fante territories in 1807.\(^{84}\) This brought the Southern border of Asante very close to the British. Former chiefs of these new provinces were allowed to remain in their positions, but office holders were sent in from Kumasi to ensure that their policy was in line with the rest of the federation. Discontent at Asante rule, however, led to a wave of Fante revolts and it took until 1816 for the area to be pacified.

In 1819, taxes were raised to cover war expenses as Asante engaged in a costly war with Gyaman to the West of its borders.\(^{85}\) Fante sentiments towards the Kumasi government worsened, and their refusal to pay the increase in taxes was encouraged by the British, who were a few miles west at Cape Coast. Nervous of being in such proximity to a nation as powerful as Asante, British merchants preferred to have Fante territories, in the form of a loose federation, as a buffer zone between themselves and Asante. They encouraged a Fante rebellion against Asante and by 1823 various districts had defected from the state, among them the chiefdom of Denkyira, the capture of which had signaled the rise of Asante a century before. Asante troops began to move into the rebel area and this led Sir Charles McCarthy, the governor of Sierra Leone, who was at that time responsible for dealing with Asante, to begin an offensive against the federation. Within weeks, however, he had been defeated and killed.\(^{86}\) Trade remained severely disrupted by

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\(^{84}\) These territories were located between the British territory and Asante – see map on page 5.

\(^{85}\) The war was supposedly caused by the disrespectful behavior of the King of Gyaman towards Asantehene Osei Bonsu, and was won by Asante; the war brought more than 20,000 slaves to Kumasi (Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 177).

repeated minor outbursts of violence between Asante and Fante. Concerned about the decline in trade profits, and interested in restoring order in the region, the British fought the Asante again in Katamanso in 1826. This time they were successful and they were able to retrieve the prestige lost by the earlier defeat and death of McCarthy.  

The Peace Treaty of 1831

In 1829/1830, negotiations for a peace settlement finally began in earnest and on April 24, 1831, a peace treaty was signed between the British and Asante. There were four areas of agreement which together frame our understanding of relations between the British and Asante at the time, and which would later turn into important issues.

The first objective of the treaty was the regulation of trade along the coast. It established that Asante trade routes were now to be “perfectly open, and free to all persons engaged in lawful traffic”. This marked an important change as Asante trade routes had formerly been controlled and dominated by official state traders and the servants of important chiefs who were increasing their masters’ fortunes. Unlike the large scale traders that had dominated Asante trade previously, small-scale traders could not be subjected to political authority to the same degree. As one British merchant pointed out, “Trade with the Ashantees is placed upon a more favorable footing than it has been at any former period”.

A second objective was the renunciation by the Asantehene of rights to tribute or homage from the Fante states, thereby causing a decrease in size of the Asanteman. However, in return, Asante traders were granted “free communication … with the Sea, without interruption by the
intermediate tribes [i.e. the Fante]”. Unlike the Asante, the British perceived this part of the treaty as an agreement to these regions being formally ceded to the British crown. This would later cause considerable conflict.

Thirdly, it was agreed that some “royal princes” should be sent to Cape Coast as quasi-hostages. The British not only provided them with generous living allowances, but also sent many of them to England to receive a British education, in line with humanist interests: “civilizing” West Africans with a European education. These princes would later play an important role in the discussion about incorporating British policies and economic practices into the Asante state system. They also often found themselves in a difficult position, torn between working for their British employers as interpreters and envoys while remaining neutral with regards to events in their home country, and taking sides and playing a role in shaping Asante politics.

Finally, the treaty dealt with the issue of human sacrifice in Asante. This issue was a constant irritant in British-Asante relations, and had an important influence on jurisdictional disputes between the governments. To what degree the executions witnessed by English travelers were really human sacrifices as opposed to judicial executions, is hard to determine. Some travelers claimed that during festivals, “criminals and prisoners of war were sacrificed in unlimited numbers to the spirits of the dead kings”. However, Dupuis observed that many of those killed on occasion of these festivals were “delinquents, and are so far deserving that

91 CO 276/112, Barnes to Brown, 25 July 1831.
92 Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 192.
93 Royal princes were not necessarily the sons of an Asantehene but simply members of the royal clan. They were, however, in the pool of eligible candidates to succeed an Asantehene. It is questionable whether the British were aware of this, and it seems more likely that they supposed that these princes, coming from a sideline, were highly unlikely ever to succeed. They may well also have underestimated the political influence of these men and the efficacy their British education might have. This will be illustrated later in the case of Prince Ansah.
anathema, as having been convicted of … having violated the civil laws”. Asantehene Kwaku Dua Panin reportedly explained to the missionary Freeman, “If I were to abolish human sacrifices, I should deprive myself of one of the most effectual means of keeping the people in subjection”. This raises the question of whether he was mistranslated by Freeman, and really was referring to the need of capital punishment in order to maintain order in Asante and to confirm his power over life and death. 95

What is certain is that the Asante did perform human sacrifice during funerals of important individuals, in the belief that this custom was providing servants for the afterlife of the deceased. Slaves were often used on these occasions, as mentioned earlier. The reported numbers, however, seem greatly exaggerated, probably due to the keen interest among Europeans to hear about them, and Williams asserts that it was often the case for judicial punishments to be falsely reported as being human sacrifices. 96 In addition to the public interest in hearing news of sacrifices, it also proved to be a useful tool in matters of policy. To provide refuge for those running from being sacrificed, was more easily legitimized than providing shelter for those who simply sought to escape punishment for criminal acts they had committed. Especially as the nineteenth century progressed, the issue was exploited “for polemical purposes, to justify … the European conquest of Africa”. 97

While bringing short term peace and stability to the region, the 1831 treaty thus laid the groundwork for a host of issues that would bedevil Anglo-Asante relations in the future. It raised questions about trade, authority and jurisdiction, and the civilizing mission of the British with regards to human sacrifice and law and justice within Asante.

The British Protectorate

In 1843, the British government took over the administration of the Gold Coast from the previous Committee of Merchants and by 1849 it asserted full sovereignty over the area of Cape Coast Town, which had developed around the old European fort, and served as an important port in the transatlantic trade. In 1852, the area of British jurisdiction was extended further to include several chiefdoms in what was to be called the British Protectorate. Here British law applied, and if those within the Protectorate were attacked by an outside power (namely Asante) they could count on British defense. As the British expanded their presence on the Gold Coast in the 1850s, reports on affairs in Asante multiplied, giving the reader a vivid picture of what was going on in the kingdom at that time.98

The creation of the Protectorate led to repeated conflict over jurisdiction. Enemies of Asante, such as the Fante, or subjects who had broken the law sought refuge in the Protectorate from punitive actions by Kumasi; so also did members of the federation, such as the Assin.99 Assin had once been part of the Asanteman, but regional stool holders had led their subjects out of the Assin area and into the Protectorate. The Asantehene presented two important Assin stool holders with generous presents of gold to entice them to move back into Asante with their subjects. Upon an attempt of the two men to lead their followers back into Asante, they were arrested by the Gold Coast authorities, tried for accepting bribes, and put to death in April 1853, indicating that both British and Asante were competing to exert control over the inhabitants of a border area.100

98 The takeover of administration of the Gold Coast and the creation of the Protectorate may have been abolitionist measures. In 1851 the British took over Lagos to stop the slave trade there, and in 1852 they pressured the king of Dahomey to stop trading with slaves. The early 1850s saw a revived drive towards the enforcement of abolition.

99 Refer to map, p.5.

100 Wilks, Asante in the Nineteenth Century, 217-8.
Pawns were also among the individuals entering the Protectorate. Like slaves, they were unfree, but in a different sense for they could be redeemed. If the head of a kin group found himself faced with a debt he could not immediately pay, he could choose to pawn one of his relatives to the person he was indebted to. Later the pawn could be redeemed on the payment of the original debt. The decision of the British to grant these pawns refugee status carried serious repercussions for their relatives and directly affected economic relations between kin groups within the federation itself. The difficulties caused by absconding pawns were recognized clearly by Governor Pine of Cape Coast Colony, who explained in 1862:

_The refuge afforded to runaway slaves and pawns under the British flag has, during my long experience, proved the sources of the greatest irritation and annoyance to native kings and chiefs._

Problems over who had jurisdiction over refugees led to another outbreak of hostilities in 1863 in the case of an Asante refugee whom Governor Pine refused to send back to Kumasi despite repeated requests to do so from the Asantehene. The Asante citizen in question, Kwasi Gyani, had been accused of hoarding gold and of not paying the established amount of tax to the Asantehene. When summoned to appear in court, he had fled to Denkyira which was at that point part of the British Protectorate. Asante troops were ordered to proceed to Denkyira, and bring home his head as well as that of Governor Pine. However, the Asante army in the second half of the nineteenth century was not as easily victorious as it had been in the earlier wars of expansion. Two months after the dispatch of troops, another report suggested that “several

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101 House of Commons Parliamentary Papers [PP] C385, “Ashantee War, 112,” Extract from a Despatch from Pine to Newcastle, 10 December 1862. It is difficult to establish how many pawns and how many slaves sought refuge in the Protectorate, because most British sources do not distinguish between the two.

102PP C385, “Ashantee War, 33,” Copy of a Despatch from Pine to Newcastle, 15 April 1863.
hundreds of Fantees [fighting for the British] have been slain, although at the cost of (it is supposed) a larger proportion of the enemy.”

Originally the British had been interested in nothing but extensive and trouble free trade, but profits were now so large that any disruption to trade, caused by disputes such as the one over Kwasi Gyani, gave rise to grave concern. The economic effects of these events become apparent when we look at export levels of gold. In 1861, 23,713 ounces of gold (worth £85,368) had been exported from Asante, but in 1863 numbers dropped to 9,680 ounces. In 1864, export levels were barely half as high as they had been in 1861, at 10,995 ounces.

Hesitant to promote a more active and involved policy in West Africa and discouraged by the repeated and severe disruptions in trade, British Members of Parliament called for withdrawal from the Coast in 1865. They feared that trade interests could not be protected without active political involvement, the cost of which would outstrip the benefits. However, Britain’s trade commitments were now too large for disengagement to be possible, and the committee considering withdrawal eventually accepted this. Their decision may also have been influenced by colonial administrators who were responsible for the protection of trade and who, when powerless in the face of political struggles between or within their African trading partners, lost revenues and influence alike. British involvement in the area continued to grow, and their sphere of influence increased in size when the Dutch ceded their possessions on the Gold Coast to the British in 1872.

The takeover of the Dutch fort of Elmina turned out to be by no means as smooth a transition as had been expected, for the Asante perceived themselves to be the overlords of

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103 PP C385, “Ashantee War, 47,” Extract from a Despatch from Pine to Newcastle, 10 June 1863.
104 CO 96/70, Macalest to Conran, 9 January 1866.
Elmina. While the British tended to confront Asante, the Dutch had been more cooperative. Indeed, they were cooperative to such a degree that it worried chiefs when some British territory came under Dutch jurisdiction in the early 1860s. Chiefs within these newly Dutch territories were scared because they perceived the Dutch as nothing more than feudatories to Asante who would, unlike the British, aide the *Asantehene* in the capture of refugees. The impression of Dutch subordination to Asante was strengthened by the fact that the *Asantehene* received regular payments from them.\(^{106}\) While the Dutch maintained that the payment constituted rent for the land, the Asante viewed it as tribute. When the Dutch decided to cede their settlements on the Gold Coast to the British in 1869, including the fort of Elmina, the *Asantehene* Kofi Kakari was outraged. He laid claim to the fort, demanding that jurisdiction over it revert back to him, and justified his demand by referring to the “tribute” paid by the Dutch. The Dutch governor of Elmina, Bartels recounted the history of Elmina in a letter to the British, assuring them that Elmina was in fact completely independent of Asante. The fort had been built by the Portuguese in 1482 and conquered by the Dutch in 1637. The latter had granted an annual payment to the King of Denkyira “as a gift to promote trade with the natives of the interior”. When the Asante federation had risen up and defeated Denkyira, the payment was redirected to them.\(^{107}\)

After long negotiations with the Dutch, the British took over Elmina in April 1872. Since the British refused to pay either tribute or rent to Asante, the *Asantehene* decided to pursue yet another costly war in order to regain authority over Elmina and possibly to halt Asante’s decline in power. In an attempt also to regain areas that had been within the British Protectorate, Kofi Kakari demanded the restoration of the chiefdoms of Denkyira, Akim and Assin to his authority.

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\(^{106}\) CO 96/76, Ussher to Kennedy, 6 April 1868.  
\(^{107}\) CO 96/76, B.C. Bartels to Kennedy, 21 December 1871. The fact that the Dutch first gained authority over parts of the British territory and then ceased their holdings along the Gold Coast altogether underscores the fact that the European powers in the 1860s were by no means certain whether settlements or even colonies along the West African Coast were desirable.
otherwise war would ensue. Inevitably, another war broke out between the British and the Asante in 1873.  

**The War of 1873**

The war that began in April 1873 over the jurisdiction of Elmina overshadowed the conflicts of the 1860s. Rumors of the strength of the Asante army ranged between 4,000 and 30,000. In an effort to avoid using British troops, the British provided the people of the Protectorate with large quantities of arms. This was indeed a change compared to the earlier wars of expansion by the Asante. Formerly they had held a quasi monopoly over the possession of arms and the chiefdoms they encountered had often been unable to counter their attacks successfully. However, at first it seemed as if Asante would again be successful, as the Asante army invaded the outskirts of Cape Coast. As late as October 1873, the African Times reported that, in addition to being equipped with plenty of ammunition and food, the Asante army confidently trusted in “the superior skill of their generals, their organization, discipline, and numbers”. In the same month, Kofi Kakari announced that he would join his troops in the field and would not return to Kumasi, unless he was carrying with him the remains of a late Asantehene which had been lost in an earlier war. Realizing that support for his African troops was necessary, the British military commander Sir Garnet Wolseley called for British reinforcements, which arrived in early December 1873. The increase in strength of the British troops coincided with a general weakening of the Asante army, caused by widespread smallpox.

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108 PP C819, “Further Correspondence respecting the Ashantee Invasion”, Kofi Kakari to Harley, March 1873.
109 CO96/104, Clipping from The African Times (3 May, 1873). The African Times was a newspaper published within the British Protectorate and British colonies in West Africa, so its information was likely obtained first hand.
110 Fynn, “Ghana-Asante (Ashanti)”, 36.
111 The African Times, XII, no.148, 30 October 1873.
112 This refers to the remains of Asantehene Kwaku Duah I, which had been taken along as a talisman for an earlier battle. When the battle was lost, his remains were captured by Asante’s enemies, and many Asante believed they were exhibited as trophies in Gold Coast (The Times, 18 November, 1873).
and dysentery. Wolseley therefore quickly managed to force the Asante troops to retreat. Kofi Kakari returned to Kumasi without having fulfilled his oath. 113

Wolseley’s goal was to capture Kumasi and dictate a new treaty to the Asantehene, similar to the one of 1831, but more encompassing. In this he went against the wishes of the British government, who wanted a new treaty without an invasion of Asante. 114 In the first week of February in 1874, Wolseley marched into Kumasi, exceeding the orders he had received from Cape Coast. No foreign troops had ever entered the city before. It had been left deserted by the Asantehene and his court. Wolseley ordered the destruction of the royal palace and the burning of the city, and he predicted that:

> From all that I can gather I believe that the result will be such a diminution in the prestige and military power of the Ashantee monarch as may result in the break-up of the kingdom altogether. 115

Wolseley’s forecast did not prove right in its entirety, but additional chiefdoms left the federation soon after the military defeat. On February 13th, Wolseley reported that the King of Adansi had applied for permission to transfer his people into Wassaw country, which lay within the Protectorate, and that he had granted this. 116 Kumasi now acknowledged that the old Southern provinces were forever lost to the kingdom, and the British turned them into the Gold Coast Colony after a heated debate over whether to pursue “complete annexation or total abandonment”. A decision to go with the middle way was reached, and it was decided that the

113 Fynn, “Ghana-Asante (Ashanti),” 38.
115 PP C269, “Further Correspondence regarding the Ashantee Invasion, No.14,” Wolseley to Kimberley, 7 February 1874.
116 PP C269, “Further Correspondence regarding the Ashantee Invasion, No.35,” Wolseley to Kimberley, 13 February, 1874.
creation of a colony along the coast could enhance “Commerce, Christianity, and Civilization” throughout the region.117

The peace treaty signed between Wolseley and Kofi Kakari replaced the 1831 treaty as the basis for British-Asante relations. It established perpetual peace between Asante and the British on the condition that 50,000 ounces of “approved” gold should be paid by Asante as indemnity, and that Kofi Kakari in his name and that of his successors, should renounce all rights to tribute or homage from the kings of Denkyira, Assin, Akim, Adansi, or any other allies of the British that had formerly been part of the federation. In addition, Asante was to renounce all claims of overlordship over Elmina and any payments for it.118

Wolseley had acted against his orders, and his actions sharpened the British dilemma. Their interest lay in stability and trade, but by destroying the Asante capital, Wolseley had destabilized the state. Approaching the problem from a purely military standpoint, Wolseley had failed to recognize the political implications of his actions. If Asante were to fall apart, not only would trade decrease but instability would spread across its former borders and into the British Protectorate. The capture and burning of Kumasi caused more problems for the British than it solved.

**Developments in Asante throughout the nineteenth Century**

Asante society underwent considerable challenges in the first decades of the nineteenth century under the reigns of *Asantehene* Osei Bonsu (r.1800-1823) and his successor Osei Yaw Akoto (r.1824-1833), especially in connection with an unprecedented influx of slaves, the result

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118 PP C269, “Further Correspondence regarding the Ashantee Invasion,” Inclosure in No.37 - Peace Treaty of 1874. It is interesting to note that the gold dust for the indemnities had to be “approved”. As Asante was beginning to run low on high-quality gold dust, it was not uncommon for the treasurers of the king to mix gold dust with some inferior metal such as brass.
of a series of successful wars at the beginning of the century. The 1819 war with Gyaman alone had brought 20,000 slaves into the kingdom. Provinces that had formerly paid their tribute in slaves were now asked to do so in gold or ivory.\footnote{Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 177.} At the same time, the beginning of the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade after 1807 altered Asante trade patterns and had social implications as well. As slaves continued to pour into the country while export channels narrowed, the number remaining in Asante grew, and incorporation became a problem. It was now that villages of \textit{nkyere}, slaves destined for sacrifice, grew rapidly, and slaves living close to Kumasi and other important towns were moved further out as rulers did not wish to have a growing slave population to reside too close to centers of administration.\footnote{Wilks, \textit{Forest of Gold}, Chapter 7.}

Abolition gradually turned into a crucial challenge, although its effects were not felt immediately. Routes to the North were still open for slave traders, and not all Europeans on the Coast ceased trade. While it had become harder to ship slaves past the British naval patrols and across the Atlantic, the value attached to the slave trade remained high and justified taking the risk of being caught. Between 1837 and 1842 for example, the Dutch at Elmina received 1,000 “recruits” from the Asante in exchange for guns. These were in reality slaves who were shipped across the Atlantic shortly thereafter.\footnote{McCaskie, \textit{State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante}, 96. There was a sharp decline in transatlantic slave exports between 1800 and 1815. However, it took until 1850 to cease completely. See Patrick Manning, \textit{Slavery and African Life: Occidental, Oriental, and African Slave Trades}(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 60-66.} And yet, the shift in patterns of trade had an effect on Asante. Items that served as status symbols among Asante’s wealthy (such as European umbrellas) had been purchased mostly with slaves, but now imports had to be paid for in gold. Gold was already becoming scarce despite the quite extensive gold fields within Asante, and
when slaves as an export good were replaced by large quantities of gold, it became even more so. Rulers now had to worry about keeping it in circulation and continuing to fill the state coffers.

**Responses to Pressure**

Partly in response to growing pressures, the *Asantehenes* of the mid nineteenth century became more autocratic than their predecessors and attempted more strenuously than before to exert their jurisdiction over their subjects. This trend really began during the reign of Kwaku Dua Panin who ruled from 1834 – 1867, although there had been earlier disputes. Kwaku Dua Panin carried through extensive reforms of the administrative system in Kumasi to centralize power there and to take it away from office holders. These “reforms”, however, did not serve a “modernizing” purpose, but were intended to ensure that Asante remained stable, and to shore up government authority.

Kwaku Dua also carried through purges of his political opponents, removing them from office and executing those from rival descent groups whose sons could be in line to succeed him to the throne.\(^{122}\) After 1844, he created more senior offices, all of which he gave to his sons. In a further attempt to secure his position in the face of discontent among the elite in Asante in general and Kumasi in particular, Kwaku Dua advanced those that were most loyal to him to powerful positions within the government, hoping that those who were indebted to him would remain loyal. An example for this is the case of Kwasi Brantuo, who had served as Kwaku Dua’s caretaker in childhood. Elevated rapidly through various government positions, Kwasi Brantuo was awarded with generous gifts of land and subjects. During the 1840s, he amassed the largest fortune of any functionary in nineteenth century Asante, aided mostly by Kwaku Dua, who sent him to collect court fines imposed on other stool holders, and often allowed him to keep some of

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these fines for himself. In 1844, he was awarded an Elephant’s Tail, the first to receive this honor without ever having undertaken military or trading ventures, and without a real public service career.\textsuperscript{123}

The repressive nature of Kwaku Dua’s government, as well as the intensifying conflict with the British, stifled Asante trade considerably. After the conflict over Assin in 1853, traders at Cape Coast had been strongly advised to abstain from selling any warlike stores to the Asante traders coming to the coast.\textsuperscript{124} Commodities such as gun flints yielded the highest profits and trade picked up only slowly; despite Kwaku Dua’s efforts to keep the Asanteman together, dispatches attest to the crumbling state of affairs in the 1850s. In 1855, for example, it was reported that some Asante office holders residing in Adansi were interested in reviving trade without the king’s knowledge.

Kwaku Dua’s wish to be succeeded by a paternal grandson of his was not granted, partially because his nominee, Kwaku Dua Kuma, was only seven when the Asantehene died in 1867. With the possible threat of a war against the British always in the background, the council of elders in charge of choosing the new Asantehene settled on Kofi Kakari (r.1867-1874). Not closely related to either Kwaku Dua’s family or that of his predecessor, Kofi Kakari’s position was by no means as secure as Kwaku Dua’s had been. The council hoped that he would abolish some of his predecessor’s practices which had resulted in unprecedented numbers and levels of court fines imposed on wealthy individuals. Kofi Kakari was expected to restore the custom by

\textsuperscript{124} PP C456, “Gold Coast, No.2,” Copy of a Despatch from Fitzpatrick to Newcastle, 3 August 1853.
which wealthy men held on to their property in their lifetime, and their wealth was appropriated by the state only upon their death.\textsuperscript{125}

The war that had been anticipated by the council of Elders when making their decision began to take shape soon after Kofi Kakari ascended to the Golden Stool. Torn between those councilors proposing war with the British and those opposing it, Kofi Kakari finally settled on war, but he failed to live up to the expectations of the proponents of war, who hoped that by retaining Elmina within Asante jurisdiction Asante could regain some of its former glory and influence.

The fact that foreign troops marched into Kumasi in 1874 and set fire to it had a considerable impact on the Asante psyche. It also had an impact on the \textit{Mpanyimfo} and shortly after the peace treaty was signed, the council destooled Kofi Kakari.\textsuperscript{126} He had failed to live up to the image of the ideal Asante citizen and custodian of the Golden Stool, whose life was to be devoted to the accumulation of wealth. Not only did he lack all talent for accumulation, he also did not manage to keep the ample state coffers left to him by Kwaku Dua well filled. He even went as far as to use the Golden Stool’s wealth to reward his favorites and concubines. The use of stool property for private business was not permissible and by so conflating his private and public personae, Kofi Kakari undermined his own position considerably. The personal use of stool wealth was certainly not the action of a man ruling in accordance with the ancestors and with the protection of \textit{sunsum} at heart, and it was one of the most important causes for the destoolment of Kofi Kakari.

\textsuperscript{125} McCaskie, “Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History,” 37.
\textsuperscript{126} Friedrich Ramseyer and Johannes Kühne, \textit{Four Years in Ashantee}, (London: James Nisbet & Co 1875), 298.
Kofi Kakari’s behavior in the 1873 war with the British ultimately caused his downfall. General Wolseley’s descent on Kumasi and the destruction of the city was blamed on the Asantehene’s inability to lead an army. The fact that he broke an oath saying that he would not return from battle unless successful further undermined his position and the council of elders lambasted him for his cowardice. To understand the implications of a warrior returning home beaten, it is necessary to understand concepts of military honor among the Asante. Before going to war, those in charge of troops took an oath according to which they would not return to the city unless they succeeded in their endeavor (Kofi Kakari had taken such an oath himself). It was then customary for a chief or war captain to commit suicide rather than be captured by the enemy, or violate any oaths taken before setting out to fight. This custom was underlined by an Asante proverb: “If it is a choice between dishonour and death, death is preferable”. Asante men showing cowardice had to be prepared to endure humiliation. It was not uncommon for them to have to dress up as women and let other men sleep with their wives without having to pay the customary court fine. Kofi Kakari did not have to do or endure any of these things, but he was no longer acceptable as Asantehene. He was succeeded on the Golden Stool by his brother, Mensa Bonsu (r. 1874-83) who expressed a wish for “peace, trade, and open roads” in order to replenish the plundered state coffers and bring back prosperity to Asante.

Trade, however, was not the only method Mensa Bonsu relied on as a means to fill the state coffers. He reintroduced the system of punitive fines against wealthy individuals which had made Kwaku Dua rich. But Mensa Bonsu outdid his predecessor and carried these measures to new extremes. Increasing numbers of wealthy Asante, even princes, moved into the Protectorate.

128 Iliffe, *Honour*, 86.
129 CO 879/8 Strahan to Carnavon, 8 January 1875.
and implored the British Governors to grant them safety. An example is the case of Prince Owusu, who sought protection in January 1881. In a statement made to Governor Griffith, the Prince recalled:

*I was living in Coomassie for many years ... the present King of Asante ordered that I, as a native of Gaman by birth, should go to my country, because a portion of the Gamans have declared themselves enemies to the Ashantees; and he charged me with having caught a man who stole my gold ... and stated that I was not right in so doing, and therefore I should be punished for it.*

This statement is interesting for a variety of reasons. First, it attests to the fact that the kingdom was continuing to shrink in size, as more chiefs retracted their allegiance to the king. It also illustrates how blatantly Mensa Bonsu sought to appropriate money and to get rid of those he had wronged. Linking Owusu with those who had broken allegiance with Kumasi seems to have been an attempt by the *Asantehene* to justify his actions to his advisers. In other cases, however, no pretense was made, and one Quabena Fua stated in 1882 that he had been arrested and only released by the king after consenting to give him all his property.

Out of fear of losing power, Mensa Bonsu began another extensive program of apparent reform, creating a new civil service and a standing army, a Hausa regiment, parts of which served as his bodyguard. Foreign mercenaries were employed in order to avoid the increasingly unpopular military conscription. Those who had previously fought for the sake of the honor of the *Asanteman*, no longer felt the same urge, an indicator of their growing disillusionment with the state of affairs in Asante. In order to balance the severe rise in spending, taxes were increased.

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130 CO 879/18, Griffith to Kimberley, 20 January 1881. The authorities at Cape Coast had an obvious interest in forwarding reports about the abusive behavior of the *Asantehene* to London.

131 CO 879/10, District Commissioner, Cape Coast, to the Colonial Officer, 26 October, 1882.

132 Wilks, *Asante in the Nineteenth Century*, 616. “Hausa” does not necessarily refer to the inhabitants of the distant Hausa region. It had become a generic term applied by the British to African soldiers recruited from the northern interior.
considerably and Mensa Bonsu relied more than ever on the courts as an instrument of fiscal policy.\textsuperscript{133} His brother, Assaya, the Kokofuhene, played an essential role. Minor chiefs reported later that Assaya sometimes informed Mensa Bonsu of the names of rich people in Kokofu, and that Mensa Bonsu “picked a fault” with them, fined them, and handed most of the fine to Assaya.\textsuperscript{134} Mensa Bonsu’s actions were soon noticed by the British. The British envoy, Captain Barrow, met a sub-chief of the Kokofuhene who recalled that Mensa Bonsu had fined him until he had no gold left to pay the fines. Barrow explained that “he had no gold on him and was poorly dressed for an important Chief”.\textsuperscript{135}

Chiefs and subjects who now sought refuge in the British Protectorate no longer cited as their reason the arbitrary taking of their wealth by the Asantehene but claimed protection because they had rebelled against their king “on account of his repeated acts of cruelty and misgovernment”.\textsuperscript{136} The accumulation of wealth had been desirable because, if successful in this endeavor, individuals were rewarded with honors during their lifetime and they could rest assured that their wealth was theirs until their death and would only then be appropriated by the state. What would motivate these men to continue to work for Asante if they gained nothing at all for it but rather were punished for doing their civic duty? As these sentiments increased, they gave rise to the conviction that Mensa Bonsu was no longer acting as agent of the Golden Stool.

By the end of the 1870s, opposition to the Asantehene had reached a peak, and the state coffers, left filled by Kwaku Dua in 1867, had been emptied. Just how desperate the condition of state finances was became clear in 1880 when Mensa Bonsu was forced to do something none of

\textsuperscript{133} Wilks, Forests of Gold, 172.  
\textsuperscript{134} CO 879/19, Barrow to Rowe, 23 April, 1883. Kokofu was an important territorial stool situated in close proximity to Kumasi; refer to Map, p.5  
\textsuperscript{135} CO 879/19, Barrow to Rowe, 23 April, 1883.  
\textsuperscript{136} CO 879/19 Acting Civil Commissioner Cape Coast to the Colonial Officer, 24 February 1883.
his predecessors had done: he turned to the British for help. Asante envoys arrived in Cape Coast
with a plea to the Governor to intercede on behalf of Mensa Bonsu with tribes northeast of
Asante who were blocking trade routes and threatening their former overlord, the Asantehene,
who was not able to muster the troops necessary to deal with the situation. In asking for help,
Mensa Bonsu also acknowledged a degree of dependency on the British, and it seems almost
impossible that only fifty years before, Asante had claimed jurisdiction over all of what now
constituted the British Protectorate.137

The internal as well as external challenges and pressures facing Asante in the nineteenth
century were linked with each other, particularly in three areas: British policy and its changes,
issues of jurisdiction, and the economic pressures discussed above.

**Changes in British Policy**

British policy gradually changed throughout the nineteenth century. Britain’s main
interest was to maintain free and stable trade on the Coast. The protection of these interests also
included the suppression of the slave trade and the development of legitimate commerce.138

The growing internal turmoil in Asante as well as repeated armed confrontations
necessitated a gradual change of British policy over several decades. The British were becoming
increasingly intent upon enlarging their sphere of control by creating the Protectorate, for
example, rather than just extending their influence, and they would not tolerate behavior that
threatened to infringe on their sphere, as shown in the case of the Assin chiefs in 1852.

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137 CO96/130, Ussher to Hicks-Beach, 2 March, 1880. The Asantehene may have thought that the British
would be able to help as they were becoming increasingly involved in trade along the Volta River, east of Asante,
and might therefore have some influence over communities in the region.

As British policy became increasingly forward, and as the Asante army suffered repeated repulses, *Asanteman* morale eroded. Successful warfare had made Asante great in the first place, but as the nineteenth century wore on it became increasingly clear that Asante’s last successful expansion had taken place in the war of 1823. Repeated defeats since then were perceived as striking losses of face. They also strained the state coffers considerably.

In 1874, both the British and the Asante found themselves facing a dilemma. The British for their part had weakened the state to such an extent, that it might soon become necessary to replace the close monitoring of Asante state affairs with direct involvement, something the British had been unwilling to do since they first settled on the coast. If the British were unwilling to expand interactions with the Asante beyond a simple trading relationship, the Asante were equally hesitant to increase interactions beyond the same realm. Since war with the British had ceased to be a real option since it had become clear that it would end in defeat, the Asante hoped to decrease British influence without armed confrontation. Both sides were therefore interested in putting a halt to the development of non-trading relations, but they found themselves unable to do so. Asante in 1874 was very different from the Asante of the 1820s, and it now lacked the power it once had to drive events in a desirable direction. The British position in the 1870s was also different. With changed policy goals and a changed Asante to face, they found themselves pushed into a course of action which had been clearly rejected as recently as 1865.

**The Issue of Jurisdiction**

The creation of the Protectorate especially raised questions of sovereignty and jurisdiction. The full extent of the problem becomes clear when one recalls that a stool holder’s power increased with the amount of subjects over whom he held jurisdiction. Thus jurisdiction had a meaning for Asante stool holders that went beyond territorial concerns. As Lonsdale
explains, “loss of sovereignty could literally mean the loss of mastery over men and women”.\textsuperscript{139} By draining Asante of subjects, the British Protectorate was undermining the chiefs’ and the Asantehene’s power, and the British presence caused an increasing polarization of Asante politics. One faction in Kumasi called for war while another advocated continued trade and slow reforms to stop the drainage of power.\textsuperscript{140} In addition, the British definition of authority over individuals differed considerably from the Asante definition. According to British understanding, once an individual crossed the Asante border, the Asantehene lost jurisdiction over that person, but in Asante political thought, jurisdiction was based on Asante-ness, not residence: no matter where an individual was located, if he or she was an Asante, the Asantehene held jurisdiction over him or her.

The Protectorate also undermined the Asante state’s authority by allowing people to escape punishment successfully. This in turn provided room for critique of the government as well as disregard for established norms such as the payment of death taxes. The importance that Asante placed on people made it a deeply antisocial act for a subject to forego these taxes, or leave Asante and settle down in another area, but as protection by the British was guaranteed, the Protectorate provided an attractive alternative for the wealthy who strove to escape the high taxes of Asante.

The economic pressures which have been discussed above also had a range of implications. The drainage of gold from Asante and the resulting increase in arbitrary exactions by the Asantehenes had far-reaching consequences especially with regards to government ideology. An indicator of conflict is provided in the case of the Adansi stool holders who

\textsuperscript{139} Lonsdale, “The European Scramble”, 729.
\textsuperscript{140} Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 477.
contemplated carrying out trade without the *Asantehene’s* knowledge or consent in 1855.\textsuperscript{141} Contemplating such behavior was a significant act of defiance because to trade without the 
*Asantehene’s* permission could be punished with the death penalty.\textsuperscript{142} Trading outside the
control of the state could constitute treason. Trade served the purpose of amassing wealth for the
state, and those who did so beyond its reach, depleted Asante of a revenue source. The fact that
this was debated as a real possibility indicates that people were no longer willing to contribute to
the state as they had before, possibly because they were growing dissatisfied with the way things
were run by *Asantehene* Kwaku Dua.

Another indicator of declining levels of commitments in response to the rulers’ reactions
to outside pressures is the story of Kwasi Brantuo. His elevation in status was solely based on
personal favors bestowed upon him by the *Asantehene*. The stories of former *abirempon* attest to
the fact that those with merit and talent advanced in Asante and contributed to the well-being of
the state through their services to it. Furthermore, those men that became stoolholders and
members of the council of Elders had proven themselves able to amass fortunes, or displayed
considerable military skill. Kwasi Brantuo had done nothing like that to distinguish himself.
Now, it seemed, one could attain power and wealth without having achieved anything for the
well-being of the state. Significantly, perhaps, there is no indication that any individual took the
Elephant’s Tail after Kwasi Brantuo. The implications are obvious. The Elephant’s Tail had been
a crucial way of encouraging public accumulation by private individuals. The fact that it had
apparently lost its appeal suggests that the ideological hegemony of the state was slipping.\textsuperscript{143}

\textsuperscript{141} See page 48.
\textsuperscript{142} CO96/35, Chiefs of Assin to Sir William Bat, 11 October 1855.
\textsuperscript{143} McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 68.
Part III: The Walls Come Tumbling Down

Revolt against Mensa Bonsu

In 1879, a militant movement called Domankama arose. Its leader claimed to be the reincarnation of the first Asantehene’s adviser, the priest Komfo Anokye, and some of his assistants claimed to be reincarnations of former Asantehenes. McCaskie describes the movement as being “grounded in a conservative appeal to historical greatness” and its emergence suggests discontent with the way things were in Asante at that point. The emergence of the backward-looking Domankama also points to the deeply split nature of political opposition among the Asante. While some, the refugees at the coast in particular, were calling for the modernization of the state, the Domankama desired the opposite. This dichotomy between traditionalists and modernizers partly explains the duration and extent of the civil war which broke out in 1883. Despite their differences, however, both movements agreed on one thing: both demanded accountability of the government.

Early in 1880, members of the Domankama attempted to kill Mensa Bonsu, while he was sitting in council. The assassination attempt failed and subsequently Mensa Bonsu crushed the movement, and employed increasingly draconian measures against opponents whom he now suspected of being after his life. In October 1882, the wife of the Bantimahene, one of Asante’s most powerful chiefs, appeared in court accused of adultery with an unnamed man. During the course of the trial she revealed to the Asantehene that her husband had been planning to give Mensa Bonsu up to the British. The Bantimahene, and his brother as well, were then imprisoned

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and executed. Interestingly rumors later surfaced that Mensa Bonsu himself had been the man who had seduced the chief’s wife. This rumor reflects the deterioration of his standing among his subjects. Adultery was a serious crime in Asante as it was understood as the theft of another man’s property and could be punished in some instances with death. Mensa Bonsu’s growing “theft” of gold dust may have supported these rumors, for someone who would steal a man’s gold might also steal his wife. The rumor gained additional force from the fact that the Bantimahene was the Asantehene’s subject. In such cases, where a chief seduced the wife of a subject, the kin of the injured man could rise and threaten to transfer their allegiance to another chief. In order to appease them, the chief would be required to pay a steep fine, which significantly had to come out of his own pocket; he could not rely on his stool fortune or on his council of elders to provide him with the required amount, for he had crossed a line and was considered to be acting as a private person and not as an agent of the stool. While the rumors of Mensa Bonsu’s guilt were never proved, their circulation might suggest a growing consensus among the Asante that Mensa Bonsu was increasingly acting in a private – and, indeed immoral - capacity. He was thus no longer fit to rule over the Asanteman.

Increasingly paranoid after the court case, the Asantehene was apparently under the impression that “a gigantic plot existed to destroy the Asante power … [and] ordered the arrest of all his councillors and linguists [advisers], about seventy of whom have already been massacred … executions occur daily”. In 1883, a rebellion took shape, and a large number of Amanhene withdrew their allegiance to the Golden Stool and thus the Asantehene. Their refusal

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145 CO 879/19 District Commissioner of Cape Coast to the Private Secretary of the Colonial Officer, 20 October, 1882.
147 Rattray, Ashanti Law and Constitution, 319-20.
148 CO 879/10, District Commissioner of Cape Coast to the Colonial Officer, 26 October, 1882.
to continue to belong to the federation was not merely a reaction to Mensa Bonsu’s irresponsible behavior, however. The governing system, which had been questioned on an increasingly large scale since the days of Kwaku Dua, now seemed completely undermined and unable to sustain itself. In a message to the Gold Coast Colony, several Amanhene announced they would no longer serve Mensa Bonsu or, in fact, “any other King of Ashantee, whether he was a good ruler or a bad one”.149 Clearly, for some, the Golden Stool, and the sunsum it embodied, was no longer the source of legitimacy.

Interregnum

On March 8, 1883, with a revolt against him well under way, Mensa Bonsu, seemingly far removed from reality, allegedly placed powder kegs in the royal palace and threatened to blow himself up along with the palace and all people within its vicinity. At the same time, hoping to seize upon the widespread discontent with his brother, ex-Asantehene Kofi Kakari was demanding to be reinstated on the Golden Stool. He had some support, but according to a report by British observers, this consisted of only one officeholder and “the discontented young men in the neighboring villages, who have everything to gain and nothing to lose by a civil war”.150 However slim his chances of success, in March 1883 Kofi Kakari marched towards Kumasi with a small army. The office holders of Kumasi moved into the palace and took Mensa Bonsu prisoner before he managed to turn his threat of self-destruction into reality. They were not acting on Kofi Kakari’s orders, however, but following their own agenda. While they desired another man as agent of the Golden Stool, they did not wish for this man to be Kofi Kakari. Treated as a state prisoner, Mensa Bonsu was banished to the small village of Abrodie. He would attempt to call together office holders in April to support his return to Kumasi as Asantehene, but

149 CO 879/19, Barrow to Rowe, 23 April, 1883.
150 CO 879/20, Rowe to Derby, 11 June, 1883.
when no one obeyed the summons, he apparently gave up on his ambitions and lived a quiet and modest life in exile, removed from politics.\textsuperscript{151}

Troops were sent out of Kumasi to meet Kofi Kakari’s men and to defend the capital. Both Kofi Kakari’s forces and those of the Kumasi chiefs plundered and pillaged the towns surrounding Kumasi, thus disrupting the town’s food supply. It is likely that the pillaging occurred as office holders ordered their troops to destroy the villages and farms belonging to their political rivals, so as to improve their chances of gaining authority after the end of the fighting. By destroying each others’ lands, the stool holders literally ate each others’ wealth and destroyed their opponents’ positions in society.

By April 1883, a council of those stool holders who still counted themselves as belonging to the \textit{Asanteman} began to debate who to put on the Golden Stool. Apart from Mensa Bonsu, the choice stood between Kofi Kakari, and Kwaku Dua, the grandson of Kwaku Dua I, who had been nominated by his grandfather but been only seven years of age upon Kwaku Dua I’s demise. Uncertain whom to choose, some chiefs suggested turning to the government of Gold Coast Colony and asking the governor to nominate one of the candidates as \textit{Asantehene}. A British commission was dispatched quickly to investigate events and to attempt to revive trade.\textsuperscript{152} In their final report, members of the commission recalled that they met no traders on the road, which was “consequently getting into disorder and becoming overgrown”.\textsuperscript{153} The fact that the Asante were so caught up in their civil war that they allowed this to happen is significant as symbolic of the slow decline of civilization and its capitulation to nature.

\textsuperscript{151} Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 538.
\textsuperscript{152} Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 538. This commission was in Asante from April until June 1883; members of the commission travelled between the various regional stool holders so as to gain a complete picture of the affairs in Asante. The concluding report of the commission was delivered in August 1883 and can be found as an attachment to CO 879/20, Lagden to the Governor of Gold Coast, 20 August 1883.
\textsuperscript{153} CO 879/20, Lagden to the Governor of Gold Coast, 20 August, 1883.
The British commission mediated in the negotiations for the election of the new
Asantehene. Clearly still hesitant to become more involved than absolutely necessary to restore
stability, the British governor at Cape Coast did not want to appoint a new Asantehene himself
but preferred simply to aid the Amanhene in the process. The commission had found a great
divide between the regional stool holders and the Kumasi bureaucracy. The Nsutahene for
example stipulated that he would only come to Kumasi to elect a new Asantehene if all other
Amanhene joined him there.154 This suggests the general mistrust of Kumasi among the
territorial stool holders. Clearly the Nsutahene was afraid of being isolated within Kumasi and
forced to accept a decision reached by the capital’s bureaucratic stool holders.

Realizing the isolated and thus powerless position they were in without the support of the
regional stool holders, the Kumasi stool holders began discussing a new form of government in
mid May so as to reconcile with the regional Amanhene. Many of the forms suggested
incorporated a government structure similar to that of the Gold Coast, including free trade.155
Throughout this debate, fighting continued. Not only Asante were involved, but also young men
from towns on the coast who entered Asante territory from the British Protectorate, possibly
intent on using the prevailing chaos to their advantage in gaining wealth. Their presence added to
the confusion and chaos already rampant in the kingdom. According to a report, they represented
themselves as being there with authority from the British government and ordered the Asante
villagers about, seizing foodstuffs and provoking unrest in formerly comparatively peaceful
areas.156 The fact that simply invoking British authority enabled them to have their orders
followed, demonstrates how far British influence had penetrated Asante and how it had begun to

154 CO 879/20, Barrow to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 11 May, 1883.
155 CO 879/20, Barrow to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 16 May 1883.
156 CO 879/20, Barrow to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 5 July 1883. It was customary in Asante for
nkwankwaa (“Young Men”) to demand food without providing payment in Kumasi and their behavior would be
tolerated.
replace the authority of the Asantehene. It seems almost as though people were willing to accept orders they believed to come from the British, because they had given up hope of receiving any from an Asante government, since no legitimate Asante government was in fact in place.

A Young Asantehene

In August 1883, Kumasi’s stool holders settled on the twenty-two year old Kwaku Dua as Asantehene-elect. Completely inexperienced, Kwaku Dua relied almost solely on his adviser, Owusu Koko, a powerful bureaucratic stool holder who had already served in the Mpanyimfo under Kwaku Dua I. Owusu Koko attempted to consolidate the young Kwaku Dua’s power and by September 1883, over a thousand people who were believed to be Kofi Kakari sympathizers had been executed - on his own orders rather than those of the young Asantehene. In addition, in an effort to collect money for the destitute Golden Stool, Owusu Koko invented new fines for actions such as offending the Asantehene. These steps, so much in line with those of Mensa Bonsu, quickly lost Kwaku Dua II a large part of his constituency despite the fact that hardly any of these orders came from him directly.

The Mamponhene, the Kokofuhene, and the Nsutahhene were still calling for Kofi Kakari to return to the Golden Stool, and a party of his supporters was being organized in Gold Coast Colony by Asante who had fled from Owusu Koko’s persecution. A member of that faction was Prince Ansah, one of the Asante nobles who had been educated in Great Britain and was at that moment working for the colonial government as an interpreter and messenger. In January 1884, the British discovered that Prince Ansah, who had served as interpreter in many recent negotiations with important Asante chiefs, had been bribed by messengers of Kofi Kakari. When

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157 The Gold Coast Times, III, no.114, 28 September 1883.
questioned, he admitted to “a leaning towards Coffee Calcalli”.158 A lengthy investigation revealed that he had used his position as an employee of the British government to send official messages to Asante chiefs, encouraging them to support the candidature of Kofi Kakari while giving the impression of speaking with the official voice of the Gold Coast government.159 Many Asante living under British rule, especially those who had been educated and even partly raised in Britain still remained active and influential figures in the political affairs of Asante. British ideas of government and legitimacy came to play an important role in the discussions around the question of how to construct a new Asanteman. Prince Ansah’s intrigues had been discovered, however, and his favored candidate ran out of luck. By the end of April 1884, most of his supporters had either been executed or left Asante, and Kwaku Dua II was officially enstooled. A short period of calm followed and trade began to flow tentatively along the roads, until Kwaku Dua died on June 11, 1884 from smallpox.160

Fighting resumed almost immediately. In July, Kofi Kakari himself was killed, but Owusu Koko’s troops were defeated by an alliance of chiefs, and, in November 1884, Akyampong Panin, Amanhene of Sawua (eight miles Southeast of Kumasi) entered Kumasi and formed a new council. It was, however, hardly comparable to the former Mpanyimfo: “the Ashantee people … are only represented by the inhabitants of Coomassie itself, all the other large towns and villages have thrown off its yoke”. Kumasi itself, starved of food supplies from the surrounding areas, was almost deserted. Houses and the royal palace lay in ruins and nature

158 CO98/5, “Minutes of the Proceedings of a meeting of the executive council held at Christiansborg Castle on the 2nd of January, 1884”.
159 CO98/5, “Minutes of the Proceedings of a meeting of the executive council held at Christiansborg Castle on the 6th of March, 1884”.
160 CO 879/21, Young to Derby, 25 June 1884.
was claiming back what was hers, with grass growing as high as twelve or fourteen feet in the streets.161

For the following months, fighting between various factions continued and, as late as February 1886, officials at the Gold Coast were reporting to London that “No authentic information from here [Asante], except fighting (desultory) is going on and peace is anything but probable”.162 In April 1886, the fighting threatened to intensify due to a conflict between the Bekwahene and the Adansehene, both of whom attempted to establish themselves as leaders in the southern region of Asante. The Bekwahene won and began to actively shape the politics of Asante. He arranged a trap and arrested and executed Akyampong Panin, still nominal leader of the council, in early 1887. The Bekwahene seized power, and called for constitutional reforms and the establishment of a new Asante administration. Negotiations over a new Asantehene commenced in late 1887. Two camps emerged: One, in Kumasi, favored the fifteen year old Agyeman Prempeh; the other, based in Gold Coast Colony, sponsored the older Yaw Twereboanna. Both candidates were grandsons of Kwaku Dua I, and eligible to succeed.

**British Intervention**

To prevent another outbreak of fighting over the choice of the two candidates, a British envoy was sent in, and, in February 1888, all Amanhene and Birempon of Asante agreed to meet in Kumasi to elect a new Asantehene.163 The British now viewed events with renewed optimism. One observed: “I am sure the King, if one is elected, would undertake to do all that Her Majesty’s Government wishes.”164 By this time, the British administration in Cape Coast had

161 PP C4906, “Further Correspondence respecting the Affairs of the Gold Coast, No.1”, Enclosure 3: The District Commissioner, Cape Coast to the Colonial Secretary, 16 May, 1885.
162 PP C4906, Enclosure 5 in No.7, District Commissioner, Cape Coast, to Colonial Secretary of the Colonial Office, 4 February 1886.
163 CO 879/28, Barnett to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 15 February, 1888.
164 CO 879/28, Barnett to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 26 February, 1888.
reached the conclusion that they had no choice but to remain actively involved in Asante affairs, although their main objective was still simply to maintain profitable trade.

On March 26, 1888, Agyeman Prempeh was declared Asantehene-elect, and by the end of 1888, all armed resistance disappeared, although it would take until late 1893 for Agyeman Prempeh to gain universal support. The Asantehene-elect attempted to reestablish state-monitored trade, and encouraged European investment in Asante, hoping to rebuild Asante’s former strength. In 1891, when the British government offered to include Asante within the Protectorate, Agyeman Prempeh replied politely but resolutely:

*My kingdom of Asante will never commit itself to any such policy; Asante must remain independent ... the cause of Asante is progressing, and ... there is no reason for any Asanteman to feel alarm at the prospects.*

Prempeh’s policies yielded promising results. Trade picked up and overall wealth slowly increased. States north of Asante revived old trade routes, and France displayed interest in investing. The constitution had been changed: Kumasi was still the capital but power was less centralized and the Amanhene were granted autonomy for many of their decisions. By 1893 several chiefs and their subjects who had fled to the Protectorate, were declaring their desire to return. In 1894, with unanimous support for Agyeman Prempeh assured, he was finally officially enstooled in a large ceremony, after the completion of funeral rites for the late Kwaku Dua II.

The resurgence of Asante coincided with the first phase of the Scramble for Africa and with an increased competition between the British and the French. By 1882 the French dominated Senegambia and the British the Gold Coast and the area around Lagos. As

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165 PP C7917, “Further Correspondence respecting the Affairs of the Gold Coast,” Letter from the Asantehene to the Governor of Gold Coast Colony, 7 May 1891.

166 The enstoolment ceremony of the Asantehene required the presence of all Amanhene and Birempoon, which explains why Agyeman Prempeh could not be officially enstooled before all stool holders agreed to his enstoolment.
competition for control of areas in the interior of West Africa began to intensify, Asante became drawn in. French interest in Asante affairs together with the increasing strength of the state and the popularity of Agyeman Prempeh, forced the British to act quickly. In 1895 they announced that a Resident would be installed in Kumasi to monitor affairs and to keep the peace. In addition, they demanded that Agyeman Prempeh pay 50,000 oz of gold in indemnities for the efforts made by the British envoys in times of civil unrest.\textsuperscript{167} Agyeman Prempeh accepted both terms, and, around the same time, his ambassadors in London, whom he had sent to secure British investments to revive trade, signed agreements for a consortium to develop Asante’s resources, such as gold mining, and to build a railway connecting its major cities. While the Asante ambassadors were still in London negotiating, however, the British government decided to send an ultimatum to Agyeman Prempeh in September 1895.\textsuperscript{168} Thus, while the Asante envoys believed their cause to be progressing, the Gold Coast government had decided on a final military solution. On January 17, 1896, British troops arrived in Kumasi without opposition. Three days later Governor Maxwell demanded the immediate payment of the indemnity. When Agyeman Prempeh responded by offering an immediate payment of 680 oz and a gradual payment of the rest, he was arrested and deported to the Gold Coast Colony. Asante was included in the British Protectorate, although it would take a war in 1900 for them to gain full control. The fact that the British, who just a few years previously had worked hard to put in place a strong Asantehene and to avoid direct rule over Asante, had now deposed the very ruler that they had apparently been looking for, is striking, and was certainly due to the threat of competition with France. At this point, the conjunction of internal and external factors, which

\textsuperscript{167} Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 648. The worth of 50,000 ounces of gold would be the equivalent of £187,500 today / about $280,000 (McCaskie, “Office, Land and Subjects”).

\textsuperscript{168} Wilks has suggested that the British government kept the ambassadors in London to prevent their going to Paris or Berlin and negotiating with the French of German governments (Wilks, \textit{Asante in the Nineteenth Century}, 647-8).
had so undermined the Asante state, was overtaken by events beyond the control of either the
Asante of the Cape Coast government. Had the second phase of the Scramble for Africa not
occurred, or at least not at this particular point, Asante might well have maintained its
independence.
Conclusion

As this thesis has established, the downfall of the Asanteman was caused by the interplay of a variety of factors. The fact that an *Asantehene* like Agyeman Prempeh, who seemingly did all the right things, could not manage to preserve Asante independence attests to the fact that the kingdom was challenged by more than simply the failures of mid-century *Asantehenes*. The constitutional crisis that had been caused partly by their irresponsible behavior was rooted in external factors, as is demonstrated by the fact that the removal of incapable rulers did not alleviate the problem. External factors had internal repercussions which led to a crisis of moral authority as well as to the material deterioration of the state. As internal and external factors cut against each other, the mix of constraints and opportunities eroded assumptions of good government. Furthermore, in the mid-1890s no state in the region could maintain its independence in the climate of intense competition between rival European imperialisms. By this time, it was largely external factors that delivered the final blow.

A particularly good example of the interplay between internal and external is the case of gold dust in Asante society. The primary effect of the gold shortage of the 19th century, caused in large part externally by the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, was not necessarily the way in which it affected trade, but rather the internal implications that it held. Gold served the purpose of stratifying Asante society: it “embedded and accelerated, crucial processes of differentiation in Asante society”. The gold shortage thus caused more than a mere shortage of currency; it upset social hierarchy. In addition, the increased outflow of gold was certainly a contributing factor to the autocratic behavior of *Asantehenes*, beginning with Kwaku Dua, who

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169 McCaskie, “Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History”, 27.
pressed judicial exaction more forcefully than before in an attempt to ensure that the state coffers would remain filled. This in turn set off a process of increasingly arbitrary exactions, which threatened the legitimacy of political power, and caused considerable numbers of people to leave Asante and enter the Protectorate, where they found a different system of governance. This experience provided an inspiration for how Asante could be reconfigured; an example of what Lonsdale has called “creeping conquests from outside”.

Another example is the issue of jurisdiction. The importance of people rather than territory for Asante political theory is crucial for understanding the far reaching consequences of clashes over jurisdiction. The British did not recognize the personal jurisdiction of the Asante rulers over their subjects. If an individual crossed into the British Protectorate he was safe from prosecution by an Asante authority. This was related to the wider issue of perceptions of rule of the law in Asante. The protection extended by the British to refugees was first inspired by humanitarian ideas (such as the condemnation of human sacrifices), which were replaced over time by a much more simple-minded opposition between “civilization” and “barbarism”. With the discourse thus simplified, the British were willing to employ more aggressive methods in furthering their politics.

At the same time, the Protectorate and Cape Coast were full of opportunities to make good money, so leaving Asante did not mean living in poverty henceforth. The repercussions this had for Asante were considerable. It undermined its judicial system and deprived the state of a

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170 It is interesting to view that in comparison to an earlier incident under Asantehene Osei Tutu Kwame (r.1777-98), who contemplated the illicit seizure of gold from one of his subjects and who was lectured by a member of his Mpanyimfo who advised him: “That man never did you any wrong, you know all the gold of your subjects is yours at their death ... but if you get all now, strangers will go away and say, only the King has gold, and that will not be good, but let them say the King has gold, all his captains have gold, and all his people have gold, then your country will look handsome, and the bush people fear you” (McCaskie, State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante, 68).

171 See page 2.
large amount of income, especially in the second half of the 19th century when considerable numbers of wealthy citizens fled into the Protectorate. The case of Kwasi Gyani “represented a trickle that was to become a flood”. However, it was not the financial aspect of the jurisdiction issue that was paramount. The drainage of subjects of the stool holders literally translated into the diminution of their political clout. Finally, the issue of jurisdiction attacked the essential concept of Asante-ness. It became easier than ever before for an Asante subject to renounce his allegiance and to choose another one.

Increasingly, the Asante government lacked time and opportunity to respond sufficiently to its subjects’ demands: the British presence from the 1870s onwards gave it neither. Had there been only the external issue of European presence, or only the internal issue of increasingly unaccountable governance, the fate of Asante might well have played out differently. It was the interplay of both internal and external issues of economic pressures and social and moral challenges that caused Asante’s demise. There had been crises of governance before (indeed, the Asante federation emerged out of one), but this one coincided with the beginnings of the active phase of the Scramble for Africa, and so the stakes were much higher. By 1900, the last Asantehene and his key advisers were in exile, and the Asanteman was about to be dismantled. It would take 30 years for a second form of Asante to be resuscitated, and, as Allman has pointed out, it would have no life in it.

While the historiography of Asante has mainly been split into two different camps – one argument based on external and economic factors (Wilks) and one on changing perceptions of

172 McCaskie, “Accumulation, Wealth and Belief in Asante History”, p.36.
173 Allman, “Be(com)ing Asante, be(com)ing Akan”, 117.
civic achievements and moral government (McCaskie) – the narrative can only come into full focus if one considers both approaches combined.

The difference in approach to the Asante political system between McCaskie and Wilks is most striking with regards to political terminology, because of Wilks’ tendency to gloss Asante politics in Western terms. While this might make it easier to follow the arguments, it also risks giving a false impression. An example of this is Wilks’ description of both a Peace Party and a War Party among the members of the Mpanyimfo. Wilks’ focus on “dovish” and “hawkish” policies driven by the changing amounts of influence of these parties, tends to overlook other important factors which spoke directly to what the Asanteman was, something that McCaskie focuses on. Again, Wilks suggests that Asante politics became more polarized in the 1820s over the question of authority over the Fante territories. While it is true that most members of the Mpanyimfo called for war, Wilks’ explanation falls short because it does not consider the internal workings of Asante sufficiently. Jurisdictional disputes with the British over parts of the Asanteman were not simply territorial disputes but went to the heart of political authority in Asante – control over people. It was this that made war inevitable, despite the economic costs.

The formalist approach takes the example of purely political polarization further and applies it to Asante’s situation in the 1880s. According to Wilks, conflict had developed “between those who subscribed to principles of mercantilism and those who wished to see the government greatly reduce its level of control over the economic life of the nation”. 174 Again, this outside perspective, while not entirely wrong, does not fully explain the complicated reasons behind the civil war. McCaskie on the other hand suggests that “the consent that framed the

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historic meaning of accumulation, wealth and the place of the *abirempon* was dissolved.” The *grundnorms* of societal structure and order had been disrupted, and it was that which contributed largely to the moral debates about authority in the 1880s, and explains why the civil war was so lengthy and so bitter.175

As both the shortage of gold dust and the conflict over jurisdiction suggest, the fate of Asante was bound up in a complex web of internal and external factors. The same might be said of other African states at the time when viewed within the frame of Fieldhouse’s “general crisis”. There has always been a conceptual gap between historiographies of European imperialism and those rooted in African society. Looking at Asante from both inside and out helps us to see that the two approaches need to be connected at a level of deep politics.

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175 McCaskie, *State and Society in Pre-Colonial Asante*, 68.
Glossary of Concepts

- *abirempon*: “Big Man” who has accumulated a considerable amount of wealth and is recognized for this achievement, he is awarded a symbolic Elephant Tail. The same term had been applied for the earliest independent rulers of Akan chiefdoms.

- *akoa/nkoa*: term applied to all Asante. It refers to a person living dependent on someone else.

- *amanhene*: Stool holders. The term could apply to regional stool holders who were named after their respective region of influence (i.e. *Kokofuhene*), or bureaucratic stool holders, who lived in Kumasi, and were usually members of the *Asantehene’s* advisory council. “-hene” means king, so the *Asantehene* is literally king of Asante, and king of kings of Asante.\(^\text{176}\) *Amanhenes* were usually descendants through the female line of former stool holders.

- *Asanteman*: the whole of the Asante federation, this term is used instead of “state” or “kingdom” and refers to all federate parts of Asante. It represents a notion of completeness and community. Throughout this thesis I have used the term interchangeably with “state” and “federation”, but they all refer to the same concept, I simply used them whenever they seemed most appropriate.

- *Sunsum*: This term can refer to the accumulated wisdom of the ancestors encapsulated in a stool, but it can also refer to the quality of being Asante, i.e. Asante-ness

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Bibliographical Note

The primary material I consulted consisted largely of dispatches and letters between British officials at Cape Coast and the Colonial Office in London. It included letters from Asantehenes and reports of British envoys to Asante.

Most of the original dispatches I used were Colonial Office Papers, which I consulted in the National Archives in London in 2008. The Parliamentary Papers contain copies of dispatches that were made available to Members of Parliament in London in order to provide them with background information for debates. Both the Parliamentary Papers and the Colonial Office Papers sometimes included newspaper clippings from which I have quoted.

Another set of primary sources used in this thesis comprises the writings of travelers and missionaries such as Freeman and Dupuis and the ethnographic writings of R.S. Rattray (1881-1938), a British district commissioner stationed in Asante between 1906 and 1930. An anthropologist by training, Rattray attempted to discover the underpinnings of Asante culture and conducted hundreds of interviews in Asante.177

Many of the reports were shaped by particular objectives and filtered through a set of assumptions about African states. This applies, for example, to the issue of human sacrifice. Policy makers may have emphasized the issue to justify certain political actions. Travelers’ accounts were also not always objective on the issue. It was a hotly debated topic in nineteenth century Europe, and they often wrote with European audiences in mind.

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