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# ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY IN ASANTE

The purpose of this lecture is to explore how far archaeology can throw light on the development of art forms in a single African society. The society I have chosen is the Asante kingdom of what is, today, Ghana. This region was formerly known as the Gold Coast for the simple reason that, for Europeans, it was a major gold-producing area. And gold is the key to much of the Asante life and Asante art. By the eighteenth century Asante was a rich and powerful centralised kingdom with a king and court who expressed their power through a profusion of gold, or gold-covered, objects and ornaments. Much of the art of Asante was an art of the court, an art of power, and it was used by political leaders in periodic public displays to signal social distinctions<sup>1</sup>.

In studying the development of art in Africa the Asante are a particularly interesting case for, quite simply, we have more written information about them than any other group in the whole of the sub-Saharan Africa. The quantity of archival information about the Asante is vast. Because of the lure of gold Europeans settled on the Gold Coast as traders from almost their earliest period of African exploration. The Portuguese founded their coastal trading fort of 'El Mina', literally the Mine, because of the vast amounts of gold they hoped to get, in 1482. They were followed by Dutch, Danes, British, Prussians, French and, to a lesser degree, other European powers. Each group left records of various coastal peoples related to the Asante and of the Asante themselves.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century, those Europeans trading on the coast became aware that a hitherto unknown kingdom, that of the Asante people, had made its appearance in the interior of the Gold Coast. Asante power grew rapidly. Soon its control over gold supplies made European traders increasingly entangled in its affairs by trade, diplomacy and, eventually, by war. In the eighteenth

century it expanded, often by military conquest, from its original base in the dense tropical rainforest, starting to control areas in both the savannah to the north and in the southern coastal zone. The flow of written accounts dealing with the Asante which began around 1700, became a flood in the nineteenth century because of extensive European diplomatic missions to the Asante capital, Kumase, and the various wars fought between the expanding Asante state and European powers and their African allies.

I mention something of the history of this area because the growth of Asante art was, to a considerable degree, linked to the development of the Asante state.

The Asante kingdom was founded or, at least, emerged as a new and distinct political organisation centered on Kumase, the capital, at the close of the seventeenth century. According to Asante oral traditions the new kingdom was largely the creation of the King or Asantehene, Osei Tutu, assisted by the great priest (*Okomfo*) Anokye. Undoubtedly there had been earlier rulers at Kumase and, probably, earlier allied states or chiefs in the region around it, but the start of the new state was symbolised when *Okomfo* Anokye brought down from heaven a Golden Stool. A new, or a newly elaborated type of object, covered in gold, was thus created to emphasise the new powers of the emergent state. It is also said that the pre-existing wooden stools, the emblems of office possessed by other chiefs in the Kumase area, were buried in a river bed so that the pre-eminence of the Golden Stool would always be assured.<sup>2</sup> Asante oral traditions also associate certain other items of state regalia with this period or the next reign: these include state swords, decorated with large gold images, cast by the lost wax process, on which oaths of loyalty to the king were sworn by senior chiefs.<sup>3</sup> These swords and their ornaments illustrate three distinctive features of court art: the use of consider-

1. A "pre-Asante" pot form Obuase



able quantities of cast gold in the form of images which for the well-informed Asante also recalled proverbs or wise sayings,<sup>4</sup> the use of these objects in tying together parts of the state, and their role in the periodic public display of the king's power.

The linking of one or more proverbs to an image, or even a highly abstracted version of an image, is a prominent feature of much Asante art. In the past such proverbs were widely used, especially at the royal court and by elders. They were believed to encapsulate traditional wisdom and used to summarise arguments in contentious issues such as law cases. An image of an elephant might, for example, be interpreted by the Asante as referring to the saying that "if an elephant steps in a trap it is the trap that suffers, not the elephant" or "one man may kill an elephant but many can dine off it". Much of the art, in this way, acquires a verbal dimension and has associated with it a set of sayings of wide applicability.

If the new Asante state crystallised around 1700, despite our best efforts, it is hard for us to see what was happening in the forest before then. For the preceding period we have very little information about the Asante: all we have are the names of

some of their rulers, some oral traditions which state that the Asante, or at least one of the groups which helped form the new state, first settled in a place called Asantemanso, south of Kumase, or emerged out of a hole in the ground there.

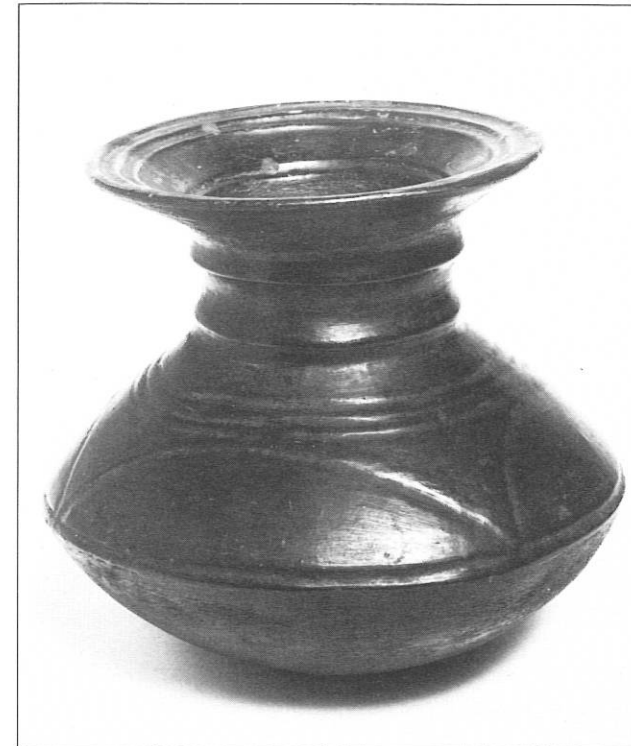
'Emerging out of a hole' is a fairly common motif in traditions of this area of Africa and is usually taken to be a statement that the people concerned are indigenous – they came from the land itself and did not move in from elsewhere.

How long the Asante had been in the area, where they had come from, what they were like, is still a matter of mystery, a mystery which can only be resolved by archaeological research. The Asante themselves speak a language closely related to that of many other groups in the forest zone of southern Ghana, the Twi-or Akan speaking groups, and these groups share with the Asante many traditions, beliefs and customs. But exactly when the Akan arrived in the area, or whether or not their culture evolved there, is still not known for certain.

To discover more of Asante prehistory we are therefore forced to rely on the study of one of the few traces of human occupation which survives fairly well in the rain-forest: pottery. From excavations in the 1920s, often carried out in association with mining operations,<sup>5</sup> and from more or less casual finds since then, it is clear that in much of the forest zone now occupied by the Akan there is found a distinctive type of pottery. This pottery is very different from that found at undoubted early Akan sites and also very different from the Akan pottery of the last 200 years or more. This earlier, heavier and more ornate pottery, at all excavated sites, underlies Akan material. From the single excavated site with a good chronology we know that it disappears before 1600 A.D. Does this give us any clue to the development of the Asante and their art?

Based on this knowledge of the early

2. Asante water vessel, early twentieth century.

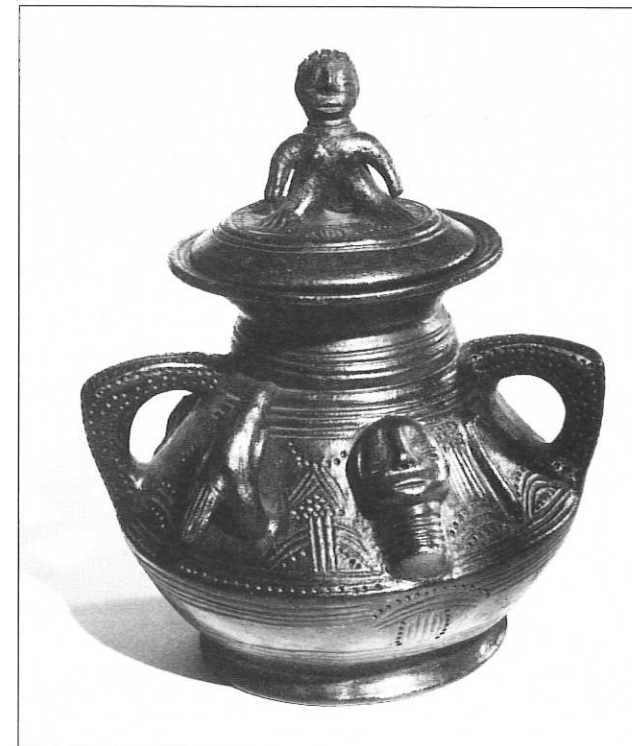


date of the pottery it has been suggested that the Akan either entered the forest after the earlier pottery makers had disappeared or that they somehow overcame them and imposed a different culture, including a new type of pottery, on them. This incursion idea is supported by some Akan traditions which suggest that they moved into the area from the north.

Professor James Bellis has proposed an alternative solution: he suggests that the earlier pottery type was in fact Akan and that it survives in a modified form as present day Asante ritual pottery.<sup>6</sup> In this view the types of elaborately decorated ritual pottery, used in ceremonies following the death of a senior member of the matrilineage, the key Asante kinship organisation, have evolved out of forms that date back well before the fifteenth century.

The question thus posed by these scraps of pottery lies at the roots any consideration of the development of Asante art. The

3. Pot (*abusua kuruwa*) used in the mortuary rituals of senior people.



basic problem to be settled is this: how far Asante art evolves out of an earlier forest culture and how far it derives from, or has been influenced by, outside factors.

To attack this question we have to consider what it was that set the Asante state on the path of its development. And here we immediately come against the problem that our knowledge of what was going on in the forest, the Asante heartland, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, is very scrappy, being based mainly on oral traditions, a few indirect written accounts but, alas, on virtually no archaeology.

It is one of the paradoxes of West African studies that, in a region for which the written records are so good, the archaeological research has been so poor.

Admitted, there are quite severe technical problems to excavating in the tropical forest which still covers much of Asante. Not only can the huge trees disrupt sites, they also force the archaeologists to exca-



4. An Asante village in the forest.



vate only in the spaces between them. Tropical forest soils are also extremely shallow, so stratification is often negligible and in the tropics organic material soon disappears through rot or being eaten by insects. Asante settlements, being made of mud brick with thatches of palm leaves, are not the sort of things which survive for long. Villages move for various reasons: political disputes, the exhaustion of surrounding farm land, to get away from, or to be near to roads, because of war, etc. Once the roof of a deserted house goes, the mud walls are soon damaged by the torrential annual rains, and the remains of walls may then collapse leaving – at best – a confused stratigraphy. Even the dating of archaeological remains in the forest is difficult – the clay from old buildings may be dug up and re-used in new bricks and into these may be incorporate bits of charcoal or wood from earlier periods, thus making C.14 dating of doubtful use.

All this goes some way to explain the curious lack of archaeology in the forest but it is not the whole story. Sites can still be found. The Asante still make their farms

by clearing the regenerated forest after it has been lying fallow for 10 or 20 or more years. They can easily recognise the debris left by old settlements and more importantly, the dry, dark, more fertile soils which are the product of old village middens – one of the places where old broken pots, pipes and other discarded products, meat and drink to archaeologists, are usually placed. Elders also recall traditions about the sites of earlier settlements and can date them more or less accurately in terms of the number of preceding generations.

If the possibilities for finding sites are there, even if stratification is almost non-existent at some forest sites and if the conditions quickly destroy organic material, the actual lack of archaeology is puzzling. One factor behind the comparative archaeological neglect of Asante may be that, just because we know so much about the Asante from written sources, archaeologists have felt it would be more profitable to dig where they had a greater chance of making a major contribution to knowledge.

Whatever the causes of this archaeo-

5. An Asante village c. 1900 showing palm thatched roofs, a building in decay and, front left, a European being carried in a palanquin.



logical neglect it is only in the last few years that attention has shifted to excavating in the Asante heartland. Prof. Shinnie has recently begun to explore sites in the area which the Asante recall as their founding settlement in the forest. So far his excavations do not allow firm conclusions but they indicate that the sites were inhabited several hundred years before the foundation of the Asante state.<sup>7</sup>

We are therefore forced to look to sources of information outside the forest zone and to those areas where excavation is easier. There is now a considerable body of evidence, some derived from excavation, some derived from the study of oral traditions and Islamic and European texts, which allows us to reconstruct indirectly what was happening in this general area in the centuries before the Asante emerged.<sup>8</sup>

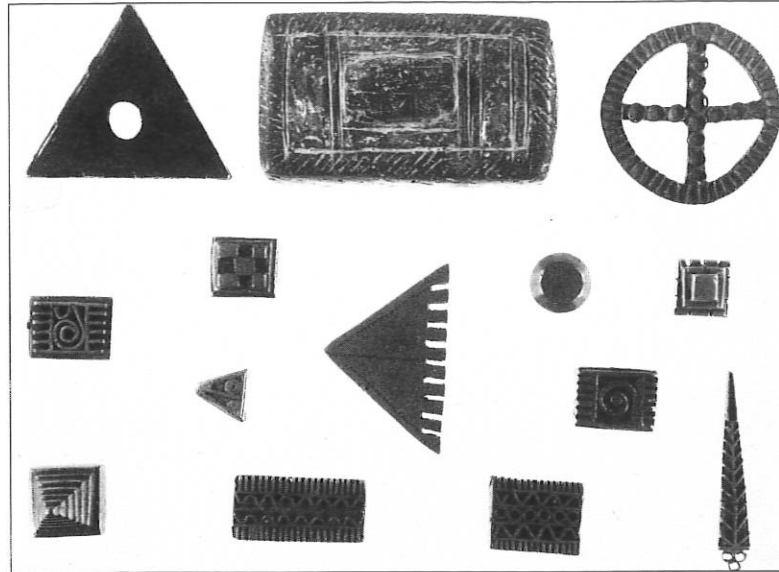
The first and most important factor in the eventual appearance of the Asante seems to have been the earlier development of a trading network, associated with the spread of Mande-speaking Islamicised groups, across West Africa and down into the forest zone. These traders were inter-

ested in obtaining gold and, perhaps, kola nuts grown in the forest. In return they exchanged savannah products and, almost certainly, metal, metal-work and other goods obtained by trade from the other side of the Sahara.

Prof. Posnansky has excavated one of their trading towns, ancient Begho, just beyond the old forest edge northwest of Kumase. From it we can begin to get clues to the pattern of development of Asante art.

Begho existed from about 1200 to 1800 A.D. Posnansky and other scholars have suggested its rise has to be seen in the context of an increase in trade and a worldwide demand for gold in the thirteenth century, and other factors leading the Mande to push down towards the forest zone. The evidence from excavation at Begho, and from sites further to the North in the Middle Niger, strongly suggests that it was by these trade routes, and from this direction, that new techniques, new goods and new materials were first transferred to the peoples of the rainforest. Principal among these were the technique of nar-

6. Geometrical gold-weights.



row-strip cotton weaving, the casting of brass and gold by the lost-wax technique, and various brass items.

But besides the transmission of such new skills and actual goods to the forest, the steady pressure on forest societies to produce gold almost certainly set in train a process of political development.

If these northern trade links affected Asante, or the proto-Asante, in the period leading up to 1700, once the kingdom began to appear in European records we get a far better idea of its progress. The new state, perhaps drawing personnel from earlier Akan-speaking states to the south, and in all probability, using military and administrative techniques developed there, embarked upon a period of rapid military and economic expansion. It is possible to identify the main elements in its success. Firstly, it had access to, or could gain control over, considerable gold resources; the gold was recovered either by fairly shallow mining or by panning in the innumerable streams and rivers which seam the tropical rain-forest. Secondly, some of this gold could be exchanged with Europeans for fire-arms and these, used in new military formations, could be organised to con-

7. A gold-weight in the form of a man and woman pounding yam or plantain to make fufu.



quer other areas. Conquest and trade brought slaves, and this increase in manpower, coupled with the productivity of new crops – maize, cassava, coco-yam, – imported via Europeans from the Americas, allowed the forest to support a far larger population that had been possible previously. Eighteenth century Asante seems to have had what was almost a run-away economy: a sort of machine in which every inclusion of new territory and resources fuelled further expansion.

Trade, both internally and with European and Islamic groups, was essential to this expansion. Vast amounts of gold-dust were in circulation as currency and every person involved in trade had his own set of weights to measure out units of gold-dust. There are two sorts of these weights: ones representing in miniature objects, creatures and scenes from local life and other, non-representational ones in the form of discs, rectangles and triangles decorated with a wide variety of cursive or straight lines in low relief, the so-called 'geometrical' weights. It has been suggested that the more numerous geometrical ones evolved first and that they relate to both Islamic and European systems of weights.<sup>9</sup> The

8. Part of the King's Palace, Kumase, 1896 or 1897.



first suggestion is plausible, but the proof offered for the second is statistically unsafe and of no use whatever.<sup>10</sup> Clearly it would be of great use if weights could be recovered from properly excavated sites in Asante but I know of no case where this has yet been done.

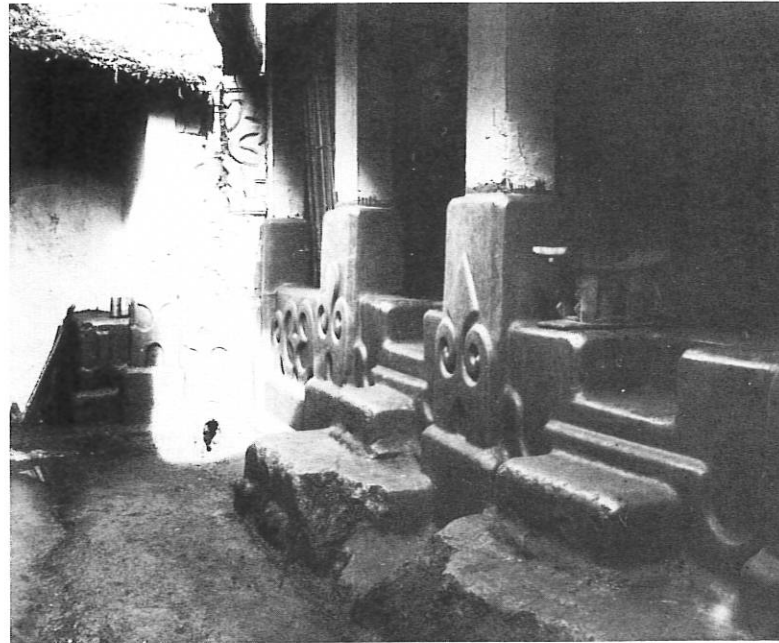
However it is sensible to accept that the northerly links of the gold trade influenced the original development of gold-weights in Asante. Posnansky recovered from Begho pottery discs which may well have been used to weight gold but absolute proof of their function is lacking. What is highly significant, however, is the way in which the Asante developed utilitarian objects into elaborate and amusing castings depicting creatures, scenes and objects from their lives. Many of these representational weights also served to call to mind aphorisms or proverbs: the image had a verbal dimension which, as I have said, is a feature we find in other areas of Asante art. In regard to gold-weights, therefore, what we seem to have is the Asante taking an exotic form, turning it into representational images, and adding a distinctive verbal ele-

ment.

By the time we get to the last century we are able to form a more detailed and comprehensive picture of Asante art and society. By 1820-1850 Asante was a complex and elaborate state, controlling directly or indirectly much of what constitutes modern Ghana and some areas of present day Ivory Coast. Kumase, the capital, was largely an administrative and political centre, perhaps somewhat like Washington D.C. is within the U.S. state. It had a population of perhaps 60,000 or more, broad streets, dominated by the Asantehene's large palace and the elaborate houses of senior chiefs and officials who were required by the king to live in, or at least to visit periodically, the capital. While the founding Asante states around Kumase retained a degree of self-government, (although this was increasingly whittled away by the Asantehene and his officials), the conquered areas beyond them were more directly administered. On the fringes of the Empire, allied or subservient groups often had Asante Residents posted to oversee them and they were also made



9. An inner court of the Asantehene's Palace, Kumase, 1896 or 1897.



10. Typical tradition Asante building of the sort used for temples (*bosom' fie*) and for chiefs in the nineteenth century.



to sent tribute in such goods as cloth and iron or in people to Kumase. The government was aided by a system of wide routes through the forest, a corps of reliable message-bearers, a form of treasury and delib-

erate state control over the flow of goods through the kingdom. "Art" also played a key part.<sup>11</sup>

I have already indicated that the much of the art of Asante was closely connected with the court and the power of the rules. You will recall that the Golden Stool, believed to contain the soul of the Asante nation, is said to have come down from heaven to supersede all earlier – and we may surmise – wooden stools. A new form of regalia was thus created to go with the new kingship.

The Asante state used a range of objects to express its overall power and to show distinctions between the various levels of chief and official. A strong element of hierarchy was present in much of court art. The Asantehenes controlled special groups of weavers, carvers, casters and other metal-workers, located near the capital, and strictly supervised what they could produce for lesser chiefs. The size and elaboration of regalia related directly to a chief's powers.

Art was used to show rank and power. Royal servants were distinguished by wearing cast gold discs, sometimes 4 inches in diameter, around their necks, and major diplomatic missions were sent out bearing a large gold-covered axe, gold-decorated swords or staffs. Senior chiefs showed their wealth and power by the variety, number and size of the gold beads they wore or the number of symbolic gold or silver keys to their treasure chests which their servants paraded. Some of the royal ornaments may have been recast in new forms to impress the populace at the main annual festival.

The needs of the court undoubtedly led to an elaboration of display art and this elaboration was an entirely Akan and mainly Asante characteristic. The roots of some of these art forms, however, may go back far before the Asante and occasionally it is possible to glimpse some sign of this earlier history. The Asante, for example, made use of elaborate umbrellas, cov-

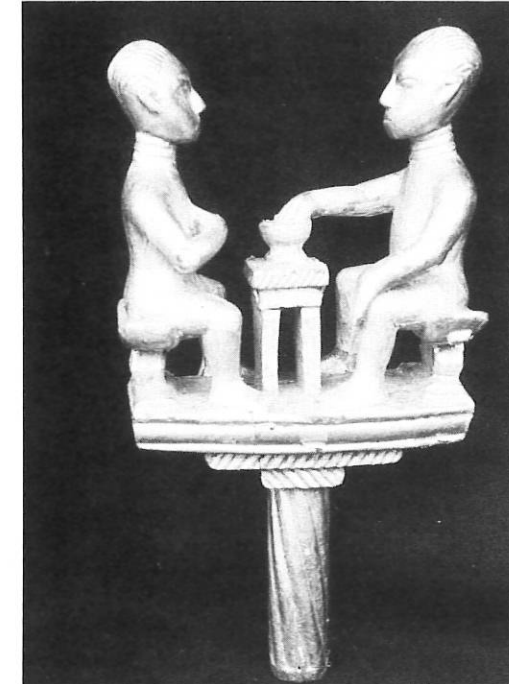
ered with brightly coloured imported cloths and topped by decorations of wood covered in gold foil. These state umbrellas were not only used to shade the rulers, keeping them in a ritually and physically cool state, but their sizes and decorations served to identify which chief was which. In addition their finials could serve to recall events in the history of the chiefship or to indicate appropriate sayings. An umbrella topped with a golden bird had been noted at the court of the king of Mali in the fourteenth century. It seems reasonable to accept that this royal use of the umbrella had, at some point, entered the forest from a generally northern direction.

Ivory trumpets or horns were also associated with Asante chiefship, and they were used to sound the praises of chiefs and to recall their histories, the notes of the horns mimicing the tones of Asante speech. Horns and horn-blowers are a common subject for gold-weights and gold – or silver-covered carvings of horns adorn state umbrellas. Prof. Posnansky excavated a similar horn at Begho indicating, at least, that Asante art had links to a common West African sub-stratum.

The needs of a complex state for regalia to distinguish its various officials is shown by another art form: the staffs carried by royal spokesmen (*akyeame*), a grade of high diplomatic and governmental advisor. In the eighteenth century Europeans developed the practice of handing out silver-topped canes to local chiefs. The idea was that when that chief sent them a messenger he should bring the cane as proof that he had the authority to speak for the chief. By the 1820s the Asante were using both gold-decorated swords and canes as markers of their negotiators' status. Later these gold-covered staffs became more and more elaborate, and were topped with figurative carvings with proverbial significance.<sup>12</sup>

If we can accept that much of Asante art derives, in a general way, from outside

11. Gold-decorated top of a linguist's staff of office.



forms, we must also give due weight to the creative transformations made by the Asante to the objects and techniques they received from outside. It has already been suggested that the technique of casting gold and brass by the lost wax method entered the forest zone via the Mande-speaking trade networks to the north. We do not know when this occurred but it is extremely probable that this way of casting gold was in use on the coast by the time the Portuguese arrived there towards the end of the fifteenth century. Many subsequent European accounts refer to the intricacy and delicacy of coastal gold castings. Once again, none of these have been recovered from satisfactory archaeological contexts in the forest zone. However some insight their development was recently come in to from an unexpected direction. In 1717 the ship "Wydah" made a trading voyage to West Africa. On its return it was captured by pirates off Jamaica and then wrecked off Cape Cod. Recently some of the gold on board has been recovered from the

12. A selection of *kuduo*; the one on the left has been patched.

13. A selection of *kuduo*.

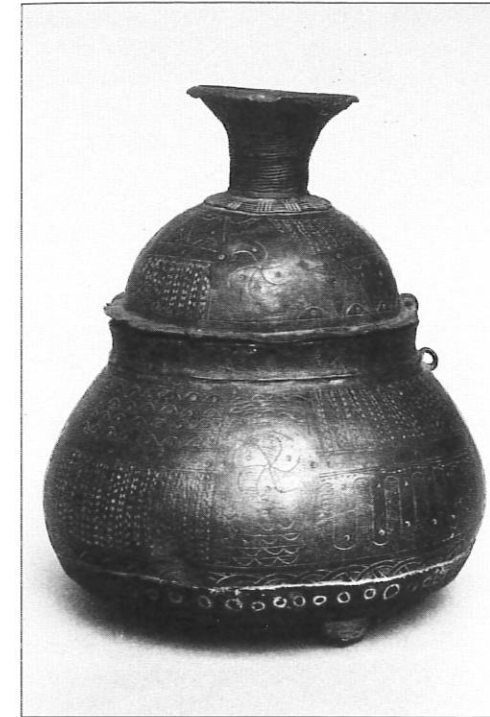


wreck. The items are all small and much worn beads, more or less scrap metal, valued for their gold content.<sup>13</sup> They are, however, of interest because in their overall form they are very close to castings illustrated in Barbot's account of the Gold Coast of 1732 and to beads collected in Asante in the last and present centuries. They indicate, perhaps, that this precise type of personal decoration was established at an early date and did not evolve greatly in subsequent centuries. The lack of beads in the form of creatures or plants, commonly found in later Asante work, among the items recovered from the "Wydah" and

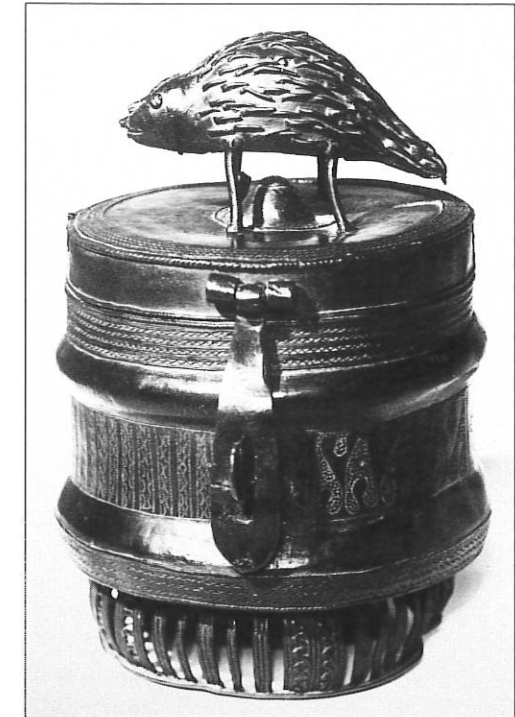
among the gold work illustrated by Barbot may further support the idea that it was largely an Asante innovation to incorporate naturalistic images with proverbial meanings into their art.

Gold castings have not been recovered from dated archaeological contexts in Asante nor have gold-weights. Both have survived in large numbers, whatever their date, not only because of their inherent value to the Asante but because they are of fairly durable metal. This is also true of another Akan form, the brass ritual vessels known as *kuduo*. Our knowledge of the way these were actually used is fragmentary and dates

14. Brass *kuduo* with repair to the base.



15. A *kuduo*, the lid decorated with a porcupine, its quills a symbol of the powers of the Asante.



almost entirely from this century, at a time when the British had taken political control of Asante and when many of the old beliefs and practices were disappearing. The vessels seem to have been owned only by the more senior members of Asante society. They were used in rituals connected with a man's spiritual state, may have also served as a place for storing gold-dust and valuable beads and, probably, were occasionally buried with a dead person or placed on his or her grave with other objects thought to have been especially closely associated with the deceased. By the eighteenth and nineteenth century, possibly earlier, these *kuduo* were being made in a wide variety of forms, presumably – and I repeat that we have virtually no information on this matter – for the use of chiefs and senior men and perhaps senior women such as queen-mothers.

The simplest of these *kuduo* are little more than cast brass open bowls, the most elaborate have hinged lids decorated with

modelled groups of men or animals, often scenes of hunting or associated with kingship, and with open-cast rings supporting their bases. Many have low-relief decorations covering most of the body of the vessel. Some of the thousands which survive show obvious signs of wear, suggesting that they have been in use for a long time, and many are patched and mended in other ways. Others, however, show few signs of use. Sometimes one finds closely similar vessels, which one might guess were the same age, showing vastly different degrees of wear. None of these vessels, as far as I can learn, has ever been recovered from a controlled archaeological excavation. Nevertheless we now have enough information to state with certainty that they have an origin outside Asante and, indeed, across the Sahara.

As early as the 1920s, R.S. Rattray, the Government Anthropologist who investigated Asante life, noted the presence in Asante of large brass bowls, decorated with



Islamic inscriptions and of non-Asante manufacture.<sup>14</sup> Some of these sorts of bowl were, it later transpired, used as the shrines for *abosam*, free divinities, who from time to time came into contact with humans by possessing individuals. Shrines, usually in metal bowls, were created with various mystically powerful materials in order to allow the god a regular conduit to humans. The importance of brass bowls to the Asante is further indicated by the fact that there are various Asante myths in which particular founding ancestors were said to have descended from the sky in brass bowls.

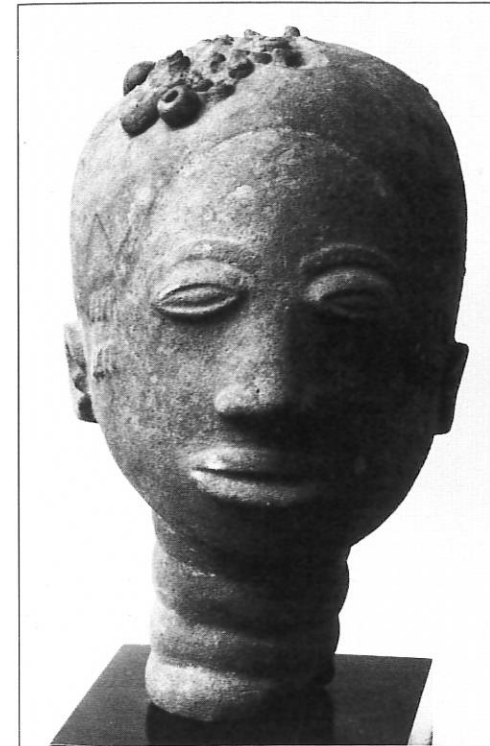
Even a cursory examination of surviving *kuduo* makes it quite clear that the Asante *kuduo* is a locally made derivative, a slightly adopted copy of these imported brass bowls. The low relief decoration on the bowl mimics, in a rather vague or stylised way, the Islamic texts on the sides of the original imported bowls. More complex forms are either derived from lidded vessels or are local constructions made by fitting two such bowls together, one as a lid, one as the base. It would be possible to construct an evolutionary sequence for the local development of *kuduo* with the simplest reproductions of engraved open bowls as the earliest stage and the *kuduo* with elaborately cast scenes on their lids as the latest. Such sequences, however, can be of little worth in the absence of any hard chronology based on excavation. Once again we simply do not have this. There is a small amount of archaeological evidence from an Akan area to the south of Asante proper which shows that vessels in brass were being cast, probably around 1700. This comes from the mould fragments excavated by Thurstan Shaw at the southern Akan settlement of Dawu.<sup>15</sup>

Once again we are forced to look to largely non-archaeological sources of knowledge to discover the earlier history of these objects. Professor Ray Silverman studied all the non-Akan bowls which were

available for scrutiny in Ghana in the early 1980s (some have been stolen since then).<sup>16</sup> His researches show convincingly that the original imported bowls, from which *kuduo* derive, were manufactured in Mameluk Egypt in the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries. He has further suggested that these were imported by Muslim Dyula traders who were settled on the fringes of the forest and exchanging savannah or trans-Saharan goods for gold. The Mameluk vessels may originally have been used for the ritual washing required in Islam. At some later date they were seen by the Akan as having high value and copied locally. More of the original bowls, I believe, still exist as shrines, hidden from outsiders in the temple of gods, sometimes placed inside larger and newer bowls and so completely lost from sight. An eventual examination of these may add to Silverman's research and help refine the broad chronology he has produced. So, at present, although we do not know when they first entered Asante, we may confidently accept they, and the *kuduo* which derive from them, were ultimately one of the products exchanged down the Mande-speaking trade networks for gold-dust. Many of the original bowls, one may also guess, were melted down over the centuries and cast into gold-weights or into *kuduo*.

In pointing out how the Asante took, and recreated for their own uses, outside forms I am doing little more than indicating that theirs was an expanding and extremely rich society in which elaboration was both useful and enjoyed. In another of their art forms, about which we know far too little, they also seem to have drawn on a common Akan tradition which, in turn, may draw on far earlier West African roots. This was the practice of making terracotta figurines for use in mortuary rituals of senior men and, probably, women. These effigies were not made in all areas of Asante and, at present, we cannot tell why this was the case. The effigies, which repre-

16. Terra-cotta head used to commemorate important people after death. The heads were placed in a special area of the bush.



sented the dead person and his attendants, not as an individual but as a holder of jural power, were used in rites related to the commemoration of the dead person and the redistribution of his powers and property after his death. They were placed in a special area in the space between the village and the forest. Regrettably no site containing these vessels has been excavated in Asante in a way that allows a good chronology to be established for them: sites are either badly disturbed or they lack adequate stratification or both.<sup>17</sup> Prof. Bellis's excavations at the southern Akan site of Twifo-Hemang suggest an early eighteenth date for the comparable terracotta heads which he found<sup>18</sup> and one would guess most Asante examples date from then or, more probably, from the last century. The exact relationship of this Akan practice to the vast range of terracotta figures found in other areas of West Africa, from Nok, to Ife, to the Middle Niger or Northern Gha-

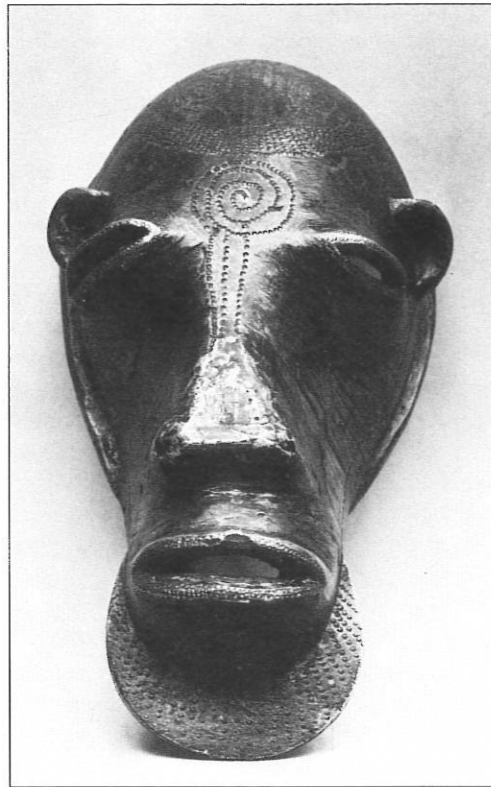
17. Terra-cotta head used in funeral rituals.



na's Komoland, remains to be established.

Terra cotta figures are, in a way, relatively easy to study because they are durable. Archaeology will eventually allow us to build up useful chronologies. It is far harder to trace the development of art forms in wood where the objects made do not survive for very long in the conditions of the forest. An excellent example of this is the type of small wooden carving known as *akua'ba*. These, with a highly stylised female body, and a large flat head, are known to have been made in thousands in the present century. They were believed to help women become pregnant and to help them have beautiful children, and were also used by young girls as dolls. We simply do not know when these dolls were first made. The earliest recorded seems to be one given by the Asantehene Kofi Kakari to one of his daughters, perhaps in the 1860s or 1870s.<sup>19</sup> All we can say, at present, is that in their form, with its emphasis on

18. Brass mask, from the Brong, Ahafo region (Metropolitan Museum, New York).



a large ovaloid head with high forehead, they are part of a wider and earlier general style of Akan art, for the same stylisation of the head occurs in most terra cottas and is also still valued highly among living Akan.

Much of this lecture has been spent pointing to what we do not know, rather than what we do know, about the evolution of Asante art. I have indicated that there is sad lack of archaeology and suggested that there is much that could be learned by good excavation. Other techniques, of course, can help solve some of the problems. Among the most puzzling objects from this area are two cast brass masks, one now in the British Museum and the other in the Metropolitan, New York. These were acquired in the late 1920s by the mining engineer, R.P.Wild, from a local trader along with two brass sheet vessels. The dealer told Wild that they had been

dug up somewhere in the Brong-Ahafo area to the north of central Asante; certainly all the objects still show traces of having been buried. The Asante do not make wooden masks nor brass ones and masked cults would have been unlikely to coexist with the fiercely centralising powers of the Asante political system. The masks, with their bulging foreheads and elongated faces, are also not like most Asante representations of the human head. The puzzle of exactly when these items were made and how they relate to other aspects of Asante art has troubled many scholars. Recent analysis at the British Museum of the metals from which they were cast has shown that they cannot possibly date from before about 1830. We may not have an archaeological context for them but we can now see that they are comparatively late and that they probably represent a style peripheral to that of Asante proper.

Many puzzles still remain, some major, some trifling. I will end by mentioning one more of these minor puzzles. Besides the *kuduo* there is a further type of brass vessel which has a sort of pseudo-archaeology which is of interest. When British forces invaded Kumase in 1896 they discovered, beneath a tree, two brass or bronze jugs of European manufacture. The jugs were found either at the Royal Palace or, perhaps, at the Royal Mausoleum – which of the two places is not certain. Like so much else they found, the British removed the jugs and the larger and more elaborate of them was soon in the British Museum. There it was quickly recognised that the jug dated from the reign of King Richard II (1377-99) and, in fact, bore the Royal coat of arms. In 1932 the British Museum acquired a second jug also taken from Kumase in 1896 and of the same English manufacture and date as the first. How these pieces of royal metal work got from London in, say, 1390 to reappear at Kumase 500 year later remained a puzzle. At

19. A courtyard at Kumase in 1896 showing two Richard II brass vessels.



Kumase, clearly, they were considered to be of some importance for they were kept in a public area of one or other of the two most important royal buildings.

Various ideas were proposed to explain their presence in Asante. It was suggested that they could have travelled across the Sahara via North Africa or, perhaps, have been part of a royal gift to one of the Gold Coast rulers (that is, as fine examples of the sort of useless and out of date brass wares we know Europeans found were easy to trade for gold on the Coast in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries). Alternatively it was suggested they could have been sent as an English royal gift to Portugal and thence, via Portuguese traders or officials, found their way to the Coast.

These vessels (despite assertions to the contrary)<sup>20</sup>, had no detectible effect on the development of Asante art but the puzzle of how they got there remains fascinating.

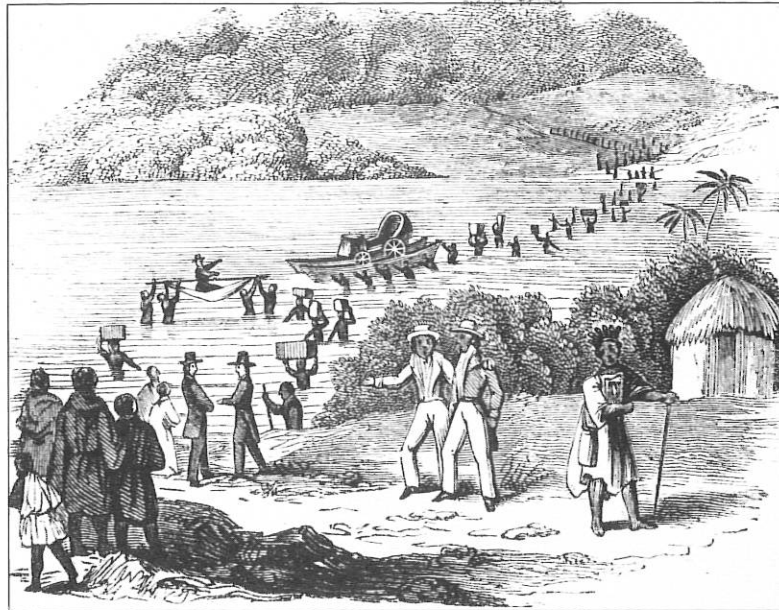
It is now a little nearer to solution. In 1988 a third jug, of the same date and almost certainly from the same foundry as the others, was discovered – it also having been removed from Kumase in 1896. We now can see that all three *must* have been sent out together – it is virtually impossible to believe that three jugs, each made in the same comparatively short period (1377-1399) could somehow have all found their way to Kumase by different routes and at different times and then been re-united and subsequently kept together. No, surely we have to accept that they must have been sent as a group and ever afterwards kept as a group.<sup>21</sup>

I have drawn attention to these three vessels, not only because of the puzzle posed by their presence at Kumase, but also because they help highlight the crucial fact that Asante was an importer – and often an absorber – of outside material.



20. An English gift to the Asantehene in the 1840's: a wheeled carriage.

21. A European being pulled in a carriage, in the coastal area.



Into Asante, from the earliest days, poured all sorts of European goods: chairs, guns, keys and locks, boxes, chests, cloth, metal vessels and metal ingots, clay tobacco pipes and tobacco and, more rarely, special gifts for the rulers whom the various European power wished to entice into alliance. These

ranged from a mirrored coffin, flags, sets of fancy pistols, to a wheeled carriage (pulled by men in the absence of horses), a lathe, a magic lantern, books, pictures, china – an almost endless variety of things which Europeans thought – usually wrongly – the Asante would appreciate. Much of the stuff never entered into Asante life, nor influenced Asante art, it was stored away from public sight in the only stone building in Kumase, built for the Asantehene in the 1820s.<sup>22</sup>

I have mentioned this case of the three jugs not only to indicate that information about the Asante past is still appearing from all sorts of unlikely places but also to emphasise that Asante was a state which, by the eighteenth century, was drawing in materials, ideas and techniques from many distant regions. The art that the Asante created depended on some of those exotic elements but it was, in the final count, entirely distinctive. It is deeply regrettable that we do not have more archaeology to allow us to date some of the major developments of that art but, thanks to the traditions of the Asante themselves and to the wealth of documentation about them, we can still form an overall picture of the way the art was shaped over the centuries. (Milano 28.11.1991)

#### References

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- <sup>5</sup> Wild R.P., Vestiges of a pre-Ashanti race at Obuasi, *Gold Coast Review*, 3(2), p. 151, 1929.
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<sup>10</sup> Hewson A.D., 'New Developments in Statistical Quantum Theory' British Museum Research Laboratory, 1978.

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<sup>14</sup> Rattray R.S. *Ashanti*, Oxford, 1923 pp. 300-321.

<sup>15</sup> Shaw T., *Excavation at Dawu*, Ghana, 1961.

<sup>16</sup> Silverman, R. 'Akan Kuduo; Form & Function' in: Ross, Doran H., and Garrard, Timothy F. *Akan Transformations*, California 1983.

<sup>17</sup> I believe the results of David Calvocoressi's excavations at the important site of Ahinsan will soon be published.

<sup>18</sup> Bellis James O., *Archaeology and the culture history of the Akan of Ghana, a case study*: Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1972.

<sup>19</sup> This beautiful carving was kept until recently in the Museum of the African Studies Centre, of the University of Ghana.

<sup>20</sup> See Fagg W.B., *Divine Kingship in Africa*. London 1970.

<sup>21</sup> See McLeod M.D., 'Richard II, Part 3 at Kumase in, McCaskie, T.C. and Henege, D., *Studies in West African Economic History*, Wisconsin, 1990.

<sup>22</sup> See McLeod M.D., 'Gifts and Attitudes' in Schildkrout op. cit.