Résumé


L'hypothèse de la féodalisation des communautés akan, émise par Rattray (1923) et reprise par Potekhin (1960), repose implicitement sur une approche évolutionniste. I. Wilks soutient que l'organisation de la société akan résulte plutôt d'une conjoncture de transformation abrupte de ses bases économiques entraînant une restructuration des rapports de production et l'apparition d'institutions politiques nouvelles. En bref, la mémoire collective conserve le souvenir d'un passage rapide d'une économie de collecte à une économie agricole. Elle ignore par contre la conjoncture historique d'ensemble où ce changement s'est produit. Il s'agit, d'une part, de la demande mondiale de métaux précieux, qui attira les Dyula puis les Portugais dans les marchés du pays akan au XVe siècle, d'autre part des besoins en main-d'œuvre des Akan eux-mêmes, ce qui conféra aux Portugais et aux Dyula un double rôle d'acheteurs d'or et de fournisseurs d'esclaves. L'originalité politique des États akan est ainsi déterminée par la configuration des rapports de production résultant de cette mutation de l'assise économique. En réalité, les États akan sont le produit de la révolution économique mondiale marquée par l'effondrement de la féodalité en Europe et l'apparition du capitalisme. Les Akan ont contribué à cette révolution et les transformations sociales qu'ils ont subies ne peuvent être comprises sans faire référence à celles qui se sont produites en Europe.

Citer ce document / Cite this document:


http://www.persee.fr/doc/cea_0008-0055_1982_num_22_87_3377

Document généré le 02/06/2016
The State of the Akan and the Akan States: A Discussion*

Preamble

In the ethnographic literature the name 'Akan' is used to refer to the peoples of the forestlands of what is now the Republic of Ghana. The root of the word is the Twi *kan*, which has much the sense of the English 'first and foremost'. In the dialects of the forestlands, the prestigious term *akan-fo* seems originally to have had the connotation of 'us (the true people)', as opposed for example to the derisory *opoto-fo*, 'them (the foreign people)'. The traditional usage was, however, situational and exclusive. At a local level the distinction between the 'us' and the 'them' may have reflected the perception of no more than minor cultural differences between adjacent villages. At a higher level the differences perceived may have been those, for example, between the Adanse, Akyem, Asen, Denkyira and Asante peoples on the one hand—the 'us'—and the Fante, Wassa, Schwi and other surrounding peoples on the other—the 'them'. It is, in fact, precisely this latter usage that is revealed in 16th- and 17th-century European attempts to map the forestlands, when different peoples are distinguished as 'Akan', 'Little Akan', and 'Great Akan'. By contrast, the contemporary ethnographic usage is inclusive and fixed rather than exclusive and situational; that is, all those who in any situation might refer to themselves as *akan-fo* are grouped within the one generic term 'Akan'. This practice probably dates only from the 19th century, and may owe much to the writings of the Basel missionaries. However that may be, there is no doubt that current usage is both justifiable and functional, in that the peoples so designated possess both a common culture and a shared historical experience. Such, at least, will be a central theme of this paper.

* An earlier and shorter version of this paper, 'The Development of Early Akan Society', was presented to the Workshop on the Akan held at Northwestern University, 21 April 1978. In its present form this paper was written in October 1979. The reader may wish to be referred to two later studies which explore further some of the same themes: see I. Wilks 1982.

Cahiers d'Études africaines, 87-88, XXII–3-4, pp. 231-249.
In the last quarter of a century the corpus of historical data on the Akan has rapidly expanded as relevant archival resources have been intensively investigated and as written recensions of hitherto orally transmitted materials have been made. It is appropriate, therefore, that early Akan society is currently the subject of lively inquiry by a group of scholars for the most part associated with the University of Ghana (see e.g. Boaten 1971; Posnansky 1975; Boahen 1977; Kea 1978). Nevertheless, no student of the subject can afford to ignore the work of R. S. Rattray who, over half a century ago, was first to attempt a systematic analysis of the origins of Akan society.

Rattray on Slavery and Feudalization

In his approach to early Akan history, Rattray afforded a central place to slavery. Characterizing it as a 'primitive institution', he remarked, 'I think slavery possibly existed at a very early date in one or other of the several forms [. . .]' Its introduction need not necessarily have synchronized with the advent of wars, or awaited the humane practice of sparing the life of a captured foe instead of cutting off his head, or have been contemporaneous with the realization of the value of wealth as represented in human labour.

Slavery may, I think, very possibly have been the outcome of a desire to extend to the domain of human beings a strongly marked characteristic among primitive peoples, i.e. the wish to possess some object over which they might enjoy an individual and undisputed control, instead of merely sharing it with many others as coparceners.' (Rattray 1929: 33.) Rattray's view of slaves as the earliest form of private property within an otherwise communalistic system suggests that he wished to see in this the beginnings of a process of feudalization in Akan society. Rattray is nowhere specific on this issue, though he had no doubt that the feudal State did in time emerge among the Akan and that Asante in particular was an example of it. Indeed, of the political changes in the late 17th century which resulted in the emergence of the unified Asante monarchy, Rattray wrote: 'We enter upon a phase where the parallel to feudalism, as known in Europe, appears to me very striking.' (Ibid.: 75-76.) In pursuit of this theme, Rattray addressed himself to the key issue of feudal relations of production, and observed: 'A silent and unnoticed revolution took place with regard to land tenure which was in conformity with the main characteristic of feudalism. A kind of multiple proprietorship arose. The King became the superior owner of all the land, i.e. soil, in the kingdom, but this claim coexisted with many grades of inferior ownership right down a descending scale until the inferior property of the family land-holder was reached.' (Ibid.: 76; see also 341.)

The issues raised by Rattray in the Akan context were remarkably similar to those which, contemporaneously, exercised Soviet historians
concerned with the feudalization of Kievan Russia. M. M. Tsvibak (of the Feudalism Section of the State Academy of Historical and Material Culture) for example, maintained that slavery was of crucial importance in the feudalization of Kievan Russia and, as Hellie (1976: 3) summarises it, argued that ‘a landowner could break his ties with the commune only by the use of slave labor, giving him the possibility of possessing land and having it farmed outside the commune’. It is not surprising, therefore, that the main thrusts of Rattray’s argument were later to receive the enthusiastic endorsement of the eminent Soviet IAfricanist, I. I. Potekhin, whose own views of the matter are on record: ‘Due to a number of historic conditions, which are still to be studied, the feudal relations of the Ashanti developed almost alongside with the development of slave-holding relations. The Ashanti did not know the slave-holding method of production, but slavery had already outgrown its initial patriarchal stage, and the labour of slaves was widely used in the mining industry and agriculture. When trade with European trading stations began developing, slaves were used to carry goods to the coast. The application of slave labour, as well as the tremendous power of clan traditions determined the relatively easy feudal dues of the free members of the community. Both in its amount and its form, the feudal rent was reminiscent of the traditional obligations of the tribe members with regard to their chief, the guardian of the interests of the tribe and its military leader.’ (1960: 8.) Great caution has rightly been urged in applying the term ‘feudal’ to African societies (Goody 1963; 1969), and it is not the purpose of this paper to reopen the old debate. It is arguable, however, that the problems implicit in Rattray’s approach, or for that matter in that of Potekhin, arise not so much from the use of the concept of feudalism, but rather from the commitment to an evolutionist perspective. Thus Rattray wrote of the stages by which ‘family land’ became ‘tribal land’ and then ‘stool land’, and suggested that, ‘at a certain stage in the social evolution of the Ashanti, a number of independent family groups chose the head of one of these groups to be head of the whole group. This head would already be the owner (in the very limited sense to be described later) of the lands of his own household or kindred group, but when he became head not only of his own group but of all the other groups composed of members of his own blood, and the title and powers of a chief came to be bestowed upon him, his piece of family land would come to be looked upon as an appurtenance of his chieftainship, and from merely being the family land of the family supplying the ruler, would become, by the association, the nucleus of all stool land’ (1923: 220-221).

Rattray, who had a very respectable knowledge of what he rightly calls the ‘unwritten history’ of the Akan, and in particular of the Asante, commented on the fullness of the tradition in so far as it relates to chiefly or dynastic affairs. It might appear, however, that he was at this point misled by his preconceptions. The unwritten history of the Akan is
indeed impressively full regarding the origins of political office or 'stools', but it is also the case (as Rattray must have known!) that there is scarcely a village which does not maintain a comparably full record of its foundation, nor a lineage of the circumstances of its inception. The accounts, moreover, of the origins of the oldest villages, of the most extended lineages, and of the matriclans, all have much the same time reference as those of the origins of the earliest stools. There is, in other words, no indication in the Akan stories of origins that lineages and villages are regarded as being significantly older than stools. It was this aspect of the situation which, I think, perplexed Rattray and led him to argue that it was in the sphere of chiefly affairs 'that their [the Akan] historians have been at most pains to prevent the record passing into oblivion', and to speculate that 'this has been done at the expense perhaps of the earlier traditional history which preceded this grouping of independent families, clans and classes under one authority' (1923: 221). Another and quite different explanation of the matter is however, possible.

Originals of Akan Society

In this paper I shall outline, and, in view of the complexity of the evidence, little more than outline, what may be called the 'big bang' theory of the origins of Akan society. Or, to use a less facetious terminology, I shall suggest that Akan society, as it is known from the historic period, came into existence as a result of a change in the mode of production which involved a transformation in the economic base, a reorganization of the social relations of production, and the appearance of new political structures. I shall also suggest that necessary though not sufficient conditions of the change in the mode of production are to be found in a set of historical determinants which acted relatively uniformly throughout the regions of the Offin, Pra and Birrim basins, the description of which can only be undertaken with reference to movements in the world economy and particularly in the demand for bullion.

A number of these themes have been explored in earlier papers. It has been argued that the 15th and 16th centuries were ones of major social and economic change in the Akan forestlands. An economy based primarily upon hunting and gathering activities gave way to one based primarily upon food-crop production, and forms of social organization appropriate to the former activities (presumably 'bands' or 'companies') were replaced by ones appropriate to the latter (matrilineages and matriclans). These changes are recognized in the cycles

1. In 1975 I was able to read through Rattray's manuscript notes at the Royal Anthropological Institute, London. It is clear that he was interested in political, but not in social, history; this seems to mirror the nature of his commission in the colonial service at the time, which was to investigate the form which 'indirect rule' might take in Asante.
of orally transmitted stories which constitute for the Akan the ideological underpinning of the social order. The beginnings of change are firmly located in the Adanse and Amansie region of the central forestlands—'the first seat of the Akan nation', where 'God first commenced with the creation of the world' (Reindorf 1895: 44). There lived Abu, the first to disinherit his own children in favour of his sister's. Hence, say the Akan, the literal meaning of abusua or lineage is 'imitating Abu' (ibid.: 44-45; Rattray 1916: 41). There, too, the great ancestresses appeared, and commenced the redistribution of the peoples into matrilineal clans; they came never from north, south, east or west, but always from the sky above or the earth below. And there, in the Adanse and Amansie region, the earliest towns were founded, the akanman piesie nnum: Adanseemanso, Abuakwa Atwumamanso, Asantemanso, Asenmanso, and Abankesieso. From these the frontier of settlement expanded outwards, as the village histories show, until throughout the forestlands the Akan had become, predominantly, farmers (Wilks 1977: 508-516).

Such are the main features of the early historic period as the Akan conceptualize them in both their myth and history; or such, at least, is our reading of these materials. It is unfortunate that the archaeological record is so inadequate for the forest country. For a period and region effectively beyond the range of written sources, only systematic excavation can attest independently to the objective reality. Kiyaga-Mulindwa has investigated sites in the Birrim valley associated with the atweafo, who are regarded locally as the first settlers on the land. Three radiocarbon dates, of A.D. 1465 ± 65, 1510 ± 80 and 1740 ± 115, indicate a 15th- or 16th-century date for what is perhaps the appearance of fully developed farming communities in the area (Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1976: 90-91). An assemblage of material from Boyase, near Kumase, includes both celts and arrowheads of polished stone, but has yielded no evidence of a knowledge of domesticated plants or animals (Newton & Woodell 1976; Anquandah 1976). Prima facie, the Boyase community was one dependent upon hunting and gathering activities, but no firm evidence of its date is available. It shows certain affiliations with the Buroburo stone-tool manufactory, also near Kumase. Nunoo obtained radiocarbon dates, from high levels at Buroburo, of A.D. 1620 ± 50 and

2. It is not commonly realised that the 'great ancestresses' of the Akan myths do not function as genealogically apical figures. The ancestresses are not so much the 'great progenitricies' as the 'great adopters'; that is, they are figures around whom people become organized. One typical example must suffice. Ankyaa Nyame, great ancestress of the Oyoko, first came down from the sky at Toaase. The people there provided her with food. 'The people then asked her the name of the Abusua [clan] to which she belonged, and she told them she was of the Oyoko Abusua [. . .] The people then asked her to permit them to become members of that Abusua. She replied that they had treated her kindly, so they had her permission to become members of that Abusua.' An intriguing gloss on the matter is provided by Bowdich (1819: 231), who observed that the Akan adopted the Portuguese, 'the first foreign traders they knew', into the Agona clan.
The dates were rejected by the excavator, probably rightly, but it is necessary to bear in mind Rattray’s comments on the late use of stone tools for hoeing (Rattray 1923: 323-324). Clearly the archaeological record can as yet provide us with few data on the appearance of agriculture in the forest.3 But it is not argued here that the orally transmitted accounts throw any light upon that particular issue; rather, it is suggested that they testify to the replacement of hunting and gathering by farming as the dominant process of production within the forestlands.

**Slaves, Trees and Farms**

The Akan village histories contain numerous references to hunters. The general impression conveyed by them is not one of earlier hunting and gathering peoples being displaced by intrusive farmers, but rather of the former transforming themselves into farmers. Thus the hunter is frequently described as ranging the forest in search of suitable land for agricultural exploitation (taking account, that is, of surface relief, the availability of water, the nature of the soils, and so forth). Mastery of the techniques of forest farming was, presumably, only acquired in the forest environment. It is therefore of special interest to find, locked into the traditions of non-Akan peoples of the forest fringes, an awareness of a time when the forests could not be farmed. The Nkonya tell of the southerly migration, to ‘the borders of the dark Gold Coast forest’, of a community led by Atu Tente: ‘The Emigrants stayed there together for some years, during which period hunters [...] explored the whole forest land to the coast and discovered an open coast line with a fine grass field stretching alongside it suitable for the then habitation of a community. This the coast line from Accra to Cape Coast.’ But for the discovery of the open littoral, the story continues, the people ‘wouldn’t have entered the dark forest’. Three principal reasons are offered. The first relates to the unsuitability of the forest environment for the type of agriculture practised by the migrants: ‘because in those days the only vegetable food for natives were chiefly yams, rice, maize, millet, guinea-corn and groundnuts. All of them were natives of grass land’. The second reason concerns the pastoral sector of the migrants’

3. Posnansky (1975: 26) has suggested that ‘agricultural societies, ultimately deriving from the savannah belt, were establishing themselves in the forest region by 1000 B.C.’. This is based upon the by no means proven assumption that the Kintampo Neolithic had an agricultural base, and that sites near Kumase such as Boyase, Buroburo, and one discovered by the writer, are indeed to be associated with the Kintampo culture. The matter remains highly speculative at present. It is, however, worthy of note that the Boyase site is an outlier of savannah vegetation in the forest. Newton & Woodell (1976: 19) suggest that ‘such outliers are relics of a time when the whole area was much drier’. I would at least raise another possibility—that they are relics of early but abortive attempts at farming, when, without a mastery of the techniques of forest agriculture, clear felling of the land permitted a savannah vegetational climax to become established.
economy: 'their cattle would die for want of grass'. And the third reason alludes to the dangers confronting the forest dweller: 'the forest of the Gold Coast was a home for Elephants and Lions'.

It is perhaps surprising that the story of Atu Tente does not explicitly comment on yet another major disadvantage confronting the would-be farmer in the 'dark forest', namely, the formidable nature of the forest cover itself. It is demonstrable that the creation of farms in the humid semi-deciduous forests of the Akan homelands required massive inputs of labour. The moist weight of dead and living vegetation on typical undisturbed forest has been computed as tending towards the middle of the range 300 to 700 tons per acre (Phillips 1959: 160-161). The creation of a fully functioning farm, based on a land rotational system able to preserve the long term fertility of the soil, and capable of supporting a family of between five and ten persons, would involve the removal of perhaps around 7 500 tons of vegetation (Wilks 1977: 490-508). The cycles of the Akan myths and histories are all but silent on the way in which labour was organized on a scale appropriate to the work of felling and clearing. This, we suggest, reflects the fact that the labour used was largely slave; that the unfree labourers were subsequently assimilated into Akan society within the framework of the emerging aman or States; and that the assimilation process involved, centrally, the suppression of references to unfree origins (Reindorf 1895: 51; Rattray 1929: 40, 82; Wilks 1975a: 86). Fortunately, at the point at which the oral record becomes deficient, the literary record becomes informative. The clearing of farmland within the forest was made possible, it may be argued, by the use of an immigrant and unfree labour force recruited by Dyula and Portuguese contractors whose services were remunerated principally in gold procured by Akan prospectors within the forests.

The entry of the Portuguese into the scene, as labour contractors, can be dated. They commenced trading on the southern coasts of the Akan country in 1470-71, were already importing slaves to Elmina from the region of the Niger delta by 1479, and built a fortress at Elmina in 1482 as a base for the expansion of their operations (Vogt 1973). The slaves found ready buyers among traders from the interior, who in the early 16th century were prepared to pay four to six ounces of gold for a fit young male.

The participation of the Dyula in the forest trade preceded that of the Portuguese but the chronology is less precise. Almost twenty years ago I suggested that the movement of these Malian merchants southwards, to establish the great entrepôt of Bighu (or Begho) on the forest fringes, commenced around the beginning of the 15th century, and that the town remained the most important outlet for the northern trade of the Akan until it was abandoned in the early 18th century (Wilks 1961:

---

Anonymous 'History of Nkonya'. I obtained this typescript recension of Nkonya traditions in 1962. It appears to have been compiled in its present form about forty years ago, but it is not known in what circumstances.
This chronology looks increasingly firm. Of the various parts of the Bighu complex, the so-called Nyarko site appears to date back to the 11th or 12th century (Crossland 1976: 86). Of eight radiocarbon dates from the central parts of the complex, two lie in the 15th century, four in the 16th, one in the 17th, and one—$1710 \pm 100$—in the 18th, leading Posnansky to remark that there is 'a strong presumption of the main phase of occupation falling within the period A.D. 1400-1700' (1976: 62).

In the early 16th century the import of slaves to Elmina amounted to about fifteen percent of total Portuguese business there, and demand seems consistently to have exceeded supply (Vogt 1973: 454). Brief accounts of the Dyula trade from the same period, by João Rodrigues and Pacheco Pereira for example, refer to the sale of slaves against gold, but give no indication of the proportion of total business which that represented (Cenival & Monod 1938: 86-87; Mauny 1956: 64-67). A Portuguese mission from Elmina to the Malian ruler Muhammad b. 'Manzugal' (??) b. Musa, despatched between 1481 and 1495, was presumably intended to negotiate agreements about the Akan trade. But the Portuguese were never able to establish other than a very local supremacy over their Dyula rivals, and in 1513 the governor at Elmina complained to Lisbon of the 'Malian (Mandingua) leak', intimating that only a better supply of slaves could make him more competitive (Mota 1972).

By 1540 the Portuguese share of the Akan trade was declining rapidly. As Vogt (1973: 466-467) has shown, this was not a result of a switch to New World markets. It is likely that it is to be associated with vigorous efforts made by the Malian authorities to increase the supply of slaves available to the Dyula, and hence to expand the flow of bullion from the forestlands. One aspect of this Malian initiative is fairly well attested: sometime in the mid-16th century, horsemen of Malian (and perhaps metropolitan Malian) origins established themselves in the savannah hinterlands of the forests (Wilks 1966a), and seemingly carried out extensive raids to supply the Dyula with slaves. It is in this same context that one must evaluate the intriguing reports of a Malian attack upon Elmina (Rodney 1967: 224-225, 235).

The Portuguese import of slaves into Elmina in the period 1500-1535 seems to have been of the order of 10,000 to 12,000, though this figure takes no account of those landed by smugglers and interlopers (Vogt 1973: 464-465). No data have yet been compiled for the later phases of the trade before, in response to new market imperatives, the Gold Coast became an exporter of slaves to the Americas. No statistical data have been, or probably can ever be, compiled for the Dyula import of slaves into the forest. To judge from the evident signs of depopulation in the hinterlands of the forest, most notably in Gonja, quite major early dislocations of population may have occurred. The North, of course,
continues to the present to be the major source of immigrant labour to
the farms and industries of the forest country.

The demand for gold in the world bullion markets led first the Dyula
and then the Portuguese to establish entrepôts along, respectively, the
northern and southern edges of the Akan forests. The demand for labour
in those forests led Akan entrepreneurs to offer gold in exchange for slaves.
That accession of labour—or such at least is the burden of our argument—
was a sine qua non of the agricultural revolution in the forestlands.

Entrepreneurs, Slaves and Settlements

European traders on the Gold Coast found much difficulty in obtaining
information on the organization of production, and especially of gold
production, in the Akan country. Barbot, who questioned traders
arriving on the Gold Coast in the late 17th century, reported their
acknowledgement 'that they had gold mines in their countries, and those
not very remote from the coast; but would never tell where, nor how
they did work them: so politick and discreet they are in that point, lest
foreigners should know them, and be tempted to invade their country,
for the sake of those subterraneous treasures' (1732: 229).

The veil of secrecy cast over the forest enterprises is not however
totally impenetrable. Kea has recently drawn attention to proposals
made in 1572 for Portuguese participation not only the distributive
trade, but in the production process: 'Once you find mines you should
make a fortress there or a large house capable of housing whites and for
the blacks a stockade [. . .] near which and near the house they can put
up cottages where the blacks who will have to work will live. In addition
to the blacks who will work the mines, you should, also, have blacks who
will clear the land, sow milho, yams, and draw wine from the palm trees,
and do other necessary things in order to sustain themselves and also
to provide sustenance for the miners.' (1978: 4.) As Kea points out,
the proposal was evidently based upon observations of local practice.
Many earthwork enclosures still exist in the Birrim valley which may
have been work camps, and excavation at one such site suggests a
15th-century date (Kiyaga-Mulindwa 1976: 90-91). Be that as it may,
the proposal of 1572 is of much interest for its association of gold mining,
forest clearing, and food production, and for its postulation of an appro-
priating class and a producing class. It is, I suggest, mutatis mutandis,
a paradigm of a sort for the early Akan State; that is, that those who
controlled the production of gold, and its distribution to the Malian and
European merchants, were those who commanded the supply of slaves
in the forest; that those who commanded the supply of slaves were those
who thereby possessed the means of clearing the land and creating new
arable; and that those who were thus possessed of the arable were those
who founded the numerous early Akan aman or 'States'.

It is not known when gold first became an item of external trade in
the forestlands. Posnansky has remarked that ‘it would appear that some long distance trade to Ghana probably goes back to the beginning of the second millennium A.D.’ (Posnansky & McIntosh 1976: 16). It is likely enough that this trade extended into the forest, and there seems no reason why hunting and gathering communities should not, *inter alia*, ‘gather’ gold. It is possible that the oldest part of the Bighu complex, the so-called Nyarko site for which radiocarbon dates of A.D. $1095 \pm 80$ and $1120 \pm 80$ have been obtained (Crossland 1976: 86), and the old settlement at Bono-Manso radiocarbon-dated A.D. $1235 \pm 75$ and $1370 \pm 70$ (Calvocoressi & David 1979: 16-17, 22), represent markets through which early trade from the forest passed northwards. However that may be, a new entrepreneurial class appears to have arisen in the forest country in the conjuncture which we have already described: the continuing demand for bullion in the world market and the establishment of entrepôts on the forest fringes by first the Dyula, and then the Portuguese, in the 15th century. The newness of the entrepreneurial class in the forest derived, however, not from its participation in the export trade in gold, but from its origination of the import trade in labour. The entrepreneurs were known in Twi as *abirempom* (sing. *birempom*), literally ‘big men’ but correctly glossed in an early source as ‘a superior rich man’ (Müller 1673, ch. 9).

We have noted above that the Akan village histories frequently refer to hunters locating land in the forest suitable for agricultural settlement. The involvement of the *birempom* is invariably described in some detail in these histories, and the nature of the treatment afforded him (or sometimes her) is best illustrated by example. I shall take two, both from a particularly authoritative source.5 Tabiri Heman was head of a group at Aduman, belonging to the Dako clan. ‘His hunter Akwante-Bofuo, in his rambles, found a beautiful land lying between the Delta [sic] of a river, which he found was suitable for settlement. He told his master about this land. He went to inspect it later and found that what the hunter told him was correct. He therefore negotiated and bought the land from Bampaadu, Beposohene, where he built his permanent town which he named “Nsuta”, meaning “Twin Rivers”.’ And, secondly, Akuamoa Panin, head of a group at Mampon Akurofosu belonging to the Bretuo clan, ‘sent his hunter Berempong Anyinam to find him a more suitable place to settle, for he found that his present place of settlement was not large enough for him and his many followers. Berempong Anyinam went round and found the present place where Mampong now stands. The land belonged to Kwaasi, Anyinasehene, who had stationed his hunter Kyereme Twa there to hunt for him [. . . ] On his

5. These, and all subsequent citations from Akan traditional sources in this paper, are extracted from a compilation of materials on Asante history undertaken under the direction of the late Asantehene, Nana Sir Osei Agyeman Prempeh II. I am grateful to the late Dr. A. Kyerematen for the part he played in affording me access to this material.
arrival [back] at Mampong Akurofosu, Berempong Anyinam told his master [of] his find [. . .] When Akuamoa heard of this he sent his executioner along with Berempong Anyinam with instructions to kill Kyereme Twa [. . .] The town which Akuamoa built at the site was very large, if compared with any other town in those days. Therefore it was called “Oman-Pon”, meaning “a large town”.

The traditions are silent on the matter, but it is the argument of this paper that the abirempon, the Tabiri Hemans and Akuamoa Panins of the Akan world, created, and for the most part could only have created, the new settlements by virtue of their access to unfree labour. The constraints are ecological ones—and, had the Akan taken cognizance of them, their historical tradition would have been one virtually without parallel until recent times! Fortunately, Kea again has perhaps provided a model, from a late 17th-century coastal context, for the operations of the felling gangs in the central forestlands at an earlier period. Aduafo, ruler of the Aftutu State, contracted to build a trading post near Cape Coast for the Danish African Company. He, and his officers, ‘ordered 300 “retainers” (Morische Sclaven) to the building site where they were divided into two work teams: one team cleared the summit of the 300 foot high hill on which the trading post was to be erected, and the other fetched wood and other necessary building materials; both teams, then, constructed several small buildings [. . .] The construction was completed within a period of one or two months’ (Kea 1982, ch. 5).

Chiefs, Subjects and States

In the Akan village histories, the successful entrepreneur, the birempon, is seen as the founder of settlements. This we have glossed by suggesting that the early abirempon were essentially developers: they put gold to work by using it to procure labour, and they put the labour to work to clear the farmland without which the communities of settlers could neither sustain nor reproduce themselves. For convenience, the term ‘birempon-dom’ will be introduced to describe the Akan State in its earliest form; it is to be envisaged as a more complex unit than the work camp of the Portuguese proposal of 1572, for while both the work camp and the ‘birempon-dom’ included an entrepreneurial group and an unfree labour force, the latter also incorporated free settlers into its domain.

Who, then, were the free settlers? No general answer can be essayed, since the question is time-specific; that is, the frontier of farming was a constantly expanding one. But let it be supposed that the settlers, in search of new land, had left Asantemanso or Adansemanso, or for that matter any one of the akanman piesie nunum where, it has been urged, the agricultural transformation of the forestlands first occurred. They were, then, people who belonged to one or other of the matriclans, ‘descendants’ in a qualified sense of that word of one or other of the great ancestresses who are so closely associated with the five first Akan
towns. But, and the point is crucial, their matriclan affiliations conferred upon them no rights whatsoever to land within the ‘birempon-dom’; these had to be obtained by negotiation with the birempon. An example will illustrate the point. Kyerewa Akenten and her brother, Kagya, belonged to the Abohyen division of the Oyoko clan. They left Asante-manso in search of land and, after rejecting a number of places as unsuitable, ‘went to Odum-Anaanfu to ask Berefo Kese, the Chief of that place, for some land to settle on. He showed them a site where they built their village which they named “Kagya-kurom” [Kagya’s village]. Owing to the large number of the followers of Kagya and his sister, Berefo Kese presented them a large portion of his lands on which to farm. From Kagya-kurom, Berefo Kese married Kyerewa Akenten and after their marriage Berefo Kese added a much larger portion of his lands to that already in their hands and presented it to them.

It will follow that the free settlers within a ‘birempon-dom’ might have quite different matriclan affiliations; that this was in fact the case is shown by the almost random dispersion of the clans throughout Akan forest society. As Fortes has remarked, the matriclan ‘delimits a diffuse field of amity, wide in extent but of minimal structural specificity’ (1969: 162). Within the ‘birempon-dom’, clanship continued to determine patterns of marriage by virtue of the rule of exogamy, and in that respect was a socially integrative factor. But claims to land were based upon the heritable rights which the birempon conferred upon the settlers, and the matrilineages which thus arose were tied to specific tracts of land within the ‘birempon-dom’.

The settlers in a ‘birempon-dom’ acquired not only heritable rights in the arable but also controlled access to other resources of the land. Conversely, the birempon established prerogatives which enabled him to draw off surplus from the communities within his jurisdiction. The specific mode of appropriation has been described, inter alios, by Ratray (1923: 224-227), Busia (1951: 18-50), and Fortes (1969: 148-150). A cardinal feature of the system is expressed in the maxim, *afum ye me dee, asase ye ahene dee*, ‘the farm is my domain, the land is the chief’s domain’. The chief took an almost token part of the harvest at the time of the annual harvest festival (the *odwira* or *apafram*), and was entitled to a substantial share of other produce of the land—fish, snails, game, kola, minerals and the like. He could levy a wide range of taxes, such as *apeato* for military expenses, *ayito* for funerals, and *omanto* to defray the costs of making regalia and putting up buildings. He was entitled, also, to a death duty on the self-acquired property of his subjects. Most importantly, he could require the provision of labour for military service, for example, or for work upon the roads. Such, briefly, were what Potekhin referred to as ‘the relatively easy feudal dues of the free members of the community’ (1960: 8).

The unfree labourers owned by the birempon had also to be settled on parts of the land they cleared—a matter allowed for in the 1572
proposal. They became the chief’s *gyasefo*, literally ‘the people of the hearth’, who were responsible not only for their own sustenance and reproduction as a community, but also for the sustenance and reproduction of the chiefly class. Again, the mode of appropriation is well known. The *gyasefo* farmed for the chief, assumed responsibility for his debts, and provided him with a wide range of personal services as his stool-carriers, drummers, hornblowers, umbrella-carriers, bathroom attendants, messengers, tradesmen, sextons, and so forth. The chief was heir to all of their property. The *gyasefo*, like anyone else, could and did acquire clan membership by adoption, but they could not claim lineage membership in the full sense of the term. Rattray commented on the matter: ‘There is little doubt that the *Gyasefo* were in olden times recruited from the slave class. A “Stool” slave became one of the *Gyasefo*. The descendants of a *Gyase* woman were of course considered as *Gyasefo*, down the female line for all time; not only was this so, but the son of a *Gyase* man would ordinarily also enter the office to which his father belonged, irrespective of the position of his mother.’ (1929: 92.) That natural recruitment to the class of *gyasefo* followed principles of both matrifiliation and patrifiliation draws attention to the fact that these ‘retainers’ did indeed constitute the personal power base of the chief. The fortunes of a *birempon* depended first and foremost upon his ability to build up the numbers of his *gyasefo*, and secondarily, upon his ability to attract free settlers onto his lands. Measured in these terms the relatively unsuccessful *birempon* emerged as no more than a village head, an *odekuro*, and was absorbed in time into the *aman* or ‘State’ of his more successful peer, the *ohene* of this or that group of towns and villages.

From the 15th century onwards, numerous ‘*birempon*-doms’ arose as the frontier of farming expanded outwards from the Adanse and Amansie region. Some in time became extinct, some merged with others, and some became the centres of hegemonic systems extending even beyond the borders of the forestlands (and one Akan *aman*—the Maroon State—was to be established in the highlands of Jamaica*). The struggles which attended the rise and fall of the early States are exhaustively chronicled in the Akan histories. Best known of all are those which narrate the rise of the Asanteman, to emerge as the most powerful of all the Akan States. They commence, as indeed they must, with a founding ancestress: Ankyaa Nyame of Asantemanso. Ankyaa Nyame’s daughter, Birempomaa Piesie (presumably, ‘the first-born female *birempon*’), gave birth to three sons and seven daughters; they held no titled office in Asantemanso but ‘looked after their own family’. Birempomaa Piesie’s daughter, Kyeremaa, had two sons, Kwabena Amanfi and Oti Akenten. ‘The land at Asumennya [i.e. Asantemanso]

6. I base this observation not only upon the extant literature, but also on talks with Martin Luther Wright, Colonel of Maroons, at Accompong Town (that is, Akyampon-kurom) in 1975.
was not large enough to hold the people who were rapidly increasing in
tumbers. Kwabena Amanfi accordingly left Asantemanso with his
family, and went to Kokofu. ‘They met a man there whose name was
Kokoo, who owned the land. He had made a farm on which he lived,
and from him Kwabena Amanfi bought the land and the farm and
settled on it.’ Again the land proved insufficient for the support of the
settlers. After the death of Kwabena Amanfi, his younger brother Oti
Akenten received reports of good land further north, in Kwaaman.
He went to inspect it and found it ‘fruitful and suitable for habitation’
(see fn. 5). Oti Akenten purchased the land from its owner, Adowaa
Nkrawiri, for 30 *peredwana* (or 67.5 ounces of gold). On it the settlers
built their town and named it Kumase. Under Oti Akenten’s successors,
Obiri Yeboa and Osei Tutu, the settlers began to extend their hegemony
over the neighbouring towns and *aman*: Domaa, Mpankronu, Sepe,
Breman, Hwereso, Tafo, Kaase, Amakrom, Wono and so forth. The
campaigns are recounted in much detail. Finally, Osei Tutu fought
and defeated the *Denkyirahene* Ntim Gyakari, who claimed the over-
lordship of the whole greater region. The new State of Asante was
formally inaugurated. The *Sika Dwa* or Golden Stool was acknowledged
the symbol of its sovereignty; the Seventy-Seven Laws of Okomfo Anokye
were promulgated as the basis of its legal code; and the kingship was
vested in the family to which Osei Tutu belonged.

The stories thus move from Asantemanso to Kumase; the major
themes are the acquisition of farmland and the growth of political
hegemony. Early literary sources not only confirm substantial parts
of the story, but also permit the secure dating of the later sequence of
events, from the Kwaaman Purchase to the Denkyira War, to the second
half of the 17th century. From those same literary sources, the records
of the European trading establishments on the Gold Coast, Kea has
succeeded in piecing together a detailed picture of the state of Akan
society in the coastal hinterlands for much the same period. Full publi-
cation of his work is eagerly awaited. It is, I think, correct to say that
his findings are fully consonant with the main lines of the argument
advanced in this paper, and I acknowledge the stimulus which his
thinking has given to mine.

Reflections

It has been argued in this paper that Akan society in its historic form
came into existence as a result of a number of changes which began in
the 15th century. The new economic, social and political order is not
viewed as evolving gradually out of the contradictions within an earlier
social formation, but rather as representing an abrupt break with the
past. This change was triggered off, as it were, by Akan entrepreneurs
who for the first time used gold to obtain labour, and were enabled to do
so as the result of the conjunction of their capacity to absorb labour and
the capacity of the world bullion market to absorb gold. It will have become apparent that the changes which occurred in Akan society are of a highly complex kind, and that the relevant evidence is highly diverse in character. Patently, I have placed much reliance upon the way in which the Akan conceptualize the origins of their society as expressed in their myths and histories.

Earlier in this paper it was suggested that the changes under consideration may be seen, together, as constituting a modification in the mode of production. Is it, then, useful to ask what was the Akan mode of production? Rattray, and Potekhin, were surely wrong in wishing to label the Akan State as ‘feudal'; as Rattray himself allowed, the free Akan peasants acquired an almost unassailable title to the lands which they farmed, and the various taxes which they paid to the chief never approximated to an economic (tax-)rent. Yet Rattray, and Potekhin, were perhaps not entirely wrong. Certain feudalizing tendencies were present in the Akan State, most apparently in the relations between a chief and his gyaasefo. What, it might be asked, would have to have been different for the Akan State to have become a feudal one? Upon consideration of a number of counter-factual situation ('games'), the answer does, I think, dictate itself. Fully feudal relations of production might have developed within the Akan State in the absence of any major involvement in external trade.

One theme of this paper has been that chieftaincy among the Akan originated in entrepreneurship. 'It was part of the State System,' Casely Hayford perceptively remarked of the Asanteman in particular, 'to encourage trade' (1903: 95), and from their inception the economies of the Akan States were built not only upon agriculture but also upon commerce. Throughout the forest country gold was obtainable both by mining and by river washing (Dumett 1979). In some aman extensive operations were directed by the chief and his functionaries; nonetheless, private prospectors—for the most part peasants at the slacker times in the farm year—probably accounted for the bulk of production. By various forms of direct and indirect appropriation, including manipulation of the local markets, a large proportion of the gold produced within an aman passed into the treasury of the chief. This was, indeed, one of the characteristic features of Akan statecraft. Another was that the chief should continuously involve the aman in trade, sending gold to the external markets and purchasing goods there which in turn circulated within the local economy to stimulate the production of more gold. It was the profits realised by the successful management of trade which sustained most particularly the chiefly class within society, and obviated the exaction of economic (tax-)rents from those engaged in food production. These themes have been more extensively explored elsewhere (Wilks 1979).

It has been seen that external trade from the forestlands was first directed northwards: throughout much of the 15th century the Malian
Dyula merchants were the principal foreign-trading partners of the Akan. I suggested some years ago that the Dyula involvement is to be seen as a response to changes in the world bullion market (Wilks 1961: 28-29), that is, to what Wallerstein will now have us recognise as the early stages in the development of a capitalist world-economy (1974, ch. 2). It remains difficult to evaluate the strength of Dyula, and therefore Akan, responsiveness to that world-economy in the early period. The outward signs are there, in for example the 14th- and 15th-century brass-ware of Egyptian and Syrian provenance which found its way into the forest, or in the fragment of 16th-century Chinese porcelain from Bighu, but quantifiable data are lacking. Certainly, however, a signal event in the incorporation of the Akan into the developing capitalist economy was the establishment of the Portuguese at Elmina, and it is no accident of history that for a time São Jorge da Mina was Europe's premier tropical outpost. Braudel was surely mistaken in his belief that Portuguese Elmina was able to 'capture' the northern trade (1946: 12-21), for it has been shown that in the middle of the 16th century the position of the Dyula in the Akan trade had been much strengthened as a result of Malian intervention. Nevertheless, as the capitalist world-economy expanded, and as Danish, Dutch, English and French commercial interests became established along the Gold Coast in the 17th century, so the external trade of the Akan was drawn increasingly to them.

Is it arguable, then, that from its inception the Akan State existed in a mode such that the feudalizing tendencies within society were constrained by a participation, albeit one of peripheral dependency, in the capitalist world-economy? The 'modes of production controversy' has been excellently surveyed in a recent paper by Foster-Carter (1978), and I am aware that this discussion on Akan history has raised more problems than it has produced answers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ANDERSON, P.

ANQUANDAH, J.

BARBOT, J.
1732 A Description of the Coasts of North and South Guinea... (London: A. & J. Churchill), 716 p. ("A Collection of Voyages and Travels" 5).
Boahen, A. A.

Boaten, K.

Bowdich, T. E.
1819 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: Murray), xiv-512 p.

Braudel, F.

Busia, K. A.

Calvacorelli, D. & David, N.

Casely Hayford, J. E.
1903 Gold Coast Native Institutions (London: Sweet & Maxwell), xvi-418 p.

Cenival, P. de & Monod, T.

Crossland, L. B.

Dumett, R.

Fortes, M.

Foster-Carter, A.

Goody, J.

Hellie, R.
Kea, R. A.
1978 'Social and Spatial Aspects of Production in Southern Ghana in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries' (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University, Workshop on the Akan, 21 April, unpub. paper), 24 p. mimeo.


Kiyaga-Mulindwa, D.

Mauny, R.
1956 Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis (Bissau: Centro de Estudos da Guiné Portuguesa), 226 p.

Mota, A. T. da

Müller, W. J.
1673 Die Africanische auf der Guineischen Gold-Cüst gelegene Landschaft Fetu (Hamburg: Härtel), 287 p.

Newton, L. E. & Woodell, S. R. J.

Phillips, J.

Posnansky, M.


Posnansky, M. & McIntosh, R.

Potekhin, I. I.

Rattray, R. S.


Reindorf, C. C.

Rodney, W.
Vogt, J. L.

Wallerstein, I.

Wilks, I.