

A NOTE ON AHAFO ORAL TRADITIONS

I paid a brief visit to Ahafo to start an enquiry into the historical relations of the peoples of Ahafo with Ashanti, - and the way in which Ahafo fits into the rise, growth and development of historic Ashanti. I was not prepared for the high level of historical self-consciousness of the chiefs and the "court" chroniclers that I met. It is certainly the practice of Akan courts, like those of many other centralised kingdoms in Africa, to have their edited traditions recited during festive assemblies (to remind the people of the glories and tribulations of their ancestors with implicit lessons for the present and future.) And Court habitués did hear versions of village, town or state histories during land and stool cases at the chiefs' courts. Even so I did not expect to be greeted with notebooks of recorded traditions, of files bulging with typed notes of the same, and state secretaries tully conversant with the traditions of their respective states.

It occurred to me on reflection that this probably meant that the fever of historical research which allegedly assails a newly independent and, ipso facto an acutely selfconscious state such as Ghana, usually extends beyond her intellectuals and politicians; that the "well-established point that every age and people is conscious of, and is influenced by the social functions of history and seeks to reconstruct the past in a large measure to explain the present", (The Historian in Tropical Africa, editors, Vasina, Mauny and Thomas, Oxford, 1964, p. 81), had a wider application, at any rate, in Ghana than the National Assembly and Ghana's Universities. District and local history may be revised to conform to new notions of dignity, and requirements of the political system. Certainly the chiefs and Court Chroniclers of Ahafo were more than aware of the social functions of history.

Perhaps it may help at this stage to state, briefly, the background to my own enquiry in Ahafo. It is well-known that the Ahafo district which, like the Brong district formed part of Ashanti, has recently been joined with Brong to form a new administrative unit, (the Brong-Ahafo Region), with a Regional Commissioner and her share of the new crop of District Commissioners.

Before the Ahafo District was separated from Ashanti, many Kumasi chiefs claimed parts of the Ahafo lands as their own: generally, that their ancestors had been rewarded with these lands for their services in the Abiri-Moro War: i.e. the Ashanti war in the reign of Opoku Ware (1720-1750) against Abiri,

the King of Aowin, and his son, Miro, who had sacked Kumasi while Opoku was at war with the Akims. The Nkawiahene, Hiawuhene, Barekumahhene, among others had, under the Asantehene, received tolls and other services from the people inhabiting those lands. Other parts of Ahafo also owed feudal service to certain Kumasi clan or wing chiefs, who provided powder and shot, and the local chiefs saw that their hunters furnished the Asantehene and the chiefs with venison. There were some towns which were free from these obligations. These facts were the basis of some Ashanti popular notions of Ahafo: in short, that Ahafo as a whole, was a hunting settlement for the Asantehene and some of his Kumasi chiefs, and, that the area was generally settled with captives of war; that Ahafo, therefore, was "bush" inhabited by "bush" people.

Ahafo resentment of Ashanti was a response to these notions and to what they considered to be the Kumasi chiefs' conception of Ahafo as an area for exploitation. These notions form the background for Ahafo revision and recitation of their oral traditions.

Thus it emerges from the traditions I have collected so far that the district of Ahafo was not so called because the first settlers were sent there to hunt. The name, a leading chief was at pains to emphasize, originated from the general fertility of the land, and the abundance of the common necessities of life with which visitors were impressed. People kept on saying *eha ye fo*, 'life here is cheap'. The settlements in Ahafo were not the creations of Kumasi chiefs at all, but of individuals who merely, as Ashantis, obtained permission from their own chiefs in Kumasi, who often acted as their hosts when the original settlers arrived from earlier homes to form new settlements. For the founders of the early settlements were not captives of war but emigrants from Akwamu or Adansi, belonging in certain cases to the royal stocks of their places of origin. In any case, many of the founders themselves played leading parts, especially as scouts, during the Abiri-Moro War. It was in war, during the search for the probable routes of the Aowins, that they discovered the sites of the early settlements. Lastly, the sum of the traditions was that elaborate stories by Ashanti chiefs of the audacious exploits of their ancestors in the Abiri-Moro War were often merely manufactured during the establishment of the Ashanti confederacy in 1935 in order to validate claims to portions of Ahafo lands.

The recitation of oral traditions in Ahafo, however, is not always shadow boxing with Ashanti chiefs. There is a very practical side to it. There is at the moment only one Omanhene in the Ahafo district and many of the Chiefs wish to attain that status. Some have petitioned the government to that effect, and

others are contemplating doing the same. I have never seen a petition to the government for recognition as an Omanhene, but I suppose such a petition states the size, population, resources and history of the proposed "traditional area". It does emerge from conversations with aspirant Omanhenes, however, that for them it is not enough that they be made Amanhene for services to Ghana: their claims must be supported by the part that their ancestors allegedly played in the evolution of Ghana.

Thus many chiefs have written down traditions which establish the antiquity of their principal towns and villages before others, perhaps more politically elevated, with improbable dates of their foundations and also recounting the alleged heroic exploits of the stool ancestors.

This concern about the support of history for claims is probably shared in many parts of Ghana where chiefs are concerned about their political status. It has advantages and disadvantages for the collector of oral traditions.

First, provided the student preserves a correct attitude towards the state or town chronicler, he can be certain of their co-operation. Few chiefs do refuse nowadays to recite their traditions, although the embargo is still laid, at any rate in Ashanti, on "revealing others' origins" and mentioning untoward events such as 'chief so-and-so was killed and beheaded in this or that war by this or that people'. I was often asked in Ahafo not to record what were regarded as improper slips and some of my informants were reprimanded for such slips. By the correct attitude, I mean not expressing doubts or disbelief about certain accounts. All questions must appear to be ones in search of clarification or further illumination of certain points. This is especially important in cases where recorded versions of tradition have obviously intruded into the local tradition. Views and doubts or disbelief about this should be reserved to oneself. Furthermore, the varied versions of traditions readily produced should facilitate checks and cross checks. The disadvantage that comes to mind is that the search for historical validation accentuates the characteristic short-coming of oral traditions: bias.

I am not sure whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages. The situation is, undoubtedly, stimulating for the student. Perhaps interested bodies will one day organize a panel of chroniclers to discuss specific points on which the books and the chroniclers cannot agree.